Lightning Only Strikes Once

by fiona_249

Summary

Consumed by grief, Clarke climbs Lexa's tower, not really thinking through what she plans to do. But any plans get taken away when she's struck by lightning, mysteriously transporting her back to before any of it happens.

Back in her cell on the Ark, Clarke remembers exactly what went wrong - and mysteriously, so does Lexa among her people on the ground. Between the two of them, can they get back to each other? Can they find a way to save both of their people and themselves? Or is the hatred surrounding them too strong?

Notes
For all my fellow Clexa fans: we're in this together. Jus drein jus daun, and may we meet again.

Note: I added the Major Character Death thing because Lexa dies (that's kind of the start of this), but obviously that's just a temporary thing. I don't promise every character's going to make it through the whole fic alive though.
Well This Was Unexpected

It’s a mistake, a foolish one. She climbs the tower. It’s no one’s fault. It’s a mistake.

Oh, Clarke could blame a whole train of events. She could blame her horror at Wells’ death, her tears at Finn’s; she could blame her guilt at the deaths of everyone within Mount Weather. But the truth is that everyone has a breaking point. And for that breaking point, there’s always someone to blame.

And the person she blames is Lexa.

It’s easy to blame Lexa – her now-pointless love for Lexa is a fire in her heart, burning through her skin and charring her bones, cooking her from the inside out. It’s nothing like the childish warmth she felt towards Wells, her brother in all but name and his poorly hidden feelings. It’s nothing like the hormonal influx of kissing Finn, a boy she never got the chance to completely know and now thinks she wouldn’t have liked if she did. And nothing like sharp-eyed Niylah, who was comfort and a brief pause, but never would have been anything more than brief to her.

Lexa was hers. Lexa was like her. Lexa was the one who made the world pause. It takes as long as it takes, that’s what she would tell Clarke. Lexa would tell her to wait out her grief.

But then, Love is weakness, she would also tell Clarke. And Lexa is the person who sacrificed everything she had, everything she was, for love. Abby sent her husband – Clarke’s father – to his death. Bellamy betrayed her without a second thought and aided the death of hundreds. Finn slaughtered innocents for her, without ever asking if that was what she wanted. *I did that for you* is the anthem that haunts the past few years of Clarke’s life.

But what Lexa did for her? Lexa saved her people. Lexa saved her. Lexa wanted to make the world a better place.

Clarke no longer thinks it deserves that.

So she stands on the top of the tower. A couple of floors below, Lexa died. Clarke bowed to Lexa, Lexa bowed to Clarke. Clarke spat on her once. Why did she do that? Her anger at the time seemed all-encompassing. Could it have felt that way if she didn’t love Lexa so very much?

Clarke closes her eyes. It’s a long drop, inches away from her feet. The wind is fierce. Rain is starting as she stands there, splattering her face, running down her cheeks like the tears she seems to have run out of. All she needs to do is lean, and gravity will handle the rest.

She leans. She pulls back.

She will not do this, not now, not to Lexa’s memory. Not to Lexa’s dream. Clarke reaches her black-blood-stained hands to the sky, letting the rain start to wash them clean. She will survive. She will not die today. *Ai gonplei nou ste odon.*

The lightning takes the choice out of her hands. She’s lit up before she can scream.

******************

“Prisoner 319, face the wall.”

The voice is emotionless. The command is heartless. Clarke is in a grey world, with grey walls. There’s a picture of a tower in darker grey against the grey. It isn’t Lexa’s tower, but for a second
she thinks it is.

She drew that. A long time ago. Didn’t she? Shit, what’s going on? Is she back in Arkadia? Did she faint? Did the lightning make her pass out? Did Pike put her back in her cell, now that it’s crashed to the ground again? Is this torture?

“What?” she says, faintly. Lost. Alone. Where’s Lexa, Octavia, her mother? The lightning? Where is she?

“Hold out your arm. Your watch. Take it off.”

The note in his voice is unfamiliar to her, after so long, but after a moment she can place it. Dismissiveness. As if she’s not Wanheda, Clarke kom Skaikru. No one has dismissed Clarke in a long time.

He strips her father’s watch off her wrist, and she doesn’t resist. Perhaps she should. But now the watch is associated with the death of Finn and the nameless Grounder. Her watch has added a terrible memory to the wonderful ones inside it. Plus, she has no idea what’s going on. Best not to establish herself as a threat until she’d in a position she can do something about it. He doesn’t seem to know her.

Clarke’s still reeling as she’s marched away. Her mother calls out to her from down the hall – “Clarke, it’s all right, you’re being sent to the ground! Clarke, I love you so much...” – but Clarke has no reply except a confused, vacant stare. What’s happening? What’s going on? Where is she?

And then she’s in the ship, and they’re all there. Finn’s across the room. Wells is next to her. She nearly reaches out to touch his face, his dear, worried face. “Welcome back,” he says, and he has no idea how far back. Suddenly, she does. Wells. The guard. Finn, over there. The drop ship. Twisting her head she can see Octavia, Harper, Monroe, Bellamy, Miller, all unscarred and clean and strangely unreal.

Clarke doesn’t reply to Wells. How can you reply to your nightmares? The world is swimming before her uselessly, her breath coming in terrified pants. Where is she? What is this? She is back nearly a year ago, before she was herself, before anything mattered as much. The only real memory of this world is the pain of her father’s death. Everything else is grey plastic or iron, wrapping around her world. After the vibrancy of the ground, this world is as unreal as a black and white movie.

Wells’ face swirls in front of her. So does everyone else’s. Finn is suddenly in front of her, floating. Spacewalker, she thinks incongruously. The boy who walked in space but died tied down. “So, you’re the traitor who’s been in solitary for more than a year -” Finn starts saying, but then he frowns, “you don’t look so good -”

And there’s purple lights flashing into her eyes and everything’s a photo negative of what it should be. Clarke recognises the early signs of unconsciousness a second before they overtake her.

*************

Lexa sits bolt upright in her bed, gasping. “Clarke?” she croaks out. But Clarke is nowhere near her. Did she leave while Lexa was healing, headed back to Arkadia?

No one is around her. Her bed is hers alone, her room empty, the door closed. Surely someone should be watching over her sleep after her injury. She thought her fight was over, surely that level of worry merited several healers on full alert. Lexa frowned. She would have to speak to Titus about
this lack of both care and security.

Or not, given he was responsible. Perhaps that was the problem – maybe he was being held. Without him, the army of people whose job it was to care for the Heda could be stumbling, uncertain.

She swings her legs out of the bed, straightens up. Looks down at her body. Then blinks. This nightdress was accidentally left behind months ago, when her people ceased attacking the Mountain. Did Titus somehow find it again and deliberately dress her in it to remind her of the event? Surely not. How strange.

There is no pain. Lexa pulls the nightdress upwards, seeking the scar there is sure to be. She hopes it is not ugly – a foolish, childish thought, but she doesn’t want Clarke to find her body unattractive when they next meet again.

There is no scar. Lexa blinks again, staring stupidly at her smooth skin. After a pause, she slowly moves around her room from area to area. Over there is the map of the Mountain she took to Tondc with her, now miraculously unmarked by their deliberations and plans. On the nearby desk her swords lie – swords she left behind when facing the pauna. One of her favourite outfits is in her closet, but she knows that it was sliced in battle with Roan.

Perhaps this is a hallucination to comfort her before her spirit moves on.

The position of the sun suggests it is not yet time to rise. She may have a couple of hours before someone is sent to rouse her from sleep. Lexa returns to her bed, crosses her legs, and inhales deeply. She will meditate and calm herself.

Lexa suspects the person sent to wake her will not be Titus or his replacement, but will instead be Gustus. Whether this is a dream, madness, hallucination or reality, she refuses to greet him with fear.

Lexa is Heda. If the world has become unwound, she will not appear foolish and weak by reacting to it with fear. She will breathe in, and out, and think of Clarke, and work with the knowledge she has.

She will open the door, and face the world as it is.
Teenage Hormones Suck

Chapter Summary

Clarke starts dealing with things. Particularly old friends who don't all know they're old friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Clarke comes back to herself, the world is still strange and wrong, her head aching with confusion. Her limbs feel too weak – not just from having recently fainted, but because she’s lost the muscle she built up over those long months on the ground. Her skin’s smoother than it should be, her hair is shining and silky, and she feels so clean it’s like she’s raw.

She isn’t the woman they call Wanheda, the one who defeated the mountain, not shiny and clean and perfect. This is the girl they call Princess.

“Hey, Clarke,” Wells is next to her, brown eyes alive with concern. He’s sitting away from her – no doubt in deference to her hatred of him. “Are you okay? How do you feel?”

“Fine, I’m fine,” she says weakly. Concentrates on breathing in and out. She gets out the map so she has an excuse to sit down and stare at it blankly.

She was tough the first time she fell to the ground. Now she’s tougher. So, this is unexpected; impossible, even. But then so was the existence of Grounders and AIs and giant mutant gorillas. She dealt with them, time to deal with this.

Besides Wells sitting next to her, the only people around are Bellamy and Octavia, talking in fierce whispers just within the clearing, a couple making out against a tree, and judging by the sound of giggling a few people inside the drop ship. She can hear whoops coming from the forest. The 100 have had time to disperse, she must have been unconscious for quite some time. Thankfully, Murphy’s nowhere nearby.

“We got problems, Clarke,” Wells says softly after she’s been staring at the map for some time, pretending to study it as her mind races with thoughts and ideas. “The systems failed, I think that’s what knocked you out. And the communication system is dead. A dozen panels are missing.”

“Okay,” she says, and forces herself to her feet. A thought comes into her head: the living are hungry.

Clarke wonders if she should be trying to keep everything as close to the original timeline as possible, like in the cheesy old time travel movies she and her father used to watch together. But that option’s already gone – it’s later in the day than when they set off last time. Even if they’d set off at the exact same time as before, if they’d walked slower or faster than the first time… the spear could pierce Jasper’s throat, his heart, his stomach. It could hit another one of them. There could be more Grounders there. There could be Reapers. Worst of all, there could be people from Mount Weather to come out, capture them, find out about their blood and track down the rest.
Plus… she is Wanheda. She is the Commander of Death. And right now, she refuses to let it anywhere near her people. She refuses to try and follow a path that ends up littered with corpses.

The original timeline can go float itself.

“Alright, I think our first priority has to be food,” Clarke says to Wells, putting away the map. “We don’t seem to be anywhere near Mount Weather. So we need to try and find something closer, hunt or fish or forage.”

“We don’t even know if there are animals here,” Wells points out.

“Well, there has to be something around.” Clarke says. “We’ll see if we can find anyone else who wants to help.”

“I’ll help,” Jasper butts in excitedly from behind her, coming out of the drop ship. Clarke jerks in surprise, turning to face him. He gives her a big, dorky grin. “Anything for a pretty lady!” Monty, also there, rolls his eyes.

Wells steps forward threateningly. “You mind?” he challenges Jasper.

“Hey, what’s happening?” Bellamy strides towards them, hand already on his gun. Octavia trails behind him, looking annoyed about something.

“We’re going looking for some food,” Clarke says shortly. “You’re welcome to come join us, given you’re the only one with a defensive weapon.” She could have that gun off him in a second, she thinks. Clarke’s been in a lot of fights compared to the Bellamy of this time and if she doesn’t have the muscle she still has the memories. Plus, Bellamy – this Bellamy – was all posture. He wouldn’t shoot her, except by accident. But it’s not worth the fight it will cause or the enemy it will make him into.

“I think maybe we should find Mount Weather, Clarke,” Wells says. “You heard my father’s message.”

“Screw your father,” Octavia practically spits the words. “What, you think…”

“She’s right,” Clarke says, surprising both of them into shutting up. “The Councillor gave us a plan that doesn’t work anymore, not where we are right now. So screw his orders. We’re nowhere near Mount Weather, and we need a new plan. Starting with food.” She nods at Jasper and Monty. “You two come help me and Wells, we’ll see what we can find.” Clarke turns to look at Octavia, deliberately ignoring Bellamy. “If you feel like eating, maybe you should join us. Or just if you feel like having a real look around.”

Octavia looks uncertain. Then Bellamy decides for her by growling “No way. Octavia stays here.”

“I was asking her, not you -” Clarke starts to say.

“I’m going, Bell,” Octavia says, finality in her tone. “I’ve been locked up all my life, I’m not gonna let you lock me up too.” Bellamy grabs her arm and starts to talk to her in a harsh undertone about the dangers.

Clarke decides to start walking, leaving Octavia to deal with her brother and the others to catch up. In under a minute Wells catches up and walks beside her. A few seconds later Octavia has caught up too, walking besides an already smitten Jasper.

She can hear the others talking behind them, already sharing stories and bonding, when Wells says to
her quietly, “I got sent down on purpose. To protect you. I want to make up for what I did, Clarke.”

Clarke catches his hand in her own and squeezes it for a second before letting go. “You didn’t do anything except try and take the blame,” she says just as quietly. “I know that now.”

His expression morphs quickly to surprise and then joy. A smile spreads across his face and she returns it gladly. Then a boy lands on top of him from the tree above.

“SURPRISE!”

“OW!” Wells rolls to the side, swearing, already trying to rise to his feet. He stumbles and nearly falls again but catches himself. “What the hell?”

Finn grins at him. “I’m sorry. You were directly below me. Couldn’t resist.”

Clarke looks at Finn, unable to resist scouring his face with her eyes for a second.

Looking at Wells makes her happy, to have this second chance. Looking at Finn makes her feel... well, confused. Grateful that he’s alive, guilty because she killed him, and deeply sad that she knows there isn’t a second chance for them. It’s not just Raven – it’s that, looking at him now, his cheeky grin and boyish charm are wasted on her.

Once upon a time she viewed everything he did with a faint sheen of perfection, after he’d gotten past her initial resistance. Clarke had taken the good she saw – good looks, charm, artistic ability, and loyalty to her – and she’d expanded it, creating an ideal person who didn’t exist. She’d been infatuated with that person, and extreme events had made her bond to him grow very quickly.

His death had made it impossible for Clarke to acknowledge what she could now admit: she hadn’t been in love with Finn, not like he’d loved (or thought he loved) her. And the murder of eighteen innocent people in her name had shocked her out of her infatuation brutally, leaving only the guilt of feeling responsibility for those deaths binding them together. The additional guilt of his death had compounded that. Her good memories of Finn are distant now. When she looks at him, she just sees a floppy-haired, immature boy, good-natured but filled with flaws, and not someone who could ever understand her now or ever challenge her like – well, like some other people could.

Clarke doesn’t want to think of Lexa, not now. In this new universe, if she plays things differently, there’s a risk they’ll never meet. An even bigger likelihood is that if they do, it won’t be under circumstances where she can both impress Lexa and bond with her like the last time, where they can spend weeks together and become something. If Clarke manages to keep everyone alive and avoid pissing off the Grounders, there’s a very real possibility she will be a stranger to Lexa forever.

“Hey, Princess,” Finn playfully gives her a flower, waking her from her thoughts. “See something you like?”

She realises she’s been staring at him for some time. Wells looks even more annoyed than when Finn landed on him, and Octavia looks jealous. Jasper is looking slightly put out by Octavia no longer staring at him. Monty looks annoyed at Jasper for ignoring him to make heart eyes at Octavia.

Teenagers, thinks Clarke. Fucking teenagers. I forgot how stupid and hormonal we all were back at the start. She drops the flower. “Actually, I was just wondering why it looks like you’ve been trying to remove your wrist monitor. Don’t you care about anyone in the Ark at all? No one else is gonna come down here if they think the air is poisonous.”

Finn’s smile drops off and he glances involuntarily at the sky. “Why would they come down here anyway?”
“They’re running out of air up there,” Clarke says shortly. “We’re a test. Either they come down, or they kill off some of the Ark’s population. So unless you don’t care about whatever family you’ve got up there suffocating, you should probably keep your wrist monitor on.”

Come to think of it, he’s the only one who does need to keep his working. He’s the reason Raven came down, and Clarke doesn’t know when she decided that and if her decision was at all based on seeing Finn’s vital signs still there before they all flatlined together. The odds are best if they keep his one online just as long as last time. If Raven assumes he’s dead and doesn’t come down, they have no radio, they have no munitions expert, and they have no chance.

It’s so difficult, thinking in terms of the past and future like this. Trying to decide what actions will keep them alive, now she knows all of the ways they could all too easily have died.

Clarke turns away, leaving Wells to answer the inevitable questions, and plunges into the forest, eyes already scanning for threats or potential food.

Chapter End Notes

So it looks like I'm continuing this, largely because everyone seemed really enthusiastic. Thanks for that! I don't know how often I'll be able to update, though, so don't expect too much.
Chapter Summary

Lexa makes her own plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lexa manages to get through the day without giving herself away. Her greeting to Gustus is perhaps more enthusiastic than she would normally be, and she speaks to him more often as they go through the day’s appointments than she usually would, but otherwise it’s very easy to get back into the normal rhythm of her peace-time life.

Lexa judges disputes in the matter of several crimes, and meets with the ambassadors of two krus to equivocate about the correct price for different kinds of smoked meat – fish versus rabbit – in a trade deal that is causing mild friction. Another ambassador comes to give her an update on Luna’s health, which has been indifferent of late, and pass on a coded message from her. Two spies from the Azgeda (Lexa has people in every clan in the coalition – it is not wise to remain ignorant) have returned, and report that all is quiet, but that Nia has been ill-tempered recently. A warrior who fought beside Lexa a year before has died of illness and she briefly attends the burning, honouring the man’s past bravery as his houmon lowers the torch onto his lover’s pyre. Lexa trains the natblidas in throwing knives, and on a whim playfully challenges Gustus to a contest and defeats him, the children cheering her on and Gustus barely able to contain his smile and affection for her. And then it is time for a meal, bolted down quickly with Gustus beside her, awaiting any orders.

It is heartbreaking to her, to know that although she has Gustus back, he will never really be her Gustus again. She will never be able to trust him as she once did. Like Titus, she can trust him with her life. But she cannot trust him with Clarke’s.

She has discovered that someone who would do absolutely anything for you out of love is almost more dangerous than an outright enemy.

She’s managed to find out what time of year it is, and she has a vague memory of this day, although nothing particularly of note occurred on it. In roughly a week’s time, she calculates, she will receive a message from Anya, telling her of strangers that have arrived on her land. A week or so later, she will receive another message, a message about the destruction of a village at these invaders’ hands – not for food or land, but apparently just for spite. Soon after messages will begin to arrive more frequently, bearing no good news, and Lexa will send Tristan and his rangers to deal with this incursion, frustrated by Anya’s unprecedented difficulty in removing this problem.

It will be the last message she ever sends Anya, and it will all but tell Anya that she has disappointed Lexa.

Lexa has always been good at waiting. But there is, in this case, no reason for her to wait. She has no desire for Clarke to once again burn three hundred of her warriors alive, for Anya to die.

“How many gonas can you gather by sundown tomorrow from the surrounding areas?” she asks Gustus suddenly. “Apart from Tristan and the rangers he commands.”
Gustus looks surprised. “In that time, maybe four hundred, if I leave to begin now. Is this about the Azgeda?”

“Four hundred,” Lexa muses, ignoring his question. “When you include Tristan’s gonas who are already here, as well as Anya’s unit, if I stop at Tondc on the way to gather Indra’s forces as well… that will give me an army of nearly eight hundred.”

“Heda?” says Gustus, eyes now worried, though he tries to conceal it. “Why do you require eight hundred warriors?”

“I wish to visit my old Fos,” Lexa says.

“Why?” Gustus asks. “And why with an army?” He blinks. “Have you heard something? Has Indra or Anya committed a crime?”

“No,” Lexa says firmly. “Of course not. They are loyal and strong.”

“Then why?”

“I have spoken to the past commanders,” Lexa says. It is completely truthful as a statement by itself, if not as an answer to Gustus’s question.

The original Skaikru will either be arriving soon or have already arrived. Clarke kom Skaikru always insisted her people never intended to start a war with the Trikru, although Lexa knows Clarke to be wily and capable of lying to protect her people (one of many traits they share). If this is the case and they truly desired peace, then she will not need eight hundred warriors at this stage, but it is best to be prepared anyway. She will certainly need them in the area sooner or later.

There are several ways to deal with a force when you wish not to kill any of them. One is to take a small force and parley with them, trusting in honour and each other’s word to protect both parties. In Lexa’s experience, this engenders goodwill but has a chance of ending as a bloodbath, since honour can rarely work to protect one from a thrown spear. Perhaps she will try this strategy first, and send in Anya and some of her unit, arms raised to show they do not intend violence, to bring Clarke back to her in order to negotiate.

Another way is to bring so many warriors that the opposing force lays down arms immediately, recognising that to fight would be suicide. This tactic worked with the Skaikru before, and that was when the rest of their people had already fallen from the sky. If Lexa arrives with eight hundred warriors backing her up, this contingent of Skaikru may well prove willing to surrender and deal straight away. If they hurt Anya, she will default to this plan.

The Trikru do not like threats, and still less like strangers with guns, but if Clarke’s people give in immediately then Lexa may be able to contain the situation and prevent the previous bad blood.

Lexa nods to herself, course decided.

“Gustus, alert Tristan that we leave at sunrise the day after tomorrow. Then send riders to the nearest towns and villages to collect those four hundred gonas.”

“Yes, Heda.” Gustus is far too disciplined to question what she has heard from the past commanders, but she sees his face has paled slightly. The Heda demanding an army of eight hundred on the basis of commands from the spirits has frightened him.

She decides to reassure him. “It is only a small number of gonas I expect to be dealing with, Gustus, we will outnumber them greatly. Do not look so worried. I merely wish to demonstrate the might of
the Trikru to them. It is a show of force.”

“Ah,” Gustus looks relieved now. “I see. We are to make an example of them.” He smiles, no doubt thinking they go to clear the area of bandits or a similar foe.

“Not we,” Lexa says, gentling her voice slightly but making it clear that it is a command. “You are to stay here, Gustus, and care for the Natblidas.”

He flinches. “I am your bodyguard, Heda, it is my duty to protect you.”

“It is your duty to obey me. I can protect myself, Gustus. You stay and protect our future.” She does something she has never done before, and briefly covers his hand with her own, an open gesture of affection that surprises them both. “Beja, Gustus. I will be fine.”

Lexa can’t take him, not when she fears having to end his life again. She has not planned past forcing Clarke’s small group to surrender, and she doesn’t know what she will end up doing with the Skaikru, so she also cannot know if he will approve of it. She does not wish to risk the situation with Pike again, but she also will not destroy Clarke’s people. Perhaps Clarke, even without her memories, will have a plan that Lexa has not thought of.

After all, she always has before.

Chapter End Notes

I figure in this case Lexa has a massive advantage - unless she endangers them, most of her people will let her do what she wants. And the Grounders in general already believe in a variety of things that (if she didn't care so much about her own religion) Lexa could absolutely use and abuse to explain her own sudden foresight.
Playing With Knives

Chapter Summary

Clarke reunites two people... in a very different way then she expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clarke can understand why Octavia is annoyed at Bellamy for forcing her to stop seeing Atom, but over two hours of complaining has her dreaming of the days when Octavia’s complaints were about betrayals and kill orders. At least then it was easier to pretend to care – after everything, it’s hard to view the end of a three-day relationship as something that matters.

She’s fairly sure she became Octavia’s confidante today due to the lack of other people. What with Atom pointedly ignoring her, Bellamy being the cause of her anger, Jasper and Monty busy fiddling with her wristband, Wells and Finn huddled over the map trying to figure out where they are... well, Octavia’s kind of out of people. That Bellamy banned her from leaving the camp and Clarke just volunteered to go hunting was probably an additional incentive.

That doesn’t mean Clarke’s particularly happy about it. At her best guess they have maybe an hour until the first yellow fog happens, and they have to get back to camp before then – and hopefully make sure everyone else is there too. If she was out on her own, she would have already caught something. Octavia’s chattering has kept all the animals away from them until right now.

Apparently, this deer likes tales about overprotective brothers.

Clarke’s just lining up her throw when a noise surprises her. Her knife hits a tree only two feet away from her target, the deer startles and flees, and she curses.

Clarke’s wristband drops to the ground. She stares at it for a second, then strides to the tree and pulls her knife out.

“I guess they didn’t manage to make my wristband work as a radio,” Octavia says, eyeing Clarke and not looking particularly concerned. “I’m sorry.”

Clarke shrugs. “We knew it was a long shot. We’ll come up with something else.” It doesn’t really matter, after all. In a week Raven will be here, and Clarke can get to the radio before Bellamy this time.

What does matter is that she’s lost the deer.

No, scratch that. She’s being negative.

What matters is she still has her people. What matters is that Wells is still alive and spends all his time with her or Finn, so she thinks he’ll stay that way – surely Charlotte won’t kill him with people around. That Jasper doesn’t have a scar and PTSD. That yesterday when she brought back her kills, Bellamy gave her a smile and a compliment, giving her hope that someday they can find their partnership again. What does matter is that Octavia is here with her, wanting to talk to her and spend time with her, even if it’s annoying. That Raven will be here soon and there won’t be any Finn.
between them to taint their friendship. That’s what matters.

She’s getting them all back, all of her people (nearly all her people. All but one). In the original world, when’s the last time she had a good moment with one of them? With no arguing and hurt feelings? She can’t remember.

Clarke looks at her unbloodied knife and sighs. “Now we have to find something else to hunt.” She holds it out to Octavia. “You should take this.”

“What?” Octavia automatically takes the knife, then stares at it, frozen. “I don’t know what to do.”

Clarke almost laughs, it’s such a contrast to what she knows about Octavia. About who Octavia will be. “There’s no real trick to it. I have another knife. This way, next time we find something, we can both throw. Double the chance. I was going to give it to you for the deer, but I forgot.”

After a short pause, Octavia tightens her loose grip on knife. She passes it from one hand to the other. Her soft face hardens, eyes narrowing, growing intent and purposeful.

Now she looks like Clarke’s Octavia. Less butterflies, more blades.

“You should practice,” Clarke suggests.

Octavia throws it against the tree and it sticks. A grin splits her face and she retrieves it. A few more throws and she’s already hitting around the same area every try. Clarke marvels at it. Indra wasn’t wrong when she said Octavia is a natural.

Clarke can’t help but think of Lexa, so carelessly deadly with her blades. In battle Lexa always moved like a dancer, a gracefulness in her movements that Octavia’s untrained savagery barely mimics. Someday she might have the effortless poise and tension in her body that Lexa has, but that day is far off.

What if she never sees Lexa fight again? What if she never sees Lexa again?

No. Even if it works out, even if she saves everyone and the Ark’s higher-ups are the ones to deal with Lexa once they come down, Clarke will bullshit her way into at least one meeting. She will stand there and she will let her gaze trace Lexa’s face, tangle in her hair, become lost in her fierce eyes. She’ll see Lexa alive and flushed and proud and perfect. Clarke promises herself this one indulgence, after all of the effort and sacrifice she’s put in for her people and will put in again: she will see Lexa one more time. Breathing. Beautiful.

“I bet I can hit that high branch there,” Octavia says, eyes narrowing even further at the challenge, tilting her head up.

Before Clarke can suggest they go hunt actual food, Octavia throws the dagger hard.

It misses the branch. It flies through the air. And there is a deep groan of pain.

Clarke and Octavia glance at each other for a horrified moment, and then scramble in the direction she threw the knife. There’s a thud as a large body hits the ground, fallen from a tree.

It’s a man, tall and muscled but currently curled up into himself on the ground. He’s bleeding copiously from the knife in his thigh, his pants already soaked, the blood beginning to pool on the ground. As they reach him, he manages to raise his head and look at them.

Clarke only just manages to stop herself from saying his name.
Octavia’s already reaching for him. “Clarke, oh shit, he’s not one of us,” she gasps. “There are people here. There are people here! On the ground! He’s a Grounder! And I stabbed him!” Her breath comes in shocked pants. She reaches for and pulls out the knife before either Lincoln or Clarke can stop her.

She’s trying to help. She doesn’t realise she just made this much worse.

Clarke yanks off her top outer layer and forces it into Octavia’s hands, snaps “Put pressure on the wound!” at her, and grabs for Lincoln’s bag. He’s already losing consciousness, she can see.

“Clarke, what are you doing?” Octavia nearly screams, pushing down hard on Lincoln’s leg. Her hands are bright red, the cloth soaking through. “This is not the time to be going through his stuff! Help me!”

The bleeding seems to be slowing a bit already, thankfully, so Clarke allows herself to hope that they haven’t hit an artery.

Clarke ignores her friend and finds what she was looking for, unscrewing the pot. She scoops out some of the greenish-grey mixture and pushes it into Lincoln’s mouth, then dribbles some of her water there as well so he swallows it. Then she continues pulling through his bag and finds the other vial she was looking for, giving it a sniff to make sure. She takes the cloth off a shocked Octavia and pours a hefty amount on the wound.

Clarke only knows basic Trikru medicine. It will have to be enough.

The needle is sharp, though she’s pretty sure the thread is made of some kind of animal intestines. “Hold the wound shut as best as you can,” she snaps at Octavia.

It looks like the knife hit at an angle, creating a slice nearly as much as a stab wound. They’re extremely lucky that’s the case – it could have been much deeper. If it had been a direct hit, Octavia removing the knife might well have been a death sentence.

Clarke sews neatly and methodically. Lincoln has passed out cold, between the blood loss and the painkiller she gave him. She hopes she didn’t use too much.

Clarke doesn’t know how long it takes to sew the wound and bandage it, but when she’s done both she and Octavia are covered in sweat, blood and grime. She thinks he’ll be fine, though. Octavia still looks stunned.

“What the hell… how did you know where those were?”

“I was looking for anything we could use to bandage it,” Clarke lies. “We were just lucky he turned out to have medicine.” Fingers crossed she hasn’t given him any of the poisons accidentally.

“He’s a Grounder. Shit, Clarke, he’s a Grounder!” Octavia is dazed. She peers at his face. “He looks just like us. I mean, except hotter.”

“Speak for yourself,” Clarke says, giving Octavia a sly grin. It’s probably the adrenaline, but at the same time they both start laughing.

Clarke’s laughter abruptly cuts off when she looks at the sky, checking the time. The sun’s further than she thought. They don’t have time to get back to the drop ship. She casts around for places near here.
The bunker is closest. The thought makes her shudder.

“We need to go,” she says sharply. “Help me carry him.” They both take one of his arms and put it around their shoulders, still staggering under the weight of all that muscle.

“Uh, Clarke, I’m pretty sure that the camp’s the other way,” Octavia says doubtfully.

Clarke grunts with the effort of pulling Lincoln along, praying that she has enough time. She can’t stand the thought of leaving Lincoln to die in the acid fog while they run for safety. “You haven’t been out here much. Trust me, this is the fastest path.”

It’s a bald-faced lie. She’s been saying a lot of those lately.

“Maybe we should go back and get some people. This guy is heavy, Clarke,” Octavia says after a while.

Clarke’s back and legs ache with all the unfamiliar activity. But they’re only steps away. “Hey, look,” she says, pretending to be surprised, raising one heavy arm to point at the top of the bunker. A few more steps towards it and she thankfully lets Lincoln go. Octavia, surprised by the sudden extra weight, lets him slide to the ground.

“Not really the time to check things out, Clarke,” Octavia huffs as Clarke opens the bunker. “I mean, it’s cool and all, but we can have a look later. Not now.” She glances meaningfully at Lincoln. Blood is starting to seep through his bandages again – they really should not be moving him. Even less should they do what Clarke’s about to do.

Agonised screams slice through the air. The deer from earlier races through in absolute terror, foaming at the mouth in fright. Acid fog begins to appear at the edge of the trees. Octavia gasps, eyes widening.

“Or now,” Clarke says frantically. She rolls Lincoln over, says “sorry” with feeling, and pushes him down the hole.

Recommended treatment for stab wounds rarely involves a sheer drop.

She pushes Octavia to start climbing down the ladder then follows, slamming the door shut as soon as she can. Several wisps of fog follow her and settle on her hand and she whimpers as blisters form. Octavia swears when Clarke steps on her hand but keeps climbing down.

And then it’s just them, the darkness, Octavia’s panting breaths, and Lincoln’s groans. He’s already split his stitches, unsurprisingly.

Clarke lets herself lean against the wall for a second, regaining her strength. Then she straightens and reaches for Lincoln’s bag again.

This is not where she thought this day would go.

Chapter End Notes

I've chosen to have Wells and Finn strike up a friendship in this fic, if you're wondering why they're spending time looking at the map together at the start. Mainly because in the books they're actually the same character (the 100 decided to make Wells black, then kill
him off and replace him with a white guy. Because WHY NOT.) But they do also share
a lot of the same views and an instinctive ability to understand each other (such as Finn
knowing Wells didn't turn in Clarke's father), and without Clarke showing interest in
either of them, I think they wouldn't have much to fight about. But that's just my
headcanon! Feel free to have your own.

I also wanted to say thank you to all of you... the reviews I've gotten have been
amazing, they absolutely inspired me to keep going from my one wine-soaked crappy
chapter to an actual story. I have no idea where this is going, but I'm going to do my
best to make sure it gets there anyway, thanks to all of you.
Lexa is not surprised to find Indra and several of her warriors already waiting when she enters TonDC. Since Lexa has an honour guard consisting of hundreds, Indra would have to be very incompetent or her scouts extremely stupid not to have seen them from miles away. And she knows that neither of these are true.

“Heda,” Indra greets her, respect in every inch of her posture and every intonation of her words. Unlike Titus, who contrasts his religious fervour for the Commander spirit with an arrogant certainty he is still wiser than her, Gustus, who sometimes has trouble seeing beyond his fatherly fondness for his charge, or even Anya, who remembers watching her Sekon grow from mischievous child into ruthless leader, Indra has never treated Lexa as anything but the Commander. To Indra, her words are gospel and her suggestions are orders.

Lexa doesn’t think it’s a result of belief in the Commander spirit nearly as much as it is a belief in this incarnation of it. Since their very first battle together, Indra has judged her entirely on her victories.

For this reason, Indra won’t challenge her about her reason for being here, let alone with so many warriors, but Lexa can see the concern in her eyes and voice nevertheless.

“You and Anya have both mentioned in recent missives that bandits are a problem in this area,” Lexa says, choosing to explain herself anyway out of respect for the older woman.

Indra stiffens. “One we are capable of dealing with, Heda.”

Lexa inclines her head. “I am well aware of that, Indra,” she says, and watches Indra relax slightly. “But I am also aware that bandits are difficult to rid an area of completely without a considerable force, so I have brought one. Many of these warriors have not fought recently enough outside of training to keep their skills sharp – some are even yongons with no battle experience to speak of – and experience fighting even so lowly a foe as bandits will be useful. I know of no general more able to aid me in honing their skills than you.”

She rarely praises Indra. In fact, as Commander, she almost never praises anyone. But she feels warm towards Indra at this moment, Indra whose loyalty she knows from the other world to be a constant. When she checks for knives at her back, there is at least one Trikru who she has no need to fear.

Indra does not flush at the words, but judging by her embarrassed scowl and glance away, if it weren’t for her dark skin she may well have.

Indra clears her throat. “I see. Will your gonas be staying in TonDC? I can send out my hunters to begin gathering meat.” Lexa dismounts and begins to walk beside Indra, heading for her tent. It is a
more private place for discussion.

“I have commanded them to stay in the forest, spread out,” Lexa says. “They can find their own food. It will be useful practise for the next time we have to march.” And prevent them from being a target for any missiles, should the large force in the area provoke the Mountain.

“March north?” Indra asks quietly, so that her words reach only Lexa’s ears. They reach the tent and Indra allows her to enter first, following and then closing the flap.

So Indra too has heard the rumours, that Nia is unhappy and the Azgeda may desire a war. That battle is further off than Indra knows, due to the distraction of the Skaikru, but since Lexa now feels that it too may be inevitable she nods gravely.

It is a convenient excuse for taking hundreds of warriors on a simple training mission to hunt bandits, and also serves to explain why Lexa is taking them to this area specifically – the Trikru area closest to the Azgeda border. The time spent among similar trees and animals during Autumn would aid her warriors in a Winter battle against the Azgeda.

That this, while plausible, does not remotely resemble her actual reasons for being there bothers Lexa not at all. Her people are not required to understand every choice their Heda makes, provided they are all for their benefit.

“We believe the bandits bold enough to attack TonDC are camped to the North-East,” Indra says. “That should allow for some training.” She smiles grimly.

This falls entirely in line with Lexa’s stated plan, but not with her actual intentions. Clarke’s people are nearly due West of here.

Clarke is nearly due West of here, with her skai eyes and sunlit hair. Not that she alone is Lexa’s reason, but it has certainly been an incentive for her quick pace.

“Excellent,” Lexa says smoothly. “I can leave several hundred of my force to your command and continue heading towards Anya with the remainder.”

Indra frowns. “Of course, Heda. You do not wish to rest for a day or two before continuing?”

“Only the night, Indra. I will leave some of Tristan’s rangers with you – it will do them good to adjust to another’s command, and they can assist in training the rest of the warriors. You can easily manage the bandits with a force that size.” She thinks on how to phrase what she next must say.

“Sha, Heda,” Indra still looks confused, but she rarely questions her Commander.

“There is another thing I must ask of you, Indra,” Lexa continues after a pause. “It is a strange request, I fear.”

“Heda?”

“I require you to set some of your warriors to watch the Mountain,” Lexa says. She lets her voice become hard, so that Indra knows that this order especially cannot be challenged or queried. “As close as is safe. How many Maunon come in, go out, what they do, whether they are the same Maunon each time… anything that you see. You will know which of your warriors may be entrusted with the task.”

Indra blinks several times, absorbing this, not allowing traces of any emotion to cross her face. “As you wish.”
“Good. You are closest to the Mountain and know it best. I also wish you to take a hundred of the warriors I leave and begin training them to catch Ripas.”

Again Indra needs some time to adjust to the strange order. “…may I ask why, Heda?” Her tentative tone (well, tentative for Indra) makes it clear that Lexa can refuse to explain if she so wishes. Luckily, Lexa prefers to explain this particular choice.

“I have received information that it may be possible to cure a Ripa, if they are gotten to early enough.” Lexa feels pity for Indra as she watches the various emotions roil over the other woman’s face. Indra is so professional that sometimes Lexa forgets that her history with the Mountain is dark and soaked with the blood of loved ones. The idea of curing a Ripa is a knife to an unarmoured spot. “When I have more information, I will come back here. I may need you to procure a Ripa quickly when that occurs. Find none before then, but train the warriors in anything you think might help – attacking from the trees, knowing the caves, mixing sleep drugs that could work on a Ripa. Anything.”

Indra nods stiffly, forcing her face back to immobility.

Mentioning curing a Ripa has recalled another subject she wishes to enquire about. “How goes Linkon?”

“We have not seen him for a week.” Indra snorts derisively, though as always her contempt cannot quite hide the mingled affection and exasperation she feels for the young man.

Lexa does not know if Linkon is actually Indra’s son, or simply became a replacement in her heart for the son she lost, but she does know that Indra’s feelings for him exceed what she would ever admit. She also knows that on one visit Indra proudly introduced her to him, saying that Linkon was an excellent scout, gona, and even reasonably proficient as a fisa, and the next visit a query about him excited the most fury she has ever seen from the perpetually-simmering Indra.

She also knows that if anyone has already encountered the Skaikru, it will be Linkon. After all, that is as it happened before, and she has changed nothing here yet. None were dead at this point, she is fairly sure. Linkon may already be beginning his relationship with Octavia.

While admiring Octavia’s fierceness, Lexa cannot like anyone who resists all compromise as fervently and foolishly as the Skaikru girl does. She is also not sure what she thinks of the way the girl feels free to criticise both of her peoples and the leaders in charge of both of her peoples – Octavia skips between cultures and seems to believe this allows her to judge both. To Lexa, who is not only trapped by her culture, but confined to the position she has in it, this level of freedom is both unimaginable and frustrating. But she matters to Clarke, who matters to Lexa, so she intends to treat the girl well if at all possible. Perhaps contacting her through Linkon may even allow an exchange of communication with Clarke, ensuring Anya’s safety when Lexa sends her to the Sky People to deal.

“How do you have a way to speak with him?”

Again, Indra does not question her. “No, he comes and goes as he likes, that one. Last he disappeared to Luna’s people for a month.” She rolls her eyes. “Perhaps Nyko will know where he is. You want him because of his knowledge of the caves?”

Lexa was not aware that Linkon knew the caves better than any other of Indra’s people before his time as a Ripa, but she seizes this explanation anyway. “Sha. If you find him, keep him here. I wish to speak with him. Be clear that it is for his knowledge, not anything else, and certainly not for any kind of punishment.”
“Sha, Heda,” Indra says again. Then she clears her throat and continues, “And… mochof, Heda.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “For what, Indra?”

“For aiding with our bandits,” Indra says simply. “And caring for our people.” She glows with quiet pride, and Lexa realises it is because Indra believes that the Heda took her missives so seriously she gathered an army for a handful of bandits, and that the Heda cares for her enough to single out the man Indra once singled out long ago and introduced to her. For Indra, this is proof that Lexa listens to her, trusts her, and considers her concerns and people very important.

If Lexa allowed herself to feel guilt for that which could not be helped, she knows she would feel terrible now. She did not value Indra or TonDC nearly so highly before they became the centre of the war with the Skaikru and the war with the Mountain. She values them now because of additional knowledge, gained through something Lexa still cannot comprehend.

So it is a good thing she does not allow herself to feel guilt. Lexa martials all her ability to remain stoic and merely gives Indra a nod, allowing no shame to show on her traitorous face.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for the amazing support!
Clarke waits as long as she waited the first time for the fog to subside, except without the distraction of alcohol. Instead she spends the time bandaging Lincoln and listening to Octavia’s various theories and thoughts as she goes through his bag, finds his sketchbook, and begins flipping through it. Lincoln stays unconscious but Clarke thinks he’ll be all right, given time. Knowing Lincoln’s stubbornness, he’ll be up and about once the sedative wears off.

Eventually she says, “The fog should be gone by now. I think one of us should head back to camp, let them know what happened.”

“Tell them that there’s Grounders?” Octavia continues studying Lincoln like he’s a Rubik’s cube she has to solve, not even looking up. She traces his face from cheek to chin with her finger.

Atom appears to have been forgotten.

“Yes, exactly,” Clarke says. “And about the fog, and why we’ve been gone so long… if you’re willing to wait here with him until he wakes up, I’ll head back.”

“Wait here with him? What if he’s dangerous?” It’s Octavia at her most contrary.

“Oh, okay,” Clarke says. “If you’re worried, I’ll stay here, and you can head back.”

“No, it’s fine!” Octavia says, a little too quickly, just as Clarke had known she would. The mysterious connection between Octavia and Lincoln had been as instant as it was in the original world.

Meeting someone in whose eyes you see the same weight, same frustration, same love, same hopes… perhaps the connection is not so mysterious after all. Perhaps when Octavia, forced to live her life quietly, invisibly and lonely, first met the eyes of Lincoln, forced to live his life coldly, ruthlessly and lonely, something of their shared desperation passed through the gaze.

Clarke can relate.

“You go tell them about all this, I’ll wait.” Octavia continues, then hesitates. “Just… maybe you shouldn’t tell them exactly where we are.”

Clarke allows herself a small, secret grin. “No?”

“Bell would overreact, you know he would,” Octavia says decisively. “This guy has a sketchbook of us and a lot of medicine. But he didn’t even reach for his weapons… he’s harmless, I can tell. He didn’t even look angry that I’d stabbed him. But you know all Bell would see is that he’s a Grounder
and he’s armed. I don’t want to get this guy in trouble.” She leans to the side, so that her face is lined up with his in the semi-darkness. “You can see he’s a good person. His face is really…” she pauses. “…gentle. I’m sure of it. I know, you think I’m crazy, but –”

“No, I don’t.” Clarke makes her voice firm, unwavering. “I trust you, Octavia. If you think I shouldn’t tell Bellamy where you are exactly, I won’t. It will take a while for the drugs to wear off. When he wakes up, just head due south – so the morning sun is on your left – and you’ll get close to the drop ship. Or he might help you find the way if you ask, clearly he knows where it is.”

Octavia’s smile is so pure that it’s like a beacon in the darkness. Clarke knows that no one has ever trusted her before, not like that – even Bellamy, the big brother she adores, tries to place walls around her, tries to tell her what to do. No one’s ever done what Octavia says before instead of the other way around. She’s not just agreeing to leave Octavia in an enclosed space with a potentially-dangerous stranger twice her size, she actually suggested it. Octavia's so used to being protected that to her this seems like freedom instead of risk.

She hopes she can live up to the adoration in Octavia’s face, this time.

It doesn’t take her long to get back to the camp. She doesn’t bother to stop on the way, to gather food or to check the environment closely. It’s too soon for the Grounders to attack directly and they haven’t done anything to anger them this time.

What she doesn’t expect is her greeting. She’s barely broken into the clearing before three angry people are shoving hand-made blades into her face, and then Murphy is in front of her. He pushes a gun into her face aggressively for a second, then relaxes slightly, but still doesn’t pull away the weapon. “Oh, it’s just you, Princess.”

“What the hell, Murphy,” Clarke snaps, shoving away the closest person who’s threatening her with a knife. They’re all retracting them now, embarrassed by their paranoia, but it takes Murphy a second longer to shove the gun back into his waistband and she bristles at the unnecessary delay.

“Don’t bitch at me,” he snarls back at her. “Where on Earth have you been? You and Bellamy’s slutty little sister? You left ages ago and then waltz back into camp the next day, without her, and expect us to roll out the red carpet?”

“We ran into someone,” she says, glaring at him. “A Grounder. There’s people down here, Murphy.” She forces the emphasis into her voice, trying to act like this is a big deal. Obviously, it’s old news for her, making fake surprise difficult.

Apparently it’s old news for them as well. “Tell me something I don’t know, Princess,” Murphy glowers at her. “They rocked up into our camp hours ago and snatched away our fearless leader.”

“They what?”

“These psychos appeared, all covered in furs and facepaint, looking for Bellamy. They spouted some Grounder gibberish at all of us, then snatched his gun, threw it to the side, tied his hands behind his back, and rode away with him,” Murphy spits to the side, showing his opinion. “Who knows how that moron pissed them off. Or maybe they’re just looking for a sacrifice or something. Pascal, Trina and Atom have all disappeared too.”

Clarke considers this, forcing herself not to overreact. She knows the Grounders aren’t likely to come up to the camp to just take a random person. Pascal, Trina and Atom may have died in the fog like last time, Bellamy isn’t so easily explained. Could Bellamy have done something to anger them?
Only one way to tell. “Give me his gun.”

Murphy takes a step back. “Hell I will.”

“I want to see if he’s fired it,” Clarke says impatiently. “In case he shot one of them.”

“They’re savages, Clarke, you really think he did anything to them?” Murphy rolls his eyes. “And the gun’s mine now. I’m in charge.”

Clarke grits her teeth, her patience officially evaporated. “The gun. I’ll fight you for it.”

He laughs loudly. “Oh, come on. Like you could fight me.”

“I’ll fight for her,” a voice comes from Clarke’s side, deep and sure. It’s Wells, glaring at Murphy in dislike.

“Me too,” Finn says.

“Oh, so you’ll send your boyfriends to come beat me up,” Murphy says snidely.

Clarke takes a deliberate step forward. “No, I’ll fight you myself. Unless of course you’re scared to fight without using a gun. Against me.”

Clarke stands in the early morning sunlight, her blonde hair gleaming. She must look innocent and harmless, she thinks, unless you look at her expression. One of Murphy’s acolytes stifles a snicker and apparently that decides it.

“Sure thing,” Murphy growls, stepping forwards. “If you want to get beat up, why not.”

She looks at Finn and Wells. “Stay out of this. Please.” Finn frowns, but one of Murphy’s people raises their blade in a threatening way, and so he takes Wells’ arm, preventing him from stepping between them. Wells turns to look at him, betrayed. Clarke wonders when they became so close they could talk with their eyes, but dismisses it.

Her muscles aren’t what they used to be. She’s going to have to find a way to fix that, as quickly as possible – preferably not by spending months in the forest, this time. She’ll see what happens, what opportunity comes. Maybe one of the Grounders will train her, Lincoln, even.

But, muscles or no muscles, she’s fierce and fast and can out-think Murphy, and she has reflexes he can’t possible understand. She moves forward, quicker than he was expecting, and has delivered two quick hits to his solar plexus before he can react.

Gasping, he attempts to grab her, wrapping one arm around her middle like a bad guy from a movie, the other one grasping at her hair. She slams the heel of her foot down on the middle of his, causing him to whimper, ignores the pulling pain at her scalp and the tears it causes to spring up in her eyes, and elbows him hard in the throat. He lets out a little gasping noise – echoed by the gasps from everyone surrounding them – and she twists in his suddenly loose grasp and punches him hard in the face. She hears a crunch.

His hands automatically go to his nose, where blood is already starting to stream. Clarke snatches the gun from his waistband and holds it up to eye height, studying it.

A part of her doesn’t know why she’s doing this. The original Bellamy caused the deaths of hundreds of people on the Ark, and she’d thought that made him want to redeem himself – in this world she hopes to prevent those deaths, which could leave him the same selfish jerk. Or was he the
same selfish jerk anyway in the original timeline? He’d said yes, and he’d killed hundreds more to prove it, even after all they’d been through together. She doesn’t even know whether she’s putting in all this effort to save a good man, a mass murderer, her best friend, her enemy, or something in between.

She just knows she has to find out. She can’t abandon Bellamy to his fate, any more than she had it in her to deliberately abandon Charlotte, or Finn, or Jasper, or even Murphy. They are her people. It’s nationalistic and ridiculous, but their lives are her responsibility, and she will do whatever it takes to get them through this. She needs them. Her life has been filled with fields of corpses, and she needs something to cling to. The 100 are what she clings to. Their lives are her proof that she had a reason for everything she did, everything she still remembers doing.

The gun has no shots fired. A small, dry part of her notes Bellamy’s restraint. But this means there’s no reason for this at all. Is it Anya? Is it one of the groups of thieves around this area? People from TonDC?

“Why did they want Bellamy?” she asks suddenly, wheeling back to face the bleeding and prone Murphy. “Did they ask for him by name, description, what?”

Murphy is too busy moaning on the ground to reply, but a tall strong boy she vaguely remembers as Miller does.

“We think they were looking for our leader,” he says gruffly.

“What? Why?”

“They kept saying the word ‘header’,,” Miller explains briefly. “We figured that means leader.”

“It sounds like it does,” says one of the others in an excusing kind of way. “You know, head person. Header. So Murphy pointed at Bellamy…” he trails off, looking shamefaced.

“And they took him,” Clarke whispers. Her mind races. Heda. They were saying Heda. Lexa. “Who was in charge? What did they look like?”

Miller shrugs. “A woman, dark paint around the eyes. Long hair, braids, dark at the top and blonde at the bottom.”

Anya, thought Clarke, her racing heart slowing once he mentioned the blonde. Before that, she’d thought... But of course. Anya would have been saying ‘Heda’ because she was looking for our Heda like they thought, or maybe even because she was doing it in Lexa’s name.

Which means she needs to get someone to take her to Anya. Fortunately, she’s already met someone who knows exactly where Anya is.

Unfortunately, Octavia just stabbed him.

Chapter End Notes

I really love all the amazing reviews. Thank you so much to every one of you! This fandom is amazing.

In case you're wondering how long this is going to be... I actually have no idea. At least
another ten to fifteen chapters if I can maintain my enthusiasm (and my gf keeps having hockey practice nearly every night. I can't deny, that's been helping a lot with my productivity).
Who's The Boss

Chapter Summary

Lexa is deeply unimpressed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hei, Anya,” Lexa says, allowing her face to soften slightly.

Her old Fos reaches for her, clasping her in a quick embrace that Skaikru would probably consider brief and business-like. For a member of the Trikru, however, this is an affection shown only to the closest of family, and speaks volumes about Anya’s feelings for her. “Hei, Lexa.”

Anya refuses to use Lexa’s given name with others, believing that would be an abuse of her past with Lexa, but between the two of them Lexa allows Anya to name her as the person she was before the Commander’s spirit chose her. The girl she was when Anya cleaned her black-bleeding cuts and teased her about her youthful affection for Costia.

Anya moves several paces back. Her face is unmoving but her eyes are warm. “Why have you come, Heda?”

“A training mission,” Lexa replies lightly. “To remove the bandits from the area.”

Anya smirks. Since the quick hug, their companions have moved far away enough for them to talk without worry of being overheard, and she takes the opportunity to be informal. They both know Lexa has felt near-hero-worship for Anya since childhood and Anya can say what she wills, provided there are none to hear. “You lie, yongon. This is about the Skaikru, sha?”

Tris stares at Lexa from her position many metres away, drinking her in like wada. Lexa gives a slight, cold inclination of her head towards the girl, causing her to flush brightly. Anya’s new sekon has always admired her previous one.

“Sha,” Lexa admits, “Perhaps I should have waited, Anya, but the previous Commanders gave me no rest.” It’s another lie, but even if Anya can tell she will not comment on the Commander spirit, Lexa knows. She will wonder if Lexa has spies in this area, but that cannot be helped.

(Of course, she does have spies. You do what you must.)

“They have not attacked yet, or attempted to climb the Mountain.” Anya says flatly.

“Why should they?” Lexa quirks an eyebrow, interested in Anya’s opinion.

Anya shrugs. “They have at least one Maunon weapon, they speak gonasleng, they act as though the land is theirs and they are alone in it. They are not Trikru, nor any kru of which I know. They came from the skai in a blaze of light and now they do not care if they burn the land down.” Anya gives a knife-edge of a smile. “I believe we should burn them first.”

“Easy, Anya,” Lexa cautions.
“What?” Anya blinks. Lexa has managed, for once, to surprise her. “They are invaders, Lexa, trying to take our land as if we have not earned it with the blood of our nomons and nontus, and our nomons’ nomons and nontus’ nontus. We have braved the Maunon and the pauna and the lions and the Azgeda… surely you do not intend to give this land to those who flew carelessly in the skai while we faced the Earth.”

“I do not intend to give anything.” Lexa gives a half-smirk, hiding her knowledge and her heart to the best of her ability. “But I believe they may be useful. Tell me all you know of them.”

“They have no use,” Anya says severely, but answers her anyway. “There are maybe a hundred of them, Linkon says. All just over the border between goufa and gona. But they cannot hunt, fish, fight… they have managed to survive on plants and luck. Their battles are minor skirmishes between themselves, over metal bracelets and burnt meat. I would have removed them already, but…” Anya hesitates.

“But?” Lexa prompts her, after waiting a few long moments.

“They seem helpless, Lexa. Weak,” she meets Lexa’s eyes. “I do not want to take my unit to wipe out those whose deaths will be easy. It is not honourable. Their fight will be no fight.”

If you only knew, thinks Lexa. Their fight will be a vicious fight. But perhaps we can pre-empt it. “Have you heard from Linkon recently?” she asks instead.

Anya shakes her head. “He was supposed to return today, with an exact number and as much information about them as he could gather. He did not.” Anya’s eyes go cold. “If they have harmed him…”

“You did not tell Indra he worked for you now,” Lexa comments, not allowing judgement to colour her tone.

“I have not seen her recently,” Anya shrugs. “and he has only worked for me a short time. He knows the area best, but he does not have a gona’s heart. I use him for scouting sometimes and that is it.”

“I see,” Lexa says slowly. It appears any plans to contact through Linkon may not work. Perhaps he already sympathises too heavily with the Skaikru, perhaps he has been captured, perhaps he is spending time with his Skai girl and will not return. She never sought to learn much about these early days after the Skaikru fell, getting only a rough idea of what happened – who died, and when, and only the most relevant facts of these deaths. She had not wanted to hear more about Anya’s time before her death, which could not be fixed. Now, of course, it can, and she knows nothing. She has erred in this matter.

“I wish you to take a small party to their camp,” Lexa says suddenly, irritated with herself. A part of her does not wish to send Anya, to risk her this way, but it cannot be helped. Anya is one of the few she can trust absolutely to retain control of herself in the face of anything. Let them call Anya a savage, a Grounder, a bitch – Anya will not kill anyone when ordered not to, Lexa is sure of that. Of course she will have to hedge her in with orders, but that is simple. “Harm no one. If they attack, leave, but harm no one, understand?”

“Sha, Heda.” Anya sounds unhappy with the order, but does not question it.

“Retrieve their leader and bring them to me.”

It takes several hours for Anya to return. Lexa spends the time pacing in the tent they have set up for her. Foolishly, she locates the knife she had the first time she met Clarke, so she can play with it. She
does her warpaint even though she does not need to, has her hair carefully rebraided. She has a chair constructed.

None of the warriors with her have travelled with her before in such close quarters as Gustus has, so they do not find her pickiness to be noteworthy. Gustus would have been confused by it, knowing that she only demands such signs of status during wartime. He would not understand that a small, shallow part of her needs everything to be the same as her first meeting with Clarke.

She wants Clarke to look at her the same way, with the wary respect of one leader greeting another. But she also wants to know that someday that look will turn to warmth. Lexa aches for what they were, what they nearly had. Having Gustus and Anya back fills holes she did not know she still felt, but the loss of her greatest weakness makes her feel weaker than her affection ever did.

Lexa sits in the chair and lets her knife catch the light, staring at it, playing with it, trying desperately to distract herself from uncharacteristic nerves. But then there is Anya’s voice filling the space again as the flap is opened and she enters, followed by two guards holding a tied person between them, a bag over the captive’s head.

*Clarke. Clarke is here. My Clarke.*

She has time to notice that the person is too tall and dark to be Clarke, her stomach sinking, before one of the guards rips away the bag and she finds herself face to face with Bellamy Blake.

It’s a long pause. His eyes are filled with anger and dislike, but overlaying all of that is paralysing, all-encompassing fear. She blinks, dealing with the fact that it is not Clarke, but instead him, a man – no, a boy, even if he is as old as she – a boy she does not know and has no reason to like. Nearly all of her interactions with him have been through Clarke, who both loves him and was betrayed by him.

She’s torn. She could treat him as the spy who helped bring down the mountain, who prevented Indra’s death. Or she could treat him as the man who gunned down a peace-keeping force and captured Clarke when she put her trust in him.

But he’s neither, not now: she sees that in his helpless fear. He is merely a boy who fell to the ground. A strong personality, but not a strong spirit – one who can maintain control by force of charisma, but cannot continue that control when a harsh choice is placed before him. Someone incapable of real decisions. He is just a boy, a boy who is overawed and managed by the strongest will around him, and thinking of him as that it is hard either to respect or dislike him.

Just a boy, to gain so much love from Clarke, to do so much damage to her people. It is hard to believe.

“So you are the leader of the Skaikru,” she says, voice heavy with disbelief. She wants to ask where Clarke is, but does not know how he is likely to react. After all, sometimes he is loyal to Clarke and sometimes he is not.

He’s pale. “I… I guess… we don’t have a real leader…” Despite his pallor, his eyes are still filled with rage as well as fear.

She sighs. “Remove his ties.” She snaps to the guard. When he hesitates and looks to Anya, her disappointment at not seeing Clarke rises as annoyance. “You think I am incapable of dealing with one Skaikru? Release him, and gon we!” The guard bows his head and obeys, his partner following him. Lexa looks to Anya. “You as well, Anya,” she says harshly. “I can deal with this.”
She could perhaps talk her people into allying with Clarke, who is strong and wise and far too sharp. Bellamy, however – she could not talk her people into allying with him any more than the Maunon.

Lexa looks at him anyway and sighs again. “Hei, Heda kom Skaikru,” the words are bitter on her tongue, even as she starts to ask for the answers she already knows. “What is your name?”

Chapter End Notes

Not much plot advancement here, I know, but I wanted to give Anya and Lexa a chance to talk. The way they never did in the actual show. And now I'm making myself sad.
The Weakest Link (Or Not)

Chapter Summary

Clarke works to get things back on track.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clarke opens the hatch again and calls down it. “Octavia?”

There’s a brief pause. “Clarke?”

“I’m here, and I’ve brought Wells and Finn.” They refused to let her go alone, even with her new gun tucked into her waistband. Strangely, this is a relief to her, the thought of having them there. She knows a series of different Anyas – regal, regretful, angry, even angrier, vicious, thoughtful, friendly. She doesn’t know which one she’ll see. Having her people with her eases the stress.

She had thought about going and getting all of the guns for them before she went. But the truth is, at this point her people are not mature enough or afraid enough not to misuse them. And with any luck, they’ll never need them. Perhaps she can deal with Anya – befriend Anya – get Bellamy back – make peace – well, maybe she can do it all without needing the guns this time. She closes her eyes and hopes.

Clarke reaches the bottom and finds Octavia and Lincoln standing there, Lincoln expressionless and Octavia filled with concern. “Don’t look so worried.” she tells Octavia.

“Yeah?” the younger girl says sharply. “So Bell didn’t send you all to drag him back to the drop ship?” She moves in front of Lincoln, already protective. “Listen, he doesn’t speak our language, but he’s still a good guy. And tough as hell – look, he’s already standing on his injured leg.”

He is, though Clarke can see both the sweat covering his face and how most of his weight is on the other one. She turns to him, ignoring Octavia. “Anya?” she asks him, pretending that’s the only word she thinks he’ll know.

Finn and Wells are down the ladder by now. Wells frowns. “Anya?” he copies her, but looking at her instead of Lincoln.

“I asked someone inside the drop ship, they said one of the others with her said that name,” Clarke lies, keeping her eyes fixed on Lincoln. In fact she’d gone into the drop ship to tell Monty and Jasper to keep an eye on the place and give them her knives, but it was the only time she’d been without Finn and Wells so it was the best idea she had. She takes a step closer, still staring into Lincoln’s eyes. “Anya. Please. I need to speak with her. We’re not dangerous, we don’t have weapons. Well, besides this one. I just need to speak with her.”

Lincoln stares at her, expression carefully blank.

“Anya,” Clarke says again, low and dangerous. There’s still no response. With an exasperated sigh, she gestures at the others. “You have the rope, Finn. You three get to the top and lower it down, I’ll help him from here. We should be able to get him up without him having to climb.”
“No, Clarke, what if he hurts you?” Wells protested, looking at her in concern.

Finn touched his shoulder. “Hey,” he said firmly. “We’ll be watching from up there. And she’s got the gun. Come on, man, she’ll be fine.” There’s a pause, then Wells sighs and nods, apparently deciding to trust Finn, even if he can’t trust Lincoln.

Octavia pauses too. “I could stay down here…”

“Please, Octavia,” Clarke says shortly. “Climb the ladder.”

Octavia stares at her for several seconds, then stalks to the ladder and begins to climb, muttering rude words under her breath. Clarke ignores her. They don’t have time. Finn and Wells will fill her in when they get Lincoln up – as of now, Bellamy’s life depends on her getting Lincoln to take them to Anya. A Lincoln who has no reason to like them, trust them or help them.

But still Lincoln. A good person. That, she knows.

She looks at him. “Please,” she says quietly. “Come on. They’ve taken Octavia’s brother. I need your help to stop everyone from dying.”

Lincoln just stares at her, impassive.

They have no time. So Clarke does something very stupid. “Beja, Lincoln,” she says, lowering her voice until it’s only a whisper. There’s no way anyone above can hear it, but Lincoln can. “Ai liek Heda kom Skaikru. Bellamy no liek Heda. Ai gaf chich op Anya in.”

There is a long space while he gapes at her. Eventually he finds his voice. “How… what…”

“I did my best to say I want to speak to Anya,” she interrupts him, still quietly. At least he’s ditched the pretence of not knowing English. “Will you help with that?”

His mouth is set in a hard line, she’s not sure she’s ever seen Lincoln wear an expression like that. Even when they had been torturing him, his eyes hadn’t had that sheen of fear she sees now. “How do you know Trigedaslang?”

“I heard it in another life.”

He lets out a scornful laugh, keeping well back from her. “Another life. I see.”

“I promise you, I’m telling the truth,” Clarke says, her voice still soft. The rope is beside her now and she passes it to him. “Tie that onto yourself as comfortably as you can. We have a long way to go. You’re taking me to Anya.”

“Oh what?” Lincoln says, his voice harsh. He looks exhausted, black circles showing up under his red eyes, barely able to stand on the leg that they wounded.

Clarke shrugs. “Or nothing. You leave – I won’t stop you, I can’t without threatening you, which I won’t do. I leave too. I don’t see Anya. A lot of people die. Someday we both look back and wonder, could we have stopped it? Well, you could have stopped it. Right now.” She meets his eyes and he blinks at the force of her gaze.

He lets out a sudden, tired laugh, pulling the rope to himself and beginning to tie it. “What are you?”

Clarke smiles up at him, hoping her fear and nerves don’t show in her expression. “Clarke kom Skaikru. Pleased to meet you.”
Clarke’s the only one who’s silent on the way there. Octavia and Lincoln talk in undertones now that she knows he can speak English, with Octavia apologising multiples times and Lincoln bestowing absolutely no blame. It doesn’t take them long to start sharing details about their lives, becoming more animated.

Meanwhile, Finn and Wells fill up the journey with quiet conversation about chess (Wells is teaching Finn) and plants (Finn wonders whether any of them make you high) and where they are (guesses range between a hundred miles from Mount Weather and five miles). Finn rags on Wells for being a stick in the mud and Wells makes fun of Finn for being an idiot, but it’s all joking, and Clarke feels lost because somehow in less than a week they’ve created a dialogue that she’s not part of at all. Because she is a hundred years older than them mentally speaking, and they are children playing games. It’s harder to banter when she knows what’s coming. She isn’t the same as Wells anymore, and somehow he’s sensed this and moved on. She can’t bond with Finn anymore out of fear, and he doesn’t care at all. They are gaping wounds to her but they don’t recognise the loss.

Bellamy doesn’t know her anymore. Lincoln is suspicious of her, Octavia’s friendship is based on lies. Jasper and Monty – this Jasper and Monty – make her feel like she’s babysitting, they are so young and undamaged. Murphy is still a dick and hasn’t grown at all, Anya never fought with her in the mud and bonded with her, Raven is up in the sky joining wires together and knows her only as Abby’s daughter. Lexa is in Polis, telling people love is a weakness and missing Costia with all her heart. And Clarke is all alone, empty and lost, her friends gone, only memories of bonds she had a long time ago and can never exist again.

Perhaps they’re alive. But they aren’t hers, anymore, and she hates herself for caring. Surely being alive ought to be good enough.

Then they’re staggering into the camp, Lincoln directing them. Clarke’s pretty sure that’s the only reason they aren’t shish-kebabed on the spot.

Still, weapons point at them from all angles. Guards, murmuring lowly in Trigedasleng, surround them.

“You have injured Linkon,” Anya says darkly, coming into Clarke’s vision, holding a giant sword as casually as if it’s a butter knife.

“Not on purpose,” Clarke says, keeping her eyes as wide and innocent as possible. “He can tell you.”

Lincoln nods, looking at Anya. “An accident, Anya,” he says gruffly. “And they attempted to heal me. This one -” he inclines his head towards Clarke. “Is an accomplished fisa.” Octavia, propping him up, looks almost hurt that he hasn’t acknowledged her, and Lincoln smiles down at her briefly. “And this one has a rare skill with a blade.”

Octavia beams, looking up at Lincoln as if he has single-handedly brought the Ark to Earth. Anya looks at him like he’s a traitor.

“I’m the leader of the Skaikru,” Clarke tells Anya. “It is me you should deal with. Release the people you took.” She says people mostly for the benefit of her listeners, aware the Trikru probably only have Bellamy.

“We only took one,” Anya says coldly, as expected. Her voice somehow manages to be both uncaring and disapproving. “The one they said was the leader.”

Octavia makes a little noise and breaks off staring at Lincoln to look at Anya instead. Apparently
flirting with Lincoln isn’t quite as acceptable to her now that they don’t know where Atom is.

“Well, like I said. I’m the leader. And I’m here to deal.”

Anya looks at the people with her. “I see. Linkon, you confirm this is the leader?”

Lincoln looks at Clarke. The suspicion and fear is still in his eyes, but nevertheless he says, “Yes, it is, Anya.”

Anya nods. “I see,” she says again, too-sharp eyes eviscerating them all. “Then come.”

Clarke follows, and so do the others, like a guard. Clarke hopes that works to their advantage instead of getting them killed.

Anya raises a tent flap and ushers them in, then follows to say, “Heda, this is the leader of the Skaikru, come to talk. I apologise for my mistake in bringing you that boy.”

Clarke stares at Lexa. Mind blown.

Lexa stares at Clarke. Then looks away with a deep breath.

Clarke is used to attempting to read Lexa’s emotions, and what she thinks she sees is: shock for her. Indifference for Octavia, Lincoln, Wells. A brief second of anger for Finn. Her returned glance to Bellamy contains the same anger.

The thought pulses through Clarke’s mind – what is happening? Why is Lexa here? Why did those emotions show in her face? What is happening?

Then Lexa clears her throat. “Remove all from the room but I and the Heda kom Skaikru,” she orders, voice strangely rough and uncertain. “Now, Anya.”

And then it is just Clarke and the lover she watched die, staring at each other for an eternal moment.

Chapter End Notes

Aww, back together again :(
Chapter Summary

Lexa's not sure what to make of the way Clarke keeps *staring* at her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lexa swallows hard. Here is Clarke, the Clarke, *her* Clarke. Clarke blonde and sleek, Clarke as she was before the death of the Mountain.

Clarke seems shocked – did she look like this the first time they met? Did she pull back, horrified by Lexa's warpaint and knife? Lexa cannot be sure. Perhaps not, perhaps Clarke was tougher then after months on the ground. But this Clarke's face is every bit as strong as the Clarke she remembers.

She looks at the people Clarke has brought with her this time.

Octavia and Linkon are not worth noting. They gaze at each other with the starry-eyed affection they demonstrated before, already well on the way towards mooning about each other like lovesick branwadas. Perhaps this time they will be the bridge between their people they failed to be in the past.

There is a tall dark-skinned boy, who looks at Clarke with affection. Lexa does not know him. That suggests he is irrelevant and can be safely disregarded. For the moment, at least. She notes he is strong and stands well, that perhaps he will be a good gona someday, and then moves on.

But there is also… Finn.

Lexa wonders what is wrong with her, what foolish maggot bored through her brain to make her forget that Clarke did not come to her alone and happy. Clarke first came to her broken and bleeding and tear-stained, broken by a love that ended in violence. It never occurred to her that by deliberately removing the violence from their interactions she would allow Clarke to be happy with her formerly deceased lover.

Finn is alive, his face not yet creased with contemplation about the killing he will do. Clarke must be happy with him – Clarke must have loved him very much, to so instantly forgive the murder of so many.

Clarke is different, now. She still has her love. If Lexa still had Costia, would she love Clarke? Perhaps not. Costia was warmth and childish giggles and the burns of a sunny day and Lexa before she was Heda. Clarke was war rooms and harsh decisions and stark eyes and fleeting moments of beauty and closeness. One was the love of just Lexa, the other was loved by Lexa and Heda alike. Innocent loves are the hardest to discard.

She does not know Finn, his flaws, his virtues, his dreams. All she knows is that he killed eighteen people for no reason. All she knows is that he died in front of her, at Clarke’s hands. Lexa watches as he leaves the room, and then returns her attention to Clarke. Clarke who is not her Clarke, Clarke who is. Clarke who does not remember, who is different. Does it matter? However different she may
be with Finn here, she is Clarke, and that is all Lexa needs her to be.

Clarke’s eyes are blazing. “You took Bellamy.”

“I requested to speak to the leader of your people,” Lexa corrects, her foolish heart constricted and useless. She allows coldness to overtake her instead.

“I’m Clarke,” Clarke says, as if her name is not carved into Lexa’s soul. “I’m the leader of my people.” She meets Lexa’s eyes steadily, but there is something in them that is strange. A desperation in the way she stares.

Lexa smirks and plays with her knife, trying to avoid that searching gaze. “Then it is good of you to meet with me. What do you do here, Clarke kom Skaikru, on my land?”

“I’m sure Bellamy already filled you in,” Clarke counters. Her eyes flick to the knife, but return to tracing Lexa’s face in a way that is both hungry and awed. Exactly how Lexa is trying not to look at her, in fact.

“Perhaps,” Lexa leans back against her chair, glad to feel in charge. “And perhaps you should also answer the question.”

“We were dropped from our home, the Ark, in order to see if this world is habitable. We don’t want to hurt anyone. We just want to survive, Lexa.” She says the words like she’s learned them by rote in her few days on the ground, barely caring. But her eyes are still fixed on Lexa, still with that strange desperation. The uncaring words and the emotion-filled gaze are at odds with each other, Lexa thinks.

Lexa feels more uncomfortable, now that the stare has gone for so long. Clarke is so intense, looking at her this way. As if every movement and blink and breath by Lexa is something miraculous. She is not acting like someone negotiating with an enemy, she is acting like someone seeing something magical. A Ripa returned to life, or a Heda chosen.

And she used Lexa’s name. Who would have told her Lexa’s name? The only Trikru she has met are Anya and Linkon, who would never use her name with a stranger. A foolish, useless suspicion enters her head.

Surely the only thing to do with such a suspicion is to find a way to discount it immediately.

“How do you know my name, Clarke Griffin?” she asks. How do you know my name, Clarke Griffin? She tacks Clarke’s whole name to the end of the sentence deliberately, watching for her reaction.

Clarke notices it, stiffens, appears to stop breathing for a second. She swallows hard and manages to speak again. “I remember your name. I remember you.”

It hangs in the air between them, this sudden and impossible shared knowledge. Perhaps they don’t remember exactly the same things – Lexa has no way to know how much memory Clarke has – but that they remember each other at all is enough of a shock that Lexa can barely breathe.

There is a moment of pure stillness, then she and Clarke are moving towards each other. Lexa folds Clarke’s body into her own, sinking her face into Clarke’s shoulder, breathing her in like air. Here is what she thought to never have again. The softness of Clarke against her. Lexa is shaking uncontrollably. Or maybe Clarke is. Or maybe they both are. It is impossible in this perfect moment to know where Lexa ends and Clarke begins, their soul is the same soul, their heartbeat a shared rhythm, their bodies intertwined, their choked uneven breaths a sobbed duet. They are matched,
pressed together, the heat of Clarke warming Lexa to the core, melting the ice inside of her.

“You remember,” Clarke half-sobs into her shirt, pressing her face into Lexa’s shoulder, inhaling the scent of her and crying at the same time. “You remember me. You remember me. You remember me.” She chants it like a prayer.

Lexa is still unable to breathe properly, and she knows her face shows nothing but weakness, she’s glad Clarke is buried in her shirt and cannot see. She cannot imagine letting her arms release, they are iron bars around Clarke, holding her there desperately. Clarke squeezes her as if she will never let go either.

“I would never be able to forget you, Clarke,” Lexa whispers, closing her eyes against the tears that burn in them. Her choked breathing sounds like sobs. It is embarrassing, but she cannot help it, her weakness, her love, her pain. Here is Clarke, her Clarke, Clarke remembering, Clarke that she loves. The smell of sunshine in her hair and hard-gained strength in the lines of her face.

She presses Clarke harder against her, revelling in the feel of her, the reality. She has not known how to express it, but she has felt alone in this world. She has ignored it, since as the Commander she frequently knows things that no others can, but this has been different – knowing who will die, what will happen, how badly this world is broken. Yet here is someone who knows as well, and she is not alone.

Or she is more alone now. Because Finn is alive, and she cannot kill him, not when Clarke loves him and she knows Clarke loves him. Her feelings are a confused mess, all she knows is that Clarke is here and against her and she loves her so much.

Eventually they break apart, retreating to opposite sides of the room. Lexa needs the time to bring up her emotional barriers again. Perhaps Clarke does too.

“You remember?” Clarke says again, amazed, her voice husky.

“I do, Clarke kom Skaikru,” Lexa confirms. Her voice is tainted with emotion as well. “What happened? The last I recall is Titus in front of me, you there, me dying…” she lets her voice trail off, unwilling to examine the memories more closely.

Clarke takes a half step towards her, as if desperate to touch her again, but then pulls back.

“Afterwards… I went up to the roof… I couldn’t…” she gives up on the sentence. “There was lightning, lightning hit me. I thought it was that which sent me back, it was a weird colour, and with everything…” she shrugs. “I don’t know, I thought maybe it was radiation, or the lightning, or a mix, or something else impossible, or I’d gone mad, I didn’t know anything, but you’re here…”

“You can think of no reason why I might too have been sent back?” Lexa says bluntly, desperate to know why this strange world has unfolded before her.

“I… no… maybe it’s that we both died, you by being shot and me by lightning…” Clarke’s voice cracks on this prosaic description of Lexa’s death, and it warms Lexa’s heart. Then Clarke freezes, eyes widening. “Or not. I had your blood on my hands.” She raises her hands, palm up, as if to show Lexa something. The rust red of old blood has sunk into the lines of her palms, Lexa is not sure what from. Clarke stares at them as if they’re revelatory. “I had your blood on my hands, literally. That could be it. If the lightning brought me back with my memories, maybe it brought you back too because of your blood. Could it be…? Are there legends about Nightbloods being able to do anything like that?”

She looks so hopeful for an explanation that Lexa is sorry to disappoint her. “No. When did you
wake up? What time?"

“Uh… right before we were dropped down to Earth.”

Lexa nods. “Then it is your miracle, not mine, Clarke. I believe I woke up as your people fell to Earth. But for me, it was just an ordinary day. Whatever happened, it was due to the importance of the day for you.”

Clarke blinks. “Or… geographical closeness, maybe… when we were all close enough to the Earth for the first time… but I woke up before then…” She looks shocked, pale.

Lexa takes several steps forward and takes Clarke’s cold hands in hers. “Calm down,” she orders gently, warming Clarke’s hands between her own. She nearly raises them to her lips but stops at the last moment.

Finn exists. That knowledge is cold and bitter in her heart.

She chaffs Clarke’s hands, forcing warmth into them, and meets Clarke’s eyes squarely. “Something occurred. Do your people have information, stories, anything about movements in time?”

“I… no. Nothing real.”

“Then we cannot know,” Lexa says bluntly. “We must work with what we have. If this is a gift of knowledge, I do not intend to waste it.” She lets go of Clarke’s hands, feeling bereft at losing the touch of her, but meets her eyes anyway. “Perhaps we can prevent the deaths that haunt us.” Some, anyway: Lexa has years of deaths haunting her.

Clarke takes a deep breath. “Perhaps. Perhaps we can.” She looks into Lexa’s eyes, her own troubled. “But will that stop them haunting us?”

Lexa winces at the question, and takes one of Clarke’s hands again. “You know the answer to that, Clarke.” Her voice is gentle but firm. No matter who lives now that died before, the two of them still have the memories of what they have seen and done.

Clarke looks at her, pain in her blue eyes, but also hope. She clears her throat and squeezes Lexa’s hand, leaning into her unintentionally as she has done so many times. “Right,” she says croakily. “Where do we start?”
release on this so you get something during that time. But don't count on it. Sorry?
Clarke’s still in shock, but she pulls herself together as best as she can. Lexa is here, alive, in front of her; Lexa remembers her. This is the first moment when she’s felt like this new world is the real one – painfully real, but beautifully so as well. “Where do we start?” she asks, reaching forward and squeezing Lexa’s hand again. It trembles in her grasp. The urge to touch her, to never stop touching her, is nearly overpowering. When she pulls away Clarke lets her go unwillingly, confused by her distance.

“With your people, the hundred you brought down with you,” Lexa says bluntly, moving away from her, turning so that she doesn’t have to look into Clarke’s eyes. “After we have considered how to deal with them, we can make plans for the rest of the Skaikru, the Maunon, and the Azgeda.”

“And your people as well,” Clarke can be just as blunt. “It’s not like none of them are threats.”

The name ‘Titus’ hovers between them, unspoken.

Lexa frowns. “A few are, perhaps. For the most part, my people follow my orders. Provided I do not show weakness, they will continue to do so.”

“So we’re back to jus drein, jus daun?” she doesn’t allow herself to sound judgemental of this. Clarke’s mouth tastes sour at the thought of it, but she can also understand why Lexa might not want to go down this path again. Last time, Clarke and her people got all of the benefits of blood must not have blood, whereas Lexa – well, she paid the price for Clarke’s ideals. Blood must not have blood, but there was blood, Lexa’s blood. All over her hands. Her fault.

“No,” Lexa says. “But this time I wish to introduce this new idea with small acts of forgiveness, instead of telling my people they must accept those who slaughtered their friends and family. I also plan to increase guards at my tower, restrict the powers Titus has, and restrict the access for several others such as Gustus.” She looks fierce but also sure. “I believe in my people, I believe they will follow and obey me. But that does not mean I will not take precautions, this time.”

“Okay,” Clarke says with a firm nod. “That’s sorted then. I think we can handle my people quite easily too. If you send Lincoln and maybe ten or twenty other warriors who you can trust to treat us well to the drop ship for protection, and have people from TonDC bring food to us, none of them are likely to attack you. Especially without weapons. Then, when everyone else comes down, we can make it clear the land is a gift from the Trikru.”

Clarke stops. Lexa is already shaking her head.

“I am well aware of the value of Skaikru gratitude,” Lexa says, voice filled with sarcasm.

“Mockery is the product of a weak mind, Lexa,” Clarke snaps back.
Lexa inclines her head. “Yes, I should not have spoken so. But truly, Clarke, when has helping your people worked out well for mine?”

“That’s unfair,” Clarke bristles. “You didn’t give us a reason to be grateful in the… in the other world.”

“I gave your people land, a place in our alliance, my fealty, and repeated forgiveness for their crimes.”

“But you also left us at the Mountain.” It hurts Clarke’s heart to say the words, even quietly. It’s a bruise she’s not sure will ever heal, even though she understands the reason for it. It’s always going to be a sore spot, somehow.

Lexa sighs. “Yes. I did do that.” There’s a moment of silence before Lexa speaks again. “You think the best of your people, Clarke, I know that. But the scheme you describe will not work. Your people would fear the warriors sent to help you, see them as captors instead of carers. Your people falling from the sky would not be grateful for the land – they would view it as their right. They see the Earth as theirs and my people as savages.”

She isn’t wrong, not really, not entirely. “And your people view mine as invaders. You can’t see past our language and weapons. So what would you suggest, Lexa?”

“I suggest we take away your language and weapons,” Lexa says coolly.

“You… what?”

“I would like for your people – the hundred goufas you have with you – to be moved to Polis.”

“What for?” Clarke is confused, it is far from what she expected.

Lexa meets Clarke’s eyes squarely. “The youngest can be fostered to parents who had to leave out their yongons for the forest to claim, or have lost them in some other way. Some older ones can become Sekons, like Octavia, if they have the spirit to. Or they may have skills from their life in the skai – mending, growing, making – that would make them useful apprentices. There are also not enough teachers of gonasleng in Polis, many of your people could do that.”

“You want to completely immerse them into your people?” Clarke says.

“It will give them an understanding of our culture.”

“It will give you a hundred hostages, you mean!” Clarke sees Lexa flush very slightly, and wonders if she’s hit on Lexa’s plan exactly.

“That too,” Lexa admits. “I saw how much your people valued your friends when they were trapped in the Mountain. I suspect they will hesitate to attack my people if their own may be scattered amongst them.”

“Lexa, I don’t…” Clarke begins.

Lexa sees Clarke’s doubtful expression, and continues more passionately. “Clarke, in the previous world the only Skaikru who tried to understand my people are you, Octavia and Marcus Kane. The only ones of my people who spent real time with yours were Indra, Linkon and I. We did not all just lose position from this – we lost far more. Our people need to integrate. Not in a year, two years, five. Now.”
Clarke considers this. She agrees with Lexa in that their people need to learn to understand each other. It took her time with first Anya and then Lexa to finally realise the foolishness of her long-ago speech to the 100 insisting they weren’t Grounders. She had allowed herself to see them as vicious savages for a while because it was easier that way. And it was even easier for the rest of the Arc to see them that way, as beasts who didn’t deserve this beautiful world, as monsters who threatened children. Instead of just people, doing their best to survive with what they had.

“We’ll need to stay close until Raven comes down, or leave someone here for her. And if I agree to this idea, then when the rest of my people fall to the ground in a month, you transport anyone who wants to return to them back to Arkadia,” she says finally. “They won’t be hostages, they’ll be… well, ambassadors. Anyone who wants to leave Polis should have the choice.”

“And if they all return?” Lexa asks.

“Then there’ll be a hundred people in Arkadia who know that Grounders aren’t so different from us,” Clarke says firmly. “But I think some will choose to stay if their treatment there is good – they’re all considered criminals on the Ark and quite a few have no parents or status to go back to. And you saw how far my people went to get forty-seven of them back from the Mountain, so if even half stay, you’ve still won. We just need to make sure we match people up with things they’ll enjoy doing and with people who’ll treat them well. And make sure they’re safe.”

“We can do that, I think,” Lexa says softly. “I will make it clear I value them and that any harm to them will be harshly punished. But your people have also not harmed mine yet, and given you do not have guns…” She trails off in question.

“We don’t,” Clarke admits. “Not yet, anyway.”

“That is good. I believe my people will be much more willing to accept yours now than they were in the old world, Clarke. It will help if more than just Octavia learn to be gonas. My people respect warriors greatly.”

Clarke thinks of Bellamy, Murphy, Miller and the others, all eager to swagger up and throw axes and knives at the trees. Without fear of the Grounders or the raw, instant power of the guns, they might well be interested in learning how to fight properly. “Bellamy and some of the others might consider it.”

“Not Bellamy,” Lexa says flatly, voice dark. “Not Finn either. I will not have them as gonas or hunters, nothing with the use of a weapon.”

“They aren’t the people they were,” Clarke objects. “They can be trusted. I’m not going to go missing again, the Mountain isn’t going to be destroyed again… they’re not the same people.”

“Yes, they are. They are still people who under certain conditions can kill innocents in cold blood. You aim to prevent some of those conditions – the upsetting things that you believe caused their actions. Well, upsetting things happen to us all. I would prefer to prevent every condition just in case. So I do not want them near weapons.”

Clarke sucks in a breath, ready to continue protesting, then lets it out. Maybe they will be better this time, less dangerous. But she can’t know that. The truth is, her protests are more about her own guilt – not just at what Bellamy and Finn did in the past world, but what she did. She wants Lexa to be wrong, the deaths not to haunt her anymore. She wants her guilt to be magically wiped away.

But what can’t be wiped away is knowledge. She knows what she is capable of. She knows she can kill. She knows what they’re capable of, too. She can’t let them become those people again.
“You’re right,” she says. “I’ve got a few names to add to that list, too.” Charlotte, for example. Maybe Murphy, though she’s not sure what he could do instead.

“Yet you still look concerned,” Lexa says. “You still do not like this.”

“My reasons for not liking this plan are selfish,” she admits. “We haven’t had time to become a real group, the 100, like we used to be. Spread out across Polis, maybe we never will. Some of the people I was closest to, the ones I cared about the most, I might never get to really know in this world.”

She can’t tell what Lexa is thinking at all when the other girl looks at the ground and frowns. “If we succeed, you will have many years to become close to them again. And you can return to them, and to the boy you love, after we have dealt with all of this,” Lexa offers. “I know it may take time, but they should be safe in Polis.”

Clarke flushes. So that was why Lexa hadn’t kissed her earlier. Of course, she could have kissed Lexa, that was her choice too, but she had also worried that something between them had changed for some reason. Like her causing Lexa’s death. “In this world, Finn and I aren’t like that.” She uses her hand to lightly raise Lexa’s chin so that they are gazing into each other’s eyes and her face feels even warmer at the look in them. “I moved on from him a while ago.”

It sounds harsh to say that about someone she’s killed. But it’s honest.

“Oh,” Lexa says softly, but with so much quiet joy that a smile spreads across Clarke’s face and she suddenly has no more worries about them at all.

They lean in towards each other. Clarke’s breathing quickens and she raises one hand to cup the back of Lexa’s head, marvelling at the silkiness of her hair, as her other hand finds a natural spot to rest on the curve of Lexa’s hip. Lexa responds by placing a hand at the small of her back, and another at the back of her neck, lightly stroking the skin there until Clarke shivers. Lexa’s eyes flick down to her lips for a millisecond before they crash together, the warmth becoming wildfire.

Their bodies are pressed together so hard it almost feels like it could bruise, and Clarke wants it, she wants that bruise as proof that Lexa is alive, she’s alive. She wants Lexa against her, pushed together, perfect. She fists the hand in Lexa’s hair, pulling slightly, and Lexa lets out a tiny whimper and forces Clarke’s mouth open with her own, biting at her lower lip desperately. Lightning races between them. Clarke moans into the kiss, pure relief in her voice, heat burning down into her stomach.

“Heda? You have been some time. May I enter?”

It’s Anya’s voice, too loud, at the tent flap, and they’re jerking away from each other like guilty teenagers caught by their parents. The absurdity is compounded when Anya enters to find them flushed and at opposite ends of the tent, Clarke fiddling with her sleeve, Lexa’s attention deliberately on her knife as she toys with it instead of the girl across from her.

This is clearly karma for Clarke being so critical of the others’ teenage hormones. She sneaks a guilty glance at Lexa and Anya looks between the two of them, visibly confused.

“Has a decision been reached?” Anya says carefully. She’s already reaching for her weapon.

“Yes,” Lexa says. “One has.”
I've decided this is what they'd do if given their chance over again (the integration, not the kissing. Well, that too). I understand if you don't agree, this is my head-canon after all.

Remember when I said this story would take another 15-20 chapters? Okay, discard that. I've started planning stuff out properly and we're probably looking at least forty more. So I guess I don't have to find any new hobbies for a few months at least. I hope you guys will stick with it, I promise that despite them being together, things aren't going to magically become easy. Obviously if it gets boring though let me know and I can try and cut the story short! I don't want this to become the Thing That Would Not Die.
Clarke’s not sure if she should find the quiet crowd of Trikru behind her ominous or comforting. They wait at the edge of the drop ship’s clearing as her, Bellamy, Octavia, Finn and Wells continue to stagger towards the others. Lexa at their head (looking dangerous even standing perfectly still) helps her relax, but Anya’s judgemental stare from beside her goes a long way towards negating that.

Several of the delinquents look on the verge of fleeing – either out into the forest or into the drop ship to try and fortify it. “It’s all right,” Clarke calls out, her exhaustion colouring her words. It’s her fault, really – it’s late at night now, and between the bunker and trekking all around the area she didn’t exactly get a good night’s sleep last night. “They’re not here to hurt us, I promise.”

Bellamy throws a derisive glance her way, but doesn’t disagree. Whether or not he thinks the Trikru are dangerous, he’s not so stupid as to incite their meagre population against the army of warriors behind them. “Yeah. Everyone out here, now.”

The people hidden in the drop ship come out in twos or threes, visibly hesitant, but eventually the clearing fills.

“What’s happening?” whimpers Charlotte, her voice grating on Clarke’s tired ears.

Bellamy smiles at her, however. “Hey, hey, it’s fine, didn’t I just say? Come on, kid, what happened to slaying those demons?” He pats her head like she’s a much younger child and she huddles into his side.

“Clarke, you’re back,” Monty gives her a genuine smile, nearly displacing the worry on his face for a split second. “With a lot of people.”

“Yeah,” Jasper says a little shakily. “A lot.” He stares at them worriedly but then forces his usual carefree grin. “Some of them are warrior women. Do you think they like nerds?”

Clarke’s just grateful he lowered his voice, because she has no idea how Lexa’s people would react to that one. But the joke does seem to lower the tension a bit as several of the other guys chuckle. “Listen up, everyone,” she says firmly. “These are the Trikru. The woman in the front is the Heda, which is their word for Commander. She’s in charge of – well, basically as far as we could go in nearly every direction.” The crowd begins to murmur to each other, quiet expressions of panic overlapping throughout the group.

“What’s she doing here?” Miller says.

“She wants to offer us a home,” Clarke says simply.

It’s the first time anyone but Clarke has heard exactly what’s going on, since she hadn’t filled the
others in on the way and they hadn’t pressed her while they were surrounded by Grounders. She’d just said it would be fine, and Wells at least had believed her, she wasn’t sure about the others.

“We have a home,” Wells objects, looking at her like she’s gone insane.

“Some of us do,” Murphy says sourly.

“The Ark will come down eventually, we can’t just take off from here,” Wells continues, ignoring Murphy. “They won’t be able to find us.”

Now the hubbub of conversation rose as everyone started arguing – some saying the Ark wasn’t coming down, others wishing it wouldn’t, some panicking about where to go.

“Quiet,” Clarke says, raising her voice. “I have no intention of leaving the Ark not knowing where we are. The Heda says we can leave several people at a nearby town just in case Pascal, Trina and Atom turn up, and they can keep an eye out for any messages as well. This is just so we have beds to sleep in and food to eat so we survive long enough for that to matter. If – when – they do come down, she also says we’ll be free to either stay in the Grounder capital Polis or to come rejoin our people. Our choice.”

She can see some of them starting to smile, despite their nerves. The lure of food and proper sleep is undeniable. “We can even bathe,” she adds for additional bribery.

“Without any river monsters?” one of the younger ones calls out. “But how will we get properly clean?” Now there’s some more laughter. Gradually, the fear of the stern warriors behind them is ebbing away, probably helped by the fact that a gesture of Lexa’s has caused all weapons to be reluctantly dropped.

“Okay,” Clarke continues. “It will take two days to walk to Polis, and we can stay overnight at a place called TonDC. The plan is to leave tomorrow morning. Everyone should get their things together and get some sleep. Heda has promised that her warriors will stand guard so we don’t need to worry about mountain lions or anything.” She turns and nods to Lexa, the agreed upon signal.

Lexa nods back and strides forwards, Anya and ten warriors matching her pace. “Greetings, Sky People,” she says. Her voice is quiet, but it hardly matters since everyone had gone silent the second she moved. “I believe you will like Polis. We will try and find families for you to stay with or empty houses for you to share, and trades for you to learn if you wish. We have brought dried meat to give you strength for the trip tomorrow.” Two Grounders behind her heave off backpacks and open them. They’re filled with the Trikru version of jerky, which Clarke knows from experience is far tastier than any food the 100 have managed to produce since they got to the ground.

There’s a pause where no one wants to be the first to go near the group of Grounders, then before Bellamy can stop her Octavia strides forward and grabs some strips of meat. She throws one to Jasper and one to Monty and bites into her own. “Delicious,” she says through a mouthful, looking back at the others like she’s daring them to come join her. Then all of the 100 are coming forward, bickering over how many pieces they get each, some snatching them off their neighbours.

“Goufas,” Clarke hears Anya hiss to Lexa.

“Shof op, Anya,” Lexa replies, not looking away from Clarke.

Clarke flushes at the hidden warmth of her stare, then turns to her side when someone grabs her arm. It’s Bellamy. “We need to talk,” he says to her in an undertone, and drags her into the drop ship, nearly bruising her arm. She manages to turn her head and give Lexa a reassuring look before they’re
inside, and Lexa lets her hand slide off the hilt of her sword.

“What the hell, Clarke,” he says once they’re in there, sounding so much like Octavia that for once she can really see their family resemblance.

Speaking of Octavia… “What’re you guys talking about?” She follows them into the drop ship, Monty and Jasper at her heels, all still tearing at the jerky cheerfully.

“Great, it’s a party,” Bellamy says sarcastically as Finn and Wells climb in too.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Wells says to Clarke quietly.

Clarke smiles at him. “I needed to talk to you too.” She takes a deep breath. “I need you to stay at TonDC. I want you to be one of the people we leave here to keep an eye out for the others.”

“Are you staying here?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not either.”

“Yes, you are,” Clarke says fiercely. “Please, Wells. I need someone I trust here, and I need you to be safe.” She swallows. “There’ll be less opportunity for me and Finn to keep an eye on you in Polis, and I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the others – Murphy, for example – did something to hurt you. Stay here. I’ll come back soon.” She meets his reluctant eyes and says “Please” again.

Because he’s Wells, he backs down. “All right,” he says, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

“I’ll stay with him,” Finn volunteers.

Clarke really doesn’t think Lexa will like that. She’s not sure she does, either – there’s something creepy about the idea of Finn staying in TonDC, among the people he killed in the last world, spending time with the families he tore apart. But she hasn’t got a good reason to say no, and she’s fairly sure Wells can hold him in check. “Okay. Jasper, Monty, I was hoping you’d be the other people to stay.”


“If the Ark do try and communicate with us, you have the best skillset to help with it,” Clarke explains. “Anya’s unit will be taking you around the area to try and find Pascal, Trina and Atom, I was hoping at the same time you could look for any bits of technology that could help.” If for some reason Raven doesn’t come down, or comes down later, they need a back-up plan. While she doesn’t think she’s changed anything on the Ark yet, she can’t be sure.

Jasper gives a cocky grin. “My skills are at your disposal, milady.” It’s shocking to see him as this carefree guy again, every time she does.

“Our skills,” Jasper amends, and they grin at each other.

“I want to stay, too,” Octavia says suddenly. “I want to help find Atom.”

“If she’s staying, I’m staying,” Bellamy chimes in immediately, looking at his little sister.

Clarke looks at the others. “I need to speak with Bellamy and Octavia alone, if that’s okay.” From
the sound of it the food is nearly eaten outside. She wonders if Lexa kept any for her…. But of course she did. Clarke is so tired that food seems a lower priority right now, anyway. “Could you keep the others out of here for the moment?”

Wells hesitates, then nods and starts herding the others out.

When they’re gone Clarke faces the siblings. “You have to go,” she tells Octavia.

“Why?” She challenges. “I want to find Atom, and I’ve already made a friend among the Grounders…”

Clarke doesn’t mince matters. “Because if you don’t go, he won’t go.”

Bellamy frowns. “Of course I won’t. But why would I go anyway? I don’t trust these guys, Clarke. You don’t know what they want.”

“I know what they don’t want,” Clarke snaps, “They don’t want us all dead, because if they did, we already would be.”

“That already makes them better than the Ark,” Octavia points out to her brother, already defending the Trikru. “Since the Ark did kinda want me dead.”

“And now they want him dead,” Clarke points at Bellamy.

There’s a second’s pause and then Bellamy makes a scoffing noise. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Princess.”

“No? Don’t I?” Clarke says. “You turned up on the drop ship with a gun. That tells me you did something very illegal and probably very stupid.” He looks surprised by her statement. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out, Bellamy. What we need to figure out is how to keep you getting in trouble for it.”

“What do you care?”

“I care about Octavia,” Clarke says, and Octavia smiles for a brief second. “But I also care about the guy who helped keep us alive down here. You’re an ass, Bellamy, but you don’t deserve what they’ll do to you.” They can worry about making the same deal for him again later. For now, this is the best idea she has.

Bellamy looks uncertain, but pulls up his jerkish façade again. “So your suggestion is to run off and become a Grounder?”

“Yes,” Clarke says simply. “I asked, and Lexa – Heda –” she clarifies at their confused expressions, “Is prepared to protect you from the Ark if you become one of them. I told her that you’d make an excellent teacher, that you could teach the children of Polis better English. They need teachers.”

“You think I can teach?” Bellamy lets out a crack of mocking laughter, but now his insecurity was plainly visible on his face.

Clarke shrugs. “You taught Octavia, didn’t you?”

He has no reply to that. “A teacher, huh?” He says, after a long and thoughtful pause.

“You managed to lead us, you took care of Charlotte. Whatever else I think about you, I know you could make a fantastic teacher, Bellamy,” Clarke says softly. It’s not a lie, not really. But the truth is
there weren't many options - once you remove violence, weaponry, or anything to do with leadership, Bellamy doesn't have a lot of skills. Except for looking after children, courtesy of helping to raise Octavia. His affection for Charlotte was also one of the first positive things she noticed about him in the original world.

“‘You’re both ignoring what I want,’” Octavia growls. “I’m not going to be a teacher. I want to stay here, with Jasper and Monty and Lincoln.” She doesn’t refer to Finn or Wells, who she hasn’t spent time with since their first day on the ground.

“How about you come with us for a while, help Bellamy settle in, see if you like Polis,” Clarke suggests. “Once we know it’s safe, then if you want you can come back with me in a week or so to check how the guys are going.”

She begs Octavia with her eyes not to make this difficult. She’s so tired, and she needs Bellamy not to be in the area when Raven comes down. The radio can’t be thrown away again, the people above can’t be culled for oxygen. Not this time. She needs him as far away as possible.

There’s a pause. “Okay,” Octavia says grudgingly. She flashes Bellamy a quick grin anyway. “I guess if I let him go off alone he’ll just get in trouble.”

“Hey!” Bellamy says, giving her a half-smile in return. “I’m right here, O!”

Clarke lets herself slide down the wall to the floor, suddenly too tired to stand now that everything’s been dealt with.

She feels a smile tugging at her face, even as she smothers a huge yawn. This moment feels so nice, so warm. She has Lexa – Wells – Bellamy – Octavia – Jasper – Finn – Monty – all alive, all alive and happy, it’s too much. If she could just stay awake – keep her eyes open – hear more –

But her eyes slide shut and the siblings’ happy banter gradually fades away as sleep takes over.

Chapter End Notes

Internet is spotty here and it looks like I'll be pretty busy for a while, so you might not get an update for a bit. Sorry. On the bright side, Easter with the family is going pretty well.
“Here we are,” Lexa says unnecessarily as they enter TonDC. Really, she just says it because she wants to talk to Clarke, but their communication is made so difficult by all the ears around, and the need not to reveal all they know. There is so little she can say. So she says the obvious just to speak.

Clarke looks around and echoes “Here we are.” Her tone is surprised.

Lexa suddenly realises that TonDC must look nothing like what Clarke remembers. There’s no glaring Trikru, no pyre, no aftereffects of a missile, no gonakru gathered with spears. An army worth of warriors is here, yes, but there is a world of difference between the attitude of gonas going up against the Mountain and the attitude of those here for a handful of bandits. Though they straighten and quieten somewhat at Lexa’s arrival, the sounds of laughter and chatter can be heard and none bristle with the aggression Clarke must be used to.

All Clarke has seen in TonDC is violence: this is the first time she sees Indra’s village as it is. Just a village, a beautiful small village filled with Trikru going about their evening, teasing each other and swigging their drinks and training and flirting and enjoying themselves. Children run in the growing darkness, playing foolish games, sticks as swords. Their yells and giggles can be heard from far away.

It is wonderful, for Lexa to be able to see her world through Clarke’s eyes and for once find nothing to be ashamed of.

Lexa wonders if someday she will also get to see the best of Clarke’s world, the peaceful, friendly Ark that she sometimes suspects is a figment of Wanheda’s imagination.

Lexa dismounts. They do not have many horses, but her dignity meant she could not walk and give her mount to a struggling Skai child. She had, however, loaded as many of their packs onto the horse as she could, and ordered the other riding Trikru to carry as many of them as possible too. Few Skaikru carried a pack any more. Clarke, walking beside her, is one such, despite Lexa’s quiet entreaties. She claimed to be trying to build muscle.

“Indra,” Lexa says, allowing her expression to soften slightly at the other woman. Indra bows, glancing at her company with a frown. “We must speak alone. Clarke, wait here. You also, Anya.”

She walks forward, following Indra to the tent they always have these discussion in. “Heda,” Indra greets her quietly.

“Did you find what I asked you to look for?” Lexa says quietly. It was a last moment request before she left TonDC before, a final flash of inspiration. From that morning Indra has had less than three days to find them. A difficult task.

“Sha,” Indra says, troubled. She unhooks a pouch from her belt and passes it to Lexa. “Six of them.”

Lexa ties the pouch to her belt, making sure it is secure. “No one knows anything?”
“Nothing at all, Heda,” Indra says.

Which means that anyone Indra involved in this task is safe to trust with the secret, or that they are dead. Most likely the first – Indra is rarely cruel. Lexa nods. “Mochof, Indra.” Indra still looks troubled, so Lexa continues. “No doubt you wonder about my company.”

“I received your messenger,” Indra says. “People who fell from the sky.” She sniffs, disapproving.

“They may be our key to taking on the Mountain,” Lexa says. “I promise, you and Anya both will be involved in any agreements I make about the land around here.” She strides to the tent flap, pulls it open, and orders “Bring Clarke,” to the warrior waiting outside.

“I am unsure about trusting these… Skaikru. How can they help us against the Mountain? There are so few of them.”

“More will arrive soon, I think,” Lexa says quietly.

Clarke enters the room just as Indra makes a disgusted noise. “Hei,” she says, meeting Indra’s dark eyes squarely. “Ai laik Clarke kom Skaikru.”

Indra blinks. “They know our language in the sky?”

Clarke shakes her head. “I asked one of the gonas for some basic words and phrases. I wanted to greet you in your language, not the language of the Mountain.”

“Indra was just about to tell me how her efforts watching the Mountain go,” Lexa says idly. She gives the other woman a meaningful look when Indra pauses, concerned about continuing in front of Clarke.

“You said not to take risks with those I assign, Heda. We have watched as best we can from safety and made notes. I believe them to be more active than normal, a small group have already made a trip to the west, but we could not see where to or why. I will need more time to get anything that may be used.”

Lexa inclines her head. “Continue your work, then, Indra. Keep your scouts safe above all else, I do not wish them to know we are watching instead of just hiding. Also, have you decided which hundred gonas you will keep to hunt Ripas with?”

Indra nods stiffly. “I have, Heda.”

“My people will be able to cure them when they come down,” Clarke says. “I promise.”

“So should we start taking them now?” Indra asks, a slight edge of sarcasm in her voice. “Cage them up, so the rest of the Skaikru can work their magic the instant they fall from the stars?”

“Better to wait,” Clarke replies smoothly, ignoring the hostility in Indra’s tone. “They’ll just make more if you begin stealing them away. We want to be able to take as large a number as possible at once, so they can’t replenish their numbers quickly enough.”

Lexa admires her Skai girl. So quick, so diplomatic, so wise. No wonder she had been able to match wits with Lexa, a seasoned Commander, after only weeks on the ground.

“We will take down the Mountain this year, Indra,” Lexa says softly, and there is a promise in her words. “I believe this.”
Indra inhales sharply, then manages a grim smile. “Sha, Heda.”

“On more thing, Indra,” Lexa continues. “I will be leaving some of the Skaikru with you and Anya while I am in Polis. They are to stay in TonDC at night, protected, and Anya will take them out in the daytime to look for three of their group that have gone missing.”

“They’re probably dead,” Clarke says, and coughs to hide the quiver of emotion in her voice.

Lexa knows that Clarke hardly knew any of the dead. She also knows that the failure hurts her anyway. But Clarke is strong, and will manage.

“Speak to your people, Indra,” Lexa says. “Make them understand that the Skaikru remaining are not to be hurt in any way. They are to be treated as if they were members of Trikru, bound by the same laws but protected by them as well. However, if they go to disobey a law, make sure they know of it first, and do not punish them if they have broken a law in ignorance.”

Indra nods. “My people will not disobey you, Heda.”

“I know that, Indra.” Lexa says. “Also, I discovered why Linkon has not been here recently. He has been working as a scout for Anya, watching the Skaikru.”

“Hmm,” Indra says, not smiling, but Lexa can see the pride in her expression anyway.

“He has been injured by an accident with a knife, but will survive,” Lexa continues. “We brought him here on horseback. Clarke is a fisa and has done her best to heal him, but he could probably use Nyko’s attention as well.”

“It will be done, Heda,” Indra says, as if she wouldn’t have treated Linkon without the order. Her stubborn refusal to admit any affection for him amuses Lexa.

Lexa sighs. “It has been a long day dealing with the Skaikru. I could use a place to rest. I am aware that there are not many houses free and that many will have to sleep on the ground, but any covered places to rest you can find for the younger Skaikru would also be appreciated. Speak to the warriors, see how many we can fit in the tents.”

She hesitates. While she is tired, and has no doubt many of the others are as well, a part of her wants to truly show Clarke TonDC. Before she can reconsider, she says, “Also, tell your people to start a bonfire, and open two of the barrels of fayowada. I will bring replacements from Polis in a week.”

Indra bows her head and leaves the tent.

Clarke quirks an eyebrow. “A bonfire, Lexa?”

“Fire does not only mean death to my people, Clarke, but also celebration,” Lexa says. “And I for one would greatly like to celebrate your return to me.”

“Oh,” Clarke says softly. She pulls Lexa in closer to her, leans their foreheads against each other. “And fayowada? That means fire water, right?”

“Sha,” Lexa breathes.

“Why, Commander, are you trying to get me drunk?” Clarke smiles, her lips only an inch from Lexa’s.

Lexa flushes. “Of course not, Clarke. That would be wrong. I do not encourage any of your people
to drink to excess, given our day of walking tomorrow. I merely wish to give my gonas and your Skaikru a good night, allowing them to enjoy this new alliance…” She’s babbling, Lexa realises. She’s the Commander. She does not babble.

“Lexa,” Clarke says, pressing a soft kiss on the very corner of Lexa’s mouth. “Shof op, please.”

Clarke presses her lips more fully to Lexa’s, in a long, sweet kiss that utterly removes Lexa’s ability to talk, or indeed to think. Her hand at the back of Lexa’s neck caresses it, and her eyes fill with tears.

“What’s wrong?” Lexa manages. Clarke’s thumb is rubbing slowly up and down exactly the spot where the Commander spirit resides within her.

“Thank you for being here with me,” Clarke whispers. A tear runs down her face. “I just… I keep thinking… I nearly lost you. To something so meaningless, so stupid. The wrong place at the wrong time and it was all my fault.”

“You did not lose me, Clarke,” Lexa takes Clarke’s other hand, and presses it to her heart. “None of it was your fault, and you did not lose me. I am right here.”

Clarke smiles, and kisses her again, then sighs and pulls away. “We shouldn’t stay here too long. It’s suspicious.”

“Yes,” Lexa pulls her in again and kisses her quickly, then steps back. “Come and see TonDC in peacetime, Clarke kom Skaikru. I think you will like it.”
The Adopt-A-Skaikru Program

Chapter Summary

The Skaikru reach their new home, and new lives. Clarke desperately needs sleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TonDC in peacetime turns out to be nearly as destructive as TonDC in wartime to the 100.

The fayowada proves to be almost dangerously strong, so Clarke’s memories are warm and blurred, a pleasant haze of intoxication over the events, but she can remember the feeling of it all. She remembers the heat of the fire burning her face, Lexa’s quiet, amused voice in her ear, the loud laughter bursting out of different groups, the contentment in the air, music and dancing and wrestling and drinking going on in every direction she looks.

At the start of the night Skaikru and Trikru were separate, but the powerful liquor and air of celebration had infected them all by the end. Some of the older Sekons joined in Monty and Jasper’s impromptu drinking game. A group of gonas started teaching some of the 100 the words for a dirty song in Trigedasleng. A Skaikru girl started flirting with one of the TonDC youths who was part of the wrestling competition going on and their groups of friends began talking. It was a look at how the world could be this time, hopefully. It was just… nice.

However, the niceness presented its bill in the morning. Clarke still has a slight headache now, and she partook very lightly compared to some of the others. The day has been filled with arguing and complaints from the hungover and tired Skaikru. Lexa simply orders her gonas to shof op when they complain: Clarke doesn’t have that option. So she’s spent the whole day helping to settle minor quarrels and mentally cursing everyone for speaking too loudly.

When they get to Polis, Clarke is exhausted. Lexa has promised to help train her up – a generous offer, because she normally only trains Natbldias – but for the moment she’s as weak as a kitten. Months in solitary confinement haven’t done her any favours, but even before that there wasn’t a whole lot of exercise on the Ark. No space, for one; for another, they couldn’t afford the extra protein and carbs required to build muscle. So they were all slender but soft.

She spares a moment to envy Wells, Finn, Jasper and Monty, staying comfortably at TonDC. Lexa had, after some discussion, allowed Finn to remain in TonDC (largely because Clarke was smart enough to wait until after two mugs of fayowada), but she’d left orders with Indra and Anya that none of the Skaikru there were to be trusted with weaponry. Wells, meanwhile, had accepted Clarke leaving much more evenly than she’d expected him to – it was like her forgiving him had somehow helped him reach closure. She wondered if he’d thought for the past year that if it weren’t for that, she would fall in love with him, but now he had the proof she wouldn’t. Or maybe it was just that she’d changed, and even if he was attributing it to her solitary confinement, he couldn’t help but notice it.

They’d hugged goodbye, like old friends, like best friends. Promised each other they’d stay safe. Then left each other without too much fuss.
Clarke can’t help comparing it to the boy who got arrested to stay with her.

Once they’re in Polis Lexa steers her into her old ambassador room, and tucks her into the bed in a way that’s not at all Commander-like. “Sleep, Clarke,” she murmurs in her soft voice. “Get some rest.”

She claws her way back to consciousness for a second to say “The others?”

“In the lower levels, for the moment,” Lexa replies. “We’ll find other places for them tomorrow.”

Clarke nods, or maybe just dreams she nods, and when she next opens her eyes the whole world is bright and there’s a knock on her door.

She tries to get out of bed but instead just manages to roll onto the floor (well done, Clarke) and calls out “Come in” anyway because she knows it’s Lexa and she doesn’t have to be too dignified with Lexa.

It’s not Lexa.

Gustus bows his head for a second, then raises it again and looks at her in a way that’s not at all as docile as the gesture of respect made him seem. “Good morning, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

“Just Clarke is fine,” Clarke yawns, forcing herself to her feet. “Where are my people? Are they awake yet?”

“Being awakened now, on Heda’s orders,” Gustus says, his voice stressing the last bit as if worried she’ll try and countermand Lexa.

She’s not that stupid. “Okay, take me to them,” she says instead, deciding she can worry about little things like changing clothes and bathing later. If they’re sorting out where her people are going she should be there.

In front of the building, a large space has been cleared, the food-sellers ordered back, so that the 100 can be there. Every single one of them looks more awake than Clarke – but then, they hadn’t had to stay up until near-dawn in TonDC trying to persuade Lexa that Finn wouldn’t (and, in fact, couldn’t) slaughter the town.

Lexa moves into view. She looks far more awake than Clarke as well.

Clarke wonders if it’s being a Nightblood, or being used to very little sleep after years of being the Commander, or if it’s just one of Lexa’s personality traits. Then, when Lexa gives her a slightly-too-amused look at her dishevelled appearance, she stops wondering and just focuses on glaring at Lexa.

Gustus clears his throat. “On Heda’s orders, sent by messenger, I have found places as a yongon, apprentice or Sekon for you all. Heda believes that through talk with Clarke kom Skaikru -” he casts a slightly disparaging glance at Clarke – “you can choose which will take each role. She is to have final say. They include tichas, gonas -”

The list is reasonably long. Even better, it includes nothing that Clarke thinks would make people actively try and leave Polis. She’s not sure who she could sell the idea of being a sanitation worker or something to (though the thought of forcing Murphy to do it is kind of enjoyable. And since his nose is still broken, the smell wouldn’t bother him).

The rest of the morning is long and filled with arguments. Bellamy becomes a teacher as promised, Miller becomes a gona, Charlotte is given to a couple who lost their child, Clarke flags a position as
an apprentice metalworker for Finn when he gets there later on, and Murphy ends up as (of all things) an apprentice woodworker. (In Clarke’s defence, he doesn’t seem to really have any skills, at least none he’ll admit to besides bullying, and she doesn’t trust him as a gona). The biggest argument occurs when Octavia tries to sign up to be someone’s Sekon.

“Oh, hell no,” Bellamy says angrily. “That’s not safe at all, O. Look, you can make clothes or something.”

“Make clothes or something?” Octavia nearly shrieks. “I don’t want to make clothes. I want to learn to fight.”

“Not a chance,” Bellamy says flatly, and the siblings glare at each other.

Clarke decides it’s time to intervene. “Octavia, you’re coming back to TonDC with me in less than a week for a visit, remember? Maybe decide on something after that. Until then you can be my assistant.”

“You need an assistant?” Octavia says, sounding doubtful. She doesn’t look at all thrilled at the idea, but her brother’s anger is making her pause. She hasn’t quite gotten rid of the automatic response to his authority yet.

Clarke shrugs. “Or a bodyguard, or an advisor. Whatever you want to call it. I just need someone to come along with me and help out, I can’t handle all this stuff on my own.”

Octavia reluctantly agrees, and Bellamy flashes Clarke a grateful look. She decides not to tell him that as soon as they’re on the road to TonDC she (possibly with Lexa’s help) will start training Octavia to fight. And then, when they get there, she suspects Lincoln will take over the job.

Clarke’s asleep almost before she hits the bed that night as well.

The next day they sort out places for everyone to stay near where they’re working – the 100 are very spread out, which Clarke suspects is on purpose. Lexa accompanies them to each place they settle one of the delinquents, sparing five minutes to tell their new foster parent, master or Fos that they have pleased their Heda. Clarke suspects money or some other inducement has also changed hands, but Lexa simply calls it an investment.

With all her guards and the 100, they make an impressive procession through the city, and Clarke is struck by how the population stare at Lexa like she’s something more than mortal. She touches their hands sometimes as they pass, stops for a brief conversation. Clarke doesn’t understand the AI in Lexa’s brain, and she doesn’t totally understand all the mythology behind being the Commander, but she does know that this show of worship owes itself at least as much to Lexa’s acts as it does to her position. Her people adore her, in their tough, stoic way.

Clarke seriously regrets making Octavia her assistant later that night. But then, her and Lexa’s dinner would not be exactly private anyway, given all the guards.

“Where’s Gustus?” Clarke asks curiously, swallowing some chicken that may be the best thing she’s ever tasted. Grounder food is ridiculously good. Octavia is making little moaning noises from down the table as she eats hers – even more understandable, since she’s probably never had anything but scraps before.

Lexa shrugs. “I have reassigned him to guarding the Natblidas.”

“Natblidas?” Octavia says indistinctly.
“When I die, the Commander spirit will pass on,” Lexa answers her. “It will choose one of the Natblidas, as it once chose me. One will be the new Heda.”

“Which won’t be for a very long time,” Clarke says, a little too harshly, and makes herself calm down. She forces a smile. “I need your spirit right where it is.”

Lexa’s amusement shows in her eyes. “After all, I may be heartless, but at least I’m smart?” You can tell from her voice she’s quoting.

Octavia’s looking at them oddly. Clarke coughs and looks away from Lexa. “Something like that.”

Lexa finishes and stands. “I must go now to speak with the other – I mean, I must speak to the ambassadors. We have a meeting tonight to discuss the Skaikru.”

“Should we come?” Clarke asks.

“I can handle it, Clarke,” Lexa assures her. “Tomorrow, we will need to see how some of your people go on in their new places, in case there are problems we have not thought of yet.”

“Well that was weird,” Octavia says, as soon as Lexa’s gone.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why’s she having dinner with us at all?” Octavia points out. “This place is huge, she’s in charge of tens of thousands of people at least, maybe hundreds of thousands. We have less than a hundred people. But she’s spending all her time on us.”

“We’re new,” Clarke says dismissively.

Octavia is undeterred. “And tomorrow, she’s going to wander around the city with us checking on how our people are going. One by one. After spending the last five days speaking to our leader, escorting us across the country, and helping find everyone somewhere nice to stay. Doesn’t that seem a little strange to you?”

“She has her reasons,” Clarke says.

“I just can’t help thinking she has plans that we don’t know,” Octavia continues.

Clarke shakes her head. “I know her plans, Octavia, I promise,” she says softly. “Please, just trust me, okay?”

There’s a long pause. “How can I do that when I’m pretty sure you’re lying?”

“What do you mean?” Clarke goes cold with fear.

There’s another long silence, then Octavia sighs. “Nothing,” she says finally. “Sorry, Clarke. I guess I’m just being paranoid.”

Clarke smiles at her, feeling like a huge fake. Her chicken tastes dry now. “That’s okay.” She stands up. “I’m going to go see if I can get a bath, it’s been way too long, I feel caked with dirt. Most of the others managed to grab one yesterday but I was too busy with all that stuff.”

Clarke walks away, but she can still feel Octavia’s thoughtful gaze on the back of her neck.
Wow! Three hundred reviews! I'll be honest, I didn't remotely expect to get this far into this fic. I hope you're all still enjoying it! Obviously I'm enjoying it. Mostly because of you guys, who are all beyond amazing (especially Cassandra. Your reviews give me much happy).

Update for anyone who cares about my personal life: homophobic grandma was very polite (even though she beat us at Trivial Pursuit) but proceeded to cry over the phone to her son about her unfortunate queer granddaughter. The rest of my future in-laws were so lovely this visit that I'm considering moving permanently to Melbourne so I can hang out with them all the time (right now it's an eight hour drive away, which is why I don't know them as well as I should.) If I didn't hate cities so much, anyway.
Polis Brutality

Chapter Summary

Clarke and Lexa check how everyone's going, and hit a snag.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is something comforting about walking through Polis with Clarke by her side. Perhaps Lexa should instead be training the Natblidas or continuing to work on the trade agreements, but she cannot stop herself from claiming this time for her own happiness.

Lexa knows there will never be a day they owe nothing more to their people – this is a beautiful fiction. However, there will be minutes, hours, even days she can steal for herself. She would not have stolen so much time from her duties in the previous world, but when she lay dying there she did not think of her people. She thought of Clarke.

Perhaps when she dies in this world it will be the opposite – she will regret wasting so much time with Clarke, and wish she had worked harder for her people – but Lexa doubts it.

“We’re up to Bellamy, finally,” Clarke says, checking her list.

She’s been waiting for them to reach him, tense with worry. Octavia, trailing behind them with the guards, perks up a little.

Most of their stops so far have been quick but boring – Lexa has watched Skaikru learning how to plant seeds, Skaikru learning the correct stance for fighting, Skaikru learning how to hold a bow for hunting, and Skaikru learning basic chores such as cleaning cloth, among others. A few appear to already have skills in things such as planting, but the majority have a skill level far below their years. However, Gustus appears to have chosen people well (Lexa is glad his last duty directly serving her has been so successful). Those with Skaikru apprentices or Sekons seem more inclined to amusement than anger about their charges’ incompetency.

When the Skaikru were gun-wielding invaders who destroyed a village and might be allied with the Maunon, they were a threat. Coming from the stars, they seemed distant and enigmatic, their ways alien, closer to the Mountain than their own. But now the Trikru see them as children, barely capable, and this means the strangeness of their ways is seen as funny instead of something to be feared.

And the Skaikru seem to be dealing well too – Lexa has waited outside for most of the checks, but has still seen a boy named Miller scowling in concentration as he learns how to perform a basic punch. She has seen a girl named Monroe kneading bread like it personally offends her. She has seen a girl named Harper examining a basic hunting bow as if it is something rare, a boy named Jones sharpening a blade like it's something precious. They seem to desperately want to learn, to be useful, to contribute. This is not a view she has had of the Sky People before.

Lexa greets the hedditha respectfully, then asks “Where are Bellamy kom Skaikru and his class?” She knows her voice cools on Bellamy’s name; she cannot help it, but nevertheless almost feels guilt
Clarke does not like that Lexa distrusts some of her people. Perhaps she fears Lexa will take a more permanent approach to dealing with them, which is something Lexa has considered. Clarke insists that in this world, they will not be threats. Perhaps this is true, but Lexa cannot live as though the other world never existed. For her, it did. It is not about blame or anger, certainly not about revenge, but instead about the potential danger they bring to her people. That danger still exists.

Unthinkingly, she touches her hand to the pouch Indra gave her.

*Not yet.*

“Through there, Heda,” the man points, and Lexa nods and walks in the direction indicated. There, behind the building, Bellamy sits on the ground in a circle with nearly a dozen Trikru children, all so focused they don’t even look up as Lexa and the others reach them. They look perhaps seven, too young to know much gonasleng at all, and Lexa wonders how Bellamy has been teaching them without sharing more than a few words in each of their languages.

Then he answers her question. “My name is Bellamy. What is your name?” He points to a child across the circle. There is a practiced feel to this, as if they’ve been doing this for some time.

“My name is Hezan,” the child says proudly, speaking the words like he knows them by heart. “What is you name?” He points to a child opposite himself.

“What is *your* name,” Bellamy corrects.

“What is *your* name?” Hezan says, pointing to the same child again.

By unspoken agreement, Lexa, Clarke and Octavia move back a few steps into the shade, and listen spellbound to Bellamy’s lesson. After they’ve played the game for some time and everyone seems to know the correct question and answer, Bellamy starts to teach them how to say they are of the Woods clan - someone must have told him they needed to know that.

He doesn’t teach like a Trikru ticha would. Their method involves translating Trigedasleng into gonasleng word by word, and learning those by rote. Later on, the different way of placing your words in each language is taught to the student, but not always perfectly. Just listening to minutes of Bellamy’s teaching makes Lexa realise that this way is more effective.

“He is a good teacher,” she says quietly to Clarke, partly because it is true, and partly as apology for the caution and dislike she often shows towards some members of Clarke’s kru. She does not wish Clarke to fear what she may do to Bellamy. “Perhaps someday he will teach the Natblidas.” He will not. But it is a peace offering, of a kind.

“We shouldn’t interrupt the class,” Octavia says in an undertone. Her eyes are shining as she watches her brother, sitting in a circle of children in the sunshine like he belongs there. And Lexa thinks perhaps he does – none of the tension and anger in his frame show while he is like this, when he gently encourages a shy goufa to say the correct words, when he says “Good!” and claps the girl’s success, when he smiles at her proudly.

Lexa nearly jumps when she feels Clarke’s hand clasp hers. Octavia is watching Bellamy, and the guards look outward, but she still did not expect Clarke to show affection in public. As always, Clarke’s touch burns her a little, makes her overly warm, makes her lighter. “Look at this,” Clarke whispers in her ear, sounding so happy that it nearly makes Lexa smile as well. “We did something good. Whatever else happens, this is something *good.*”
Unfortunately, that night is when the first problem occurs.

She has kept Titus at a distance even greater than Gustus, asking him to deal with her day to day duties while she handles the Skaikru. It is only a temporary plan, she knows, but she has been working on some ideas that will involve him leaving Polis altogether for some time. It has been working, as well. He has not so much as met a Skaikru yet.

It is a shame the first one he encounters happens to be Murphy.

It is even more regrettable that when Titus encounters Murphy, it is because a citizen of Polis has discovered Murphy inside her house stealing food, and dragged him to Titus for justice since Lexa could not be found.

As a result, when Lexa, Clarke and Octavia return for dinner, they find an angry Titus holding an even angrier Murphy by the back of his shirt. He shoves the boy forward at Clarke. “This Skaikru was caught stealing. We do not tolerate thieves here.” Murphy glares at him.

There is a momentary pause, then Clarke says “Stealing what?”

“Just some bread,” Murphy says furiously, his broken nose making his words slightly indistinct. Lexa wonders who broke it and hopes it was not Titus, then realises the injury is days old and relaxes slightly. “That psycho you’re making me work for wouldn’t give me anything for lunch.”

Clarke frowns. “Why not?”

Murphy shrugs, though Lexa can see that his face flushes slightly at the question. “Who knows. Just on a power trip, I bet. Or maybe he wanted to eat all my food.”

They’d visited Murphy in the morning – he had been one of the first Clarke wanted to check on. It had been a brief stop, Lexa waiting outside, but Clarke had reported that the man Murphy had been made apprentice to seemed perfectly nice, carefully teaching him how to cut and shape the wood.

“I see,” Lexa says, keeping her voice flat as she tries to remain objective. “I shall have to call him in and get his account of this.”

“Or you could just tell us the truth now,” Clarke suggests to Murphy.

Murphy glared at her. “Oh, shut up, little miss perfect, you don’t know if I’m lying.”

“Well, you’re talking, so I assume…” Clarke says, and then sighs, not finishing the barb. “Murphy, just tell me what actually happened.”

“Fine,” Murphy snaps, “I said working with wood was really fucking boring and his furniture was ugly, he bitched that it was his life’s work and how dare I and called me an ungrateful brain water or something like that, and I threw the saw at him. Then he said I couldn’t have lunch.”

Clarke puts her head in her hands. “So then the obvious next step was to break into someone’s house.”

“I don’t even know why we’re here, Princess,” he says furiously. “No one bothered to ask me. You attacked me like a crazy person, you took my gun, you forced us all to come stay with these savages and be slaves for them… what’s wrong with you? For that matter, what the hell was wrong with staying at the drop ship?”

“You only liked it because you were in charge, or at least high up enough that you didn’t have to do
any real work,” Clarke says accusingly. “You went and threw the occasional knife at a pig – badly – and tortured anyone you could find an excuse to, and that was it. You didn’t do anything else.”

“It’s called a management role,” he snarked back. “Like what you’re doing now, right? I don’t see you getting splinters in your hands for your food.”

“Shut up, Murphy.” Octavia cuts in, apparently out of patience. “Clarke’s been doing nothing but work since we got here, I’ve been following her, trust me. You don’t know a damn thing.”

“This is all irrelevant to the point at hand,” Titus says, annoyed. “This branwada must be punished for his crime.”

“I am not normally required to deal with crimes as small as stealing bread,” Lexa observes.

“You have taken responsibility for these Skaikru, against advice,” Titus says stiffly. “The woman whose food was stolen did not know whether our laws applied, or whether he was to have no punishment as he is under your protection, or whether he was to be thrown out of Polis for his ingratitude.”

“He is to get the same punishment as would apply for any of my people,” Lexa says. “For minor theft, two nights and two days without food. Place him in a cell.” She does not look at Clarke. If they were by themselves and the crime wasn’t widely known, perhaps she could afford to be gentler towards him. But they are not alone, Titus is here, and the woman who was stolen from has no doubt already told many on the way to Titus. If nothing else, she would have to explain why she was dragging a struggling Skai boy.

Titus inclines his head. “Sha, Heda.” He grabs Murphy again and leads the twisting, angry boy away as he shouts expletives.

“Are you kidding?” Octavia says. “I mean, Murphy’s a dick, but -”

“That was a little harsh, Lexa,” Clarke agrees. Lexa is just grateful that for once Clarke has waited until there are not as many people around to argue with her. “I mean, he just took some bread. And he’s right, we didn’t exactly give him much of a choice about coming here. Can’t you let him off with just missing a meal or something? Two days in a cell with no food is just going to make him dislike your people even more.”

“And allowing a Skai person to commit crimes in Polis without proper punishment will make my people dislike yours even more, Clarke,” Lexa points out. “I cannot treat your people better than my own.”

“Blood must not have blood -”

“But there will not be blood,” Lexa interrupts. She dislikes fighting with Clarke, but she cannot back down on this one. “If punishments for crimes are to be lessened, it must be decided on for all people, and announced so that they know. I cannot just begin handing out lighter punishments to your friends.”

“Hardly her friend, she broke his nose the other day,” mutters Octavia, and Lexa feels a swell of pride in her fierce Clarke. “But Clarke’s right, this is harsh. If he’d known you were going to punish him like that, he probably wouldn’t have taken the bread.”

“So your people do not punish this harshly for theft?” Lexa asks, honestly curious.

There’s an awkward pause. Octavia coughs and looks to the side. It is all the answer Lexa needs.
Clarke hesitates, looking faintly guilty, then opens her mouth, no doubt to begin explaining that whatever the Ark does, they should be striving to be better down here.

At this moment, Lexa is in no mood for it. She has been doing nothing but striving for better in the past week, and this has involved cutting out and sidelining her own people, people she cares for. In fact, it has also involved giving unearned trust to people she knows to be dangerous, simply because Clarke cares for them. “I see,” she says, voice arctic. “Like always, you expect more of my people than you do of your own.”

She turns and leaves. Before she closes the door behind her, she hears Octavia say, “What does she mean, like always?”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you like this, but I suspect many of you probably won’t because of the argument. However, it is just a minor one. And making up is fun :)
“Thank you,” Clarke says from the doorway of the room.

Lexa opens her eyes. Clarke can see she was meditating, perhaps trying to relax after their argument before.

Clarke found it difficult to relax after that too. She takes several steps into Lexa’s room and repeats, “Thank you.” She holds up the sketch pad and pencils that only Lexa could have left in her room. “Thank you for remembering.”

She meets Lexa’s eyes and sees the other woman register the double meaning. “You’re welcome, Clarke.” Lexa clears her throat. “Is that why you have come, to say thank you?”

“No,” Clarke admits. Some art supplies are not why she’s here. That was just a reminder to her that Lexa is a good person, a great one, in fact. That she’s not trying to hurt Clarke, she’s not even trying to hurt Murphy. Like Clarke, she is just trying to do what’s best for both of their people. But unlike Clarke, she’s good at seeing them as a shared people, good at seeing exactly what needs to be done. “I came to say you’re right. I do expect more of your people than I do of my own. But you need to understand, that’s not because I think less of your people. It’s the opposite. It’s because I think more of you.”

“Mochof, Clarke,” Lexa says, but she still looks unhappy. Perhaps she too had been expecting more of an argument, a screaming match, even – some real outlet for the tension they keep producing between them. It fizzles between them even now, Clarke can feel it. It’s hard to be around someone you feel so much for and hold yourself back, and she wonders if that’s why she overreacted earlier. If it wasn’t about her people, about Murphy, but instead about the fact that Lexa was right there and she still couldn’t touch her.

“I should be the one saying thank you, after all you’ve done,” Clarke continues softly. “And I’m sorry. I should be saying that too. I’m really sorry. We do need to use the same punishments for my people and yours, otherwise things will go south quickly, I get that. It was a gut reaction and I was being a hypocrite. I hope someday we can make the punishments we use for our people less severe. Maybe peacetime – making a strong, lasting peace – will let us do that eventually. But right now, Murphy spending a couple of days in a pit isn’t the end of the world.” She smiles at Lexa. “If nothing else, at least it’ll be quieter.”

Now Lexa manages a slight smile, which warms Clarke’s heart. Lexa smiles so infrequently that each one she gets to see feels like a gift. “I too am sorry, Clarke. I should have consulted you before I gave the order. I simply did not wish to do that in front of Titus.”

“I understand that,” Clarke says. Lexa is still smiling, leaning forward, the many candles burning in
the room warming the air and giving a glow to her face. “That was… totally understandable.” Great, now she sounds like a moron. But how can she think straight when Lexa is smiling at her like that?

“I’ve instructed the woodworker to not demand further labour from Murphy when he is let out of his cell, but to provide food for him anyway,” Lexa says. “We can make further plans once we return from TonDC, if it seems necessary. I do not wish your people to refuse to contribute and be viewed as a burden on mine, but I also do not wish to strain things between our people by forcing Murphy to do work he will only resent and avoid.”

“For the moment, that should work,” Clarke says. She tries to think of something to do with Murphy. Maybe after the trip to TonDC she can make him her assistant instead of Octavia, getting a gona (maybe even Indra) to take Octavia on as a Seken – that will also get the increasingly suspicious Octavia out of her immediate vicinity. However, the idea of spending all day every day with Murphy makes her cringe, and she’s sure he’ll be much less useful than Octavia has been.

Lexa raises her eyebrows as Clarke remains in the room. “Was that all?” There’s still constraint in her voice, despite the smile. Clarke feels like she’s created distance between them by overreacting about Murphy. That wasn’t what she wanted at all. Sometimes she has a blind spot for her people. Often, even. Maybe, in time, she’ll be like Lexa – able to move beyond that way of thinking, able to see things more clearly. Right now, her gut response is always that they’re her people, her responsibility, her job. That she should be shielding them. But that’s almost patronising, isn’t it? Her people need to face consequences. Trying to make it so they didn’t last time only ended with Lexa bleeding out in front of her, a casualty of compassion. Something Lexa has never blamed her for, and knowing her, never will.

“I was hoping,” Clarke says, and hesitates. She hasn’t thought this through totally, but she knows what she wants. “I was hoping you’d let me draw you. While you’re awake, this time.” She tries not to show how badly she wants this on her face, but probably fails. She’s always wanted to draw Lexa, to capture her, in a way she never felt the urge to with anyone else, but she was too busy and then too proud to ask. Even with her parents, Wells, Finn – well, even with all the other people she’s loved, she’s never so badly wanted the chance to spend hours staring at them, showing the warmth in their eyes, immortalising the quirk of their lips in a way she can keep.

Hopefully, in this world she’ll get to keep the real Lexa as well.

Lexa considers this. “That is fine,” she says. Her smile returns, sweet and hopeful, a smile that says Lexa far more than Heda.

She’s never drawn Lexa like this before. And while Lexa is beautiful in sleep there’s something undefinable in her poise and in her expressions that makes her beauty stronger, tougher, imbued with quiet power. She’s a challenge to draw, more so than anyone else Clarke has ever drawn, since she doesn’t think she’ll ever be able capture everything that’s there.

She does manage to get Lexa’s smile, though, which stays on her face as she studies Clarke.

“Can you do a picture of yourself for me?” Lexa asks eventually. “I would like a picture of you.” The request feels like a fist squeezing Clarke’s heart. It’s so… so Lexa. Her Lexa.

“I can’t draw myself well,” Clarke admits. “I’ve tried before, it never comes out looking quite like me. Maybe because I have to draw it from a reflection, so it’s back to front. Lincoln can draw, I suppose we could ask him.”

“Perhaps I shall,” Lexa says, smile broadening slightly. “His confusion would be very amusing. He is no doubt already wondering why I troubled to ask both Anya and Indra specifically about him.
“That confused them, as well.”

“It’s hard, knowing who could become important,” Clarke replies, trying to sketch the glow in Lexa’s green eyes. It’s impossible, of course. Some things can’t be put on paper. “I mean, they’re all important, but you know what I mean. We’re paying closer attention to people on the basis of what they might do. Who they might be. It’s difficult, knowing more.”

“Yes,” Lexa says. “Yes, exactly. It is difficult, knowing what might happen, knowing how much we have to lose.” She meets Clarke’s eyes.

There is such tangible emotion in them that Clarke nearly forgets that she’s drawing. She drops the pencil. “Lexa,” she says, and it’s a breath more than a word.

“Clarke,” Lexa says solemnly, her eyes still filled with so much love that it makes Clarke weak. But not simple, childish love – love tangled with loss and certainty and friendship and fear and sacrifice. Love that has weathered betrayal, grief, violence, divided loyalties. Love so strong that Clarke half-believes that it’s the reason they could rip through time itself. “You make it much less difficult. Thank you for being here with me.”

Clarke doesn’t know if she means being the only other person to remember, or if she means in Lexa’s room specifically. It doesn’t really matter. She takes several steps forward and pulls Lexa up so that their lips can meet.

The kiss starts out softly, emotionally, but then Clarke feels the fire between them flare when Lexa pulls very slightly at her hair and from then it’s pure passion. She pulls Lexa as close to her as she can, digging her fingers into her like that will prove the other girl is real, and is rewarded with a gasp that she feels through her whole body. Lexa’s skin is warm and impossibly smooth, she can’t stop touching it, but there’s not enough on display. Clarke mouths at Lexa’s neck, and her shivers of pleasure vibrate through Clarke and turn her on unbearably.

“Clarke,” Lexa moans, in a very different tone than she used before. She scratches the nails of her right hand against Clarke’s back through shirt and Clarke shudders uncontrollably.

They have hours, hell, they may have days, weeks, even months. They might have forever. They should take it slow, softly, nicely, they should spend the time that they couldn’t afford the first time they were together, but right now Clarke couldn’t care less. Sometime she will kiss every inch of Lexa’s body, she will kiss every scar and tattoo, she will build her up so slowly that it’s like a rising symphony. Let them take it slow later or tomorrow or next week, right now Clarke couldn’t care less. They will touch every inch of Lexa’s body, she will kiss every scar and tattoo, she will build her up so slowly that it’s like a rising symphony. Let them take it slow later or tomorrow or next week, right now Clarke couldn’t care less.

She yanks at Lexa’s nightgown, finally managing to pull the straps to the side and kissing where they were, Lexa’s strong tanned shoulders. Lexa carries the weight of the world on these, and she carries Clarke, and she tastes like honey and salt and Lexa, and it’s all too much but she needs more, and she moves her mouth to Lexa’s to kiss her again hungrily.

Lexa seems to be on the same page, trying uselessly to tear off Clarke’s top without letting go of her, pressing her lips frantically to Clarke’s face and neck while she does it, licking her way up Clarke’s neck with a whimper. Clarke pulls back – her body protesting every inch – and yanks off her top before going back into the heat and the taste and Lexa, always Lexa, only Lexa. The whole world narrows to Lexa as her nightgown hits the floor, face flushed, and Clarke runs her trembling hands all over Lexa, pressing in, wanting her so badly, because her skin is like warm silk and her eyes are forest green in the candle-lit room and Clarke loves her.
“Clarke,” Lexa says hoarsely, “Please.” And Clarke licks at her nipples, hard rose-coloured darts against her light honey-tasting skin with its summer tan, and Lexa’s body flexes like a bow being pulled back, the tension in her winding up, begging for a release. Then Clarke falls to her knees.

Clarke can feel the wetness between her own legs, how desperately she wants Lexa’s hands or mouth or even leg against her, how she wants to writhe and ride her way to incoherency more than she’s ever wanted anything. But she licks into Lexa instead because the taste of her is just as good, especially because of what it means, because what it means is that Lexa wants her, and it’s Lexa, and she thinks she could almost come without being touched at all, just from the knowledge that her tongue is against Lexa, on Lexa, inside Lexa. Her Lexa. The second time, the second chance she never thought she’d get.

Lexa makes a little noise and drags Clarke up, taking her away from that taste, and kisses it off Clarke’s wet lips, tasting herself on them. “Not like that,” she says, voice so ragged that she’s barely comprehensible. “Together.” And she draws Clarke towards her bed, pulling her down on top of it, on top of Lexa, rubbing her finger against Clarke’s hard, desperate little clit, moving the wetness around with her fingers. Clarke whimpers but obeys, moving her face to nuzzle into Lexa’s neck because she can’t focus enough right now to do anything but deliver wet, open-mouthed kisses along the line of it, she’s so wet, so desperately wet. She rubs her fingers against Lexa as well, and half moves against Lexa’s fingers, half against the press of her firm, silky thigh. It builds so fast that she’s gasping and half-sobbing in seconds, twisting against the insistent press of Lexa’s strong fingers as they circle her and flick back and forth and stroke her away, circling the edge of oblivion, the edge of ecstasy. Every move is a moan but she presses harder against Lexa because there’s more and she wants it. When she comes it’s with a short, sharp scream, the pleasure slamming into her unavoidably and roughly, barrelling through her. And then every breath and movement is another, shorter hit of that, until she is squirming away from it, toomuchtoomuchtoomuch. And squirming towards at the same time because she wants more. This isn’t sex, this is heaven, and she’s almost scared by the feeling of it “oh, oh, OH!” because it is so much and she’s not sure she’s designed for that much “OHHHH!” but Lexa is losing it too, whimpering as Clarke sends her to the same place, screwing her eyes up and chanting Clarke’s name, her spare hand digging into Clarke’s back as it hits her. Her other hand is slowing against Clarke’s wetness, and then the shock of it all is fading into twisting, panting aftershocks, pleasant little hills of pleasure after Lexa just sent her up to the goddamn stars.

“That was amazing,” Clarke manages to say breathlessly after a while. “Lexa.”

Clarke, Lexa mimics, and kisses her. The kiss is long, open-mouthed, filled with the taste of them and what they’ve just done, and Lexa is beautiful and smiling and relaxed below her, all that strength and control uncoiled into happiness, and Clarke wants her again. So this time, they do it slow.

Clarke is the first to wake, hours later. It occurs to her that she probably shouldn’t be in Lexa’s bed. Even if neither Titus nor Gustus are in charge of waking Lexa at the moment, it’s probably a bad idea to be too blatant about this. She should have thought of that earlier.

She manages to get dressed and stagger out. She lets herself into her room in the half-darkness of before dawn, then freezes.

A person lying on her bed sits up.

Octavia looks at her blearily, blinking sleep out of her eyes. “You’ve been gone a while,” she accuses.
“I – don’t you have your own room?” Clarke says.

“Yeah,” Octavia says. “But I came to see you earlier and you weren’t here.”

Clarke forces a smile. “Just going over some things with Lexa.”

“Oh, I know,” Octavia says, and her glare nails Clarke to the wall. “Her room was one of the first places I checked. I didn’t knock, though, because I could hear from the corridor that you really didn’t want to be disturbed. So then I waited here to talk to you about that.”

“Oh.” Clarke closes her eyes, then opens them again, regroups. “Listen, Octavia, what’s between me and Lexa is our business -”

“No, it isn’t!” Octavia says, managing to keep her voice down but still convey her anger. “She’s their goddamn leader, Clarke! This is going to affect the rest of us!” She takes several steps towards Clarke. “Is this the ‘plans’ of hers you said you knew about? Did you trade yourself to Lexa to keep us safe?”

“No. No, Lexa would never ask for that.”

“So you’re sleeping with her because, what? Because you like her?” Octavia sounds even more furious now. “You’re willing to endanger all of us because you want to get laid? Because you have a crush on someone you’ve known less than a week? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m not endangering us,” Clarke defends herself. “The relationship between me and Lexa has nothing to do with anyone else.”

“And what happens when you guys break up? When things go wrong, we’re the people she’ll take it out on, all of us,” Octavia says angrily. “Have you thought about that at all?”

“She won’t,” Clarke says strongly. “I promise, Octavia, we’re all fine. We’re all safe. And what’s between me and Lexa will not affect that.” She meets Octavia’s eyes directly, letting the sincerity in her words sink in.

After a long pause, Octavia exhales. “I hope you know what the hell you’re doing,” she says, no longer angry, just grim and tired.

It’s ironic that she’s getting this lecture from Octavia of all people. Clarke walks forward and touches her shoulder, trying to comfort her. “I promise you, Octavia, no one is going to be hurt by this. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Octavia stares at her, nods abruptly in a way that could be agreement but is more likely to just be acknowledgement, and leaves. Clarke’s hand drops back to her side.

She tries to tell herself that her last sentence was the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo I'm not great at sex scenes. But I tried! Points for trying?

I think a lot of you expected the argument to balloon. But I like to think that Clarke's grown up a lot from Lexa's death. This is a conflict which will come up again in this
story, though not necessarily between Clarke and Lexa.
Lexa makes some plans for her people - specifically, Titus and Gustus.

“Heda, I wish to speak with you.” It’s Titus.

Lexa looks up, trying to feign disinterest, but well aware of where this conversation will end up going – rapidly downhill, to be precise. “Of course, Titus. What issue do you wish to speak to me about?”

Titus frowns at her. “I have been informed that you are getting very… close, with the leader of the Sky People.”

“I was not aware my guards were such gossips,” Lexa says coolly. “Or that you would lower yourself to seek out such rumours.”

He flushes slightly, looking offended. “Your business is my business, Heda. I try only to help you.”

Lexa sighs. “I know that, Titus. Please, continue.” Inwardly, she thinks: you do not try and help me. You try and help the Commander. Right now, I have the Commander’s spirit, and as long as I behave as you wish, that means you will help me too. The second that changes… I must begin fearing bullets again.

These thoughts make her cold. She wants to view Titus as her teacher, her advisor, her guard, her fleimkepa. Like she did before. She hates that now when she sees him she checks his hands for a gun. But that cannot be helped. Like with Bellamy and Finn kom Skaikru, all she can do is try to limit the danger.

“I simply wish to make sure you are not allowing yourself to be influenced by her,” Titus says, unaware of her train of thought. “Hodnes laik kwelnes, Heda. The clans will see this relationship as weakness.”

“If you cannot influence me, do you really believe a Skai girl can?” Lexa says, remaining emotionless this time. She will not yell at him again – for all she knows, that’s what led him to think she had become weak in the other world. “Our relationship is… pleasant, but not in the way you are implying. It will not be a cause of weakness.” She begins walking, forcing Titus to keep pace with her.

He still frowns. “You have not sought such relationships before. You cannot blame me for being concerned.”

He means she hasn’t been with anyone since Costia, and he wants to know why now. The unspoken name angers her, as does the intrusion into her personal affairs. “Clarke is not Costia. Her company is enjoyable, and I intend to continue enjoying it, but I will not lose sight of my priorities. Our people come first.” By ‘our’, though, she doesn’t mean the Trikru or even the twelve clans. She means her
and Clarke’s people – all of their people – together.

“That is good to know, Heda,” Titus says. “Now, as for the thief.”

“He will take his punishment, the same as any thief,” Lexa says coldly. “He is not to be wounded, exiled, killed, or disturbed in any way except for the standard two days in a cell given for his crime. I will hear no more about it.”

“As you wish, Heda.”

She wonders how he will take the news that she wants Clarke as her advisor. Poorly, no doubt. So it is best if by the time it reaches him – by the time Clarke’s people fall to the ground – he is far from here. “I wished to speak to you as well, Titus.”

“Heda?” His brow knits again.

“I have heard concerning news from the North,” she states.

Titus bows his head. “Indeed. The Azgeda grow restless.”

“Not that. Other news.” She waits until he looks up at her before continuing. “They may have a Natblida they are training alone. They hope the Commander spirit will move to this Natblida when I die, and she will favour them over the other clans.”

He blinks, taken aback. “Nia would rule in all but name!”

Lexa nods. “Exactly. If true, I believe this is an indication that the Azgeda could use more oversight from their Heda. I would like you to go North.”

“Me? Heda, I cannot leave Polis. If you were called away, who would manage things here?”

“You are the most able to spot a Natblida,” Lexa says firmly. “You know what to look for. Nia will hesitate to harm you – she cannot afford to offend you, it would be an act of war and if she attacks I doubt she intends to warn us so usefully beforehand. It will be for perhaps a month. I will send a messenger when I require you.”

He sucks in a breath. “As you wish,” he says, a little more constriction in his voice than before. “So you will remain in Polis until my return?”

“No,” she says. “I plan to leave the day after tomorrow, and head West.”

“The Skaikru or the Maunon?” he asks bluntly.

“Both,” she says honestly. “Whatever the cause is, there is unrest in the area, and it must be dealt with. It is time to see how the ambassadors manage with us both away. I will let them know tonight.”

“There will be chaos, Heda!”

“I will not leave them with the power to go to war or to execute each other, Titus,” Lexa says firmly. “For one thing, I do not plan to leave enough gonas here for them to do more but ensure the safety of Polis. They may scheme and jockey for position, but they will not tear down the alliance in a few weeks. They can easily handle minor crimes, settle disputes, and negotiate trade agreements as a group. Perhaps experience in this will allow them to work together better in future.”

Titus looks agonised by this. Lexa can understand his concern – it wasn’t very long from now that the ambassadors were giving her a vote of no confidence in the other world, so she has some
concerns of her own. However, they would be fools to do a vote like that at the present, when Lexa’s people approve her actions. Even more, they would be fools to do it while she commands a large gonakru nearby. If she were them, she would wonder: if we depose Lexa, will she return and take back her position by force?

She wouldn’t. If she does not rule by the will of her people, she is no ruler. If she kills her people for her own status, then she is no peacekeeper. Her dark blood, her unquiet dreams, her unbranded back, they all tell the unchangeable truth – she is Heda. Whatever happens, she lives for her people. Lexa will not choose herself over the lives of those in Polis. But the ambassadors do not know this.

“You have never asked me to leave Polis before, Heda,” Titus observes.

Lexa shrugs. “The Natblidas needed training, but they are nearly grown now. The ambassadors needed watching, but the alliance has held for years now. I needed your advice, but I am Heda and I am the one who must make a path for our people. You are useful here, Titus. But you will be essential there. I need to know Nia’s plans. Beja, Titus. Do as I ask.”

There is a long pause, and then he gives a sharp jerk of his head to indicate unwilling agreement.

“Mochof,” Lexa says. “I doubt I will see you before you leave tomorrow. Go see the Natblidas and inform them you are leaving, and ready yourself for the journey.” She turns to leave, dismissing him, then hesitates. “Oh, and send Gustus to me now.”

She doesn’t check to see if she is obeyed, and sure enough, by the time she reaches her room Gustus is beside her.

“Oh, Heda.” He says cautiously. Gustus does not know what to make of her lately, Lexa knows. Her decisions seem random to him, especially the one to reassign him.

“You are to accompany Titus to the Azgeda,” Lexa says. “Pick ten gonas and take them with you – enough to protect the two of you, but not enough to offend Nia or give her cause to claim I am trying to threaten her.”

“Why me, Heda?” She can hear the hurt in his voice that he can only barely cover.

Perhaps she should be like Titus, and view this as weakness. Instead it warms her. Her Gustus and his open affection for her. “Because I trust you to defend me,” she says. It is the truth. “More than anyone else, I know you would never let harm come to me.” She hopes he hears what she cannot say. That unlike many others, she knows Gustus doesn’t fight and die for the coalition, or the Commander, or the Trikru. He holds Lexa herself in his heart. He would take poison for the chance of making her safer. What makes him a danger to Clarke and the Skaikru, makes him the ideal person to send North.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” he says, and the hurt in his voice has receded a little. But not completely.

“Beja, Gustus,” she says more quietly. “Nia will always hate me. Once she ruled, she was the first of all in her lands, able to order deaths with the snap of her fingers; now she has to obey the orders of another or be wiped out by the alliance. Now she must follow our laws. She has never accepted the loss of status, or the loss of the power she believed she got from her victims. I send Titus to find out if she has a Natblida she’s been hiding, and to see if he can learn any of her other plans.”

“And he needs my protection. Of course, Heda.”

“No. Any gona could protect him,” Lexa says flatly. “But you I trust to watch him as well as Nia.”
Gustus’ eyes widen, he’s surprised. “He’s loyal to you, Heda. I’m sure of that.”

“He’s loyal to the Heda,” Lexa touches her hand to the back of her neck very deliberately, so Gustus can see what she’s talking about. He was there when she got it, after all, and he has not left her side since except when specifically ordered to, and even then with reluctance. “Someday he could decide his loyalty belongs to the next Heda more than the current one.”

“I see,” Gustus says heavily. He probably does – Titus had tried to convince Lexa to retire him the previous year. He believed Lexa cared too much about Gustus for him to be an effective bodyguard. If Titus had his way, the only people who could talk to Lexa would be Titus himself and the former Commanders in her head.

But Lexa cannot live her life alone, not anymore.

“I will not fail you,” Gustus tells her, a promise in his voice.

Lexa swallows. I killed you, she wants to tell him. I failed you. But she cannot. Instead, she says, “You never have, and I know you will not this time. Be careful, Gustus. I do not trust Nia, and I do not trust Titus. But I trust you. So do not die. That is an order from your Heda.”

“I would never disobey an order from my Heda,” Gustus says, with a gruff smile, and they stand there, just looking at each other, for a long moment.

She will miss him.

Chapter End Notes

Not really any Clexa in this chapter, sorry. But I do have to have them interacting with other people because otherwise the plot would be very, very slow. Plus, while I'm a huge Clexa fan, I also love writing about Clarke and Lexa's friendships and relationships with other people. I think they have the most interesting ones out of the show, especially Lexa.
Cold Calling

Chapter Summary

And it's time to leave Polis.

Octavia’s glare continues to burn into the back of Clarke’s neck as they ride – ineptly – towards TonDC. After a while of this, she gives the quiet Lexa a regretful look and drops back to ride next to Octavia instead. It’s time they talked, even if she’d rather continue admiring the way the light makes shadows out of Lexa’s ridiculously long and curly eyelashes.

“Okay, out with it,” Clarke says softly.

“Out with what?”

“Whatever you’re trying to send me by really angry telepathy,” Clarke gives Octavia an unimpressed look.

“I was just thinking that you don’t seem to care much about the Ark,” Octavia says. “Or Atom, Trina and Pascal, either. You’re all about Her Majesty there.”

Clarke glares back at her for that. They’ve been riding for hours, she’s sore (though admittedly she was a bit sore before they started riding, and for much more pleasant reasons). She has a headache, a backache, a severe case of déjà vu, and no patience for this right now. “I care enough to ride for nearly a whole day, Octavia. That’s how much I care. Unlike you, I’m not here just to rebel against my brother.”

“Hey, it took me an hour to talk Bellamy into letting me go. I had to promise I’d be really careful and stick with you and the others at all times. I want to know what happened to Atom,” Octavia says. “If he’s all right. This isn’t rebellion.”

At that, Clarke’s annoyance vanishes a little bit. She reaches out and pats Octavia’s hand, risking falling off her mount. “Hey. We’ll find out what happened to him, I promise.”

There’s a moment of silence. “You think he’s dead, don’t you.”

It’s a statement more than a question, but Clarke replies anyway. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry, Octavia.”

“No. I think you’re right.” She sounds sad, but not heartbroken, not really. Octavia’s always tougher than Clarke expects her to be. Perhaps growing up under floorboards makes everything after seem much better in comparison. “The fog probably got him.”

Lexa’s stopped ahead of them. Several of the horses are moving restlessly, unnerved, as a star falls from the sky, blazing down just like the drop ship must have. It’s almost beautiful.

“That looks like it is for you, Clarke,” Lexa comments. “I must go to TonDC and speak to Indra. You and Octavia should take half the group and go towards your message.”

Octavia’s still staring up at the sky, mouth wide open. “What the hell,” she manages finally. “Right when we got near here. What are the odds?”
It’s probably not a good idea to answer that.

Lexa gives Clarke a nod of farewell, then gestures to the others and rides off. Exactly half of the gonas they brought split off and follow her. Clarke notices they ride much faster without having to slow down for the cumbersome Sky People.

Clarke steers her horse towards Raven, and presses her heels against it uncertainly. She got more used to horses over time, but she doubts she’ll ever be as comfortable with them as Lexa and the other Trikru. She estimates it will take a few more hours at least to get to the fallen pod, even if she’s willing to learn how to canter. They should still get there earlier than the other world, but she hopes nothing happens to Raven anyway.

After a while she pulls back on the reins – possibly too harshly, judging by the frustrated noise the horse makes. There’s someone standing directly in front of them.

“Lincoln,” she and Octavia say at the same time, Clarke resigned, Octavia thrilled.

Lincoln’s probably the person she’s given the most away to, with her knowledge of Trigedasleng. Even if he hasn’t done anything about it yet, that doesn’t mean he won’t. So Clarke can’t help that her stomach knots slightly when she sees him, even though she likes him, even though she knows he’s a good person. He’s still a risk she took – and one Lexa knows nothing about. As far as Lexa’s aware, Lincoln brought Clarke to Anya’s camp just because she was very persuasive and claimed to be the leader.

“Hei,” Lincoln says, eyes wary. His thigh is still bandaged and he’s limping. Clarke wonders what he’s doing out alone – but then, it’s Lincoln. He never exactly fit in with the rest of the Trikru. “Are you going to find the fallen ship?”

“Sha,” Octavia says, pleased to show off one of the few words of Trigedasleng she’s learned. “Lexa thought it might be a message from our people.”

Lincoln nods. “I have seen one like that fall from the stars before. It had a person in it,” He spares a suspicious glance for Clarke when she inhales slightly too quickly, then returns his eyes to Octavia. “May I join you?”

“Of course,” Octavia says immediately, before Clarke can reply. “Do you want to share my horse?” Now Clarke remembers a detail from the hazy fayowada night – Octavia, getting the injured Lincoln drinks and food, telling Bellamy it was out of guilt at being the one who stabbed him. They’ve already started to develop the closeness that came so naturally to them before.

He nods and pulls himself up behind Octavia without a problem. They fall into quiet conversation straight away, and Clarke can’t hear quite what they’re saying as they ride on. At first she catches Bellamy’s name a few times, Indra’s name. Then she just hears her own and Lexa’s. She considers turning around and telling them to stop talking about her, but that would be even more suspicious, so she simply keeps riding and hopes Octavia’s talking about how they’ve spent the last few days instead of telling him about all her unformed, hazy suspicions. Much like Lincoln, Octavia suspects something, but unlike Lincoln she has no concrete reasons to be suspicious yet. Clarke really doesn’t want him to share his reasons with her, if he hasn’t already.

They arrive at the pod about when Clarke thought they would. She’s off the horse before she can think too much, rushing towards it, towards Raven. Clarke hadn’t realised how much she’d missed her up until now. She prays that it will be Raven there when she opens the escape pod, not someone else.
Unless it’s Abby. Or Abby and Raven – but that seems unlikely. Really, they need Raven more than anyone, right now.

When she pulls it open it’s Raven in there, thankfully. Clarke nearly sighs in relief. “Hey, hey,” she says quietly, reaching out to grip the unconscious girl’s shoulder comfortingy. “Hey there.” She pulls off Raven’s helmet and the girl makes a groaning noise. Clarke touches her face lightly, swept away by how much she’s missed Raven. Lincoln and Octavia have reached them by now.

Raven’s eyes open and focus on Clarke’s face. For a second, it looks like there’s recognition in her eyes, and Clarke’s heart leaps with a foolish hope. Maybe Raven remembers –

“I made it?” Raven says, voice dazed. It’s not a look of recognition. She’s just trying to see through her concussion.

“Yes, you’re here, you made it,” Clarke says. With Lincoln and Octavia’s help, she gets Raven out of the craft and lays her onto the grass. She doesn’t look nearly as awake as last time, probably because they’re much earlier. At this point last time, the only one here would have been Bellamy, and he wouldn’t have worried about the unconscious woman in the pod.

Reminded of the radio, Clarke looks back inside and locates it in moments.

“It smells just like I dreamed it,” Raven says finally, still lying on the ground.

“Hey, how do I work this?” Clarke says, plunking the radio next to her. “I’m really sorry to spoil the moment for you, but I don’t want anyone up there to die.”

“Right,” Raven says, forcing herself into a sitting position. She grins at Clarke. “Clarke, right? Your mom sent me. Bossy, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” Octavia says fervently.

Raven reaches over and starts twiddling with things. Clarke could probably remember how to work it by herself, but she doesn’t want to do anything more questionable in front of the two people she’s already given the most ammunition to.

Raven finally notices thegonas hiding in the shadows. Perhaps she’s becoming more lucid. “Wait, who the hell are they?” She looks back at Lincoln and registers his facial markings and looks even more confused. “And you. Who are you?”

“Grounders,” Clarke says.

“Trikru,” Octavia corrects.

“Lincoln kom Trikru,” Lincoln says. “What is your name?”

“Raven,” Raven says absently, still staring round her in shock. “Grounders, huh?”

“Ai gud hit yu op, Raven kom Skaikru,” Lincoln says, bowing his head slightly then meeting her eyes. He’s looking at her slightly too intensely, Clarke notes, searching for something – understanding. It’s a test, to see if other Sky People can speak Trigedasleng. She curses herself for showing her fluency with him.

Raven looks at him blankly. “He said it’s good to meet you,” Clarke says, shooting Lincoln a look telling him to stop now. “I think,” she adds, to try and make it less obvious that she’s once again showing too much knowledge for the time she’s been here.
“Oh,” Raven says weakly. She returns to the radio. “Good to meet you too, big guy. So, uh, you guys been making friends with the locals?”

“We kind of moved in with them,” Clarke says. “Into their capital, actually.”

“Except for Monty, Jasper, Finn and Wells,” Octavia says. “They’ve been here keeping an eye out for – well, you. And some of our friends who’ve gone missi –”

“Finn?” Raven says, her head jerking up, eyes widening. “He’s okay?”

“Totally fine,” Clarke says firmly, then adds, “Well, as far as I know. We haven’t seen him for a while because he’s been in TonDC, but Heda ordered Anya and her unit to protect him and the others at all costs so he’s probably one of the safest of us. It’s only a few hours away by horse, we can head off soon.”

“Horse? Heda?” Raven asks, then gets distracted as the radio crackles into life. “Aha!”

“Their leader,” Clarke says in response to the second question, then leans forward to talk into the radio. “Hello? Hello? Mom, you there?”

There’s a shocked pause, then “Clarke?”

“Jackson? Can you get my mom?”

“You’re alive?”

Jackson was usually so clever, too, Clarke thought. But then sometimes he showed exactly why he was just her mother’s assistant. “Yes, I am. Nearly all of us are. We just accidentally fried our wristbands trying to contact you guys. Can you go get mom?”

“Uh, she’s kind of in jail right now,” Jackson says reluctantly.

“All right. Jaha or Kane, then,” Clarke says, unable to be too bothered about that. No matter how many illegal things her mother does, she’s pretty sure neither Kane nor Jaha will actually float her. Well, Kane, maybe – this version of Kane. Clarke closes her eyes and hopes he will be as changed by nearly killing hundreds of people as he was by actually killing them. She needs Kane, the logical, Kane, the empathetic, Kane, the Grounders-loving peacekeeper. She doesn’t want Kane, the scarily dogmatic pragmatist he used to be. Someone worthwhile needs to be in charge of Arkadia.

“It will take me a few minutes,” Jackson warns, and then the radio goes silent.

Raven clears her throat. “So. Grounders, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Octavia says. “They don’t call themselves that, obviously. There’s twelve clans and they all have different names.”

“And this Header guy rules them all?”

“Heda,” Clarke says, pronouncing it subtly differently. “It means Commander. And yes, she rules them all. She made the alliance between the twelve clans all by herself.”

She sounds slightly too proud, she realises a second later. Octavia shoots her a look. “Through killing anyone who disagreed,” she says, not quite under her breath.

“Octavia!”
“What? I hear people in Polis talk as well, you know.”

“She didn’t kill everyone who disagreed,” Lincoln says gravely. “But she is famed for her ruthlessness, even among our people.”

“But she’s been nothing but good to us,” Clarke insists, glaring at Octavia.

“That’s true,” Octavia acknowledges grudgingly.

The radio crackles again. “Clarke?” It’s Jaha, this time.

“Hey, Chancellor,” Clarke says. “The weather is just lovely down here. Are you guys planning to join us any time soon?”

“You’re alive?”

“Nearly all of us,” Clarke says. “Three are missing. Wells is alive, though. So how about you start planning your re-entry, and let my mother out of her cell.”
Anya and Indra are both already waiting when Lexa enters TonDC. She feels a surge of uncharacteristic fondness and represses it. Clarke has been a bad influence on her, inspiring her to care about Indra, miss Anya, show affection to Gustus.

“Heda,” Indra says, bowing her head.

“Indra,” Lexa acknowledges. “Anya. It is good to see you.” That is enough emotion for her. Otherwise she will be like Clarke, hugging people indiscriminately, becoming attached to branwadas like Murphy. She is the Commander. She may have decided to allow herself some weakness, but there is a limit.

“And you as well, Heda,” Anya says. “We must speak with you. In private.”

“Me too,” Someone says from beside her. It’s the dark-skinned boy Lexa remembers standing beside Clarke. Wells, she had called him when Lexa asked eventually. Her oldest friend, who died in the first world, but who she is grateful to have back. For this reason, he has importance.

Anya hesitates, but Lexa says, “Of course. You can fill in Clarke kom Skaikru later.” It will give them a chance to talk. Clarke needs friends. She is not like Lexa. She is not weak, either, but she is not like Lexa. Clarke needs many people.

They’re back in the tent they use for these discussions, which was carried here by her gonas when she first came to fetch the Skaikru. Houses have better walls to block sound, but also have corners for people to hide. With a tent, all that is needed is to set it in the middle of a reasonably empty area and post trusted guards to watch for people, and it is secure. If it weren’t for the risk of archers, Lexa would probably have all classified discussions in the middle of an empty field. In a forest, there could always be someone up a tree, down a hole, hidden behind a bush. Only fools felt safer just from being surrounded by more things. The trick was emptiness, so the snakes had no way to sneak up on you.


Indra frowns. “It is the Mountain.”

“Yes?” She glances at Anya, who she never discussed this with.

Anya looks faintly embarrassed. No one but Lexa would know her well enough to see. “I noticed Indra had sent gonas to spy on it. I needed to know why.”

Perhaps Lexa should give her a reprimand for prying into her Heda’s business. But Anya is trustworthy enough. She needs trustworthy people, and she cannot demand that Anya pretend to be
blind and stupid. “I see.”

“I am sorry, Heda,” Indra says gruffly. “I did not know.”

Lexa waves a hand. “No doubt Anya tricked you into telling her,” she says. “And in any case, Anya is trustworthy. You may tell her as much as you like.” Anya looks faintly gratified by the praise. She is handing out too much of it, these days. She looks at the Skai boy, and makes a decision that is about Clarke instead of him. “Wells may also be trusted. His leader vouches for him, and I for her.”

Wells blinks, probably surprised she knows his name. “I… thank you.”

“I assume there is also a reason you wanted to be part of this discussion,” she comments.

He nods. “I know this has something to do with what happened to Atom, Trina and Pascal.”

“The three lost in the fog,” Lexa clarifies.

“Yes,” Wells says, but his voice is hesitant.

“Perhaps,” Anya says, equally hesitant, which is unusual for her.

Lexa frowns. Clarke had been sure that was what happened. “You have not found their bodies?”

“One of them,” Wells says. “We found Atom. We gave him a proper burial already, I thought about waiting for Octavia but I didn’t know when she’d be back.” He wrinkles his nose a little when he mentions Octavia and Lexa decides she likes this quiet, sensible boy.

“We did not find the other two,” Anya says. “And it is possible we are reading too much into that.”

“But?” Lexa asks.

“My gonas watching the Mountain reported that more men went West around that time,” Indra says. “In the direction Anya expected to find the bodies. And they returned with two things, covered in black plastic. I believe they were the Skaikru bodies.”

“They stole their bodies?” Wells says, sounding faintly horrified. “What for?”

Anya gives a negligent shrug. Lexa knows that it does not express callousness, but instead disguised annoyance and mortification at her lack of knowledge.

Lexa nods, trying not to look like this has not surprised her. So the Maunon have caught on faster this time – that’s understandable, given the number of gonas she brought here. Of course they thought there was something to find. But Clarke’s friends are safe, far away. They have a couple of corpses, that is all.

She makes a mental note to ask Clarke whether bone marrow can be taken from a corpse.

“Anything further?” she says coolly.

Indra nods. “We believe there are at most twenty Maunon who work as soldiers outside the Mountain at present. They have left the place several times since we began watching and swept the area to the West, but returned with nothing except the two bodies. Not even potential Ripas or… whatever else they use our people for. They seem uncertain, on edge.”

“Hmm,” Lexa says slowly, storing this information away to also discuss with Clarke. After Wells has filled her in, of course.
“I have also been working with the gonas you left to catch a Ripa when you wish for one,” Indra continues.

“Ripas?” Wells asks.

“I will explain to you later,” Lexa promises, voice short.

“They are learning, but they are scared,” Indra says. “I picked those who were from far away so there was no chance they would fight a friend or bro, but the Maunon’s reach is wide. All know to fear it.” She bares her teeth. “Perhaps I should have chosen my own people. They are warriors, not cowards.”

Lexa meets her eyes. “None of them are cowards, Indra. Just cautious. This is good. Continue the training. Try the methods on mountain lions, bandits, whatever can be found. They will not be on the same level, but small victories will give confidence, and practice cannot hurt.”

Anya makes a sceptical noise. “Can any practice help them deal with Ripas, though?”

Lexa shrugs. “You once asked me if an alliance seemed possible. At the time, it did not. Now it exists and has existed for years.” She meets Anya’s eyes. “If there is a chance… well, that is all we require. A chance.” She looks to Wells. “Now. We should talk. I can explain the Ripas to you, and answer any other questions. Do you have somewhere to speak?”

The other thing Clarke told her of Wells is that his father rules the Ark right now – though it is hard to connect him in her mind with the Jaha fool enough to hold a knife to her. The more she tells Wells about the Mountain and their crimes, the more he is likely to tell his nontu. She needs the Ark to fear the Mountain as her people do. The theft of the bodies will help, but she needs them to fall in with any battle plans or deals she and Clarke might make, so the more she can do here, the better.

“You can stay here,” Indra says.

“No,” Lexa replies. “You must speak with the leader of your Ripa force and plan this practice. And we discuss nothing that needs be secret. I can speak with the boy in the home you have given him, while you talk of necessary things in this tent.” She wants to have a long conversation, spelling out the crimes of the Mountain as clearly as possible.

“I… I have the place we’ve been given,” Wells says, with only a slight pause. “Finn shares with me, though. He’s there right now.”

Lexa shows her indifference on her face, and he gestures her to follow him. After a moment, Anya follows too, unwilling to leave her Heda alone. Lexa thinks of stopping her, but decides it cannot hurt to have the extra protection.

Two hours later she regrets bringing her former Fos to watch her fail.

“So this moves… straight?” Lexa says, trying not to sound confused, and touching her finger to the tiny bit of spiky metal.

“It’s a castle,” Wells says patiently. They’d discussed Ripas and the Mountain for some time, but then Lexa had noticed the strange scratched square of wood in the middle of the room with the twisted metal figures on it, and Wells had started to explain…. “It moves in straight lines, yeah.”

Finn is also here. It bothers Lexa less than she thought. Perhaps because this feckless boy-man bears no resemblance to the one she saw die. Much like Bellamy, in him she sees a goufa. A threat, but still a child. Confusing. “If you move it to the left you can get his knight,” Finn says almost eagerly. He is
not very good at this game, by Lexa’s estimation.

Anya frowns. “But then will not the other fortress destroy hers?”

“Oh. Right.” Finn studies it. “How about that bishop -”

“That would end in the death of my haiplana,” Lexa says. “He would move this… this bishop there, and then I would have to move my haiplana here…” she frowns at the board.

“So this is a war challenge?” Anya asks Finn.

“Uh. Yes. Sort of. It's about strategy.” Finn answers.

“Hmm,” Anya looks at the board. “So the castles must represent fast moving groups of warriors, like Tristan’s rangers. Pawns could be usual gonas. The haiplana – the queen – is the Commander, obviously. What are the horses? They cannot be actual horses, horses cannot jump over the ground like that. Trees and broken terrain stop horses, more even than usual gonas.”

“I do not think it is that straightforward, Anya,” Lexa says, frowning at the board. “After all, the most valuable piece appears to be the king, but it is ineffective. It would die fast in battle. And why should castles move in straight lines and bishops not?” She reaches out and moves the one shaped like a horse in an L shape. This places her between the two that Wells said were most important.

“Good move,” he says enthusiastically. “That’s called a check. Now I need to move my king, and you can take my queen.”

She does so, and waits for him to move.

She did not expect to like Clarke’s friend. She did not expect to like any of the Skaikru, truthfully, except for Clarke (and Kane, she had liked Kane somewhat). But this boy is interesting and respectful, and talks about Clarke like there is no one more important. He is overly loyal to his people, as Clarke once was, so certain of their rightness and goodness he cannot see them objectively, but besides this there is no harm in him she can see and at least he does not view her people as lesser. There is a toughness to him as well, she can sense it beneath the surface, and it shows in the ease with which he deals with the information she gives him – but of course, Clarke’s best friend would need to be tough.

Finn, weak Finn who she knows to be a danger, still seems interested in her people and in the peace she and Clarke want to create, and he is charming enough in a feckless way that she can understand why a foolish younger Clarke might like him (a little, anyway). Even in regards to the Mountain, he talks of potential deals, of peaceful solutions. He is far removed from the killer who slaughtered those in TonDC, and she can almost see why Clarke says he is not the same person at all.

She has even gotten used to Octavia’s alternate sour and sweet comments, her strange mix of cynicism towards the world and amazement at it. The girl is judgemental and brash and filled with rash assumptions, but she is also fierce and loyal and pure in her actions.

The twelve clans still come first to her, of course. They are her responsibility beyond this tenuous alliance with the Skaikru, and until they join the coalition that remains the truth. But she can for the first time see why Clarke cares so much for her people. Previously, she has always wondered – they have seemed so foolish, so violent, so prejudiced. The Skaikru have given her no reason besides Clarke to care for their welfare. But now she sees them and she knows that even those who have crossed the boundary into adulthood are as children to her people. They have had such regimented lives, such unbreakable rules, that they have never learned to mind themselves without them. They
have told themselves tales of the world they deserved to have and chose to believe them.

She cannot care for them as Clarke does. But she can understand why Clarke cares. Perhaps that is enough.

And in this new world, they will be her people as well, if all goes as planned. So perhaps she is allowed to like them.

Lexa moves her knight again, and looks expectantly at Wells.

Chapter End Notes

I'm out of it, exhausted, slightly tipsy, a little drugged, and just spent eleven hours being tattooed. So I'm not too sure what to say here. I hope you like it? It's hard to imagine Wells and Lexa together, since they were more than a season away from each other and in vastly different places. I hope I came close to what you guys pictured.
I'd Like To Phone A Friend

Chapter Summary

Clarke cuts through a lot of annoying stuff to focus on the important thing: the Ark coming to the ground.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s bittersweet and strange to see Raven and Finn’s reunion. Raven runs into his arms, beaming at him like he hung the stars, and they kiss. They whirl around in circles, locked together. Always moving in unison, like it’s a dance they’ve done a hundred times. Clarke feels like she should just be happy for them, but there’s an echo of the last time she saw this – she can remember the hurt, the anger, the heartbreak of realising just who Raven was. Realising she’d been lied to, and made an accomplice in hurting someone else.

And part of her thinks: doesn’t Raven deserve better than Finn, as well? Better than the cheater, the murderer?

She shakes off her weird mood. He hasn’t cheated, he’s killed no one, not here, anyway. She can’t preach to Lexa about how she shouldn’t judge people for what they might do and continue to judge based on that herself. This is a new world, a new day, new people.

Clarke’s just gotten down from her horse – cautiously, those things are huge – when Lexa, Wells, Monty, Jasper, Anya and Indra arrive. Indra casts a surprised glance at Lincoln, who’s still deep in quiet conversation with Octavia, and Wells pauses in confusion on seeing Raven and Finn’s embrace. Everyone else’s eyes immediately zero in on the radio, with its blinking lights.

“I see you found your message,” Lexa says carefully. “Perhaps you should place that in the tent over here. The guards will ensure your discussions are not overheard.”

“What is that?” Anya asks, scowling at it.

“A radio, a way to talk with people far away,” Clarke explains. Judging by Lexa’s brief chagrined expression, she’s realising she just gave away that she knows exactly what it is by her comment about ‘discussions’. Luckily, no one else seems to have noticed – perhaps they think she meant discussions about what to do with the radio, instead of discussions using it.

“And I’m here as the radio operator,” Raven says cheerfully, breaking away from Finn. She grins. “All the way from the Ark, baby. Free fall.”

“Awesome,” Jasper says eagerly.

“We did that too,” Monty points out.

“Not by choice,” Jasper replies. “By choice would take serious – wait, it was by choice, right?”

“Not only by choice, but against all rules, regulations and common sense,” Raven says. “Clarke’s mom had me fix up an old escape pod and come down. She didn’t believe it when your vital signs all
“My fault,” Monty says regretfully. “I was trying to communicate with the Ark using one of them and it shorted out them all.”

“No harm done,” Clarke says. “Now we have this, which will be much easier than using Morse code on wrist monitors. I already told Jaha to get Mom, Kane, Sinclair, and any other advisors who’ll be helpful, and I’d talk to them as soon as we were somewhere secure. I didn’t want to risk being attacked or something and losing the radio, even with so many gonas there to protect us.”

“Damn straight,” Raven says, apparently unable to stop grinning at Finn. He grins back, but it doesn’t quite have the unrestrained happiness apparent on his girlfriend’s face.

The Trikru all leave as soon as the radio is in the tent, Lexa giving Clarke a respectful nod and the ghost of a smile as she goes. Clarke puts it down to politeness more than anything else – Lexa must know that she can hear anything that’s being discussed, and the guards at the tent flap will no doubt report everything to Indra anyway.

All of the Skaikru stay though. (Clarke realises, with slight surprise, that she now calls her people ‘Skaikru’ automatically). Even Octavia, though she looks after the departing Lincoln regretfully. Even Finn and Raven, still entwined with each other.

Wells smiles at Clarke, but it’s clearly forced, and she realises that he must be feeling very alone now that she’s gone off with Lexa and Finn has Raven back. To make up for her abandonment, she reaches out and squeezes his hand briefly. “Ready to talk to your dad?” she asks him jokingly.

“Well, I’m fine,” Clarke cuts her mother off. Jasper is already snickering uncomfortably at the outpouring of emotion. “I have Wells, Raven, Finn, Jasper, Monty, and Octavia here with me.”
There’s a brief pause. Clarke realises that apart from the first two names, all of them must be meaningless to her mother, except maybe Finn as Raven’s boyfriend. The thought is disturbing.

“Okay,” Abby says eventually. “I’m so glad you made it down okay, Raven. Here with me I have Thelonius, Muir, Kane, Cole, Kaplan, Sinclair, Fuji, Jackson, Diana and Commander Shumway.”

Every member of the Council, the medical officer, engineering officer, and the Commander of the Guard, in other words. And Diana Sydney, who had somehow managed to make it in – perhaps when Clarke told Jaha to get anyone useful, he decided involving the former Chancellor in matters would help to pacify the people he’d nearly killed. Or perhaps she just managed to talk her way in like she somehow always did.

“Thelonius is a stupid name,” Jasper says in an undertone to Monty.

“I know, right?” Octavia says, and they all grin at each other. “Always thought so.”

Clarke glares them into silence. “Right. Okay. The first thing I need you guys to do is arrest Diana and Shumway.”

There’s a long pause. Everyone in the tent looks at Clarke like she’s gone mad. She suspects that everyone up on the Ark is looking at the radio in the same way.

“Bellamy Blake has explained to me what happened,” Clarke says evenly. Someone – Diana, probably – starts to say something in protest and is hushed by the others. “Shumway gave him the gun to shoot Jaha, on orders from Diana.”

This produces an immediate furore up on the Ark, which ends when Abby yells for the guards. A shot goes off and everyone in the tent flinches at the noise, but a few seconds later Abby says into the radio, voice slightly constrained, “Clarke. Everyone’s fine. They’re being held. Are you sure about this?”

“Completely,” Clarke assures her. Octavia is looking at her, brow furrowed, mouth open. Probably wondering when Clarke found the time to talk to Bellamy alone and get this information. Wells, on the other hand, just looks shellshocked – regardless of his complex feelings towards his father, Clarke knows Wells would die before he let Jaha get hurt.

“Will the Blake boy testify to this?” Jaha asks.

“He will,” Clarke promises, wondering exactly how she’s going to persuade Bellamy to pretend he believes Diana was behind it when he doesn’t have a clue. Luckily, this is a problem for tomorrow. “He can’t right now, though. He’s at least a day’s ride away. And to be honest, I think we have bigger issues to deal with right now.”

“Bigger… issues?” Jaha says, sounding slightly bewildered. “Clarke, could you please clarify what you’re talking about.”

Raven rolls her eyes at his slowness. “I’m pretty sure she’s talking about your glorious return to Earth, Chancellor.”

Jasper, Monty and Octavia snicker in unison. Even Finn smiles. Clarke blinks. She’d forgotten how much reason all of them had to dislike Jaha – in the original world fear of the Grounders had caused the 100 to view the Ark coming down as protection from a greater threat. In this new world, the Grounders have already become their providers, their allies. If not their friends, than at least not a direct threat. Which means that, to them, Jaha is more of an enemy.

Clarke wishes she didn’t have the kind of mind that immediately began whirring with information
like that, looking for a way to take advantage of it. But she does have exactly that type of brain. How can she use this dislike and distrust to more effectively achieve her aims? How can Lexa use it?

“We’re looking into it,” Kane says crisply. “The drop ships will only take a fraction of the Ark’s population. We need to work out who’s most essential. I think we should focus on food production, science and medicine.”

“Good thing we didn’t kill our skilled food workers off after all,” Abby says sarcastically.

There is a barely-audible but sharp inhale from Kane at that comment. “Yes,” he says, his voice shaking slightly. Clarke feels a flash of pity for him. “It is.”

“A fraction?” Monty says, his voice rising. “You’re not going to bring down everyone? What about my parents?”

“They’re coming down,” Clarke says grimly. “Actually, everyone’s coming down.”

Another pause. “What?” Abby says. “Clarke, we don’t -”

“Bring down everything,” Clarke orders, forgetting that in this world she has no high official leadership position. “The whole Ark.”

“The Ark would burn up in re-entry -” Sinclair starts.

Raven starts to grin. “But not all of it. Come on, Sinclair, surely you can figure out the best bits to hide out in?” She gives Clarke an approving look.

“I… suppose…” Sinclair says hesitantly. “We’ll look into it. But I wouldn’t -”

“Good,” Clarke says, cutting him off decisively. “Let us know when you have a tentative ETA, we’ll start figuring things out here.”

“What things?” Abby says, confused.

Clarke blinks, and realises she hasn’t filled them in on anything at all. “Oh, right. Well, we have to let the locals know when millions of tonnes of red-hot metal are going to slam into their land, and thousands of strangers are going to pour out.”


“They’re called the Trikru, Chancellor,” Clarke replies. “And it’s a very long story.”

Chapter End Notes

Stand by for some Clexa next chapter. I hope you like this!

WOW. Nearly five hundred reviews. You guys are AWESOME.
“If we move the knight to take that pawn,” Clarke whispers.

Lexa gives a minute shake of her head. “In three turns that will cause us to lose our bishop, Clarke.”

According to Clarke, the Skaikru will not be able to come down for at least two weeks. Her choices were to return to Polis for this time, or find things to occupy them at TonDC – Lexa, without any hesitation at all, chose TonDC.

She could justify it to herself in any number of ways. She could say she wishes to be on hand to receive any new information immediately, or pretend she is giving the ambassadors a chance to experience more direct authority over the day-to-day affairs of Polis. She could talk about training the gonas here.

But, truth be told? Lexa is here because here is where Clarke is. Even if they took the radio to Polis, she would be so distracted by responsibilities she might have no time to spend with Clarke. Here, in TonDC, Indra and Anya are well able to manage things. So Lexa can lie with Clarke, and touch her, and speak to her, and right now with her help attempt to beat Wells in this confusing strategy game.

She has gotten extremely close twice already, and once has caused the end of the game by both sides having only two pieces and finding it impossible to complete the trap known as a ‘checkmate’. But now Clarke is here, no longer sequestered with the radio speaking to her mother or Kane, and Lexa does not wish to lose in front of her.

Also in the audience, Anya lounges in the corner, cleaning under her nails with a knife as Tris stands big-eyed beside her; Octavia is seated cross-legged on the floor frowning at Clarke like she is the one looking at a puzzle; Jasper and Monty are ignoring the game to mutter quiet commentary to each other and have twice had cause to slap their own palms in an odd yet self-congratulatory manner; Finn sits next to Wells with a deliberate space between them and tries to smile encouragingly at him, only to be ignored for some petty reason; and finally Raven is standing on the other side of Anya fiddling with several pieces of metal, oblivious to Anya’s annoyance about her closeness.

Lexa hesitates. She cautiously moves one her pawns forward a space, and looks at Wells from under her lashes nervously. “This game is most confusing,” she says innocuously, and watches as he falls for her assumed air of innocence.

“There,” Wells assures her, moving his queen to take the pawn without looking closely, too focused on reassurance to double-check his play. “It took me years to -”

“Checkmate,” Lexa says serenely, moving her own queen. He is blocked from returning his to the defence of his king by an unfortunately placed bishop, and anywhere he can move his king is now covered by one of several pieces of hers. It has been the careful work of multiple turns to place these so without being noticed.

“Oh, no way,” Finn says, looking comically annoyed. “Not fair. I haven’t even gotten close to beating him yet, and you can checkmate on your third day playing?”

Raven chuckles and looks up from her work. “Babe, you’re good at a lot of things -” she wiggles her eyebrows flirtatiously, “-but strategy is not one of them.”
Wells looks away, and Lexa suspects that under the camouflage of his dark skin he’s flushed. She’s observed that he has strong bonds with both Clarke and Finn, and has noticed that suggestive comments regarding either of them – even joking ones, such as those Jasper occasionally lobbies towards Clarke – make him uncomfortable.

Then Wells returns his gaze to the chess board, evaluating possibilities. Eventually he raises his warm, thoughtful eyes to her and smiles. “Well done,” he says ruefully. “You should play my father – the Chancellor – when he comes down. Normally he’s the only one who can beat me.”

He is so steady and kind, that Lexa feels a pang of regret that he will undoubtedly return permanently to Arkadia once it is built. His ties to his people are the strongest of them all, but she feels he could do well among the Trikru. In an odd way, he reminds her of Gustus.

“I look forward to it,” Lexa says politely, inclining her head. “But for now, we waste daylight hours. We should go and train.”

She looks at Clarke, who is glowing with pleasure at watching Lexa interact with her friends. On the journey to Polis, Clarke had asked Lexa to train her, so she could regain some of her old skills, and this is the first opportunity they have really had. Most of Clarke’s battle reflexes are from attacking animals, and desperate struggles, neither of which Lexa considers to be true gona training. It is likely she will have to start from the very beginning, teaching Clarke stances and how to distribute her weight.

Lexa hopes this will require a lot of hands-on instruction.

“Lincoln’s started teaching me,” Octavia says, apropos of nothing. “I’m pretty good. I’ll come train with you. If that’s okay, Heda?” she adds as an addendum, brow raised, clear and pointless defiance in her tone.

“Sha, Octavia. Do any of the rest of you wish to come? The training will not be too advanced.”

Wells looks at Clarke, then shrugs and says, “Why not?” easily. Finn glances his way for a second, then looks at Raven and frowns, and they both shake their heads at the same moment, Raven immediately looking back down at her metal puzzle. Monty whispers something less than complimentary to Jasper about exercise and Jasper whacks him lightly, and they let out a chorus of negatives as well, laughing. Anya lets out a huff that could be a sigh or a disdainful laugh, but sheaths her knife and moves to follow her old Seken. Tris trails her eagerly as she leaves.

The Skaikru are… not impressive, to Lexa, in the beginning at least. She focuses on teaching them how to stand correctly, and on exercises to strengthen their weak muscles, refusing them weapons until they demonstrate some form of skill at these activities.

She enjoys showing Clarke the right way to stand, moving her limbs into place, enjoys the sparks she feels every time she places her hands on Clarke, the way Clarke’s face flushes and she licks her lips slightly too often. However, even with this distraction, Clarke grasps this quicker than the others and adds it to her already-developed fighting style easily. Soon she is good enough to drill properly, and Lexa steps back, deciding she cannot bring herself to exchange blows with Clarke right now, even in practice. She calls over a gona to practice with her instead, and sees the relief on Clarke’s face. She did not wish to fight Lexa either.

Clarke is well aware of how to defend herself, and proves this by nearly defeating the gona after only a few rounds. While he still wins most of the time and has a clear advantage, Clarke makes him work for every strike. With some added muscle, Clarke will be formidable indeed, and Lexa glows with pride at her accomplished lover. It is a shame the presence of others means she cannot express this
pride as she would like to, but later in the tent set aside for Lexa she will come up with a reason to ‘confer’ extensively with the Skaikru leader.

This is a contentedness that Lexa has never experienced before. She pauses in her movements regularly to revel in it. There is Clarke, there, right there, in reaching distance – Clarke who knows her as no one else ever has, who knows all of her and understands all of her as even Costia could not. (Because Costia lived in the light, but her death brought darkness to Lexa, which makes her wonder if Costia could have loved this version of the Commander as much as she loved the first one). Clarke who sees this, who knows it, who has been wounded by Lexa’s duty before, but nevertheless looks at her with that impossible warmth in her Skai eyes. A Skai girl, fallen from the stars for her.

She just wishes they had more time with each other. That it was not stolen moments. That there weren’t dangers surrounding them from every angle – the Maunon. The Azgeda. Their own people.

Octavia has a fierceness which will serve her well, Lexa notes. Even sparring with – and being defeated by – Tris, a girl half her age, does not dim the fire in her eyes. She encourages Tris to be as vicious as she would be in a normal battle, and stands every time she is toppled. Octavia ignores her blood and bruises as if there was no pain at all. Lexa feels a reluctant admiration for the fool despite her position staunchly against Lexa, a dislike she knows from Octavia’s occasional glances to still exist.

“She is strong, that one,” Indra remarks from behind her, startling Lexa, who had not realised she was there. Her eyes follow Octavia.

“Indeed,” Lexa says in a non-committal way. “However, without a Fos, I suspect that promise will subside into nothing.” She eyes the older woman carefully.

Indra understands the implication immediately. “You wish me to train the girl?” She sounds greatly offended.

“There is no better trainer,” Lexa says evenly. She and Indra look at each other for a long moment, and Lexa adds, “Judging by their glances, she and Lincoln will someday be bonded.”

“Foolish fantasies,” Indra scoffs.

“Perhaps,” Lexa says. “Or perhaps not. Regardless, she has skill. She lacks discipline. You would be an excellent Fos for her.” She lets Indra think about it, deciding not to press further.

“I will consider it,” Indra says finally, which for her is as good as an acceptance.

Lexa nods. Indra will follow her suggestion, for Indra is loyal. For herself, she is not sure why she suggested this path – some lingering affection for the original world, the one that no longer exists? Perhaps. It was in that world, after all, that she first grew to care for the Skai girl with her burning eyes and sharp rejoinders.

Wells may also become reasonably skilled, though in his case that is less native talent and more about his obedience to instruction, and his sturdy thoughtfulness. He watches the stance and movements carefully, and follows them as precisely as he can. When corrected by his partner, Anya, he shows no frustrated ego, but calmly moves to amend his error. He also demonstrates more strength than the others – perhaps, as son of their ruler, he was allowed more food than the others. He is probably the only one who of the Sky People who could train with Anya with angering her somehow, and Lexa is glad she paired them together.
Lexa wonders how he died in the first world.

Then she stops wondering, and returns to watching Clarke train. Admiring the movement of her arms, her legs, the fierceness of her. The blaze of blue eyes, the cunning with which she fights. The silhouette of her body against the setting sun, the halo of light from it turning her hair to fiery gold. She is incredible.

“Lexa,” Clarke calls out finally after managing to knock the gona over for the third time, glowing with sweat. “I think I’m out of strength, here. I also needed to talk to you about the conversation I had with the Ark earlier, are you free?”

Clarke’s gaze is overly warm. Perhaps Lexa’s staring had been a little too admiring. Lexa clears her throat and attempts to sound normal (judging by Anya’s snort, she does not entirely succeed), and says, “Of course, Clarke. Come this way?”

She leads Clarke to where she’s been staying – and where she and Clarke have been holding ‘discussions’ as Clarke updates her about conversations with the Ark. These discussions rarely involve more than a minute of actual speech.

They are barely inside before Clarke presses against her and kisses her thoroughly. “Thank you for the training,” she says, moving so that her arms are around Lexa, so that they are entwined perfectly, so that they are one being.

Be Titus's standards, Lexa is weak. She knows this. But she is blessed, and knows this even more.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like it!
Chapter Summary

Octavia and Clarke have a confrontation. It goes extremely poorly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No, Dad, I don’t know their numbers,” Wells says into the radio, frustrated. “I keep telling you, I’m not hiding anything about the Grounders, I just -” he breaks off as Clarke enters and gives her a weary smile.

“Hi, Chancellor,” Clarke says pleasantly, so that Jaha will know she’s here as well. Inside, she’s annoyed. Jaha has asked both Wells and her about the number of Grounders, their positions, their technology, and so on, multiple times. He’s treating them as a threat already even though everything he knows about them is positive.

She could consider that he’s just trying to account for every possibility. But given past events, she’s not very good at giving the Chancellor the benefit of the doubt anymore.

“Hello, Clarke,” Jaha says, slight constraint in his voice. “I’ll talk to you later, son.”

Wells clicks the radio off and mutters “Can’t wait,” to it sarcastically, then turns to face Clarke.

She’d forgotten the awkwardness in their relationship, the distance they show sometimes. She thinks it’s caused by Jaha’s position as Chancellor, as judge, jury and executioner of everyone else. Maybe now the distance is also exacerbated by Clarke’s father’s death and by Wells’ arrest.

“Don’t tell him,” Clarke says suddenly.

“What?”

“Don’t tell him anything about the Grounders except what you already have,” Clarke clarifies. “Not a thing, okay?” She remembers how loyal he’s always been to his father, in spite of their differences. But she also remembers when he wasn’t loyal to his father. When he refused to throw Jake – to throw Clarke – under the bus for his father’s approval. His loyalty to his father is trumped by one thing, and that’s her, and right now she needs Jaha to focus on bringing the Ark down and not on an imaginary war with the Trikru.

Wells looks at her for a moment, then nods. “Of course,” he says firmly, and she relaxes. Wells doesn’t break his promises, she knows that now. “But I don’t think he’s planning anything, Clarke. He’s just being cautious.”

“I know,” Clarke says softly. “But caution led to my father’s pointless death, so I think maybe he should be a little less cautious from now on.”

“Clarke,” Wells looks sad, “I know you must hate my father, but -”

“I don’t,” Clarke says quickly, and sees his doubtful expression. “No, really, I don’t. Sometimes
people have to make terrible decisions. Especially leaders. He did the wrong thing, but he believed he was protecting our people. I don’t hate him.” She injects her voice with sincerity. It’s true. She doesn’t hate Jaha. She doesn’t like him, and she doesn’t trust him, but she does understand his actions. After what she’s done, she can’t hate him for the death of her father, although she can’t forget it either.

A pause. “Do you feel that way about your mom, too? Now that you know what happened?”

“I haven’t told her I know,” Clarke admits, and Wells nods like she’s just confirming something he already suspected.

“Why not?”

Clarke shrugs. “She’d want to talk about it, talk it through, work out our feelings.” She’s already worked out her feelings. She has no desire to go through the painful process again. It’s easier just to leave it behind her.

“Maybe you should,” he suggests.

“No,” Clarke says with finality, and searches for a change of subject. “So what’s going on with you and Finn?”

Wells stiffens. “What do you mean?” he says.

“You moved into a different house,” Clarke points out.

“To give him and Raven space.”

“You ignore him whenever he talks to you.”

Wells hesitates, and she can almost see him weighing his loyalty to Finn against his loyalty to her. She wins, clearly. “I’m just… annoyed at him about something.” At her look he elaborates slightly. “He… he did something, and I think he should be honest about it. To Raven.”

The question pops out of her mouth immediately, with no intervention from her brain at all. “He cheated on her?”

“I…” Wells looks shocked at her guess, but admits, “Yes, he did. When he didn’t think the Ark was going to come down. And I told him he needs to tell Raven, that she doesn’t deserve to be the last to know.” Wells has always had very strong morality, although he does understand sacrifice and shades of grey – he plays chess, after all, and he was brought up by Jaha. When it comes to the people he loves, though, Wells considers their safety and happiness to be the most important things in the world. He could never understand or accept Finn cheating on Raven.

Of course, it’s ironic he’s against Finn lying for the sake of Raven’s feelings when that’s exactly what he did to Clarke. But there’s no point in bringing that up now, and Clarke does know that there’s a world of difference between the two scenarios in terms of severity and intent.

Clarke wonders if she should feel offended. Finn fell in love with her in the other world – it should hurt her feelings that he could so easily replace that with another girl in this world. Like he was just looking for someone to cheat on Raven with and she happened to be the most convenient back then. But instead, all she feels is resigned. Finn the flirt, the charming one, the Spacewalker… it just feels inevitable somehow. Nevertheless, she pokes at the spot where her hurt should be, testing with the question, “Does he have feelings for the other person?”
“As far as I know, none,” Wells says flatly, looking away, disapproving. Wells has always been a romantic. “But he should still tell Raven.”

Clarke wonders who it was. A random girl from the 100 in the first few days, a TonDC local after they left? A gona the night of the party? Then she wonders if it will hurt Raven less that it was sex with no strings attached, or hurt her more. At least with Clarke and Finn’s relationship Raven had known she was betrayed for a real reason, real emotion, instead of just temporary lust.

She wishes she didn’t know. Now she’s betraying Raven again, by not telling her. Because she can’t tell her, it’s *really* not her business this time. *Great.*

“So about your mom -” Wells says, changing the subject back in an obvious attempt to stop talking about Finn and Raven, but he’s interrupted by Octavia and Lincoln entering the tent.


“Hello,” Clarke says, choosing not to respond in the same language. Despite her uncaring pose, inwardly, she’s tensed. Octavia has been looking at her a lot lately with that considering, almost angry look. Octavia’s already suspicious – very suspicious, in fact – and Clarke hasn’t decided whether she should come clean about what’s going on. Of course, if it comes up, she should probably discuss it with Lexa before she tells the truth about why they know so much about everything. But since she hasn’t yet told Lexa about how much she’s given away to both Octavia and Lincoln, she doesn’t know quite how she’ll broach the subject.

Plus, what are the chances either of them will believe her? She barely believes herself. Time travel is something from stories. They’ll think she’s nuts. And that’s not a bridge she wants to burn, not yet. Aimless suspicions are better than an iron-clad belief that she’s insane.

Unfortunately, it appears she’s about to have to make a decision.

“We need to talk,” Octavia says shortly. Lincoln nods, staring at Clarke with an unreadable expression.

Clarke forces a smile. “What’s the matter?”

Their combined gazes pin her down. “We finally figured it out,” Octavia says harshly. “We’re not stupid, you know.”

“Figured what out?” Wells says, honestly bewildered.

“We, maybe you could just -” Clarke says, wanting him to leave before the confrontation really begins, but Octavia stops her.

“Oh, please,” she spits at Wells, “You’re the son of the Chancellor. There’s no way you’re not in on this.”

“In on what?”

“We know you must have been communicating with my people before you fell from the stars,” Lincoln says quietly, his face unfriendly, his eyes fixed on Clarke still.

“What?” Clarke says blankly. This is not a conclusion she expected them to reach.

“It’s obvious,” Octavia hisses. “It explains why you speak Trigedasleng. Lincoln told me about that,
It’s the one thing Clarke has no real explanation for. She gropes for one, and comes up with, “I found an old book with some of it written. I didn’t even realise it was a real language until -”

“There is no written form of Trigedasleng,” Lincoln says flatly. “We use gonasleng for written communication, and that not often.”

“Plus, that excuse wouldn’t explain how you knew Raven would come down,” Octavia points out. “And you knew, I saw you. You knew the exact time. I bet you’ve been talking to your mom back on the Ark from the moment you ran into Lexa. I know she must have a radio, she knew straight away what Raven’s one was, there’s no way she should know that otherwise. How long has the Ark been talking to Lexa, planning this?”

“This is insane,” Wells objects. He’s ignored.

“Did you know we’d survive the drop and just let us be terrified anyway? Did you let Atom walk into the fog when you could have warned us?” Octavia says, her voice dropping to nearly a whisper, staring at Clarke. “Trina, Pascal? Were you so scared of revealing this secret that you let people die for it?”

Clarke feels a sudden burst of paralysing guilt. She could have told them. She hadn’t, because she thought she’d be back to the drop ship in time to get everyone inside, because she thought the 100 wouldn’t have believed her even if she had told them. But she could have tried. Would that have kept Atom, Trina and Pascal alive? She went to so much effort to keep Wells alive, but with them…

It must show on her face, because Octavia makes a little noise of disgust and paces to the other end of the tent.

“The Heda does not make deals, not with invaders,” Lincoln says grimly. “Yet she deals with you.”

“Oh, more than deals with you,” Octavia says cuttingly, still staring at Clarke like she’s seeing a monster. “You must have been talking to her for ages, forming a real close bond, for the two of you to get together so immediately. Lots of lovely little chats from up in the Ark. The Council’s little secret, huh? Just another one in a long line of -”

“Get together?” Wells looks at Octavia in shock, then looks at Clarke. “What do you mean? Clarke…?”

Octavia glances at him and utters a short, disdainful bark of laughter. “She didn’t mention she’s screwing the Commander?”

Hearing it put so rudely, so harshly, is like a punch to Clarke’s stomach. And to Wells – he seems to stop breathing for a second. He opens his mouth to say something, pauses, and searches Clarke’s face. Whatever he sees there must tell him the truth, because he gets up and walks slowly, almost blindly, out of the tent. She doesn’t need to see his face as he pushes open the flap and stumbles out to know his eyes are filled with tears.

“Wells,” Clarke says helplessly, but he keeps going, and she doesn’t follow him. Instead she looks at Octavia, suddenly angry. “Did you have to do that, Octavia? Really?”

Octavia looks slightly ashamed for a second, then recovers. “That was your fault, not mine,” she snaps. She looks away, though, after Wells, like she also wants to go after him.

This is how every argument with Octavia feels, Clarke reflects – she’s never completely wrong in
her criticism, and the points where she is correct hit Clarke’s sore spots exactly, so Clarke can never retort as easily as she can in arguments with other people. But Octavia’s comments and attitude also ignore context and shades of grey.

“I was going to tell him,” Clarke says slowly. “I was just waiting for the right time.”

“This does not matter,” Lincoln says, though he looks uneasy at all the unexpected emotion. “What matters is that you have been talking with Heda, planning to come down, and my people do not know. They must be told.”

Clarke feels another unfair flare of anger. “If I had, and anyone needed to know, Lexa would already have told them,” she snaps. “But as it happens, no, I haven’t been dating the Grounder Commander by radio, from space, for years. Thanks for asking.” Her voice makes it clear just how ridiculous the accusation is. “Actually, I never even spoke to Lexa until I ended up on the ground. So if you two could stop being conspiracy theorists and actually do something, that would be great.”

This makes Octavia draw back, but only for a second. “Don’t try and play this off. I know that -”

“You know?” Clarke says harshly. “What do you know? You know I saved Lincoln’s life by caring for him when you threw a knife into him. You know I made deals with the Grounders to keep us alive. You know I helped Raven when she fell from the Ark. What you know, is that I have done nothing but good for our people. Have I saved everyone? No. Have I done my best with what I know? Yes. So you can either shof op, or go float yourself, Octavia.”

She stands up and walks out of the tent, beyond done with this conversation.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think. I wondered what Octavia and Lincoln's theory for everything that had been happening would be, and to be honest I just went with the conclusion I'd probably have (stupidly) come to before time travel if I was her.
Lexa moves left, feints to the right side and then delivers a blow from the left, before ducking a swing of the staff from Anya. There is no real point in tricks here, beyond the practice of them: Anya taught her nearly everything she knows. Pretending to be weaker than she is would be foolish, as Anya knows Lexa’s strength as well as her own. Pretending to be less skilled will just get her mocked. Instead, in fights with Anya, Lexa must rely on her greater speed, her quick thinking, her own knowledge of Anya’s techniques.

In a real fight, of course, she would bring down Anya almost immediately. Lexa can throw her knives with far greater accuracy – the fight would be over before Anya closed the distance between them. With a spear, it would be just as quick. Even with swords, she would probably have a more noticeable advantage due to her speed, since it takes no great strength to slice into someone. To Anya’s great credit, she considers Lexa her best accomplishment instead of her competition, so it pleases her to be defeated most times.

Fighting with staffs, however, lets Anya use her slightly greater strength and height to her benefit, and that evens them up. This allows Lexa to get just as good a workout, and them to make it a closer contest of skills.

Anya swings the staff overhand, bringing it down against Lexa’s with a sharp crack that echoes across the square – filled with eager watchers – and Lexa slides her pole against the forceful blow in a sneaky stab towards Anya’s middle. Anya moves out of the way, shifting her stance, and strikes her next blow towards Lexa’s side, forcing Lexa to twist out of the way as well. Anya’s going on the offensive.

Wells walks across the square. He pauses to stare at Lexa for a long moment, unhappiness etched into his face, then turns with a shake of his head to stalk away.

Lexa frowns, and barely avoids a blow to her head.

“Sloppy,” Anya says calmly, though she also has registered the Skai boy’s brief expression. Lexa can tell by her furrowed brow.

Lexa growls slightly, and swipes her foot unexpectedly behind Anya’s leg, causing her to stumble and nearly fall. As Anya recovers, Lexa swings her staff in a diagonal movement that her old Fos barely avoids. “Better,” Anya allows, breathless.

Clarke also hurries across the square now. She gives Lexa a meaningful look, then walks in the same direction as Wells.

Lexa decides it is time to finish this match. She catches hold of the staff and kicks out at Anya, then
when Anya manages to evade this, grabs Anya’s neck and pulls her towards her, lowering her head so that their skulls crash together.

It hurts, but it hurts Anya more than her, and there is no doubt that in a real fight – with all her force behind it, aimed at the weakest point of Anya’s head instead of the boniest – Anya would now be dead or at least disabled.

“Well done,” Anya gasps, reaching a hand to her head and wincing. “We may make a warrior of you yet, yongon,” she says jokingly. Anya’s sense of humour has always been mocking quips, and Lexa is well accustomed to her deadpan delivery of these.

Lexa doesn’t reply. She is looking to see where Clarke has gone, but the Skai girl has already disappeared.

She hands the staff off to the nearest gona. “Drill with Anya,” she orders. “Maybe defeating you can restore her confidence.” Quiet laughter ripples through the crowd of onlookers. Anya gives a smirk to the luckless gona.

Lexa walks confidently in the direction Clarke and Wells walked. She checks the home Wells just requested the previous day, but it is empty. Clarke’s tent is similarly bereft of people. Her third try is Finn and Raven’s – formerly Finn and Wells’ – small house, where she finds several people, although not who she was looking for.

Finn leans against the wall, looking at the floor, a frown on his face. Wells is seated, looking upset, as Raven attempts to console him awkwardly. She is visibly uncomfortable in the role of comforter. All three look up as Lexa clears her throat.

“Where is Clarke?” she demands, no room for tact. Clarke looked like she needed Lexa. She must find her.

Wells’ eyes are a little red, but he meets her gaze squarely. If there were tears in his eyes, they are gone now. “So… you and Clarke, huh?” he says evenly.

She simply looks at him, unsure what to say. It is clear to her now that he has romantic feelings for Clarke. Clarke did not warn her of this – perhaps she did not know? “Yes,” she says eventually. “Me and Clarke.”

Wells nods slowly, like this short response is exactly what he expected. “I wish she’d told me herself,” he says unhappily, almost to himself, then focuses on her again. “Treat her well. Or you’ll have me to deal with.” His expression warms a little as he says this, and he manages a half-smile, despite the implied threat. Perhaps he considers her a friend, after all their chess games.

Lexa nods to Wells brusquely, then turns and leaves the room. As she exits, she hears Finn say, “You’re better off, man,” in what he no doubt thinks is a comforting manner.

Lexa cannot imagine how anyone could be distracted from the loss of Clarke. But Wells, whatever his feelings, is clearly already dealing with this new reality. If she judged his expression correctly, his hurt may even be more to do with his lack of knowledge about this development in Clarke’s life than about her position as Clarke’s lover – perhaps he never expected his romantic feelings towards Clarke to come to fruition. Or maybe he is simply so unselfish that he would rather Clarke be happy, even if it is with someone else. Whatever the case, he is not angry at Lexa.

She finds Clarke in her tent, where perhaps she should have looked first. Clarke is seated on the bed, looking thoughtful.
“We have a problem,” Clarke says.

Lexa sits on the bed beside her gingerly. She has comforted Clarke in the wake of executions, missiles, and genocide, but she has never helped to deal with something as simple as a friend’s feelings being hurt. It is strange. “Wells seems fine,” she offers.

Clarke twists on the bed to look at her. “You spoke to him?”

“Yes. He told me to treat you well.”

“Oh,” Clarke says. “Oh, good.”

“…Are you all right, Clarke?”

“I’m fine,” Clarke says. “I just… I guess I always knew part of our friendship was based on his feelings for me. But when Octavia said I was with you, it looked like he gave up on that. I mean, I thought he was getting over it before then, but I guess not… he looked really crushed. I never wanted to do that.”

“I know you didn’t,” Lexa says. “And so does he.”

“Right,” Clarke sighs. “That’s not why I’m here, though. I’m here because of Octavia. I was trying to figure out what to do about her, and I needed to talk to you.”

“What about Octavia?” Lexa says, confused.

“When I said I needed to talk to you, Wells wasn’t my primary concern,” Clarke says. She moves to lean against Lexa, resting her head on Lexa’s shoulder. Lexa smooths her hair back and kisses her head lightly, even this small affectionate touch making her heart speed up a little. “Octavia knows about us. More than the fact we’re together. Octavia – and Lincoln, for that matter – have been working on some theories about why we seem to care about each other so much, and know so much of what’s happening. They’re suspicious.”

Lexa blinks, absorbing this information. Clarke’s preoccupation and concerned expression make more sense when viewed through this knowledge. No doubt Clarke would suffer for Wells – she is very empathetic. But Clarke’s biggest worries are normally about her people’s survival, not one individual’s emotional health. “I see,” she says, considering this.

“I can’t decide if we should tell them everything,” Clarke says. “They’re coming up with wild ideas.”

“As wild as reality?” Lexa asks dryly.

Clarke manages a laugh. “That’s a good point,” she allows. “I want to tell them. I want more people to know. My friendship with Octavia is disintegrating over this. She’s lashing out, she doesn’t trust me anymore, and she didn’t have the warmest feelings toward authority to start with. Also, frankly, I’m going to find it hard to maintain my half of the friendship if she keeps attacking me like she just did. It would be nice to finally explain ourselves so she’ll back off. And I really don’t want her and Lincoln assuming we’ve got sinister reasons for everything we’re doing.”

“But…?”

“But I don’t think they’ll believe us,” Clarke says. “They’ll think we’re lying.”

“They already think we’re lying,” Lexa points out.
It goes against all of her instincts to share this information with anyone. Her years have Commander taught her that information others do not have is an advantage that should not be given up.

But then, her years as Commander have also taught her not to trust anyone. They have taught her to remove threats immediately, any threats. They have taught her love is weakness. All her instincts scream at her not to be here, not to have the warmth of Clarke at her side, not to allow the squeeze of emotion she feels whenever she sees Clarke.

From the moment she met Clarke, her instincts have fought a losing battle against the – at first scarcely noticeable – promptings of her scarred heart.

Clarke studies her, frowns. “So you think we should talk to them?”

Lexa shrugs. “I cannot think what harm it could do. They are already suspicious, already distrust us.”

“We don’t have any proof at all, anymore,” Clarke says after a long, thoughtful moment. “We’ve changed everything too much. The last thing I was even slightly sure of was Raven coming down. Polis, TonDC, the Ark… we’ve altered the world so much. We haven’t even done anything directly to the Mountain and we’ve still completely changed everything there as well. I can’t begin to guess what’s going to happen next.” She looks at Lexa, eyes worried. “Do you think we should have tried to follow the same path? At least a bit? Then we would know what was going to happen.”

“And many more would be dead.” Lexa looks back at her steadily. “And…” she hesitates, then continues. “And even if I had decided following that path was best, I do not think I could have waited for so many weeks to see you again.”

Clarke smiles, the worry in her face easing. “What happened to ‘it takes as long as it takes’?”

“Sometimes it takes too long,” Lexa says solemnly, though a smile betrays her. “Truly, Clarke, I did not feel as if I could breathe properly in this new world until I saw you again. And even then, even then it hurt to see you, for Finn was next to you and I did not know if I had lost you.”

“I’m the one who nearly lost you,” Clarke says fiercely, taking her hand so that their fingers are intertwined, clasped together in Clarke’s lap. “I dream about it, you know. Nearly every night.”

“I would not have blamed you had you still loved him,” Lexa closes her eyes for a second, breathing in the scent of Clarke right next to her. They do not talk about the old world in terms of them often – only in terms of their people. The survival of their people. This is unusual. “You lost him too, after all.”

She can remember the fierce pain of seeing Finn, knowing what must be. But the memory is faded compared to the one from only minutes later – Clarke, her hand reaching out to raise Lexa’s chin, her eyes soft and warm, her voice a whisper. We’re not like that. And Lexa had been struck by it, speechless, too many impossible gifts set too quickly after each other, Clarke here, Clarke remembering, Clarke hers, three wondrous discoveries in a row.

Clarke leans moves her head and kisses her lightly, and Lexa gets lost in it, the feeling of Clarke’s hands as they tangle in her braids, the feeling of her lips as they move so gently against her.

“I’m glad you came for me so soon,” Clarke says softly, pulling away only an inch to say it. Lexa can feel Clarke’s breath against her. “Any longer would have been too long for me as well.”

Wow, the response to the last chapter was overwhelming! And a little scary. A lot of people seemed kind of mad. Can I ask that if you're mad at a character, to please make it clear it's towards them and not me? And if you think a character's OOC or makes no sense, that's fine, but you do have to remember that this whole thing is a lot of very hard work and I'm doing my best to get them right. I can't get them perfect, because I'm not going to understand every character in canon perfectly, and this is my personal interpretation of them all - you'll all have different ones. I get anxiety quite badly (which is pretty much why I rarely write fanfiction, and why I drink heavily while I do, because otherwise I can't publish a word) so if I think someone's mad at me I get kinda panicky. Even if it's strangers over the internet.

I don't mind constructive criticism, so absolutely use that if you see something which bothers you, but try and be reasonably nice about it. (It's weird, in my work I can have shouted arguments over spreadsheets and the correct way to account for depreciation without any problems, but in my personal life I'm basically pathetic and horrifyingly non-confrontational. It just makes me feel sick). Most of you have been great about this so far! I'm just telling you for the future.

Now, I need to go spend eight hours being tattooed again. Hope you like where this is going :)}
“Hey, have you seen Octavia?” Clarke asks.

“She and Lincoln went hunting,” Finn says through a mouth full of food. He’s seated on the grass, in the sun, next to Raven. It took Clarke ages to find them, even though they’re less than a couple of hundred feet from the village. She wonders if they’re avoiding all the training warriors, or just the Grounders in general.

Clarke sighs. “I know. But they left yesterday, they should be back by now. Lincoln told Indra they’d be back by midday.” The hunt is an obvious cover. Clarke just isn’t sure whether the two of them have taken off because Octavia wants time to cool down, or to think of more crazy theories. Maybe both. Either way, now that she and Lexa have agreed to tell them everything (well, nearly everything) Clarke just wants them here. They left while she was still with Lexa. She’s been fighting the desire to tell one of the others everything since she fell to the ground, and now she finally can it’s stressful to delay.

At least her free morning has done her some good, though. She spent it with Wells, being beaten at chess, talking about nothing in particular. He hadn’t said a single word about Lexa, and she’d been too scared to bring it up. But then when she’d stood up to leave, he took her hand and squeezed it for a second, and smiled at her.

Perhaps they’ll talk about it more at a later date. For the moment, for them, that’s enough. They’ve known each other long enough to not need many words.

“Try Anya, she’d know,” Raven suggests absently, not looking at either one of them. She’s still fiddling with some of the little pieces of metal she brings everywhere. Then there’s a little sliding noise, and she crows, “Aha! Done!”

“What are you done with?” Clarke says curiously. In her experience, everything Raven makes is useful, and nearly everything Raven makes is deadly. Lexa and Clarke had requested Raven work on some things – radios, specifically, followed by bombs – but this doesn’t look like either one of those. Too small.

“Found an old broken watch earlier in the scraps,” Raven says, holding it up. “Just wanted to see if I could fix it. Lots of little cogs.” Despite her triumph, her voice sounds flat, and Clarke realises that despite nominally sitting next to Finn on the ground, there’s a very deliberate and pointed space between them.

Her stomach sinks. So Wells persuaded Finn to come clean after all. Poor Raven.

Of course, Raven would hate her pity, so Clarke forces herself to pay attention to other things. “Nice,” she says, taking a step closer to look at the watch. It’s old and clunky, and whatever kind of band it used to be connected to has clearly rotted away or been ripped off, but she can see the hands tick-tick-ticking their way around the little circle. It makes her think of her father’s watch, accidentally abandoned back on the Ark in her first few minutes in this new world.

Finn reaches out tentatively and takes it. Raven lets him, though she doesn’t look pleased about it. “Pretty cool,” he says, giving Raven a cautious smile. She gives a wooden one back.
Clarke smiles uncomfortably, deciding that it’s time to get the hell out of this awkward situation. She’ll go talk to Anya, then maybe train with Lexa for a while. While her heart aches for Raven – and even Finn somewhat, it can’t be fun to have the person he’s closest to give him that cold look – she’s not going to be any use here.

“Can I have it?” Clarke says suddenly, gesturing at the watch. “It’s fine if you want to keep it,” she adds hurriedly. But the truth is, she suddenly really wants it. She wants that comforting ticking noise, reminding her of her father, his strength, his kindness. If she can’t have his actual watch, it would be good to have something.

“Sure,” Raven says with a negligent shrug. “Take it, it’s yours. I should really be working on making radios out of the scraps Anya’s been bringing me instead.”

Finn passes it over to Clarke with an effort at his usual charming grin. Then he glances at Raven nervously when his hand touches Clarke’s for a second as he gives her the watch, and the charm falls away.

“Thanks,” Clarke says, unable to stop herself from looking at Raven as well, probably with a sliver of guilt in her expression. She might not have screwed over Raven in this timeline, but she sure as hell did in the other one. Even if it was never on purpose.

Raven’s eyes narrow. “You’re welcome,” she says, and suddenly there’s suspicion in her voice. She looks between Finn and Clarke, searching for something.

Clarke can’t exactly say that it wasn’t her this time, not when she isn’t supposed to know about anything about Finn’s unfaithfulness. So instead she just slips the watch into her pocket, gives Raven an uncomfortable smile, and escapes over to where Anya is probably already running her gonas through drills.

She waits until the drill is over. It takes a while, which allows her to go get some food – Indra’s assigned some people purely to find and cook things for the Skaikru and the leaders. At first Clarke wondered if this would be viewed by the Trikru as freeloading, but apparently Lexa brought an additional barrel of fayowada to the village as thanks, and had Indra spread knowledge of that around. Between that and the party the first night they were there, the TonDC villagers probably think of the Skaikru as some sort of omen of drunkenness.

Which is far better than the omen of death they used to be considered to be. Causing some liver damage is considerably less fearsome than burning men alive. It’s a good trade-off, even if it means that so far her respect in this world is nearly entirely based off Lexa’s treatment of her. It was at least partially based on that in the other world, as well, and she can deal with it.

When Anya finally looks done, covered in sweat and mud from wrestling one of her warriors into the dirt, Clarke calls out her name. Anya looks over, frowns, says a couple of quick words to the others, and stalks over, imperious and intimidating as always. While she’s struck up an odd, barbed banter with Raven, and seems to have no problem helping to train Wells, Anya doesn’t like Clarke at all for some reason. It’s clear in the way her eyes narrow when she sees Clarke with Lexa, the snorts she makes in the background sometimes, the way she tenses like she’s preparing for battle when Clarke speaks to her.

“What is it, Skai girl?” Anya says, lip curling.

“I just wanted to know if any of your scouts had seen Octavia and Lincoln return,” Clarke says quietly.
Anya shrugs. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. I did not tell them to look out for a lost Skaikru, or a wandering scout.”

“Well, could you ask around,” Clarke says, annoyance starting to surface at Anya’s tone. She’s about had it with people attacking her, considering she’s done nothing wrong.

“Is that an order?” Anya asks, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

Clarke tries not to grind her teeth. “It was more like a request. If you want me to make it an order -”

“You don’t command me, Clarke,” Anya replies, voice dangerous.

“I don’t, no. But I speak with the authority of the Commander,” Clarke says with finality.

Then Anya gives a razor’s edge of a smile, and Clarke realises this is exactly what Anya wanted her to say, that in fact she was manipulating her towards it. “Yes, you do, don’t you? You use her authority as your weapon. Her affection as your shield. She is all that lies between your people and death – you should think twice before you waste the power she’s given you on such small requests.”

Anya looks at Clarke with contempt. “Because I do not expect you to maintain that power for long.”

“Jealous, are you, Anya? Only you can use her affection to your advantage?” She remembers Anya saying in the first world that her old Seken will listen to her. Remembers her in this world, making sour comments to Lexa, giving unasked for advice. She isn’t the only person here who takes advantage of the fact Lexa cares about her.

Anya snorts. “So that is what you’re doing then. How cold, how practical. Especially for your people. The rest of them are branwadas, are goufas, but you aren’t, Clarke kom Skaikru. You are a snake. A threat. And you will get our Commander killed.”

Clarke’s heart pounds hard in her chest. Lexa – blood – blackness, all over her fingers, all over her – lightning – Lexa – her breath comes in little pants and she forces it back into a normal rhythm. She had the dream again last night. “I won’t let Lexa die,” Clarke says fiercely.

“You would kill her yourself if it would help your people,” Anya says coldly. “You are invaders, you are thieves, and you use whatever you find. I will not let you use her.”

Would she kill Lexa for her people? She honestly doesn’t know. Clarke hopes that’s never a choice she has to make. “Our people,” Clarke says, letting her voice grow chillier too.

“What?”

“Our people. Not just mine. We’re all the same people. Our ways are different from yours, but we’re on the same side. Are Trikru ways the same as Azgeda? Floudenkru ways the same as Sangedakru? But that doesn’t mean you can’t work with them.”

“Your ways are the ways of the Mountain,” Anya growls.

“No. They’re not,” Clarke grits her teeth. “You care about Lexa, I understand that. And I know that’s where this is coming from. But don’t you dare compare my people to theirs again. We will fight them with you, Anya. I promise. We will.”

“My people will fight,” Anya says flatly. “And we will die. While your people run around playing at being hunters, bakers, teachers. You have promised Heda that you will help to take down the Mountain, and it is a fool’s plan.”
“It’s Lexa’s plan too.”

“And you make Lexa a fool!” Anya says harshly, and turns her face away, apparently realising she’s gone too far. She looks visibly upset even as she tries to straighten her face out, and Clarke feels a pang of sympathy. Anya’s anger doesn’t come from hatred or condemnation but from fear and love. She’s known Lexa for years, and suddenly Lexa is behaving differently, making different choices than she expected, acting in ways their people might not accept. She’s scared for her.

“You’re not the only one who loves her, Anya,” Clarke says quietly.

“I have known her since she was a yongon,” Anya says, enraged at her emotions being so visible. “You have known her only weeks.”

“I’ve known her forever,” Clarke says, the words brutally honest as they hang in the air. Because part of her has known Lexa forever – Lexa feels almost like another part of her, now. Her soulmate, if such things existed. “I promise you. Lexa will not die. I won’t let her. We’re tougher than you think. I’m tougher than you think.”

Anya opens her mouth to reply, but instead another voice cuts through the air.

“Clarke.” It’s Octavia, skidding to a stop beside her, face hard. “Raven told me you were looking for me, and I know we probably have some stuff to talk about after earlier, but that might need to wait... We have a problem.”

“What?” Clarke says, turning to her.

“Lincoln and I stopped by the drop ship,” Octavia says. “I wanted to see it again, it seemed like a good place to think about... things. Just process stuff. And guess what, it’s not empty.”

“What?” Clarke says again.

“Murphy, John and Drew are there,” Octavia tells her. “They must have left only a little while after we did to get there by now.” Probably following them at least part of the way, for that matter – the trail of a couple of dozen horses through the forest would be easy to track, if they couldn’t remember the exact route they’d walked to Polis.

Clarke blinks. She didn’t expect this, but it makes sense – at least for Murphy. She doesn’t really know the others. They died before the Ark even came down, so she only remembers them for the same reason as she knows of them in this world, being part of Bellamy’s ‘there are no rules’ gang. Nothing else. “Did you speak to them?” she wants to know. “Find out why they were there?”

“I considered it,” Octavia admits. “But no. They all had knives, and looked like they were gathering supplies. Also...” she hesitates, then plunges in. “Murphy has a gun.”

Clarke looks at her and then swears softly and fluently. “I left it in my room. God damn it. I just left it there. Because I didn’t want to carry it.” Then she remembers she wasn’t entirely stupid. “I did take the bullets out though. I didn’t want anyone else getting their hands on a loaded gun.”

Octavia gives a little sigh of relief. “Okay. We probably could’ve taken them, then. I wasn’t sure if we wanted to, though. I mean, you said everyone had a choice...” She leaves the sentence hanging.

“They do,” Clarke assures her. “But we should talk to them anyway, make sure they’re not going to go around stabbing Trikru and starting a war. I’ll go talk to Lexa, get some gonas to go with us just in case.”
“All right. I’m coming too.”

Clarke considers pointing out that she’s already been out all night. But the truth is, Octavia doesn’t look tired, she almost never looks tired – it’s like she saved up energy for sixteen years and now has enough stored to power through just about anything. Or has a secret caffeine stash. “Good. Thanks. And, Octavia…” she waits until Octavia looks at her. “Once we’re done with this, once we’re back here and have a chance to be alone, we’ll talk. I promise.” She’s promising a lot, lately.

Octavia relaxes slightly. The omnipresent chip on her shoulder seems to slide off. “Thanks. That would be good. I thought you were... I thought you were angry at me. I went too far, before.” she swallows. Octavia doesn’t like to admit fault. “You were right. You’ve done nothing but good things for everyone. You haven’t been totally honest, I know that, but I do trust you to do what’s best for us, Clarke. I do. Really. And the way I spoke to you was just horrible, I treated you like crap and you didn’t deserve it. I’m sorry. If you can’t tell me everything, then just... just tell me what you can. Alright?”

"Alright," Clarke says softly, giving her a smile. "I'll do that."

It’s a moment that feels like it should end in a hug or something, even with the silent Anya glowering at them both. Instead they just both give an awkward nod and head off in opposite directions.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just sitting here really hoping the comments for this aren't just a stream of anger against Anya for also yelling at Clarke. Please try and remember she's just worried for Lexa - who from her vantage point, just fell in love for only the second time in her life and immediately made an all-give-and-no-take alliance that favours her new girlfriend's people (a people Anya doesn't really understand or like). Like Gustus, Anya has known Lexa since she was a small child, and no matter how proud of you or how much respect for you people have, if they've known you since you were a kid they will nearly always be a little more protective of you than they should be.

But apart from that, let me know what you think! And if you actually remember either John or Drew from the brief, mostly wordless time they spent on the show!
Clarke, Lexa and Octavia go to talk to Murphy.

Lexa frowns as they approach the drop ship, her horse becoming restive in response to her unease. This will be only the third time she has ever been to this place, the place where dozens of Skaikru and hundreds of Trikru met their deaths in the other world. The first time she came here was back then, to see if Clarke was telling the truth about being able to cure Ripas (the answer: sort of). The second time was to persuade the Skaikru in this world to come to Polis.

Both of those times seemed needful. This time does not. She could have sent the dozen gonas by themselves to retrieve the three boys. They could have done it without difficulty. But Clarke wishes simply to talk to Murphy and the others without dragging them to TonDC, so that is what they are doing.

Of course, that is not a reason for Lexa to be here. That is an excuse. The reason is simply Clarke. She wants to be beside Clarke. Always.

It is not a new thought, but there is more purpose behind it than ever before, more assurance. Because in this world, Clarke wants to be beside her as well, and she knows it. That awareness still seems bright and fresh.

She swings down off her horse easily, and moves to help Clarke down. Her hands briefly clasp Clarke’s waist and she enjoys the way her hands fit right there. As if she was designed to hold Clarke, and Clarke to hold her.

She is becoming weaker by the day, and it makes her feel stronger than it should.

She looks forward to the soft warmth and routine that a relationship becomes once the edges have worn off, now that they may have time to find that. The ease and comfort and contentment of shared love and hope replacing the jagged, extreme ups and downs of the beginning. It makes her happy to think that now she may have time enough that she will grow to think of Clarke as an inalterable part of her life, not ever taken for granted, but still a presence she can depend on and wake up beside and lean on in times of stress.

Octavia makes a frustrated noise, and Lexa helps her as she nearly falls off the horse, unused to them even after their trip from Polis to TonDC. Linkon could not come – the night out hunting and walking the distance to the drop ship and back has inflamed his injured leg, and he is with Nyko being treated. He would probably enjoy helping Octavia down much more than Lexa does.

At a sign from Lexa, the gonas all remain on their horses, in the clearing, as her, Clarke and Octavia walk towards the drop ship. She can hear the sounds of conversation inside. Lexa glances at Clarke quickly and raises her eyebrows, silently asking if she should enter or remain outside. Clarke nods.
determinedly, and so Lexa follows her inside.

Three boys are there. Lexa only knows one of them – Murphy. She has no fondness for Murphy, and she has never understood why any of the Skaikru do, especially Clarke. As far as she is aware, he has brought nothing but death, illness, and injury to Clarke’s people. But then, that is Clarke: she loves and defends her people anyway, regardless of their crimes. A true heart.

The other two boys are both tall, one dark-skinned and brunet, the other light-skinned and blonde, both with faces set into fierce expressions. It seems almost surprising that the shorter, sourer Murphy should be in charge, but from a single glance at them Lexa can tell he is.

Murphy looks up and sees them as Clarke closes the drop ship’s door, presumably so the warriors outside will not hear what they discuss. Lexa feels it would be better to leave it open so they can yell for her gonakru if need be, but does not say anything – knowing Clarke that is why she chose to close it, so matters were less likely to turn violent. “What are you doing here?” he snaps.

“Just wanted to check what was going on,” Clarke says carefully. “You could have let someone know you were leaving.”

“I told Bellamy,” Murphy snarled. “I’m sure he would have let you know if you ever went back to that hellhole.”

Lexa bristles, offended on behalf of her city, but does not comment on this. She can see that the boys all have badly crafted bags, already half-filled with food. One has tipped and dried meat, fruit and jobi nuts have fallen out. “You took some of that from my people,” she says instead, inclining her head towards one of the bags.

Murphy bares his teeth at her. “Wages. For the woodwork I did.”

“So what’s the plan?” Clarke asks. “Stay here?”

“Hell no,” Murphy says, “We don’t want to be around when the Ark comes down. We’re gonna head off on our own.”

“See the ocean,” the paler one of his companions says, “All that pale, blue water, instead of woods or buildings blocking in the view.” He gives a smile, looking animated for the first time.

Lexa wonders whether she should inform him that the ocean is typically dark and filled with dangers, but there seems no point. There are few places in this world that are not somewhat dangerous.

“Drew…” Clarke starts to say, then sighs. “If that’s what you want,” she says instead. Then she points down at the bag. “You probably shouldn’t take those nuts, though. They’re hallucinogens.” She sees all of their confused glances at her. “They cause visions,” she elaborates. “Don’t eat them. You should give them to us, we can burn them.”

“You should not do that either,” Lexa advises. “When they first go bad, they only cause visions when eaten, but they can get far worse in time. After they have been left for a while, even burning as little as a handful of them can cause half a gonakru to see things which are not there. If you do not know what stage they are at it is best to dispose of them by burying.”

Murphy looks at the nuts, then crouches and picks up a handful thoughtfully. “Visions, huh? So they send you on a trip if you burn them or eat them?”

“Not a fun one, Murphy,” Clarke says sharply, divining his intentions.
“So you say, Princess,” Murphy replies, “But you seem to have forgotten you’re not in charge here.”

“Come on, man,” the darker one his friends says quietly. “We can just go. Save the trippy nuts for later if you want, but I’d like to get out of here.” He meets Lexa’s eyes and she sees that his are green, unusual for his dark skin. If the other one is Drew, this one must be the one they referred to as John.

Murphy looks at him and lets the nuts trickle back into the bag. “Right, sure.” He gives a nod. “Let’s get the fuck out of this dump.” He looks at Lexa as well. “Any suggestions for a direction, oh great and wise queen of the Grounders?”

“I suggest you not come anywhere near me,” Lexa says, showing her teeth in what is not at all a smile. She does not like his insolent tone. If he was one of her people, or in earshot of one of her people, he would lie dead on the ground now. She expects he would not talk so if he was aware that outside the closed door of the drop ship a dozen gonas wait for the slightest noise to give them a reason to come inside and protect her.

“MAUNON! MAU -”

The voice is cut off with a hoarse, choking noise. More yells follow.

Clarke is the first one to react. She unsheathes Lexa’s sword – Lexa has to suppress her instincts, which all scream at her not to allow another to take her weapon – and apparently stabs it into the floor of the drop ship. A second later she is prying up a part of the floor that is nearly identical to the others, revealing a cramped area below, filled with colourful wires and lights. Lexa winces at the damage to her sword, but she can easily get another one later. Surviving now is the priority.

“Down,” Clarke snaps, eyes filled with panic but voice level.

Octavia obeys immediately, not even asking how Clarke knew how to open the floor that quickly. The sounds of pain and violence outside are dwindling, but are no less horrifying for that. What sounds like a bullet hits the drop ship, followed by another.

“What the fuck?” Murphy says, too loudly. Certainly audible outside. He moves several steps away from the door, foolishly also moving away from the hole Clarke has found.

Clarke grabs the closest boy – John – and yanks him towards the hole in the ground. “Come on, come on,” she says frantically. He allows himself to be pulled, brow furrowed.

There is a scraping noise at the door to the drop ship. Lexa decides they are done waiting and jerks both Clarke and John into the hole by their sleeves, dragging the piece of floor quickly over them so it settles into its original place. The last thing she sees as she closes it are the frightened eyes of the boy Drew as he starts towards the hold. But it is too late.

The metal above squeals and howls, Lexa believes it is the door being pulled off the ship by the Maunon. John begins to whimper and Lexa mashes her palm against his mouth, muffling him. Gagging him. He bites her hand – probably not on purpose – and she ignores it, using her other hand against his neck to crush him against the side and make it even harder for him to make noise. They cannot be found. These are the Maunon, fully armed. In direct combat with so many of them, they will all die. Lexa presses her ear against the top of their cramped hiding place.

There is a groan, followed by two thuds within moments of each other. Drew and Murphy hitting the floor above them.

“Looks like most ………….. sensor trigg-……….. were coming fr…. Outsiders, but …… -et
some,” a very muffled voice says, whole parts of his sentences incomprehensible through the floor. A pause, probably to get a reply from his radio. “Two. Male. No, sir. She’s n-……… -re, sir.” Another pause. “Yes, sir.”

Footsteps from above echo around their refuge as the Mountain Men apparently search the drop ship. They climb the ladder, drop back down.

It’s tense, extremely so. Clarke moves one of her hands to the small of Lexa’s back, rubbing at it, and even in the gloom she can just barely make out her reaching the other one out to hold Octavia’s hand. Octavia starts, surprised at the unexpected touch, but then allows it. She’s shaking.

Lexa remembers hearing from Clarke once that Octavia grew up under a floor for nearly all her life. What must it be like, after that, to believe you will die under one as well?

Not that she’s unmoved, either. Lexa does not allow herself to shake but the gentle touch of Clarke’s hand on her back, the calming circles she’s moving it in, remind her exactly what she has to lose here. Lexa prepared herself for death a long time ago, but back then she expected death to be a rest, a reprieve, as the Commander spirit passed on to someone else. In the other world, although she stayed calm and pretended serenity for Clarke, all she could think about was what she was losing. The conversations she would never have with Clarke, when she wanted to say everything. The places she only got to touch once, when she wanted to memorise her skin. The peace they would not build together, when she wanted to stand beside Clarke in a better world and know it was their work.

She can hear the faint noise of the leader saying something else into the radio, but he’s too far away to make it out. They are probably also in those suits of theirs, muffling the noise further – for a second she feels wild fury and wishes nothing more than to pop out of the floor and slice through his suit, condemning him to die as the air itself removes his rot from the world, burning him to death. But she controls herself. The Maunon are many, they are few.

Wait. Not now. Kill them later.

“………-othing, sir. We’ll leave …………-ors here, if………………………………-ack we’ll get th-…. Can interrog-……………………………………………………-ey’ll know where ………-onde girl…..”

Clarke’s hand stops moving. She pulls it away from Lexa’s back, pulls the other back from gripping Octavia’s. She’s already half bent over, but stumbles backwards anyway and slides to the floor. Even in the darkness Lexa can see she’s pale, her mouth opening and closing like she’s in shock. Lexa wonders why she has moved so abruptly from composed to panicking. What did she hear that Lexa missed?

The Maunon leave. Silence reigns, none willing to open their refuge and step out. John is nearly sobbing, Octavia has wrapped her arms around herself and is shaking even harder now. Lexa herself is trying to regulate her breathing, return to calmness instead of the rage and fear that gripped her momentarily.

Clarke finally speaks from her place lying on the floor, curled into herself. She looks numb, lost. “Emerson,” she croaks.

“What?” Lexa asks sharply.


“Clarke, I do not.”
“He remembers.”

Chapter End Notes

So, um... hope you guys like this?

Later note: enough people are asking "does that mean Emerson's dead in the original timeline?" that I feel I should comment on it here. I don't know if he is or not, I stopped watching once they killed Lexa. But being dead in canon isn't a pass to having your memories - otherwise Wells, Anya, Gustus and many others would all have their memories.
When they leave their hiding place, they find nothing but a few milling horses, and the bodies of Grounders with neat bullet holes in their heads. Distantly, Clarke notes that the horses they left are a godsend – whatever sensors the Mountain Men installed here will be being continually triggered by them, so the Maunon are unlikely to come back and investigate again for a while. They should probably go in a different direction to head back anyway, just in case it’s some kind of perimeter sensor, but they’ll probably survive.

“They threw this at the gonas, knocked them all out with it,” Clarke says tonelessly, picking up a used gas grenade and handing it to Lexa, who takes it with a visible look of disgust. “It’s amazing they managed to shout a warning at all. One of the gonas must have spotted them first and then they all tried to yell out to us, and fight, but then the Mountain Men threw these… after that, they would have been knocked out. So the Mountain Men walked around and shot every single one of them.”

“Clarke…” Lexa says softly.

Clarke swallows the bile in her throat. “Maybe they had silencers. I didn’t hear the shots, did you? I don’t understand why they’d bother with silencers, though. It would have been easy to shoot them, since they were unconscious. Maybe I just didn’t hear them, I was too worried about us. There was no reason to shoot them, either, since they were already unconscious.” She reaches down and closes one of the warrior’s eyes gently, hand shaking slightly. “They just shot them because… well, why not. Bullets are cheap, easy to make.” She closes the eyes of the woman next to him as well. This gona has a facial tattoo, and Clarke wonders what it means – do the three bars on her cheek represent her children? Her siblings? The number of wars she’s fought, the number of decades she’s been alive, the number of people she’s fallen in love with?

“What’s going on?” Octavia says, her voice trembling. “Why did they do this? Who’s Emerson?”

“I killed his children,” Clarke says, her voice still a monotone. Somehow she can’t force herself to wake up from this shock.

“No,” Lexa says forcefully. “No, you didn’t. You did what you had to do. And that wasn’t here, Clarke, wasn’t now. It did not happen.”

“But he remembers it,” Clarke says dully. “So it did for him.”

“Why would he remember?” Lexa says reasonably.

“Remember what?” Octavia says shrilly. John is still sick, lying on the ground just inside the drop ship – one of them should probably be helping. He started throwing up when he saw all the corpses, the careless bullet shots to the middle of the head for each of them, not neat and clean like in movies.
but complete with brain matter and blood and the ugly realness of murder. Octavia seems to be holding together better, but only just. Neither of them have seen things like this before.

“Remember everything,” Clarke says to Octavia, abruptly sick of lying. It’s too much effort, in this moment. John can’t hear, and they agreed to tell Octavia anyway. “Everything about the first time around. The first time we fell from the Ark. Jasper was hit by a spear, Charlotte killed Wells, Bellamy threw away Raven’s radio and hundreds of people up there died because of him. You were kidnapped by Lincoln, we tortured him, you became a warrior. We burned three hundred people alive, Finn shot people in cold blood in TonDC and was executed, the Maunon wanted us all dead, so we killed them all, even the children, but then Pike started killing off all of the Grounders even though they were helping us…” her voice fades away. She doesn’t know what to say. There’s too much. It hurts too much.

Lexa takes over for her. “Clarke and I lived through the first year of your people coming to the ground already,” she says quietly to Octavia. “We fought each other, and the Mountain, and the Ice Nation, and each other again. Then I died. And Clarke went to the top of the tower in Polis, and lightning hit her, and we both woke up and remembered it all.”

“That’s insane,” Octavia snaps, but she looks even more shaken now.

“That’s how I knew Raven would come down,” Clarke says, still unable to care about much of anything. She’s staring at the hole through a man’s head and she feels nothing except a numb distance from everything real. She’s fucked up. She’s fucked up so badly. “How I knew Trigedasleng. How Lexa knew what the radio was. How I and Lexa knew each other. How I knew where that hiding place was – I helped Raven do some things there, in the last world. It sounds insane, but it’s true, and it explains everything.”

“But it does not explain why Emerson would remember,” Lexa says, sounding stressed, worried about Clarke. “Please, ai hodnes -”

“I’m so stupid,” Clarke says, closing another warrior’s staring dead eyes. They should be getting out of here straight away, but she can’t bring herself to care enough right now. Their guards are dead, Murphy and Drew have either been taken by the Mountain Men or are dead as well. She wanders back inside numbly and looks at the walls, seeing the truth immediately. “There, look, one of their knock-out darts missed and hit the wall. The others must not have – kind of amazing they missed with any at this range, maybe one guy pulled his shot up at the last second to avoid overdosing one of them on sedatives. They use those darts on small groups, with only two or three people, and save the gas grenades for larger clusters. So Murphy and Drew are probably alive. For the moment. They’ll have their bone marrow sucked out by tomorrow, I bet. Maybe a little later since they were talking about interrogation. And we can’t do anything about it.” She bends down and picks up the useless empty gun, discarded here by Murphy, and stares at it for a second before shoving it into her waistband.

Lexa plucks the dart out of the wall, curling her fist around it as if to hide it from Clarke’s view. Clarke hopes she doesn’t squeeze too hard and knock herself out. “Clarke,” she says, almost pleadingly. “This isn’t your fault -”

“Why would they take them?” Octavia says, clearly still trying to comprehend what’s going on. “I mean, take them alive? Why?”

“They can’t handle radiation,” Clarke says, moving her gaze to Lexa. “They burn up if they leave the Mountain. Using our bone marrow, they can. There’s nearly four hundred of them, they need one person per seven, so Murphy and Drew will only help fourteen…” and then she breaks, the force within her, the sadness, the horror, finally overcoming the walls of numbness. She screws up her
eyes so much that they sting with the force of it, but the hot tears still well out of them, tracing lines
down her face.

“Clarke,” Lexa says, “Clarke,” And Lexa’s arms are around her pulling her close, so that her tears
soak Lexa’s shoulder, so she snuffles against her, so her wails are muffled against the woman she
loves.

And that’s how she’s able to stand again, with Lexa against her, with Lexa’s strength flowing into
her. She sobs against her and ignores everything for what seems like hours but is probably only
minutes, and then she runs out of tears, and she leans on Lexa and pulls herself together. She doesn’t
even know why she’s reacting this badly. She didn’t know Drew, didn’t know the gonas who died
for her. She knew Murphy, but he was kind of a dick. Maybe again he would have become more –
maybe not. He’s lost the chance to, now.

But maybe she’s crying because she thought that this time, no one had to die. She and Lexa, with
their command of the future, could save the day! Sure, they’d lost a few. Atom, Trina and Pascal had
died. More would when the Ark came to Earth, that was unavoidable if they landed wrongly. But
there was no reason why it couldn’t work out for the rest of them. In the back of her mind she’d even
been going over deals they could make with the Mountain, ways they could trade their bone marrow
for the destruction of the fog machine and discontinuation of the Reaper program, for example. But
now that’s useless. Emerson won’t let that happen. He hates her too much.

She thought this was about love. Her love for Lexa, powerful enough to rip through time. Her
feelings for Lexa were so strong they seemed bigger than just her, so it almost made sense to Clarke
that she could change the whole world just with grief and need. But when has anything on the
ground been about love? “It’s all about blood,” Clarke says finally when she’s in control again.

It’s always about blood. Grounder blood, healing Maunon so their burns fade away like they’d never
existed at all. Skaikru blood, giving them the addictive taste of sunshine which spurred them to
murder. Lexa’s black blood soaking Clarke’s hands, Clarke’s blood boiling in her veins as the
lightning struck, and just the tiniest touch of Emerson’s blood to ruin it all. Clarke thinks she’s been
covered in blood more often than rain since she got here.

“What is?” Octavia says, looking unnerved. Even if she thinks they’re crazy, their devotion to this lie
has her on edge, Clarke can see.

“This. How we were brought back. The lightning hit me, so I came back,” Clarke says. “My hands
were covered in Lexa’s blood, so she came back. But I must have had some of Emerson’s on me as
well. Just a little, the smallest amount, but I guess it was enough.”

“How would you -” Lexa begins, then stops. Her eyes widen. “Oh,” she says thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” Clarke says, almost rueful. “He tackled me, wrestled me to the ground, opened up my
forehead. He was covered in blood, had a bloody nose, forehead, chest, hands… he must have
gotten a smear on me. I was wearing the same clothes then as when you died,” she swallows hard. “I
didn’t wash them. I don’t even remember if I bathed properly between then and the lightning. His
blood could have been on my clothes or in my hair or under my fingernails… I’ve ruined
everything.”

There’s a momentary pause, and then Octavia snickers.

“Octavia!”

“What?” Octavia tries to stifle it, but can’t stop laughing. “I’m sorry… but… you… you’ve doomed
the world… through poor hygiene?” She really can’t stop. “That’s your epic-level mistake? Not washing?”

There’s a long pause. Then Lexa swallows hard and looks away from Clarke.

“Lexa!” Clarke says, in the same half-horrified, half-angry tone of voice.

“I… Clarke,” Lexa visibly tries to force her expression to remain stoic instead of smirking. “This is all very serious, of course. It’s just… that statement is hard to take seriously.” She and Octavia make eye contact only to look away from each other, Octavia struggling not to crack up again.

Clarke massages her forehead, grits her teeth to stop herself bursting out into hysterical giggling as well. She knows that’s what it is – neither Octavia nor Lexa are the kind of people to find something like that funny while in a clearing filled with corpses. In fact, Lexa almost never laughs at all. But the truth is, this situation is so morbid and bizarre it’s hard not to lose your composure.

“I apologise, Clarke,” Lexa says, managing to contain her inappropriate amusement. She clears her throat, schooling her face back into blankness. Octavia sober as well. “So. You believe you had some of Emerson’s blood on you. But we cannot be sure.”

“We can’t,” Clarke admits. “But it explains this. Why they reacted so fast. Why they took dead bodies, even though they showed no interest in them the previous world – Cage was checking to see if Emerson was telling the truth. Emerson would have gone straight to him, he’s the follower type, he wouldn’t have wanted to act on his own. And the timeframe just means it took him a little while to convince him.” She thinks about it. “I bet the drop ship falling convinced him, especially if they checked it out. And then Emerson’s guesses stopped working, but they took Trina and Pascal’s bodies just in case he was on to something anyway.”

“And they found something in the blood or bone marrow that convinced them he was telling the truth,” Lexa says slowly. She nods. “So they put sensors here to catch more prey, hoping you would be one of them. It’s a possibility, certainly. If this is about blood, though, did anyone else bleed on you around that time? Is there another person we should worry about?”

Lexa opens a pouch at her belt and puts in the knock-out dart she was still holding in her hands, as if she’d only just remembered it. To show Indra later, Clarke assumes, though why Lexa would need to prove anything to Indra is beyond her. She closes and knots the pouch carefully again.

Octavia looks between them, clearly still at least half-convinced they’re either mad or making the worst-timed practical joke in history.

“Ontari,” Clarke says slowly, “But I washed that off incredibly thoroughly, trust me, having her blood on my face creeped me out. Roan? No, I definitely washed several times between being captured and… what happened. No one else I can think of.”

John staggers out of the drop ship. His dark skin still has a greenish tinge, but his face is furious. “Murphy,” he manages to choke out. “Where’s Murphy -”

“Out of our reach,” Lexa says bluntly. “You should come back to TonDC with us. Your friends will likely die before we can do anything about it, whatever we try. But if you wish to have even the chance of avenging them, you will come with us.” She looks at him. “Of course, if you still wish to leave for the ocean, I will not stop you.”

John blinks. “He was my friend,” he says hoarsely. His skin is returning to its normal colour, his face beginning to set with determination and anger.
He was your partner in crime, Clarke thinks disrespectfully, unable to stop herself. He provided the brains, you provided the brawn. Together you made one whole bully. Well done.

She doesn’t say it. Whatever they were, John is clearly upset by what’s happened. So is she. No one else will care about the probable death of Murphy, no one but them and maybe Bellamy. In the other world she remembers John trying to stop them lynching Murphy, but not going with him after Charlotte’s death – she doesn’t know if that’s because he was horrified by her death, or because he didn’t care enough about Murphy, or if his fear of the Grounders back then just outweighed any other considerations. She doesn’t know what kind of man he is at all.

John thinks for a long moment, then his face hardens. “Let’s go,” he says to Lexa. “I’m not going back to Polis, though. I don’t want to keep learning how to hunt, I want to find my friend. Save him.”

“Was learning to hunt so bad?” Clarke asks curiously before she can stop herself. She remembers that he seemed eager about hunting when he signed up for it.

“No, I liked it,” he says. “But Murphy asked me to come with him. And he’s my closest friend, and it didn’t look like the Ark was gonna come down, not really. So I came with him. Come on, let’s go. And on the way, you tell me exactly what we’re up against.”

Lexa nods and makes a clicking noise with her tongue, summoning several of the horses to her easily. She helps them up onto the horses one by one, showing no concern about her dignity as Heda. Then she mounts her own and leads them off.

Clarke follows, digging her heels into the sides of the horse, praying that she’s wrong. That Emerson remembers nothing. That she and Lexa are safe.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the bit of levity in the middle wasn't too distracting, I just couldn't resist it. Someone had to point out how ridiculous it sounded.

Also, John is John Mbege, if anyone's interested and wants to look him up. When I started going through these things it surprised me to realise Murphy actually had a best friend in early season 1. Weird, huh?
It’s late at night by now – nearly morning, in fact – but Lexa’s not sure she’s ever felt so awake.

She goes with Clarke to the radio tent as soon as they return, pausing only to give Anya curt orders to spread out and double the number of people on watch. Octavia, hard-faced but apparently now a believer, takes charge of John and bears him off to get sleep and food. He’s still processing what they told him – only about the Mountain Men, and only the basic facts that every Trikru knows. Nothing about Emerson, or bone marrow, or their memories.

Lexa hasn’t really been into this tent since the radio was carefully placed there. All of her communication with the Ark has happened through Clarke. But they need to talk before Clarke contacts the Ark, to decide what she should tell them.

“I think Octavia believes us,” Lexa comments.

“She’s getting there,” Clarke agrees. “And she’ll tell Lincoln, so that’s two people…” her voice trails off and she switches subjects. “Is there any way we could get inside Mount Weather before Murphy and Drew are dead? If they’re being interrogated… we might have time. I could be our person on the inside this time. I know the way in.”

Lexa can hear in Clarke’s voice that she knows it’s hopeless. “We don’t have a former Ripa on our side to fake a capture,” she says, stating things Clarke is already aware of but wants to hear confirmed by another. It seems easier for Clarke to face bad things in this way. “We don’t have any allies inside. We have no Skaikru warriors or scientists with us, Raven has yet to make any bombs or even radios, we have no tone generators. They still have missiles and the acid fog and Ripas. If Emerson’s told them everything then they’ll be expecting us to do the same things as last time, so we will not even have the element of surprise. We will need to leave TonDC as soon as possible if we want to remain safe, not stay here attempting to attack a fortress and making ourselves easy targets.”

“If I told the Ark to come down sooner,” Clarke says thoughtfully. Then she sighs. “It wouldn’t help at all, would it? We’d lose more of them because they’d have less time to prepare, and I don’t even know what we could have them do once they get here. All the plans I had for the Mountain required them to be willing to deal with us, or at least for us to be able to surprise them and get in that way. There’s no point telling the Ark to do anything, is there?”

“How about telling them to land elsewhere, so Emerson will not know to have Maunon there waiting?” Lexa suggests. “Perhaps far away.”

Clarke blinks, considers it. “And maybe keeping them that far away? With only a dozen or so people able to go outside without suits, if we get my people far enough away, we could make it very hard to get more of them. That could give us leverage if we get my Mom to start collecting bone marrow
from volunteers – we could agree to trade those to them.”

“How could we guarantee they would keep whatever terms we ask them for?” Lexa says doubtfully.

Clarke starts to pace. “What if… um… maybe we could promise that anyone from Mount Weather who leaves and comes to TonDC with one of the Grounder prisoners to trade will be given bone marrow.”

“That will leave them with none of my people as prisoners eventually, but they will then have the ability to go outside as well as all of their weapons,” Lexa points out. “They will still have acid fog and Ripas and gas grenades and knock out darts and guns and missiles. They will also still believe their people are superior to mine.” It itches, as it always does, when she thinks of the tones in which the Maunon spoke to her as they made the deal at Mount Weather. The disrespect towards her and her people had been hard to stomach. She had only been able to because of the number of her people’s lives at stake. They could default to such a deal if they had to – in the other world she did, after all – but she would prefer a plan that does not leave the Maunon stronger.

“We also don’t know if their children will be born with the immunity to radiation as well,” Clarke says. “Just like my people, I think they’re going to have to integrate.”

“They consider us savages.”

“Not integrate with your people, with the Skaikru,” Clarke explains. “Eventually they’ll have to get used to Grounders too, of course. But in the short-term, if we have the Mountain Men come live with my people, we can keep any new children born supplied with bone marrow. And with four hundred of them among more than two thousand Skaikru, after a few generations of intermarriage nearly all of them should be immune – assuming we can pass immunity on like that. And in return for that, we could get them to destroy the Mountain, we know they have the ability to do it. Get out all the medical supplies and food then use the self-destruct.”

Lexa pauses, unsure what to say. Her thoughts must show on her face though.

“I know it’s a naïve and idealistic plan, Lexa,” Clarke says softly. “But it’s the only one I’ve got.” She swallows hard, fighting to keep her face smooth. “And regardless of if we manage to make any kind of deal, it’s a very good idea to keep my people far away from them. If things get desperate and we end up needing to come up with a plan to take them all out -” she shudders at the thought, no doubt plagued by her memories, and closes her eyes to block them out. “- then using radiation again would be the easiest way.” She moves towards Lexa and Lexa folds her into an embrace. For a long moment Clarke is tense, then she sighs and relaxes, leaning against Lexa and allowing herself to be comforted. Lexa places a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

After consideration – slightly extended as she is distracted by trying to stem Clarke’s sadness – Lexa nods. “It is our best option. We will have to see where else your people can land.”

“Can you stay?” Clarke says pleadingly, revealing for a second how much she likes having Lexa there to lean against. Then she clears her throat, and attempts to straighten, stepping out of Lexa’s hold. “I mean, you could tell us which clan we’d be invading in each area, so we could choose where best to go.”

“Of course, ai hodnes,” Lexa assures her. “Hmm. We will have to see where they are able to land. The Boat People to the east would doubtless be kindest to your people after the Woods Clan, but are surrounded by water. Can your people safely land in water?”

“No, probably not,” Clarke admits.
“The other clans close by are the Desert Clan and the Ice Nation. It would be best not to land in the
middle of the desert, but if necessary we could manage that. Perhaps your people could land further
south? It is Woods Clan territory quite far in that direction, and then the Glowing Forest People, who
have always been closely allied with us. If I order that no Skaikru are to be harmed, they will obey.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clarke says, “South if possible, with the desert as a back-up plan.” She flicks
on the radio. “Hi? Anyone there?”

“Clarke?” a worried voice replies.

Lexa identifies it immediately. Abby.

“Hey, Mom,” Clarke says, though she doesn’t seem particularly happy about it. Perhaps, like Lexa,
she would rather talk to Kane. “I’m here with the leader of the Grounders. Mom, this is Lexa,
Commander of the twelve clans, creator of the alliance, Heda of these lands. Lexa, this is Abby
Griffin, Council member – well, sort of – and my mother.”

Lexa notes that Clarke has added or repeated things somewhat in her description of Lexa, no doubt
to impress upon her mother the need for deference. She inclines her head towards the radio, though
she knows Abby can’t see it. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Abby Griffin. You have raised your
daughter to be a wise leader.”

“Oh,” Abby sounds surprised. “It’s – it’s nice to meet you too, Commander. Your English is very
good.”

“As is yours,” Lexa says, and there is a prolonged silence in response as if Abby is searching for
something to say.

Clarke intervenes. “We need to speak to Sinclair, Mom, is he there?”

“He’s working on some calculations with his people,” Abby says. “I can go get him if you like.
What did you want to talk to him about? What’s the Commander want to talk to him about?”

“His calculations, actually,” Clarke says.

“Why?” Abby asks. She lowers her voice. “And should the Commander really – I mean, Clarke,
should we really be -”

Lexa decides to interrupt before Abby becomes offensive by saying that she shouldn’t be there. From
that it is only a short step to Abby admitting she doesn’t trust the Grounders. ‘The Grounders’, as the
people above call them, have given food and homes to the goufas the Skaikru chose to sacrifice,
have taught them how to survive and worked to ensure they are safe, yet their leaders still insist on
viewing Lexa’s people as a threat. It annoys her. “It is important. Fetch him for us now, please.”

“I’m not going to get him until you tell me what this is about,” Abby snaps. She sounds somewhat
offended by her brusqueness, which Lexa thinks is something she’ll have to get over if she expects to
deal with her people. But then, Abby in the old world had never entirely learnt how to deal with
Lexa’s people, either.

“You may remain while we discuss it, if you wish. We simply do not want to go through the issue
twice.” There’s still a pause, and Lexa adds a hint of steel to her voice. “If you do not trust me, you
must at least trust your daughter. Find him for us now.” She makes sure her tone is deliberately
commanding. From the information Clarke has given her, Abby is part of the Council, seven people
who share command over two and a half thousand Sky People at most. Lexa is the Commander,
leader of at least thirty times that, a large proportion of whom are warriors, and who are the rightful
owners of the land the Skaikru plan to descend to. She will not behave as if they are equals, and set a precedent she has no desire to follow.

Abby in her capacity as Clarke’s nomon – that is different. That is something she will have to navigate when the Ark returns to Earth, if Abby survives the fall. Perhaps there is some set way Sky People deal with the parents of their lover, and Clarke can inform her how to follow it.

“I’m here with Abby now, hello, Clarke, and uh, hello Commander,” a man’s voice crackles through the radio, tense and breathless. “What’s the matter?”

“Hi, Sinclair,” Clarke says, “Mom, you remember when I mentioned that there were already people in Mount Weather? How I said they were unfriendly?”

Lexa quirks an eyebrow at Clarke. Unfriendly seems like perhaps an understatement.

“Yes,” Abby says.

“They’ve gotten more unfriendly. Specifically against us.”

“What did you do?” Abby says.

“Nothing,” Clarke says, “Maybe they just don’t like people falling from the sky.” She gives Lexa a little shrug, as if to say it’s easier than explaining the whole story. Lexa agrees – besides anything else, there’s no way they should know what the Mountain want the Skaikru for, and if Lexa’s people become aware she has information she should have no way to get it will produce suspicion. “We found out earlier that they’re specifically trying to get as many Skaikru – sorry, as many of our people – as possible. I need to know what areas we could safely land the Ark in.”

“The Ark’s in a geosynchronous orbit, Clarke,” Sinclair says. “We deliberately aimed when the stations joined together to have the Ark be above Mount Weather part of the time for when we came to Earth. That means we’re always around the same area – not the exact area, because we’re not along the equator, but reasonably close, moving like a distorted figure eight every day. So if you mean you want us to land in another country, we can’t do that.”

“We wouldn’t do that anyway,” Abby says immediately. “We need to come down where you are, Clarke. We can’t just leave you kids -”

“We’ll be fine, Mom,” Clarke says firmly. “And I wasn’t thinking another country. How far away from Mount Weather can you get?”

“We sent you kids down when we’d just passed the southwestern-most point of our orbit, close to the bottom of the eight,” Sinclair says. “So we could do slightly south, but not much. Reasonably far east because of the distortion, but we’d be over the ocean then. Best bet is to go further north if you’re looking for us to be any distance from Mount Weather.”

Clarke looks at Lexa, unhappy. “It will have to be north then. North, and the Azgeda.”

Lexa nods silently, and Clarke turns back to the radio to begin organising this. There is a Skaikru saying she heard Clarke use once – from the frying pan to the fire. Lexa hopes they have not just committed this.
I feel like any scientists reading this will be groaning "that's not what a geosynchronous orbit is AT ALL" right now. I'm not a very science-y person, if you can't tell, but on the other hand enough of the science in the actual show makes no sense that I think there's some wiggle room there :)

I'm writing most of the Skaikru as reasonably xenophobic (though obviously to varying levels) - partially on the basis of the show, and partially because they've been a very insulated society for a hundred years and they literally believed they were the only people who existed. Groups like that, especially when they have a higher level of technology than the other people they eventually meet, tend to develop both a superiority complex and a habit of treating the new people badly. The twelve clans, on the other hand, are used to dealing with new groups of people fairly regularly, so I like to think that if it wasn't for a) the 100 invading their lands and immediately trying to go to the Mountain, b) the 100 resembling the Mountain in many ways, and c) the 100 accidentally destroying a village, they would have been much nicer. This is all just my opinion though! It doesn't have to be shared!
“How are the radios going?” Clarke asks.

“Not great,” Raven replies, squinting at what she’s fiddling with. It looks a bit like a radio, to Clarke’s untrained eyes. Beside her there is a massive pile of electronic parts, most of them beaten up, ripped apart, rusted or otherwise useless – it looks like Anya’s unit has eagerly obeyed the orders to bring back anything useful, but don’t have to clear an idea what ‘useful’ means in this context. As she watches, Raven reaches out without looking and snags a wire from a small pile of them she’s made. “How’s everything in the sky going?”

“Also not great,” Clarke says ruefully. “Shumway’s turned on Diana Sydney and some of the others to save his own skin, so she’s still being held, but she hasn’t admitted anything herself. They think there must be people helping her that Shumway doesn’t know about. Obviously, the arrests of Shumway and some of their conspirators have thrown the Guard into chaos. Meanwhile, the scientists are arguing about the exact right way to come down to earth, and about how people should be split between the stations so if only one makes it down our ‘species’ will still survive – ignoring the fact that we’re hardly the last of our species. Oxygen’s getting lower and four people so far have gone completely blind, with twenty-seven more experiencing other vision problems, and they’re considering coming down early but have no chance of sorting things out in time. The parents of kids in Polis and Monty’s parents are campaigning to come down as close to us as possible because they think we’re exaggerating about Mount Weather, and some of the others are joining in because they think that we’re delinquents who want to keep the nice land for ourselves and force them into the snow. So basically…” Clarke takes a breath, but Raven interrupts.

“So basically, you’re telling me not to bitch about these stupid radios,” Raven flashes Clarke a quick grin before returning her eyes to the quasi-radio.

“Is it the lack of supplies?” Clarke asks. “We can get more people searching.” Or maybe the underground aid depot will have something they can use – then she dismisses that thought. The place was wrecked. Sometime they will have to go there to get the guns though. When the others get down, maybe.

“Please don’t,” Raven replies emphatically. “I have more than enough junk here. I’ve trained some of Anya’s guys to recognise what a wire is, so I might get some good stuff from them eventually. But for the most part it’s a pile of crap. Digging through it to find decent things is the hardest part. Monty’s been helping out some. And Jasper’s got a recipe for bombs after I’ve finished the radios, that shouldn’t be too hard.”

Clarke hesitates, but she has to ask. “Will you have at least one radio done by tomorrow? That’s when Lexa wants to leave for Polis.” And even waiting that long is making her edgy. Lexa’s started spending significant time each day away from the village, just in case, and has ordered Clarke to be
at the edge or outside of the village whenever possible, guarded by as many people as possible. Last night Lexa took some of the gonas on an impromptu hunt as far from the Mountain as possible and camped out, splitting the chief targets. With the number of scouts they have around it would be hard for Mount Weather to paint a target and send a missile towards them – but not impossible. It’s good logic, since if she and Lexa both die then Emerson will be the only person to remember (if he does remember). Besides, she has no doubt Murphy or Drew will have told the Maunon everything by now. Polis is probably safe, given the distance and sheer number of Grounders there, but if the Mountain Men decide to attack TonDC with guns and gas grenades they might have a chance. Clarke just hopes the sheer number of scouts and guards and traps they have spread out around the area, and the impossibility of confirming if she’s still there, will make the Mountain pause.

It’s not particularly helping Clarke’s mood to be apart from Lexa. They’ll be able to spend time together again once they’re on the move and a missile will be too slow to use effectively against them, thankfully, but for now it grates on her.

“I should,” Raven says absently. “And once I’ve got one, it should be child’s play to make more, the main difficulty is figuring it out from scratch ‘cause I don’t want to accidentally wreck the main one we’re using by opening it up. And parts, they’re always a problem. I’m looking forward to seeing Polis. Anya told me there’s piles of mechanical crap there in the old buildings so I should really like it. She also called me a metal-brained, scavenging branwada. I really think she’s warming up to me, by the way.”

“Not knocking you unconscious is pretty much as friendly as Anya gets,” Clarke says. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask. After Polis, will you come north with me and the Commander? We could probably use you. We’ll have to leave the stations there, but I want to salvage anything important from the crash sites and I have no clue what’s important.”

“I’ll think about it,” Raven hedges. Then there’s a moment where Raven looks up, and is clearly wondering if she should say something. She opens her mouth, stops, then says something else instead. “So, how are you coping? With what happened?”

“I’m fine,” Clarke says. It’s actually not a lie.

She mourns Murphy and the others. She mourns the gonas who died to call out a warning to them. But she can cope.

It had been a shock when Murphy and Drew were taken, and she’d nearly broken down over it. But then only hours later she’d been looking at Lexa struggle not to refer to the destruction of the Mountain – so Clarke had done it for her. Admitted the truth.

She’d thought they would change the world. And they have, somewhat. But not enough. They haven’t changed the people, the threats, the dangers. They haven’t changed the fact that people are going to die, that there is no chance everyone will survive, that this world is just that kind of place, however much she wants it to be something better. They haven’t changed that some of the deaths will be caused by Clarke, even ordered by Clarke – and that she will do that, she will bear the weight of those deaths, because the alternative is stepping back and avoiding responsibility and causing more deaths. In the past, trying to prevent anyone from dying has only lead to far more people dying.

Like Lexa, she’s born to carry this weight. It hurts and it should. She can’t be Clarke the idealist right now when there are people depending on her to be the tough one. They don’t understand this world. They shouldn’t have to.

If the Mountain needs to fall again, and it probably does, then she will do what’s necessary. She’ll agonise and she’ll fall apart again and she’ll hate herself, but she’ll do it. Because although Clarke
never wanted to be the kind of person who could see other people’s deaths as collateral damage or necessary sacrifices… now she is.

She once let Finn die to save countless lives. Now she’ll let Murphy and Drew die to give them a chance against the Mountain. She can’t save everyone. All she can do is try to keep as many people alive as possible. She can’t blame Lexa for those choices any more, and she can’t allow her grief and self-hatred to get in the way of looking after their people.

Even if the Mountain don’t get her people, she can’t just leave them alone in return, not anymore, not with what she knows. Leave them to turn a thousand Lincolns into Ripas, to bleed dry a thousand Anyas, to burn a thousand Atoms to death with toxic fog? She can’t do that. And she can’t make Lexa face them alone. She won’t. They’re in this together.

Raven looks at her like she doesn’t quite believe her. “Okay,” she says finally. Then she hesitates again. It’s unlike Raven to hesitate at all, let alone this often.

“Whatever it is, just say it,” Clarke orders.

“Was it you?” Raven asks quietly.


“But you knew about it?”

“Only because Wells told me,” Clarke assures her. “He hasn’t told anyone else, and neither have I.”

Raven visibly relaxes. “Okay,” she says. “Good. I – I wondered, that’s all. I mean, it didn’t seem likely that it was you, obviously you’ve got other stuff going on there, but you seemed kinda jumpy around me. Clearly I just scare you with my brilliance.”

“Sure,” Clarke says dryly, but she still can’t help her smile. She wonders what Raven means by ‘other stuff’ – is she talking about Lexa? Are they that obvious? Or does she mean Wells? “I don’t know who it was. You could ask Wells -”

“No!” Raven hurries to say. “I don’t want to know, or I’d talk to Finn about it. I just wanted to be absolutely sure it wasn’t you. You know, if we’re gonna go on this massive road trip north together.”

Clarke smiles again. “Glad you’re joining us. It will give me an excellent chance to get used to your, what was it, ‘brilliance’?”

“Clarke,” Raven says in an exaggeratedly patient way. “I don’t care how far we’re going, it’s not going to be a long enough trip for that.”

“Right. That much awesome takes a lot of time to get used to,” Clarke feels almost normal, taking to Raven like this.

“Mmhmm,” Raven says jokingly. She flips her hair like she’s in an old commercial. “Have you seen my face? Come on, look at this face. And what other mechanic could make radios out of scraps? Not that I have yet, but I will. I’m just that good.”

Has she ever seen Raven as relaxed as this before? Maybe for ten seconds when they first met. Then, people were dying up above, and Clarke was the boyfriend stealer, and then the boyfriend killer. She valued her hard-earned friendship with Raven in the other world more than nearly anything, but there was never a conversation where she could forget how hard-earned it was.
She hates to ruin it. But she has to know. “So, how are you coping?”

Raven looks away. “It’s not the same as people dying.”

“That doesn’t mean that how you’re feeling isn’t important.”

“Then how I’m feeling,” Raven says with a flare of anger, which doesn’t seem to be directed at her. “How I’m feeling – is like shit, Clarke. While I was risking my ass to come down here my boyfriend was off screwing someone else. After ten days. How the fuck are we supposed to work past that?”

She was angry at me last time, Clarke realises. She was angry at me, and so she didn’t get as angry at Finn. This time she only has one target. “Slowly, I guess? Look, he thought you were dead, Raven, or that you would have been soon. And according to Wells, Finn told him it meant nothing.”

Raven sighs. “What would you do if you were me?”

“I’m not the brilliant one,” Clarke evades, trying to sound joking.

“Oh, float that,” Raven snaps. “You’ve kept just about everyone alive and made an alliance and become the personal advisor of the most powerful person on the ground and order the Council around like you’re the one in charge of the Ark. You can’t give me relationship advice?”

“What would I know about your relationship?” She feels incredibly dishonest as she says it. Especially since she knows some of what she wants to say to Raven, even if it’s contradictory – her guilty conscience wants them to be happy together. But the rest of her wants Raven to be happy, period, and wonders if that can happen with Finn.

“You clearly know something about relationships, since it took you like a week on the ground to get a girlfriend,” Raven replies.

“Octavia told you.” Clarke makes a mental note to tell Octavia not to tell anyone else. She could have let something slip to anyone, and the last thing they need is gossip about them.

“Wells told me, actually,” Raven grabs another wire and starts to work it into the existing mix, so quickly and deftly it’s amazing to watch. “Not that I can blame you. The Commander’s been pretty awesome to us. Plus, swords. Come on, we all get a little warm when it comes to badasses with swords.”

Clarke raises her eyebrows. “Plenty of those around, if that’s what you’re looking for,” she teases. None quite like Lexa, she has to admit. But still plenty of them.

“But I’m not. That’s kind of the problem. Please, Clarke,” Raven is unexpectedly straightforward again. “I’m not asking for therapy. Just asking what you’d do, if you were me.”

What I did do, thinks Clarke. That’s what I’d do. “Move on.” Honest, but knowing Raven, it’s more likely to have the opposite effect. Raven can be pretty contrary.

Raven jerks her head up. “Move on? He’s all that I have!”

“Hey, you asked me,” Clarke defends herself.

“Yeah, I did,” grumbles Raven. “Doesn’t mean I have to like what you say.” There’s a pause. “You did say he thought I was dead, and that it didn’t mean anything…”

Clarke shrugs. “I didn’t exactly say that. It did mean something. You refused to believe he was dead
even though you had every reason to, and so you spent all your time finding a way to get down here and prove he was alive. He didn’t do that.” She watches Raven carefully for a reaction, too focused on her to consider what she’s saying. “Raven, all I’m saying is that him saving your life when you’re children doesn’t absolve him of treating you badly when you’re adults.”

Raven freezes. “Saving my life?” she says carefully. “How’d you know about that?”

“Wells,” Clarke lies, calling herself ten kinds of idiot in her head. It’s so hard to remember what she should know and what she shouldn’t. “He said Finn gave you rations when you were kids, that you’re basically family.”

“We are,” Raven says. She sighs. “He loves me. I just don’t know if he loves me like I want to be loved, you know?” She clacks something into place in her hands.

“I-” Clarke says, but a hissing noise interrupts her. She blinks and looks down at the makeshift radio in Raven’s grip. “It’s working. You actually did it. You made a radio out of scraps.”

Raven gives her a smug grin, clearly trying to banish her moment of weakness. “What, like it’s hard?”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I make Clarke stuff up and reveal future knowledge way more often than Lexa. But then, Clarke spends a lot of her time talking emotionally to close friends she only made during that time period, and people are all a lot more willing to question her stuff-ups, so I suppose that sort of makes sense.
“Indra’s offered to make me her Seken,” Octavia says.

Lexa looks up from the map she was staring at, busy plotting the best way from Polis to the expected drop zones for the Ark. She must take into account areas with many thieves, weather (and Mount Weather, for that matter), the border between Trikru and Azgeda, and what Azgeda towns are more likely to react well to their intrusion.

She’s sent two messengers to let Nia and the villages in the area know of her arrival. She does not entirely expect them to return. It twinged a little to send them to what might be their deaths in the icy north – but she knew that if she didn’t, then when Nia accused her of entering her lands without giving warning, no one would be able to vouch that messengers had indeed been sent. She did also send them with verbal messages for Titus and Gustus, so if they find one of her people first, Nia will not dare to kill them as there will be proof they arrived safely. That way, she will not be able to claim bandits killed them before they reached her. That is the best Lexa can do for them.

“She says that you recommended it,” Octavia says bluntly.

“You show promise,” Lexa keeps her voice cool. “If that is it -”

“I – no.” Octavia swallows. “I’m here because… I apologised to Clarke, for being so harsh to her. I should probably apologise to you too.”

Lexa quirks an eyebrow. The Octavia she remembers would never have apologised to her. Perhaps the girl’s dislike in this world is not so firmly entrenched as she had thought. Or perhaps Clarke has asked her to do this. “I see.” She looks at Octavia expectantly.

After a long pause, Octavia realises what Lexa’s waiting for. “I’m sorry, then,” she grits out.

“Mochof, Octavia,” Lexa says politely, wondering why Octavia looks annoyed. Perhaps it is the simple act of admitting her fault, or perhaps Lexa has stepped on the Sky Person’s feelings. It will not be the first time. She decides to throw the girl a bone. “I look forward to commanding you as a gona.”

Octavia looks mulish for a second, no doubt at the thought of being commanded, but then her face straightens out. Already showing more discipline. “I’ll try and be a good one, Heda.”

“I know you will,” Lexa says, still impassive. They stare at each other.
“I have trouble obeying orders sometimes,” Octavia admits eventually. “I didn’t have a great history with authority on the Ark.” Perhaps she’s trying to explain why she was so hard on Lexa and Clarke, so unwilling to believe they could have good reason for any of their actions. Lexa doesn’t know if she’s trying to explain herself or excuse herself, though. “I’m not very good at trusting people.”

“Then that is something we have in common, Octavia kom Skaikru en Trikru,” Lexa says softly.

Octavia lets out a crack of laughter. “Probably the only thing.”

Lexa notes that the girl isn’t intimidated by her, not as she was in the other world. A little, but not as much. Perhaps spending so much time around Lexa – eating with her, training with her, arguing with her – has robbed her of her fear. She’s unsure if this is a good thing. “Probably,” she agrees.

“I just don’t…” Octavia looks at her like she’s trying to figure something out. “I don’t get you. You’re always so cold, except with Clarke. Even with her if I hadn’t overheard it I might not have realised you were together. And with everyone else… you didn’t seem to care when those gonas died. When Murphy and Drew were taken.”

“My people are less expressive in our emotions than yours,” Lexa suggests. It is the truth, is some ways. She believes it is one reason why several of her people – Titus and Anya, for example – have easily noticed her affection for Clarke whereas Clarke’s people need to be told before they realise. (She must try to stop thinking of them as her people and Clarke’s people. But it is hard, sometimes.)

“That’s not it,” Octavia says, “Lincoln’s not expressive, but he’s warm. I still get him. I don’t get you. You’re willing to leave Murphy and Drew to die -”

“Linkon has been a gona, a scout, even a fisa at times,” Lexa replies. “Gonas need hot blood to throw themselves at the enemy. Scouts need to trust their instincts to sense those around. Fisas need to understand their patients’ pain in order to heal them. I am a leader, Octavia. I must be cold and ruthless – not cruel, but pragmatic. Follow my head and not my heart.”

“So you’re saying leaders don’t care about the people they lead?”

“Oh, we care,” Lexa’s lips twist wryly at Octavia’s foolish question, and she sighs. “We simply cannot decide based on that. My emotions tell me Clarke is more important than all the people the Mountain could kill, and must be kept safe. But my mind tells me that she is necessary to defeat them, and cannot be kept safe. If I used my heart to decide, my people would continue to die in the Mountain, burn to death in the fog, be turned into Ripas to kill their own families.” She looks directly at Octavia, burning the girl with her gaze, not cold anymore. “And if we decided that it was more important to rescue those two Skaikru than to protect the rest, all of you would die futilely attacking the Mountain.”

“I don’t believe in sacrificing people,” Octavia says quietly, but she’s already looking more thoughtful.

“You mean you have never had to,” Lexa says simply. “Because you are just a gona, and that means you do not need to make those decisions. If you were me, would you send countless to their deaths to retrieve Murphy and Drew?”

“I… I don’t know,” Octavia says, doing her the credit of honestly considering it. She glances down, scowling at the ground, upset. “It feels like there should be a third option, somewhere.”

“Let me know if you think of one,” Lexa says dryly.
After a long pause, Octavia continues. “Either way… either way, whatever I decided, I think it would haunt me forever.”

“As it will Clarke and I,” Lexa replies, though in truth the deaths of the two Skaikru and the group of gonas will be lesser ghosts compared to the legions she deals with. The memories of the most ruthless things she’s done… the ache of the other Commander’s regrets in her dreams… Costia’s head, the signs of torture horrifically visible on it… yes, Lexa is haunted by so many things that it is surprising death can still hurt her. But it is two sides of a coin – death can pain her, but life can amaze her, and when she tried to stop caring she cut herself off from the beauty of living as well as the pain of it. And she will not do that again, not when Clarke is here now to make life that much more beautiful. “Even if I do not show that it hurts, because to show it would be to show weakness, weakness that might get me killed. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Octavia says quietly. There is more understanding in her eyes now then there has ever been before. “I understand.” There’s another pause, and Octavia swallows. “I’m learning to understand that, anyway.”

Perhaps it is not so bad, to trade fear for respect.

“Can you tell me who I was in your and Clarke’s weird dream world thing?” Octavia asks after a minute lost in thought.

“So you believe us?” Lexa asks in return, looking up from the maps again, not bothering to address the girl’s statement that the other world was a dream. She is not even sure it was real anymore, her last memories of it before the travel through time are so blurred and unreal (perhaps no one can remember their own death, or maybe the blood loss made her hazy), and it would be too much to expect Octavia to view the two worlds as equal when she has not experienced one of them.

“I’ve been watching,” Octavia says. “You do know things. Things you shouldn’t know. About me, about all of us. About what’s going to happen. So for the moment, yes, I believe you guys. A lie that insane would be pretty stupid to go with if it wasn’t the truth.”

Lexa nods. This seems reasonable to her, though of course not infallible. “Then I shall tell the truth again, Octavia. In the last world, you were Indra’s Seken. You loved Linkon. You were Skaikru and Trikru. You disliked me, you challenged Clarke, you fought for what you believed and you sometimes had beliefs that were too certain… much like this world.”

“Mochof,” Octavia says quietly, though she looks taken aback at the implied criticism in the last comment, “But you’re not telling me anything new. What was different about me there?”

Lexa considers her. “Your people did not like you or trust you,” she says simply. “Because of what you were to Linkon. They locked him up, they killed innocent Trikru, and they trapped the both of you between our two worlds until they crushed you with the force of it. Your brother,” she adds as an afterthought. “Was one such Sky Person, eager to condemn. You were not on the same side, he fought for Chancellor Pike as you fought for Indra. I do not know what things between you were like, you would do better to ask Clarke for that, but I cannot imagine they were warm.”

Octavia takes a step back. “Bell would never do anything to hurt me.”

“But he would do anything to protect you,” Lexa says. “And like you, Octavia, he has trouble seeing shades of grey.” She meets Octavia’s eyes. “I have found that someone who would do absolutely anything for you out of love can be more dangerous than an outright enemy. There is a reason why he teaches in Polis now, instead of learns to fight.”
Octavia shifts from one foot to the other, and doesn’t reply.

Lexa sighs, dismissing this conversation. “As your first order as a Seken, could you please fetch Anya to me. She took her unit south to find more metal things for Raven kom Skaikru. I must speak with her. And it is fitting that your first action as a member of the Woods Clan should be to navigate the forest on the request of your Heda.”

“Sha, Heda,” Octavia says, still clearly distracted by what Lexa said about the other world. Nevertheless, she disappears into the trees, and Lexa returns to her map.

She no longer knows what areas are safest to pass through along the border to the Azgeda, except in general terms. Looking after twelve clans has made Lexa less aware of the clan she came from. But Anya has been here, near the border, and will know precisely where the crossing will be safest.

It is some time later, as Lexa has just decided that the horses must remain in either Polis or TonDC because they are too valuable to risk in the snow up north, when Anya arrives. “You asked for my presence, Heda?” she says, slightly too formal.

“Sha,” Lexa says, deciding to ignore it. “I wished for your advice, in fact. We must cross the border north, and I thought you could tell me where.”

Anya glances around. The guards are outside of listening distance, partially a deliberate attempt by Lexa to get more privacy, but mostly because she wants significant warning of any approach by the Mountain Men. If Clarke is right and Emerson remembers, they are not safe anywhere. Seeing that she cannot be overheard, Anya is blunt. Even more so than usual. “Why must we?”

“What?”

“Why must we go north, Lexa?” Anya leans closer to her, making absolutely sure her words do not travel.

Lexa frowns at her. “The Sky People must land in Azgeda territory. Although the Azgeda have been restless of late, they will still obey my orders, and they are far less dangerous than the Maunon. You know this.” She worries about the decision herself, though she does not believe Nia will have her killed while on her territory. It would be too obviously her fault and might cause the rest of the alliance to band against them – without allies, the Azgeda would lose any war quickly.

Anya looks at her, eyes narrowed. “But why must we go north? What are the Skaikru to us but invaders? You spoke of them helping us take down the Maunon, but now they hide from them. Are they powerful or weak? If powerful, we should destroy them before they can take our lands. If weak, they are of no use to us.”

“You question my decision, Anya?” Lexa lets her voice become iron.

Anya does not flinch. She scowls. “I question whether you will get yourself killed, yongon. You defend them and help them when they do nothing for us. A couple of them are interesting, even likable, but that is no reason for this. Gonas have already died trying to protect them from the Maunon. The Azgeda will not like you entering their territory, and allowing strangers to come to it. Nia may well try to challenge you once you have returned to Polis, accuse you of weakness.”

“She will fail,” Lexa says, remaining calm.

“Will she?” Anya challenges. “I know why you risk so much for the Skaikru, Lexa, even if the others cannot see. The way you look at that Sky girl… I have not seen you like this since Costia. But Costia I know felt the same as you did.”
“Do not mention Costia to me,” Lexa growls.

“Do not mistake me,” Anya says quickly. “I will follow you, obey you, protect you, whatever you ask… as I always have. All I am saying is that you have not known Clarke kom Skaikru long. I am not Titus. I do not believe that what you felt for Costia made you weak, and I do not believe that caring again will make you weak. But making decisions based on those feelings…” she lets her voice trail off, but Lexa knows how the sentence ends.

“That would make me weak,” she completes it. Anya doesn’t know she is echoing what Lexa herself was just explaining – even after so many years, she still mirrors her mentor, her Fos. “Weaker than I have been before. Because I never made decisions based on what I feel for Costia, or Gustus, or you. And I feel much for you.” Anya looks shocked at this admission. “I will not be a liar, Anya, not anymore. I care for you, I care for Gustus. I loved Costia so much her death nearly destroyed me. That is the truth. But understand, Anya – what I am doing for the Skaikru is for our people. Not for Clarke. I will be glad if she is spared pain, but I believe the Skaikru can aid us. Have you seen nothing of worth in them?”

“Nothing,” Anya hisses, “All they do is talk, whine and argue,” Then she pauses, looking thoughtful for a split second.

“What?” Lexa asks.

“The… the girl, Raven, she took the nothings I gave her and she made sparks come from them,” Anya admits reluctantly. “Sparks that were not hot yet burned… but differently than fire. But what use are those against the Maunon?”

“According to Clarke, sparks like those are the start of what makes the radio speak to the stars, what makes the fog roll out over our lands,” Lexa says. “As strange as it sounds, I believe her. Perhaps if we too learn to control these things, we can use them. And the Skaikru can use guns, as we cannot.”

“Guns!” Anya looks horrified.

“Guns,” Lexa says firmly. “It is not our way, it is not our belief, and it is not an honourable tactic, but the Skaikru do not have the same ways or beliefs or honour as we do. I once told you that I believed the other clans had ways that could be of use to us, and now we eat fish we cannot catch and wear the furs of creatures we’ve never seen and own horses we never bred. The Boat People and the Ice Nation and Plains Riders gave us those. And they have wood to build homes and nuts and meat to eat that we gave them. The Trikru did not take their ways, but we benefit from them, as they benefit from ours. Our children learn to fight bandits and beasts instead of killing each other. They are all my people now, all twelve of the clans, because I willed it so, because I did not listen when you and others spoke of danger. I do not wish to allow a potential ally to be destroyed simply because it is easier than to help them live.”

There’s a long pause as Anya looks at her. Then her former Fos looks down, and stabs her knife into the map. “There,” Anya says gruffly, “That will be the safest space to cross the border.”

Chapter End Notes

I was like, everyone loves reading about people arguing with Octavia! Except wait, no they don’t.
For the two or three people who cared about my tattoo, I have now added it as my icon. Sorry about how small the thing is, I couldn't figure out how to put it in this. I've had the upper half for a while and recently got the second half - I promised myself I wouldn't get any more tattoos until I was twenty-five, but I also promised myself I would update this two times a week at most, so you may have noticed I am slightly obsessive and completely unable to leave things half-finished.
They set off for Polis again.

It’s time to leave.

Raven’s made two new radios, neither powerful enough to call up to the Ark like the one she came down with, but powerful enough to reach each other and it. Clarke’s decided the one sent by the Ark should be left at Polis – that way the members of the 100 there will be able to talk to their families. She and Lexa will take one of the Raven-made ones with them north, so if anything happens up on the Ark her people in Polis can radio and let them know. The other radio made by Raven will be left at TonDC – she held a brief training session with Nyko and a couple of the others to teach them how to use it – so that way if anything happens at the Mountain they’ll know about it too.

In other words, they have everything prepared and set up, and everyone protected. So why the hell is Clarke so goddamn nervous?

She thinks it might be Lexa, rubbing off on her. Even now as they set up to start the walk to Polis, Lexa’s got scouts around in every direction and glances regularly at the sky, looking for missiles or other threats. Her nerves don’t show on her face of course – it’s Lexa – but Clarke’s seen her this way enough to recognise it. And she understands. Clarke and Lexa, stationary, surrounded by an army of gonas, would be a very tempting target for the Maunon. (If they know who Clarke and Lexa are. But at some point she’s just accepted it as fact that Emerson remembers.)

“Griffin? Griffin!”

Clarke jerks back to her surroundings, blinking. Judging by the scowl on his face, John’s been trying to get her attention for a while. She notices that while the rest of them have packs and are wearing as much clothing as possible to protect against whipping branches and the wind, he’s dressed normally and has no pack. “What is it?”

“I’m staying,” John says, looking very decided. “I’m not leaving this place. If we’re gonna have any chance of rescuing Murphy -”

We don’t, Clarke thinks. She doesn’t say it though. Let him have hope. Besides, what does she know? If Emerson doesn’t remember, Murphy could still be being treated as an honoured guest. If Emerson does remember, he might think Murphy and Drew could make good hostages – Murphy’s pretty good at talking his way out of trouble. It’s just her instincts that tell her the two boys are dead, killed to give fourteen Mountain Men the ability to go wherever they want to.

“- well, I should be here,” he finishes. “I’m the only one who gives a damn about him.”

“It won’t be safe here,” Clarke warns.

“It won’t be safe anywhere,” he points out. “This is the ground, it’s not a safe place anytime. I can
Clarke considers this. She doesn’t believe he will, but she doesn’t think the Maunon will storm TonDC for the chance of capturing one Skaikru either – well, unless the Skaikru is her. “You stay out of the forest and in TonDC as much as you can,” she starts, holding up a finger to silence him when he tries to speak. “Stay indoors whenever possible so you can’t be seen. Go ask Nyko for some Trikru clothing so that you blend in more. If you do anything stupid, like trying to get inside the Mountain on your own, the Mountain Men won’t have to shoot you because I’ll have done it first. Understood?” If they have any element of surprise at all she wants to keep it.

“Understood,” he says gruffly. But there’s something in his tone that makes her quirk her brow.

“Right, you understand. But will you do what I said?”

“Maybe,” he says. At her look, he adds, “I don’t plan to get killed by the Mountain, alright? So I’ll be careful. But if I see a chance to do something, don’t expect me not to take it.”

“Fair enough,” she says, resigned. She can’t drag him with her if he wants to stay.

“Move out,” Indra yells, and all the gonas raise their weapons and give a quick shout. Then they’re moving forwards. John gives her a little wave goodbye and weaves his way back through the crowds towards the village, out of her sight in seconds. She hopes he doesn’t get himself killed.

Lexa’s at the head of the group, with Indra and Anya beside her (Nyko’s been left in charge of the village). Part of Clarke aches to go to the front and walk beside Lexa, but she knows that if she does, she won’t be able to resist brushing against her, touching her. It’s been several days since they’ve done more than see each other in passing, and Clarke wouldn’t be able to stop herself from being too obvious about her affection. She promises herself that once they’re in Polis – and have some privacy – she won’t leave Lexa’s side.

Octavia’s immediately behind Indra, already throwing herself into being a Seken, and Lincoln is next to her. As she watches, he puts his hand on Octavia’s shoulder, and for a second Clarke thinks he’s showing affection – then she realises he’s steadying himself. He’s favouring his leg, still, and weeks of walking are probably the last thing it needs. But he’s been trained as a fisa, at least a little, and he must know that. Her repeating it to him won’t mean a thing.

Clarke’s somewhere in about the third row and falls into step beside Raven. Finn and Wells are behind them, chatting easily – apparently Finn coming clean to Raven has made everything between them return to normal. Clarke only wishes it hadn’t had the opposite effect on Raven, who still looks a combination of sad and pissed off.

“Watch still working?” Raven says after a few minutes.

“Yeah,” Clarke replies. “Don’t tell me you forgot you’re amazing?” She holds up her wrist for Raven to see – she got a friendly craftsman in TonDC to make a thong and wrist strap for it. It doesn’t look like one of the old mass-produced watches, there’s too many uneven bits and asymmetrical parts, but she really likes it anyway.

“I just wanted to make sure you remembered,” Raven says jokingly, and grins at her. “That reminds me, I was talking to your mom yesterday and she told me to tell you she was keeping your dad’s watch for you and would give it to you when she came down.”

“Great,” Clarke says, not sure if she means it. Once, she associated that watch with the person she loved most in the world. She’s not sure there’s any way to recapture that feeling, not anymore.
Raven studies her sidelong. “Any reason why she had to get me to pass that on? She said you keep saying you’re too busy to have a private talk with her.”

“I’ve had several,” Clarke says defensively. Alright, so they were about logistics and plans, not about personal things, but she hasn’t had too much time spare for personal things lately. She knows she’s going to have to deal with her mother sooner or later – even if Clarke’s managed to move on from her dad’s death to an extent, Abby still needs the absolution she hasn’t gotten in this world. But it’s not a conversation she wants to have over radio.

She and Raven concentrate on walking for a little longer. “Look,” Raven says finally. “Tell me if it’s none of my business, but is there a reason you’re avoiding her?”

“Sort of,” Clarke admits. She hesitates. “When my dad found out about the oxygen situation, he told her, and she turned him in to get floated.”

“Shit,” Raven says. “No way. Okay, that’s a good reason. A really good reason. Though I gotta say, she did move heaven and earth to find out if you were alive.”

“Oh, I know she loves me,” Clarke says. “And I love her. But I also loved my dad. I just think maybe we should wait to be face to face to have that discussion.”

“Wow. You guys may be even more dysfunctional than my family,” Raven considers this. “Or not. Few things are more dysfunctional than my family.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. My mum drank all my rations, pretty sure she had a kid precisely for that,” Raven shrugs, like it happened to someone else, but there’s tension in her movements now. “Pretty sure whoever my dad is was a moonshine trade as well. It’s a miracle I didn’t get foetal alcohol syndrome or something.”

“It’s even more of a miracle you lived through all that to become the best mechanic in the world,” Clarke says, not sure what to do. She squeezes Raven’s shoulder for a brief moment, then keeps walking.

Raven relaxes slightly. “Well that’s me. The miracle worker. Though I’m not sure ‘best mechanic in the world’ is saying much, I’m the only mechanic in the world at the moment.”

“Hmm. We can organise competitions with the others when they come down,” Clarke suggests flippantly. “See who can make me a coffee-maker quickest.”

“Ooh. Or a hot tub, I’ve seen those in old movies.”

“A motorbike,” Clarke nods. “Much better than all those horses.”

“You’d hit a tree in three seconds,” Raven scoffs. “What about a toaster?”

“We have fires for that,” Clarke points out, “A computer.”

“Not exactly what mechanics do,” Monty says, joining them. He must have been half-listening for a while. “A jetpack.”

“We just came down from the sky and you want to go back?” Jasper says, beside him. “I vote for a camera.”
“You just want to take pictures of hot chicks,” Monty says. “No. A jetpack is much cooler.”

“I just said a motorbike is too dangerous, why would I say yes to a jetpack?” Raven asks.

“We’re planning to make bombs,” Monty replies. “Is safety really a concern at this point?”

“A hair drier,” Clarke says thoughtfully. “I’d like a hair drier.”

“Electric razor,” Jasper rubs his chin. “Much easier.”

“Like you need to shave,” Monty rolls his eyes.

“Hey! I shave! Regularly!”

“Regularly, yeah, sure, I believe you,” Raven says sarcastically. “Your regular monthly shave.”

“A welding torch,” Finn suggests, joining them. Apparently Monty and Jasper weren’t the only people listening. “That would be incredibly useful.”

“But if you can do that, you may as well make a flamethrower,” Jasper says eagerly, then considers it. “I mean… not to use on people… obviously… but it would be useful for something, I’m sure.”

“Fans,” Wells says firmly, practical as always. “Fans for summer, heaters for winter. Unlike the Ark, the weather here will change.”

“There must be some way to make an electronic bong,” Monty says thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Jasper says emphatically. “Two votes for that. Did I tell you about these wonderful plants they have here? The Trikru never even thought of using them to get high.”

“Just goes to show, we might be next-to-useless at most practical stuff, but us Arkers are still way better at what’s important,” Monty grins. He and Jasper do their weird little self-five.

Someone clears their throat. All of them look up with similar guilty expressions at Anya’s impassive face. She must have dropped back to check on them.

Clarke smiles awkwardly. “Hei, Anya.”

Anya looks at her for a long second. For the first time, there is something more than contempt in her gaze, and Clarke wonders what’s happened to change that. “I saw a picture once of a thing called a chainsaw,” she says eventually. “I would not object if you produced one, Raven kom Skaikru.”

The others laugh, at the breaking of tension more than the actual comment, but Clarke just meets Anya’s gaze squarely. Anya jerks her head to the side slightly and Clarke veers so that she’s next to Anya as the others begin to debate what the most useless thing to create would be (Clarke thinks that ‘clothes iron’ will probably end up being the winner).

“I…” Anya says quietly, then pauses. She touches her hand to her sword, not in threat, but like she’s looking for reassurance. “I said some things to you the other day about Heda that I am grateful you did not pass on.”

“When you called her a fool, you mean,” Clarke says, also keeping her voice down so no one can hear.

Anya winces. “Sha.”
“You didn’t mean it. I know that,” Clarke says firmly. “You’re worried about her. You care about her.”

“Sha,” Anya says again.

“Well, so do I,” Clarke says. “We’re on the same side, Anya kom Trikru. We can help you. We will help you.”

Anya studies her. “That remains to be seen,” she says softly. “But if I could believe it of any of your people, Clarke kom Skaikru, I would believe it of you.”

Chapter End Notes

I considered having the chapter title be "I Vote Vibrators" instead but decided it would probably give everyone entirely the wrong idea of what this chapter is about.

I know this is a bit filler-y, but the truth is so much of what's happening in this story is based on the relationships between the characters that I really do need to have some chapters which just show that. Lexa and Clarke will have more interaction in the next chapter once they get to Polis and get to have some time alone :)}
Lexa and Clarke finally get some alone time.

“I understand that, Heda,” Indra’s face is set and angry. “I do. I even accept your plan to ally with the Sky People.”

“Then I fail to see the problem,” Lexa says coolly. They’re in her room, as Indra came late at night to discuss this. They plan to stay a day in Polis gathering supplies and then continue north, and Lexa could really use some sleep.

Of more immediate concern, however, is that Clarke is probably not enjoying her current position hiding semi-naked in Lexa’s closet.

“I do not believe it is wise for you personally to enter Azgeda territory,” Indra states. “You can remain in Polis, safely.”

Lexa raises a hand. “I have never been safe, Indra,” she points out. “And if we are to make an alliance with these people, I wish to get their measure. I will need to meet their leaders at some point – it may as well be soon.” The truth is somewhat more complex, of course – she does not wish to send Clarke north without her, and she has no doubt Clarke will go north whatever. She has plans of her own to put in action, too.

“Anya and I can handle it for you,” Indra insists. “We are already going with you, can we not be trusted to manage this between us?”

“So that it is the Trikru invading the Azgeda, instead of the Commander visiting some of her lands?” Lexa asks. “Imagine what Nia could do with that. No, Indra. I will not remain in Polis while you go.”

“But the Azgeda…” Indra starts, concern knotting her forehead.

“Em pleni!” Lexa gives Indra a stern look. “It is not your place to question my orders, any more than it is Anya’s. I respect you and I value your advice, but my decision is final. I am Heda. Be my General, Indra, and obey.”

Indra gives a sharp nod, her face still twisted in worry and disapproval.

“Now leave me,” Lexa orders.

Clarke emerges from the closet as soon as the door closes behind Indra. “Well, that was demeaning,” she says sourly. Despite her expression, she moves to wrap her arms around Lexa, pressing her face into the curve of Lexa’s neck and inhaling. The days with no real time together have been difficult.

“I did not tell you to do that,” Lexa points out. She can’t help smiling, though. “I told you to remain.”

“Indra doesn’t know about us yet,” Clarke replies, her voice slightly muffled against Lexa. “I’d like to keep it that way.”
“With Octavia as her Seken, I doubt her ignorance will last long,” Lexa comments dryly.

“You don’t seem too concerned,” Clarke says, pulling back to study Lexa’s face.

“You’re the current acting leader of the Skaikru,” Lexa says. “Everyone knows that you have accompanied me for the past month and that I listen to your advice. Awareness of our relationship is unlikely to place you in more danger than you are currently in, especially since our greatest threat is the Maunon and they seek you.” Their relationship places Clarke in danger, Lexa knows – but Clarke always places herself in danger. Ending their relationship would only ensure that Lexa is not there to protect her. Or perhaps that is her selfishness speaking – but if it is, she will let it continue to speak.

“What about after we’ve dealt with them? If we manage to deal with them, anyway.” Clarke strokes Lexa’s hair lightly and drops a kiss on her head.

“People will find out,” Lexa says honestly. “We can excuse the time we spend together now as discussing how to deal with your people. But eventually we will run out of excuses. Even if you were to be the ambassador once again, as soon as I was no longer dealing with some crisis to do with your people it would become apparent that we were spending time together for no reason at all.”

Clarke frowns. “So what do you suggest?”

“While our current secrecy works, I think in the end we will have to be open about what we are,” Lexa says. Then she flushes slightly. “That is, if you wish for us to continue. I know that once your people have arrived -”

“Lexa. I’m with you. Here. Got it?” Clarke says fiercely. She wraps her arms around Lexa, holding her tightly, and kisses the top of her head again, then leaves her cheek pressed against Lexa’s hair.

“Oh,” Lexa smiles slightly. “Well, then, we will be open about the fact that you are with me. You will be under threat whatever happens, just from the rumours and the amount of time we spend alone together, so all that admitting it would do is to give you more status with my people. It would help prevent the belief that you are trying to influence me towards our people.” Lexa hesitates, then adds, “Of course, you could not be leader or ambassador for your people if we did this. At present you can lead your people without issue, but once things settle down more…”

“Why not?” Clarke asks.

“I am Heda,” Lexa states. “I must not express favouritism towards any clan. They have realised by now that I am not influenced by the clan I grew up in, but if I am to have you as a constant in my life they cannot believe you are influencing me towards your people. If you become my advisor, they will see you helping to mediate between the other clans, and know you are objective there in a way even I cannot be. You will have more power as my official advisor and partner – an extension of my power – than you would as an ambassador, as well. You would be in charge of Polis when I am away, and deal with negotiations or lead gonakrus when I am unable to. But if you are ambassador or leader for your people, you will deal directly with me on matters specifically about the Skaikru only, and they will know that our relationship must influence that.”

Clarke blinks. “But you made me an ambassador last time,” she says reasonably. She pulls slightly back from Lexa to kiss her forehead again. It’s very distracting.

“That was when I thought there was no chance you would ever return my regard,” Lexa says softly. “I believed we would never have the kind of relationship that could cause the others to question my impartiality. You despised me. It wasn’t until you drew me while I slept -”
“Lexa. No,” Clarke says. She pulls Lexa close again, and kisses her. “No. I never despised you. Not for one second, okay? I just – I was angry at everyone, and you were a really convenient target. And I hated myself because even after everything happened, even after deciding it was your fault, I still felt drawn to you, and I took that self-hatred and aimed it at you. I didn’t hate you. I loved you. It just took me some time to realise it.”

There’s a long pause. “You… loved me?” Lexa says carefully. She is awed by it, by the feeling in Clarke’s voice, by the arms wrapped around her – holding her, protecting her, loving her.

Before Clarke, no one had held Lexa in a very long time.

“No,” Clarke says fiercely. “I love you. Not just past tense, present. And future. I loved you then, I love you now, and I’m pretty sure I’ll always love you.” She kisses Lexa with every ounce of emotion in her.

“I feel as you do,” Lexa manages to gasp out between kisses, and then she doesn’t manage to say anything else at all.

Clarke licks, kisses and nibbles her way down Lexa’s neck, moves to her collarbone, then moves further. It seems like hours of exploration but may be much less as Lexa bucks against her and moans incoherently – Clarke seems determined to kiss every inch of Lexa’s body, know every curve and scar and freckle that she possesses. Each touch feels like it leaves a burning point of light there.

Clarke presses her fingers inside Lexa and swallows her next moan with another kiss, then slides down to chase her fingers with her lips. It’s slow and purposeful and merciless, laving and sucking and kissing as her fingers push into her, making her crazy from the inside out. Even when Lexa tries to move against her, tries to hurry her, Clarke keeps the pace slow and perfect. Perfectly infuriating. She comes in a wave, steady and inexorable, but by the end it feels more like a tsunami and she gasps out her love into the beautiful, candlelit room where she once died.

There is a sense of wonder, every time she is able to touch Clarke. She has been starved of touch for years and never known it, and every brush of their skin is a sharp jolt of relief. Pressing herself against Clarke – pressing her tongue against Clarke, and tasting the core of her – is something more than relief, however. It’s not redemption, which may belong to anyone who chooses to lie to themselves, nor forgiveness, which is a matter of another individual’s decision. It’s something more like grace. An unexpected gift, an impossible mercy, to find exactly what she never knew she should seek. To find Clarke.

Afterwards, lying in the peaceful afterglow, she traces Clarke’s warm body. Everything glows in the soft candlelight, throwing the shadows into sharp relief. She runs her fingers down Clarke’s arms, with their burgeoning muscles, allows her hand to follow the dip of Clarke’s waistline and move up the hill of her hip, writes meaningless words against her skin. Mouths kisses against her shoulder, her neck.

“Is she right?” Clarke says suddenly.

“What?”

“Indra,” Clarke clarifies. “She thinks you should stay in Polis. Maybe she’s right. Nia would love to kill you, you know that.”

“Nia would love to defeat me,” Lexa says firmly. “Not kill me. If she had Roan kill me in a challenge, that would be one thing. It would show that I am weak, and she is powerful. If she assassinated me and none knew, she could remain in power. But if she brings a gonakru to kill me on
her land, the other clans will know she killed me, and will attack. Even if she challenges me on her land they will assume she killed me by foul means, since the other ambassadors will not be there to act as witnesses as they did last time.”

“Maybe she doesn’t care if they know,” Clarke counters, “Maybe she just wants you dead.”

“The Azgeda desire power. They may even desire war. But fighting against all eleven of the clans – they cannot wish this. They would be wiped out.”

“What if they have allies?” Clarke says, rolling over to face Lexa. “Blue Cliff, or the Rock Line clan.” She names two of the clans which have a reasonable number of gonas and no long friendship with the Trikru.

“The Ice Nation had no allies before the coalition,” Lexa says flatly. “They believed they needed none, as they are protected by ice and snow, and the rest of us fought each other instead of facing that. They acted as bandits and thieves to the rest, and angered many. The only reason any of the clans would side with them is if they considered me weak. At present, I have their approval.”

“You’re sure?” Clarke’s face starts to wrinkle in worry, and Lexa reaches out to caress her cheek.

“Very sure, ai niron,” she says. “I spoke with the ambassadors about my plans. None were concerned. Your people have killed none of ours yet, so there is no bad blood to speak of, and no reason why your possible entry into the alliance should concern them if you are not to take their land. Several of them have gone to see your people around the city, and have decided they are harmless. No doubt they will have more opinions when I tell them we plan to take on the Maunon, but I assure you, they will not believe I am weak for that. Quite the opposite.”

Clarke pauses, and then asks another question, dread in her eyes. “What if they ally with the Maunon?”

Lexa blinks, considers it, and then dismisses it. “No. The Maunon despise my people, and the Azgeda despise the Mountain.”

“But they’re powerful,” Clarke says flatly. “It might be worth it, just for that alliance.” She stops propping herself on her side with her arm and half-rolls to lie on her back, staring up at Lexa.

“No,” Lexa says again, her voice firm and sure. She moves so she is half over Clarke, her hands planted on either side of Clarke’s head to support her, and kisses Clarke’s forehead, then her lips. When Lexa pulls back Clarke pushes herself up for a second to follow for one more quick kiss, before falling back with a sigh. “The Azgeda hate the Maunon more than anything. They would turn against Nia if she tried to ally with the Mountain – they nearly turned against me for the crime of merely ceasing our failing assault on the Maunon. It was only the release of their own captives which prevented an immediate attack on me from them. Some to the far north even consider the Mountain Men not to be men at all, but demons, who wear their suits to cover this. They tell their children that the Maunon drink blood and create the Ripas by infecting them with madness. Even Nia has stated that the leader of the Maunon has more power than any other person in the world due to the number he has killed. There’s a reason why they feared and respected you so much for defeating the Maunon. They would never help the Mountain.”

“So you think there’s no risk to going north?” Clarke asks, making her doubt clear. She winds one of Lexa’s dangling braids around her finger, playing with it, then moves her hand to let it rest on the back of Lexa’s neck.

“Plenty of it,” Lexa says dryly. “Though I have ordered no death, there is no guarantee the Azgeda
will treat your people well, and they could begin a war. Factions beside Nia may wish me dead, or believe that she wishes me dead and act on it. Someone may wish to frame Nia for my death – she certainly has enemies enough.”

“And the Mountain Men might be able to figure out where we’re going, as well,” Clarke says. She sighs. “If they have the equipment to detect the Ark, they’ll know exactly where the orbit takes it. So us all disappearing north will be a very obvious red flag.”

“So there are lots of risks,” Lexa summarises.

“As always,” Clarke agrees. She leans forward and kisses Lexa.

“Ai hod yu in, Clarke,” Lexa whispers, an inch from Clarke’s lips.

“Ai hod yu in, Lexa,” Clarke echoes with a smile.
Bellamy listens through to the end without interrupting. “Right,” he says eventually. “So let me see if I’ve got this straight. There are a bunch of people who live inside Mount Weather.”

“Yes.”

“They hate us. For some reason,” Bellamy continues.

“Pretty much,” Octavia confirms, though she does shoot a glance at Clarke.

“They took Murphy and Drew,” Bellamy states. “And you reckon they want to take the rest of us. So you told the Ark to come down as far away as possible, which means that instead of landing among our friendly neighbourhood Grounders, they’ll be surrounded by savages. And you’re planning to go north with the Commander to stop said savages from killing our people.”

“I’m going too,” Raven says helpfully. She’s sitting next to Finn, although not leaning on him like she used to. “Apparently, making bombs is a really useful skill around here.”

“And I’m going because Clarke’s going,” Wells says firmly.

“And I’m going because Raven’s going,” Finn echoes.

“Great,” Bellamy says, not caring. “You’re very supportive boyfriends, good for you. And you want me to -”

“Fill everyone in on what’s going on,” Clarke says, still wincing at the ‘boyfriend’ comment. “And with Monty and Jasper’s help, keep in touch with the Ark. Contact us and let us know if anything changes. Make a list of which people are expected to come down in each station so we can try and keep track of everyone. That kind of thing.”

“What about O?” Bellamy frowns.

“I’m going north as well. Because Indra’s going,” Octavia says challengingly. “She’s my Fos.”

“She’s your… wait, what?” Bellamy wheels to face Clarke, glaring. “You let her become a warrior? I thought we agreed -”

“That she’d be my assistant,” Clarke says coldly. “Luckily I don’t need one anymore.” She relents a little at the look on Bellamy’s face. “Come on, Bellamy, this is Octavia. She’s going to do dangerous things and risk her life anyway, you should at least let her get the skills to defend herself.”

“Exactly,” Octavia says, apparently having no issues with this description of her. “And I’m an adult in Trikru terms, anyway. You can’t stop me doing what I want to do. And I want to learn to fight.”


“I’m going, Bell,” Octavia says, her voice final.

He glares. “Then I’m going too.”
“No, you’re not,” Clarke says, just as hotly. “You’re the closest thing our people here have to a leader. Right now, you’re keeping everyone in enough control to stop any of them getting arrested. We need the Grounders here to like us.”

“If you think I’m going to let my sister run off into a warzone just so you can play politics -”

“That politics is the only thing giving us somewhere to run to!” Clarke says fiercely. “If things go badly up north, we’re going to need to fall back to Polis. We might even need to turn up at Polis with hundreds of our people in tow. The people of Polis need to be willing to let us do that, so I want absolutely nobody to screw anything up between now and then. Perfect guests, do you understand? That’s what I need you to do.”

“If I stay, Octavia stays,” Bellamy says flatly. “And if Octavia’s going, I’m going. That’s it.”

“I’m going,” Octavia says mulishly. “Whatever happens. I’m not leaving Indra.” Clarke’s glad she didn’t mention Lincoln, since Bellamy already looks furious. “I’ll run away if you try and force me to stay.”

“Then I’m going too,” Bellamy says again forcefully.

“No, you’re not,” Clarke says, wondering if she should either force Octavia to stay or allow Bellamy to go. She’s sure Octavia, Lincoln and Indra would all disapprove of the first choice, and equally sure that Lexa will be horrified by the second one. Lexa’s already grudgingly accepted Finn, it’s not fair to make her put up with Bellamy as well. “I need you to be a leader, Bellamy. I need you to take care of our people.”

“One of the others can do it,” Bellamy says impatiently, “Miller, maybe.”

“No,” Jasper says unexpectedly. They all turn to look at him in surprise. “Don’t know if you’ve noticed, dude, but only two people ever got the rest of us criminals to do anything. You, and Clarke.”

Monty chimes in after a moment. “And Clarke has to go north, I’ve heard the Commander and the others talk to her, she’s the only one they’re going to listen to. So she can’t stay here.”

“That leaves you,” Wells says to Bellamy, an edge of distaste in his voice. “I don’t like you, but they do. They’ll listen to you.”

“Clarke’s right. She knows what she’s doing. Come on, Bell,” Octavia says finally. “I’m an adult. I can take care of myself. Please, can’t you just trust me?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Bellamy begins, and Clarke knows from his defeated tone of voice that they’ve already won. “Fine. All right. But,” he turns to look at Clarke again, “If anything happens to my sister, I’ll kill you. Understand?”

“I understand you’ll try,” Clarke replies, meeting him stare for stare until he blinks and looks away.

After a second, he gives a bitter huff of laughter. “Right. Sure.”

Clarke wonders if this is the moment to bring up Diana Sydney and Shumway, both of whom are still locked up on the Ark with everyone else Shumway flipped on. Clarke had recommended they be floated for their crimes, though not without a twinge, hoping that executing them would make getting Bellamy’s statement moot. Her mother had told her they needed to show mercy, and Diana Sydney and her people were being watched carefully and that would be enough. (Clarke does wonder what they’ll do with them now though – it’s not exactly like they have the facilities or spare
resources to hold them forever, any more than they would have before they decided to come to the ground.

However, Clarke suspects there’s more going on than some abstract attempt at ‘mercy’ that the Ark has never shown before. Diana Sydney and her people are popular, and right now Jaha isn’t. Floating people could always be excused before as necessary for the survival of the Ark. Now they know the ground is liveable. Bellamy accused Clarke of playing politics, but she’s got nothing on Jaha – she thinks he’s trying to paint himself as the saviour of the Skaikru, and executing a bunch of people would contrast sharply with that. So Jaha will wait until they get to the ground, and get Bellamy’s testimony, and probably even hold a proper trial, and all those things which the Council have never bothered to do before. All the things they never even bothered to do when they were sending children to the ground to die.

Octavia knows that Clarke based her accusations on knowledge she shouldn’t have, but all Bellamy knows is that Jaha survived since Clarke mentioned talking to him – he gave a slight sigh of relief at knowing he hadn’t killed Jaha, and that was all. He’s so settled in his new life here that he probably doesn’t think of the Ark’s ‘justice’ as being relevant to him anymore. It’s probably not the right time to bring up Sydney or Shumway.

He breaks the silence again. “I can’t believe Murphy might be dead.”

“I never met the guy,” Raven says with a shrug, and Clarke realises with a shock that that’s the truth. This Raven was never shot by Murphy, never tried to give him to the Trikru in place of Finn. “Or any of the other ones, for that matter. So it doesn’t really seem as real to me. I’m sorry for your loss, though.”

Bellamy gives her a half smile, clearly uncomfortable with her sympathy. “I’m fine. I wasn’t really close with Murphy or Drew, although we were sort of friends the first few days here. It’s just… shit, I kind of understood people being killed by that fog stuff. But killed on purpose, murdered…”

“Oh,” Clarke says, surprised. “Didn’t I mention – well, the fog is done by the Mountain Men as well. Along with these cannibal psychos called Reapers, who you really don’t want to meet.”

“I see,” Bellamy says, an unpleasant tone entering his voice. “And they’re after us. So how do we kill them?”

“Right now, we’re more concentrating on surviving them,” Wells says dryly. “When the Ark gets down -”

“When the Ark gets down, they’ll be exactly as useless as they’ve always been,” Bellamy says shortly. He rubs his eyes, clearly annoyed. “Listen, I have a class pretty soon, judging by the sun. Can we continue this later? How many days are you guys staying?”

There’s an awkward pause, which Jasper rushes to fill, “Well, me and Monty are staying for the foreseeable future. They’re letting me try and make bombs! And Monty’s gonna -”

“Well, me and Monty are staying for the foreseeable future. They’re letting me try and make bombs! And Monty’s gonna -”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Clarke cuts through his chatter ruthlessly. “Raven needs some time to go through the tower’s electronics – I’m actually not sure why she’s not doing that now -”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Raven says. Now that she mentions it, Clarke can see the circles under her eyes. She feels guilty. “Mostly a load of crap, but some useful things. Well, useful-ish. Stuff like an EMP isn’t exactly useful with no technology to knock out that isn’t buried under a mountain. But I can definitely make as many radios as we need, maybe some timers or even triggers for bombs if you like. Grenades, perhaps.”
“Right,” Clarke says, wrong-footed. “Uh… so Raven’s sorted. I’ll send some gonas to carry anything you need, if you tell them what to take,” she addresses Raven, then moves back to Bellamy. “We need to keep moving. The Mountain Men have missiles, and the last thing we want is for them to decide to shoot them at Polis, which they might do if Lexa or I stay here long. Besides which, I’d like to reach the area where the stations are most likely to come down with some time to prepare.” Of course, there’s almost no chance of the Maunon figuring out how to send a missile at Polis. They need a spotter. But she also can’t discount the possibility that they’ll figure out a way – Polis is a large, stationary target, after all.

“Lexa or you?” Bellamy says shrewdly. “You think they’re targeting the two of you?”

Octavia flicks a glance Clarke’s way, then says, “Yeah, from what we overheard the Mountain seem to have decided that Clarke and the Commander are our leaders. They think taking them out will cripple us.”

Bellamy snorts. “Of course they do.” He gives Clarke a half-grin. “Guess they don’t know how tough we are, huh, Griffin?”

“You know you’re lost without me, Bellamy,” Clarke lobbies back at him.

“Okay,” Bellamy looks out the window at the sky. “I really need to go now. O, you know where I live, right?” Octavia nods. “I stop teaching at sunset. Be there then. We’ll have a goodbye dinner, okay? And a nice long talk.” From Bellamy’s expression, Clarke suspects the talk will be more like a long lecture. He turns to the others. “Uh, Spacewalker, Jaha’s kid, mechanic chick, Princess, I guess I probably won’t see you before you go.”

Clarke can tell from his voice that he chose those names specifically to distance himself from them. “I guess you won’t,” she says. “Keep in touch via the radio.”

“Don’t get my sister killed,” he says back. Then, after a moment’s pause, adds, “Don’t get yourself killed either, Princess. I really don’t want to have to be the one mediating deals between the Commander and Jaha.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t leave a job that important for you anyway,” Clarke says, with a smile to show she doesn’t really mean it.

He surprises her when he moves, hugging her awkwardly for half a second before stepping back, an embarrassed expression on his face. “Yeah. Better not.”

Then he’s out the door. After a second’s pause, Octavia follows him, presumably to catch him for some last-minute comment.

“Maybe we should come with you guys too,” Jasper says into the sudden silence. “I don’t know, but he seems kinda tense. You guys are much nicer.”

“You don’t want to stay here and make bombs?” Clarke quirks an eyebrow.

“You have no idea what my bomb recipe contains,” Jasper says, making a disgusted face. “It is nothing like baking a cake.”

“Plus there’s the offside chance he might accidentally blow up Polis,” Monty adds. “It’s a good thing I’m helping out with plants, instead of something which involves staying in the city.” Jasper sticks his tongue out at him.

“We’ll probably need the bombs,” Clarke says firmly. “And look on the bright side, staying here
you’ll get beds and baths.”

“Wait, we won’t?” Raven says playfully. “What did I sign up for?”

“A week-long trek through icy wastelands filled with violent warriors,” Jasper says brightly. “And that reminds me, I’d like to formally retract my offer to go with you.”

“You would,” Finn grumbles.

“No one asked you to go,” Raven says to Finn, an edge of ice in her voice.

“No one had to,” he says quietly. “If you go somewhere, I go. That’s the deal, right?”

“I thought so,” Raven replies, and now her voice is just sad.

Wells jumps in, transparently trying to change the subject. “This city is really impressive, Clarke. Especially the tower we’re staying in. I can’t believe it survived the bombs.”

“Me neither,” Finn says, shooting Wells a grateful look. “It’s stupid to say it makes me feel like we’re higher up since we came from a space station, but it really does.”

“It’s the awareness you can fall,” Monty says, nodding. “Makes all the difference.”

Clarke looks at him. “I’m going to miss you,” she says honestly. “You and Jasper. Try not to blow yourselves up, okay?”

“Always do,” Jasper assures her, and gives her a quick hug. He flushes red immediately afterwards and Clarke hugs Monty as well.

“Yeah, please try and be here when we get back,” Wells says, and Clarke remembers they spent time together in TonDC while the rest of them were in Polis.

“How about a deal, if we are, then you try one of my concoctions,” Monty proposes.

“Yes! Good idea!” Jasper enthuses.

Wells steps forward and hooks an arm around each of them, as affectionate as Clarke has ever seen him be outside of her, Jaha or Finn. “Do you mean alcohol or drugs? You know what, never mind, I don’t care. I’ll consider it.”

“That means no,” Jasper grumbles, but then disentangles himself from Wells to hug Finn as well.

“No way I’m getting up early tomorrow to see you guys off, so this definitely feels like goodbye time. Bye, Finn.”

“Yeah, bye,” Monty adds, giving an awkward pat to Finn’s shoulder instead of a hug. “We’ll see you soon. Right, Clarke?” he turns towards Clarke.

She has to clear something out of her throat and blink quickly several times before she’s composed enough to respond. “Yeah. We’ll see you soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Cassandra_387 for agreeing to beta for me! :)
A Line in the Sand

Chapter Summary

The group crosses the border into Azgeda land.

In some places, the borders between the different clans are very clear. A river, a line of mountains, a visible change from forest to desert – they all obviously mark the transition. And some places don’t have that clear a sign but the occupants know to an inch which land is theirs and which is their neighbouring clan’s. However, other borders are less a line than they are a no man’s land, a strip of earth where neither side step in case the land belongs to the other – generally because in the past when they have stepped there, the other side hasn’t hesitated to attack. Animals graze in peace and nuts and berries grow wildly, in areas like that.

This part of the border between the Ice Nation and the Woods Clan is like that. Lexa finds it unnerving. It might be the safest place to cross the border, she trusts Anya’s judgment about that, but there’s something about the lack of any signs of people at all that makes it seem ominous. She’s used to seeing the marks of hunters, travellers, and gatherers. Subtle marks like crushed grass or a scraped tree instead of more obvious ones, but marks nonetheless.

Even the Skaikru, who wouldn’t consciously recognise those marks, seem concerned by this. The casual chatter in the group has all but ceased.

“How much further to the village?” Lexa says under her breath to Anya. Across this border is the village Anya considers to be the friendliest to the Trikru – perhaps because it has been years since any ventured into the hazy border between the two clans. Good fences, after all, make good neighbours. The only Trikru these Azgeda will have seen in the intervening time are merchants travelling over worn paths to sell them things, instead of hunters and trappers arguing over whose kill an animal is, or Trikru bandits looking to steal from the closest villages across the border.

“Perhaps half an hour’s walk at most,” Anya replies just as quietly.

“Hopefully Nia’s had time to let everyone know they’ll be getting a visit from their Heda,” Clarke comments. She’s no longer wearing Skaikru clothing, having borrowed some of Lexa’s clothes – much better defensively than hers, and much warmer. Lexa is biased, of course, but she also thinks Clarke looks more natural in them.

“If she’s bothered to,” Anya mutters.

Any’a probably right, Lexa knows. While she doesn’t believe Nia will attempt to kill her, she’s also unlikely to try and ease their path north.

Lexa is wearing her Commander gear in full, as she has not recently. Warpaint is smeared around her eyes, creating the effect of a Natblida crying blood. Her thick hair is carefully braided in the style she uses when she wishes to be unapproachable and regal but also suspects she may be in a fight, small bits of barbed wire and other surprises carefully incorporated so that it cannot be grabbed without pain. Her clothes are black, all ripped fabric and leather and belts, creating an intimidating effect. The only colour is the red of her sash slashing through all of the monochrome.
She has noticed that the Skaikru – excluding Clarke – seem more reluctant to speak to her now that she is dressed as her rank requires. Wells and Finn have become more quiet and deferent, Raven compensates for her wariness by talking with forced cheer, and Octavia avoids speaking to her at all. It is as though her wearing this reminds them of who she is. Clarke, Anya, Indra and the gonakru following them treat her no differently, as none ever forgot who she was.

“There it is,” Anya says, sounding slightly relieved. No doubt she feared she had the location wrong. Lexa nods, seeing the village ahead as well. She starts to move quicker.

“HOD OP!” a yell comes.

Lexa blinks, but stills, her hand on her sword. In seconds they’re surrounded. A large gonakru, although not close to equalling their force by Lexa’s estimate. The gona who moves to stand directly in front of Lexa must be their leader, judging by his confident – bordering on arrogant – gait.

“Greetings,” Lexa says, making her voice iron. “Explain yourself.”

“You got quite far into our territory before we caught you,” he says, ignoring her question. He is very tall – topping Lexa by nearly a foot – and has a long beard, carefully braided. A thick ropy scar stretches across his right cheek and down his chin. Despite this, he could only be a year or two her elder, running on bravado and ego.

“You got quite far into our territory before we caught you,” he says, ignoring her question. He is very tall – topping Lexa by nearly a foot – and has a long beard, carefully braided. A thick ropy scar stretches across his right cheek and down his chin. Despite this, he could only be a year or two her elder, running on bravado and ego.

“Your territory?” Lexa’s voice becomes colder. “All of the twelve clans are my territory. Or have the Azgeda forgotten their duty to their Heda?”

He bows, though not with enough apology for Lexa’s approval. “Moba, Heda. I am sorry. The Azplana has ordered that all gonakrus entering must be stopped.”

“But not mine, surely,” Lexa says, using her most silky and dangerous tone.

The leader just quirks his eyebrow at her, an unimaginably dismissive gesture that fills Lexa with rage.

The man next to the leader, no doubt his second in command, swallows hard. Lexa realises he is sweating. He does not like his orders, this man. His leader may be confident but he is terrified. “Even yours, Heda. The knowledge of your visit is so widespread, our Azplana worries that someone may attempt to impersonate you to enter our lands.” His voice breaks a little at the end and he bows, much deeper than the leader. The look he gives Lexa is filled with unquestioning deference, nearly reverence. This man is smaller than the other but older.

Lexa looks at him. “And you believe I am an impersonator?”

“No, Heda,” he says immediately, bowing deeply again.

“What is your name?”

“He is my second in command, Zion,” the leader says, shooting a glare the unfortunate Zion’s way. “I am Rathan. I command here.” He sounds boastful of the fact, instead of powerful and weighted with responsibility as most leaders are.

“And I command everywhere,” Lexa says coldly. “Zion is wiser than you, General. He is aware I am no impersonator.”

“He believes that, he does not know,” Rathan says with a tone of smugness. “We must send a messenger to fetch someone who has met Heda before, and they can identify you.”
Lexa blinks. It is an absurd accusation for many reasons. An impersonator could not have an army of Trikru. Lexa meets every description of the Heda, including her sacred tattoos. Most importantly, no one would dare to impersonate the Commander. Nia has planned this purely to annoy Lexa, she realises, and she is using this fool Rathan to do it. He is the type who lets his muscles do his thinking for him, who believes his strength and height make him better. He must have leapt at the chance to show the slender, petite girl-Commander that he did not consider her superior to him. Also, this explains his relative youth – he has been given this command only now, and is drunk on the power. Nia has sent him to his death for her own petty spite and he is too foolish to know it. But before that, perhaps Lexa can use this.

“Then I, and my three advisors, shall come to the village and wait, with a guard of course,” Lexa says, voice pleasant. She knows from experience that people find her pleasant tones almost more fearsome than her threatening ones – they do not know what she will do next. She glances at Indra, Anya and Clarke, none of whom look happy, then looks forward again.

Zion meets her eyes for a second and then looks down. He is properly afraid, that one.

Rathan does not look down. “Search them all for weapons and remove them,” he barks at his gonas. “Her and her advisors first.”

There is a rumble of disapproval from the gonas behind them – and behind Rathan, for that matter, though they quiet when he turns and glares. Indra, despite being ordered by Lexa earlier not to speak, can clearly take it no more. “You offend our Heda,” she hisses. Her sword is out before Lexa can stop her. Octavia beats her by a second, though, Lexa can see from the corner of her eye. Perhaps Indra is a bad influence on her.

Lexa stares calmly into Rathan’s eyes. With one word, one movement, one blink even, she could turn this into a fight. And it is a fight the Azgeda gonakru would lose quickly. But this one is too stubborn and arrogant, she sees it in his eyes – he would order his people to fight. He would not surrender. Many would die.

“Peace, Indra, Octavia,” she says instead. She bares her teeth at the gonas in front of her and they step back as one, cringing from fear of their Heda. “Do any of you truly wish to search me? Then you may.”

After a long pause it becomes apparent that none of the gonas are willing to search her. Eventually Rathan steps forward and runs his hands roughly along her, removing two swords and six knives quickly. He doesn’t linger, and Lexa is fiercely pleased to note that despite his bravado he still has some sense left.

Anya makes a noise like an angry mountain lion.

“Now the rest of them,” Rathan says. When still none of the gonas move, he spits the word, “Cowards,” at them, and adds, “You will be punished for this later.”

When he steps forward to put his hands on Clarke, Lexa tilts her head slightly. “I would recommend you do not do that,” she cautions him, letting her voice be louder now so that gonas rows back may hear it. “Clarke kom Skaikru will give you her weapons, you will not search her.” She deliberately stresses the word Skaikru – it is important for what she is about to do that every gona here knows that Clarke is one of them.

Rathan bares his teeth and steps forward anyway.

It is the last mistake he ever makes. In one swift movement, Lexa reaches into the sheath carefully
braid into her hair – perfectly disguised as always, it is so cleverly designed that no one has ever
found it without prior knowledge of it – grabs the hilt of a tiny knife and flings it forward into his
throat. “Yu gonplei ste odon, Rathan,” she says softly. Then she faces back towards Zion. “Return
my weapons, General Zion.”

Clarke steps back as Rathan chokes, air bubbling the blood pouring out of his mouth. He slumps to
the cold ground less than a foot from her, curling in on himself, hands becoming grasping claws
reaching towards her as he dies. She looks down at him unemotionally, making no move to try and
stem the bleeding. There is a brief moment when his gonas react with anger and surprise, reaching
for their weapons, but not a single one dares to draw one. After a second most return to their
previous stance.

Zion glances nervously towards his fallen superior, then bows to Lexa once again. “Sha, Heda.”

“And you will accompany us to where we wish to go, as an honour guard,” Lexa says, voice hard.
“We will set up camp this night outside the village. Organise a room for my advisors and I to confer
in by the time we reach there. Also, burn that branwada’s body.”

“Sha, Heda,” he says again. Rashan no longer makes any noise at all. As they leave, Anya stoops to
yank the tiny knife out of the body. She cleans it against her sleeve and hands it silently back to
Lexa. Otherwise, no one talks.

When they reach the village they are ushered into the village leader’s home. He leaves immediately,
bowing as well, eyeing Lexa as if she is a snake who could strike at any moment.

“Why did you wait?” Anya asks bluntly as soon as there is only the four of them. “We should have
killed that branwada the second he spoke to you with disrespect. We could have.”

“I wished to make a point,” Lexa says calmly. “Now every gona there knows that touching a
member of the Skaikru will earn them their death. That message will spread. I do not trust Nia to tell
her people to protect the Skaikru. But fear will ensure that they do.”

“I think you shocked Raven and the others,” Clarke says. “I should probably go talk with them.”

“Perhaps,” Lexa says. “You can also speak to the village leader – he will be waiting immediately
outside, I expect – and organise them rooms in the village. Your people are not as accustomed to
being outside in this weather as the gonas are, and I can see this pace has been exhausting them.”

“Except my Seken,” Indra says. “She will remain outside with the rest of us.”

“And so will I,” Clarke says firmly. After a moment, she takes Lexa’s hand and kisses the back of it.
Lexa raises her eyebrows. Apparently Clarke listened when Lexa commented that there was no point
in hiding this from Indra. “If you’re fine with that, Heda.”

“Always, Clarke,” Lexa says with a smile. She takes this to mean Clarke will be sharing her tent for
the rest of the journey, instead of with the Skaikru as she has so far – greatly improving the trip. In
fact, since most of the tents have multiple people in them and the numbers will only increase once the
Skaikru come down, it may not even be seen as suspicious by the others. The gonas will think she is
setting an example for them. “Before, I did not…?”

“I’m not that easily shocked, anymore,” Clarke says wryly, and leaves with one more look back.

After a second, Anya lets out a chuckle. “Sometimes, yongon, you sicken me,” she informs Lexa,
just as she once did when she caught Lexa mooning over Costia. “But the Skai girl… she’s growing
on me, I admit.”
Indra doesn’t look remotely surprised. Perhaps she already knew that Lexa and Clarke had a relationship – anyone in TonDC who realised would have told her immediately. Or Octavia could have told her, or Lincoln could have, or Raven… or she could even have known just from Lexa’s face, as Anya did. “She did not react at all to his death,” Indra comments. “Perhaps there is hope for them yet. Though the others did not handle it so well.”

“The other Skaikru will become tougher in time, as Clarke has,” Lexa says. Then she nearly smiles. “Well. Perhaps not as tough as Clarke.”
She forgets, sometimes, how much she loves Lexa.

It’s the shock of the second when she sees her again after hours apart, when her green eyes blaze at the sight of Clarke. It’s the deep, even breaths she makes as she falls asleep beside Clarke after stolen, beautiful moments. It’s the urge to run her fingers through Lexa’s hair, to touch her skin, to make whatever contact she can just to remind herself that Lexa is real and there and alive. It’s the genuine little half-smile Lexa gives sometimes, too timid to belong on the face of such a powerful person, and the fact that Clarke may be the only one who ever gets to see that particular smile.

It’s the look that only Lexa can give her – total understanding, total acceptance. Even before they were the only two people who could remember a whole world, that look was nearly always in Lexa’s eyes. It’s how on the rare occasions she didn’t understand, she was surprised by Clarke, but always like it was an amazing surprise, an unexpected gift. Like Lexa got to see more of Clarke, and that was the only thing that she wanted. All those things… they remind her how much she loves Lexa.

But right now, perhaps the clearest indication of how much she loves Lexa is that she just watched a man bleed to death in front of her by Lexa’s hand and all she thought was, he shouldn’t have talked to her like that.

It bothers her that she can think like that. But the truth is, if Lexa hadn’t killed him, then every gona there would have thought she was weak. Clarke knows that. And she knows that they’re going to be introducing a lot of new things to the Grounders soon – Skaikru as part of the alliance, jus nou drein jus daun, open war with the Mountain. They can’t afford to have anyone questioning Lexa now or there’s no way they can even start working on those.

Of course, without that in context, and without much experience with death, it’s not a surprise the others are taking it poorly.

“What the hell was that?” Raven asks. She’s pale, but otherwise fine, eyes dark and fierce in her wan face.

“You’ve seen people be floated before,” Clarke points out.

“Exactly, floated,” Finn points out. “Not stabbed in the throat. And when they’re floated it’s for committing a crime. She just straight-up murdered him, Clarke! How can you be so fine with this?”

“An exaggeration,” Clarke says firmly. “I know you don’t understand this, but Lexa was doing what she had to do.” She turns to Wells for back-up. “Do you think someone would have lived through threatening your father with an army?”

“No,” Wells says after a moment, though he still looks concerned. “That’s true. Threatening the Chancellor is a crime.”

Not that Diana Sydney was punished for it, Clarke thinks cynically. Threatening the Chancellor is a floating crime when it’s done by someone young and stupid, but when it’s done by someone influential and popular the Ark will show ‘mercy’ and just keep them locked up. Sometimes she thinks Bellamy has a point with his talk about some people in the Ark being privileged – people like Jaha, Kane, Sydney and even Clarke’s own mother get a better level of treatment by the law than the others.
“We nearly ended up in an actual battle back there,” Clarke says, “There was no way the Trikru gonas would have gone along with it and given up their weapons. At least one would have fought back, the Azgeda gonakru would have attacked, and some of us would have died.”

“Right,” says Raven, calming down a bit. “Okay. So the Commander took that Rathan guy out to make sure that didn’t happen. Removing a stuck cog before the machine breaks.”

“Sacrificing a pawn,” Wells corrects with a sigh. Clarke can see from his face that despite recognising the logic of it, the death doesn’t stick well with him. “Makes sense.”

“Killing him doesn’t, though,” Finn argues. “We could have held him or knocked him out or… something.”

“She was sending a message to the Azgeda,” Clarke says. “Telling them that the Skaikru are protected.”

“You shouldn’t kill someone just to send a message,” Finn replies self-righteously. “We could have held him or knocked him out or… something.”

Clarke clears her throat before Finn can say anything back. “I have a thought: how about we save arguing about the morality of executing someone until we’re in a position to do anything about it? The Grounders have their own laws, guys. And so far they’ve led to considerably fewer deaths than ours. We can focus on trying to change things later – after we’ve cleaned our own house. Right now, I, for one, am going to go get some sleep.”

“You’re not staying with us tonight?” Raven asks, and then cackles. “Oh, of course you’re not.”

“What?” Finn says, confused. Sometimes he’s a bit slow.

Clarke gives Raven a grin. “Night, guys.”

“Night, Clarke,” Wells says. He manages a smile. Clarke’s sure he’s still not too thrilled about her and Lexa, but he’s doing an amazing job of covering up his hurt and being happy for her. She kisses him on the cheek swiftly before leaving.

Clarke stops on the way to find Octavia. She’s sparring with Lincoln, already obviously improved. She’s helped by the fact he seems barely able to put any weight at all on his injured leg, though, and Clarke hopes it hasn’t become inflamed again, or even infected. Surely, Octavia would have told her if that was the case. When Octavia sees Clarke she breaks off.

“What’s up, Clarke?” she asks quietly. “You’ve got that look. The worried one.”

“I was hoping you could keep an eye on the Azgeda gonakru,” Clarke replies, equally as quiet. “Befriend some of them. The Azgeda and the Trikru are old enemies, but they might let you get close since you’re not exactly Trikru. I want to know who’s angry about their leader’s death, who hates the Trikru most, what they think about Zion… if they turn on us, I want us to have warning.”

Octavia nods. “I can do that,” she says, though she’s obviously not a fan of being a spy. Clarke nods in return and turns to go. “Oh, and Clarke? Tell the Commander…”
She hesitates, emotions battling in her expressive face.

“Yes?” Clarke asks.

“Tell the Commander, great throw.”

Heda’s tent is already set up, and the guards nearest allow Clarke through without bothering to stop her. At some point Clarke must have been added to the very short list of people who the guards have been ordered to never stop and never question. The only others who have that honour are Anya and Gustus – and presumably Costia, a long time ago.

Lexa is seated cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, but she’s not meditating. Instead her fingers are busy in her hair, carefully dismantling the coiled braids. A little pot of water with a cloth is beside her, presumably for her warpaint afterwards.

“Here,” Clarke says, crouching behind her. If her voice startles Lexa, the other girl shows no sign of it. “I’ll help.” Lexa lets her arms fall to her sides. Clarke starts to untangle one of the largest braids, unknotting the end so she can begin to separate the strands.

“Mochof, Clarke,” Lexa says quietly.

Clarke finds that she enjoys this, her hands in Lexa’s hair, doing something so trivial and yet so wonderfully domestic it makes her heart skip. “Barbed wire? In your hair?”

“In case someone grabbed it,” Lexa explains. “Normally I do not do my braids anew every day, but when I am in a particularly unsafe place I prefer to include spikes in my hair and that is difficult to sleep on.”

Clarke hits the centre of Lexa’s mass of braids after a while and frowns. There’s a large braid right at the centre, made from incredibly tiny strands. She starts to pull those away and blinks when realises that they surround a small sheath, hooks carefully inset in it so that hair can easily be braided as if to replace the rawhide some Grounders pattern scabbards with. “This is very clever,” she remarks as she finally manages to extract it, “I would never have noticed it. Is this where you got that knife from?”

“Sha,” Lexa says, and something about her tone is off. It’s a little too flat. When Clarke drops the sheath she picks it up immediately, as if she can’t bear for it to be on the floor. She slides the tiny knife back into it. “It was made by very clever hands.”

“Who made it?”

There’s a very long pause before Lexa says, voice still distant, “Costia. A long time ago. She designed it so that I would never be without a weapon.” She sighs, body relaxing slightly as Clarke presses a kiss to her shoulder. “Perhaps she should have made one for herself, instead.” She tucks the little sheath into her belt.

Clarke wraps her arms around Lexa from behind, and Lexa gives in completely and leans against her. “I’m sorry, Lexa.”

“I should use it more than I do,” Lexa admits. “But now when I see it, it is hard to think of good memories. All I think of is death.”

Clarke thinks of her father’s watch. “I understand that.”

Lexa twists to look at her. “Perhaps you should wear it instead. I could braid it into your hair,
tomorrow.”

“No,” Clarke says firmly. “It’s a memory of Costia. I’m not going to take it from you.” She smiles, trying to lighten the mood. “Besides, my knife throwing is nowhere near as good at yours. It takes me multiple tries to even hit an animal, let alone a human. For me it would be more useful to use for carrying jerky in than a knife.”

“You underrate yourself, Clarke,” Lexa admonishes her. “But if you truly worry about your throwing skills, we can add that to our training regimen.”

“You mean the training regimen that already includes forcing me, Wells and Octavia to run ahead of the group and back a dozen times every day of the journey, in order to build muscle?” Clarke makes a face at Lexa and kisses her cheek, avoiding the warpaint. “Yeah, I think we’re all sorted for the moment. Maybe later.”

“I was surprised that Finn did not wish to learn to fight,” Lexa commented. “He… he is not what I imagined him to be, long ago when we executed him.”

“No. When he killed those people... That was out of character for him. Really, really out of character. It doesn’t excuse him at all, I know that now, but it wasn’t like him. He just... snapped.” Clarke moves around so that she’s in front of Lexa and picks up the wet cloth. The water’s not too cold – presumably Lexa got snow and melted it over a fire. She slowly, carefully presses the cloth against Lexa’s face, trying not to get any of the water in her eyes, moving in careful rhythmic strokes.

“My people call it gonplei-haken,” Lexa says idly. “Battle-sickness. Normally they flinch at small sounds and have times when they breathe too quickly. They can’t sleep, they have nightmares, they feel pain on their bodies when there is no cause. I have heard of a few who reacted as badly as Finn, broken by it and turning violent, but not many. Most are just injured in their soul as others are in their bodies.”

There’s something wonderful about watching the layers of Heda – warpaint, braids, armour, weapons – fall off and just leave Lexa behind. She makes each wipe of the cloth a gentle caress, working systematically and thoroughly as Lexa talks. She ensures that no smear of black or grey remains, so that Lexa’s face is clear and young. It would be easy to tell herself that this Lexa is not the one who killed a man only hours ago but Clarke doesn’t bother. Lexa can be fierce, ruthless, and violent, but Clarke loves every part of her and she won’t try to reduce and simplify Lexa by ignoring those parts of her that can be cold-blooded and merciless.

“What do you do with people when they have that? That battle-sickness?” Clarke asks curiously.

Lexa shrugs. “If it is very bad, we move them into a group of gonas who are assigned to gathering plants and nuts out in the forest. It is a relatively peaceful duty. They are encouraged to meditate and they often practice tree-climbing and running instead of battle. There is no set amount they must gather and the village or town makes sure the families are fed. Sometimes, in time, they feel better and return to a different gonakru to rejoin the fight, sometimes not.”

Clarke doesn’t say anything in return. For some reason she expected to hear that they ostracised them as weak, or even exiled them like they did Grounders with mutations. She keeps forgetting how little she knows about Lexa’s people, how much she has assumed. She knows they can be cruel. But she often forgets that they can be kind as well. Clarke’s heard of worse treatments for PTSD than that. Sometimes it seems like the Grounders have better systems to help the vulnerable people in their community than the Ark does – look at how the Ark failed Raven, for example.
“I wish Finn hadn’t come with us,” she says eventually. “He was fine when we didn’t go after Murphy and Drew, so I know he’s okay sacrificing people. But he’s definitely still very anti-violence in this world and it’s going to put him in conflict with the rest of us sooner or later. If we lived in a perfect world, he’d be right, but he needs to catch up and realise we don’t.”

Lexa runs her fingers through her loose hair and stands up, reaching down to help Clarke up as well. She leans in and kisses Clarke lightly. “He will, ai niron .” She kisses Clarke again, more passionately. Clarke melts a little, at the term of endearment as well as the kiss. “Perhaps we should stop speaking of past loves now, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

“Sounds good to me,” Clarke says fervently, and pulls Lexa even closer to her.
The Games We Play

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zion is a conscientious guide, warning the group well in advance of any natural hazards – or unnatural ones. Lexa is unsure if it’s loyalty or fear that causes him to send his gonas ahead to warn every town they go by that Heda is passing, but he does ensure there are no threats there before they arrive. For the first two days, he even organises places inside for the Skaikru to sleep.

“Stop it,” Raven tells Lexa flatly on the next day. “We don’t need to sleep inside.”

“You are finding the journey difficult,” Lexa observes.

“I’m pretty tough,” Raven says. “We are all. Sleeping on the ground will suck, sure. But all the others looking at us with a mixture of we-hate-your-guts and you-poor-weaklings in their eyes… that is sucking more.”

Lexa blinks. “Point taken.” She quietly takes Zion aside and gets him to stop organising places for the Skaikru to sleep. She wonders if due to her liking of them, she has been treating them better than her own – but then, if civilians of her own people travelled with the gonakru, she believes she would be doing the same for them. After all, citizens cannot be expected to be as tough as gonas.

The Ark is due to fall in the north-east part of the Azgeda territories. Bellamy reports Sinclair has been unable to narrow it down much, and that he can’t say which stations will fall in which directions. They are leaving something called the Government and Science Station up in orbit, along with a couple more that are deemed unsafe, while sending down the rest. Lexa recognises the name of Farm Station – where Pike will come down – and Alpha Station – where Abby will no doubt come down – but the rest make a confusing list of functions. Prison Station makes sense, but what of Factory Station, Mecha Station, Tesla Station? And Clarke assures her that Arrow Station has nothing to do with arrows at all. Most nonsensical.

They are leaving all prisoners alive, Clarke tells her, because they no longer need to sacrifice people to have enough supplies if they are to fall to the ground. Lexa considers this just as illogical – the people are every bit as criminal as they were before. Sky People are not consistent, and it is one of the things she has always found most concerning about them. It is one thing to change a rule, quite another to haphazardly grant forgiveness sometimes and condemn at others – the people of the twelve clans appreciate consistency.

Right now, they are passing as near to Nia’s capital as they will in the journey, and it is making Lexa tense. As a result, she is calming herself by surrounding herself with people. Normally only Clarke would calm her, but having her Skaikru friends around makes Clarke happy, and this makes Lexa happy in turn. So her tent is filled with Skaikru, lit and warmed by the candles Lexa brought. Octavia is not there, still apparently immersing herself in life as a Seken – Lexa saw her and Lincoln playing a dice game of some kind with the Azgeda Sekens. Octavia appeared to be losing badly.

As Finn is also doing at the moment.

“This game is the most boring thing ever,” Raven announces, splayed on her side, squinting at the chessboard.

“Too complicated for you?” Wells says teasingly. He’s seated next to her, sewing a tear in the front
of his light brown shirt with surprisingly quick, clever fingers.

“Too simple, Chancellor of the Nerds,” she lobbies back. “Not enough moving parts. Once you’ve fixed a space station most games are a little too straightforward for ya. I keep expecting them to be able to move in three dimensions.”

“And yet you’re still better than me, Rae,” Finn says mournfully, staring at the board. “If I claim I’m just losing because I’m scared of the Commander, will anyone believe me?”

“I believe you,” Lexa assures him. Then she pauses. “Well, I believe you fear me, at least.”

Raven cackles and then ducks the knight Finn throws at her. “But seriously,” she says, “You couldn’t have brought Twister? Twister would be fun.” She picks up the knight and hands it to Lexa casually.

Lexa is still unsure what she thinks of these Skaikru’s lack of real fear for her. Raven, Wells, even Finn – they don’t have the dread of the Commander that people of the twelve clans are brought up to have, and they have not developed it. Perhaps it’s seeing her and Clarke together, knowing she and Clarke are in a relationship. Maybe it’s that in the beginning Lexa tried not to appear intimidating. Or it could be the large amount of time they’ve spent with her – normally only Gustus, Titus, the Natblidas and Anya (when she’s nearby) spend any time with her that could be considered social. This is… new. Strange. Not necessarily bad, though.

“Chess is a game of strategy,” Wells informs her loftily.

“Twister’s a game of flexibility,” Clarke counters. “Just as useful.” There’s a little pause where Clarke realises what she said, and everyone else realises what she said, and then Clarke goes bright red and says, “I mean, mental flexibility! Flexibility as a person!”

“I know what’ll make this interesting,” Raven says. She reaches into her pack and pulls out a waterskin. She shakes it triumphantly. “Monty gave me some moonshine. He’s been fermenting it for weeks.”

“Oh, that’s a bad idea,” Clarke says immediately. “We have to walk tomorrow, guys.”

“What is moonshine?” Lexa asks curiously.

“Like fayowada,” Clarke explains. “Except probably not nearly as nice.”

“We can bet on the games and drink when we win,” Raven says cheerfully.

“Isn’t it normally when you lose?” Finn says.

“I have a limited amount of moonshine, babe ,” Raven informs him. A second after she reflexively uses the term of endearment, her face puckers as if she has tasted something sour, but she forces it back into a cheerful expression. “So I’m going with winners drinking.” She gives Finn a grin that seems unnatural, like she’s playacting, and then looks at the moonshine with something that seems less like pleasure and more like desperation.

“Alcohol’s toxic, guys,” Wells says flatly. “And more importantly, no one’s going to side with Finn when he’s playing the Commander.”

“Okay, firstly, ouch, man. Secondly, you drank in TonDC that one time,” Finn points out. If he notices that his niron’s smile is unhappy and strained, he gives no sign of it, teasing Wells with his usual oblivious good humour.
“I didn’t know it was alcohol!”

“Oh come on. By the third cup, I’m pretty sure you’d figured it out.”

Wells flushes slightly and Clarke laughs. He looks over at her and smiles. “Okay, fine,” he caves. “But it can’t be Finn versus L – versus Heda.”

“You can call me Lexa,” Lexa says softly, looking at Wells. She doesn’t know why she extends this offer – the only ones who normally call her Lexa are Anya and Clarke. But actually, she does know why. She plays chess against this boy and he challenges her at it. She tells him to run and climb trees when he’s exhausted to train him, and he does it without complaint. He does not like violence, but he is willing to accept it, and he is never disrespectful. He is not a visionary as Clarke is, not as smart or as brave in her prejudiced eyes, but he has loyalty and heart. She likes him. She even trusts him. It is unexpected. But then, Clarke has brought many unexpected things to her life.

His flush becomes darker as he looks at her. “Lexa, then,” he says, and clears his throat. “We’re pretty evenly matched. Maybe if we play each other -”

“Takes too long when you guys play,” Raven counters.

Eventually, after Lexa elects to simply watch, they decide to form two teams, each member to take turns playing – without discussion with the teammate. As such, Finn (the worst) and Wells (the best), play Clarke and Raven (both reasonably skilled). It is amusing to watch Finn screw up manoeuvre after manoeuvre by Wells, until Wells lets out a deep sigh every time Finn moves a piece.

When the waterskin is handed around, Lexa takes a swig. Raven raises her eyebrows in question, wondering what she makes of it. Lexa considers. “It stings, slightly,” she says eventually, “But I have had far worse. A lot of the clans have drinks of their own. You should try the Desert Clan’s lizard wine. It is… unforgettable.”

“I bet,” Raven says, making a face.

Raven and Clarke win the first game, then the second. After that Wells starts using simpler techniques, making sure it is very obvious to Finn (if to the other team as well) what he has to move each turn to continue the gambit. Then they win the next two, though Lexa suspects this has more to do with Clarke’s subtle yet deliberate errors. Perhaps she does not wish to suffer through the moonshine herself, or maybe she just does not wish Raven to drink any more.

“Tiebreaker,” Raven says, voice slurring slightly. She’s drunk more of the moonshine than anyone else, though a small amount remains.

When it comes time for her next turn she appears to have fallen asleep. “I’ll carry her back,” Finn offers doubtfully, looking at her passed out form.

Clarke glances at Lexa for permission, then looks at Finn when Lexa gives her a nod. “She can stay here, Finn, it’s alright.”

This saves their lives.

Lexa wakes in the night when she hears a soft exhale of breath. She grabs the knife next to her and springs out of the bed, moving quickly already – the assassin, for it must be an assassin, is on his knees before her. Judging by his position, he was entering quietly and fell over Raven kom Skaikru. That is the noise she heard. Raven shifts in her sleep but doesn’t wake, undoubtedly still under the effect of the moonshine.
The assassin rises, fear in his face, but it is too late as she slashes her blade across his throat, causing blood to spray across the room. He doesn’t even have time to speak before he dies, clutching at his throat and gasping silently. Lexa watches the life flee his eyes with indifference.

There are two more behind him and the furthest one raises a bow, then drops it as Clarke’s knife hits him in the forearm. He lets out a quiet curse and drops to his knee. The closest man steps forward and raises his sword threateningly, but he is visibly sweating and the sword shakes in his hand.

Lexa could yell for help. Even if her guards are dead, the other gonas would come and kill these two before they could breathe. But she wants one alive. She wants to know who is fool enough to try and kill her here. Is it Nia, abandoning schemes for outright murder?

Lexa takes two steps to the side and grabs her own sword, raising it in response. Clarke is already up and beside her, face dazed with sleep but rapidly gaining awareness, raising Lexa’s other sword. “Looks like you were wrong about your knife throwing skills,” Lexa comments quietly to Clarke, who gives her a look as if to ask whether this is the right time to be talking.

The second man moves two paces back and tries to pick up his bow again, but his hands are wet with his own blood and it slips from his grasp. With his other hand he gropes at his belt and comes up with a knife which he throws at Lexa. Lexa deflects it with her sword and it glances off her shoulder, leaving a thin black line that is such a superficial injury she barely even feels it.

She surges forward to meet the sword-wielding one with her blade, ignoring the injured one – Clarke can take care of him, she is sure. If she is in danger then Lexa will interfere. She doesn’t bother with fancy techniques, slashing at his torso and forcing him to block, then block again. She slides past him when she blocks his own wild strike towards her, forcing him to turn, then goes on the offensive. He takes two steps backwards to avoid her slashing attacks and trips over Raven as the other one did, as she deliberately manoeuvred him to. She knocks the sword out of his hand easily as he lies there. He tries to twist and get up but she reverses the sword neatly and slams the hilt into the side of his head.

Clarke has used the unpredictability that comes with being largely untrained in sword fighting and managed to slash the injured man’s leg. With his leg and arm injured, he tries to turn and flee from the tent. Clarke grabs the spear leaning against the side of the tent and sweeps it below him, tripping him as well, and stabs him through the heart with it from behind. He dies within moments.

They both stand there for a few seconds, gasping. “I must find some water to bring the survivor round with,” Lexa says eventually. “I have a waterskin over there, I think. We will wake our gonas once we find out who he works for.”

“Good plan,” Clarke says, shaken but still steady. She crouches over Raven. “Raven? You okay?”

Raven yawns and turns over, “Not morning yet,” she mutters, and goes back to sleep.

Lexa blinks. She and Clarke look at each other, then laugh as one.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys are enjoying reading this as much as I'm enjoying writing it :)
“Are you okay?” Clarke says, reaching out to touch Lexa’s shoulder. The dark line the thrown dagger cut has started slowly oozing black blood.

“It was not poisoned,” Lexa assures her. “I sniffed the blade. I do not know any poisons with no scent at all.”

“All right,” Clarke says. “Good.”

She holds her hand in front of her. It’s smeared black now, because she touched Lexa. Covered in black. She blinks and for a split second she sees her hands drenched in Lexa’s blood, covered in it; she sees Lexa before her, dying; Lexa leaving her all alone, Lexa dead through Clarke’s actions and Clarke’s choices and a bullet from Clarke’s people’s guns…


“But you weren’t,” Clarke says, and it comes out as nearly a sob. “You died, Lexa, you died in front of me.”

“And you brought me back,” Lexa says, certain and sure. “You went up to the top of the tower and you created a miracle, Clarke. You didn’t just give me the rest of my life, you gave us all another chance to get this right. In the last version of this year Anya and Gustus died, this time they thrive. In the other world I never met Wells, this time he is my friend.”

“That was the lightning.”

“That was you, Clarke,” Lexa says firmly. “I have climbed that tower many times and never been sent to the past. Something about you caused this. You turned back the clock, and now I am alive. Now nearly all of us are alive. You cannot blame yourself for the deaths you believe you caused yet fail to credit yourself for the lives you saved.”

Clarke’s breathing’s back to normal now. “I love you, you know that?”

“You have informed me of it, ai hodnes,” Lexa says, giving Clarke a brief smile. “Now. We must interrogate this branwada.”

Clarke grabs a waterskin from the ground and splashes some of the meagre contents into the man’s face. They’ve moved to the opposite end of the tent as Raven in deference to what Clarke suspects will be a severe hangover (of course, if Lexa ends up torturing the man Clarke doubts even Raven will be able to stay asleep), but haven’t fetched anyone yet. If the assassins were sent by Nia, Clarke and Lexa need to decide how to respond before alerting the others. Same if he was sent by the Mountain (as unlikely as it seems) or one of the other clans.

He wakes, spitting and cursing, blinking his eyes as if in pain. Clarke realises from the smell that she just threw moonshine into his face. Still, it worked.

“Shof op,” Lexa says in a fierce undertone. She raises the knife she cut the other’s throat with. It gleams blood-red and silver in the light of the one candle Lexa has lit. Splatters of his blood still dot her face.

He quietens immediately, staring at it.
“I will not lie to you,” Lexa says, almost casually. “You will die tonight. You tried to kill me and Clarke kom Skaikru.” She flashes her teeth in what is most definitely not a smile. “But there are many ways for a man to die.”

“Heda,” Clarke admonishes, then turns to the man. “Or… we could let you go.”

“To return to his master with word of this?” Lexa looks unimpressed by the idea. “No.”

“Jus nou drein jus daun,” Clarke reminds her.

Lexa sighs. It is almost too regretful, making it obvious to Clarke at least that she’s playing a role, deliberately seeming bloodthirsty. “But he will not tell us anything, Clarke kom Skaikru, I am sure of it. It will be easier to simply kill him -” She stresses the word Skaikru almost imperceptibly, Clarke suspects to make the man realise that Clarke is from a clan that might have more merciful beliefs.

“You’ll let me live if I tell you?” the man says, looking at Clarke nervously, clearly hoping for some kind of support. She suspects in a normal interrogation he’d be holding up much better, but the Grounder’s beliefs about Heda are working to their advantage. He looks at Lexa like she’s more demon than person.

Clarke shrugs. “Perhaps,” she says, glancing at Lexa. “I’m not sure.”

“We could leave him at the nearest village, I suppose,” Lexa says, looking unimpressed with the idea. “Have them put him to work for his crimes. Perhaps at a smithy or something. They could chain him up. That way we could know he would not run back to his master.”

“So that’s a few years of your life gone, but you’d survive,” Clarke says to the assassin. “If you stay loyal to whoever sent you, though, we will have to kill you. But why would you stay loyal to someone who sent you here to die? When we’re offering you a chance at life.”

“Of course you could lie,” Lexa says casually. “We interrogated your friend before he died, the one with the bow.” Their first outright lie, but he was unconscious at the time and has no way of knowing that. “He insisted on telling us lies.”

“At the beginning,” Clarke corrects her, keeping her face even. “I think the last name he said was the truth.”

“By then it was too late, unfortunately,” Lexa flips the knife in her hand, catching the hilt over and over again as she twirls it in the air. The man watches like he’s hypnotised. “I do not like being lied to. I suppose if your first answer matches what we now believe to be the truth, I might be persuaded to let you live.” She stops playing with the knife and instead moves it so it is pressed lightly against his cheek. “Or you die. Slowly.”

The man tries to stare at the knife as it traces down his cheek, so that his eyes are rolled to show nearly completely white. “Roan,” he chokes out. “Prince Roan sent us.”

Lexa looks at Clarke, surprise in her eyes. Then she turns back to the man. “Interesting,” she says coolly. “And why would your former Prince do such a thing?”

“Heda – I – I don’t -” the man babbles. Lexa presses the knife in, slicing a shallow cut dangerously close to his left eye. “I think – I think he hoped that – that the Azplana would be blamed -”

Clarke raises her eyebrows. Even more interesting. Although she almost grew to like Roan in the previous world by the end, it doesn’t sound completely outside the realm of possibility. He had hated his mother, and he’d asked Clarke to assassinate Lexa. A mission which caused the deaths of both of
them… it wouldn’t benefit him, though, as far as she could see. “His own mother?” she asks, just to get the man’s opinion.

“She – she has turned against him – put out a kill order -”

“A kill order,” Lexa echoes, brow furrowed. “And why did she do that?”

That didn’t happen in the other world, Clarke’s sure. Why would Nia want her son dead now? What possible gain was that for her? Or had Roan made some move against her?

The man’s eyes roll in his head again. He doesn’t seem to know what to say. “I don’t – I don’t -”

With a sigh, Lexa slams the hilt of the knife into his head, sending him to unconsciousness once again.

“Lexa,” Clarke scolds, “Head wounds can be dangerous.”

“So can assassination, Clarke,” Lexa says, showing no guilt at all, and Clarke drops the matter. She doesn’t care too much about the health of a man who just tried to kill them. “What do you make of what he said?”

“I think it was the truth,” Clarke admits. “It sounded like it, anyway. But why would Nia put out a kill order on Roan?”

Lexa frowns. “I do not know, Clarke. Perhaps she thinks I am here to depose her, and wishes there to be no possible replacements. Even exiled, Roan is the most obvious choice of successor – in fact, especially exiled, since due to that I would be more likely to place him in charge. If I killed Nia and placed Roan in charge, as I did in the other world, few would object.”

“That’s very sloppy of her, though,” Clarke comments.

“No one ever accused Nia of subtlety,” Lexa says dryly. “Of course, perhaps this did happen in the other world, and Roan simply failed to mention it. I believe my spies would have reported such a thing – but they may not have considered it important with everything else going on. Perhaps the death order was even what inspired Roan to volunteer to retrieve you for me. Or perhaps Nia ordered his death but then changed her mind – she can be capricious.”

“So basically what you’re saying is we just don’t know enough,” Clarke says, not thrilled with that thought. She hesitates. “Could Nia remember?”

“I do not think so.” Lexa says. “There is no way I know of for her blood to be on you as the lightning struck, if that is what caused us to keep our memories. And if she did know, why would she aim to kill Roan? When she died it was by my hand, with Roan her loyal son. She could not blame him for her death.”

“The assassin could be lying. Nia could remember, and have sent them to kill us. But I doubt it – I think he was telling the truth, I really do.” Clarke sighs. One step forward, two steps back. Yet another mystery. “Okay. So do we kill this guy?”

Lexa consider him. “No,” she says eventually. “We will keep our word. We can leave him at the nearest village. It will be a way to introduce jus nou drein jus daun to my people, and I do not think he is a threat to us anymore.”

“So, we can tell them to watch him,” Clarke suggests. “If he tries to escape and go somewhere we might learn more about his motives. Or if Roan hears about him and sends someone to kill him for
revenge or because he’s worried about what the guy might say, we can capture whoever he sends and squeeze more information about what’s going on.”

“A good idea. Roan must have scraped together everything he has to afford assassins,” Lexa muses. “Unless of course they did it for loyalty. The man did call him Prince Roan, and I know he has supporters. Not many who are willing to go against Nia, but some.”

“We should go check if the guards are alright,” Clarke says, concerned, deciding to leave the discussion of schemes for another time. “Some might be just wounded.”

Only three gonas are dead, they find. Lexa sends Clarke to wake the next shift, who gather their fallen friends and the two assassins, faces carved in stone. They also bring water for Lexa to clean the blood off herself, and two quietly and quickly clean the blood off the tent wall and floor.

“Will we execute the other, Heda, or is there more information to be had?” a female gona asks Lexa respectfully, inclining her head.

“Neither,” Lexa says shortly. “We will leave him at the next village. He can labour in the smithy there for a year.”

“A year?” the gona next to her says incredulously, then flushes and stammers when Lexa’s gaze moves to him. “I-I-I-I- moba, Heda. I should not have spoken so.”

“No, share your thoughts, Jora kom Trikru,” Lexa says. “I will listen.” He looks shocked she knows his name.

“He killed three, Heda,” the man says, emboldened but still making sure to adopt a submissive posture as he speaks. “Surely he should have the deaths of three.”

“Blood must no longer have blood, Jora.”

“With respect, Heda…” the woman speaks up. “That is not our way.”

“But a decade ago, being allied with the other clans was not our way either,” Lexa points out. “And it has brought peace to our lands. I value peace more than I value vengeance, gona.”

Clarke knows she values other things as well. This isn’t about some abstract idea of mercy or forgiveness, not for either of them. Lexa wants to never have to stab Gustus through the heart again, she wants her Natblidas not to be forced to kill one each other when her fight is over. And Clarke wants this world to stop seeming like a never-ending cycle of revenge.

“But a year, Commander…”

“How long do you think fair for three lives?” Lexa asks. “There is no time long enough. Even splitting the crime between him and his two fellows, he is responsible for one death. But if you had to name a length of time to imprison him, what would it be?”

The two glance at each other. “At least twenty years,” Jora says baldly. “Twenty years of hard labour for a home not his own, twenty years of being burnt by the forge and kicked by the smith and hated by the village… twenty years might give him time to recognise his guilt.”

“I see,” Lexa says, glancing sideways at Clarke. “I will consider this. Until tomorrow, hold him and do not harm him. Much.” She adds with the ghost of a vindictive smile.

“Somewhere between five and ten years,” Clarke suggests after they’ve gone. “If the town is willing
to hold him for that long, anyway. That way it looks like you listened, but not like you caved.”

“Perhaps,” Lexa says. “The village would certainly be willing to hold him for as long as ordered to, that I know. Ten years of hard work seems like it would do him good. Now I would wish to get some sleep, Clarke, before the sun rises again.”

Clarke nods, stifling a yawn. They head back into the tent together. She glances down at Raven on the floor – still asleep – and then frowns. There’s something a bit too even about Raven’s breathing. Maybe the gonas cleaning off the blood woke her. “Raven?” she says doubtfully.

Raven stretches, yawning in an exaggerated way. She opens her eyes. For some reason, she doesn’t look quite bleary enough to have just woken up. “Is it morning already?” she asks.

“No,” Clarke answers, suddenly concerned. Was Raven faking sleep? What did she hear? What does she know? What should Clarke tell her? Or perhaps Clarke’s just being paranoid. She forces a smile at Raven. “Everything’s fine. You should go back to sleeping off your hangover.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Raven says, yawning again but in a more genuine way. “Good idea.” She turns over, so that she isn’t facing Clarke anymore.

Clarke studies her for a long second, then sighs and follows Lexa to their sleeping space.
Three days after the failed assassination, Lexa and Clarke wait outside. All the gonas do, and all the
Skaikru. All of them just staring at the sky. Some pretend to spar, but they glance upwards so often
they are ineffective and the pretence of disinterest fails. The tents have been dismantled, packs lie
near their owners, and the whole gonakru waits with bated breath.

None wish to miss the sight of the space station falling, as Bellamy, Monty and Jasper assured them
over the radio will happen today. Within the hour, in fact. More citizens going blind from lack of
oxygen has prompted the Ark to take this loop in their orbit to fall instead of the next, whatever that
means.

Lexa blinks, and then there it is. The people surrounding her gasp. Lexa can’t count the falling stars,
not as quickly as they plummet, but she can tell their direction. Most burn lines in the sky slightly to
the north of their camp, but two split off in other directions, spiralling away from the bulk of it – one
to the south and one to the east.

“We should go towards where most fell,” Clarke says reluctantly.

“The odds are good that one will be your station, Clarke,” Lexa reassures her. “Even if not, your
mother is tough. We will reach the stations to the south and east before she allows any to be
harmed.”

Clarke swallows. “I hope so,” she says.

Indra turns to the gonas around and yells, “We go north, this instant!” There is a flurry of movement
as gonas sheath their weapons and find their packs, getting ready to go.

Lexa looks at Zion. “Send your fastest ahead as scouts immediately, they will move quicker over the
snow than Trikru gonas can. Have them return the second they find any Skaikru. Unless the station
is more than five hours’ walk away, in which case have them go to the surrounding villages and tell
them that the Commander has ordered them to care for these people. Have them bring blankets, food
and firewood. No Skaikru is to be harmed. Make that clear to them. Send scouts south and west as
well. We must find them all.”

“Sha, Heda,” Zion says, obedient as always.

Then they march. Lexa can feel Clarke’s tension, her fear, rising off her like smoke. She wishes she
could comfort her but does not know how to.

The first scout to return with news tells them of a burning wreck. They go to it anyway. At first sight
Lexa knows it is useless – the station hit an incline and ploughed through the earth into a cliff face.
Sharp little explosions are going off inside, and the fire is too fierce to go near. There are no noises,
not even screams. No life could have survived inside that thing.

“Arrow Station,” Raven says faintly, her face colourless.

“You’re sure?” Clarke says, voice agonised.

“I’ve repaired the place from the outside, Clarke, I know all the stations by sight,” Raven snaps.
“Yes, I’m sure. Arrow Station.” She lets out a noise that is half a scornful laugh and half a sob, and Finn reaches out to embrace her. This time, she lets him.

Lexa reaches out and brushes her hand lightly against Clarke’s arm, and Clarke lets out a little sigh like it helps. It’s all the comfort Lexa can offer right now, in front of everyone. Clarke meets her eyes gratefully and just stares at her like the sight is all the comfort she needs.

Lexa notices Raven looking at them from her position entwined with Finn, something strange in the girl’s eyes.

“Sorry,” Clarke tells Raven, “I didn’t mean to overreact. I’m just worried about Alpha. But we’ll find it. And we’ll find Mecha too, I’m sure of it.”

Raven frowns. “I hope so,” she says quietly. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Zion comes with news of another one located, two hours from their current location, and reports that it is much more intact. “Do you wish us to stay?” Lexa asks Clarke quietly.

“The dead are gone,” Clarke tells her, still looking at the downed station like she expects someone to cry out. “The living are hungry. Let’s go.”

Lexa nods and they set off again, leaving the bodies to burn inside their home. She whispers “Yu gonplei ste odon,” as they go.

“The stations are much closer to each other than they were in the original drop,” Clarke remarks to Lexa quietly. “It must be because it was a more controlled drop, and they brought down nearly all of the stations. Last time they didn’t have many options at all.”

Then she says nothing else, simply staring ahead, face filled with a mixture of determination and desperation.

Lexa prays the next one will have Clarke’s nomon inside it.

It does not. “Farm Station ,” Raven says as soon as they get near. Her face lights up at how whole it looks and she speeds up.

Wells puts an arm around Clarke. “It’s okay,” he tells her quietly, and Lexa remembers that his father is on another station, just like Clarke’s – unless he has dropped into the desert again, of course. “Your mom will be on the next one. I’m sure of it.”

Clarke, Wells, Raven and Finn go into the station, hands raised, and are greeted eagerly by the survivors, from the sound of it. Lexa waits out in the snow as the buzz of conversation hums from the crashed station. Octavia stays outside too, with the gonas, apparently not eager to meet the Skaikru. The gonas mill about and mutter until Indra glares them into silence. After some time, a decision seems to have been reached inside.

Lexa, Anya and Indra enter as soon as Clarke calls out for them. The gonas wait outside – Lexa is sure Clarke will not endanger them, so she should need no guards but Anya and Indra.

For a second there are nothing but guns pointing at them, and Lexa wonders if she has misjudged. Then Clarke pushes the nearest one down. “I told you, these are friends,” she says sharply.

A short dark man with a beard is the last to lower his weapon. “Are you sure about that?” he says suspiciously, glaring straight at Indra, who looks back impassively. “They don’t look that friendly.”
“Well, they are,” Clarke replies firmly.

“Are you this station’s leader?” Lexa asks him bluntly.

“Spose I am,” he says, a little rudely. “Charles Pike. Who the hell are you?”

Lexa blinks. She is not sure what she pictured Pike to look like, but this is not it. Perhaps, like Finn and Bellamy, he has depths to him she does not know. “I am Heda, Commander of the twelve clans,” she tells him.

“You? You can’t be more than twenty!”

Clarke winces. “Grounders don’t keep track of their ages like we do,” she explains quickly, “And Lexa is an excellent leader; she negotiated the alliance between the clans -”

“Your leaders must have told you to expect us when you fell,” Lexa says pleasantly.

“I know Mom and Jaha told everyone,” Clarke says.

“They said people,” Pike says offensively, “Not a bunch of sword-wielding savages ruled by a teenage girl!” Even the Skaikru around him flinch at the word ‘savages’, and Anya reaches out automatically to stop Indra drawing her weapon at the insult.

Lexa blinks at him, suppressing her immediate desire for violence. “Perhaps you wish to talk to your people without us,” she suggests to Clarke coolly, and moves back to the entrance. “Indra, Anya, check with Zion if we have any more news.” That will stop them committing any acts of violence against the man. They leave only reluctantly, though, not pleased to leave her in the lion’s den.

Unfortunately, she can still hear Pike’s voice as Clarke explains about the potential alliance between their peoples. “Clarke, you can’t be serious. You’re my favourite student, you know that, but this is not a good idea. Make an alliance with these barbarians? They’re dressed in animal skins and have swords, for Christ’s sake. That one looked like she wanted to cut me in two – and her face? She was covered in scars!”

“This land is theirs,” Clarke retorts, keeping her voice lower than his. “And they’ve come to offer some of it to us and help us learn how to live on it.”

“We know how to live on it,” Pike says, sounding offended. “I taught everyone that, remember? Earth Skills. We probably know more than they do, it doesn’t look like they have any technology at all. And they can’t have any large-scale fields of crops or we would have been able to detect some of them from orbit.”

“They live off the land,” Clarke says, “They don’t need crops. They have some small farms for medicinal plants.”

“Medicinal plants? Do they have shamans too? We have real medicine, Clarke. Real crops, as well. We can use this land better – they don’t own any of it, it’s ours as much as it is theirs -”

Lexa had assumed that Pike’s hatred of her people stemmed from the Azgeda’s actions, the death of the Farm Station at Mount Weather. Now she realises that it’s more than that. He is personally offended by their existence, by the fact he did not know of it. By the idea that people could exist on this earth with different ways and different customs than his. And because he rejects this idea, he does not consider them people. It is not a bloody massacre that made this man first despise them, though perhaps that is what motivated him to violence – it is, at its simplest, a hatred of them for flourishing here on the land he considers his. A desire to own that land, instead of negotiate for it. He
doesn’t want to learn the earth, discovering what plants may be eaten and animals may be hunted. He wants to take his own learning and force the earth to fit it, make an earth of crops where verdant forest now thrives. His ‘Earth Skills’ are not about working with the earth, but against it.

He is not like Finn or Bellamy, then. He does not have hidden depths. She will not come to appreciate him or understand why he committed his crimes, or see him learn to become someone better. He is not a good person. He is simply a threat.

Lexa approaches again and pretends timidity, the servant girl act she once used on Jaha and Kane. “Commander Pike?” she says softly.

He looks up from his argument. “What?” he barks.

“We discovered the Arrow Station two hours from here,” she tells him, shrinking back a little. Clarke looks at her, confused by her odd demeanour. “Everyone on it died in the crash.”

He curses.

Anya enters and come up to Lexa. The eyes of everyone on Farm Station follow her fearfully. Raven is talking quickly to the people of the station, no doubt trying to get them to calm down a bit. Anya bares her teeth in a knife-edge of a smile, deliberately scaring them, and Raven glares at her for making the task more difficult.

“None of the others have returned yet, Heda,” Anya tells Lexa, her smile fading. “Since it is starting to get late, it’s likely his scouts wait for morning to return. The ones south and west may even take multiple days, since we’re moving around and will be hard to find.”

Lexa turns to Clarke. “Maybe Zion and the others will have more information for you by tomorrow. Perhaps we should remain here for the night and wait.” She still keeps her tone timid, loading her words with uncertainty and submissiveness, conscious of Pike’s eyes on her.

Clarke swallows, but nods. “Sha.”

Lexa touches Clarke’s shoulder lightly. “We will find her, Clarke,” she promises in something closer to her usual tone. “We will.” Then she turns to Pike and says meekly, “We can fetch blankets, food, and other supplies for you from the nearby villages, Commander Pike. Anything you require. In a bad winter three years ago the other clans provided the Azgeda with many of these things, so it is fair they provide them to the newest clan in turn.”

“We’re not a clan,” Pike says coldly, though Lexa notices he doesn’t refuse the offer of help. “And you should hurry, everyone’s freezing. Some of the kids went out in the snow without proper clothing.”

“Sha, Commander Pike,” Lexa says. She nods to Clarke and tells her to stay with a look. Anya glances sideways at Lexa as they walk out together. Lexa’s stance, her walk, and her attitude all change with each step, from assumed shyness and weakness to her normal air of effortless command.

“What are you planning, yongon?” Anya says to her in an undertone. “We cannot help that man.”

“We must help his people, though, Anya,” Lexa says calmly. “Whatever he believes, we are not savages.”

“With someone like that, you can never change their thoughts,” Anya comments.

“We shall see, Anya,” Lexa says thoughtfully, mind whirling. “We shall see.”
I was like, what character do people want to see more of? Oh, I know, the worst one. The absolute worst.
Clarke spots them through the crowd of Farm Station people. They’re wrapped in blankets from the pile Lexa’s people brought, rich furs that she guesses are from bears but could be from almost any predator animal. They look lost and tired, but she can see the similarity immediately.

“Mr Green? Mrs Green?” she waits until they turn to face her. “I’m Clarke, I’m a friend of Monty’s.”

Their faces collapse in relief. “We spoke to him yesterday morning,” the woman says, words rushing out over the top of each other. “But they wouldn’t let us talk to him before we came down earlier. Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Clarke says firmly, sure she would have heard from him otherwise. “We have a radio you can talk to him over if you’d like.”

“That would be amazing,” Monty’s father says, breaking into a relieved smile. “How far away is he? How far away is our son? Will we go there tomorrow?”

Clarke winces. “We have to stay here for a while to find the other stations,” she tells them frankly. “Then we’ll all travel south together. There’s an area of Trikru land – right on the southern border, as far away as we can get from the Mountain – that the Commander is willing to give to us. Many of the Trikru have met us and she thinks they’ll accept us there, if we’re careful. But because we have to go the long way round to avoid Mount Weather as much as possible, it might take us weeks to get there. Monty and anyone else who wants to leave Polis – the capital – should be able to meet us there, though. We’ll contact them on the radio and let them know when.”

“Weeks?” Monty’s mother says, looking at Clarke in horror.

“You can talk to him on the radio tonight,” Clarke promises. “And it looks like we’re going to all travel to each station together to find our people, if we’ve got enough tents, so if that happens you can keep in contact with him every day if you like.”

“Tents?” she says blankly, like the idea of tents is inconceivable.

Clarke decides to pretend she’s asking about the number of tents, instead of tents as a general concept. “Each of the gonas – warriors – we brought has been carrying an extra tent, and the Ice Nation warriors also have some. We can manage the survivors here easily enough –” Only seven people died in Farm Station in the fall. “- but if some of the larger stations have landed safely we might have to start squashing more people into each tent.”

The Trikru gonas have been pushed to the limit carrying what they are, Clarke knows – all the tents, the dried food, extra clothing, extra blankets. Luckily, they were able to offload some to be carried by the Azgeda gonas, making it easier. Also, this seems to have stopped some of the resentment towards the Skaikru for the additional baggage, with Lexa confiding in her that the Trikru are enjoying forcing the Azgedakru to carry heavy loads and act as their guides. In fact, the dislike between the two clans seems to be distracting either from disliking the Skaikru, though Clarke’s not sure that’s a good thing.

“Whatever it takes,” Monty’s father says firmly, taking his wife’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “So long as we can see our son again.” He smiles at Clarke. “It is good to meet a friend of his. I am glad he is making more, for the longest time it was just him and Jasper.”
“Oh, it’s still him and Jasper,” Clarke says dryly, though she can’t help but smile at the thought. “Lively as always.”

Monty’s father laughs, and his wife manages a smile. “You are the chief of Medical’s daughter, yes?”

“I am,” Clarke says, swallowing hard. “She was on Alpha Station. The biggest one. We haven’t found it yet.”

“That one had most of the Council, didn’t it?” Monty’s father says reassuringly. Clarke can see where Monty got both his calmness and his kindness. “I’m sure they wouldn’t have been put there unless it was the safest.”

“Less than half the Council,” Clarke says, fears still worrying at her. “Only three. Muir, Kane and my mother.”

The Greens look at each other quickly, then Monty’s father tells her, “Just your mother and Muir, then. The release mechanism failed, so Councilman Kane released it manually.” He looks regretful. “He remained behind. It was a great act of heroism.”

Clarke inhales quickly. For some reason she’d thought with all the careful planning this time that they’d avoid that problem, or set up some kind of failsafe. She hadn’t mentioned it to them – how could she mention an unlikely system error without giving everything away?

And of course Jaha didn’t stay this time. Last time, filled with grief over Wells’ death and guilt over the culling, he volunteered. So it was only natural this time that Kane would do it instead. Talking with him over the radio, she’d noticed how nearly killing so many people had humbled him slightly, though he’d still been a long way from the nicest version of Kane she’d eventually known. Looks like he’d skipped to the end.

“Yes,” a voice chimes in from nearby, “My son was a hero.”

Clarke swings around and sees Kane’s mother leaning against the wall, the Eden Tree in her arms. She smiles at Clarke, eyes full of tears. “Hello, child.”

Clarke had always liked Vera Kane, though the religion didn’t strike a chord within her. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she offers gently. She wonders if Kane will fall from the sky like Jaha did, finding another way. She hopes so. Kane’s always been smart. If Jaha figured it out, he will too. Surely. Hopefully.

She really wants him to be all right, more than she thought she did until this moment.

“Thank you,” Vera says softly, and returns her attention to her tree, touching one of the leaves lightly. “I shouldn’t plant this in the snow. But it made it down, just as we did. So I will plant it somewhere – in our new home, perhaps. And remember my son.”

“We’ll all remember him,” Clarke promises, her voice a little choked.

After she’s spent another hour talking to Vera and the Greens, mostly going over the same things again and again, Clarke decides it’s time to extricate herself and go find Lexa. She needs to know that Kane might no longer be a possibility for either leader of ambassador of the Sky People.

And besides, Clarke wants to get out of this press of people. It’s so long since she’s spent any real time with a large group of her people, apart from the 100, and that only briefly. They’re suddenly
foreign to her. The way they talk is so strange compared to the accent of the Trikru. They’re so impossibly clean, it seems almost clinical, as if they’ve scrubbed for a surgery or something. Their clothes and hair are very neat but not practical for the cold or for a fight. They smell of the Ark’s air conditioning more than dirt or sweat, and it seems so unnatural to her now. When they went outside to receive the blankets (because God forbid their saviours should be allowed inside the station) they stepped around everything like they were scared to go near the landscape, as if a tree was a threat. They’re just – wrong, as out of place on the earth as a Trikru gona would be slashing their way through the Ark.

She wants to be with Lexa, breathe in her reassuring earthy scent of dirt and leather, bury her hands in her twisted braids, take in the way she fits into the landscape with as much unconscious assurance as a mountain lion. Lexa stands out against the scenery or blends in when she chooses to, but she always looks like she belongs there. She acts like the world is all her land, and the truth is, it is.

Octavia intercepts Clarke, though. “Clarke, we need to talk,” she says. She has her disapproving face on.

“What is it?” Clarke says, trying to cover up her annoyance. She’s not in the mood for a lecture right now.

Octavia looks around nervously, and that’s when Clarke realises this is something actually important, and the disapproval (for once) isn’t aimed in her direction. “One of the ‘scouts’ who came back with no news wasn’t a scout. I didn’t recognise him, and I know the Azgeda gonas now – their faces, anyway. I’ve been watching like you asked. He wasn’t one of them.”

Clarke inhales. “Oh,” she says. “Any idea who he was?”

Octavia nods. “A messenger. I listened in – they don’t know I can speak a little Trigedasleng, and I think they thought I was too far away anyway – and I heard the word ‘Azplana’ several times.”

“Nia,” Clarke says slowly. “A message from Nia. No idea what it was?”

“Too complicated and fast for me to understand,” Octavia confesses. “But the messenger gave Zion a satchel with something in it, maybe a longer message. Zion didn’t send the messenger back, but the guy definitely asked him a question and I heard the answer.”

“What was it?”

“Sha,” Octavia says. “It was ‘Sha’. They stare at each other in silence. Clarke’s brain works busily. This is not good. Whatever it is, if it’s Nia, it’s not good.

Then a couple of the Azgeda gonas walk past and Octavia says brightly, “So Raven hasn’t found anyone yet, though she’s spent quite a while retuning the radio. She’s sure at least one must have survived the fall from the Ark and a station will try and reach out soon.”

“Good,” Clarke says, forcing a smile. “I should go let Lexa know.”

Lexa listens in silence about the messenger, though her brow creases. “I see,” she says thoughtfully.

“I’m wondering if we should send the Azgeda gonakru away for safety,” Clarke says. “Get them as far away as possible.”

“No,” Lexa disagrees. “That would just enable them to surprise us somewhere down the road. We get the word out to our gonas to be very careful and watch for treachery. I will send a messenger to Gustus, he will be able to let me know if we should expect them to attack us soon, or if they plan an
attack of some other clan, or even Polis.”

“What if they attack us before then?”

“Attacking us right now would be foolish,” Lexa says flatly. “We have more gonas than them, and we also have your people, who would doubtless side with us in a fight. And they have guns. No. We are safe for now. Besides, as I told you, Nia does not want me to die on her lands. Whatever else she may be, she is not a fool.”

“Right. Good point,” Clarke says, though she still can’t quite banish her worry. “What if Nia doesn’t let Gustus send us a message?”

“She will not prevent him from sending me something, although she may listen in as he gives the message. We have an old code, however,” Lexa explains. “It is very simple, but it worked well back when the alliance was first formed and I sent him travelling to keep an eye on the clans. When he sends me messages he addresses them to Heda, and finishes saying they are from Gustus, and that means there are no immediate concerns. If a clan is threatening another clan, he changes it – for example, when the Azgeda were planning to attack the Trikru long ago he addressed his message to ‘the Commander of the Trikru’, and finished by saying ‘from your loyal guard, Gustus’ – the first part means the Azgeda, the second the Trikru. My name means the attacker, his means the clan that is attacked. He will send that message again if he believes it.”

“What if the Azgeda do have an ally?” Clarke says curiously. “If they managed to forge an alliance with, say, the Blue Cliff. I know you think it’s unlikely, but -”

“The codes for the two of them together. Do not be so worried, ai niron. I do not like that Nia sent a message we do not know the contents of, but at present I do not think we will be attacked. She sends a lot of messages. This one could have been anything from ‘try to delay them’ or ‘warn me if they near my location’. They did not send a return message, after all. We will have to keep watch to see if they do.”

Clarke sighs. “All right,” she says finally. “You’re assuming that whatever’s going on, Gustus will know about it, though.”

“Gustus has never failed me,” Lexa says quietly. “And if he errs, it will assuredly be on the side of caution, instead of generosity. He does not trust Nia at all. If the messenger does not return in six days, though, then we will have to consider alternatives.”

“Kane hasn’t come down,” Clarke says bluntly after a pause. “He stayed to manually operate the release.”

“So he is dead?” Lexa says calmly, though her eyes show shock and pain for a brief moment. “I… I am very sorry to hear that. He was a great man.”

“Or he might be dead,” Clarke says, “Or he might turn up again. I’m going to borrow the radio, ask the guys in Polis to try and contact him. But whether he’s finding a way down or waiting to die, I doubt he’ll be sitting next to the radio up there.”

Clarke feels suddenly exhausted. There’s so much to do, all the time, a never-ending list.

Lexa reaches forward and brushes a lock of hair back from her face. For a moment, it makes Clarke forget how hard this world is.
It’s only just past dawn when Lexa extricates herself from the blankets and Clarke’s arms, careful not to wake her. She pulls on some of Clarke’s old Skaikru clothes, and avoids the toughest outer layers of her own armour except for a couple of pieces. She’s had an uneasy sleep, filled with her waking fears, and the nagging sensation that she should talk to Clarke about everything. She doesn’t like keeping things from Clarke, but she hates arguing with Clarke even more, and she can recognise when they will not agree on a subject and it is better to be avoided.

When Clarke had asked her what they should do about Pike the night before, Lexa had found herself shrugging, telling Clarke it could be decided later.

Well. Technically, this is later. And she has decided.

The guards outside start to follow her, but she quietly orders them to remain protecting Clarke. She picks only four to follow her. Then she walks to the station, them surrounding her.

The gonas she has picked are all over six foot, bristling with muscles and weaponry. It is not that she needs them to look fierce – it is that in comparison, she needs to appear harmless. Few people look to the unarmed, smallest, physically weakest person in a group to find the most dangerous.

“Good morning,” she says to Pike, who is at the door to the station. It can’t be closed – damaged in the fall – and her gonas have reported that he remained there all night with a gun, guarding his people from the ‘savages’. There’s another man next to him who looks more awake, and nudges Pike with the butt of his gun to wake him properly too.

He blinks, seeming to wake up from a daze, and raises his weapon immediately, pointing it at the gona on her left, who scowls at him. “What are you doing here?” He nods at the other Skaikru man, and the man disappears inside, presumably to get more people.

“I wished to speak to you about your people,” she says, letting some nerves show in her voice. She looks at him, young and naïve and foolish. “I… you said some things about crops. If our land is not good for that -”

“I’m not speaking to you,” he says gruffly, “I’m not talking to you wherever.”

Lexa blinks. “Oh! Of course!” she turns to her guards. “Please, we will go for a walk so we cannot be overheard. You must stay here.” She looks at Pike again. “I have no weapons, and we may walk in whichever direction you would prefer. Unless you would like to go inside -” She moves slightly towards the open door.

She can see his brain working. Taking her inside will let her see exactly what they have in there. How many gonas, how many weapons. “No,” he says gruffly, “I’m not talking to you wherever.” He raises the gun again threateningly.

“I just,” Lexa lets her voice go a little higher-pitched, as if he is really scaring her, instead of mildly annoying her. “I wish to know what my people may do, to reach an agreement with you. A – what did Clarke call it – an accord, I think? You can bring more people if you wish. As many as you like.”

He looks at Lexa, visibly harmless and young. Wearing Skaikru clothing. Very short compared to
her guards, eyes wide, nerves palpable. She sees him weigh the opportunity here – to bully the young girl into giving him the land and respect he wants – against his distaste for her people. Then he looks at her guards, a pace back, all intimidating. Clearly, he needs to leave people behind to stop them from entering. “Jay?” he calls back.

The other man appears again, this time accompanied by two more, all with weapons that they point half-heartedly at Lexa’s guards. “Yeah?”

“I’m going for a walk with this young lady,” he tells them. “She’s the Grounder princess or something.”

“I don’t know, perhaps one of them should come as well,” Lexa says anxiously. “There are many dangers on the ground – animals, bandits, Maunon -”

“I have a gun, not a sharpened table knife like your lot,” he says brusquely, offended by her implication that he can’t deal with anything the ground has to offer, as she suspected he would be. Perhaps the only difference the ground made to this man in the first world was that it humbled him slightly – surely he could not have been chosen as leader of the Skaikru with such prideful, reckless thinking? “We’ll be fine.” If he was going to get one or even a couple of them to accompany him before, he will not now she has dented his pride. He turns to his men. “You make sure these brutes don’t get in.”

Lexa should feel satisfaction, now, at how well she read the man, at how well she is playing him. Instead all she thinks is how angry Clarke will be at her for this. How she should have spoken to her about it first. But it cannot be undone now.

She lets him lead the way through the forest, walking in small steps behind him so that she has to take double as many. It makes her appear even more childish, she knows. “I just want our people to get along,” she tells him worriedly. “I know you are mad at us. Ai gonas -”

“Speak English,” he orders her, wheeling to give her a look of disdain. “Our people aren’t going to get along until you learn how to at least act civilised.”

Lexa wonders what language has to do with civility. Do the Skaikru truly believe gonasleng has some inherent value that other languages lack? Though now she compares how they reacted to her people in the first world to how they reacted to the Maunon originally, she could see how that might be a Skaikru belief. “I’m sorry,” Lexa says, looking as humble and apologetic as she knows how. It almost hurts her face. “We… we are trying. We know you command marvels. These things you call guns… I have known none but the Maunon to use them. And a home among the stars -”

“A space station. The Ark,” he corrects, still enjoying feeling superior to her. Or perhaps it is because he was once a ticha, and cannot help correcting people. She almost feels a pang of sympathy for him, for a second. How strange it must be to go from being a figure with all knowledge, looked to by others for the answers, to someone who knows nothing at all about his supposed area of expertise. It must have been a shock to learn his facts were lies. No wonder he lashes out, disguises his new fear with anger.

It only lasts a second, though. She remembers Clarke saying that flexibility is just as useful as strategy. It was said about a foolish game, but she was right. Clarke adapted to finding the earth occupied, to discovering the Maunon were dangerous, to coming back in time. Lexa modified her plans to create the first alliance when it became a possibility, then later to ally with the Skaikru. Flexibility is a core requirement to a leader.

This man has none. His strategies might be good, but he cannot change to reflect the world around
him.

And like Rathan… like Rathan, he is a threat.

“Yes, Clarke calls it that as well,” she says sweetly. Pike has started curving his trail. If they keep moving in this direction, they will reach where the gonas are camped, which undoubtedly is not his intention. They are within hearing distance if she yells by now, she suspects. She thought to be in hearing distance of the station, but this will work as well. In fact, it will work far better – there was a slim chance she would be shot by angry Skaikru if they reached her before her gonas.

She stops, gasping a little. “I… I am sorry. You are walking very quickly. May we slow down?”

Pike snorts at her weakness. “I don’t know why -” he breaks off mid-sentence as Lexa flinches, looking beyond him. “What is it?” he says in alarm, turning around, raising his gun.

It wouldn’t have fooled one of the Sekens, she thinks, let alone a gona. The Natblidas would have been more likely to laugh at the distraction than fall for it. But then they are used to tricks and traps like this. She moves forward in a smooth step, yanking open and reaching inside the pouch Indra gave her as she goes. “This,” she whispers, and plunges two of them into his back at once.

He makes a small noise and then topples onto his front, breathing deeply and evenly, unconscious. His gun splays out before him.

Lexa opens the pouch fully and pulls out the remaining five sleep darts salvaged from Maunon attacks. The Maunon do not miss often, and her people rarely keep anything from the Mountain, out of fear that it will somehow draw the Maunon to them. Indra was lucky to find six – and Lexa lucky to find a seventh at the drop ship when Murphy and Drew were taken.

She did not know who she would end up using these on. It was a contingency plan more than anything. She had a list of threats in her mind, the chief ones being Finn, Bellamy and Pike. A swift strike to remove a threat and help cement the Skaikru’s fear of the Mountain. Of course, they now fear the Mountain without her help, but perhaps this will help those of Farm Station.

They will be suspicious. She does not doubt that. But Pike phrased the walk as his decision to his gonas, and these are Maunon weapons. With her people, the Azgeda, and the Skaikru who fell in the drop ship all confirming there is no way she could be guilty, they will be forced to assume she is innocent.

Coldly, she stabs three more darts into his back, so that it appears they all came from the same direction. After a few moments she places her palm on the front of his neck. There is no thrum of life, though she waits another minute to be sure. “Yu gonplei ste odon,” she whispers to his corpse.

Lexa stands, moving to position herself so that it appears she was standing facing him, although she moves back to be several steps away. He was struck in the back. She will be struck in the front, shot by the same Maunon.

She pushes the first one into the armour at her right shoulder, making sure it doesn’t go fully through to touch her skin. She takes several steps forward and pushes the dead man’s finger down over the gun to let off a loud rat-tat-tat of gunfire, telling herself that it is he firing the gun and not her, a technicality that is comforting but foolish.

The gunfire echoes through the frozen forest. She fills her lungs and yells “MAUNON! MAUNON!” and pushes the remaining dart into the skin of her upper right arm, near the other.

She barely feels hitting the ground, but unconsciousness takes a while to fully claim her. Perhaps it is
her sheidjus – her dark blood – trying to fight off the effects. She has observed in the past that everything from alcohol to jobi nuts affects her less than many of the others, creating a sort of dizziness or lightness of spirit but no drunkenness or hallucinations.

She realises, in slow, dazed horror that she has not tied the pouch shut again, it is splayed open obviously, an oddity someone will notice. She tries to move a hand like lead to it and curses herself for a fool.

Lexa is not sure if she dreams the next part. Octavia is leaning over her with panic in her face. “Where?” she hisses frantically, “Where are they?” Then she glances down at the pouch, and looks at Pike, and something like understanding dawns in her face. Understanding and horror.

I must have used Pike’s name with Octavia once, Lexa thinks muzzily – she knows who he is, something of what he will do. Enough to suspect my actions, anyway, if not to be sure.

She tries to keep her eyes open, tries to say something to Octavia, and fails to move at all.

But Octavia is already yelling, “To the south! I saw him! He ran to the south!” and her hands are at Lexa’s belt, yanking the pouch shut and tying it in jerky moves. “Gonas, to the south!” Backing Lexa up, giving her lie credence, something the old Octavia would never have done. Perhaps she is changing after all.

Perhaps they all are.

Then Lexa finally gives in, her eyes fluttering shut as the darkness claims her.

Chapter End Notes

Let the mourning begin, I guess :)
Clarke’s woken by the sound of shouting nearby. She jerks upright and turns to look at Lexa, a question already on her lips – to find Lexa absent. She stares at the empty spot for a second, heart pounding far too quickly. Lexa. Where is Lexa?

She doesn’t even bother to put on clothing, thankful it was cold enough last night that she yanked some pants and a top on before drifting off to sleep. She does go to grab her knives though, only to pause again for a second in shock when she sees that every single one of Lexa’s weapons are there. Even the clever sheath Costia made for her sits with her knives. Lexa never goes anywhere without weapons. Even in sleep they’re within reaching distance.

Clarke stumbles outside. Some guards are still outside the tent, staying stiffly in their positions, but everyone else is gone. “What’s happening?” she says sharply to the nearest gona.

“Heda yelled out,” the gona tells her. He’s trying to look stoic, but can’t quite prevent himself from looking around himself nervously, searching for threats. “The Maunon are here.”

Clarke gapes at him for a second. “Where’s Lexa?” she says, voice cracking. “Which way is Lexa?”

“The shout came from that way,” He gestures and she nearly sprints. She forces herself to keep to a swift jog instead so that she’ll still have energy when she reaches the enemy, her guards keeping pace with her easily.

Then there are more gonas in front of her and she’s never felt sicker. She can feel the colour drain out of her face. They carry Lexa between them, slumped, boneless, lifeless.

“No,” Clarke croaks, staggering back for a second, and then her medical training takes over and she races towards them. She won’t fail Lexa this time. She won’t. She reaches out, puts her fingers against Lexa’s pulse – steady, strong. Clarke takes a deep breath. She’s alive. “Where’s she injured?” she snaps at the two gonas holding her.

“Maunon sleep darts,” Octavia says, appearing from behind them. She looks angry, her eyes snapping with furious energy. “They hit her with two but one didn’t get through her armour. The other one hit her right arm. I got it out nearly immediately though.”

“What’s going on?” another voice intrudes. Clarke glances up briefly before returning her attention to Lexa, lightly slapping her cheeks, double-checking her breathing.

It’s a man dressed in Skaikru guard clothing, waving a gun around like he’s never held one before. She recognises him as Jay, a guard she’s met a few times, including yesterday. There are others behind him, all looking terrified. “Clarke? What’s going -” then he gasps. “Charles. Charles!”

“His fight is over,” A woman says, and Clarke glances up again from counting Lexa’s pulse to realise that more gonas have arrived, this time carrying Pike. Or, she’s guessing from the absolute stillness of him and what the gona just said, Pike’s body. She doesn’t have the attention to check right now.

“You savages!” Jay says furiously, pointing his gun at them. “What did you do to him?”
“They didn’t do anything,” Octavia snarls at him. “Those are sleep darts, they’re used by the Mountain Men. They’ve been gunning for the Commander for a long time. He must’ve gotten in their way.”

“Do you really think -” he starts to say to her angrily, then pauses. “Wait. You’re the Blake kid. Bellamy’s little sister?”

“Yeah,” Octavia says, “What’s it to you?”

“You’re from the Ark,” he says obviously. “I’m sorry, dressed like that, I thought…”

“I’m from the Ark,” Octavia spits out the word like it’s dirty. “And this isn’t the time for you to be throwing accusations around. Take your friend’s body. Check the darts in him. They’re way above what the Trikru and Azgeda are capable of producing.”

Clarke’s not entirely sure that’s accurate, but it is true that they certainly wouldn’t produce such uniform machine-manufactured darts. She doesn’t have the brainpower to join in the argument though, tracking the time on her watch as she counts heartbeats. Less than forty beats per minute – Lexa’s normal resting heartbeat would be quite low, she’s very fit, but probably not that low. The unconsciousness would lower it further though, and it’s very steady. She’s not in any distress, not having any noticeably bad reaction to the sedation.

“To our tent,” she orders the gonas still holding Lexa up, and follows them blindly, leaving Octavia to her argument. When they get there she says, “Guard the outside. One of you, go get a fisa. Another one, go get Wells.”

Wells isn’t a trained medical professional by any stretch of the term, but when they were younger he’d sometimes accompanied her and her mother in the clinic, both of them feeling very important as they ordered grown-ups to say “ah”. More importantly, he’ll do whatever she says, with no hesitation.

Even more importantly, if she breaks down, he’ll hold her. That moment when she thought Lexa was dead again…

She moves Lexa to be on her side, so if she has any kind of reaction to the darts that causes her to throw up, she’ll still be able to breathe. Then she pats Lexa’s face again, calls her name, and squeezes her hand. There’s probably no way to wake her up before the sedatives get out of her system. She tries to remember how long it took Anya to wake up from this – it must have been hours. But if Octavia got the dart out almost immediately… there’s no way of knowing when she’ll wake.

After a time, Wells comes to sit beside her. “She’ll be okay, Clarke,” he says, and the words are meaningless, but the arm he puts around her shoulders is comforting.

“Yeah, the Commander’s way too tough to get put down by something like that,” That’s Raven, trying to help. Finn’s in the corner, just staring at them all.

After some time, Octavia returns and joins them. “We didn’t find the Maunon,” she says shortly, and it’s not like Octavia to give up so easily, but Clarke doesn’t question it. A fisa enters, examines Lexa, gives Clarke some bitter leaves for her when she wakes, then leaves.

Anya arrives, Tris following her. She crouches next to Raven, watching Lexa like a hawk. “Indra is still searching,” she tells everyone. “But I believe the attacker to be long gone.”

“She’s going to be fine, Clarke and the healer guy both think,” Raven murmurs to her. “She’s just
unconscious, not hurt. They reckon she’ll wake up in a while. I should go back to listening to the radio, actually.”

Anya glances at Lexa. “I do not like seeing her like this,” she mutters. “I will accompany you. Tris, let me know when she wakes.”

Clarke nods goodbye, but doesn’t look up. She’s too busy watching Lexa. She counts heartbeats. She says Lexa’s name, over and over again. She kisses her cheek. She squeezes her hand, waiting for a response.

It could be minutes later, hours, days. Clarke doesn’t know. Eventually a response comes. Lexa squeezes back. And then her eyelids are fluttering open. “Clarke?” she says, sounding dazed.

“Oh, thank God,” Clarke says fervently. “You gave me a scare, ai hodnes .” She kisses Lexa on the cheek again instead of the mouth, not wanting to impede Lexa’s breathing for any reason.

“Moba,” Lexa says apologetically, and Clarke laughs, because only Lexa could apologise for nearly being killed. Lexa struggles to sit up, and gives Clarke a weak smile. “Have I been out long?” she asks.

“Only a few hours,” Wells reassures her.

“Oh,” Lexa flexes her hands, apparently trying to get full feeling back into them. “That is good. If we are to reach the next station, we will have to set off soon.”

“Are you insane?” Clarke demands. “You were unconscious for hours, now you want to go on a hike?”

Wells clears his throat. “Maybe we’ll leave you two alone,” he suggests tactfully. Tris has already darted out quietly while they talked, to go tell Anya. Finn follows Wells out without comment. Octavia makes as if to follow them out of the tent, but turns at the last minute and comes back in.

“I will be fine,” Lexa says firmly, looking at Clarke.

“About that,” Octavia says, looking at Lexa with a dark expression.

Lexa looks at Octavia. “I did not ask you to,” she comments, confusing Clarke utterly.

“I know,” Octavia replies. “But still…”

Clarke looks between them quickly and blinks. She’s been thinking about nothing except Lexa’s safety for hours, but now her mind starts working again, processing things outside that. Lexa getting up earlier than normal and not taking her weapons. Pike, dead. Lexa, alive. A convenient Maunon attack. Her watching Lexa, weeks ago at the drop ship, as the Commander carefully took a dart and placed it in a pouch. “You did it…” she whispers disbelievingly. Lexa glances at her, winces, and then returns her wary gaze to Octavia.

“You are right, Octavia,” Lexa admits to Octavia. “That was… above and beyond the duty of a gona. Tell me. What do you wish?”

“I’m not asking for any favours, or a reward, or anything,” Octavia says grimly. “I just want to know. What did he do? Did he deserve that?”

“He earned his death in the other world,” Lexa tells her. “He killed a peacekeeping force of three hundred while they slept. He imprisoned your Lincoln. He nearly killed Indra.” She shrugs. “But I
“I killed him for what he could do.”

“Punishment before the crime,” Octavia says, but her voice is uncertain.

“Dealing with a threat,” Lexa corrects. “I do not kill a snake because it is evil. I kill it so that it may not bite me. He was a risk. Now he is not.” Clarke stares at her, feelings welling up. Fury. Anger. Fear. Boundless hurt.

Octavia thinks about this. “He locked up Lincoln?” she says eventually. “Hurt Indra? That’s why he’s dead?” After a second, she manages a brittle smile. “Then I guess I can live with that, Heda. But I’d kinda like not to be in this position again, if possible.” Then, with an abrupt nod, she turns and leaves the tent.

Leaving Clarke just looking at Lexa.

Lexa returns her gaze anxiously. “Clarke, ai niron,” she says, “I would have told you -”

“But?” Clarke says, keeping her voice down. She can’t shout about this, although she wants to, there’s too much risk someone will hear. She can’t slap Lexa, is not physically capable of slapping the girl she loves, but part of her wants to do that as well. She wants to scream and cry and rage. “But what, Lexa?”

“I know you’re angry,” Lexa says. “I knew his death would anger you, that you do not approve of killing anyone based on their actions in the other world -”

“His death? I’m not angry about his fucking death, Lexa!” Clarke says, then forces herself to lower her voice to a hiss again. “I wanted to give him a chance, but I saw how he reacted to you guys, I saw that he would still be a problem -”

“Then why are you angry?” Lexa says, looking confused, and Clarke wonders if she’s in love with an absolute moron.

“You lied to me!” Clarke snarls. “We’re in this together, we do all of this together, don’t you understand that? You didn’t tell me the truth -”

“I did not believe you would agree with my plan -”

“And you still should have told me! Even if you weren’t asking, even if you just told me you were going to do it, warned me – do you have any idea how badly you scared me? I thought you were dead when I saw them carrying you, dead, and how dare you do that to me…” Clarke shuts her eyes, forcing back tears, and turns her face away from Lexa so she won’t see them.

“Yes,” Lexa admits, voice quavering. “Yes, ai hodnes, I forget both those things. I forget them all the time. I am not used to having your love. And my death… my death, to me, is a sort of dream. But I should have remembered that to you that is still a nightmare, not a dream – and I should have told you the truth – sometimes I spend so much time lying that I do not recall how the truth works –
Clarke, I am so sorry, so sorry, please believe me – I should not have lied to you -”

And now her tears are flowing in earnest and Clarke can’t bear it, she can’t bear it. She wraps her arms around Lexa and pulls her close, feeling Lexa’s heartbeat thumping against her chest. “It’s okay,” she says softly, “Shh, it’s okay.” Her anger starts to fade a little in the face of Lexa’s distress.

After a long few minutes, Lexa’s sobs subside. “Are we,” she begins in a croaky voice, then clears her throat. “Are we – still?”

“Ai hod yu in,” Clarke says fiercely. “We’re still – us.” Lexa lets out a sigh of pure relief, nuzzling her face against Clarke’s shirt. “It will take more than you being an idiot one time to stop that. But I reserve the right to bring this up in our next few arguments.” She thinks she feels Lexa smile against her. “Oh, and give you the cold shoulder for a while. Or try to, anyway. Sleep on the couch. That kind of thing.”

“We’re in a tent,” Lexa points out, voice muffled by Clarke’s shirt but starting to sound better. “There is no couch.”

“Damn,” Clarke says, and kisses Lexa’s forehead. “I guess just the other stuff, then.” She closes her eyes and thinks how lucky she is Lexa’s alive, and how angry she is Lexa lied to her, and how terrified she is at the thought of losing Lexa, and just how very, very much she loves Lexa.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I don't thank Cassy enough for how much she increases the quality of the story (and has been doing so since even before she was officially beta-ing!), or for how much she decreases my anxiety levels by being willing to spend hours checking these chapters before I shove them out into the world :) She's the best. So thank you Cassy!
They do not go anywhere that day. The Skaikru bury Pike and the others who died when the station fell. Lexa attends, and is glared at by most of the Farm Station as they commend the souls to the ground. Although both Clarke and Octavia have already told them it was Maunon weaponry, and although they have examined the darts and seen they are unlike weapons used by the twelve clans, they are still unsure. Octavia’s statement that she saw the Mountain Man running away has gone a long way to dispelling any outright suspicion, but they still do not like her attendance at this Sky People ceremony.

When they ask who will speak for Pike, one of the men with guns goes to stand, but Lexa goes instead, forcing him back into his seat with the power of her gaze. She knows a little of Skaikru funeral customs.

“Today, your leader, Charles Pike, died for my protection,” she says, letting her voice carry. She does not bother with the pretence of timidity she showed with Pike – the sooner these people realise she is a leader, the better. She showed her mask of weakness and innocence only to Pike. For many of Farm Station, this is the first moment they have to get Lexa’s measure. Her only concession is that she does not wear warpaint. Everything else about her, from braided hair to leather armour to her expression, radiates command and control. “When he was hit, his first action was to move me so that his body blocked mine. He took shots for me. He sacrificed his life for me. He was a hero, who will not be forgotten. I will owe him – and his people – my gratitude in this and all my lives.”

She lets sorrow show convincingly on her face, and places the dart pulled out of her body by Octavia on the grave.

The sorrow is for hurting Clarke. She feels no sorrow at all for killing Pike. Despite her speech, he will not be remembered, not for long, not by her. He doesn’t deserve to be.

There’s a pause, and then everyone choruses, “May we meet again.”

They believe me, Lexa thinks. Most of them believe me. The lie is better than the truth – they would prefer to think he died a hero, earning them the protection and fealty of a powerful leader, than think he died for no reason at all.

Lexa finds Indra at the edge of the clearing they are using for training. She and Linkon are arguing quietly. Lexa assumes it is about the death of Pike, and moves closer to hear what they are saying. She needs to know their thoughts.

“At least let me and my Seken carry some of your burdens,” Indra growls, “if you will not allow me to split them between the gonakru.”

“I can carry my share,” Linkon says stubbornly.

“Show sense, skat!” Indra glares at him. “You will lame yourself if you continue at this pace. I do not need to be a fisa to see that you are limping. You should have stayed in TonDC.”

Lexa has noticed Linkon still favours his injured leg, but had not thought much of it – he knows some healing and surely would know if he were able to travel. Now she reconsiders. It makes sense to her that he would come even if he believed he should not for his health – certainly it would take a lot more than a leg wound to prevent Lexa accompanying Clarke if she was going somewhere dangerous. She clears her throat. “Indra. Linkon.”
They both immediately straighten and face her, no sign of their previous argument on their faces. “Heda,” they chorus.

“No doubt Octavia has filled you in on this morning,” Lexa states, allowing no emotion to colour her words.

“I informed my Seken that if something was not meant for my ears, I had no desire to hear it,” Indra replies crisply. “You are my Commander. I do not question your actions.”

There is a slight pause, and then Linkon says in a low voice, “No more do I, Heda.”

Lexa looks at him. “That is a new development,” she comments, almost amused, though she hides it under her usual indifferent mask. “From what Indra tells me, normally you do nothing but question.”

“Our ways, our laws…” he says hesitantly. “Sometimes, they leave no space for kindness or mercy. I question that.” He meets her eyes. “But you are the Commander. You created the alliance, you saved Octavia’s people, you will take down the Mountain. I do not question you.”

“Mochof, Linkon,” Lexa says. He bows his head respectfully. She turns to look at Indra. “Whether or not Octavia told you, you know how I used the darts you gave me,” she says quietly. Indra does not respond. “You will never ask for an explanation, Indra, that I know. You are loyal beyond measure. But you are one of the people I trust most, and you deserve to know my reasons – Pike was a danger. Pike would have killed many of our people. He needed to be removed. I thank you for your part in this, Indra kom Trikru.”

“Sha, Heda,” Indra says. Her eyes are fierce with pleasure, at the death of Pike or at having her Heda confide in her, Lexa is not sure which. Perhaps both.

“What do the two of you make of the Azgeda gonakru?” Lexa says idly. “Zion has been nothing but helpful, but the messenger the other day….”

“Their leader is not bad, for a member of the Ice Nation,” Indra says grudgingly. “He seems loyal to the alliance and to you, Heda. His youngest bro found a houmon amongst the Plains Riders, and Zion believes that if not for the alliance they would both now be outcasts as a result.”

“His gonas are calm,” Linkon adds. “They play dice. Their training is light. They grumble, argue over who should share tents, talk of their families and villages. They show no signs of urgency, or fear. They do not seem to be planning an attack.”

“They do not study our training as if they wish to know our weakness,” Indra continues. “Zion lets his gonas speak with ours if they wish, but none seem to be trying to find out secrets. Zion never asks me for any troubling information – the only time I have wondered if he was trying to discover something is when he asked when we expected to return to Polis.”

“Knowing ahead of time when I’ll return could be useful to Nia,” Lexa says slowly. “For negotiations or ploys. Or if she wishes to challenge me, or to plan an assassination attempt then…” she breaks off with a sigh. “We know too little,” she says, half to herself.

Gustus should get back to her soon, though. She trusts his instincts nearly as strongly as she trusts her own. Her own tell her now that the Azgeda gonakru will not attack, but the unknown message nags at her. Perhaps it is harmless, but in her experience nothing to do with Nia is harmless.

Indra and Lincoln wait patiently as Lexa glances to the side, thinking. Her eyes meet sky blue ones – Clarke, perhaps a hundred feet away, looking up as she exits the Skaikru tent, Tris beside her. Their eyes hold for a second.
Lexa’s heart lurches. Even though Clarke has forgiven her, she has not yet forgiven herself for hurting the girl she loves. It is unlike Lexa to err in this way. Or rather, it is exactly like Lexa, but it is like Lexa before she had Clarke’s love and trust. She fell back into her old instincts.

She made a mistake. And then immediately, she made a second, forcing Clarke to take care of her and comfort her while she broke down. Clarke has so much to deal with already, and there was Lexa, hurting her by not thinking through her plan and the effects of it carefully, and then acting as if she was the one who deserved to be upset.

“Heda?” Linkon recalls her to herself apologetically.

Lexa blinks, looking back at Linkon and Indra. “Indra,” she says shortly. “Speak to Zion. Mention casually that we may return to Polis earlier than planned. When he tries to get more details, keep track of exactly what he wishes to know. Is it our timing, our route, whether we plan to leave any Skaikru there? We may learn what he is after. Linkon, befriend the messenger if you can. We brought a small store of alcohol to fight the cold, use as much of it as you need to get him genial and talkative. At some point while we travel I may also need an excuse for us to gather and plan without arousing suspicion from Zion – if you hear me cough twice, pretend your leg has given out. Clarke will come to tend to you, Octavia and Indra will come in concern, and I will accompany them. I will inform the others to react with concern and gather as well.”

“Sha, Heda,” Linkon promises. Indra nods and at a meaningful glance from Lexa turns to go and seek out Zion. Linkon does not leave, just meets Lexa’s eyes steadily. “May I ask you something, Heda?”

“Sha,” Lexa replies. She knows what’s coming.

“In the other world… in the other world you and Clarke kom Skaikru came from, did we defeat the Maunon?”

“We did,” Lexa says, though her heart feels heavy at the memory of it. “But you had a far greater part in that than I did, Linkon. You were the first in the world to become a Ripa and come back from it. You killed their leader. You helped to bring down the Mountain.”

Linkon looks surprised, but a near-smile appears on his serious face anyway. “That is good to know, Heda. I thank you.”

Lexa waits, but that seems to be it. “You do not wish to know what you were like in the other world?” she asks curiously. “If you lived? Who you loved, who you hated, whether we were on the same side?”

“I cared for Octavia,” he says, voice certain. “And I cared for Indra. I served the twelve clans and I helped the Skaikru. If I died, I died for my people. In any world, I believe that is true.”

Lexa smiles. Linkon takes a step back, apparently surprised by her amusement — Lexa doesn’t smile often, and never before in his presence. “You are a good man, Linkon,” she says honestly. “Not always a good gona, not always a good fisa, not even always a good Trikru. But always a very good man. We need more of those, I think.”

Linkon swallows. “It is good of you to say so, Heda,” he says, a little cautiously. “I owe you an apology, I know, for the past.”

He’s referring to his and Octavia’s accusations, she realises. It seems so long ago that she can’t bring herself to care about it. It was unlike Linkon to go along with such things. But of course, he’d just
been seriously injured, taking fisa mixes for it, falling in love for the first time, and the world had been changing very quickly. From the sound of it, Clarke speaking Trigedas leng had unnerved him considerably, as well. If she could forgive Octavia for her offensiveness, she can certainly forgive Linkon for being swept up in it. Besides, she has no doubt that he’s one of the main reasons for Octavia’s improving attitude. “No apology is necessary,” she tells him. Then she adds, voice low and fierce, “What you said before… You are not wrong about our ways, not entirely. But our ways can change. And in time, they will. We have begun that work already.”

For a second Linkon’s face shows shock and something like admiration. Then he nods, expression returning to its customary stoicism. Lexa allows her expression to even out as well. They do not need more words. She gives a wave of her hand as a careless dismissal and watches him leave.
Clarke tries to tell herself it’s a good thing they’re staying around for another day. It gives them time to bury Pike (she could almost believe Lexa’s speech, if she didn’t know better). It gives Lexa time to get better.

And it gives Raven a chance to tune the radio some more. “I’ve found two stations,” she reports proudly when Clarke stops by. “Uh, how are you doing, by the way? How’s Lexa?”

“Fine,” Clarke says shortly. She doesn’t want to talk about Lexa’s injury right now, not until it stops making her feel a lurch of icy fear and picture that still body. She’ll get herself under control soon. Lexa’s ploy has opened up a few fears she’d nearly managed to banish, but she will be fine in time. She always is.

“She figured out our funeral customs pretty quickly, from the sound of it,” Raven comments, looking a little impressed. “Farm Station loved that eulogy.”

“Which two stations?” Clarke decides to change the subject.

Raven throws her an apologetic look. “Not Abby’s, I’m afraid. These ones are the ones further north, from what they can tell, not the two that veered off. Mecha Station, with Cole. Factory Station, with Jaha. I got Wells to speak to him as well as me. So I guess at least we have our leadership back?” Raven’s voice is doubtful – she doesn’t necessarily seem to think that’s a good thing.

Clarke doesn’t think it’s a particularly good thing either. Good for Wells, and good for the nearly six hundred people on Factory Station (it’s one of the largest, along with Alpha), but probably not good for everyone else. She notes that the two stations who have working radios are the station where Raven worked, and the station where Raven lived – that doesn’t feel like a coincidence. She can definitely picture Raven fiddling around with everything in her vicinity, making sure it’s all strong and sturdy and functioning perfectly.

“How many stations does that account for?” Clarke wonders, working it out.

“Well, Octavia told me two of the scouts have returned, and they’ve both found stations, but one of them is apparently wiped out – it looks like the station split into five parts and everyone died of impact or exposure before the scout got there. The other one found Mecha Station, which I also spoke to earlier. Jaha’s one hasn’t seen a scout yet. It makes sense that the guys without blankets were more desperate to find people and spent more time fiddling with the radio. So that’s three more, in addition to the two we already found,” Raven summarises. “Two of which have survivors. We only sent people down in seven of the stations, the ones least likely to break up. So I think we’ve found all the ones in the north. Well, ‘found’ may be too strong a word, since we don’t know exactly where Factory is.”

“We’ll find Factory Station soon,” Clarke promises. “If Jaha has any information about where they landed, a description of the land, even, maybe we can get one of Zion’s gonas who comes from around here to guess a location.”

“That would be good,” Raven says distantly, already back to fiddling with the radio.

Clarke leaves the tent. She sees Lexa speaking to Indra and Lincoln and meets her eyes. As well as the normal rush of love when she sees Lexa, there’s a feeling of overpowering relief – Lexa’s alive. But there’s also a blast of hurt. She felt it along with the fear, earlier, when Raven referred to Lexa’s
injury, and she feels it again now. It’s a deep, aching hurt, like pushing hard against a bad bruise. Lexa lied to her. Lexa hurt her. And no matter how much she loves her, that hurt, that confusion, that betrayal – it will take a little while to heal properly, to fade. But it will fade. Just like the nightmares. It has before, after all. Nevertheless, she can’t stop herself from glancing away from Lexa, from taking a deep breath to get her feelings under control. When she looks again, Lexa’s deep in conversation and doesn’t notice.

Clarke finds Tris and sends her off to locate Anya and tell her to find one of Zion’s people from around the area. It doesn’t take long before Anya shows up.

“This gona is from the north,” Anya says casually, shoving an Azgeda gona ahead of her like someone forcing a misbehaving child to apologise. “Perhaps he can help locate your missing station, sky girl.”

“No missing,” Raven objects, crossing her arms. “I found it. Me and my radio. We’re just… narrowing it down.”

“Yes. Narrowing it down,” Anya scoffs. “Because you and your radios cannot find it without my gonas’ help. Once again your devices have proved pointless.”

“They are not pointless, they’re more useful than you are,” Raven says, offended. She turns to Clarke and rolls her eyes. Clarke gets the feeling this isn’t the first – or even the tenth – argument that these two have had, just judging by how swiftly they snark and the smirks they shoot towards each other. “Clarke, explain to this… this Luddite that some of us don’t just stab all our problems into submission.”

Anya doesn’t look remotely offended by any of this, leading Clarke to think that Raven is just allowed to say whatever she wants to Anya. “I am not a Luddite, I am Trikru. And when you say some of us don’t stab all their problems, you mean some of us can’t. If you learnt to wield a blade you could leave all this childish tinkering behind you.” She gives Raven a wicked grin. It sounds like they’ve had this conversation quite a few times, and that despite all of the edges and insults to it, it’s actually strangely friendly.

Raven glares back and starts twiddling the radio. “Chancellor? Chancellor? Are you there?”

“Miss Reyes?” Jaha’s voice crackles over the line.

“And me,” Clarke says. “We’ve gotten someone from this area to join us, we were hoping we could figure out where you’ve landed if you give us a description.”

“We’ve been thinking over here,” Jaha says. “I asked Sinclair, and he said if we have to he can definitely send up some flares or even fireworks, that would get rid of the problem. You could easily find us.”

“Fireworks?” Anya says in an undertone.

“A bad idea,” Clarke murmurs back. She raises her voice for Jaha’s benefit. “And Chancellor, what do you think the locals will make of a bunch of colourful explosions in the sky? Assuming they stay in the sky. The last thing they need is to hit another village.

“You can explain that they’re harmless,” Jaha says impatiently.

Clarke closes her eyes for a second, seeking patience. “They’re not small children who need to be told that lightning isn’t scary, Jaha. What they are is a culture of warriors going back a hundred years. Like most sane people, they will associate explosions with danger. We’ve already asked them
to accept us crashing an entire space station onto their lands. I would like all of our first encounters with them to be as non-violent as possible. So how about you try describing where you’ve landed.”

It’s unmistakeably an order, and Clarke can practically feel Jaha wondering if he should continue arguing. Instead, he says in a slightly patronising tone, “Alright, Clarke. We’ll try that first if you’re worried about scaring these tribes.”

“Clans, not tribes,” Anya corrects, still too quietly to be heard by Jaha, looking at the radio with disdain. “This man is really your leader?”

“Well, technically,” Raven says, also quietly. She and Anya both look at Clarke, then look at each other and grin.

With prompting, Clarke’s able to get Jaha to list some things about where they landed. A nearby hill. A frozen lake.

The Azgeda gona eventually guesses a location. He asks a couple of questions into the radio to confirm – Clarke’s impressed by how quickly he’s figured out how to work it. Eventually they’re able to narrow it down to a very small area. Clarke marks it on the map as the gona leaves. She’s already marked the others.

Luckily, while far from their current location, the stations aren’t quite as far from each other. She estimates that in five hours they can walk to the first one, in another two hours to the second one (the one without survivors, which they should check anyway), and only an hour and a half to the third. Provided the first station – which Raven has confirmed is Mecha Station, led by Cole who spoke to Raven on the radio – is able to pack their things and be ready to walk quickly, they should be able to reach the third one by tomorrow night.

“Anya,” Clarke says after a while. “With all these new people, we’re going to be short of tents, aren’t we?”

“No, we will have enough,” Anya says. “We will need four or five people in each tent, so it may not be comfortable, but at least it will be warm.”

“Four or five,” Clarke muses. “Should Lexa and I get more people in ours? Is it suspicious we don’t?” She wants to be alone with Lexa, but she really doesn’t want people to start getting the wrong idea about them. Or the right one, for that matter. So far they’ve been able to play it off as consolidating the need for guards for the two of them, and setting an example for everyone else who needs to share tents, but she worries anyway.

“I could come join you guys,” Raven suggests. “If you’re really looking for a third wheel. I mean, it was pretty exciting last time I slept there. You know. Assassins and all.”

“And you will no longer need to share a tent with the floppy-haired one,” Anya remarks, a little bit of satisfaction in her voice.

“You know his name, cheekbones,” Raven rolls her eyes. “I know you know his name.” The nickname’s a surprise to Clarke.

“You don’t know that,” Anya says loftily. “There are many of you Skaikru now. It is easy to confuse you with each other. You are no longer rare or interesting.”

“I’m still the only mechanic,” Raven says. “So I’m a hundred percent unique. Whereas there are how many gonas, Anya? Come on, how many?”
“Few as good as me,” Anya grins smugly at Raven. “Someday we should fight, sky girl. See what damage you can do. Maybe then you will accept my offer and learn to use a blade.”

“Hey, I started making grenades the other day,” Raven says. “I can do plenty of damage.”

“Save those for Finn,” Anya advises. “You will run out of grenades quickly, but I can use my sword as many times as I wish.”

“Ha! I knew that you knew his name!”

Clarke decides to interrupt, since they show no sign of slowing down. She wonders if they’re always like this. This does seem like the kind of conversation Raven has for fun, and Anya is blatantly enjoying the argument, smirk widening with every comment. “If you’re sure, Raven, that would be great,” Clarke says. “I’d really appreciate it.”

“Sure,” Raven says, stopping her staring competition with Anya to gaze in surprise at Clarke, like she’d almost forgotten she was there. “I could also use some space.”

“You and Finn?” Clarke asks hesitantly.

“Over,” Raven says baldly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Clarke says.

“You kind of inspired it,” Raven says, returning to fiddling with the radio, though it doesn’t seem to do anything. Maybe it’s just something to do with her hands. The raven necklace dangles down from her neck still and she tucks it under her shirt in a frustrated way, but doesn’t take it off. “Oh, not what you said, your advice or anything. It’s the other day, when we found Arrow Station. Finn hugged me and it was just – automatic, you know? There wasn’t half as much real feeling behind us practically on top of each other as there was from the Commander just touching your arm. I guess I just realised I want something more, you know?” Despite her apparent insouciance, Clarke can see from the way she hunches her shoulders that she’s fighting tears.

Anya gives her a smirk, but Clarke can see a slight edge of concern behind it. “I imagine any person would say they want ‘something more’ from him.” The tone of her voice makes it clear what she thinks Finn lacks.

Raven glares at her, locking eyes again. “As your people would say, shof op, Anya. Just because it’s been a while since you got the chance to -”

“Please stop,” Clarke says, horrified, before Raven says anything X-rated.

“Right,” Raven says, looking a little shamefaced, stopping herself in the middle of a highly suggestive hand gesture. “Sorry, Clarke.”

Nevertheless, Clarke can hear them resume bickering as she leaves.

It’s late, by now, so she goes into the tent she shares with Lexa. “Raven’s staying here as well,” Clarke says. “She’s having some trouble with Finn. So we should, we should probably sleep in separate areas.” She starts separating out her sleep mat and blankets from Lexa’s, moving it to the other side. Last time when Raven was there they still slept side by side. But it feels insensitive somehow, now that Raven and Finn have broken up, to show off the fact that Clarke’s still in a relationship. Maybe she wouldn’t feel that way if she’d never slept with Finn, but she did.

“Sha, Clarke. As you wish.” There’s a faint quaver in Lexa’s voice, but she has it under control. She
reaches up to start undoing her braids. Clarke goes and hugs her from behind, pressing her face into the curve of Lexa’s shoulder, but it feels like she’s pushing on that bruise again.

Or maybe it’s not about Raven at all. Maybe that’s just an excuse. Maybe the couch comment wasn’t as much of a joke as she meant it to be. They’re still them, just like she said, but she can’t deny she’s hurt and confused. She can’t deny that even as she wraps her arms around Lexa she feels the pain from earlier bubbling up again. She loves Lexa, and she forgives her, but she can’t understand why Lexa hadn’t talked to her. Why the person she trusted most doesn’t seem to trust her in return. It’s hard to look at Lexa, to speak to her, and especially to touch her, with that ache inside her. It’s not that she can’t deal with it – it’s that she’s worried her hurt and anger will motivate her to say something that will cause Lexa pain in return, and she can’t do that. She doesn’t want to do that. She just needs to sort her head out and they’ll be okay again.

“Hey,” Clarke says softly anyway, trying to convince herself as much as Lexa. “This isn’t some kind of petty revenge. We’re okay. Raven’s just staying here to give her some space from Finn and to hopefully quell any potential rumours.”

“Oh,” Lexa relaxes slightly. “I see.” But she still doesn’t look entirely convinced, either.
Lexa’s woken in the night by the sound of rough gasping and movement. It’s Clarke on her sleep mat on the other side of the tent, clearly having a nightmare.

“Ai hodnes,” Lexa says softly, crouching over and touching her arm, shaking her very lightly. Raven sleeps on, undisturbed – apparently even without moonshine she is hard to wake. “Clarke, please, you’re having a nightmare. Wake up."

Clarke stiffens, then her eyes open. “Lexa?” she says, voice a little croaky. She hugs Lexa fiercely. “You’re alright. You’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Lexa promises, feeling sick at heart. “I’m fine.” She looks at Clarke in the darkness, barely able to make out her face. “I did this, didn’t I? This morning. You had stopped having these dreams and now they are back because of that.”

“Maybe,” Clarke admits wearily. “Or maybe it’s because I’m not sleeping next to you. That’s when they mostly stopped, after I started sharing this tent with you.” There’s a long pause. “I was going to leave it alone, I wasn’t going to bring it up again. But I think I need to – I don’t want to avoid talking about our problems, not if that means there’s a chance they become bigger. So I need to say… I’m trying, but I still don’t understand. Why did you do it, Lexa?” Clarke’s voice is unexpectedly young and vulnerable. “Really? Why couldn’t you trust me?”

“I made a mistake, Clarke, and I am truly sorry. I hurt you. I will not let that happen again.” Lexa hears how her voice quavers and clears her throat, trying to control herself. “I should not be so over-emotional. Forgive me.”

“You’re allowed to makes mistakes, and you’re definitely allowed to be emotional, but please still talk to me,” Clarke says, sounding frustrated. “I lean on you all the time, can’t you lean on me sometimes? And I ask you for help all the time too. You can ask me for help in return, you know. You could have asked for my help with Pike. I could have been a witness, at least.”

“I’m not used to having someone I can trust,”Lexa says softly. “I was alone. Especially once Gustus and Anya died, I was alone. I had you for only the briefest time. I am used to making decisions by myself, and sharing nothing with others – not my feelings and especially not my plans. I fell back into old habits. And… and I wished to protect you, I think. I have forced you to make terrible decisions before.” She remembers the ruins of TonDC. She remembers Clarke’s expression as she held a knife to Lexa’s throat. “I wished to take that away from you. He was your friend, your ticha, before all of this. I wish to help with your burdens, not add to them.”

“Oh,” Clarke exhales, understanding. “You can’t do that, Lexa. You can’t protect me from who I am, and I’m always… I’m always going to be the person who makes those decisions, for my people or otherwise. Whether I’m the leader of the Skaikru, or the ambassador, or your advisor like we’ve planned. It doesn’t matter where I end up, there’s no version of this world where I don’t have to make hard choices. So please, help me make them, but don’t make them for me next time. And let me help you when you have to make them. You don’t have to be the strong one in our relationship, this isn’t a one-way street, you don’t have to protect and comfort me and help me all the time while asking for nothing in return. Let me help you with your burdens too, and don’t try and take mine from me and call that protection. That’s not what I want. Next time, tell me what’s going on.”

“I will, Clarke,” Lexa promises, after a long moment. She hadn’t thought of it like that. Perhaps she’s so used to being needed by others, she has trouble allowing herself to need. But she needs Clarke.
“It’s just… perhaps I have trouble believing that anyone could look at all I do and think and feel and still care for me.”

“I’m the same as you. You need to remember that. I’m not as used to harsh choices as you are, and I know I’ve lashed out at you in the past, but I’m getting there. Please treat me like an equal, not like someone who needs to be lied to or coddled. I know you’re a good person, Lexa. The best. You make impossible decisions and you do everything for everyone and you don’t ask for anything in return, and you never even get thanked for it.” Clarke kisses Lexa’s cheek. “You amaze me and you inspire me. And I want all of you, the sadness and the ruthlessness and the weariness and the fear. I love Heda as much as I love Lexa. I want the bad as well as the good, okay? It’s greedy, but I want it all. You’re not going to lose me, no matter what. I’m here.”

“I love you.” Lexa says, meaning it with her whole heart. A tear slips down her face.

“I love you too,” Clarke says. She hesitates, then smiles. Lexa can only just see the curve of her lips in the darkness. “Any chance you can drag your sleep mat over here? There’s still a few hours of sleep we can get in. Raven can deal with it, I’m pretty sure.”

Lexa kisses Clarke.

Her sleep feels much better and deeper curled around the girl she loves.

The next morning, Farm Station pack up readily. Lexa’s not sure if this is because they wish to reach more of their people, or because they fear there may be more Maunon about. She notices they have fewer guns than she assumed they did, only a handful, and can’t decide if this is good or bad. Clarke quietly orders them to pack all the guns away. The look on her face is not one Lexa would want to cross. Something seems to have settled between them after their conversation in the night – it’s like they can both breathe normally again.

They also have less goufas than she imagined – less than one tenth of their people. No couples seem to have more than one goufa, either. There are not even any twins. It is very strange.

She makes a point of talking with the acting leader, Jay, on the way to the first station, asking him about his people until he softens. Physically, he is similar to Pike, dark and short, but he is noticeably younger and his face is clean-shaven. He listens better, too, and seems more respectful – or at least more fearful.

She also walks beside Clarke for a time. Eventually Clarke clears her throat. “I notice you sent the Azgeda scouts off again,” she comments, a little awkwardly.

“I sent them to find the other two stations,” Lexa explains simply. “The ones we sent before must have been unable to find our trail again. One of the stations might be Alpha Station. Might have your mother.”

“I hope so,” Clarke says, looking anxious. Lexa tangles her fingers with Clarke’s for a moment, letting go before anyone can see, and Clarke smiles at the attempt to offer comfort.

“I love you,” Lexa says quietly.

“I love you too,” Clarke says in return, and there is nothing awkward about that. Perhaps their argument really is over, though Lexa’s guilt lingers.

Cole proves to be one of the more reasonable Skaikru leaders. Lexa wonders why she did not meet her in the other world. Raven – apparently from this station, though she worked in the next one they are to visit – has already told her that they will be expected to leave as soon as possible, so she has
her people ready and waiting to go. She thanks Lexa for the blankets and food the local villagers provided. When Lexa tells her that the gona will help them find food the rest of the way to their people, that they have tents for everyone to sleep in, and that there is land for the Skaikru down south her gratitude becomes even more effusive. They also have a medic to aid Clarke and the fisas, as it turns out – a man named Jackson who Clarke is very happy to see.

Clarke tenses more and more the closer they get to the other station which crashed. Lexa can’t blame her – there’s a one in three chance that her mother was on board. And even if not, they haven’t heard from the other two, they don’t know if there are any survivors on either. Wells says something encouraging to her but only receives a lost look in response, perhaps because his father is safe while Clarke’s mother may well be dead.

“Clarke,” Lexa says to her softly, not sure what else to say. “Ste yuj. Your mother is tough, as you are. You must believe that.”


Clarke relaxes, then looks guilty. She swallows. “Okay,” she says, voice strong. “We should check if there are any survivors.”

The ruins of the station are an icy husk. The pieces dot the landscape. It takes no time at all to ascertain that no one lived through the crash. There are bodies everywhere, though – some decorated with frozen blood, some with skin so blue it’s clear they died of the cold. There was no fire here, it was just that the station split apart, Raven believes. Perhaps the station was not as tough as Sinclair estimated. The Skaikru argue over whether they should stay and bury the bodies.

Clarke looks at Lexa. Lexa sighs. “I do not wish to dishonour the dead, Clarke,” she says quietly. “But the living are hungry.”

In the end, they compromise. They don’t dig graves for the two hundred dead, but instead the gona and Skaikru cut down all of the trees around, place them inside the different parts of the station with the bodies, and light the fire – hopefully with enough fuel to consign all the bodies inside to the flames. They wait for some time, watching it and saying the words that Skaikru use, and then they set off again.

It’s nearly night by the time they reach Jaha’s station. By now, they have so many people – Trikru and Azgeda and Skaikru, with the Skaikru nearly outnumbering the others – that just by walking they cut a path through the landscape. They tread down the snow. Animals foolish enough to remain are killed to replenish their dwindling food supplies. Slumbering plants are crushed. Trees are cut down for firewood. Lexa wonders if Nia will accuse her of causing the Azgeda to starve by bringing so many people to her lands to be fed and warmed by fire.

This time, Lexa approaches the station with Clarke, her guards following. She let Clarke enter first for Farm Station, and it gave the Skaikru there the incorrect idea that they had power. She does not wish to allow Jaha this misconception. She still recalls the fool threatening her with a knife, naïve and aggressive, a terrible combination. But she does not wear a grey scarf around her braids or a pale, fearful face now – her warpaint claws at her cheeks, her gold cog gleams on her forehead, and her red sash flows down behind her.

“Open the doors, Jaha,” Clarke says loudly and clearly, an order. The door opens almost immediately. “He saw us approaching,” Clarke mutters to Lexa. “Wanted to wait until we asked anyway.”
“That sounds like my father,” Wells says, a little grimly.

Jaha steps out, followed by several Skaikru dressed in their guard uniforms. He looks as Lexa remembered, maybe a little bit smugger. “Hello, son,” he says to Wells, genuine emotion on his face for a second before he forces it down. He turns to Lexa instead. Surprise flashes over his face as he registers her. “You must be the Commander,” he says. “Greetings. It is a pleasure to meet you. I didn’t expect you to be so… young.” He looks at Clarke in the middle, frowning, as if it’s somehow her fault.

He talks slowly as he speaks to her, and it annoys Lexa. It reeks of condescension. “And you must be leader of the kru that lives by my grace,” she says coldly. “I suggest you remember that. My age is irrelevant, as I am the Commander, and so have lived many lifetimes while you stumble through your first.”

Jaha looks stunned for a moment, then rallies. “I… I meant no offence.”

“Perhaps not. You can, after all, cause offence without meaning to,” Lexa says, voice silky and dangerous. She does not think he will mention her age again. “I suggest you consider your words carefully to avoid this.”

Clarke intervenes. “Is everyone okay?”

“Eighteen dead in the landing. Four broken bones, ten people haven’t entirely got their sight back yet, but everyone’s able to walk,” Jaha says distractedly, still looking at Lexa.

“Then we will leave in the morning,” Lexa orders, with the calm certainty of someone who is never disobeyed. “Be ready.”

Jaha bristles. “I’m not sure we should leave at all, Commander. I was thinking our people could use this station as a base, it’s stayed pretty complete. And we’ve got nearly everyone here already. I think…”

“Think again,” Lexa says bluntly, stating what is going to happen as a fact. “We leave at first light. See that your people are ready.”

“We can trade technology -” Jaha starts.

“And we will,” Clarke interrupts firmly. “But we won’t trade it for this land. The Commander has been kind enough to offer us land close to the Trikru clan’s southern border. They’ll help us set up. In return, we’ll help in the war against the Maunon, and we’ll owe the Trikru as much food, technology and medical aid as we can reasonably spare over the next few years. After that, we’ll negotiate a price to buy the land over the next few decades, or pay a reasonable ongoing rent in goods.”

“Rent?” Jaha looks scandalised. “Clarke, we’ve never -”

“Learn to,” Lexa replies coolly. “Or leave to find new lands for yourselves. Perhaps somewhere out there is land that no others want. I do not envy you trying to find it, however.” The Skaikru cannot expect to take land from a member of the alliance without paying for it somehow. This will make the Trikru considerably more positive towards their presence. Is he a fool, to believe he should be given land for nothing?

Of course, she is being unfair, as she would have given them the land for nothing, initially. It was Clarke who insisted they find a way to pay for it, noting that this would make her people understand the value of what they had been given.
“With respect, Commander -” Jaha is gritting his teeth now, angry.

“With respect,” Wells becomes the third person to interrupt his father, voice firm as he talks over him. From Clarke’s brief expression of surprise, Wells does not typically do this. “With respect, Commander, my father would like to thank you for the kindness you have offered us. And that’s all he’d like to say right now. I’d like to talk to him in private, if you would allow us that. It’s been some time since I’ve seen him.”

Lexa nods graciously. Jaha isn’t stupid enough to interrupt, though he looks like he wants to. “Of course, Wells kom Skaikru,” she says. “My people will set up our tents outside.” Wells says something quietly but fiercely to his father and they begin a tense yet inaudible argument, Jaha gesticulating wildly.

“I’ll stay,” Clarke says, glancing at Jaha and then looking back to Lexa as if the Chancellor is not even important enough to pay attention to. “I can make sure Factory Station are ready for tomorrow.”

“If any of your people require aid of any kind, food or blankets perhaps, send someone to fetch me. I am sure you will have much to organise. I will leave you half these gona to assist with that.” Lexa tells her, allowing a slight bit of warmth to colour her tone.

“Sha, Heda,” Clarke says, giving her a smile. Half of Lexa’s guard – the half who by now are used to going with Clarke whenever Lexa says this – split off and go to stand by her, large and dangerous-looking in the cramped space. Jaha looks up at them, stopping his quiet rant at Wells briefly, unnerved by their size. They dwarf the three men with shock sticks and guns.

Lexa turns and leaves.
The Chains of Command

It’s close to being a sleepless night for Clarke, but between teaching the people of Farm Station and Mecha Station how to put up tents, persuading Factory Station to start packing, and explaining multiple times to Jaha that they can’t remain in Azgeda territory, she does somehow manage to catch a couple of hours. The only reason she got any was because of Sinclair’s quiet support and Raven’s relationships with her former co-workers. It feels like she only spends minutes curled up against Lexa though before she’s being apologetically woken.

“The sky is light, ai niron,” Lexa tells her softly. “It is time to pack up and leave. However, if you would like -”

“No,” Clarke replies, stifling a yawn and sitting up. “I’m fine. I’m ready to go find Alpha Station and Prison Station.”

“Jaha is difficult,” Lexa observes. “Cole was not so.”

“Cole’s more of a follower,” Clarke says grumpily. “And Jaha’s more of an idiot. I think half the reason he’s being unreasonable is because he doesn’t like it that I’ve taken charge. So far he’s been managing to avoid outright argument by patronising me, and I’ve been mostly working around him while he’s distracted, but sooner or later Wells isn’t going to be there to mediate and there will be a fight.” She’s only really been avoiding putting Jaha in his place because of Wells, and suspects he’s thinking the exact same thing about her. This can only end well.

Lexa frowns. “I do not believe it would be honourable for Jaha to use a gun,” she says thoughtfully. “I suppose one of the gona could lend him a sword for your battle.” She doesn’t express any worry at all – making it crystal clear who she thinks the victor would be.

“It will probably be a verbal fight,” Clarke says, although she does dwell longingly on the idea for a few seconds first. “But I’ll keep that in mind just in case.”

Lexa nods briskly and helps Clarke up, starting to pack their things with brutal efficiency. Clarke tries to ignore the butterflies in her stomach – today she’ll find her mother, either alive or dead.

Clarke walks beside Lexa at the head of the column. Jaha finds himself politely pushed back by guards so that he’s not quite equal to them – the only people allowed to walk as an equal with the Commander are those she chooses to allow. Farm Station, Mecha Station and Factory Station are managing to keep up relatively well, especially impressive for Factory Station as they haven’t had much food in the days since they landed.

They walk mostly in silence. Everyone’s tense. The surviving stations are absorbing the fact that at least six hundred of their people are dead – and possibly more, depending on the safety of the remaining two stations. They’re nervous and twitchy around the Grounders. In turn, the Azgeda aren’t especially comfortable with the soft, slow Sky People, who are as unlike their people as it is possible to be. Previously, on Clarke’s orders, all of the Skaikru had hidden their guns, but it looks like Jaha has reversed that order, which isn’t helping matters. The Trikru, now outnumbered by strangers in their closest rival’s lands, half crouch as they move forward, automatically falling into a warrior’s cautious stance.

“So, Heda,” Clarke says after a while, her voice carrying. She forces herself to sound casual. “I’ve been meaning to tell you.” She needs to find something that is nearly identical between their people, a common ground. A relaxing common ground.
Lexa looks at Clarke, and realises what she’s trying to do – get everyone to calm down a bit. “Yes, Clarke kom Skaikru?”

“You shared your fayowada with us,” Clarke says. “We have some drinks I’d like to share with you. Vodka, for starters. You know, in celebration, when we get to our new home. Guaranteed no poison.” The Trikru immediately behind them mutter at that, but quieten straight away when Anya glances back. Raven raises an eyebrow at Clarke, though, looking intrigued by the random comment.

“I may perhaps accept this gift from your people,” Lexa says soberly, but Clarke can see her hidden smile. “However, my people do not become impaired so easily as your own. Are you sure it will be strong enough?”

Anya lets out a bark of laughter. “You’re right, Heda. Skaikru drinks are probably as weak and pale as their people.”

“Oh, no,” Raven says loudly, looking at Anya like she’s daring her, a smirk on her face. Apparently she’s realised what Clarke’s doing too. “No way. You really think you’re better drinkers than us, cheekbones? That’s what you’re going with?”

“Do you wish to challenge me, sky girl?” Anya says, returning the smirk.

“Oh, I think we both know that’s exactly what I-”

“She’ll have help,” Finn interrupts. He looks back at some people Clarke vaguely recognises from Mecha Station, and says in a persuasive way, “Right, Mark? Cara? Come on, you’re not going to leave us drinking alone here, are you?”

“I don’t drink,” a man says coldly.

The woman grins shakily. “I don’t know about a drinking contest,” she says, barely loudly enough to be heard. “I mean, we might not have enough vodka for that.”

“You can have my share,” Wells says, joining in. “Fayowada is better.”

“You’re not old enough to drink,” Jaha says, looking at Wells like he’s disappointed him.

Raven shoots Jaha a glare. “Old enough to be sent to die,” she mutters, then speaks up again stridently. “Monty’s been making some moonshine for anyone who’d like that once we run out of vodka!”

“Not again,” a dismayed voice comes from many rows back in the group. “That boy -” Looking back Clarke recognises that it’s Monty’s father. The people around him – from Farm Station, Clarke thinks – chuckle at that, apparently well aware of Monty’s habit of illegal brewing.

“You didn’t seem to be enjoying the moonshine the other day, Raven,” Octavia says. “I saw you, you could barely move, you were so hungover.”

This gets a laugh, the loudest from Anya, and Raven glares melodramatically at Octavia. “Betrayed!” she laments jokingly. “Seriously, O, if you’d drunk that much, you wouldn’t even be able to stand. My head felt like that time the alarms on the Ark broke and went off for ten hours straight.”

This produces some more laughter, and several people start sharing stories of their worst hangovers with the people next to them. Even the Trikru and Azgeda gona seem to have taken up the topic, which Clarke has no doubt is because Lexa made a joke first. She all but sent them a message she wanted them to talk and relax a bit.
“Good thinking,” Lexa says quietly to Clarke. “Our people will never integrate until they at least learn to speak.”

It doesn’t entirely calm everyone, or really lead to the groups talking directly to each other, but it’s a start, Clarke thinks. At least they’re relaxing around each other, the Trikru and Azgeda no longer eyeing guns, the Skaikru no longer starting at sudden movements.

Then Lexa pauses, frowning. She holds up a hand and everyone behind them stills, the gona glaring Skaikru into silence when they start to ask what’s happening. “You see it, Indra, Anya?” she says quietly.

“I see it,” Indra says in a low voice. She stares at the ground, which looks pretty much like regular snow to Clarke. Maybe a little bit less even, but otherwise the same. “Many people passed this way.”

“Hundreds,” Zion says, peering at a nearby tree. Clarke realises he must know this area better than nearly anyone. “At least.”

“Which way did they go?”

“That way,” Zion says after a long pause studying the ground, pointing east. “Perhaps four days ago. They have no skill at concealing their tracks.”

Clarke frowns and looks east, sees nothing, then turns to look west as well. She can’t see very far, but – “Zion?” she asks, “Can you see – is that -”

He looks that way and blinks. “Metal,” he breathes.

The sun comes out briefly, conveniently, and Clarke blinks as the reflection off the station catches her in the eye. It’s probably two miles away, half buried in snow, and if she hadn’t been looking closely over the icy plains below she never would have seen it. Now she’s looking, though, she can see that in the distance the snowy carpet is strange, hills and valleys too even. Only the occasional high piece of metal sticks out. After a glance at Lexa she starts towards it. Lexa frowns again and makes a beckoning gesture to the army of people behind her so that they all follow.

When Clarke reaches the station, she listens for a second. No sound coming from inside, and the protruding upper door is only half shut. She peers inside and sees nothing but darkness. “Open it,” she snaps at the closest gona. If she was paying more attention, she might have been pleased that he didn’t so much as glance at Lexa, Anya or Indra before automatically obeying, forcing the door completely open. As it is, she’s too worried about what this means. Did the Maunon take these people?

She recognises the station as soon as she climbs down inside. After all, she spent a year here. The Skybox. And it’s empty, apart from two corpses across the room from her. She approaches one. It’s Kaplan, a neat bullet hole in his head. For a second all of her instincts scream that it’s the Mountain, then she notices – a burn on his side. She’s seen burns like that, treated burns like that in fact. A shock stick used too enthusiastically. The guards aren’t always very careful with the power they’ve been given. Sometimes they seem downright eager to use their weapons.

“What in the world…?” Jaha starts to say, confused. He puts his hand on his gun, looking around like he expects the killer to leap out and yell ‘surprise!’

“Wells,” Clarke says sharply. Her voice echoes. “Before they came down, Bellamy and the others were making a list of the people in each station, like I asked. Go get Raven –” the other girl is still outside, Clarke’s not sure why. Clarke reaches into her pack for her valuable paper and pencils and
hands them to Wells, not without a pang. “Contact Bellamy. Find out who was on the list for this one, and write them down.”

“Of course,” he says immediately, frowning.

Clarke investigates while they do that, ignoring everyone else who enters to mill around and stare. The prison doors are still working, which is one point in the Ark’s favour – sending down treasonous criminals in cells they expected to short out would have been ridiculously stupid. Of course, that means someone with access opened them and let all of the people inside out. Nearly all of them, anyway – Shumway lies in his cell, eyes wide open, a bullet in his head.

Diana Sydney would have been in Clarke’s cell. There’s no sign of a scuffle there to disturb Clarke’s pictures. There’s no sign of a scuffle anywhere. If supplies came down in this station, they’re all gone. Wires have been pulled out of different places, scavenged. Clarke lived here for a year in solitary and she still didn’t know where all the cameras and speakers were, but they’ve been methodically ripped out of the walls in well-hidden places. The only people who could have known exactly where they were are the prison guards.

“We stored a lot of supplies in the spare cells,” Jaha says, frowning. “Someone’s taken them.”

Clarke knows exactly what’s happened here, and grits her teeth to avoid screaming at him.

She goes back outside. Lexa is beside Raven and Wells as they listen to a radio Sinclair’s fiddling with, surrounded by gona and Skaikru alike. Everyone looks up as she approaches.

“We’ve got about a hundred people so far out of the three hundred in this part,” Wells begins.

“Let me guess,” Clarke says flatly. “Mostly working class. Quite a few guards, all armed. Any known supporters of Diana Sydney on there?”

Raven blinks, looks down at the partial list, then stabs her finger at a name. “Him,” she says, “He used to campaign for Sydney, I remember when she was trying to get elected again.”

Sinclair frowns, peering down as well. “Yes. That’s right, that was him.”

Wells stares at the list. He’s well-informed about the politics of the Ark, having been involved in them through his father since before he could walk. After a few moments he looks up, stricken. “I recognise some of them,” he admits.

Jaha has followed Clarke out. “You’re saying Diana escaped? Took these people and ran?” he sounds unbelieving. He looks down at the list, then up at Clarke again.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Clarke says harshly. “She managed to get some of the people organising the Ark coming down to stack the deck for her, so the station would be mostly filled with her people. You guys kept her alive because you were worried about being too rough on her – never mind that you sent a hundred minor criminals to die a few weeks ago – and now we have a serious problem.”

“Shewas popular with a lot of the Ark,” Jaha says, then flushes slightly as if even he realises that’s a stupid reason to leave a threat alive. A threat who literally tried to kill him, as well. There’s mercy, there’s game-playing, and then there’s blatantly stupid lobbying for popularity, and Clarke thinks Jaha’s fallen well into the stupid category this time. His desire to play the wise leader has led him to one of his dumbest actions yet.

Clarke remembers suggesting to the Council that they remove Diana Sydney and her followers from
the situation, but they had reacted (somewhat hypocritically) like her suggestion was callous. That they hadn’t even bothered to check that the people assigned to the same station as Diana Sydney weren’t previous supporters of her – it boggles Clarke’s mind. They were so desperate to grab a non-existent moral high ground, to pretend the reason they executed people was necessity and nothing more, that they’ve risked hundreds of people and lost important supplies.

“They went to the east,” Lexa says, looking at Clarke. Clarke can read her eyes well enough to see that Lexa’s not only feeling annoyance at this development, but disgust at the stupidity of the Sky People. This time, she can’t blame her. She’s feeling some disgust herself. “Do you wish to follow them?”

“Of course,” Jaha says immediately, as if the question was directed at him. He looks at the many people gathered around them – a little back out of respect (or fear) of Lexa, but still dozens close enough to hear. “We’ll need to -”

“No,” Clarke says, speaking over him as if his views are unimportant, looking only at Lexa. It’s rude but right now she’s too annoyed to care. “We’ll go to the next station. They’re headed east, they’ve got nearly five days’ head start, and we don’t have the time or supplies to deal with them right now. Not to mention we’re lacking a plan and they have some guns.”

A round trip of ten days. Six, maybe, if they left the Skaikru behind and just took the gona. They still don’t have enough food or goodwill to make the trip. And who knows what kind of resistance they’d meet? It’s a terrible plan.

“Clarke,” Jaha says icily, “You’re not in charge here.”

“Yes, I am,” Clarke says, not loudly, but confidently. She stares Jaha down. Everyone else watches in shocked silence.

“I’m the leader of the Ark,” Jaha says, looking furious, but also still trying to talk to her like she’s a kid – like he’s telling off a child, in fact. Like she’s four again and he’s explaining that she and Wells can’t have a food fight just because it’s their food.

“And how’s that been going?” Clarke questions him, voice strong. “You lied to everyone about the oxygen situation, while I risked my life to try and tell them. You sent a hundred children to die, but I kept them alive. You nearly killed three hundred innocent people, you were going to come down with only a small percentage of the Ark, you let a dangerous political prisoner out into the world with three hundred supporters! I don’t think I want to see where you plan to lead us next.”

“Clarke, you’re a child.”

“If I wasn’t a child when you decided I was expendable, I don’t think I’m a child now, Chancellor. I made a deal with the Grounders, I kept us safe from the Mountain, and I ensured that our people got help as soon as they landed. I am the only reason any of us are alive. You should keep that in mind.”

She doesn’t wait to see if he listens. She turns and walks away, Lexa matching her pace. After a long moment, everyone else follows.
They’ve been marching south for some time now and the argument between Clarke and Jaha has made everyone return to their previous uneasy silence. The Sky People are shocked and uncertain. The Azgeda aren’t sure what to make of a leadership contest which has not ended in a challenge, and consider the shamed Jaha weak for giving in. On the other side, the Trikru are used to considering Clarke the leader of her people, and are confused as to why she did not kill Jaha for his insolent words.

Wells looks especially uncomfortable, and Lexa feels for him, caught between people he cares for. She has no sympathy to spare for Jaha, who is wan under his dark skin, and who throws venomous glares at Clarke as they walk.

It takes Jaha a long time to work his way to the front of the train of people – her guards have been doing their best to subtly keep him back, blocking his way without hurting him. She wonders idly if she should give them some kind of honours for their efforts, which she greatly appreciates. Eventually he still manages to get there, of course, and Lexa knows what his aim is.

“Commander,” Jaha says to Lexa, face contorted with anger. “I need to speak to you.”

She looks at him, sighs as if she is doing him a massive favour, and holds her hand up for everyone to halt. Then walks to the side, far away enough that they won’t be heard. She gestures to Clarke to follow.

“I am the Chancellor,” Jaha growls to Lexa. She meets his eyes steadily, uncaring.

“And I’m in charge,” Clarke says, spelling it out for him. Lexa can barely suppress a smile, so proud of her strong, clever niron that she can barely contain it. Clarke is a far better leader than the Skaikru deserve. “This is my deal with the alliance. The land they’re letting us have? It’s for my people. Any goodwill from the twelve clans is towards me and the rest of the 100.”

“People will not accept you as the leader, not in the long-term,” Jaha says. “You’re too young, you don’t -”

“They it’s good that it’s just for the moment. Later, when things have settled down, I’ll consider who should be put in charge of our new home.” Clarke says.

“You’ll consider -” Jaha gapes at her, beyond fury now.

“She will,” Lexa says coolly, “I have offered her this land in our deal, after all – it is her deal, the one she came up with and negotiated. Clarke kom Skaikru is the only one who may decide who she trusts to run her land.”

It warms Lexa’s heart that Clarke thought so thoroughly about how the deal could benefit all their peoples, instead of just Skaikru. How she thought carefully about how to prevent leaders who would restart old conflicts and risk the Trikru.

They will probably have to allow the Skaikru to go back to their strange voting system at some point. But perhaps not for some time. If Clarke is going to live in Polis and help run the alliance, they need to trust whoever leads the Skaikru. Lexa thinks that at some point, Clarke realised that she cannot trust her people to choose well anymore, not after Pike.

So they will choose. Clarke and her have not settled on the exact system yet, but are considering
having it so that Heda and the ambassador both must approve all potential leaders before any vote, and Clarke is also fond of perhaps having some kind of overseer who has the power to remove Chancellors, just in case one goes off the rails.

They will not risk another Pike.

“And you think our people will follow you in this?” Jaha hisses, starting to completely lose his composure.

“They don’t have to,” Clarke says with another shrug. “If they don’t want to live on the land the Trikru have agreed to give our people, they can walk to a new area. There’s the Dead Zone to the west, which is pretty much exactly like it sounds. South you could walk for six months and not find a new place, and east there’s the ocean, but there’s always north. If you walk north for a month or so you’ll get out of Azgeda territory, they don’t go that far north because it’s too cold.”

“Of course, the second you decide you’re not one of Clarke kom Skaikru’s people, none of the deals she has made apply,” Lexa adds idly, continuing to back up Clarke. “None of the clans will have any reason not to kill you.”

The Sky People don’t have many guns, yet. They haven’t stopped by the storage place that Clarke says they got guns from last time. Maybe a dozen or so small guns and shock sticks, instead of the hundreds of fast large guns they had in the other world. The Azgeda will easily kill anyone who leaves the group now.

“This conversation is over,” Lexa says indifferently after watching Jaha struggle to come up with something to say. “Do not attempt to speak with me again on what is already decided.” She rejoins the group and signals for the walk to begin again. Jaha is pushed back by the guards once more. Clarke watches this, some undefinable emotion on her face, then looks forward again and dismisses it.

“So what do you think we should do about Diana Sydney?” Clarke says in an undertone. They have not discussed this yet, probably because they both wanted time to consider the options.

Lexa look sideways at Clarke. “I can tell Nia to order her people to either avoid them or attack them, that is up to you, Clarke. If you wish to hold off, we can return when we are able and deal with them then.”

“Probably a good idea,” Clarke says. “We need to know whether we’re trying to kill or capture, for starters. And Raven and the other mechanics and engineers will have time to come up with more things if we wait.”

“I can have an EMP in a few days,” Raven says eagerly. She’s walking reasonably closely behind them, and has avoided commenting on the argument with Jaha. “I kept the pieces of the one I found in Polis with me just in case.”

“They don’t have enough technology for that to be useful,” Clarke points out.

Raven sighs. “I just really want to make an EMP,” she says mournfully. “Do you know how interesting that would be?”

“I’m sure it will come in use eventually,” Finn says to her coaxingly, but doesn’t get anything more than a sigh.

“Then that is more than I can say for most of your kind, Finn kom Skaikru,” Anya says sharply. Raven throws her a look that is half annoyance and half amusement.
Lexa blinks in surprise, glancing at her former Fos. Anya has always been able to cut people with her words, but the strong distaste in her voice seems unlike her. She has not seemed to care enough about any of the Skaikru to dislike them. She wonders if Finn has offended the other woman somehow. “Perhaps there are other strategies we can try,” Lexa says to Clarke, focusing again. “A virus, perhaps.”

“Won’t that kill them?” Raven says doubtfully.

“Some,” Lexa admits. “Only a few, though. The virus is designed only to weaken. Goufas are less likely to die, as well – many of our people are exposed to the virus when young on purpose, so that later they need not fear it.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Clarke says, considering it. “And there are more guns we can get, if we need. I think the Maunon have to be our first priority, though. Diana Sydney’s group have chosen to leave and it’s unlikely they’ll attack us in the near future. We can’t say that about the Mountain. Plus, if we take down the Mountain, we might be able to get some of their gas grenades and sleep darts. That should help us deal with any innocents along for the ride as well as Diana and her people.”

Lexa nods. “There is the possibility they will be able to use the time to strengthen their defences,” she says thoughtfully. “But also the possibility the cold and animals will weaken them in the meantime. We should see if we can discover exactly what supplies they have with them, and try and work out what they will do. But you are correct – for the moment, let’s focus on the Mountain.”

Clarke is doing a very good job not worrying about the last station, Lexa thinks. She knows how much Clarke loves Abby, how much Abby loves Clarke. Whatever her disagreements with the older woman, she has never doubted those two facts.

As if summoned by her, there is one of the Azgeda scouts she sent ahead – not the one she sent days ago, but the one she sent just this morning. “I found you, Heda,” she says breathlessly, sinking to one knee through either reverence or exhaustion.

“Speak,” Lexa commands.

“The station is that way, less than an hour,” she says, gesturing south-west and pronouncing the word station uncertainly. “But none survive.”

Clarke pales immediately, then nearly as quickly gains control over herself. “Did it split up?” she says, voice also carefully controlled. “Crash? Catch fire? What?”

The scout hesitates. “I am… not certain,” she says reluctantly. “Moba, Heda. It is hard to describe.”

“You think the fires were deliberately set?” Lexa frowns. “Is there anything further?”

“You think the fires were deliberately set?” Lexa frowns. “Is there anything further?”

“Moba, Heda. It is hard to describe.”

She bows her head quickly. “They seem to have bled to death, Heda, or died of head wounds, as far as I can tell. But many are too charred to tell. Several fires have burnt themselves out but – they seem strange fires compared to those in the first place we saw. There is ash in them, and trees nearby dragged in. Not all of the trees burned.”

“You think the fires were deliberately set?” Lexa frowns. “Is there anything further?”

“No, Heda.”

Lexa nods and quickens her pace. Her red sash billows behind her and she can’t help that her hand goes to her weapon. Even knowing she will find nothing living, it is unnerving that someone has already attempted to mourn these bodies. She wonders if it is the Sydney woman’s people – but they
went east, entirely the wrong direction. Perhaps they lost their way? It seems unlikely.

Clarke walks quickly beside her and Lexa aches for her. She continues to try and distract herself with
questions, possibilities, motives, but nothing is enough distraction from the too-pale, too-quiet girl
who walks beside her. Only hours ago Clarke’s eyes shone fiercely as she forced Jaha to obey her –
now they are dull and shocked.

After a while, Lexa can take it no more. She throws her sash over her shoulder so it hangs over her
arm, hiding it from view, and she uses this invisible hand to clasp Clarke’s tightly. Clarke grips her in
return, so tightly it is almost painful as her fingers dig in, but it allows Lexa to feel like she is at least
doing something for Clarke. She wishes she could throw off all constraints and be public about how
she feels for Clarke, but her more sensible side tells her that will make everyone question her
motives. Once things are more settled, once the Skaikru have proved themselves by taking down the
Mountain and Clarke has agreed to be Lexa’s chief advisor and second-in-command, then they can
choose to be open about how they feel. For now this quiet comfort is all she can offer.

The walk goes too quickly and yet takes too long. If Lexa could prolong it – well, she does not know
what she would do. She wants to keep Clarke from this but waiting is worse than almost anything.
Lexa closes her eyes for a brief moment and hopes that Clarke’s mother is not burnt, has not died in
pain, is the kind of body that looks at peace instead of one that looks tormented.

When they get there the Skaikru wander through the wreckage like they are lost. The station has split
into three pieces and there are corpses everywhere, both inside and out.

Lexa stays close to Clarke and mentally notes each cause of death – snapped neck, blood loss, head
trauma. She is not a fisa as Clarke is but she has seen many gona die. There is almost nothing Lexa
does not know about the ways a person can die – except, of course, for the way to stop it. That is a
mystery reserved for Lincoln, Nyko, Clarke, people like them. Those who know how to fix more
than they know how to break.

Two fires have been set. Set badly, as well. As the scout reported, parts of the trees used to light it
have not burnt. They were lit without enough small branches or leaves to get the fires going properly
in the cold, leaving only green wood, scorch marks and a few partially burnt bodies nearby.

Clarke steps forward, letting go of Lexa. She frowns and moves close to one of the burnt bodies. A
woman.

“Clarke,” Lexa says softly, heart aching for her. “Clarke, come away. We will bury your mother -”
They will stay to bury this one instead of burn, she decides, though it is foolish when they have burnt
the others. But Clarke’s nomon deserves – well, Clarke herself deserves whatever comfort Lexa can
offer.

“It’s not my mother,” Clarke says flatly. She stares at the charred body and looks even closer. “And
whoever she was, she died of a bullet.”

Lexa blinks, wrong-footed. “A bullet?” Perhaps this is the work of Diana Sydney after all. But it is
not possible, not really – they would have seen the signs of that many people coming here.

“Shot in the head,” Clarke says, and smiles humourlessly. “I hear that’s going around. I can see that
she broke her leg – I’m guessing that was from the crash. Then someone executed her. Then I think
they set the fire to cover that up. She’s not the only one, either.”

“Clarke,” Octavia says, turning up beside them. Her face is grim. “You’d better come see the other
fire.”
“What is the problem, Octavia?” Lexa asks, keeping an eye on Clarke.

“Come see,” Octavia says.

It takes Lexa several minutes of studying the third part of the wreckage before she looks beyond the scorch marks and the dead bodies. “There are less of them,” she says eventually. “Fewer bodies, for the space.”

“Exactly,” Octavia replies, face hard. “Indra’s had people counting in each area – it’s pretty morbid, but you know how it is. This station split up pretty evenly, and including the people on the ground, we’re missing about eighty. This piece of the station is much less damaged in itself than the other ones, too – the first bit hit a hill and skidded, the second ran into rocks and fell apart. This one seems to have landed much better than the others – I mean, it hit the ground hard, but the people are much less banged up. But everyone here is dead anyway.”

Clarke looks at the bodies around this fire as well. “No bullets on any of these ones,” she says thoughtfully. “The fire here wasn’t to cover that up. They haven’t managed to burn much, there’s a lot of wood completely untouched and the bodies are barely scorched, but I still can’t see anything but wounds from the crash.”

“Maybe they weren’t supposed to shoot anyone,” Octavia suggests, “So they burned those people to cover it up, and burned these ones so we didn’t look closely at just one fire?” She makes a face as if her idea doesn’t even make sense to her.

“Maybe,” Clarke replies absent-mindedly. “Or they hoped that burning this part would disguise that so many people are missing.”

“We do not know that for sure,” Lexa cautions. “We will need to count several times before we can be sure that we are missing bodies -”

Clarke suddenly darts forward. She pulls a pencil out of her pack and crouches. When she rises, a shining metal watch is hooked around the pencil. “Oh, we’re missing people,” she says darkly. “Including my mother.”

“Clarke?”

“This is my father’s watch,” Clarke says, holding it up. “She was going to bring it down for me. None of the bodies in here are completely burned, so I can say with certainty that none of them are hers. But the watch is here.”

“She could have gotten thrown out,” Octavia says doubtfully.

Clarke shrugs. “Then we’ll look. We’ll count everyone again, and we’ll keep an eye out, and we’ll cross everyone off our list until we figure out which people have been taken by the Mountain.” She presses the watch to her cheek and closes her eyes.

It’s then when Lexa realises Clarke is not holding onto an unrealistic hope. That actually, she almost dreads her mother being taken more than she dreads her mother’s death.
“The Mountain?” Octavia looks uncertain. “How could they take that many people?”

“I don’t know,” Clarke says wearily. She knows she sounds older than her years. She passes the watch to Lexa – she doesn’t want to be touching it anymore. “But they’ve done it before. I never knew how they transported me and the others to the Mountain when they captured us in the first world, but they did.” It’s never actually occurred to her to question that until now.

Lexa swallows hard. “We must be sure,” she says strongly, though it’s clear from her expression a part of her already is. “Get the list from Bellamy. Mark off names as best you can. I will have the gona scour the area around, find any that have been flung far.”

It takes several hours, and is unpleasant work for everyone. Eventually they conclude there are probably seventy-four Skaikru missing, eight children and sixty-six adults, including Clarke’s mother and a council member named Muir.

“That’s enough for them to top up on bone marrow,” Clarke comments quietly to Lexa. They’re inside one of the parts of station, talking privately. The only time they can mention bone marrow. The others are dragging all the bodies into one of the other parts of the station, getting them together to light a proper fire.

“It might not be Maunon. It could be Diana Sydney,” Lexa replies doubtfully.

Clarke gives her a look. The trail in the snow’s been covered better, the supplies haven’t been carefully scavenged as they were from the other station, Diana Sydney took the injured with her instead of executing them, and there’d be no reason for her to light fires here to cover her actions when she didn’t bother at the other station. This is the Maunon and they both know it.

“No, it can’t,” she says, tired and sad. “Besides everything else, she would have executed Muir first thing, like she did with Kaplan. She probably would have executed my mother as well.”

“Whereas the Maunon won’t,” Lexa tells her fiercely. “They won’t kill her at all.”

Clarke turns to face Lexa properly, instead of staring off into the distance feeling miserable. “What?”

“Emerson knows you,” Lexa tells her. “He knows your mother. Why would he kill the greatest hostage he could have gotten? He may threaten her, he may harm her, he may even take some of her bone marrow. But he will not kill her.”

Clarke blinks. She feels slightly better, hearing that, and Lexa takes the watch and carefully closes Clarke’s hands around it.

“Thank you,” Clarke says automatically. Then, when Lexa lets go, she hands the watch back to her.

“Clarke?” Lexa asks, confused.

“That used to be a link to my father, the person I loved most in the world, before everything went wrong,” Clarke says quietly. “Now it’s a symbol of different things, and not all of them are good. I’d like you to have it. If you wear it, maybe someday I can look at it and associate it with the person I love most in the world again. Maybe I can look at it and feel happy again.”

Lexa swallows and blinks back sudden tears. “I… I thank you, Clarke kom Skaikru. Will you
perform the same service for me?” She reaches into the pouch attached to her belt, no longer filled with sleep darts, and pulls out the hair sheath Costia made her.

“Yeah,” Clarke says softly, “Of course.” She wouldn’t have taken it before, but now it makes her heart overfull to think of what Lexa’s asking. What Lexa’s saying. She takes the sheath with shaking hands. It’s beautiful and clever, and it makes her ache to think of a fierce young woman spending hours fiddling with her gift to make it perfect. Praying all the time that it would help keep her lover safe to come home to her.

She wants to lean forward and kiss Lexa, but it seems more important right now to pause and fix this memory in her mind: Lexa’s green eyes, shiny with unshed tears; her delicate ears and nose red with the cold; her braided hair with little specks of snow in it; the nervous movement of her arm as she pushes her sash back over her shoulder. Lexa’s strange uncertainty as she tries to put the watch on her wrist without dropping it – it looks odd there, shiny silver against the black of her sleeves.

Clarke murmurs, “May I?” and at Lexa’s silent nod, reaches forward and helps do it up. It’s still working, strangely enough, and Clarke wonders if Lexa knows how to read an analogue clock. It doesn’t really matter though. Her fingers brush against Lexa as she does it up, and even though it’s through the sleeve, Lexa still flushes slightly.

“Turn, beja,” Lexa says back, also quietly. Even though there’s no one around to hear, being hushed seems right – this moment feels important. Feels like it matters. Clarke gives her the sheath again. Clarke turns, and Lexa’s hands enter her hair. It’s braided, but not very well, she didn’t have time to get Lexa to redo it this morning, any more than Lexa had time to find Clarke or one of the gona to redo hers. Lexa swiftly undoes some of the messy braids. Clarke feels her carefully tugging and smoothing, interweaving the hair, and she feels it when Lexa places the knife and sheath in there, close to her scalp, and braids the little pieces around it.

“Done,” Lexa says finally, and Clarke turns around again. Her hair feels different like this – she feels different like this. More herself, and more Lexa’s at the same time. She doesn’t think you can really belong to people – but maybe you can belong with them. And she belongs with Lexa, every fibre of her knows it, every piece of her. She feels the thrum of it in her bones.

What they’re doing feels kind of like a wedding ceremony, the moment when the couple exchange rings, Clarke thinks dreamily.

She leans in and kisses Lexa lightly, as amazed by her as always, by the complexity and contradictions of her. The fierce warrior weighed down by weapons. The sweet girl wearing Clarke’s father’s watch. The strong leader bearing the pauldron of the Commander. The breathtaking woman holding Clarke’s heart in her hands.

She’s never felt more in love than she does in this moment.

Octavia comes in suddenly, interrupting the moment. “Guys?” she says. “A messenger from Gustus arrived. Apparently he’s been trailing us for a couple of days but only caught up now.”

They yank back from each other, breathing hard and flushed. Octavia ignores it except to give Clarke an eye-roll and Clarke silently curses her.

Lexa clears her throat. “Of course.”

They meet the messenger outside, standing in the snow. Zion stands next to him, his calm expression at odds with the messenger’s clear exhaustion. “Do you wish me to leave you?” he asks.

“Gustus sent the following message: ‘Great Commander of the Trikru, I and the Fleimkepa remain with the Azplana. We are well and wish you victory, and hope that your fight may not end before your time. Send if you require our return. From your loyal guard, Gustus.’” The messenger bows as he finishes, then stands waiting, presumably for a reply. Lexa inhales a little faster than she normally does.

Commander of the Trikru, Clarke remembers, is Azgeda in their code – so Gustus thinks the Azgeda will attack. “Great Commander?” she says idly to Lexa, making it sound like a joke, instead of a question about whether this means the Azgeda are working with someone. “Very poetic of Gustus.”

“He has always had a way with words,” Lexa says pleasantly, which almost makes Clarke snort. “He has always liked embellishment as well, in fact. In his younger days, he used to call the Maunon ‘the demonic ones’.”

“Dramatic,” Clarke says, fighting to keep her voice even. The Mountain. The Mountain? How can it be the Mountain? Lexa had assured her that there was no chance of the Azgeda ever allying with them. Also, she’s spent time with the Azgeda – so has Octavia, and Lincoln, even Indra. She’s spoken to Zion, he all but spits every time someone mentions the Mountain, and he seems to almost worship Lexa. Is he a very cunning actor? What could the Mountain offer to make the Azgeda agree to this?

It explains some things, though. Pieces slot into place for Clarke. Emerson demanded the kill order on Roan. The Mountain knew they’d come to Alpha Station last, that’s why they took the people from there – but how did they know? A radio, she realises. That’s what the Azgeda messenger’s satchel contained, a radio. It’s why Zion didn’t have to send a return message. He could just speak to the Maunon via that.

“I do not need you to take a message back to the Fleimkepa and his guard,” Lexa tells the messenger after a minute. “Gustus knows what he must do. You may rejoin us and journey to Polis.”

“Mochof, Heda,” the messenger bows.

“Now come,” Lexa says haughtily, as if she’s not nervous at all. Clarke envies her composure. “We must continue our journey. We have what we came here to find.”

Clarke wonders what Lexa’s doing. They can’t leave, they need to talk, to figure out what to do. But she doesn’t know how to protest so she follows Lexa numbly as they continue. She glances at the faces of the Azgeda around them – they don’t look any more threatening now that she knows they are. That just makes it even more unnerving.

She notices suddenly that despite all the composure she’s showing, Lexa’s breathing a little too quickly. In and out and in and out, much too fast. Clarke touches her arm for just a second as everyone else starts following them, and Lexa calms a little. It feels odd for Clarke to be more controlled than Lexa, but perhaps this is less of a shock for her – to Lexa, the thought of the Ice Nation allying with the Mountain Men is unthinkable, more than blasphemy, completely impossible. To Clarke, it’s just one more blow in what feels like a line of them.

Someone lights the fire behind them. “Yu gonplei ste odon,” Clarke says quietly, as her people chorus “May we meet again.”

The smoke rises, thick and black and acrid, choking the air. They start walking, leaving it behind
them, heading south. Towards the Trikru. Towards the Mountain.

When Lexa coughs, Clarke thinks it’s from the smoke, even though they’ve walked quite far by then. Then she coughs again, and it almost sounds too loud. “Are you -” Clarke starts to say.

A yell of pain comes from behind her. Clarke jerks around. “Clarke,” Octavia yells, sounding panicked. “It’s Lincoln, get back here! His leg!”

Clarke moves towards her quickly. “Keep walking,” Lexa commands Zion. “We will catch up to you easily without having to keep to the Skaikru children’s pace.”

“But Heda, your safety -”

“I can ensure my own safety,” Lexa tells him, sounding offended. “Lincoln was injured doing our people a great service, and I must repay him for that. I cannot leave him while he is in pain.”

Clarke reaches Lincoln, who is ashen-faced and grasping his leg, wincing. It must be a lot of pain for him to cry out, Clarke thinks – Lincoln is one of the toughest people she knows. “Okay, can you stretch it out?” she says, keeping her voice calm and professional.

He tries and shakes his head, eyes wild. “No. No, it hurts.” Octavia lets out a little whimper, and that’s when Clarke realises that both of them are acting just a little bit off – a little too loud, a little too worried. Wells offers her a cloth with snow in it to put on Lincoln’s leg, the Chancellor standing behind him scowling and looking out of place.

“Linkon,” Indra says, crouching beside him, also looking uncharacteristically worried. “Why did you not say your injury still hurt? How long has it pained you?”

Anya appears beside Lexa. “Heda,” she says, “You should not remain without me to protect you.” The others are still passing beside them and Anya waves them on, telling the Trikru when they pause “I will guard the Commander. We will catch up shortly. Continue.”

Raven jogs to be next to Anya. “Hey, cheekbones, where’d you disappear to?” she looks down at Lincoln. “Dude, you have it the wrong way around. You’re supposed to be vertical to walk, not horizontal.”

In barely a minute, nearly everyone has disappeared.

Remaining, there is only Clarke, Lexa, Anya, Indra, Wells, Raven, Finn, Jaha, Octavia, and Lincoln. The pained expression fades from Lincoln’s face.

Lexa straightens. “We have a problem,” she says starkly.
“To Bring a Gun To a Knife Fight”

It worked quite well as a way to get them all there, Lexa thinks – though unfortunately with two additions. She did not particularly want Jaha to follow his son, or Finn to follow Raven, but that is the situation and she will have to work with it.

“What is the problem, Heda?” Indra says, face sharp.

“Gustus sent a message,” Lexa says bluntly. “The Azgeda are working with the Maunon.”

Anya blinks, taken aback. “That is not possible,” she says, apparently too shocked to consider her words. Then she flushes. “Moba, Heda. I know you wouldn’t -”

“Lexa knows it wasn’t an insult,” Raven says impatiently. Then she flushes just as Anya did a second ago. “I mean, the Commander knows.”

“It is fine,” Lexa says, giving a wave of her hand. “Call me what you wish.” This is hardly the time to stand on ceremony.

“Oh, you don’t want to give her that kind of choice,” Wells says, managing a wry smile despite the nervousness obvious in his expression. “Not a good idea.”

Anya succeeds in giving him a smile in return, and then looks at Lexa. “The Azgeda would not work with the Maunon. They could not. It goes against every belief they possess, to aid the Mountain Men.”

Lexa shrugs. “I am aware,” she says, a little coldly. Inside she is cursing herself. She thought the same. She was complacent. And by being complacent, she has risked them all.

“Well, we can’t,” Clarke says.

“Yes, we can,” Indra retorts. “We have enough people.”

“I do not wish them dead,” Lexa says flatly. “They have information we require – about Nia, about the Mountain.”

“We’ll have to surprise them, incapacitate as many as possible and take out the ones we can’t,” Clarke says. “They might have a radio, but we don’t know who has it, so we’ll need to take them out pretty fast as well.”

Raven curses suddenly. “Shit. Shit! I noticed that the radio was getting weird static on one frequency but I thought it was just one of the Ark’s radios malfunctioning. This is all my fault.”

“Don’t be a branwada, of course it’s not,” Anya snaps.

“Don’t call me an idiot,” Raven hisses.

“Then don’t be one!” Anya retorts. “You have been building impossible inventions, grenades and explosives and something called an EMP, while spending hours with the radio, in addition to stripping each station of things you believe your people might require. No one has slept less than you these past weeks. None of us expect you to find something that cannot be sensed on top of all these
tasks.”

Lexa feels guilty for a second – she had not realised how much Raven had been working. Now she recalls Raven’s quick, almost desperate intoxication with the moonshine, and how late Raven came to sleep in the tent the previous night. Looking at her now, she can see Raven is tired, dark shadows under her eyes like the ones under Lexa’s own. Though hers at least are hidden by warpaint.

The night they all drank together, Wells told her of a commander who wore red, so that no one could see him bleed. Perhaps the original Heda began wearing warpaint like this so no one could ever see she was exhausted.

“Any is correct,” Lexa says firmly. “The fault is not yours, Raven kom Skaikru, but mine. I believe we should –”

“Azgeda,” Jaha says, butting in. “They’re the ones with scars?”


“Well, perhaps we could –” Jaha begins.

“Dad,” Wells looks at him. “No offence. But you don’t even know what their culture is called. Could you just… just let the Commander speak?” He meets Lexa’s eyes.

“I believe our first action needs to be removing the Skaikru from here,” Lexa says flatly. “We can much more easily restrain the Azgeda without them around.”

Clarke nods. “That also means we don’t have to explain what’s going on to them. It’s not going to help integration between our peoples if they see the twelve clans fighting amongst themselves.”

“We should begin catching up,” Linkon suggests, getting to his feet with a slight wince. “Stay a little behind, of course, but we do not want to get too far from them in case anything happens.”

“Good thinking,” Clarke says. “Okay, where do we send the Skaikru?”

“The original plan,” Lexa says decisively. “They go to the south, to the new land for them. We send the Skaikru that way and we go to TonDC – we have not gotten enough information from TonDC since we left due to the interference of the Mountain’s jammers, so we would have needed to go there eventually anyway.”

“We can’t just send the Skaikru off alone,” Clarke says. “They’ll get lost.” She shows no sign that she considers herself one of them, which would amuse Lexa if she wasn’t so worried.

“Indra and Linkon will go with them, along with fifty or so Trikru gonas,” Lexa replies.

Linkon frowns. “With respect, Heda –” he begins.

“With respect, Linkon, walking pains you,” Lexa says dryly. “I do not wish to see you attempt to run or fight. This is an order. You will help take the Skaikru to their new home.” She looks at the rest of them. “Any of you who wish may accompany them.”

“We’re good, I think,” Wells says, after looking from side to side at Raven and Finn. “We’ll stay with you and Clarke.”

“I’m coming too,” Jaha says firmly.

Lexa looks at him and decides it is unimportant. She does not like him, but by now he seems to be
aware that Clarke leads the Skaikru. Perhaps it is even for the best – if he does not go with the Skaikru, he cannot try to win them back to his leadership.

“Fine,” she says shortly. “Anya, once Indra, Linkon and the Skaikru have gone, begin letting our people know to wait for my signal. They should mingle with the Azgeda. We outnumber them significantly. When I give the order, they are to take down every single Azgeda – disarm or disable, not kill, unless they must.”

“We should wait until we’re over the border,” Anya suggests. “That way Indra will be long gone, and we will know the forests better than they do. It will be useful to have TonDC to call on if we are in need, as well.”

“Sha,” Lexa says, though not without hesitation. Anya’s points are good, but Mount Weather is also across the border, and whatever the Azgeda have orders to do they have not done it on their side of the line – perhaps they are waiting for her to be officially outside their borders. But they are changing their entire direction, and if they keep watch on the Azgeda so none can use the radio, it should be difficult for the Azgeda to contact the Maunon and let them know of the change. “Indra, go in an unexpected direction to get to the south. Perhaps go east first and around. Tell the Skaikru it is to avoid a river, or a dangerous animal, or whatever you like. The pauna is not too far from here, you can use that as a reason perhaps.”

“If it comes to a fight, I’ve made five grenades,” Raven says grimly. “In my spare time, you know. I gave Anya one -”

“Normal people give flowers,” Octavia says snarkily, so quietly that if Lexa was not directly beside her she would not have heard.

Octavia sees Lexa’s glance and blushes. “Bad joke,” she says. She squeezes Lincoln’s hand, and Lexa feels a moment’s sympathy for them. Of course, Octavia could follow Lincoln if she wished – but she knows instinctively that Octavia will stay with them, even as her partner and Fos go. Octavia has the need in her blood and bones to be where the fight is. Even as she watches, Octavia looks towards Indra, and Indra gives the slightest of nods.

Raven is still talking and Lexa refocuses. “The bombs I’ve made have triggers I got from the tower, but are made from materials from the Ark. They’re much less likely to go off accidentally then the ones Jasper’s making, but we do have a limited amount. Anyway, with those and the grenades, if we need to take out the Azgeda, it should be easy.”

“Except that our current plan is to have a group of our people essentially merged with theirs, to surprise them and take most of them alive,” Clarke points out. “Meaning we’re as likely to hit Trikru as Azgeda.”

Lexa sighs. “If it comes to that, it comes to that,” she says. “But I do not believe it will. We outnumber them greatly.”

“I have some thoughts -” Jaha starts to say, but Indra begins speaking at the same time and continues over him.

“We should rejoin the group,” she says. “We have been missing some time. If we are to split off, I think it would also be good to do so soon. We are about to reach the border.”

Lexa nods. Then she looks at Jaha and asks flatly, “Did you have something you wished to add?”

He hesitates then shakes his head, frowning.
Lexa quickens her pace. Her hand has automatically gone to rest on her sword – in fact, it is difficult not to take out her knife and play with it. That always calms her when she is worried.

And she is very worried now. A constant in the world has shifted. Her temporary truce with the Maunon – give us our people and we will leave – had been unprecedented in the other world. Had it not been for the resentment caused by the perception they attacked then only to aid the Skaikru, the massive amount of gonas who had already died, the promise of the Maunon that they would never again need her people’s blood, and the release of the prisoners, she has no doubt at all that the alliance would have ended that minute. It was only because so many things hinged on that moment that she had survived it. She had looked at what was happening and weighed the deaths of so many of her people – certainly ending the alliance – between the risk inherent in agreeing to the deal – which would only probably end the alliance. She had taken the better option. Head over heart.

(Could she do it again? Perhaps. No. Maybe. She thinks she could not do it again without talking to Clarke first… and she also thinks that Clarke would not react this time as she did the last, if it should come to that.)

There is no way Nia has that many reasons. The Maunon cannot have given the Azgeda prisoners to her, not with the gonas in TonDC watching the Mountain closely. They cannot have threatened the Azgeda, when only a few of them have been able to go to see her. And Nia has no reason to trust that the Maunon will stop harming their people once they have the Skaikru, she does not have the knowledge about bone marrow that Lexa had.

So what is worth aiding them? And how has she aided them? Zion’s interest in when they would arrive and how long the trip would take could explain much, if the Maunon plan to ambush them. They will need to zigzag just in case, go in unexpected directions. They will cross the border at a different location.

Nia gave them the Skaikru from Alpha Station, that Lexa is sure of. The location, definitely, and the information that the gonakru would not arrive there for some time as well. Did the Maunon who went kill the extra? Some did have bullet wounds. Or perhaps they only killed the most injured – removing those who would have died anyway, but might have survived long enough to tell the arriving gonakru what had occurred. Perhaps it was just luck that there were enough Skaikru to provide enough bone marrow. Maybe they wished for Prison Station – not much further than Alpha – but Diana Sydney’s departure stymied them.

Clarke sees her stress and bumps her shoulder against Lexa’s, then pulls at her sash like she’s making it more even. Instead, she’s moving it so it covers Lexa’s hand, which she closes her own around and squeezes comfortingly, much like Lexa did when they found Alpha Station. “I’m here,” she says quietly, then flushes, clearly thinking it was a meaningless thing to say. But it’s not, not to Lexa – it means a lot.

They reach the group and Lexa detaches from Clarke. Everyone stops walking respectfully to allow Lexa and Clarke back to the front, even the Skaikru. They’re learning fast. “Indra is going to take the Skaikru and some Trikru gonas and split off,” she tells Zion. Indra beckons at some of her people and yells out a few orders. The Trikru obey immediately. Anya orders Tris to follow Indra sharply, hiding her regret at the child’s hurt behind her usual cold visage. The Skaikru hesitate, but at a few words from Clarke and Jaha, peel off and follow Indra.

Zion blinks. “Why, Heda?”

“They go to their new home,” Lexa says carefully. “We go to fight the Maunon.”

“The Maunon?” Zion pales slightly, but his eyes gleam. “We go to fight the Maunon,” he says,
almost to himself. Then he raises his voice. “We go to fight the Maunon!” he yells to his people.

The Azgeda let out a cheer that is immediately echoed by the Trikru, as all lift their weapons into the air.

Anya begins to talk quietly to one of her unit as Indra and the Skaikru disappear out of sight. Then he moves to talk to another casually as she does the same, the word spreading quietly through seemingly unimportant conversations. Lexa tries not to tense up, watching as the word spreads slowly. They can’t alert the Azgeda.

They make it across the border without incident, and Lexa casually takes them further to the south than the direction which would take them to the Mountain or TonDC. That should throw off anyone waiting. None of the Azgeda comments. If they continue at this rate, they may be near enough to easily send a message to TonDC once they have subdued the Azgeda.

“So you’re the Commander of the Azgeda, have I got that right?” Jaha says conversationally to Zion.

Zion looks at him, confused. “There is only one Commander,” he says, bowing his head to Lexa. “I am the leader of this gonakru. I serve my Heda, and after that my haiplana and her advisors.”

“But you’re in charge of every Azgeda man here,” Jaha persists.

“Man and woman, sha.” When he sees Jaha does not understand, he translates, “Yes.”

“I see,” Jaha says thoughtfully.

Lexa sees it coming a second before it happens. Time enough to curse herself again, but not time enough to stop it. The knowledge comes in a flash of memory – Jaha holding a knife to her throat, confident that an entire clan would give in to him for the life of one servant girl. Unable to comprehend that having a blade did not give him the upper hand in any way, shape or form.

He probably thinks he is helping, he is proving himself. That he thought of a better option than the savages and children could come up with, and put it into action, all by himself.

Jaha pulls his gun out and grabs Zion in a headlock, holding the gun to his head. “AZGEDA!” he yells. “Drop your weapons! On your knees!”

And then all hell breaks loose.
Shoot the Messenger

It takes Clarke completely by surprise. Wells, stock still beside her, looks just as shocked for a second. Then he’s pelting towards his father. He slams into him hard, tackling him to the ground as half a dozen arrows slice through the air where Jaha just was. One catches Wells in the arm and he cries out in pain.

“Guys, guys, stop!” Finn yells, completely ineffectually.

Raven starts rummaging through her pack, presumably looking for a grenade.

Octavia is suddenly in front of Wells, blocking as an Azgeda gona swings his sword down at Clarke’s best friend. Clarke draws her sword and goes to help but is immediately blocked in by two Azgeda who slash towards her. She blocks them both wildly, heart pounding too quickly. The clash of blades is deafening.

One closes in on her and tries a stab which she dodges. The other turns to Raven, who has just triumphantly produced a grenade, and swings his sword at her. Anya is there before the blade reaches her, letting out a furious war cry as she kicks the man backwards. She corrals Raven behind her, protecting the mechanic from the Azgeda.

Though good in the short-term (especially for Raven), Anya’s defence shows that it isn’t just the Skaikru turning on the Azgeda, but the Trikru as well. With a cry, nearly every Azgeda warrior converges on the Trikru, attacking with all their might.

Clarke hacks at the sword hand of the gona attacking her and he drops his sword with a scream. She’s already pushing by him, though – not to help any of her friends, but because she’s seen what’s happening at the back of the group, one gona retreating instead of attacking.

She manages to force her way through, mostly because no one seems to be expecting her to try and go further into a group of angry gonas. She slashes at one woman’s legs and the gona collapses with a scream, throws herself forward to avoid two arrows sent at her head, and manages to slice in half the bow of the person shooting at her. He drives the blunt edge of one half of the broken bow into her stomach, leaving her gasping and bruised, and then as she falls to her knees pulls out a dagger to finish her.

Clarke rolls to one side and uses the longer reach of her sword to hold him off, then crawls backwards. He throws the knife at her and it barely misses when she slams herself to the ground.

From here she can see what’s happening, and manages to take in most of it in the split second she has to look around. Raven is still backing away, Anya hacking at anyone who dares to come close. Raven’s holding up a grenade but she won’t throw it – too many people she cares about dotted around what’s suddenly become a battleground.

Wells is putting his never-before-used training to good effect, managing to (just barely) block the attacks coming his way. He’s aided by Jaha, who’s managed to get to his feet again and is holding the gun up threateningly. Gonas move swiftly to the side as he points it at them, making it hard for him to keep them all covered or successfully follow any of them with the barrel.

Octavia’s slashing away like her life depends on it – which, clearly, it does. She has one Azgeda lying bloodied on the ground next to her and no regret at all in her face as she stabs another in the thigh, the exact place she once accidentally stabbed Lincoln. She lets out a war cry of her own,
holding up her bloodstained blade in challenge.

Finn has the worst of it. He has no training, no weapons. He wasn’t standing close to any of his friends when it broke out. Two of the Trikru are defending him – or rather, they’re fighting in the same area he’s in. Helping him is only a coincidence. As Clarke watches, he tries to hold up his hands to a man with a knife. The man slashes him in the face and Clarke looks away – she’s too far to help, there’s no point to this.

Lexa. Where’s Lexa?

Clarke would expect her to be in the thick of the fight, but she’s not.

She’s climbing a tree.

“GONA!” Lexa’s voice rings out across the clearing. She’s gotten halfway up the tree and she stands on a sturdy branch there, looking like some kind of forest goddess. The height makes her instantly visible and audible to everyone. “Trikru, Azgeda, Skaikru! HOD YU OP! NOW!” Everyone pauses for a second, looking at their Heda, an instinctive reaction to the icy command in her tone.

Clarke rolls so that she’s on her hands and knees and gets up quickly, nearly falling over again. She’s winded and badly bruised, but still able to move. She has to reach the man who was retreating.

He might be the messenger, he might not. She doesn’t recognise him. But he’s back from the rest of the fight and he’s holding the radio and speaking into it frantically.

“Sha, tell the Azplana, we are there exactly -”

Clarke stabs him in the throat. Perhaps she should pause and consider, aim for a hand or something, but this is not the moment. She needs whatever will shut him up fastest, so she goes for the throat. He lets out a gurgle and slumps. A voice comes out of the radio urgently, a man’s voice, and Clarke raises her foot to slam her heel into it, then hesitates. She grabs the radio instead and tears out the batteries frenziedly, tearing her nails and bloodying her hands as she rips off the backing roughly. Maybe Raven can get something out of it, she doesn’t know. If it undoes the Mountain’s encryptions…

Lexa’s been talking as Clarke does this. The momentary pause in fighting has extended out to several. Clarke registers it with half her mind, processing it only once the radio is down.

“You are a disgrace,” Lexa has been saying clearly – voice mildly disappointed instead of angry. “Brawling like Sekens in their first week? What kind of gona are you? What kind of gonakru? Have you forgotten your training?”

There is a long, awkward pause following this. It’s clear that absolutely no one expected their Commander to scold them like they were misbehaving children. Clarke realises, darkly amused even in the face of what’s going on, that Lexa has picked exactly the right tactic to surprise everyone into listening.

“Drop your weapons. All of you, now. Drop them!” Lexa orders sternly, reminding Clarke forcibly of the voice Indra uses when she’s training Octavia. “Or I will have you eating nothing but rabbit for months.”

There’s another long moment where anything could happen. Then Wells very deliberately drops the sword he was just using for the first time. It hits the ground and clatters against a rock.

“The last person to drop theirs will receive the usual punishment for brawling,” Lexa says
ominously, in a laughably parental way, and then every single person is dropping theirs. Except for Jaha – Wells reaches into his hand, takes the gun and sets it on the ground carefully, giving his father an annoyed look.

“They attacked us!” one Azgeda is foolish enough to say. “The Skaikru man held a gun to Zion’s head!”

“Then you wait for his order,” Lexa says coldly, stepping out of the tree and landing on her feet lightly. Definitely a forest goddess, Clarke decides. “Are you a goufa or a branwada? You wait for your leader’s order. You wait for your Commander’s order. Do you truly believe that I could not save Zion and stop the Sky Man?”

“I… uh…” the luckless gona looks around himself for support and finds none.

Lexa approaches Zion, casually reaches down and pulls him upright effortlessly. “Do you believe your leader couldn’t handle it on his own, for that matter?”

“He couldn’t -”

Zion bristles, not at Lexa but at the Azgeda gona who spoke. “It was one Skayon, Birg! I did not need a rain of arrows to stop him.”

“Zion,” Lexa says clearly. She smiles without humour. “I ask you a question now. What would you do if I ordered you to allow yourself and all your gonas to be bound? Tied up?”

There is a pause so brief it’s almost not there. Then Zion holds up his wrists together.

Lexa studies him. “Interesting,” she says idly. “You may put your arms down, Zion. Go around and gather all of your people’s weapons and make a pile of them at my feet.”

He looks like he wants to protest – argue that the Skaikru were the first to attack – but instead he swallows and walks around, picking up weapons like a child cleaning up the rubbish in his room.

Clarke walks back over to the Lexa, holding up the radio. “I got it,” she tells Lexa quietly. “But I don’t know if -”

Zion dumps another load of swords in front of Lexa. “You broke it,” he comments, looking at the radio. “The Azplana will be angry with us.”

“Compared to my anger, that seems less important,” Lexa says dryly.

“What anger?” Zion asks, looking exasperated. “We have done nothing, Heda, nothing! … Sha, we did not tell you of the device Clarke kom Skaikru has destroyed. But you already possess many of these, and we were ordered not to! I am sorry that -”

“Why?” Lexa asks, eyes steady on his face.

“The Azplana wishes to trade them in the spring and did not wish you to claim them before,” Zion says immediately. “I wished to tell you, but our land has had several bad winters, and a marvel such as this to trade to the other clans could -”

“Where did she get the device?” Lexa snaps. “Do you know that, Zion kom Azgeda?”

“From men, men to the far north, they found them and traded them to her,” he says promptly. The Azgeda gonas shift, uncomfortable and afraid.
“No,” Lexa says. “She got them from the Maunon.”

Zion takes a step back. “No! No, she did not. The Azplana would never.”

“They are from the Mountain Men,”Lexa says slowly and clearly. “Did you not use this device to tell the Azplana which Skaikru station we would go to last? Did you not tell her when we were to return, which route we would use? Why did you think she wished for this information?”

Zion gapes, shock and turmoil on his face. It’s answer enough.

“They aren’t with the Maunon,” Clarke says, understanding. Her mouth tastes sour. “They’re sacrifices too. The Mountain Men are supposed to ambush us and kill us all. She used them to know what time and where. Since most of the Maunon probably still can’t be outside too long, they couldn’t exactly set up a vigil.”

“A temporary deal,” Lexa says flatly, realising what Clarke means. “I die, both gonakrus die, the Skaikru all disappear. And because it was in Trikru territory, done by the Maunon, and because Nia loses one of her own gonakrus – no one would ever accuse her. She gains power. Maybe control of the alliance was her aim, or maybe they gave her weapons or technology, I do not know. She thought she could fight the Maunon later – not a permanent alliance between them, just a trade. If so, it does not change that she is natrona.”

“Lexa,” Clarke says. “We need to go. I don’t know how far that gona got into the message – the Maunon could show up here. We don’t know how far away they are or how soon they could get here.”

“Clarke,” it’s Raven’s voice, distraught. “Clarke, please -”

Clarke frowns and looks over. Raven is huddled over a body. Finn.

She moves swiftly to his side. “Is he alive, is he -” she says apprehensively.

“Yes, he’s alive, but his face -” Raven’s weeping openly. “Look at his face -”

Finn’s making a low moaning noise. Amongst the dozens of people injured, she hadn’t heard it, hadn’t been paying attention. His face is covered in blood and Clarke grabs a cloth out of her bag – there’s not quite enough snow on the ground so she takes her waterskin out and wets the cloth and manages to clear some away. She almost throws up when she sees the damage done – she’s not an expert, not like her mother is, she’s not a real doctor, but she knows the second she sees the slash that there’s no way he’ll ever see again, no way at all, his eyes -

“Clarke,” Lexa says, voice controlled, coming to stand beside her. “We must leave now. If what you said is true, the Maunon will be here any minute.”

“Come on,” Anya says brusquely. She grabs one of Finn’s arms and hooks it over her neck, pulling him up. He slumps, still not really conscious. Clarke notices that there’s a bump on the side of his head that might explain that – given his wounds, the unconsciousness may be a blessing. “Help me, yongon,” she orders Wells, and he obeys immediately, going to Finn’s other side and hooking an arm around his neck as well. They start walking and manage a rhythm almost immediately, going towards Lexa.

Some of the gonas start to do the same with fallen comrades – checking whether they are alive, helping them to stand up, that kind of thing.

“I can help, I can -” Raven says, but she’s still crying.
“You don’t have to,” Anya says, her voice going softer than Clarke’s ever heard it. “You don’t have to, sky girl. We’ve got him. We will carry him. It will be okay, Raven. Come on now. It is fine. It will be fine. We must leave -”

There’s a sudden noise. Jaha, standing several metres away from Clarke, collapses, a Mount Weather sleep dart in his neck.

“Too late,” Raven whispers, pale and shocked.

A gas grenade lands beside Clarke. In one swift, unthinking move, she snatches it up and throws it as far as she can. It explodes in mid-air and several people near it – two Azgeda gonas and one Trikru gona – go to their knees before collapsing. A Ripa bursts into their little clearing, growling like an animal.

“RUN!” Anya howls.

“THIS WAY!” Lexa yells. She steps towards Clarke and yanks her forward, and then they’re running into the forest, hand in hand, as sleep darts slice through the air around them.
Lexa remembers being a child, a Seken, in these forests. She loved the forest at night – especially nights like this, clear and still with the crispness of autumn hanging in the air. She loved running through them after Anya or after whatever quarry they hunted. Dodging trees and vines and jumping easily over holes in the ground. In her childish fancies she had seen herself as a deer or a mountain lion, a creature of the forest.

By her estimation there are maybe thirty or forty Maunon firing at them – so they may have already started to use the people of Alpha Station for bone marrow, or may just have a lot of the suits they use. Perhaps if they were alone her people could take them out, using the forest to their advantage. But she can hear the sound of screams as someone left behind is torn into by a Ripa. Who knows how many of the monsters they have brought with them? The Maunon might be slowed by the forest, but any Ripa with them will not be.

Looking to her side she notices Raven pause, turn briefly, and throw the grenade she’s holding as hard as possible. Luckily, it does not hit a tree and rebound towards them.

There is an explosion and scream of pain from someone behind them.

She lets go of Clarke’s hand, reasoning that yanking Clarke behind her will only make the other girl more likely to fall. Zion is on her other side, face pale, scrambling to keep up. Before, when he and the other Azgeda had showed no signs of wanting to attack Lexa – no signs of wanting to attack the Trikru, even, before Anya was involved – she had known she had to stop the fight, but she had not expected him to live through their discussion. Now, she is grimly satisfied that he survives as a witness to Nia’s treachery. If she can only keep him and a handful of the other Azgeda alive, it should not be hard to order Nia’s death when she returns to Polis with the other ambassadors’ full approval.

“My father,” Wells gasps, nearly tripping over an exposed root. Finn lolls between him and Anya, still unconscious.

“He is lost,” Anya snaps, driving him forward ruthlessly, not even straining under Finn’s weight.

“Continue moving or your friend may be lost as well. Or all of us.”

Lexa darts through the gap between two trees and leaps a small gorge, helping Raven up when the girl falls. She wonders why Anya did not leave Finn – normally, she would not have hesitated to take the sensible action, leaving the injured boy behind so that their pace is not slowed.

A Ripa appears to Lexa’s left and she slashes it immediately, continuing without pausing. “This way!” she calls again, and the others follow her, though she does not know who is with them still and who is lost. Her legs feel strained and sore with the effort of continuous movement. Almost there. Almost there…

There is never just one Ripa. The group thrashes through the forest behind them, uncaring of the noise they make. They will catch up shortly. Outrunning Ripa is nearly impossible – whatever is done to them makes them strong as well as making them forget themselves. Once the Ripa are on them, they will need to fight them, and that will give the Maunon time to catch up. With their grenades and sleep darts the fight will be over soon. So there must be no fight.
“I recognise this place,” Clarke says breathlessly, sliding down a little hill after Lexa. “Good thinking.”

“Mochof,” Lexa manages, equally as breathless. She spots the movement up ahead, in an area which has no other movement – which is why she headed this way. When there is a feared predator around, all of the animals go still and silent except for it.

Nevertheless, she is lucky to have found the creature. If it can be considered lucky to succeed in your foolishness, anyway. She holds up her sword and stops running, judges the distance and prays that the movement in the dark forest is what she thinks it is. Then she throws her sword.

It is difficult to harm or kill with a thrown sword, since unlike knives they are rarely weighted to be effective when used like this. Luckily, she has no intention of harming or killing, she simply wants to attract the creature’s attention.

A bellow fills the air and suddenly the movement is not slow, the pauna is bounding towards Lexa, knocking trees aside in her blind rage. Several people scream. “To the side!” Lexa yells and takes a hard right, followed by nearly everyone. Clarke is keeping pace with her now, old forest instincts coming back.

The patch of trees they’re heading towards are set closely, which should slow the pauna following them.

There’s another scream from behind and Lexa dares to glance back. The Ripa have reached where she was standing only seconds ago, and the pauna has reached the place only a moment after. She grabs a Ripa and tears off his arm in an almost petulant way. She has already disposed of two gona, one thrown against a tree so violently that he resembles a slab of meat more than a man. The pauna looks up suddenly, her eyes surveying the forest for her original tormentor, anger tempered with a sharp intelligence that seems almost unnervingly human in its spite. She is tensing up to bound in their direction when another Ripa attacks her viciously and suicidally. They all pile on, throwing themselves against the pauna like an ant nest disturbed by a mouse, tearing at her with hands and teeth and weapons while she throws them off easily and bellows again. Ripa are unable to ignore a battle when their bloodlust is up and the pauna is a mighty foe.

Then they are out of sight through the trees, Lexa’s heart pounding quickly and her face numb with primal fear. Roars echo through the forest as the animal rage of the pauna meets the bloodthirsty frenzy of the Ripa. Lexa hopes that the Maunon catch up in time to join the battle and be killed by the pauna. She hopes the pauna will stay in that fight instead of following her original attacker, for otherwise they are all dead.

The adrenaline from the pauna makes running easier, though Lexa can still hear the effects on her companions – Raven’s breaths are harsh sobs, Wells is nearly hyperventilating even as he keeps pace with Anya, and Octavia is muttering curse words under her breath. Zion is still beside Lexa but shaking so fiercely he finds it hard to run. Glancing back quickly she can see that the two dozen or so gona still with them are pale and terrified, one even whimpering without pause. Only Clarke, Anya and Lexa herself seem calm.

Eventually, Lexa slows. She can feel the subdued burn in her legs and knows she could continue at this speed for a while longer, but it is unlikely many of her companions can. The Skaikru are soft and unused to this and Anya and Wells are carrying another person. She might be safer from the pauna if she keeps her speed up, but she will be at risk from whatever the next threat is. As she once told the clans when she first began the alliance, strength lies in unity.

And also – her strength lies in them. Her love. Her former Fos. Her… friends, strange as it may seem to say, because somewhere along the way she has grown to consider Wells, Raven, even Octavia to be something to her.
Everyone catches up as Lexa goes to a brisk walk – still moving, because if they stop they will fall, but moving slowly enough to accommodate the others. She looks at the group following her and counts. It is lucky the moon is bright tonight, since they have not gone far enough south for the glowing plants to be plentiful – it makes her easily able to tell the survivors. The Skaikru all gathered around Finn when Clarke began looking at him, and Lexa moved to there as well before she yelled at everyone to follow her, so all of them managed to stay with her despite their slowness – except Jaha, who was the first to fall. Including Anya and Zion, there are twenty-eight gona with them, ten Azgeda and eighteen Trikru.

“Everyone else…” Octavia says wretchedly, looking around and clearly doing the maths as well.

“Many are no doubt alive,” Lexa says firmly, projecting certainty. “They will have scattered at Anya’s yell. The Maunon wanted Clarke and I, so I believe most of their forces followed our group. If the others went in different directions they had a good chance.”

“We should have gone back,” Wells says hoarsely. Now that she looks at him, she realises he’s crying, the moonlight turning the tears rolling silently down his cheeks to silver. “We shouldn’t have left. My Dad -”

“I’m sorry, Wells,” Clarke says, genuine sadness in her voice. “But you know we couldn’t have. You know that.”

“Yeah,” he says, sounding exhausted. “I guess I do.”

“Besides, he was only knocked out,” Clarke tells him. “He’s the Chancellor, he’d be a good hostage or source of information, just like my mother. He could still be alive.”

Lexa looks behind her. “You two,” she says sharply, looking at two gona. “Take over carrying the Skayon for Anya and Wells.”

“I should bandage Finn’s face as well, and I’ve got some sedatives I can give him,” Clarke says. “If we can scrape up some snow or ice from somewhere for the bump on his head, that could help. That’s about all I can do, though. I might be able to stitch up the scars on his face but I can’t… I don’t know how to do anything about his eyes. At least the sedative will keep him out of it, because him regaining consciousness is not going to be fun for any of us.”

“But your mother,” Raven says sharply, her eyes still red and raw with weeping. “Abby. She’ll be able to fix him up, right?”

“I don’t know, Raven, I don’t think so,” Clarke says gently, “I’m sorry. You can see the damage. I don’t think it’s fixable. But if we get the sedatives down his throat and douse his cuts with some of the tonic used to stop infections, he should probably live. He just won’t be able to see. Eyes are… pretty fragile.”

Raven lets out another angry sob. “Shit. Shit. Oh my God, Finn.”

“We will have a brief break for Clarke to help him,” Lexa decides. “Not long, though. Everyone, drink water. Stretch. Do not sit if you believe you might not be able to stand again.” These are obvious things to her gona, but not to all of the Skaikru, some of whom look longingly at the ground.

Lexa walks away from the rest of the group to stand alone, thinking. She wishes Clarke was not fixing Finn so they could speak.

“Yongon?” It’s Anya, covered in dirt and minor scratches from their run and looking somehow defeated. “Are we going to TonDC?”
“No,” Lexa says, “We will go south, to rejoin Indra and the Skaikru. I will send one of these gona as a messenger to Nyko in TonDC to gather any information they have found from watching the Maunon and send it to us, along with the gona who were training to catch Ripa. We may find a use for them.” This will leave TonDC largely undefended, which worries her given its closeness to the Mountain. But if there are no targets there, then surely there will be no reason to attack it.

Anya nods.

Lexa studies her old Fos closely. “Anya, are you all right?”

Anya stiffens. “Of course. I am unharmed, Heda.” But there is something wrong in her face. Lexa’s never seen such a stormy look in her eyes before, so much churning emotion.

“There is more than one way to be harmed,” Lexa says softly. “You know that better than most. You and Gustus have always helped me through pain that Titus called weakness. Even as a Seken, I came to you with my foolish problems and worries and hurts, and you helped me. Will you not let me aid you in the same way?”

“I…” Anya hesitates, then shakes her head indecisively. She glances over at Clarke, busy bandaging Finn as Raven holds his hand.

No, she’s not looking at Clarke. She’s looking at Raven. “Is this about Finn kom Skaikru’s injury?” Lexa asks.

Anya frowns. “She… Raven kom Skaikru… she just worked herself free of him. She is exceptional, that one, it can be seen in what she says and what she makes. But the boy is ordinary. She has fierceness that he quells with his disapproval and spirit that he crushes with his indifference.” She looks down, gritting her teeth.

Lexa blinks, realising what Anya is saying. That Lexa is not the only one who has come to care for a Skayon. It must pain Anya to reveal that she is not as heartless as she claims. “I see,” she says softly.

“And now she is tied to him by pain as well as love,” Anya continues, voice flat. “She loves him and he is injured. I know her, now, and I know what she will do. She will return to him, be with him, care for him. That slash blinded Finn kom Skaikru… but it caged Raven kom Skaikru, as well.”

“And yet you did not leave him behind,” Lexa observes, seeking absolute confirmation of Anya’s feelings with a questioning glance.

Anya gives her this confirmation. She sighs. “I could not. As I said… she loves him.”

“I am sorry, Anya,” Lexa says, meaning it absolutely. “Raven kom Skaikru is not the only one who is exceptional. I hope you know that.”

Anya manages a grim smile. “Only a truly exceptional person could have taught one such as you how to shoot a bow,” she tells Lexa.

“Perhaps so,” Lexa says, managing a half-smile of her own. Her skills with a bow have never been particularly good, but they both know that the joking taunt is just Anya’s way of trying to move the conversation into territory she is more comfortable with. Lexa looks back – Clarke appears to have finished bandaging Finn. “We should continue. I do not think they have tracked us, but again, we do not know.”

“Which ‘they’? The Maunon, Ripa or pauna?” Anya asks dryly, her face becoming stoic yet again though her eyes show she still aches with private pain. “I will say this for you, yongon – travelling
with you is not dull.”

“Hey,” it’s Raven, face still tear-stained but wearing a fierce scowl. “What are we doing now? Finn needs help, proper help, as soon as possible. Which way are we going?”

“We will go to Arkadia,” Lexa says. Raven gives her a confused look and opens her mouth to say something, but then Clarke moves to join them and Raven pauses. “But the fastest way would be to go back the way we just came, and we cannot do that.”

“No, we can’t. I really don’t want to meet the pauna ever again,” Clarke says grimly. “And if we cross at the bridge the Maunon will probably be waiting.”

“Yes,” Lexa says. “We will go downriver, to where it is narrow enough to cross without a bridge.”

Anya and Raven glance at each other for a moment, then Anya looks away. “Sha, Heda,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Ranya: the ship I did not intend, which somehow happened anyway. Because they are just so much fun to write.
Sky City

By the time they reach the new Arkadia – or whatever they’ll decide to call it – Clarke is messy, grouchy, hungry, thirsty, tired, has a hundred tiny scratches, desperately wants a bath, and is seriously wondering if she should stop dosing Finn and allow him to wake up.

Keeping someone unconscious for days at a time is not a highly recommended medical strategy, as far as she knows, and even though they’ve been taking turns, carrying him hasn’t exactly been doing great things for their pace. They couldn’t risk the agonised noises he started making every time it seemed like he was close to waking up, though, not with the Maunon around. It was just too loud. So she’s been dosing him – and devoutly hoping she hasn’t gotten him addicted to a wonder drug or given him some kind of overdose.

One of Indra’s scouts is the first person to see them, and he’s almost overawed by Lexa’s presence. Apparently three of the gona have made it there before them, and all of them reported that every Reaper had gone after Lexa and there was no way she could have survived. Turning up unharmed with more than thirty people in tow has probably added another story to the Commander mythology.

Indra’s expression when she sees Lexa and Octavia is so clear that Clarke wonders how she could have ever thought the Grounders were emotionless. They don’t express themselves like Skaikru, but that doesn’t mean they’re not expressive – they let their eyes and slight gestures and inflections say everything they need to.

“Heda,” Indra says, clearing her throat. “I see you have returned my Seken to me.”

“She acquitted herself well,” Lexa says idly. Octavia glows at the praise. “We have much to speak of.”

Indra looks at Zion. “I see that we do,” she says thoughtfully. Clarke remembers when Indra last saw them, the Azgeda were the enemy.

Arkadia is mostly made up of tents at the moment. It’s in the middle of a large clearing. They’ve arrived at lunchtime, thankfully, and the place is bustling with people – most of them muddy and tired-looking, but relatively cheerful. There’s multiple animals being cooked over a large central fire, as well as some plants being chopped up with knives nearby – she wonders if any of them were gotten by her people or if Indra’s gona are still providing for them. Hopefully the former.

Clarke has to search the crowd for quite a while to find the one she’s looking for, but eventually she does, even out of the thousand-odd people around. “Jackson!” she calls out. “Jackson!”

“You’re the one in charge,” he says, gently teasing her.

Clarke manages a grim smile. “Even more so now than I was before. Jaha might be dead.”

“Might?” Jackson asks.
“Yes,” Clarke says. “I can’t really give a more definite statement than that, unfortunately. I’ll fill everyone in later. I’ve ordered Cole, Fuji and Jay to make sure everyone’s gathered tonight so I can talk to all of our people at once.”

Jackson hisses when he takes off the bandages. He does the best he can with his medicine, but eventually says, “I can’t do much about this, Clarke, I’m sorry.”

“There must be something you can do,” Raven says insistently. “Come on. We have so much technology.”

“I’m sorry,” Jackson says again. “This is – the damage is much too severe. I can give him some injections to hopefully stop him getting an infection, a tetanus shot, and maybe some localised shots for the pain instead of the general sedation you’ve been putting him under, so that he can wake up without it being as bad.”

“Are you telling me -” Raven starts to say hotly.

“What I’m telling you is the truth,” Jackson says, gently but firmly. “You’re a mechanic, aren’t you? You must know that sometimes you can’t fix everything. Listen, the sooner he wakes up, the better. Six people have gone permanently blind from the lack of oxygen up on the Ark, four of them younger than your friend. Many more look like they’re going to stay partially blind as well. They’re already learning how to get around, being taught braille, even being counselled for it. He won’t be alone in this.”

There’s a long pause. “I know he won’t,” Raven says, in an odd, flat tone. “Thanks for your help.”

After Jackson’s gone, Clarke goes back to sit with Raven. “I’m sorry,” she says gently. “I know you were hoping for a miracle.”

“Yeah, I guess I was,” Raven says. She’s just sitting there staring at Finn. “Did you know he’s an artist? Not like you are, exactly, but he makes things out of metal. Like Wells’ chess pieces. He told me there was an apprenticeship waiting for him in Polis to learn more metalworking, swords and shields and shit like that. He was really looking forward to it.”

“Maybe he’ll still be able to make things like the chess pieces, like your bird, but by touch,” Clarke suggests. “People do.”

“I guess,” Raven says, but she doesn’t sound comforted. “We’re going to have to stay here, aren’t we? Me and Finn. In Arkadia – that’s what they’ve already named it, apparently. TonDC and Polis are great, but here he has Jackson and a bunch of other people with vision problems. He’ll get the best help here.”

“Probably,” Clarke admits.

“Then I guess you’ll be handling the Mountain without me,” Raven says grimly. “I can’t leave Finn here alone. We’re family.”

“Raven, we really need you,” Clarke begins.

“So does he,” Raven counters. “And he needs me more.”

“I was going to say, we really need you, but if you want to stay with Finn, of course you should,” Clarke finishes.

Raven sighs. “Right. Right. I just… I don’t know if I want to. But I have to. He needs me.” She
Wells enters. “How is he?” he asks. “Any better?”

“He’s supposed to wake up soon,” Raven says. She kisses his hand, something oddly formal and awkward about the gesture, less affection than a sort of duty. “In the next hour or so.”

Wells blinks, then exchanges a worried look with Clarke. Clarke clears her throat. “Does this mean… you two… are back together?” she says, gesturing towards Finn.

“Yeah,” Raven says, voice almost defiant. A dozen conflicting emotions swim in her eyes. “I think we are. I’ll stay here, take care of him. And, you know, I do love him.”

“I thought you guys broke up,” Wells says carefully. “You know he wouldn’t want you to be with him just to take care of him, or out of pity, or from some misguided sense of guilt, right?”

“I know that,” Raven snaps.

Raven never does anything by halves, Clarke reflects – and she’s facing the fact that the person she loves more than anything is never going to be the same, is facing something difficult and horrible, so of course she wants to support him in every way she can. Including going back to being the supportive, close girlfriend she used to be. But it makes Clarke uncomfortable anyway. “Wells is just saying…” Clarke starts, voice conciliatory.

“I know what he’s saying,” Raven glares at Clarke. “I told you before, Clarke. Finn is all I have. If you think -”

“You did tell me that before. It was wrong then, and it’s just stupid now,” Clarke retorts. “Finn is your family, I get that. But he’s not all you have. You have me and Wells and Octavia and Jasper and Monty and Lexa and my mother if she’s alive and maybe even Anya, for Christ’s sake. You aren’t alone. Neither’s he. We’re all going to help as much as we can. You don’t get to decide you’re going to become some weird martyr and spend the rest of your life just focusing on supporting him, not when we’re here to help support you both.”

There’s a long pause. “I’m still staying here with him, whatever,” Raven says, but her voice is much softer. “I know you want me to come take on the Mountain, Clarke, but I can’t just leave him here.”

“And Wells is absolutely right,” Clarke continues ruthlessly. “Do you think Finn wants you to be with him just because he’s hurt and you want to help however you can? That’s a bad idea. If you want to be in a relationship with Finn, be in one, but don’t bury yourself in it just because you love him and he’s dealing with something terrible. Don’t be in it just to make yourself feel less guilty.”

“You know, Mount Weather have my father and Clarke’s mother,” Wells tells Raven. “You’re the best mechanic we have, the absolute best. You’re going to be vital in taking them down. How about you go deal with that, and I stay here taking care of Finn. I know it’s not the same, but my grandfather eventually went blind and I helped out with him, so I know a bit.”

“I don’t want to leave him,” Raven states.

“And I don’t want to leave my father!” Wells says fiercely. “But you’ll be more useful there, and I’ll be more useful here. Besides which, this is going to be an adjustment for Finn, but it’s not going to be the end of the world. He’s tougher than you seem to think. He’s not going to need you around him every day, forever, just because he’s lost his sight. He’s not a child you have to take care of.”
Clarke coughs. “You know, there’s one person whose opinion is missing from this conversation,” she points out, voice firm. “If you’re going to talk about Finn not being a child, maybe you should stop acting like he’s one. We don’t get to argue amongst ourselves and decide his life. Wait until he wakes up and asks what he wants to happen, what he wants to do, what he wants you to do.”

“Right,” Raven flushes. “Good point. You’re right. It’s just, because he’s been unconscious for so long, I’ve kind of been forgetting he’ll still be Finn when he wakes up.”

“Clarke?” Fuji pokes his head inside. “There you are. We’ve gathered nearly all the adults to come listen. Some are staying with their children, we didn’t think you’d want kids to be present, but their partners will fill them in or we will.”

“Good,” Clarke says, aiming for confidence. She’s lead her people before, of course, but she’s almost never dealt with them as a large group. She’s also rarely dealt with them without any of Lexa’s people with her, or without the support of Kane or her mother at least.

After a moment, Wells follows her, presumably to provide moral support. She’s grateful for that – grateful to have him, always quietly supporting her, helping her with his calm good sense and unflinching loyalty. If his father doesn’t survive, Wells won’t have many ties to Arkadia anymore, and she wonders if she’ll be able to talk him into becoming Arkadia’s ambassador. It would be good to have him in Polis, and he’d be excellent at the job. Lexa would like that too.

But of course, she shouldn’t write Jaha off. He’s a survivor.

So is she, she reminds herself, as she stands in front of hundreds of her people, all eyes trained on her. She’s lit up by the bonfire next to her and the heat makes her feel dizzy for a second.

“By now you all will have heard about Mount Weather’s latest attack,” Clarke says as loudly and clearly as she can without actually yelling. The crowded space quiets instantly. She makes her voice carry. “I didn’t have time to explain everything when we found Alpha Station, so here are the facts everyone needs to know. Mount Weather wants our people. They kidnapped two boys, John Murphy and Drew Hogan. They killed Charles Pike. They took the survivors of Alpha Station. Now they have Chancellor Jaha, as well. None of these attacks are coincidence, and if it wasn’t for the protection of the Commander and her people, nearly all of us would be dead already.”

She takes a deep breath and continues. “We can’t give up on our people, some of whom may still be alive inside Mount Weather. We also can’t sit here and wait to see if they plan to kill the rest of us. We need to fight back. And with the help of our new allies, we can. However, Mount Weather is designed to be one of the most secure locations on earth, so we can’t depend on better numbers. We have to base our attack on better information, better plans, and better teamwork. In a few days, we’ll also have some better weapons – as we speak, a group of Trikru warriors are being sent covertly to retrieve a number of assault rifles from an old supply cache for us. We’re waiting for some messengers who should be arriving from TonDC soon with more up-to-date information about Mount Weather’s actions too. After we have all the information and weaponry available, I’ll be looking for volunteers to help in the fight.”

Clarke stops speaking and waits for someone to comment. No one does, though a nervous murmur runs through the watching crowd. She expected someone to challenge her leadership, but apparently her certainty contrasts so strongly with their fear that they’re unable to face her. Good.

“For now, we can focus on building our new home. The Trikru have promised help and supplies that we will pay back in time, just like we’ll pay them back for letting us live on their land. The first step in that is taking on the Mountain that’s victimised all of our people, but it isn’t the last. Remember everything they’ve done for us and everything they’ve given us. Be grateful for what we now have –
this new and beautiful world – but remember we aren’t the owners of it. If there are any problems, come speak to me about them. If you want to find someone, we have lists of what station different people were on and we know what happened to nearly everyone. Any of the 100 who are still in Polis but wish to come here will be brought in the next few weeks, and in the meantime we have a radio if you need to speak to them. Right now, our people are divided between a few different places, but most of us are here. Most of us have survived. We will keep surviving. And we will build a home.”

“And one last thing,” she adds after a pause, and the brief hum of conversation dies down again. “I know I’m a few days late, but I just wanted to say – welcome to Arkadia!”
“What do you plan to do with the guns once they have been retrieved?” Lexa asks Clarke. “The gona should return with the barrels tomorrow, as ordered. Do you plan to just give them out among the population?”

“No, just the opposite, actually.” Clarke says firmly. “I think we should remove the bullets from them. I mean, me, Octavia, Wells, and some Arkadia volunteers can do the actual removing – I’m not asking Trikru to touch the guns. We’ll take the bullets out and store them here, then put nearly all of the guns back in the grease barrels they were in and send them to Polis – we can use the trip to escort any of the 100 who want to live in Arkadia back here as well. But anyway, if we make sure they’re not loaded, no one in Polis will be able to use them since they won’t have ammo, and a limited number of people here will be able to have guns. Specifically, I think only the people who volunteer against the Mountain, and even then we only let them have the guns for practice sessions and for the actual assault.”

Lexa raises her eyebrows. “I see,” she says.

“I want to keep track of every single gun and know where it is at every moment,” Clarke continues fiercely. “Afterwards, we’ll send those to Polis too, and in future we’ll only receive extra guns by directly applying to you in times of warfare or if we need more protection. Once the Mountain falls, I don’t want Arkadia to be armed to the teeth, that’s just asking for trouble. Frankly, I’m debating whether I should get most of the guard’s guns and send them to Polis as well.”

“It would ease my mind to know your people are not so heavily armed,” Lexa admits. “It is certainly a good idea to keep track of them. Unlike swords, knives, even bows, guns can kill too many too quickly for my people to be safe while yours have them – I think that was proved by both Finn and Pike in the other world.” Of course, it was also proven by Titus that her people should not have guns either, so it is a good idea to keep the ammo separate. It’s not surprising Clarke no longer wants guns to be so prevalent given so many terrible events they have experienced were caused by them. “What will your people make of this plan?”

“I’m thinking of telling them that it’s to keep the guns from Mount Weather,” Clarke says. “That could work. Alternatively, I guess I could say we’re continuing on with the gun control we had on the Ark. Or if I have to, I’ll tell them that the alliance doesn’t allow guns, but I’d prefer not to make you the bad guy taking away their shiny new toys if I can help it.”

A trip to Polis is not a bad idea. She can send Zion and his Azgeda gona with orders to speak to the ambassadors. If Indra goes as well, she is respected enough that they will definitely listen to Lexa’s relayed commands not to attack the Azgeda yet. Taking out Nia will be a delicate operation – she would prefer something closer to assassination than outright war, as most of the Azgeda are blameless in this. Lexa is beginning to plan her attacks to better accommodate jus nou drein jus daun, she realises, surprised.

“How is Finn?” Lexa asks, after a moment’s contemplation.

Clarke sighs. “Dealing. Putting on a brave face for Raven and Wells, I think. He jokes that he must look like a seer with the bandage around his head, pretends the injections for the pain are making him high, says now that he’s a blind artist every girl in Arkadia will swoon when he walks by. So on the
surface, he acts fine. But I know he’s in pain and having real trouble with it all.”

It is strange to Lexa to think that now she will never need to worry about Finn shooting her people. This is not how she wished for that risk to be removed. She does not consider Finn a friend as she does Wells or Raven, but because they and Clarke care about him she cares also.

She can see Arkadia growing, even in the few days they have been here. The clearing is increasing in size as trees are cut down and small hut-like homes are constructed, replacing the tents they dwell in now. The Skaikru have never really worked with wood before, but with aid from the gona gathered here, they are learning how to make functional (if unattractive) buildings. One of the first buildings created has been a sort of hospital – really just one large room presided over by Jackson – and Finn remains there for now.

“Heda,” Anya says loudly from outside the tent. She used to enter without announcing herself first, but there was an incident yesterday that has stopped her from continuing that practice. Lexa has decided the incident was entirely Clarke’s fault, as Anya never walked in on such things before Clarke entered her life.

“Come in, Anya,” Lexa says.

“The gona from TonDC are here,” Anya announces. “Including the Skaiskat who stayed with them. They have information about the Mountain. They believe they have found another way to enter.”

Lexa stands up and goes to see. Indra waits outside with a dozen or so representatives – most are strong gona, but there is also John from the drop ship attack and a young Seken who looks scared just to be near his Heda. “What news do you have?” she asks, trying not to sound too eager. This information they badly need.

“At first there was not much movement,” one of the gona says. “Then a day after you left, John kom Skaikru and Artigas saw something.” He pushes the young Seken forward casually.

Artigas swallows hard. “We went closer than the others,” he says in a rush. “John and I.”

Clarke gives John a look. “I thought I told you to stay away from Mount Weather,” she comments. He gives her a rueful look, which looks strange on his thin and angry face. “Yeah. But I was a criminal, I’m not that great at following orders. And I did survive.”

“And we found a door,” Artigas says, his words still eager and quick. “The day after you left, Heda, they opened this small metal door at the top and pushed out a girl. We were as close as we could get without being taken and we could still barely see it. The door did not look very strong, or well-guarded.”

“We lost five gona watching the place, but none from that area,” another gona says. “Three from near the dam, and two from near the Ripa tunnels, both which seem to have many more Maunon and Ripa than is usual. We lost none from the front – they do not seem to guard the front door so heavily.”

“They don’t need to,” Clarke says dryly. “When you have an impenetrable door, guards aren’t really necessary.”

“Two days after you left, ten men came out of the Mountain,” the gona continues. “They went north. We attempted to use the radio to contact you, but could not make it work. We could not contact Polis either.”
“Mount Weather was in the way,” Clarke explains. “It wasn’t a problem with the radio, it’s just sometimes Mount Weather can block radio signals between places, and they must have boosted that to cover TonDC as well.”

“Were the Maunon wearing suits?” Lexa asks, already sure of the answer.

“No, Heda,” the gona says. “We attempted to send messengers to find you but none returned. Eventually the Maunon came back, then left again with many of their vehicles. We could not see what they contained. Moba, Heda, but we did not see them until they were already close enough to the Mountain that we could not have attacked in time.” So that is how they brought the Skaikru back with them.

They might not have attacked anyway, Lexa thinks. Her people have feared the Mountain for so long that they flinch at the thought of fighting back. The Maunon take advantage of this when they roam the countryside. “And after that?” she asks, voice crisp.

“Lots more people came in and out of Mount Weather, all armed,” John says. “They increased the number of guards around the place, too. I’m not sure why because it’s pretty obvious they’ve already got a bunch of technological crap around to detect people, but they seem pretty freaked.”

“Because we could knock out some of the ‘technological crap’ if we really wanted to, and they know it,” Clarke says flatly, “Having a bunch of guards just standing around is their way of making it clear they won’t hesitate to come out and kill us if we try that.”

“Or maybe they just wish to feel the sunlight,” Lexa says softly. It’s nightmarish, to her, the idea of being locked away as the Maunon are. As the Skaikru were up in their station. As Clarke and the others were in their cells. She believes that she would do almost anything to escape such a fate, but ‘almost anything’ does not include draining innocent people dry for it. She can pity the Maunon. She cannot absolve them. “Well, we know what we need to. We should see Raven kom Skaikru, get her opinion.” She glances at Anya and Indra, indicating with her eyes they should follow.

“John, come with us,” Clarke orders, “She may have questions about the door.”

“Of course she will,” John says, rolling his eyes. “I met her in TonDC, remember. That chick has nothing but questions.”

They are lucky to find Raven in the tent she has been using as a place to construct, instead of at the makeshift hospital with Finn. It must be Wells’ shift – Lexa has gathered from Clarke that Raven and Wells ensure that one of them is with Finn at all times. Personally, that would aggravate her, but perhaps Finn prefers to have his friends nearby constantly.

Sinclair runs into them as they enter, coming face to face with them at the tent flap, and visibly hesitates to leave. He has been working with Raven since they arrived here, though he seems to provide a sounding board and practical help more than the leadership role Lexa expected him to assume. He treats Raven like a doting parent or ticha, coaxing her towards answers instead of providing them, helping without taking over. Lexa thinks he is probably an intelligent and useful person, but one without Raven’s brilliance.

Clarke tells him quietly that it is Raven they wish to see, and that she knows he has a lot to do. Lexa’s not sure if that is because Clarke thinks Raven will have all the answers she needs, or if Clarke is simply unwilling to trust any Ark authority after all of the negative experiences she has had with them. Lexa herself feels more comfortable without him there – and judging by his slight exhale and quickened pace as he leaves, he feels the same about her, Indra and Anya. They are building familiarity between Skaikru and Trikru, but true trust and integration will take time.
Anya does not greet Raven as they enter or meet the girl’s eyes, preferring to look at the tent’s ceiling. Lexa knows that her former Fos is embarrassed by the emotion she showed for the girl before, and ashamed of her jealousy and hurt at the sky girl’s return to her boy, and is trying not to show any more of her feelings in Raven’s presence. Anya doesn’t say anything as Lexa and Clarke explain to Raven the situation at present. As they tell her that it seems most of the Mountain Men are no longer vulnerable to radiation, but they have a potential doorway in.

“There’ll be all kinds of electronic sensors, though,” Clarke says. “I was wondering, could you use the EMP you were working on to knock those out?”

“Some of them,” Raven says. “Not all, though – it would only knock out what’s in its radius, which is maybe fifty feet in every direction. So if there are cameras, it will kill them easily.”

“We should be able to clear the area and enter through the door then,” Lexa says. “That is more than enough space for forty or fifty of us to easily slip through. Then Raven could blow up the door and we could enter through there.”

“There would be no point in using the EMP for that,” Raven says flatly. “Like I said, it will take out the cameras. But the systems running those cameras and sensors will be below the ground, in some kind of central control station. Unless you could somehow take those out, the second any of the ones outside go offline, Mount Weather will know. And it will be pretty obvious to them that the place which has just gone dark is where their attackers are. At that point, you may as well run through setting off the sensors, it would have the same effect.”

“Could you make more of them?” Anya asks, finally looking at Raven. Lexa knows this is the first time she’s been in the same room as the girl since they all reached here. Even on the way to the new Arkadia, Anya managed to keep herself busy enough to avoid much conversation with Raven, to the girl’s evident confusion and annoyance. “If we removed the sensors all around the mountain, in ten locations, for example, then they would not know where we attacked from.”

Raven shakes her head. “I only found the parts of one. That’s why I was so excited by it, they’re not exactly common.”

“If you know how it works, though -” Anya starts, looking down her nose at Raven.

“Not unless you have another nine explosively pumped flux compression generators,” Raven says, annoyed. “I wouldn’t expect there to be many around, though, because they’re one use only. They generate a single pulse and then they’re dead.”

“Can’t you make anything that doesn’t explode?” Clarke says to Raven jokingly, blatantly trying to lighten the atmosphere. Raven and Anya are now glaring at each other.

Raven blinks and looks away from Anya. “Guess not. They don’t explode violently, though. Or at least this one won’t. It will just make a little noise. But it will burn up the bit at the centre.”

“You really can’t make any more? Or pump this one up so it covers a wider area?”

“I could make a few littler ones, maybe, if we found a lot more useful parts,” Raven says with a shrug. “But you’d be lucky if they covered a couple of feet in diameter. If you’re looking for a bigger area, the biggest ones are caused by nuclear explosives, lightning, or sometimes electricity shorting out if you get lucky. I might be able to do the last one but it would be very iffy and unless they’re very sensitive I don’t think it would take any of the stuff down for more than a few seconds, so there wouldn’t be much point unless one of you is the Flash and no one told me.” She looks around. “The Flash? It was this… you know, never mind. My point is, EMPs are probably not the answer here.”
Lexa looks at Clarke. “I suppose we cannot surprise them like this, then,” she remarks. “We will have to come up with something else. Or hope we can blow the door and enter before too many Maunon get to us.”

Clarke gives a bleak smile. They both know that plan is suicidal.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap fifty chapters HOW DID THIS HAPPEN
“How the hell are you doing that so quickly?” Octavia wonders out loud.

Open gun. Remove bullet clips. It’s not that hard, when you have prior experience with the guns. Of course, Octavia doesn’t.

“Look on the bright side,” Finn says from where he’s slumped in the corner. “You’re getting through them faster than me.” He raises his cup mockingly and drinks from it. From the smell, Clarke suspects it contains vodka. She wonders where he got it, and if he should really be mixing it with whatever pain medication he’s on.

It’s a bad joke. But then, considering how much pain he’s in and that he can’t see, it’s pretty impressive he’s joking at all right now.

“Clarke has always had very clever hands,” Wells says calmly, working through the guns methodically and carefully.

Octavia snorts. “Oh, I bet she does.” She winks suggestively at Clarke. Lincoln, standing guard by the door, smiles slightly at his girlfriend.

“To draw so well, I meant!” Wells says hastily, face reddening slightly. “I meant to draw well. Not… whatever you were talking about.”

“I’m sure someday you’ll understand what I was talking about,” Octavia says in mock sympathy, still struggling to get the clip out of the gun she’s on.

“Maybe you should stop making fun of me and just concentrate on your own weapon,” Wells says, giving her an annoyed look.

“That’s what she said,” Finn says, taking another large gulp out of his cup of liquor, and letting out a sour laugh. It’s an even worse joke.

There are fifteen people working to get the bullets out of most of the guns right now. There were twenty earlier, but some had to go do other jobs. There’s no way anyone could take a gun – they’re not exactly small and Lincoln’s at the door – but occasionally when there’s a noise Clarke’s head snaps up anyway, and for just a second she thinks someone’s about to shoot up the room. She wonders if that reaction will ever stop happening.

“Maybe the reason I’m so bad at this is because I’m actually Trikru and shouldn’t be touching a gun,” Octavia says thoughtfully.

“Maybe you’d be better at it if you stopped squirming in your seat and deliberately annoying everyone else,” Clarke suggests dryly. Octavia’s not too thrilled she’s missing practice for something so boring, but Indra had told her it would be a good opportunity to practice her meditation – which Clarke thinks is code for ‘stop bothering me’.

Octavia sticks her tongue out at Clarke.

“So do you know who’s coming back to Arkadia and who’s staying in Polis?” Wells asks,
diplomatically changing the subject. He picks up another gun and opens it to remove the bullets, adding the clip to his pile – the biggest pile out of all of theirs, even Clarke’s, because he’s been sitting here the longest. Then he puts the gun in an empty barrel – well, empty except of grease, anyway.

“We have thirty-one people returning permanently to Arkadia, including Monty and Jasper,” Clarke says. “According to Bellamy, anyway. Eleven more who would like to come back briefly to visit their families but want to continue living in Polis after that – we haven’t worked out yet what we’ll do if their families want to go with them, that’s something I’ll have to discuss with Lexa if it happens. Everyone else is apparently pretty settled by now.”

“No more thefts?” Wells asks.

“Two minor crimes,” Clarke says. “Bellamy ensured they got the necessary punishment, from the sound of it he’s actually doing pretty well at this. Monty told me his students and their families adore him.”

“All of the Skaikru Sekens are going to be so jealous when we get back,” Octavia says cheerfully. “While they’ve been stuck protecting Polis from nothing at all, I’ve been in actual battle -” She breaks off, apparently remembering what that battle was and what happened in it, and casts an apologetic look at Finn that he can’t see. “I mean, unless we stay in TonDC. That is Indra’s home I guess. But I overheard her the other day talking to Anya and we might end up going to Polis to manage some things after the Mountain’s dealt with, since that Titus guy might not be coming back. She and Anya are arguing over who should go do his job.”

“He’s the Fleimkepa,” Clarke says, quietly marvelling at how casually certain Octavia is about the Mountain being ‘dealt with’. “Indra could take over his job helping to protect Polis, punish criminals there, and train the Natblida in combat, but she can’t exactly do his religious duties. If Nia’s killed Titus we’re going to have a serious problem.” She sighs. “Lexa thinks she’ll probably try and trade him back for some kind of mercy, though. Or it’s possible Gustus got them out in time, since we know he was suspicious about Nia. We just don’t know enough.” ‘We just don’t know enough’ feels like it’s become Clarke’s motto, lately, which is ironic considering that out of her people she knows the most about what’s going on.

“For that matter, ‘after the Mountain’s dealt with’ is hardly going to be the end of our problems,” Wells points out. “There’s the Ice Queen. Diana Sydney. Setting up this place properly.” He sighs.

“Maybe we could attack the Mountain from all sides,” Octavia says, switching the subject again and looking at Clarke. “Just start taking out all the cameras and sensors from every direction, wipe them all out. Then they won’t know how to respond.”

Clarke shakes her head. “The only reason using a bunch of EMPs might have worked is because they’re fast, they go off in an instant, and they’d take out all the guards’ communicators as well. It would leave them blind and reeling, and we could use that window of time to get our people inside the Mountain before they could recall theirs and send out the acid fog. If we start attacking one camera at a time they’ll contact all their guards over their walkie-talkies and get them to come in, then just burn us all. If they wanted to be even more straightforward they could even just explode a missile directly above themselves – you don’t need a spotter at that distance.” She opens the gun she’s holding with a little too much force and nearly drops it. “Of course, even EMPs might not work if they just decided to let the guards die, and sent out the fog immediately.”

“Would they do that?” Wells asks, frowning. “Just kill their own people?”

“If they thought they had to, without a doubt,” Clarke says flatly. She puts down the gun she’s
working on, suddenly tired. “You just reminded me, I need to go talk to Lexa about something.”

She stands up and stalks off, past Finn, who seems to have fallen asleep. His cup has tipped over.

Lexa is conversing with Anya when she enters the tent they use for strategizing. A map is open on the table, but neither are paying attention to it. “If you do not tell her, of course she will not know,” Lexa is saying bluntly. “Just as you do not know if she -”

Anya makes a hushing noise and Lexa breaks off, turning to see Clarke. “Hei, Clarke,” Lexa says softly.

“Hei, Lexa,” Clarke says, smiling at her. Since Anya’s the only other person in the tent, she leans in and kisses Lexa lightly.

“You two disgust me,” Anya informs them. “The other day was bad enough, but this? Please remember I am present.” She turns and leaves.

“Just wanted you to know we’re nearly finished with the guns,” Clarke tells Lexa.

“Good,” Lexa says, looking relieved. “Indra and the Azgeda are ready to go on your command. I will feel better when the guns are in Polis.”

“Except thirty of them,” Clarke says. “Actually, wait, make that twenty. We can get the other ten from the guards’ guns. I can’t see any situation in which having more than thirty people with guns gives us a noticeable advantage, not against Mount Weather.”

“No,” Lexa sighs. “I suppose not. Bullets cannot harm the outside, and that is the part we are having problems with. Once we figure out how to get inside a relatively small force could easily take the place, from what you have told me.”

“A small force with Raven to blow through some doors and Monty to hack through others, yeah,” Clarke says. They’ve gone over this so many times and they still don’t have anything. “Not many of the Maunon have any experience with fighting or have guns. The people will be the easiest part. It’s everything else that’s the problem.”

“Could we blow the river somewhere higher, change its course?” Lexa says doubtfully, turning her head to study the map. “Remove their water supply entirely? That would force them all out, at least.”

“And completely change the topography and ecosystem of the region,” Clarke says. “We don’t know a safe way to change the course of the biggest supply of clean water in the area. Whole villages might be washed away, plants and animals would die, hills would be eroded, and there’s a pretty decent chance if it goes through the wrong area we’ll end up poisoning the water supply.” She takes Lexa’s hand and kisses it anyway, grateful that they’re still able to come up with new ideas even if those ideas aren’t workable.

“We will figure this out, Clarke,” Lexa promises quietly. Then she sighs. “Perhaps we should not have waited for your people to join us. If we had gotten Raven working on bombs instead of radios, perhaps we could have killed the Maunon with radiation before they became immune.”

“That might have worked if Emerson hadn’t remembered,” Clarke allows. “But since he did, trying to do anything the same way as last time would have just gotten us all killed. From the sound of it the generators are being guarded pretty heavily.”

“Trying to come up with a strategy is making my head ache,” Lexa admits.
Clarke kisses her again, pressing enthusiastically against her until Lexa takes a step back from the onslaught and lets out a little noise of pleasure. “Is this helping?” she asks teasingly.

“I don’t know,” Lexa says, but her eyes brighten a little.

“Mm-hmm. How about now?” Clarke rests her hand on Lexa’s hips and pushes her back even more until Lexa’s half-sitting on the table. Clarke shoves the map out of the way. She kisses Lexa’s collarbone and works her way up the side of the other girl’s neck in short, sweet kisses.

“It is hard to tell,” Lexa says, sounding breathless. “You should keep trying, just in case.”

Clarke lifts her so that Lexa is sitting entirely on the table, and runs her hands to rest on Lexa’s knees, pushing them apart so she can stand between. “Good idea,” she says, and cups Lexa’s head to hold her in a deeper, more passionate kiss. Lexa moans into it, and when Clarke pulls back a little she follows Clarke’s mouth with her own, continuing the kiss. Clarke bites lightly at Lexa’s lower lip and runs her right hand up Lexa’s leg, and Lexa wraps them around her waist tightly.

“I’m not sure,” Lexa gasps after a while, letting out a little whimper and bucking herself towards Clarke’s questing fingers. “Not sure… that this… is helping me to think, ai niron.” She flashes Clarke a smile anyway, which fades as she lets out another moan, tossing her head.

“You think too much anyway,” Clarke says huskily, and then they say nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

So this is basically what I wanted them to do in canon every single time they were near that damn table. I mean, come on, guys.
“Anya? What is it you wished to -” Lexa breaks off in mild surprise as she enters the tent. Instead of just containing Anya, her strategy tent has Wells and Raven in it as well. She hasn’t seen Raven and Anya share the same space for a while now, and Wells and Raven have been taking turns spending time with Finn, so to see them all in one place is unusual. “Tris said you needed to speak to me, Anya.”

“I do, Heda,” Anya says, unusually hesitant. “We all do.”

Clarke enters after Lexa, also looking confused. “What’s going on? One of the Sekens called me out of a meeting with Cole, Jay and Fuji, saying it was important. Is Indra back?”

“Not yet,” Anya says. “She should be soon, though.”

Clarke blinks, noticing Wells and Raven. “If you’re both here, who’s with Finn?”

“Finn’s busy learning braille. He asked us for some alone time,” Wells says diplomatically.

Raven snorts. “I think his exact words were ‘stop hovering, you’re driving me insane’,,” she says, hiding her hurt with a mask of insouciance. “But anyway, that’s given us the perfect opportunity to talk to you without him around. I don’t wanna give him any more to worry about.”

“What’s the matter?” Clarke looks concerned.

“Is there news about the Maunon?” Lexa asks, keeping calm. “The radio Clarke broke?”

“That’s working, I’m pretty sure, but we’re too far away to pick up their signals,” Raven says. “No. This is about you two.”

There’s a pause, and Clarke says, “Is this an intervention?” She crosses her arms casually and raises her eyebrows, looking amused.

Wells clears his throat. “Something like that,” he allows. “All three of us have noticed that the two of you seem… different. Well, to be more accurate, I noticed you seemed different, Anya noticed Lexa seemed different, and Raven -”

“I just noticed something super-weird was going on,” Raven interrupts helpfully. “I overheard some stuff. I mean, it takes me a while to wake up, but even I can’t sleep through swordfights and interrogations. I was half-asleep, but what I heard … I wanted to figure out what was going on but I also didn’t want you to think I was accusing you of anything. So I just decided to wait and listen. After that I just kept noticing all the stuff it seemed kinda strange that you knew. Little things, but they added up.”

“I was there when Octavia started making those accusations,” Wells continues, eyes steady on Clarke, who has gone very still. “I saw how you reacted. You’re a good liar, but I’ve been there since the first time we broke a vase, Clarke, I know when something’s going on. Octavia wasn’t right, but she wasn’t entirely wrong either. Before then I just thought your time in solitary had changed you. But it’s not that, is it?”

“When I noticed the difference in you I also dismissed it as unimportant, yongon,” Anya says, still hesitant, but meeting Lexa’s gaze anyway. “But that does not mean I did not notice it. I wondered why the change in you began before you met Clarke kom Skaikru, yet seemed like you fitted with
her exactly because of that change. When I saw you with her for the first time... I wondered if somehow you had met before. But it did not seem possible."

"Listen, guys -" Clarke begins.

"I decided I needed to talk to you guys after I realised you knew the place the gorilla was at and Lexa knew what Arkadia would end up being called," Raven continues, talking quickly, apparently unable to stop herself spilling everything. "That's when I decided I had absolutely no clue what was going on, and I wanted to get Anya's opinion before I spoke to you, since I knew she thought something was weird too. But she's been avoiding me -” She shoots Anya a glare that Anya ignores, “- so I talked it through with Wells instead a few days back. Then cornered Anya today to say we were gonna have a talk with you. And here we are. Talking with you."

Lexa looks at Clarke, trying to judge what she’s thinking.

"We want to make it clear,” Wells adds firmly, “This isn’t us pressuring you to tell us anything. I trust both of you, and if you think we shouldn’t know about whatever’s going on, then I trust your judgement."

"We’re just saying that if you had something you wanted to tell us,” Raven says, still speaking at double her normal speed, not giving Lexa time to speak. “Even if it sounds completely batshit - well, we’re your friends. We’ll listen.”

“I will follow you as I have always done, Heda,” Anya says firmly, “Regardless of whether you -”

Lexa raises a hand slowly in silent command and Anya stops speaking. She’s heard enough, and can see in Clarke’s face that they have reached the same conclusion.

She thinks this is why she has come to care for them, come to consider them friends. They are not demanding an explanation or pressuring them into saying anything they might not be comfortable sharing. What Anya, Wells, and Raven are telling them is that they are here for them. They are here to support them. They are here if Clarke and Lexa wish to confide in them. She feels a surge of warmth and affection towards them, and she has to fight to keep her expression neutral.

“We moved in time,” Lexa says bluntly.

Raven is the first to respond. “You... what?”

“We call it 'the first world', or 'the original world', or 'the other world', when we speak of it,” Lexa continues, ignoring Raven’s shock. “In the first world, Anya attacked the 100. I stayed in Polis at that time. Events happened differently as a result.”

“I remember falling to the earth the first time,” Clarke says grimly, “Watching it come closer. Finn undid his seatbelt and floated over to me. Two boys copied him and they died.”

“A couple of people went to do that,” Wells says slowly. “But when you passed out it distracted everyone, and they didn’t.”

“A great many things happened in that world that did not happen in this one,” Lexa says. “It would take some time to explain them all. And many events no longer matter, now, with what we have changed. This world is so different from the other world.”

“That’s not possible,” Raven says, stress in her voice. She starts to pace back and forth, then stops and throws up her hand. “I mean, time travel? Maybe it was a shared hallucination. Or, I don’t know, some kind of... I don’t know. I’m a mechanic, this isn’t exactly my area!”
“So it was another life,” Anya says, relatively unmoved, but still not totally calm. “You have already lived many lives, as Heda. This is merely one more.”

“I died before Clarke’s actions moved us back to when she first fell,” Lexa tells her. “It is due to her we are back, not due to me.”

“Right,” Raven says, still looking stunned. “In the tent. You guys kept talking about how Lexa died once. I remember that. Most of what you said is a blur, but I do remember that. But this is insane, guys. I mean, how would this even happen?”

“You died?” Anya asks, looking stunned, then thoughtful. “I see. So your spirit refused to move to the next Heda and came back to you instead. That must explain it. What would time mean to a spirit? It could go where it wished.”

“You know that is not how the spirit works,” Lexa says gently, touching the back of her neck where the spirit sits.

“We do not know how the spirit works, not completely. You have done more than any other Commander,” Anya says, stubborn as always. “If the spirit would defy time for anyone, it would be for you.”

“Wait, you said ‘Clarke’s actions’,” Wells says, trying to keep up. He looks shocked, but is managing to stay calm anyway. “What did you do? What do you think caused this?”

“Lightning,” Clarke flushes slightly as she says it, as if realising it sounds ridiculous. “I went to the top of the tower in Polis and lightning hit me. Then I was back.”

“Lightning couldn’t do that,” Raven says, but her voice is fainter now and she sounds less sure. “That’s not how lightning works.”

“Well, it looked like lightning. That’s all I know,” Clarke says dryly. “If you work out a scientific theory for why I remember months on the ground that I’m now living again, let me know. And it wasn’t just memories, either – the drop ship was mostly destroyed, now it’s back. So is the Mountain. Everyone who was dead there is alive again.” she breaks off, looking away.

Wells has been studying her face. “Like me, you mean,” he supplies, voice too calm. “That’s why you were so protective of me at first. And also why you didn’t tell me about all of this. Because in your memories, I’m dead. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Clarke reaches forward, takes his hand and squeezes it for a second. “But not here,” she says fiercely, “You’re not dead here.”

“In your last life, was my fight also over?” Anya asks Lexa.

Lexa swallows. “Sha. Yu gonplei don te odon. ” She bows her head slightly. “You died well, escaping the Maunon with Clarke, bringing a message to me. She brought me your braid to remember you by.”

“So is that my fate, then?” Anya’s face is hard. “Am I to die against the Mountain once more?”

“If that is your fate, then it is my fate to die as well,” Lexa points out reasonably. “I choose to believe we can change that. That we have already changed that.”

“Crap, were we all dead?” Raven asks. She starts pacing again. “Was I dead?”
“No, you were alive, as far as I know,” Clarke says.

“The Mountain. Did the Mountain fall?” Anya takes out her knife and starts playing with it in quick, agitated movements. She cuts herself accidentally – something Lexa’s sure she has not done in years – and hisses, shoving the knife away into its sheath again.

Lexa’s quite impressed they have all accepted this so quickly, despite their clear anxiety. “The Mountain fell.”

“Then it will fall again,” Anya says, letting out a sigh of relief, relaxing slightly at this sign of good news, “Now that you may be open with your knowledge -”

“We can’t do the same things again,” Clarke says uncomfortably.

“Why not?” Raven asks. “If we know how to get in already -”

“They have guards on the entry we used last time,” Clarke says wearily. “All of the entries we used, in fact. And they’re prepared for anything we could try. One of them remembers as well. His name’s Emerson.”

“Why does he remember too?” Raven asks. She rakes her fingers through her hair, clearly frustrated and overwhelmed. “Who else remembers?”

“He’s the only other one, as far as we know,” Clarke says cautiously. “We told Octavia about what’s going on, and she’s passed it on to Lincoln, but we think that only the three of us actually remember.”

“You trusted Octavia more than me?” Wells says, looking offended for the first time.

“She didn’t give us much choice!”

“Right, but why do you remember? That’s what I don’t get.” Raven asks, ignoring Clarke and Wells’ digression.

“We think it is about the blood Clarke had on her at the time,” Lexa states. “She may have had the blood of the last Maunon on her skin as well as my blood.”

“The last Maunon?” Wells looks surprised. “You took out everyone, the whole place?” He stares at Lexa, eyes wide. “Huh.”

“That was me, actually,” Clarke says, sounding tired.

“You blew up a whole mountain,” Raven says disbelievingly. She gives a nervous smile. “Did I help, at least? I’d like to think I helped. Blowing shit up is kind of my thing.” The lame joke falls flat, though Anya snorts.

“No, I didn’t blow anything up, I just killed them all. I irradiated the whole place,” Clarke winces at her own words, curling into herself a little. “Emerson was the only one left. He blew the place up months later in revenge, with Farm Station inside it. He hates our people and he especially hates me for what I did last time. For killing them all. The Grounders called me Wanheda after that – Commander of Death.”

There’s a long, shocked silence, and then Wells takes three steps forward and hugs Clarke firmly. “Hey, it’s okay,” he says. “I know you, Clarke. You’re a good person. I know whatever you did, you didn’t have a choice.”
“I did, though,” she says softly. “I had a choice. I chose my people. And I’d choose the same again.” She disentangles from him and comes to stand beside Lexa again, a united front. Lexa places a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. “That’s what we’re doing now, after all. I’m sure he thinks that’s what he’s doing as well. Killing us before we can kill his family again.”

“We have a family as well, a people,” Lexa says firmly. “And we did not build ours by bleeding others dry, by drugging them into becoming monstrosities, by blinding and burning people with deadly fog, by sucking out their bones as they scream. Clarke saved thousands of our people in the first world by acting as she did.”

Clarke manages to smile at Lexa, and kisses her cheek softly with cool lips. “Mochof,” she whispers. She takes Lexa’s hand in her own cold one, and Lexa lifts it up to chafe it with her other hand, trying to get some warmth back into it. Clarke’s memories of the Mountain are dark ones, but Lexa hopes someday she will learn to see her actions there as Lexa sees them – the act of a brave leader doing what is necessary.

“Heda,” a frantic voice comes from outside, “Clarke, Heda, you there?”

Lexa frowns. “Enter, Octavia.” So Indra and her Seken have returned, presumably with the members of the 100 who wish to live in Arkadia. She wonders how Zion and the nine other Azgeda are doing – the ambassadors will be shocked to hear that Nia has become a natrona and allied with the Maunon. The Azgeda ambassador in particular will have to be watched, in case he plans to report back to his queen.

Octavia bursts in. “You’re not going to believe who’s with us,” she says triumphantly. Despite her success at the physical aspects of being a Seken, she has yet to manage all of the reserve and sense of ceremony the other Sekens possess. “It’s Kane! He was in Polis!”

Clarke starts to smile properly.

Octavia takes a deep breath, grinning. “And he brought a nuke!”
“So you fell from space in it,” Clarke says, “And bringing it with you seemed like the next logical step?” She can’t suppress a smile at the absurdity.

Kane shrugs. He’s leaner than she remembers, and a little more tanned, but otherwise about the same. Apparently he fell not far from the ocean and the Boat People were very helpful and kind. He’s already learnt some Trigedalseng and seems to have made friends with half the Trikru who escorted him here. She’s glad to see him like this, glad that he’s the good person she remembers him being underneath all that stiffness. “The other option was leaving a nuclear device in the middle of nowhere. I was a little concerned about bringing it back here as well, but I thought that we would be more likely to know how to disable it completely than the Floudonkru.” He sets down the cup he’s been drinking from and tilts his head slightly, studying her. “So the Chancellor and your mother…”

“Like I said. They might be alive.” Her smile dwindles though. ‘Might be’ isn’t ‘definitely’. Her mother has much better odds than Jaha, though – Emerson will want to kill her family in front of her, she thinks. Besides, Jaha won’t be nearly as useful to them. Except that he’s spent time with Clarke and Lexa recently, unlike Alpha Station. Maybe Emerson will assume Jaha knows their plans. It’s possible.

“And you’ve taken charge until they come back,” he says carefully.

“Yes, I have,” she meets his eyes, wondering if he will react like Jaha.

He rubs the slight beard he’s grown. “All right,” he says finally. “If you need any advice, I’m here.”

“You’re not going to say how young I am?” Clarke raises her brows at him in challenge.

“I assume you already know that. You were taking charge before we came down, I did notice that. And the truth is…” he hesitates, then forge on. “The truth is, lately us ‘adults’ have done a pretty poor job.” He gives her a wry smile. “Sending children down to die, nearly executing hundreds of people, and according to what you said letting Diana Sydney take off with weapons and supplies. I’m sorry that you’ve taken charge, but that’s because I know how hard it is, not because I don’t think you know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Clarke admits quietly, compelled to honesty by his bizarre faith in her. He seems to have softened even more than he did last time. She remembers thinking in the old world that spending time with the Trikru – people he had no authority over and therefore no responsibility to enforce the law with – was good for him, making him calmer and more reasonable. It seems like in this world spending a while with the Floudonkru has been even better.

“Then you’re doing it very well,” Kane says. “Did you know the gona already have stories about you? They’re very poetic. Hair like the sun, eyes like the sky, all of that. They say you flew down from the stars and saved the Commander’s life. That you’ve met the Maunon and survived. When we were leaving, there was already a new one starting about how you and the Commander were attacked by a hundred Maunon and a thousand Ripa and escaped anyway.”

Clarke blinks. “Why would they – I haven’t done anything, really, it’s mostly been Lexa. Some of it together, but I assumed they would give the credit for everything to her.”

Kane shrugs. “From what they told me, the Commander is a legend, a visionary. They see her as more than human, supernatural, nearly. But she doesn’t trust many people. Despite that, she gave
you authority over her people straight away and takes you everywhere with her, which already made you a mysterious figure to them. Since you also came from space and have apparently decided to declare war on the most powerful and vicious faction in this whole place, a certain degree of renown should probably be expected.”

Clarke wonders if she was talked about like that in the last world before the Mountain. She never had the chance to talk to many people apart from the gona she fought with – they certainly hadn’t travelled around as much as they have this time. Maybe it’s not surprising that running around the country collecting people from space stations is making her noticeable. Not as infamous as destroying Mount Weather made her, of course, but still noticeable.

“Clarke,” Kane says, “For what it’s worth, no one knows what they’re doing. If you need any help, I’m here. And if you decide you don’t want to have to deal with all of this, I think Cole could probably do a decent job as interim Chancellor.”

“So could you,” Clarke says honestly.

“I used to think so,” Kane says, voice soft. “I don’t anymore. I’m not the kind of leader our people need.” He gives a slightly bleaker smile. “I’m not exactly inspirational, Clarke. I’m the man who almost killed three hundred people, and I’ll have to see the looks they give me every day. When I was up in the Ark waiting to die I realised I was never very good when I tried to lead. But I can be a useful assistant – I know how to do everything by the book.”

“Thank you,” she says to him, not sure how to reply. Inwardly, she thinks that his attitude makes him exactly the leader their people need. She clears her throat. “Listen. I need to go check what’s happening with the missile you brought. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

He nods, and lifts his cup to take another sip out of it.

Raven swings around to glare the second Clarke enters the room. “So Octavia told me you wanted me to take apart the nuke,” she says flatly.

“Not completely,” Clarke says, well aware that it’s probably not a helpful response.

Raven sighs and rubs her forehead. “Clarke. You’re one of my closest friends and I love you, and your ideas are brilliant, but can I just say… I hate your plans. Not the whole plans, just the bit where they kinda inevitably turn into ‘oh we’ll need to enter a hostile nation.’ ‘Oh there’ll be assassins.’ ‘Oh we have to take out the Ice Nation army.’ ‘Oh let’s run towards the giant mutated gorilla’…”

“To be fair, that one was Lexa’s idea,” Clarke objects.

“That’s nice, proof that you really are meant for each other,” Raven deadpans. “My point is… can your next plan not involve ‘oh let’s start peeling layers off a nuclear missile and see what happens’?”

“I promise my next plan won’t involve that,” Clarke says. “Just this one. So how’s it going?”

Raven rolls her eyes. “Fine. On a scale of one to ten, where one is ‘still alive’ and ten is ‘mushroom cloud’, I think it’s going very well.”

“It’s only the outer layer,” Clarke says persuasively. “Just the bits which, you know, tell people it’s a nuclear missile.”

“You mean the bits that according to the production stamping on the side contain uranium in them, right? I think that’s to help reflect neutrons to make a bigger boom, which sounds just fantastic. Have I done this successfully before?” Raven asks, staring nervously at the missile. “It would actually
make me feel a lot better to know I’ve managed to peel a nuclear missile like an onion in another world without us all dying. Because, you know, generally the outer layers of a missile are pretty important.”

“This one crashed from space,” Clarke points out. “I think we can safely assume it’s tough. Which is one reason why we can use it.”

Raven sighs and works in silence for a while, apart from the occasional careful scraping of tools.

Clarke shifts a little nervously. “The outer layers… the uranium… we’re not going to get cancer or something from it, are we?”

“No,” Raven says, “That would be the middle bit that does that, as far as I know. Which I hope I won’t accidentally expose, because prior to giving us cancer it will explode in a fiery ball of death, making the cancer kinda irrelevant.” She flashes Clarke a quick smile. “But hey, no worries.”

“I thought you were just telling me to worry.”

“No, no,” Raven says. “I’ll worry. The truth is, it’s pretty unlikely I’ll explode this, you’re right, these things are designed to be tough, and there are a lot of protective layers. It just makes me nervous to know if I accidentally touch exactly the wrong wire everyone I know and love will die instantaneously.”

“Right,” Clarke says, deciding not to ask any more questions. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

“No!” Raven says. “Actually, wait. I had… a couple of questions. About your first time around.”

“Go for it,” Clarke says. “I’ll answer if I can.”

“So… I was alive.” Raven says, clearly trying to figure out exactly what she wants to know.

“Yes,” Clarke says. “You got shot in the spine, though. You found it hard to walk.”

Raven winces. “Was Finn blind there as well?”

“No,” Clarke says, a little awkwardly. “Actually he was dead. Sorry.”

“Oh,” Raven says with another flinch. “You know, this is turning out to not be very fun.” She sighs. “Was I… with Finn there? Before he died?”

“You weren’t in a relationship with him,” Clarke says, deciding to gloss over the details. “For pretty much the same reason you broke up here, although different circumstances.”

Raven frowns. “Great, so even in alternate universes he’s not any good at staying faithful. That’s depressing.”

“Are you two back together?” Clarke asks curiously.

“No, but I considered it,” Raven admits. “I just… when I saw what happened to him, it just reminded me how much I loved him. How crazy I was about him. How much we needed each other back on the Ark. He gave up everything for me. And it finally seemed like I could return the favour somehow.” She sighs. “But then I couldn’t do it. We broke up for a reason, and that reason hasn’t gone away. He didn’t love me the way I wanted him to, and he wasn’t gonna start loving me that way just through depending on me — that sounds like a shitty relationship anyway. Our break-up was for the best and he agrees. He even suggested we stay apart for a while… thinks I can’t treat him
normally anymore because all I see is that he’s different, and we need time to figure out how to be normal exes anyway.” She levers irritably at something on the outside of the missile.

“Maybe he’s right.”

“Oh, I know he’s right. Doesn’t make it any better.” Raven angrily rubs her sleeve over her eyes to wipe away a tear. “And stupid Anya’s not making it any better, since I have two people I care about avoiding me. Though at least I know why Finn’s doing it. I kind of thought Anya and I were friends, but I guess she was just being ordered to guard me for the trip.”

“She wasn’t ordered to by me or Lexa,” Clarke tells her. “She just started doing it on her own.”

“Hmph,” Raven says, but she smiles a little. “Then I wonder what her deal is. Maybe I pissed her off somehow.”

“Give her some more grenades,” Clarke advises her. “I’m pretty sure she’ll forgive anything for those.”
“We have found thirty-three of them,” Anya tells Lexa. “Thirty where the guns were. Three in the underground place you had Linkon take us to.”

Lexa considers it for a second. She had hoped for more, but expected less. Raven kom Skaikru had assured her gas masks should be easy to find in bomb shelters or any other supply intended to help people to survive an apocalypse, but Lexa had believed most of them had been torn apart years ago for her people to use as battle masks or spare bits. “That will be enough,” she decides.

“It is strange to think that these things will protect us from gas grenades,” Anya says sceptically. “But no stranger than a lot of recent events, I suppose. Thirty-three will cover less than half the group we plan to take, though. I can keep searching – we have time.”

“That is exactly what we do not have,” Lexa says grimly. “Every time we have waited, the Maunon have used the time better than we have. We do not know what they will do next. I am sick of reacting to what they do – running and hiding and creating defensive plans. It is time to strike back.”

“Sha, Heda,” Anya gives her a dark smile. “When do we leave?”

“Within the hour, if we can manage it,” Lexa orders. “The core hundred or so people, anyway. Our reserves can leave hours later if necessary – there is no harm in that.”

Anya nods, and Lexa goes to see Clarke, who is pacing inside the tent. Octavia is standing next to her. Clarke looks up as Lexa enters. “How’s it going?”

“We have thirty-three of the masks you wished for,” Lexa says calmly. “And we have nearly all the other supplies we require for your plan. Of course, we will have to stop by TonDC on the way, but otherwise I believe it is time to go.”

“Okay,” Clarke says with a sigh. “By the way, we’ve sorted something out. Octavia’s volunteered to be the Skaikru representative in the first group.” She frowns, and Lexa can see that Clarke does not like any of this. Her plan is risky, but although it is risky for herself most of all, Lexa knows that is not what worries Clarke.

“Mochof, Octavia,” Lexa inclines her head slightly towards Octavia.

“Are you sure?” Clarke asks Octavia. Judging by Octavia’s eye roll, this isn’t anywhere near the first time Clarke has asked that particular question. “Listen, I’m just saying, this is going to be very dangerous.”

“Compared to the position of perfect safety you’ll be in?” Octavia asks sarcastically.

“That’s not the point,” Clarke says. “There’s a very high chance you’ll die before we can do anything about it. Even if you survive .”

“I’m sure,” Octavia interrupts her, voice firm. “I told you, Clarke. I know what I’m getting into.”

Clarke stares at Octavia, then closes her eyes for a moment in surrender. “Okay. Okay. Fine. You realise Bellamy is going to kill me.”

“I realise he’ll try,” Octavia retorts with a grin. Lexa can see the edges of sharp fear under it, but recognises that with someone like Octavia the fear is only more of a goad. Indra is like that as well.
She takes every ounce of fear in her system and turns it into anger and ferociousness, until it becomes hard to tell there is any fear underneath at all. “I think you can take him, Clarke. And Lincoln understands that it’s my decision, so I don’t think you’ll have any problem from him. He’s part of the group following a few hours behind us and asked me to save a couple for him.”

“You should pack,” Lexa tells Octavia. “We leave as soon as possible.” Personally, she approves Octavia as the first person. From what Clarke has told her, Octavia is ideal for this – in fact, she thinks Octavia may have been who Clarke pictured when she crafted this plan, and that part of Clarke’s resistance is due to guilt about this fact.

“Please let the Skaikru volunteers know they need to be ready in half an hour, too,” Clarke requests. “If you tell Jackson, he should sort the rest of them out.”

Lexa raises her eyebrows as Octavia leaves. “Jackson? Your mother’s assistant?”

“Sha,” Clarke says, “He was the first one to volunteer, I think he’s worried about my mom.”

Lexa studies Clarke. She has dark shadows under her eyes and her face is tense. This is her plan, after all, so she will blame herself for everyone who gets hurt. “Raven, Jasper and Monty kom Skaikru will all be with me,” she says softly. “I will do my best to bring them back alive, Clarke. Linkon will most likely be fine as well, since he is following as part of the largest group, the one only for distraction purposes – the Maunon are likely to watch them, but I do not think they will risk attacking. And Wells, Finn, and Kane will all be in Arkadia, safe. Try to relax, ainiron. Stressing will not change what we have to do.”

“I know that,” Clarke snaps, then looks apologetic. “Sorry. I just… knowing that stressing doesn’t help won’t make me stop doing it.”

“Nor me,” Lexa admits. “I spent two hours meditating earlier, and yet when I think of you at the Mountain I still cannot remain calm.”

Clarke moves forward and wraps her arms around Lexa, not kissing her, just pressing Lexa as closely to her as possible. Lexa can feel the thump of Clarke’s heartbeat against her body. “Does this help?” Clarke asks gently.

“More than you could imagine,” Lexa says honestly.

They just stay in the same place for a long time, not moving, just breathing. It feels almost like meditation does except that instead of being alone in the blankness of her trance she has Clarke with her, and that makes all the difference. After a while, she shakes herself out of it and looks down at the watch Clarke gave her. Clarke has explained how it shows the time passing, and she finds it very interesting, but at this moment she despises the hands for ticking forward. “We must go, Clarke,” she says, keeping her voice quiet to not break the spell of calm a second before she must.

“I know,” Clarke says back, just as quietly. She squeezes Lexa close once more, and then steps back. She looks better. Still worried and tired, but better.

The journey is silent. No one says a word apart from the occasional quiet orders given by Lexa or Indra. The smallest sound – the crack of a breaking stick, the cry of a bird, the buzz of an insect – causes the gona to jerk their heads around in watchfulness. The Skaikru keep hands on their new guns at all times. Lexa watched them practice with them yesterday. They are not very precise marksmen, but with the rate of fire these weapons have that is probably unimportant.

Monty and Jasper look the most scared, perhaps understandably. Everyone else here has travelled
further than they have, been closer to danger. They have been comfortably in Polis fiddling with plants and simple bombs. Lexa can understand why Clarke worries for them. Lexa is also concerned about how they will deal under this unaccustomed pressure, but Clarke assures her they are the best ‘hackers’ out of the Skaikru (who apparently discourage this practice for some reason), which makes them necessary. When they stop for the first night, Monty quietly admits in Lexa’s hearing that his parents believe he is spending time with Finn to help out, and may not realise for a while that he has left with the gona.

They have left Jasper’s simpler bombs in Arkadia – Raven has probably produced enough sophisticated ones for their mission, and it may give Arkadia a chance if Clarke’s scheme fails and the Maunon come for them.

TonDC is also quiet. Nearly all of the gona from here left for Arkadia. They will come back soon, following Lexa’s group at a slower pace as a distraction for the watching Maunon, but for now TonDC has lost its busy, bustling atmosphere. It annoys Lexa for a reason she can’t quite pin down. Perhaps it is this – tomorrow, they attack the Mountain. They may not all die, but at the very least some of them will. Lexa has spent far too many nights in grim, quiet contemplation of her mortality. She would like the liveliness of villagers talking and laughing and running around to dispel that feeling. Perhaps that is why Clarke is over talking with Monty and Jasper, who despite their nervousness still joke.

“You know, yongon, this is one more time when you have shocked me,” Anya says to her suddenly, passing her a strip of dried meat. They sit around a fire, but it smokes instead of blazes, and Lexa can’t help but feel like the very flames themselves dread the Mountain. It makes their circle dimly lit and cold.

“Have I?” Lexa asks, tilting her head slightly.

“Fighting the Maunon. Such a wild, foolish idea.” Anya smiles slightly.

“I suppose it is,” Lexa says coolly, trying not to show that the words sting.

“Just as uniting the clans was,” Anya says. There is something odd in her eyes, a depth of emotion Anya has never shown to her before. “Just as allying with the Skaikru was. I knew when the spirit chose you that you would lead us well, but I never suspected you would lead us so far. I never knew that someday I would look at you and see not my young Seken, but the greatest of all of us.” Her smile widens and she closes her eyes for a second, as if overcome. “If we are to die tomorrow, then there is no better fate I could imagine than to die by your side, yongon.”

“Nor I yours,” Lexa says, voice slightly choked. She reaches out and they clasp each other’s forearms in a warrior’s grip, holding for a few seconds.

Anya clears her throat and releases Lexa. “I simply… I felt I should say that, as we may not have another chance.”

The Trikru are all raised to believe that facing or defying the Mountain is a death sentence. Lexa can feel the weight of that lifelong belief even in her own mind, and she has seen the Mountain fall before. So she cannot blame the others for their gloom or their fear.

“If we are talking of leaving things undone, there is another you should consider,” Lexa says. When Anya looks confused, Lexa gestures to the other side of the fire. Raven looks up and sees her. A frown crosses her face.
Anya flushes almost imperceptibly. “I have told you, Lexa, leave this.”

“At least do not continue to act like she has wronged you,” Lexa says softly. “You know she has not. Raven does not know what she did, and it bothers her. If you will not tell her how you really feel at least tell her that you care about her and you are friends. You think tomorrow we will die. If that is the case, will you have her die thinking she has angered you?”

“I do not -” Anya begins.

“Hey,” Raven says, standing beside Lexa, still frowning. “You looked like you wanted to talk to me. What’s up?”

“I merely wished to ask about your niron,” Lexa says, feeling a spark of wickedness she hasn’t felt in a long time. This is something a much younger Lexa would have done – a Lexa who was not Heda, who was just a feckless Seken running through the woods. Anya looks murderous.

“My… what?”

“Oh,” Lexa says, feeling the twitch of an evil smile at her lips. “It means your partner. Finn.” That is slightly less suggestive than what the word actually means, but it is close enough.

Raven huffs an annoyed breath. “He’s not my partner,” she snaps. Apparently Lexa has hit a sore spot. “Clarke didn’t tell you?”

“I do not aim to get involved in your romantic affairs,” Lexa says with faux innocence. Now she cannot prevent her smile. Clarke had indicated that she thought Raven and Finn’s romantic relationship was finished, but it is good to have confirmation. Anya has suddenly stopped fuming next to her and is silent with shock. “I apologise, Raven kom Skaikru. I thought the two of you had reunited after what happened.”

“Well, we haven’t,” Raven says, looking slightly mollified by the apology. “And we’re not going to. We’re family. That’s it.” She stalks off, not even bothering to answer Lexa’s original question.

Lexa turns to look at Anya and raises an eyebrow. “There, see?”

Anya glares at her, but still can’t stop herself from returning Lexa’s smile. “If you were still my Seken, I’d have you whipped.” She informs Lexa.
The air is cold this morning, but it’s still bright and sunny. The kind of day you want to spend outside, enjoying the brief sunlight before winter sets in fully. Not the kind of day you want to spend trying to break into a secure military base.

Of course, Clarke thinks, there probably aren’t many days with the perfect weather for that. ‘Perfect weather’ in this case being some more serendipitous lightning just blowing the place to hell without their interference. Except her mother’s inside. So maybe not.

She hadn’t been able to sleep properly at all last night, just a few uneasy dozes. Neither had Lexa. On the bright side, this gave them hours wrapped around each other, whispering about nothing all, kissing, touching each other, just being together. They’d alternated between periods when they couldn’t get close enough to each other, when they’d nearly bruised each other with desperation, and quieter soft moments where every touch was feather-light.

“Sit still,” Lexa commands quietly from behind her. They’re sitting at the entrance to the tent, with Clarke looking out over the village. “Your hair is a mess, it is difficult to even get this comb through.”

“You’re the one who messed it up,” Clarke points out.

She feels Lexa’s smile even though she can’t see it. “Is that a complaint, Clarke kom Skaikru? Because at the time someone was ordering me to. However, if you are concerned about your neatness, in future I will make sure to ignore your forceful words.”

“Mockery is not the product of a strong mind, Lexa,” Clarke quotes at her, grinning. Lexa’s hands are quick and deft in her hair, looping and tugging with swift skill. She almost wants to ask her to go slower. She gazes out at the quiet stillness of the village.

Octavia looks odd, standing in the middle of TonDC dressed in Skaikru clothes once more, next to a small Grounder child she’s trying to give a flower to. But Skaikru clothes are a protection now – the Maunon are far more likely to just outright kill a Grounder than a Sky Person. The Trikru have outlived their usefulness to the Mountain, literally.

As Clarke watches, Octavia lifts the small child up and bounces him in her arms several times. Clarke smiles as Octavia then holds the boy away in a panicked fashion as he throws up dark liquid, barely missing her clothing. Even from this far away she can see the disgusted face Octavia makes. Nevertheless, Octavia jogs to her pack nearby and pulls out a cloth, wiping the child’s face with it. He starts bawling, not appreciative at all.

“Have you ever thought about having children?” Clarke asks, without intending to. It just slips out.

Llea pauses in her movements for a second. “I used to think about it sometimes with Costia,” she admits. “But I knew it could not be. Whether a child I gave birth to or just raised, it would always be a target. And I have the Natblida. Do you think of such things?”

“Back on the Ark, it was sort of assumed we’d all have one kid,” Clarke says idly. “When I was young, I figured I would get older, get married, have one kid, be a doctor. So basically I thought I’d be a carbon copy of my mother. But that was back when she used to be my hero so of course all I wanted was to be like her. The kid thing… I’m not sure about that, anymore.”

“Married,” Lexa says, tone thoughtful. “That is like being bonded, correct?”
“Exactly like, except with rings instead of tattoos, and a slightly different ceremony,” Clarke says. She swallows nervously. “Want to do it someday?” This has to be the worst marriage proposal of all time. Somehow, that doesn’t seem to matter. Here, on this clear, cool day, with Lexa fiddling with her hair, this is right. The words do have weight, but she already knows she’ll be with Lexa forever. The ceremony is just a formality – albeit one that she realises she wants. She wants to be open and free and honest, wants to shout to the skies that Lexa means everything to her and will for the rest of time.

Lexa presses a kiss to her head, and Clarke can hear a slight quiver in her voice as she answers. “Sha. I would love to be bonded to you, Clarke kom Skaikru. In heart and spirit, I already am. Body is all that remains. All it would take are the tattoos. Whenever you wish to do that, we can. Or did you mean the Skaikru ceremony?”

“I want to take parts of both our cultures for it,” Clarke says decisively. Despite her business-like tone, her heart soars and she can’t suppress the smile that takes over her face. “Tattoos and a Trikru ceremony are absolutely fine. But there’s one Skaikru custom I can’t compromise on.” Lexa gives a braid a slight tug to let her know she’s done, and Clarke turns to face her. Her wide smile is reflected in Lexa’s glowing eyes.

“The rings? We can easily find someone to -”

“The honeymoon,” Clarke says firmly.

“The honey moon?” Lexa asks, confusion showing on her face adorably. “I do not understand.”

“It means, after the ceremony, we go away somewhere together,” Clarke says. “If there are guards, then they’re far away enough not to bother us. There can be beaches or forests or even just desert, I don’t care where it is, but it’s just the two of us. Alone together. For at least a week.”

Lexa smiles more widely than Clarke’s ever seen her. The transparent happiness on her face makes her look younger than she should, with her dark warpaint and Commander’s pauldron and sash. It lights up her eyes and removes all worry from her forehead. “That is a good tradition. I will be happy to embrace it.”

Clarke suspects they’re both trying to forget that her plan involves them being split up, distracting themselves from being separated with the hope of being together forever. She wants Lexa with her, but she can’t do that, she can’t give Emerson another weapon to use against her. And Lexa has her own place to be. “How do I look?” she asks Lexa.

“Like a Grounder,” Lexa says, a world of meaning in her voice.

“Good,” Clarke smiles a sharp little smile. She does look like a Grounder right now – braids, leather, weaponry hung all around her. She looks fierce and uncompromising. There would be no point to her wearing Skaikru clothing to the Mountain – either Emerson has ordered them to keep her alive or to kill her on sight, and knowing him she thinks it will be the former to make her suffer. Tit for tat. “That’s good. Because that’s what I am. You know that, right? Skaikru is the clan I’m from, like how Trikru is where you’re from. But what I am right now…”

Lexa takes her hand and kisses the inside of her wrist so quickly and lightly that even if someone in the village was watching they wouldn’t see it. The feel of it lingers on Clarke’s arm. “What you are right now, ai niron, is the same as what I am. You are of all clans, and fight for all clans.”

“I fight for you, ai hodnes,” Clarke says softly.
“That as well,” Lexa replies. “And I for you.” They stare into each other’s eyes, caught in the moment.

A shout breaks the silence. Clarke frowns and looks around. It’s coming from a nearby tent – the one Raven, Jasper and Monty have been sharing. “That’s Raven,” she says, worriedly. “I better go check on her. If something we need is broken -”

“Go,” Lexa says, only a slight sigh showing her disappointment at the end of the moment.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Clarke promises. Inwardly, she thinks: there’s always something. But she’s just been promised a whole week where there’s nothing but each other, so she’ll cope, somehow.

She walks into Raven’s tent, ready to address whatever the problem is, and freezes in shock.

Anya is kissing Raven passionately, hands resting lightly on her waistline, as Raven gasps into the kiss, her own hands buried in Anya’s braids. They look like the cover of some cheesy romance novel, entwined with each other like that.

Clarke takes a step back, still stunned, and decides to get the hell out of here. Unfortunately her sword clunks against one of the tent’s supporting poles – not hard enough to endanger the tent, but hard enough to make a noise.

Raven and Anya yank apart, both breathing heavily, and swing their heads around in unison to stare at Clarke. Clarke raises her hand weakly to give a lame wave of greeting. She had no idea – she didn’t even think – Raven and Anya, how could anyone have seen that coming –

Anya’s face returns to its customary stoicism and she gives Clarke a nod as she stalks out of the tent. She looks back at Raven for a moment, waiting for her to say something, then when Raven just stands there gaping she whirls around and is gone.


“Me too,” Raven says faintly. “She was just… I mean…” She waves her hands, apparently out of words. For Raven that’s pretty much impossible. Eventually she finds her composure. “Kinda interrupted us a bit there, oh fearless leader.”

“Yeah?” Clarke replies. “Well you interrupted me and Lexa with your yelling, so I think we’re even.”

Raven frowns, chewing on her lip as she thinks. “I didn’t know she – I didn’t have a clue she thought that way about me. I mean, we flirt a bit, but I always thought it was just, like, edgy banter. And you know, it was less flirting and more continuous teasing.”

“I thought that was your flirting,” Clarke says, only half-joking. It might have surprised her but now that she thinks about it, it actually makes a lot of sense. She wonders if Lexa had any idea Anya felt that way.

“Ha. Not with Finn,” Raven says, “And I don’t have any experience with anyone except -” Her eyes widen and she turns to Clarke. “The alternate future. Was I with Anya?”

“No. She was a little bit busy being dead,” Clarke says dryly, though she can’t suppress a pang at the thought.

“But I was with someone else? Who?” Raven asks. She still seems reasonably shaken, and keeps
glancing at the tent-flap like she’s expecting Anya to appear again, but otherwise she’s doing a reasonable job of pretending normality.

Clarke can’t see any reason not to share. “Wick. Kyle Wick, I think his full name was.”

Raven blinks, then makes a face. “Wick? He was an engineer. And I knew him since I was a kid.”

Clarke shrugs. “I’m just telling you what happened.” Then she notices the tense Raven used. “Was?”

There’s a pause, then Raven says, a little sadly. “He came down on Tesla Station, actually, because there wasn’t quite enough room for him on Mecha. I put some nuts and bolts on the fire we lit for them, in his memory.” She hesitates. “Was I in love with him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” Clarke considers it for a moment, then to lighten the mood slightly, adds jokingly, “But you also slept with Bellamy in that world. So who knows?”

“Say that again and I’ll throw a wrench at you,” Raven says, her seriousness broken up by an incredulous smile. “But, Anya… I don’t know how I feel about her. And I mean, I just broke up with Finn. She was just here and she apologised for ignoring me and then I said something mean and we were arguing and I yelled at her and she said something about things left undone and then she kissed me. Like, really slowly, so I could see it coming. I should probably have moved away. But she was right there. And really hot. I mean, I call her ‘cheekbones’ for a reason. Oh, shit. What do I do when I see her again?”

“Since in like two hours you’re about to try and break into Mount Weather, I suggest you say ‘hey, Anya, can you carry some of these explosives for me?’” Clarke says wryly. “But otherwise you’re on your own.”

“Hey, guys,” it’s Octavia, standing at the door of the tent. Her face is set. She stands and moves like Trikru, even in her Skaikru clothing. “First group is about to take off. We should be at the generators pretty quickly, we’re taking some of the horses.”

Clarke moves towards her automatically, but Octavia holds up a hand while she’s still several feet away.

“Hey,” she says, and manages a shaky grin. “No hugs, remember? I’ll see you later.”

“May we meet again,” Clarke says softly, stopping. Raven echoes her.

“Ai gonplei nou ste odon,” Octavia replies, with false bravado. “Let’s do this.”
One Weak Spot

It takes as long as it takes. That is one of the Commander’s first lessons, and it is one she has needed to use so often that it has become ingrained in her. Heda has lived a hundred years and will live a thousand more, so an hour means nothing, is nothing. The Commander spirit knows this, and is calm – Lexa knows this as well, however her calmness takes far more effort, for she is a person and not a spirit and prey to the weaknesses that causes. But it is still possible for her to wait, to be still.

So once again she sits patiently as Clarke paces, as they wait for the return of Indra and the two dozen gona with her. Or whatever remains of them, at least. It is the first move in a game of chess, Lexa knows – you do not play your pawns carefully, fearful that one might be taken. You accept that some will die from the start and resolve that if they must, they will die for a purpose, a cause. They will die for a greater victory. This attack is to convince the Maunon they are weak and desperate, clutching at straws, going for the generators because that is the only idea they have.

They may lose a pawn, today. But she does not intend they should lose the game.

Her fingers itch to touch Clarke, but she shouldn’t. Indra could return at any moment. Lexa clears her throat. “Remind me how this ‘hacking’ works, Clarke kom Skaikru?” she asks casually.

Clarke pauses in her pacing. She must know Lexa’s trying to distract her, but it still works. “It’s… it’s hard to explain. Mostly because I’m not that great with technology either.”

“Maybe I can help,” Monty says, opening the tent flap. His face is a light shade of green. Jasper, following him, is the same. They look worse than any Seken Lexa has ever seen on the eve of battle. “If it’s okay. That we’re in here, I mean. We just kind of -”

“That would be appreciated, Monty Green,” Lexa says coolly, eyeing them. She can work out why they’re seeking the company of her and Clarke now – they are scared, whereas she and Clarke appear to know what they are doing. They wish for that comfort. She will act as confident as they wish her to be. “So. What is ‘hacking’?”

“It’s, uh, you kind of, you take over someone else’s computers,” Jasper says, taking over. He looks unnerved that Lexa knows his friend’s name. “They want it to do one thing – like in this case, keep us out – and then we type a bunch of stuff and their computer does what we want and lets us in. The doom-bot turns against his evil overlord and fights by our side.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow, making it clear just by her expression that this is not a useful explanation and that she is not amused. Clarke looks a little amused, though.

Monty coughs, and speaks up. “Have you ever seen a rock which is big and strong, but as soon as you hit it in exactly the right place, it breaks apart?” he says, sounding a little calmer than Jasper. “Or it happens with metal, sometimes, too. Just one weak spot, even though everything else is strong.”

“I have,” Lexa says. She has seen the former at the Rock Line clan, and the latter in other’s poorly made weapons.

“Right,” Monty says, looking a bit relieved that he got a positive response. “It’s like that, except with computers – the ones that control the doors, and the acid fog, and pretty much all things in a high-technology society. Sometimes they have one weak spot. The right numbers and letters are like hitting that spot. Except when you do, they don’t just break – they become yours.”

“I see,” Lexa says, interested in spite of herself. These Sky People do not understand how to make
food or hunt or build or anything at all. They live off things made a hundred years ago. But when it comes to some things, they know worlds that her people never have. “Perhaps someday you will have to become a ticha, so that our goufa may learn of these things.”

“The Skaikru are planning to give the Trikru some technology in return for everything,” Clarke comments, “If they’re going to do that, it would be a good idea to teach them how to use it.”

“Skaikru?” Jasper says, tone teasing, though he does glance nervously at Lexa as he speaks. “You sound like you’re not one of us anymore. Where’s your loyalty, Clarke?”

“Right where it should be,” Clarke says firmly, sending Lexa a small, secret smile.

There’s a pause. “Why aren’t they back yet?” Jasper says plaintively. “I hope O’s okay. Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask, are she and Lincoln -”

“Completely and absolutely a couple,” Clarke says, leaving no room for interpretation. “I really wouldn’t try and hit on her, if I was you.”

“You think he’d beat me up?”

“I think she’d beat you up. Lincoln’s pretty easy-going,” Clarke says. “Octavia is… not.”

“Told you,” Monty mutters under his breath.

Jasper sighs. “I really thought there was a spark there.”

“Clarke? Heda?” Raven’s voice comes through the tent-flap.

“Enter,” Lexa says evenly.

Raven slumps to the ground as soon as she’s inside. She’s also a bit pale. “Waiting sucks. Can I blow something up? I’d feel so much better if I could throw a grenade someplace.”

“Later, Raven kom Skaikru,” Lexa promises. Her heart aches a little. She thinks that if they all survive this, it will be hard for her to return to Polis, even with Clarke there. If either Anya or Indra return with them, that will help, but the truth is she will still be lacking many of the people who she is able to be just Lexa around. She will never be able to be anything but Heda to the coalition, or to whichever adults the Skaikru send as ambassador and appoint as leader.

Her brief closeness with Raven, Octavia, even Wells, will fade and be forgotten.

“You guys never let me blow up anything,” Raven grumbles. “Despite all your promises. It’s like -”

Raven cuts herself off as Lexa raises a hand. There is noise outside. “They have returned.” She lets her gaze rest on Clarke’s face. “We will have to see if they succeeded.”

She leaves the tent, all of them waiting for her to go in front of them. Outside is Indra, bleeding copiously from her shoulder, although she makes no effort to staunch it. Instead she bows to her Heda. “Clarke,” Lexa says, not taking her eyes of Indra.

Clarke nods and moves to Indra’s side, yanking bandages out of her bag. “It’s a bullet,” she says grimly. “Not a through and through, but it’s safer just to leave it in. It’s nearly always safer just to leave it in.”

“Are you sure?” Jasper says doubtfully, looking queasy.
“Completely.”

“Report, Indra,” Lexa says, not letting her concern show on her face.

Indra grunts and straightens, ignoring Clarke as the girl bandages her wounds. “They got Octavia,” she says gruffly.

“I see,” Lexa says, keeping her face emotionless, though she can see Clarke inhale sharply. “We will have to hope they choose to keep her alive, then.”

“We’ll know soon enough, I guess,” Clarke says darkly. She finishes bandaging Indra and looks at Lexa. “Time to go, then?”

Lexa nods. “Time for you to go, certainly,” she says. “You know when we will be there.” Lexa touches her fingers lightly to the silver watch on her wrist. Then she looks across the clearing. The gona around straighten their stance and quickly check their weapons, ready to leave whenever she is. The Skaikru standing and sitting around notice this and follow suit, some putting on their gas masks already. Only a dozen of them will leave now with Clarke, but it is good they all prepare themselves to go anyway.

The child from earlier is still there, far away from the gona and Skaikru, sitting on his mother’s lap as she makes faces at him. When she notices Lexa’s gaze on her, she removes the child from her lap, stands up and bows as Indra just did. She pushes lightly at the child’s back, perhaps to make him bow as well.

The boy makes it several steps before falling over. Clarke glances at Lexa, then walks over to help him up again. He’s bleeding from his mouth. Clarke wipes it off, then picks him up to make a funny face to him as well. He coughs lightly, sickness showing in the rough notes of it. Clarke kisses his forehead and hands him back to his mother. For a second the sight of Clarke holding the child makes Lexa’s heart lurch uncomfortably. Now, Clarke holds a child. In only moments, she will go to war.

Clarke comes back over, face grim, and Raven, Monty and Jasper move back from her automatically.

“I guess I’m ready to go,” Clarke says.

Lexa swallows. “I must give you one more thing, Clarke kom Skaikru,” she says coolly, and turns to enter the tent again.

Clarke follows her and as soon as they’re inside grabs her arm and whirls her around, kissing her fiercely. She digs the tips of her fingers into Lexa’s back as if she’s desperate to feel her through the layers of protective gear, and Lexa nearly whimper. She presses back just as hard, until they’re clinging to each other as they were the night before, hands too rough and kisses too needy.

“Stay alive,” Lexa begs when Clarke pulls away for a second, well aware that it is a stupid request to make.

“I will, I will,” Clarke says, her voice a sob, and she tightens around Lexa like she’s the only thing holding her to this world. Because the Mountain is a nightmare for Clarke and she is about to walk right into it. Lexa can only hope she comes back out. “You too. Please. Please don’t leave me again.”

Lexa could say a lot of things. She could talk of her spirit finding another, or of how it was always her destiny as Commander to die young, or say if it is her time then it is her time. But instead, she says, “I won’t.” Because the spirit might live forever but Lexa wants to live right now. She doesn’t
want to die young again and leave Clarke to grieve. She is greedy and foolish but she wants those precious days and weeks and years with her beautiful sky girl: she wants to fall asleep and wake up beside her, wants to laugh with her and cry with her, wants to build a world together, wants everything she never thought she could have. She wants love and hope and forever.

Clarke presses her forehead against Lexa’s, breathing a bit more evenly now. “Ai hod yu in, ai niron. May we meet again.”

“Ai hod yu in, Clarke kom Skaikru,” Lexa whispers, feeling a lone tear slip down her face. “May we meet again.”
It feels odd to Clarke to be carrying a pack that is so much lighter than her usual one. In the weeks of travelling around she’s almost forgotten what it feel like to only carry the basics. Right now ‘the basics’ is some medical supplies, her knives, and, oh yes, Raven’s device.

It makes her seriously nervous. At any moment she could be adjusting the weight of the pack on her shoulders or fiddling with her hair and accidentally set it off. Alternatively, it might not go off at all – for obvious reasons Raven hadn’t exactly been able to do a test run. Of course, she’s never lost a battle due to one of Raven’s contraptions before, so maybe she should stop worrying about that so much.

Then she can go back to worrying about whether her mother’s still alive or whether Emerson will just show Clarke the body to torture her instead of making her witness it personally. And worrying about whether the Reapers are in these tunnels right now or are out looking for the others. Worrying about whether the twelve gona with her will survive this. Worrying about every noise she hears. Worrying about Lexa’s safety.

Lexa’s tough and she’s smart. But if Clarke screws this up, if she doesn’t understand Emerson or Cage as well as she thinks she does, or even if they’re just really unlucky, then there’s a pretty good chance Lexa will die today. Clarke can deal with her mother dying, if she has to – she survived her father’s death, after all, and she dealt with it when she thought her mother had died on the Exodus Ship in the original world. It will be agonising, the grief will be a weight around her, she will cry and suffer and lean on Lexa, but it won’t destroy her.

But she’s not sure she can live through Lexa’s death again. The first time she didn’t even really live through it. Maybe this time she won’t be able to convince herself that she needs to go on, needs to try and build the world they would have built together by herself. If the Mountain kill Lexa and Clarke survives, she thinks she’ll destroy them, whatever it takes. She will burn them to ash, every single one of them, spit on their graves, blow up the whole place, make it so there’s not a single thing to remember any one of them by – the strength of her hatred almost surprises her. If they kill Lexa, she won’t be Clarke anymore, she’ll be Wanheda, and she’ll bring death to all of them. And then when they’re all dead maybe she’ll go up to the top of the tower in Polis and wait. She’ll wait for the lightning for as long as she can, until one day, she won’t be able to wait for Lexa anymore. And then she’ll just step off.

“We should have seen Ripa by now,” the gona nearest to her says nervously, and Clarke shakes herself out of her morbid thoughts. The gona are spread out, moving quickly in the half-crouch they only do when expecting imminent battle, glancing at Clarke every few seconds as if waiting for further orders. Of course, a plan of ‘wander into the Ripa caves’ probably seems a little incomplete to them.

“That’s a good sign,” Clarke tells him. “It means things might be going as planned.” She understands his nerves, though – there’s something creepy about the bare, empty tunnels. It would almost be less worrying if there was a group of Reapers, at least then there would be something to fight. Their huddled, anxious advance through the dark and echoing corridors feels like something from a horror movie, the tension rising and rising until a monster would nearly be a relief.

One gona hits a rock with his foot as he moves forward, sending it skittering loudly into the darkness ahead. All of the others have their weapons pulled in a moment and he curses quietly. Clarke alone remains calm. “Steady,” she says quietly.
Then there’s a noise ahead, a yell. It’s not a fearful one or a Reaper’s howl, it’s the sharp yell of a command, and Clarke knows they’ve been found. “Now,” she orders.

They sprint ahead towards the threat, spacing themselves as best they can. The tunnel’s too narrow for effective evasion tactics though, and there’s three cross-tunnels ahead that make their odds even worse. A grenade flies from the left and clatters to a stop next to Clarke so she kicks it as far as she can towards the source. They’re using non-lethal methods – excellent. And it’s the Maunon, not the Reapers. This sharply increases the odds that Octavia’s still alive. From the thuds in the direction she kicked the grenade, they’re also not wearing suits – too eager to be out of their suits to remember that this leaves them vulnerable to their own gas grenades, the acid fog, and similar threats.

There’s roughly thirty of them ahead, she sees. One goes to throw another grenade but an order from his leader stops him. Instead a gona goes down with a sleep dart in his throat. They’ve realised no one can throw or kick those back towards the source. Still non-lethal though.

One sticks into the armour Clarke’s wearing as she slows, maybe ten feet from the Mountain Men. A glance around tells her that nearly all the others are down already. Only two have reached the Maunon, and as she watches one falls. Clarke reaches for the dart sticking into her armour, pretending to be trying to remove it, then pushes it in just a little bit further so that the sedative just barely enters her skin.

She falls immediately.

 Clarke wakes up dizzy in her old room in the Mountain. A quick glance down shows that they’ve removed the armour and weapons but nothing else. They haven’t undone her braids or taken the watch Raven gave her, which is a relief. Glancing at it she sees that she’s been asleep fairly long compared to how long Lexa was under. She has less than half an hour left.

She manages to stumble off the bed and slams on the door with her fists. “Emerson,” she yells. “Take me to Emerson.”

The door opens almost immediately. Two guards stand there. “Hands,” one barks at her.

Clarke blinks at him, then holds her hands in front of her. They tie them swiftly and so tightly she winces. “Emerson,” she says again insistently.

“We have orders to take you to President Wallace,” one of the soldiers informs her coldly.

“Dante or Cage?” Clarke says, raising an eyebrow. “I hear you guys are pretty indecisive about presidents lately.” Of course, she hasn’t heard anything. She’s just assuming, based on how quickly they seem to be immunising their people to radiation, that Dante has already been ousted. She gives the soldier a bland smile.

The soldier takes a step back and pales, looking at her like she’s a wild animal that could strike at any moment. “Shut up, you Outsider bitch,” he says venomously.

“Just asking,” Clarke says, shrugging. It hurts her wrists to do so, but it’s worth it to see how much her casual attitude is terrifying them.

He grabs one of her arms and yanks her down the corridor, his friend following to push a gun against her spine. “Try anything and we’ll shoot,” he spits, though his threat doesn’t quite manage to hide his nerves.

They force her down to Level 3 – the medical labs, Clarke thinks. Also where the cages are. It’s the most logical place for them to be since they’ve been transferring bone marrow. It sounds like they
haven’t even bothered to pretend to be allies to her people this time, either, so storing them in the cages is logical. The only reason to keep any of the Grounders would be to try and make the same deal with Lexa as last time, and Emerson must realise they’ve gone far beyond the point where that could happen.

She’s pushed inside the medical labs instead of the room with cages, and she can’t help feel a slight pulse of relief at that. Either some of her people are in the cages, or all of the remains of Alpha Station are dead, and she doesn’t want to face either of those situations. They lock the door after entering, which is also a relief – otherwise she was going to have to force one of them to do that.

There’s nearly a dozen soldiers inside, hands all on their weapons. In the middle stands Cage Wallace, and to his left is Emerson, smug smiles on both their faces. There are medical seats all around, two of them occupied. Clarke’s eyes are immediately drawn to them – one contains Octavia, badly beaten. Tsing’s standing next to her, caressing her injured face in a decidedly creepy manner as Octavia tries to move away.

The other contains her mother, staring at her with a mixture of relief and horror. “What are you doing here?” Abby whispers. “Clarke…”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Griffin,” Cage looks her up and down and raises an eyebrow. “Or should I call you by one of those primitive Outsider names? You seem to have gone native. It makes you look quite savage.”

“No one who wears that much hair gel should criticise anyone else’s fashion sense,” Clarke retorts. It gives her a small amount of petty enjoyment when he frowns momentarily.

“You know, I expected something more,” Cage says, almost sounding disappointed. “Emerson talked about you like you were some kind of tactical genius, out to destroy us all. And now… you’re just a little blonde teenager, talking about hairstyles. Someone I would pass in the halls and roll my eyes at.”

“She’s everything I said she is,” Emerson says darkly.

Cage takes several steps towards Clarke and grips her chin in his fingers, raising it up so he can stare into her eyes. “I’ll take your word for it,” he remarks uncaringly to Emerson. “You can have her for – well, whatever it is you wanted her for. Torture, death, that kind of thing. But first I want to know how this works.” He gestures to the nearest table where Raven’s device sits, deceptively small and unthreatening, a dark metal box.

Clarke spits in Cage’s face. He yanks back, stunned and enraged, and backhands her hard across the face. She takes the excuse to look down, staring at her watch. Ten minutes now. She only has ten minutes. “You don’t even know what it does,” she tells Cage, voice a little twisted by her swelling cheek, giving him a smile.

He manages to contain his temper again, and gives a sharp laugh. “Actually, I know exactly what it is. Your little friend could barely wait to sell you out.” He gestures dismissively towards Octavia. “Told me that you had a ‘solution’ to my Cerberus project. Now I don’t believe you could really do anything to my specially-designed guards -”

“I told you, she’s cured one before,” Emerson interrupts. Though Cage casts him an annoyed glance, it’s clear that Emerson’s additional knowledge has made them closer to the same level in this world.

“Still, something meant to cure them all immediately?” Cage smiles sharply. “Fascinating. Tell me how to open the container and I might let your mother live.”

“Oh, I doubt it,” Clarke says. All of the guards are staring at her, tensed and ready to attack. She
could act now but it would be risky. She needs a distraction. “And if you’re about to threaten Octavia to make me talk, don’t bother,” she looks at Octavia, meaning in her eyes. “Natrona,” she says venomously.

Octavia blinks. One of her eyes is black, her cheek has three deep parallel cuts which are bleeding steadily, and the hand closest to Clarke is missing several fingernails. Clarke can see she’s woozy with blood loss and pain. Nevertheless, she reacts. “You’re going to call me a traitor?” she yells at Clarke, starting to thrash against her bindings wildly and overdramatically. “You bitch! You bitch! This is all your fault, Clarke! You did this! I hate you! I hate you!” She bucks against her restraints and manages to bite onto the surprised Tsing’s hand like a wild dog, making the woman yelp in pain.

For just a moment all of the soldiers are concentrating more on that than Clarke, focused on detaching and pulling away the shocked Tsing from Octavia as one of them pistol whips her in the face. That’s all Clarke needs. She reaches her bound hands up to her braids and grabs the trigger out of the sheath Lexa braided in so carefully earlier, darting a few steps away from the distracted soldiers as she does so. She presses her thumbs down on the top button. Raven’s device makes a little humming noise. One of the nearest medical screens sprays sparks. The lights dim, some shattering, only two basic emergency lights surviving to cast a hazy glow over the entire proceedings. The soldiers start towards her in anger and she holds the trigger up high, backing away.

“Back!” Clarke orders. “Back, or I let go of this button, and the nuclear bomb I just activated detonates.” She grins coldly at Cage. He looks at Raven’s device on the table and blanches. Emerson just stares at Clarke, his smug smile evaporating as he gapes at her. “Trust me, you don’t want to shoot me, either. This is a dead man’s switch. Stay very, very still, and I might let you live.”
“It is time,” Lexa says quietly, looking at the watch Clarke gave her. “Skaikru, stay back. We will go first and clear the way.”

“And if Clarke hasn’t managed to activate it yet?” Monty says, worried.

Anya bares her teeth at him. “Then our fight will be over, and you will leave.”

Jasper swallows. “Right. Right, we can do that.”

“Float that,” Raven says grimly. “I’m not going anywhere. If either of you die, then so do all of them. It’s about time I got to blow some stuff up.” She hands Lexa and Anya a grenade each.

“I already have one,” Anya points out.

“Then have another one,” Raven snaps. “Have as many as you like, just don’t die or I’ll kill you.” She puts her hand on the back on Anya’s head and kisses her hard before pulling back, glaring at Anya like her action was somehow Anya’s fault.

Anya blinks, surprised, opening and closing her mouth like she wants to ask what that kiss just meant. Everyone else looks fairly shocked by it too.

Lexa clears her throat, checking her watch again. She passes the grenade to the nearest gona. She prefers her sword, though she appreciates the sentiment from Raven. “Now.” she says forcefully, “Clarke should be awake and have activated it by now. Forward, gona!”

There are only three guards on the way to the door. John, along with them for his knowledge of the doorway but still worryingly enthusiastic about the gun he now holds, manages to direct them around any areas that are normally well guarded. The first one falls with Lexa’s knife through his left eye.

Raven snags his communicator and fiddles with it, then nods. “It’s working, but there’s nothing there for it to contact,” she says, a sharp grin on her face. “Clarke managed to activate it. The central control station is down.”

“They could still have an army of Maunon with guns waiting,” Anya points out.

“Really?” Raven asks smugly. “I think they’ll be a little distracted by the active nuclear device. The apparent side-effect of gamma rays fucking up their equipment is probably a bit less important.”

Lexa rolls her eyes and continues forward. She makes a mental note not to bring Raven and Anya into battle together again, at least until they have had some time with each other to work out their tension. It is probably for the best they are about to be split up. Hopefully she and Clarke do not appear so easily distracted when they fight together. She has to admit, though, that her first thought when the communicator did not work was less about the mission and more about her relief that Clarke was still alive.

Raven’s glee when she blows the door is apparent. “Boom,” she whispers, pressing the trigger from a safe distance.

Dirt fountains and metal squeals, but it is less noticeable than the way the world shakes. “They will
“Any, sorry, now you want quiet explosives?” Raven snarks softly. “Should have said.”

Lexa ignores them both. “Third Team, ready yourselves,” she snaps. “Down there they will have heard this but will find it difficult to tell where the noise is from. Up here they will not have that issue. Guard our exit at all costs.” First Team was Octavia’s, Second Team was Clarke’s, Third Team is Anya’s and Fourth is Lexa’s. Third remains around the door, stopping any Maunon from blocking it back up or ambushing the entering team from behind. Maunon are already appearing and Anya throws a grenade, her face lighting up as she sees the devastation it causes. John laughs, the first time Lexa has seen him look truly happy. A scrap of metal tears past Lexa’s head as she ducks into the passageway Raven has forced open.

Fourth Team, with Lexa in the lead, enter the Mountain. Raven has to blow another door almost straight away but it is less dramatic, the explosion barely more than a handful of sparks. The gona closest to Lexa move out of the range of the sparks, keeping their packs safe and unburnt. The next door is thick metal.

“You cannot blow it,” Lexa observes coolly, “We’re too far in, the ceiling might fall if you do.”

“Probably,” Raven admits, a little disappointed. She makes a face.

“Monty, Jasper,” Lexa commands, and the two of them are pushed forward by the gona in their group.

“Right,” Jasper says nervously. “Clarke mentioned that this is kind of a shot in the dark, right? Like, sometimes hacking works, sometimes it doesn’t. If their systems are really secure -”

“Begin,” Lexa says ominously. She gives the gona and the Skaikru behind her a meaningful look, and they all raise their weapons, ready for when the door opens. As a bonus it also makes Jasper stop trying to explain hacking to Lexa.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jasper squeaks, and he and Monty go to work, fiddling with the door control and arguing in whispers.

“If they can’t -” Raven says uncertainly. She pulls round her gas mask, which she should have already been wearing, and starts to fasten it.

“Then we will attempt to blow through it,” Lexa assures her nonchalantly. “And hope we are not buried in the rubble.” The gona look mostly unbothered by this information, though the Skaikru start speaking to each other in urgent undertones until Lexa turns to glance at them again.

Raven stares at her, then closes her eyes like she’s trying to summon patience. “You people and your goddamn suicidal plans…” Her words are muffled by the mask, but still comprehensible.

“Got it,” Monty says triumphantly, his voice similarly muffled by his mask, and the door creaks its way open.

Lexa pulls Raven down swiftly, out of the way of a dart, and the Skaikru begin shooting wildly at the enemy. They are not accurate, but it does not seem to matter. Jackson in particular holds his gun like he wishes he did not have to touch it. Only four armed Maunon have heard the noise and gathered, though Lexa can see another one behind desperately trying to get his radio to work to call for aid. They are easily overcome, taken down by the hail of bullets. She suspects the civilians have fled, to return with either weapons or whatever backup they can find.
“Forward,” Lexa orders, “We need to get down to the fourth level.” She yanks a security card off a dead Maunon and the others do the same, enabling them to easily use the stairs. They could take the elevator, but that would group them too closely together. Better to go down using the stairs. One of the Skaikru has fallen, hit by a bullet from a Maunon gun, but all of the others are still moving. One stoops to take the gas mask the dead man wore, muttering their death rite to his corpse before passing the mask to one of the few people not wearing one – they did not have quite enough gas masks for the entire team, leaving some vulnerable to gas grenades.

There’s noise from below and Lexa gestures at Raven, who nods grimly and throws one of her grenades down the stairs. There’s a scream and then an explosion. Then, silence, and Lexa races down the stairs, followed by the gona and Skaikru. She needs to hurry. They don’t know what kind of danger Clarke is in, how long she’ll be able to distract them with her ‘dead man’s switch’. If the bulk of Mount Weather’s occupants realise they are being invaded, they will strike back.

Lexa recognises the location from Clarke’s map. Here is the floor where it is – life support. It is the only room and unmistakeable. The security passes let them in, but the room is just a mysterious warren of technology to Lexa.

“Guard the door,” she snaps to the rest of her team. There is only one way in and out of this room and they need it to be clear – they can’t afford to be blocked in here. The five gona with packs drop them at her feet quickly before heading out the door. “Raven, Monty, Jasper, make these work.”

“Yes, Commander,” Raven says. “Dammit, I was hoping these would all be dead, not still active. Guys, get the air purification system open. Now.”

“Sure thing,” Monty says, using his access pass on the nearest computer. “It looks like this is a separate system and this room’s lined with protective stuff – guess they’re a bit paranoid about their life support systems. That’s why it didn’t get fried when central went down.” Then, when a screen flashes up asking for something called a password, he grimaces and starts typing quickly. Jasper groans at it then suggests something in an undertone. “It’s not pure oxygen, just regular air,” he reports in a relieved tone after a second.

Lexa is not sure what this means or why it matters, but Raven sighs and says “Thank fuck.” She suddenly remembers Clarke mentioning something about Mount Weather’s air supply in their early planning – how if their system used pure oxygen, it could somehow be used to blow up the whole place, but she eventually decided the Maunon would never take that risk. It looks like she was correct.

One of the Skaikru shoots at someone outside. “A couple of them are on the stairs,” a gona reports.

Lexa hears a gas grenade go off. The few gona and Skaikru not wearing gas masks pass out immediately, one staggering back into the room before his eyes roll up in his head. “Masks,” she snaps at Jasper and Monty as the smoke enters the room. She pulls hers down as well – so far she has been ignoring it since she needs to be able to give commands clearly, but now she cannot afford to faint. They follow suit quickly, then Monty continues typing away.

A clear chamber nearby slides open with a swish, air blowing out like a strong wind. “Good job, guys,” Raven says. It’s hard to tell through the mask but she sounds like she’s smiling. She grabs one of the packs and starts pouring the jobi nuts into the air purification system. Jasper and Monty help and soon they have all five packs’ worth piled there, some of the lighter nuts being blown away already. Raven pulls another one of her small devices out of her pack, detaches some kind of trigger system from it, and buries the device in the jobi nuts. “Close it now.”

“Easy,” Monty says, and with the press of a button it slides shut again. Raven presses the trigger she
holds and Lexa braces herself, but the device only sizzles red. The rotten jobi nuts start to catch, burning and sending great puffs of smoke into the air purification system.

“This is some kind of irony,” Jasper says mournfully. “The two of us, sober, making everyone else high.”

“Call it a public service,” Monty suggests, voice muffled by his mask, and they both clap their hand in an odd, exaggerated way at the same time – some kind of celebration ritual, clearly. “They should be thanking us.”

“Gona,” Lexa orders, striding towards the door. “It is time for us to go. Kill any who get in your way, but ignore those who run or hide, as well as those who are rendered useless by the jobi nuts. Focus on threats, not revenge.”

“Sha, Heda,” the gona chorus. The Skaikru copy them after a second, though Lexa’s not sure if they know exactly what the words mean. They certainly know they’re agreeing with her orders, though.

It is time for the Mountain to fall.

Chapter End Notes

This must be very frustrating for anyone who wanted to see what was happening with Clarke. The main problem with alternating viewpoints :)
“She’s lying,” Emerson rages. “Kill her or I will.” He raises his gun but Cage forces his arm down before he can fire.

“Gamma rays destroy electronics, if you’re wondering why all your computers are freaking out,” Clarke says helpfully. “And you can easily check if it’s a bomb, if you have a close look at it. I don’t bluff.”

“Check it,” he snaps at Dr Tsing, jerking his head at Raven’s device. She hurries over, still nursing her wounded hand.

Clarke looks over at Octavia, whose entire face is now bloody and bruised. “O, are you okay?”

Octavia spits out some more blood and croaks, “Worth it. Though I will say she tasted awful.” She lets out a hoarse laugh as blood trickles down the side of her face.

“I said to tell them everything as soon as possible,” Clarke comments, still keeping a wary eye on the rest of the room. “Not get yourself tortured.”

“More believable,” Octavia says, looking like she’s trying to smile. “Plus, I wanted them to think I still had useful information they might be able to get out of me with some more effort. If they thought I told them everything I knew they might have killed me.” She has a point, Clarke admits. However, she’s not too thrilled with how injured Octavia is, and she suspects Bellamy may well actually try and kill her over this one.

“The laser stamp on the metal says it contains uranium,” Tsing says, face paling. “And it does look like the kind of metal they used for the outer layer of nuclear missiles.”

“That’s what we built it from,” Clarke says. “We had a missile up on the Ark, so we brought it down with us. I just knew it would come in use.”

Cage curses. He raises his own gun and points it at Clarke. “Disarm it, now,” he snaps.

“You won’t shoot me unless you want everyone here to die,” Clarke says calmly. “You aren’t protected down here. The entire Mountain will collapse in on itself. Your guards, your scientists, your children, you… if I let go of this trigger you’re all dead.”

“Clarke,” Abby whispers, looking shocked.

Clarke manages to give her mother a crooked smile. “Hi, Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Abby replies, but she’s staring at Raven’s device in mingled fear and horror as she says it.

“You’ll kill your own people as well,” Emerson says fiercely. “Not just our families, but yours.”

“That’s a lie,” Abby says immediately, trying to sit up but stopped by her restraints. “They’re dead, they’re all dead, even Thelonious is dead …” she breaks off into a sob.

Emerson walks up to her and hits her with the butt of his gun. “Shut up,” he says viciously. Clarke can’t stop herself from flinching. Then he looks at Clarke. “She’s wrong,” he tells Clarke, trying to keep his voice level. “More than a dozen of your people are still alive.”
“You wouldn’t keep any of them alive,” Clarke says softly, looking at him. “Don’t forget, Carl, I know you too. I know exactly what you’re capable of, just like you know what I’m capable of. So tell your boss that I’m absolutely capable of blowing us all to hell if I have to, won’t you?”

“He’s telling the truth, actually,” Cage says, his mouth twisting. “Some of our people have… misguided sympathies. The younger ones of your people are being protected by them. You’ll kill your own people’s children too. There’s a dozen of them still alive.”

Clarke shrugs, careful to keep her thumb on the button. “That doesn’t matter. A dozen lives versus all the ones I could end if I just let go? Not a very good deal. Plus, you’ll kill them anyway.”

“Maybe not,” Tsing says, raising her hands as if to show she’s harmless, although Clarke knows she’s not harmless at all. She’s pleased to note that Octavia’s vicious bite is bleeding copiously. “We could keep some alive, let them live here, raise them. It would be useful in case the bone marrow transplants aren’t as permanent as they seem.”

“I’m not going to disarm this so you can keep children as cattle,” Clarke hisses. She glances at her watch. How much time will Lexa need? As long as possible, presumably.

“Then how about disarming it to keep your mother from agonising pain,” Cage says, a trace of his former smugness coming back. “I saw your reaction before when Emerson hit her.” Emerson moves out of the way as he walks to stand next to Abby and holds his gun against her knee. Clarke’s mother shrieks and thrashes, trying to get away, but Cage easily keeps the barrel of the gun on her kneecap even though his eyes are trained on Clarke. “Kneecapping hurts immensely, you know.”

Clarke just stares at him, working on keeping her face stone, her eyes cold. “Not as much as having your bone marrow forcibly removed. Like you did to dozens of Sky People.”

The soldiers around the room are having quiet conversations with each other, though their eyes remain fixated on Clarke and the trigger she holds. She suspects they’re coming up with strategies to grab her while keeping the button down. They must know how difficult that will be to do, though – and they’re used to obeying orders, so they’re waiting to see what Cage wants them to do. Clarke wonders what kind of idiots would willingly follow someone whose strategies were as psychotic and short-sighted as a typical Bond villain.

One of the soldiers touches a hand to his nose, which has started to bleed. He frowns at his bloody hand in confusion, then wipes his nose against his sleeve, apparently deciding the nosebleed is either random or fear-induced instead of something more serious.

“Sky People? What a charming name,” Cage says, his smug smile widening. He clicks the safety off. Abby looks at him, eyes wide and terrified. “Do ‘Sky People’ love their parents, or are you too much like the savages for things like that to matter to you?”

“Do Mountain Men love their parents?” Clarke retorts. “Where’s your loving father, Cage? Dead? Locked up? Or was Dante smart enough to realise that his son was going to stab him in the back and get out before that happened? He must have thought you were losing your mind, talking about time travel and space stations. Or did he finally open his eyes enough to notice that you’d lost your mind long before? Did he realise how empty, how worthless, how pathetic and sociopathic you’d always been?”

Cage’s smile fades momentarily. “You don’t know anything about my father,” he growls. The noise of the gun going off in the confined space is deafening, so much so that it takes a couple of seconds for Clarke to register Abby’s agonised scream.
The scream fades into a constant whimpering and breathless sobbing. Abby thrashes against her bonds for a moment and then lets out another wordless exclamation of pain as she jostles her leg.

“She has another knee,” Cage says pleasantly. He moves his gun slightly to the left.

“No, no, no!” Abby screams, her face white and taut with pain. “Please! No! You don’t have to -”

“You bastard!” Octavia yells hoarsely at Cage, teeth bared like a wild animal. She lets out a snarl of fury. “You’re going to die, you miserable, weak, pathetic little mokskwoma, you -”

“We have a volunteer,” Cage says, walking around the chair to point the gun at Octavia’s knee instead.

Abby lets out a broken little sob. A red tear slides down her face, unnoticed by the others. Blood is swelling up from her shattered knee. Meanwhile, Clarke notices that Emerson has been subtly edging towards the door. To go get more people, perhaps, though what they can do to help the situation she has no idea. It’s probably best not to find out.

“Stop moving,” she orders him, then turns back to Cage. “This is all pointless,” Clarke says clearly, not looking at her mother’s face again and definitely not looking at her blood-covered pants leg, though she feels like throwing up. “Because I can’t disarm it anyway.”

“You what?” Cage glares at her. “What kind of plan -”

“All of us walk out of the Mountain,” Clarke says clearly. “You, me, my mother, your people, Sky People, Tree People and Ice People if you’ve left any of those alive.”

“And what?” Emerson says snidely. “You’ll leave the bomb here and blow it up?”

“Exactly.” Clarke tightens her grip on the trigger. Her hands are starting to become slippery with sweat and the fact that they’re still tied isn’t helping at all. “We all live. Mount Weather doesn’t.”

Clarke blinks, and for a second she sees her father standing in front of her instead of Cage. She nearly sighs in relief. The standoff has been going for quite a while now. Lexa’s team made it inside, and without any kind of coordinated attack against them or any effective leadership, they must have made it through easily. The only remotely competent people are in this room, arguing over what to do about her.

She recognises the feeling of jobi nuts, the strange lightness and fear mixed together, the way everything’s starting to glow a little. It’s not good that they seem to be affecting her faster than the others, though. The last thing she needs right now is to start losing her grasp on reality.

“It’s a nuclear bomb,” Tsing says. For a second she looks distracted, taking a step back from something only she can see. She inhales sharply. “The trigger mechanism wouldn’t work from a distance, not through all our levels of protection. We… we wouldn’t be able to get far enough. We’d all die of radiation poisoning.”

“It seems fair that you would die of radiation poisoning,” Clarke says. “But I could leave someone here holding the trigger. That would solve the problem.”

“I…” Tsing puts her hand to her head. “What’s happening to me?”

A soldier next to her frowns and reaches out to stabilise her. “Doctor?”

“Gamma rays destroy people as well as electronics,” Clarke says, giving them a vindictive smile.
“You might want to decide on what to do fast. Radiation poisoning is an awful way to die, I’ve heard.”

“This isn’t radiation poisoning,” Tsing snaps, “We burn in radiation, we don’t see things that aren’t there.”

“But now you have my people’s bone marrow in you,” Clarke says. She holds back a cough, the smoke from the jobi nuts curling into her. “So you don’t burn. You get to die the slow, painful way, like us.”

Cage takes several steps back from Raven’s device. “Is this possible?” he snaps at Tsing.

“I don’t – no!” Tsing says. She struggles against the soldier’s grip, looking at him like he’s a monster, before coming back to herself. “Sorry, I – no. No. Radiation wouldn’t affect our brain first, that’s not how it works.”

Clarke wonders what Tsing sees when she hallucinates. In her experience, the hallucinations seem to be about what you fear, what you want, what you haven’t been able to work through. What would someone like Cage or Tsing experience? Someone so lacking in empathy, that the darkest thing in their world has always been themselves. Maybe for the first time in her life, Tsing is seeing something scarier than herself. Or maybe what she’s seeing is herself.

“No, it’s not how it works. Firstly, it would make our organs shut down,” Clarke says helpfully. She finally allows herself to give in to the desire to cough, amazed it’s taken this long to affect her. Her coughing fit goes for nearly a minute before she straightens. No one’s taken the opportunity to try and move closer to her. They’re all staring, horrified, at the floor, now covered in the blood she just coughed up. She manages a blood-stained smile at them, doing her best to remain standing. “So it seems to have started for me. How are you all feeling?”
Levelled Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Resistance is light – much lighter than Lexa was expecting, in truth. Some Maunon thrash against things only they can see, others whimper in corners. Some are passed out, bleeding from their nose, mouth, eyes, even ears. They are helpless. One threatens her with a gun but he clearly sees someone else in her place, someone far more terrifying. She slits his throat without effort and the two bullets he fires hit the ceiling.

They’ve cleared out the two lowest levels already. Anyone showing signs of violence is immediately executed. Raven found a stack of plastic bindings in one room they entered that they have begun to use on the more harmless members of the population, binding their wrists and ankles tightly while they moan and thrash and ask for their parents and other such things. They ignore the children hiding in corners or whimpering in closets.

The very lowest level was nothing but a fancy office. The access passes they found did not get them into it, but Jasper and Monty were able to make the door open eventually. There was nothing of use inside and no people, so Lexa simply closed it again and went to clear out the level above, Level 6. She has no use for the Maunon’s finery, their smooth perfect furniture and fancy technology, which may as well be built with the bones of her people.

Level 6 contained wide open spaces, what looked like many homes, and a strange place with odd machines that the Skaikru told her was a ‘gym’ for training. It also had hundreds of civilians and most of the guards. All were easily removed from the situation, killed or tied up without much effort. When Lexa thought of the inside of the Mountain in the past she always automatically thought it would be as fierce and well-guarded as the outside, but instead it is as luxurious and vulnerable as Clarke proclaimed. The hard outer shell is all the defences they seem to have.

Now they reach Level 5 – or try to. “I can’t get it open,” Monty says, frustrated.

“Or rather, we can get it open, but we can’t get it open,” Jasper says, apparently trying to clarify. He quails when Lexa looks at him. “Uh, we can hack it, that’s not a problem. The door says it can open. But there’s something stopping it, like the wires aren’t connected.”

“They have damaged it so it will not open,” Lexa realises. None of the Maunon they’ve encountered so far on the lower levels have had grenades, so she has removed her gas mask to gives orders more easily. The smoke from the jobi nuts gives her an unfamiliar sense of lightness, but none of the hallucinations the others fear. “Raven, use your bombs to remove the door.”

Raven grins a little nervously. “And if I blow us all up?” she asks.

“We will all wait on the stairs. They are relatively strong, structurally speaking,” Lexa says. “Do it. Now.”

There’s a pause where Lexa wonders if Raven might be about to argue, but instead she says, “Sure thing, Commander.” She starts setting up her bombs, her face becoming set as the smile on it fades. “We’re probably far enough down now that the explosion will make the whole place shake, though. Everyone in the Mountain will know they’re under attack.”

“If they are anything like the warriors we have faced already, I think we can withstand that,” Lexa
says dryly, avoiding discussing what she knows Raven was actually talking about – Clarke. If Mount Weather’s leadership haven’t realised they’re under attack yet, that the nuclear bomb was simply a distraction, then they will definitely realise it now. The direct threat will no doubt stop any negotiation with Clarke, placing her at great risk. Lexa hopes that the Maunon with Clarke will be impaired enough that they are unable to harm her – and also hopes that Clarke will not be so impaired. But there is nothing she can do about it right now. Perhaps Clarke is on this level, perhaps not.

She prays that Clarke is on this level.

Raven said that whichever level she’s on must be close to the bottom to have knocked out the main lights as far as the very lowest level, so that the only thing left undamaged was life support with its extra-thick metal walls. So they work from the bottom up. They will find her. The map is in Lexa’s mind. And Clarke is strong. She has successfully distracted and manipulated the Maunon this long, a task no one else could ever have completed, and she will continue doing so.

As promised, the explosion shakes the place. “Forward,” Lexa orders her people. She steps through first, however, dust and smoke from the explosion swirling around her, blowing back her red sash. She spots a shape and leaps forward, knocking the gun out of the man’s hand before he can fire, then slicing at the next one while one of her gona dispatches the first. They are both wearing the green suits the others have discarded – so they will not have been affected as the others were, Lexa realises, annoyed. If all those on this floor wear suits they will have a problem.

“Wait!” One of them commands, voice clear and authoritative. “Wait, stop! Put your weapons down, everyone!” He raises his arms and Lexa pauses. The Mountain Men behind him lower their guns immediately. She raises her hand and those behind her halt. She steps forward to face the man.

“You’re not who I expected,” he comments lightly. She can see his face through the clear plastic front of his helmet, blocked slightly by the circle and tubes over his mouth. He’s an old man with sparse white hair and a thin face. His eyes are sharp and knowing. He talks to her as if speaking to an equal, and Lexa knows in a flash who he is.

“And who were you expecting, Dante Wallace?” Lexa smirks at him, holding up her sword so the tip rests at his throat. He looks surprised for a second at her knowledge of him but then dismisses it.

“My son,” he says, a little grimly. “He’s why we’re here, why the level’s locked. There’s nearly sixty of us, plus a dozen children from the Ark who are locked in the other room for their safety. We’re all in suits because my son threatened to let radiation into this level if we didn’t give him the children and agree to be injected with their bone marrow.”

“Are you saying we share a common enemy?” Lexa lets her smirk grow. “Make your offer, Dante kom Maunon. Tell me why I should not kill you all for the harm you have dealt my people.”

“Because we’re protecting some of the young people from the Ark,” Dante says, eyes fixed on her face like he is looking for any sign his words are having an effect. “Surely that’s enough to know we’re better than the others. Everyone here with me objected to killing children. Many of them have never harmed a single one of your people.”

“You mean they did not stain their own hands with my people’s blood,” Lexa points out. “But that does not mean it was not shed on their behalf. My people’s blood flows in their veins.”

“My mother never took a single drop of Outsider blood,” a young, female voice chimes in from behind Dante. “She died refusing to take another’s life. Please. A lot of the people here refused to let Outsiders die for them once they were old enough to say no. We knew it was wrong.”
Lexa looks at the girl, small and helpless-looking in her baggy green Maunon suit, her dark hair a halo around her wan face. “And did this knowledge inspire you to free my people? To fight against the system that bled them dry? Did this knowledge prevent my people from dying, burning in fog, being turned into Ripa?”

There are tears in the girls’ eyes, but she still replies, and Lexa thinks there is strength in this one despite her tears. “Please,” she whispers. “Please, don’t kill us. Show mercy. I don’t want to die.”

Lexa looks back at her people, who shift under her gaze but stand in place, weapons lowered. “We are not savages,” she says softly, “And blood must not have blood.” Lexa faces Dante again. “Place all of your weapons in a pile,” she commands him. “You have information I could use. If you give it to me, your supporters here will live.”

Dante closes his eyes for a moment. Lexa knows he has been ruling his people long enough to see what her assurance means. Those who make alliances based purely on their honour never promise what they cannot deliver, because they cannot afford to have their word ever questioned. He knows she has promised Dante’s supporters will survive, but not that he will. She waits to see if he accepts this.

He opens his eyes again, and says, a little hoarsely. “I will give you whatever information you want, Commander. Just ensure that some of my people survive this.”

“She code,” Lexa says baldly. “You know which one I mean. You will give me your security pass so that no doors may stop me, you will give me the code, and then you will all wait here for my word.”

“How can I trust -” Dante starts to say, then stops, realising he has no option but to trust her not to kill them when she has what she wants. Perhaps he also knows that the Commander keeps her word, and that she makes alliances in good faith. She does not know how closely the Maunon watch the world outside them. Not closely enough to see that the ‘Outsiders’ they speak of are people too, clearly, but perhaps close enough to know their actions and beliefs.

Dante nods, and looks around – perhaps to find a writing tool, there do not appear to be any close by. After a minute, Lexa passes him her knife, and holds out her arm. “Write it on me,” she orders softly. The gona behind her make quiet noises of displeasure but make no move to argue.

He looks at her, startled, but then presses the knife lightly against her arm and begins to carve out numbers. It bleeds a little, but does not hurt much. “I could cut your wrist to the bone,” he comments quietly, for no one’s ears but hers. It is not said like a threat, just a statement of fact.

“And your people would die, every single one of them,” she says, just as softly. “As they will if this code is incorrect. No, you will not do that. The first thing a good commander learns is how to read their enemies.”

“I thought I was good at that as well,” he says, with a twinge of sadness. “I suppose that belief has been disproven by recent events.”

“Even the best rulers sometimes have a blind spot for family,” Lexa says, thinking of Titus and Gustus. Thinking of Clarke’s father who died for trusting his wife, of Clarke who looked to her friend as a traitor instead of her mother. Dante finishes his writing and hands her back her knife.

Lexa looks behind her and does a quick count. Eighteen Skaikru remain. “Jackson,” she says authoritatively.
“Yes, Commander?” he says, looking surprised to be addressed.

“The next level is the medical one, I believe,” she says. “You will find the equipment necessary to give these people bone marrow. Apart from Raven, Jasper and Monty who may still be required, our team’s Skaikru will then remain here and volunteer their bone marrow. There are more than enough of you here to only take a safe amount.”

The Skaikru all start talking at once.

“You know, it’s not really volunteering if you order them to,” Raven points out in an undertone.

“They volunteered to follow my orders,” Lexa says reasonably. “This is my order.” Nevertheless, she speaks up again. “If you do not wish to do this, you do not have to,” she informs the Skaikru, and they quiet. “However, this will endanger us all further as the Mountain will have to be kept standing long enough for us to find bone marrow for those who protected your children.”

One of the Skaikru men clears his throat. “It’s not that, it’s… isn’t giving bone marrow painful? Really painful?”

Lexa blinks. This would not be a consideration for her people. She turns back to Dante again. “Do you have sleep darts?” He nods. “Then the Skaikru can be knocked out for a couple of hours, long enough for the marrow to be taken painlessly.” This seems generally acceptable, though some Skaikru still do not look particularly happy.

“Come,” Lexa orders. “It is time to deal with the next level.”

Chapter End Notes

Remember at the beginning of this when I was like "I think this will probably be just one chapter"... "I don't know when I'll be able to update, but not often"... "fifteen chapters, maybe twenty"... "maybe forty, actually"... and NOW WE'RE AT SIXTY CHAPTERS. Wow. Thanks to everyone who's been sticking with this since the beginning! You guys are awesome! And so is Cassy, you are the best and most enthusiastic beta ever :)
The explosion below them shakes the whole room. For a moment everyone looks wildly at each other, wondering if it’s part of their hallucinations, before realising that they all reacted to the same noise.

“We’re under attack,” Emerson says, face paling. He raises his gun at Clarke and winces, seeing another hallucination. Blood starts to dribble down from his nose. “You did this, I know you did -”

“Father?” Cage says dazedly. “Father, I didn’t mean to – please, Father – forgive me -” Most of the room are like him now, locked in their own little worlds.

Emerson dives across the room towards Clarke, waving his gun like it’s a sword instead. A shot goes off and buries itself in the wall. The other soldiers react – some of them seem less affected than the others – starting towards her as well. Clarke’s father keeps appearing next to her mother, Wells chokes to death on the floor, and Raven screams at the ceiling. Meanwhile Lexa slumps next to Clarke, bleeding out, but when Clarke reaches for her frantically there’s nothing there.

Clarke decides that, on the whole, she doesn’t like jobi nuts. Jobi nuts are awful, especially in gaseous form. Why the hell did they bring jobi nuts into this plan? Even though she knows she’s hallucinating, she keeps forgetting. “Dad?” she says, then slumps to the floor.

Then a soldier reaches out for her and she kicks him, hard. He makes a pained noise but covers her hands with his anyway, squeezing them roughly and painfully, and she realises he’s trying to take the trigger from her but keep the button down. She kicks him again and again, wildly, and eventually he lets out a choked scream and coughs more blood onto her.

“Clarke!” her mother looks down at her – not the one on the bed, another one, a younger one, face disapproving. “You need learn to share.” Clarke glances at the soldier, but it’s not a soldier, of course it’s not, why would there be a soldier in her room? It’s Wells and he wants the toy she’s holding. She likes Wells, he’s nice, of course she should share with him. She lets go of it.

He falls back and it’s not Wells anymore but a soldier again – shit, this stuff is potent when you burn it. He has the trigger but almost immediately drops it. The four or five people in the room still coherent enough to know what’s going on flinch as the button pops up, but nothing happens. The trigger rolls across the floor harmlessly.

“What?” Emerson says hoarsely. Then he’s her teacher, she’s learning Earth Skills and it’s a test. “Why didn’t it go off?”

She wants to pass the test. “Oh, it’s because -”Then she blinks and realises what she’s doing, realises it’s Emerson, but decides to keep going anyway. She wants him to know. Clarke gives him a dark grin. “My mechanic isn’t very good at making nuclear bombs, it turns out. She’s pretty great at EMPs though. All your most important systems are within fifty feet of here, right? Vertically and horizontally.” That’s better, she can see what’s real now if she concentrates. “I didn’t really like the idea of carrying around a nuclear bomb anyway. Kinda dangerous.” She spits out blood on the floor.

He blinks, and she realises his eyes are starting to get more focused as well. Maybe the smoke from the burnt jobi nuts is dissipating. Either way, he’s looking straight at her without a problem. “It’s…
that was an EMP? You pressed it and it knocked out… But what about…?” He touches a hand to his mouth, which has blood seeping out the side.

“Turns out the ‘savages’ are still a fair bit smarter than you,” Clarke says spitefully. She coughs up some more blood. “Fun, right? It’s a virus. Biological warfare. Octavia and I got it from a kid in TonDC who travelled there just for us. You guys got it from Octavia, she’s immune but she’s still a carrier. Maybe you shouldn’t torture people so up close and personal, it’s very catching. Don’t worry. Most people survive. I’ll keep my fingers crossed for your family -”

She knows the second she says it that she’s gone too far. He leaps up with a cry of rage and throws himself at her, hands closing around her neck. His weight presses down her legs and her arms are still bound, leaving her nearly helpless. She thrashes against him, choking, trying desperately to breathe as he roars wordlessly. She tries to throw him off but can’t.

Clarke manages to get her bound hands up to his throat as well somehow and squeeze. “You’ll die long before you can choke me,” he gasps out, blood trickling from his mouth down over her hands.

I know, Clarke thinks. She lowers her head, and uses her grip on him to pull his head forward to meet hers quickly. Just like Lexa taught her. The strongest part of her head hits one of the weakest parts of his. He yanks back, yowling, clutching at his head – it looks like she’s caved in a part of it, but that could just be a hallucination. Suddenly there’s the noise of gunfire and Emerson staggers and collapses on her, blood blossoming from two wounds on his right shoulder. Then Jackson’s crouching there, rolling Emerson off her – why is she hallucinating Jackson? “He’ll live,” Jackson says.

“You’ll care, jobi nuts work quickly like this but they wear off quickly as well. Just breathe, ai niron. Breathe.” She turns and looks at Jackson. “Find something for her,” she orders.

“What?” Jackson says, confused.

“They will have medicines for viruses, will they not?” Lexa snaps, “Find some. Now.”

Then there’s Jackson in front of her. No, it’s her mother, about to give her an injection. She always hated this as a little kid, her mother suddenly turning into someone she couldn’t trust, pushing a needle into her arm as she fought against it. But Clarke obeys Lexa when Lexa tells her to stay still, to breathe, that it’s all right, and slowly her mother fades back into being Jackson. The injection stays though, pushed into her arm.

“It should work pretty quickly,” Jackson says, “But it won’t cure it, it will just get her up and moving better for a while. It works by -”

“There are others who need help as well,” Lexa interrupts him, iron command in her voice. “Sedate Octavia and Abby kom Skaikru before they injure themselves more. And you are needed downstairs to begin injecting bone marrow.”

“I like it when you do the Commander voice,” Clarke says through the gas mask, starting to feel more normal. She notices Lexa’s team is all here, Skaikru and Trikru, efficiently moving around to tie the wrists and ankles of everyone. Jackson’s giving Octavia and Abby some injections.

“Mochof,” Lexa says, peering at Clarke. “Are you back with us?”
Clarke blinks. “For the moment, it seems like it.”

Raven appears there as well. “Hey, Clarke, good to see you’re still alive. And Octavia too. Even Abby. This is turning out to be a pretty good attack. Nine out of ten, would invade again. It loses a point for the colour scheme though.”

“Good to see you too,” Clarke says dryly. With Lexa’s help, she manages to stand up.

“I believe we have now successfully taken the place,” Lexa tells her. “We must clear out the two levels above, but I think we have encountered nearly all the Mountain’s forces.” She clears her throat. “May I leave you for the moment? I wish to continue upwards. I have sent a gona back to get Anya and her team to come help. We think it is time to begin removing all of our new captives from the Mountain. The mechanism that controls the fog from inside here seems to have been knocked out by Raven’s device, but I would still like to ensure there is no one here to try and remedy that.”

“Yes, you should go,” Clarke says, still feeling weak and dizzy. “I can treat the wounded here and start gathering any useful medical supplies to take with us.”

Lexa nods, and smiles at her brilliantly for a brief moment. “I am glad you kept your promise to remain alive, ai hodnes.”

Then she is gone.

Clarke finds some water and rinses her mouth out, not bothering to clean the rest of the blood off herself even though she’s covered in it. The bloody tears she’s accidentally smudged around her face look like a red-brown version of Lexa’s warpaint, and even her dark Grounder clothing is covered so liberally that the red shows. The sour, coppery smell of it hangs in the air.

Clarke busies herself bandaging her mother and Octavia, who have both passed out from the sedative. Then she treats the unconscious and tied Emerson as well. He will remain alive to face a trial, and that gives her a surge of vindictive pleasure. They might have started trying out ‘blood must not have blood’, but Clarke knows that they will give the worst of the Mountain to the people to die in the traditional way, by a thousand cuts. Blood must not always have blood, but decades of blood does deserve some in return. Revenge and justice aren’t always polar opposites.

It’s taken her a long time to find that middle ground.

She goes down a level and helps Jackson transfer bone marrow to the remaining Maunon, then turns to find herself face to face with Maya. “Hello,” she manages to choke out, the air all gone from her lungs. She doesn’t know why it surprises her, still, to see the dead alive again. “I’m Clarke.”

“Maya,” the other girl says, giving her a shy smile, which is impressive given Clarke looks like she’s literally bathed in blood.

“Maya,” Clarke repeats. “It’s nice to meet you.” She injects her with the bone marrow.

“Maya,” Clarke repeats. “It’s nice to meet you.” She injects her with the bone marrow.

After a while, Lexa’s back again. “We have the entire Mountain, and we’ve gotten nearly everyone out,” she tells Clarke. “All are dead or tied. This is the last group remaining inside.” Around them the room empties, people carried out by crowds of gona, who are all resistant to the virus and don’t need masks now that the smoke from the jobi nuts has finally dispersed.

Then it’s just Lexa and Clarke standing there. “We’ll be taking people back to TonDC as soon as possible,” Lexa says quietly. Her eyes search Clarke’s face now that the gas mask is gone, looking for signs of strain or sickness. Since the injection was just some adrenalin mixed with a generic antiviral, it’s unlikely the virus is actually gone from her system – she probably has a couple more hours before she crashes again. “I think we can hold the executions there. Your mother and the
others are also outside, being treated with whatever we have. I have not allowed anyone to remove anything but medical supplies and food and a few of the vehicles, I hope that is acceptable to you. I do not wish for anyone to be able to build another acid fog machine. I-”

“Lexa,” Clarke interrupts. “Shof op.”

Lexa quiets, and Clarke leans in and kisses her, long and slow and perfect. They’re both covered in blood and sweat and dirt, both tired and on edge. But something about the moment is perfect.

Then she pulls back and smiles at Lexa. “We did it,” she says, grinning. “We did it, ai hodnes. We took down the Mountain.” Lexa holds out her arm and for a second Clarke’s not sure why. Then she sees the code scratched into Lexa’s skin.

“Remember it,” Lexa says softly, and kisses Clarke again. “Remember it and use it. I will wait for you outside, ai niron. As long as it takes.”

Clarke looks at Lexa’s arm, burning the code into her mind. Her lips move as she says it again and again. Then she looks up. “You could do it. You have it on your arm.”

Lexa’s lips twist into a wry smile. “I appreciate the thought, Clarke kom Skaikru. But only one of us is the Slayer of the Mountain, and it is not me. It was your plan, your risks, your nightmares that made this happen. This is not my part to play.”

“Oh,” Clarke says softly. She realises what Lexa’s trying to do, what she’s giving her – closure. The chance to become the destroyer of the Mountain again, but the right way. “Mochof.” She kisses Lexa again, and Lexa leaves.

Clarke wanders the Mountain for a while. It’s empty, just as ruthlessly empty and silent as it was the first time. It feels like children’s laughter still echoes in the halls. The common areas are still comfortable. The kitchens still smell of chocolate cake.

But it doesn’t feel like a tomb anymore. There are a few bodies around – men with guns, mostly – but otherwise it seems more like an old house someone’s moved out of. The lack of people isn’t horrifying. She knows they’re far above. Sick, tied up, injured, unhappy and homeless, but alive. And for most of them, she thinks that’s more than they deserve.

A part of her wishes Lexa was still here to wander the halls with her. But another part wants to destroy this place all on her own, as if doing so will allow her to conquer her nightmares of it. Like how waking up to see Lexa breathing beside her is slowly helping to reduce her nightmares of Lexa’s death. Maybe someday she’ll almost never have nightmares at all. Maybe someday she’ll heal.

Eventually, just as she’s starting to cough blood again, she finds the place to enter the code. All the computer systems and doors are unlocked – Monty and Jasper’s parting act.

She keys in the self-destruct code, and walks out of the Mountain, leaving her nightmares behind her. There is a crowd of people waiting outside, many of them on horses, already ready to go. Lexa’s in the front and Clarke keeps her eyes on her. She doesn’t look around when she hears the shuddering boom as the Mountain falls – doesn’t look to see if there are lights or fire or smoke or if it looks like nothing at all from the surface.

Clarke doesn’t look back. Not even once.
Congrats to the person who actually figured the virus thing out... well done :)}
Clarke’s exit from the Mountain will become a legend, Lexa knows. Some of her people had understood that the code she had was for a self-destruct, but even to the ones who know, Clarke’s calm, unflinching walk towards them is striking. They are already whispering in awe as it happens.

Clarke fixes her eyes on Lexa’s face, a small smirk on her lips. She is dramatically bloodstained, her hair in wild braids, her expression fierce and unyielding. She doesn’t react to the explosion behind her as the most feared place in the world falls. She strides forward as the night sky is lit up behind her, the blaze of furious light silhouetting her so that she seems more like a living shadow than a person, something inhuman and unfathomable. In that one moment, even Lexa could almost believe that Clarke blew up the Mountain just with the strength of her wrath.

There are no shortage of gona to see it, either. Nearly all have arrived from Arkadia by now. She originally ordered the rest of the gona to follow slowly in order to provide a distraction – a quick-moving group of a hundred people would not be noticeable compared to the far greater, slow-moving gonakru, distracting the Maunon’s gaze and making them expect an entirely different style of attack. But the gona have also come in use securing the Maunon and caring for the sick and injured, and it is good that so many are here to witness the end of the Mountain.

Clarke stops in front of Lexa. Blood drips from her eyes. “Let’s get out of here,” she says, for Lexa’s ears only. “We’ve dealt with my nightmare. Once we’ve finished sorting this out, we head north, find Nia and deal with yours. Sha?”

“Sha,” Lexa says softly, spellbound. She moves back in her seat and reaches out her hand. Clarke stares in confusion for a moment then takes it, and Lexa pulls Clarke up onto the horse in front of her. “Hold on tight, Mountain Slayer.” Then she raises her voice. “GONA! TO TONDC!” She wheels the horse around and takes off at a canter. She wants to get Clarke back before her illness makes it difficult for her to stay on the horse. It will not do for her people to see Clarke fall now.

Only Anya and Tristan’s rangers are able to keep up with them. The night is filled with stars and the hazy smoke of the Mountain’s destruction, but Lexa’s world narrows to the girl in front of her and the horse beneath her. With her arms around Clarke, she keeps her upright and manages to get her to TonDC, though she can feel the difference in Clarke as they go, the way her energy fades, adrenalin (both natural and injected) starting to dwindle.

Once they arrive she helps Clarke down from the horse, holding her up when Clarke would fall. “Come on, ai hodnes,” she says quietly. “Our tent is just here. It is time to rest.”

Clarke coughs some blood onto the ground. “You’ll be here when I wake up?”

“I could not leave,” Lexa says honestly. She helps Clarke undress and get onto the sleep mats and she wraps every blanket around her, cocooning her in warmth. Clarke is starting to become feverish, and Lexa fetches a waterskin and persuades her to drink some of it. Finally she gets a cloth and begins to sponge off the blood on Clarke’s face and shoulders as Clarke slips into a restless sleep.

After a while she realise she is not alone in the tent.

“I was wondering when you would notice I was here,” Anya says, a little teasingly. “You show your
heart in your eyes, yongon. You always have.”

“And is that a bad thing, Anya? To feel for her and show that feeling?” Lexa replies softly, still focusing on Clarke. Only a small percentage of people die of the virus, and Clarke has survived it before, but she still worries.

“I do not still object to her, Lexa, if that is what you mean,” Anya tells her. “She has more than proven herself to me – to all of us. But that does not mean I do not worry about you.” She hesitates. “She is the leader of her people. She cannot continue to accompany you everywhere and she cannot live with you in Polis. Also, you wish the Skaikru to join the alliance – you cannot be with the leader of one of the clans, the other clans will think you are influenced by her.”

“I cannot be with the leader of one of the clans,” Lexa acknowledges. She drags the damp cloth across Clarke’s forehead again – it seems to help her sleep. “But Clarke will not be leader for much longer. I plan to make her my chief advisor, my second in command, an extension of my power and authority.”

Anya sucks in a quick breath. “That… is a great deal of power to give, Heda.”

“You think the clans will object? The ambassadors?” Lexa glances back at her former Fos.

Anya considers it. “No,” she says eventually, sounding surprised. “Not if you announce it while this is still fresh. She has done the impossible and brought down the Mountain with only a handful of gona. With Titus taken by the Azgeda, it will also comfort the coalition to know that someone will take charge if you are killed until he can be retrieved or replaced and the Conclave can take place. I do not think they will object – they will grumble like they do at anything, but nothing serious.”

Lexa looks back at Clarke, Bruises from Emerson’s attack ring her throat, a necklace of blue and black splotches that make her skin look even paler in comparison. “Good. Because even if they object, I am the Commander, and this is my choice. As always, I will do what is best for my people. She is what is best for my people.”

“And she is what is best for you,” Anya says softly, giving Lexa a rare sweet smile. Normally Anya is all edges and sharpness, so softness from her always feels more meaningful than from anyone else.

It feels like something is trapped in Lexa’s throat, blocking her air. “Yes,” she chokes out, and is surprised to find tears in her eyes. “She is what is best for me.”

Anya places her hand on Lexa’s shoulder. “I am glad for you, yongon,” she says. She clears her throat, withdrawing her hand and clearly trying to move the conversation away from topics that make her uncomfortably emotional. “So. As you ordered, I have many of the gona treating the sick Maunon.”

“Sha?”

“They are… quite enthusiastic about it,” Anya says hesitantly. “They believe we are attempting to keep the Maunon alive and lucid so that they may suffer the pain fully as they die.”

“I see,” Lexa says noncommittally.

Anya eyes her. “May I tell them that is what they are doing?”

“No,” Lexa says simply. “I have not decided what the fate of the Maunon will be yet.”

“Some of them are not ill,” Anya says carefully, “These ones claim you promised them safety and
sanctuary.”

“I did,” Lexa replies.

Anya closes her eyes for a second. “I see,” she says, keeping her voice level. “And what did they do to deserve this, if I can ask?”

“They gave me the code to destroy the Mountain,” Lexa says. “They have tried to avoid the deaths of our people, they saved Skaikru goufa from death. They are still guilty, but not as guilty as the others, weak and foolish instead of malevolent. I believe watching their home, their ways and their people destroyed is punishment enough for them.”

“They will become our enemies, Heda!” Anya growls, eyes flashing. “They will seek revenge -”

“Seek revenge how? They have no weapons, no allies,” Lexa points out calmly. “They have far less than a hundred people, and I believe those people will be absorbed into the Skaikru, who will watch them very closely. We can show mercy to the powerless this time, I think. Blood must not have blood.”

“Why do you seek to change our ways?” The question is almost plaintive.

“Because our ways need to change,” Lexa says flatly. She strokes Clarke’s hair lightly. “So do theirs. If I kill the defenceless, what is to stop others killing our defenceless? There is value in small acts, small changes, in unimportant lives spared.”

“Not a value I have ever seen,” Anya says darkly.

“But you will,” Lexa promises. She bends down and kisses Clarke’s hot forehead lightly. The other girl shifts in her sleep and moans. “I will not slaughter those who aided us. Not because I believe sparing them will make them our allies, but because otherwise why would anyone else seek to help us? People need to know that we do not decide guilt by association, that their individual actions still matter.”

Anya inhales sharply, and when Lexa turns to look at her in mild surprise, her face is filled with realisation. “The Azgeda…” she breathes, “You are doing this to send a message. That any who side with us against Nia will be forgiven. You are giving them a reason to come to our side instead of work with her out of fear.” She surveys Lexa and shakes her head slowly, a smile growing on her face. “Your mind terrifies me, yongon.”

“And that is as it should be,” Lexa says, managing a smile of her own. Then Clarke starts making little heaving noises in her sleep and Lexa barely manages to grab the bowl she uses for her warpaint in time for Clarke to vomit blood into it. Amazingly, she remains asleep through this, and Lexa touches a finger lightly to where her pulse beats in her neck – a little too fast, but strong and steady. Lexa focuses on her as the fit of vomiting continues, then looks up briefly after it seems to be over.

“Go manage the gona, Anya, ensure they do not kill any Maunon through mistreatment. I also wish you to check on Octavia and Abby – Clarke’s nomon, the other Skayon with the virus – and let me know how they fare.”

“Sha, Heda,” Anya says, and disappears.

Only a few minutes later, though, Lexa hears the tent flap open again. She frowns and turns. “Anya, why – oh. Raven kom Skaikru. Moba, I expected Anya.”

“Right,” Raven flushes slightly, remaining standing by the tent flap. “I shoulda knocked. Or, I don’t know, yodelled or something. Yodelling was banned in the Ark, did you know? Something to do
with the way the noise travelled. But I always thought -”

Lexa never expected to know Raven well enough to know when she is hedging, avoiding a subject. But sometimes life surprises you. “Raven. Why are you here?”

“I came to check on Clarke,” Raven huffs, “From a distance, obviously, so I don’t get what she has.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “Clarke is fine, feverish but resting. Did you really come for that?”

Raven glares at her. “She’s one of my best friends! Of course I want to check on her!”

“And…?”

Raven tries to keep up her glare, but it collapses into a reluctant smile. “Okay, maybe I didn’t come just to check on her. I wanted to talk to you about… stuff.”

“I see,” Lexa says politely, hiding an eye roll as she gives Clarke another soft kiss on the cheek. “And after that you would like to do ‘things’, I suspect. Or go ‘places’. You are going to have to be more specific, Raven.”

“Clarke’s one of my closest friends,” Raven says slowly. “So are you, really, or getting there at least.” She swallows and comes to her point. “So is Anya.”

“Oh.” Now Lexa understands why Raven entered as soon as Anya left. She was waiting for a chance to see Lexa without her there.

“I just need to know… what she wants,” Raven says, a little wretchedly. “What she’s looking for.”

“You would do better to speak to her about that,” Lexa points out.

“I get… distracted… when I talk to her,” Raven flushes and looks to the side. “We argue, and she smirks, and she makes me laugh, and then she gives me this look, all intense and evil. And it’s really hot. That’s why I kissed her before. But I can’t do this. I just broke up with Finn, I need time.” The words burst out of her like she needs to say them. “I need time, and I need space, and I can’t deal with something serious right now.” She swallows hard, looking on the verge of tears. “I don’t think Anya wants something casual, and even if she did, I don’t think I could do casual with her, not with how much I care about her. But I don’t know that I can manage a real relationship, not while I’m still healing from the last one. And I don’t want to lose her friendship, not after everything.”

Lexa wonders if the universe is punishing her for getting involved in Anya’s romantic life in the first place. “Talk to her,” she urges Raven, trying to stop herself from sounding as stiff and uncomfortable as she is. “Anya will be silent and listen and not argue if you ask her to do that. She may even wait for you if you ask her to.”

“You think?”

“I think there is not much Anya wouldn’t do, if you asked her to,” Lexa says softly. She looks down at Clarke again, at her flushed, feverish face, and moves the container to catch it as Clarke throws up blood in her sleep again. “Trust me. I understand what that is like.”

Chapter End Notes
I'll probably only be updating every second day for a while, guys. More time to sleep!
Taking Stock

When Clarke’s world swims back into focus again, she immediately tries to sit up. “Lexa -”

“Easy, Clarke,” Lexa says sharply, supporting her.

The world seems very bright, swirling dizzily around her as she fights her way back to consciousness, purple spots blinking in front of her vision. Everything seems to sway a little and she gags, but then manages to orient herself. “How… how long have I been asleep?”

“Around fifteen hours,” Lexa says. Now that Clarke looks at her, she can see that Lexa is very tired, the darkness under her eyes and the angles of her face more pronounced than normal.

“I asked you to stay with me,” Clarke remembers, and winces. “Sorry. You should have gotten some sleep, you must have been up for nearly forty-eight hours straight now.”

“I have stayed awake for longer,” Lexa says wryly. “I would have been too worried to sleep, anyway.”

Clarke snuggles into the warm, strong arms supporting her, selfishly glad that Lexa is still here. “Come nap with me, then,” she says sleepily, and yawns.

“That sounds good, ai niron,” Lexa says quietly, giving Clarke’s forehead a kiss.

Then Clarke’s eyes slam open. “My mother -”

“Well. Jackson cares for her,” Lexa says firmly. “For a time she was sedated so he could undertake some work on her knee, but she woke up several hours ago and appears to be getting better from the virus slowly.”

“The others?”

“Twenty-three of our people died in the assault on the Mountain, killed in the crossfire or executed by the Maunon before we could get them out. Octavia was up many hours ago – she is immune, as you said. Her torture will leave scars but she is already showing them with pride to the other Sekens and Linkon and none of her injuries will permanently incapacitate her.”

“That sounds like Octavia,” Clarke says, almost amused, even though she feels tears come to her eyes at the thought of the two dozen of their people who have died. She opens her mouth to ask more about her mother’s knee, then closes it again. She saw the shot. She knows it’s very likely her mother will need crutches or at least a cane the rest of her life. Instead, she asks, “How about the Maunon? How many died?”

“Anyon has – most unwillingly – been keeping track of their numbers with Dante,” Lexa tells her. “Twelve have died from the virus, and around seventy died in our invasion of the place – though he suspects some died before at his son’s hands. Around three hundred remain alive.”

“Tsing, Cage, Emerson?”

“All alive,” Lexa says firmly. After a pause, she adds, “Though I do not believe we can leave them that way.”

Clarke considers it. No, she doesn’t think so, either. Partially because she thinks they would be a
threat someday if they were left alive. And also because she got closure from destroying the
Mountain, but she isn’t the only one who needs that – all of Lexa’s people, and now all of her
people, have lost someone at the hands of the Maunon. They need to pay.

“And the rest of them,” Lexa says, watching her carefully, “Do you have any thoughts?”

Clarke swallows, and hopes what she’s about to say isn’t too bloodthirsty. “We leave alive everyone
below the age of twenty or so and everyone who refused to take bone marrow until it was
volunteered,” she proposes. If she’s worked it out correctly, that probably means executing
somewhere between two hundred and ten to two hundred and thirty Mountain Men. It curdles her
stomach a little, but if what they’re trying to do is gradually introduce ‘blood must not have blood’,
then it’s an acceptable compromise. Most of the Maunon die. But some survive. And after decades,
the Grounders finally get something approaching justice for the way they’ve been treated.

Lexa nods. “That is reasonable. That supports our aim to make our laws less harsh, but will lead to
the execution of enough of the Maunon that my people will support it. What of Dante?” Clarke can
see the tension in her face.

“That one’s up to you,” Clarke tells her. “His crimes were against your people, not Skaikru.” She
doesn’t think the Grounders could accept the idea of leaving the man alive. It’s under his leadership
that their people began to be taken. His kindness to the Sky People doesn’t absolve him of that – in
some ways, Clarke thinks Clarke thinks it makes it worse, since it means he knew what he was doing but found it
acceptable since it was only to the ‘savages’. Now that she knows so many Grounders, it’s disturbing
to her that someone could have that kind of hypocrisy, that kind of willing moral dissonance. Dante
would have drained Lexa, Anya, Lincoln, Indra, and so many more amazing people without feeling
a qualm.

Lexa bites her lip, then seems to reach a decision. “Then he will die. Tomorrow, with the rest of
them.”

“Death of a thousand cuts?”

“Yes,” Lexa says baldly. “Out of respect for his actions protecting your people, he may be the first to
die by a thousand cuts, though. So he does not have to have to witness the death of his son.”

It’s a strange, twisted mercy. Clarke’s stomach nearly revolts at the thought of all of it – hundreds of
people, strung up like Finn was, a modern day Calvary. Gona with knives, waiting for the chance to
cut at their enemies, lining up like the Maunon used to line up at the cafeteria. The slashes, the pleas,
the moans of pain slicing through the air. It’s not even the thought of Dante, really – it’s the thought
of an imaginary twenty-one year old who took the bone marrow because he wanted to see the sky
for the first time. An imaginary mother who took it because she didn’t want her to children to go
outside without her. Even an imaginary soldier, told that he needed to take the bone marrow because
an army was coming to kill them and it was the only way to survive.

She forces herself to remember real people, though, from both worlds. Lincoln remembering his time
as a Ripa, his face filled with torment. Anya biting a tracker implant out of her skin because anything
was better than going back to be bled. Octavia, bruised and scarred for life, because the Mountain
didn’t care if she was sixteen provided she had information they wanted. Atom, begging for death as
his skin blistered and burned from the fog. That’s what’s real. That’s what happened.

“I love you,” she whispers to Lexa, because it’s true. She loves the girl who is sentencing hundreds
of people to death. But then, she also loves the girl who is sparing some of the Maunon, against all
her people’s beliefs, and the girl who did not leave Clarke’s side when she was sick, and the girl who
would do anything that’s necessary for her people.
“I love you too,” Lexa says, and Clarke can see both sadness and understanding in her eyes.

“I didn’t expect us to manage to keep any of them alive,” Clarke says suddenly. She didn’t even know she was going to say it before she did.

“Neither did I,” Lexa admits. She presses a kiss to side of Clarke’s head. “And I still do not entirely know what to do with the survivors. Do you still stand by your plan to integrate them with your people?”

“I guess,” Clarke says uncertainly. She takes Lexa’s hand and pulls her so that they’re even closer, then unwraps herself from the blankets to put them around Lexa as well so they’re cocooned together. She was serious about her idea of a nap, though some of her sleepiness has dissipated. It’s nice to be pressed against Lexa in the warmth. “If we make it clear that they’re only alive because they helped some of our children escape death, my people might accept them. A lot depends on how they treat us, though. The last thing we need in Arkadia is a group who despise the rest of us.”

“My people will never accept them, regardless of how they feel,” Lexa says bluntly. She presses a kiss to Clarke’s shoulder. At the exact same moment they collapse onto the sleep mat together, lying down facing each other. Clarke feels a little gross and sweaty from her fever, but the idea of getting up and washing seems much harder than lying here beside the girl she loves.

“I understand that,” Clarke says. She nuzzles into Lexa, enjoying the warmth and softness of her. “I guess even if they hate us, we outnumber them, and it’s better than killing them. Will it make the other clans dislike us more?”

“I hope not,” Lexa replies, sighing and closing her eyes. “We are executing most of them, that should help. I may tell the ambassadors you are imprisoning them, or have them as workers, something like that – forced replacements for the people they took from you. They could accept that as a Skaikru custom, forcing murderers to complete all of the work their victims could have accomplished in their life.”

“Tell them whatever you like,” Clarke says, stifling a yawn. Her eyes are sliding shut too. “We’ll have to let the ambassador and the Chancellor know what you’re saying so they can go along with it, though.”

She can’t see Lexa, but she can feel the light kiss Lexa places on her forehead. Clarke presses more closely against her – nothing sexual in it, they’re both too tired for that, but just because it feels like every bit of her skin is cold and stinging apart from the parts where she’s touching Lexa. Much better than medication.

“Do you know who you wish for?” Lexa says. She yawns as well, and Clarke finds the sound ridiculously cute. “As ambassador and Chancellor, I mean.”

“I thought Wells might be a good ambassador,” Clarke says. She feels a twinge of pain suddenly. Soon, very soon, when they get back to Arkadia, she’s going to have to tell Wells that his father is dead. That she was wrong when she said they might keep Jaha alive as a hostage or for information. That she gave him false hope. There’s another hit of even worse guilt when she realises that part of her is selfishly glad that he has nothing tying him to Arkadia, so he can come with her to Polis.

As if sensing her pain, Lexa nuzzles her face against Clarke’s neck. “I would like that,” she admits, voice muffled. “He has become… something of a friend to me. Besides that, though, he is reasonable and thoughtful, he understands sacrifice but does not enjoy it, he is accepting of the differences between the other clans and his without losing loyalty due to this. He would be an ideal ambassador.”
“And that frees Kane up to be the Chancellor,” Clarke yawns, stretching a little. Her body aches from her sickness, but it’s already starting to get better, so it’s a good ache. “I think Cole, Fuji, Jay and my mother could make an acceptable council if he wants one, too. For the big decisions. Most of them are pretty reasonable people, and apart from my Mom they’ve spent enough time with Grounders that they understand some of their customs and beliefs.”

“Would they be able to overrule him?” Lexa says, her voice slow and drowsy. “That creates a… a risk…” she yawns again as well.

“Maybe just advisors at first,” Clarke says sleepily, “We can give them actual powers later if need be. And we need some kind of mechanism to remove the Chancellor … if necessary… maybe we can station someone here, someone reliable like Indra… we won’t need it with Kane, I don’t think, but… remind them that this is the Coalition’s land… keep them in line…” Clarke forgets what she was saying. She nuzzles into Lexa some more.

Lexa’s breathing is even and slow. She’s fast asleep. Clarke sighs happily and joins her.
“Is everyone gathered?” Lexa asks quietly.

“Sha, Heda,” Anya says, face set. “We are ready whenever you wish to address us.”

Lexa nods. She grabs a nearby square of blue fabric, tucking it into her belt, and picks up the small mirror she left close by. Clarke takes it off her wordlessly and holds it up, allowing Lexa to use both hands to apply her warpaint, and then to apply similar warpaint to Clarke. When she finishes Lexa looks as much the Commander as she ever has, a spirit of war instead of a person, and as she washes the excess warpaint off her hands a strange sort of dread creeps up on her.

She notices suddenly that she is still wearing the watch Clarke gave her, and for some reason that makes her feel a cold weight in her stomach. It’s wrong to be wearing it today, when she will walk out of this tent and order the death of hundreds, when she will slice into flesh and hear agonised cries and pleas. They might be Maunon, murderers by default, but as she condemns them she knows for a flicker of a moment she will see something else – she will see a sibling, a parent, a lover, a child. It does not matter that she lost count of the deaths she ordered long ago, she always sees that, with every single execution, and she thinks she always will.

“Hey,” Clarke says softly, taking Lexa’s wrist gently as Lexa struggles to take the watch off. She removes it herself, hands deft. Lexa raises her eyes to meet Clarke’s, and her words of explanation die in her mouth. Clarke’s expression holds nothing but understanding. She remembers that though Clarke had Lexa braid her hair today she did not ask for Costia’s sheath to be put in.

Clarke looks at her steadily. “We’re doing the right thing,” she says, so quietly Lexa can barely hear her. There’s a faint tremor of uncertainty beneath her words, but she clears her throat and says it again more decisively.

“We’re doing what is necessary,” Lexa corrects, because they are. The right thing is irrelevant, in this case. When she thinks of watching them all die – that odd moment when suddenly the whole world changes a little, when a life extinguishes like a blown-out candle and the person’s eyes become eerily dull and unmoving – her heart clenches a little. There is something that seems so harmless about them, the Maunon civilians, pale and weak as they recover from their illness, as scared and defenceless as goufa now they are outside their little world. She reminds herself that inside that world, inside the Mountain, they ended her people’s lives as if it was a treatment akin to putting a bandage on a wound.

They have developed their defencelessness by hiding away in luxury, never questioning the deaths of those who enabled that luxury. She inhales sharply, glancing at her reflection one last time. “Let’s go.”

People stretch as far as the eye can see. There’s the gona, the villagers of TonDC, and the Skaikru who came with them, but Lexa suspects that in the past few days all of her people within travelling distance have also come. Perhaps they came just to see what had caused the explosion, originally, but when they got closer and realised the Mountain had been destroyed – well. Of course they stayed.

The Maunon are in a group, on their knees with their hands tied, surrounded by gona with spears. Indra stands in front of them, expressionless. Abby is standing near her as well, surprising Lexa – she thought Abby was still unconscious. She leans hard on Jackson, but is still pale from the pain and stress on her knee.

Anya follows her gaze. “She just woke up ten minutes ago,” she murmurs to Clarke and Lexa. “And insisted on coming. Clearly stubbornness runs in the blood.”
“I’ll have to see her afterwards,” Clarke says, strong emotion showing until she breathes deeply and schools her face to blankness again. “I checked on her while she was still out, but we haven’t had a chance to actually talk.”

“Afterwards,” Lexa echoes, glad that Clarke hasn’t asked her to delay this for their reunion. She wants to get this over with.

Lexa steps forward and every single conversation quiets immediately. The only sounds are distant bird calls and a couple of quietly whimpering babes. The crowd of people stare at her. The silence seems to pull at her words, sucking them out into the world. “For years, the Maunon have terrorised us,” she says, her voice ringing out clearly. “They have burnt us, and they have bled us. But they have not broken us. The Mountain is gone, and we remain!” She pauses while the crowd cheers, waiting for silence again. “Today, we decide what happens to the survivors. It has always been our way to meet force with force, seek an eye for an eye, to say that blood must have blood.”

She takes a deep breath. “But that will no longer be our way.” The silence deepens even further, the very air seeming to grow colder.

“We are not like them,” she says into the growing tension, making her voice iron. “We will not slaughter children and call that honourable. We will not kill those who have helped us, those who have shown genuine remorse, those who have tried to do right. Their recent actions do not erase their crimes, but it shows a willingness to begin trying to make amends. The children of the Mountain, and fifty-seven of the adult Maunon who tried to help us, will be given the chance they never gave our people. They will be given their lives. Blood must not have blood.”

People are arguing amongst themselves now quietly, some of the Maunon are starting to cry or call out, and Abby takes a step forward as if she wants to say something and then half-collapses as she puts weight onto her injured leg, whimpering, Jackson pulling her upright again.

“Although blood must not have blood, murder without regret must still be punished. The Maunon who drained the blood from our people, and sucked the bones from the Skaikru, will die today,” Lexa continues, raising her voice over the talking. “They will die quickly and without pain, stabbed through the heart.” Now a gona yells an objection, storming forwards only for Anya to almost casually smack him down.

Lexa ignores this. “But there are four who will experience the death of a thousand cuts.”

Now the crowd quiets again, apart from the sobbing and begging of the Maunon. Lexa wonders if her people think she chose scapegoats only because they cannot afford the time to kill every Maunon so slowly, but regardless, the news that she intends to punish some of them in the traditional way seems to have calmed them. “The first to die by the death of a thousand cuts will be Dante Wallace,” she says, voice ringing through the hush. “For he was the first to order our people’s deaths, many years ago, and it is by his order that so many of us have bled.”

Anya yanks Dante Wallace up out of the kneeling Maunon. His expression is almost calm, and he puts up no resistance at all as she ties him to a pole. Indra has had her people set up four of them at Lexa’s command, just as Anya has memorised which people she needs to pull out of the Maunon to be executed. Abby starts to say desperately, “But he helped -”

“Be quiet, Mom,” Clarke says, voice firm and unyielding, cutting through her mother’s cry. “We’ll talk about it later. This isn’t the time.” Somewhat unexpectedly, Abby stops.

“The second will be Doctor Tsing, who bled our people with enjoyment, and laughed at their struggles.” Lexa’s voice is icy, matching the coldness inside of her. Tsing screams as she is tied to the pole, struggling wildly against the binding around both her wrist and her body, shouting insults
and pleas by turn, calling Lexa a savage Outsider bitch one moment and begging her for mercy the next. Anya shoves a gag into her mouth to shut her up.

“The third to experience this death will be Cage Wallace, who created the Ripa and considers them his pets.” Lexa wonders how the Ripa retrieval is going – Clarke had said there did not seem to be any Ripa in the tunnels when she was captured, removed because Cage didn’t want them infected with the fictional ‘cure’, but they haven’t found where the Maunon sent the Ripa. It’s possible they were in the tunnels, only hiding from the tone generators, and they died when the Mountain blew up – or even that they returned after Clarke’s capture. But it is also possible that out there in the forest Ripa even now lie on the ground thrashing, the drugs working their way out of their systems, requiring only a Skaikru shock stick to return them to something more like the people they once were. She hopes the scouts find them.

Cage Wallace does not fight as he is moved to the pole, but he does not have his father’s dignity either. He looks to be in shock, face white and terrified, eyes blank and confused. He looks like a lost child, and Lexa feels no sympathy for him at all.

“Lastly, Carl Emerson will die, for his schemes against all our people,” Lexa says firmly. She does not add any further detail – originally she thought to mention his dealings with Nia, but she would prefer to keep her plans against the Azplana quiet until a real strategy can be decided. Certainly some of those here must be Azgeda, who will return home with news of all that has occurred – of the death of the Mountain, of the executions, of blood must not have blood, of the Skaikru with their new and powerful weapons. That gives Nia warning enough of what is coming for her, without confirming that they know of her treachery.

Emerson is already gagged, at Lexa’s insistence. She does not wish to know what he might say. Tales of time travel are best kept out of this. He tries to struggle as he is tied, but it is of no use. Bound, he looks at Clarke and Lexa with eyes that burn with hatred. Lexa gives him a thin, cold smile in return, one that promises him a long death.

“Remove those who are to survive from the rest of the Maunon,” Lexa says calmly. They have put those ones at the back of the group, and the gona easily yank them upright and force them away, pushing them into a series of guarded tents set further back. She waits for this to be accomplished, then clears her throat. “Now kill the others.”

She makes herself watch. Swords flash and screams pierce the air. The Maunon sob and whimper and cower and try to run, but they are surrounded by armed gona, and in under a minute it is all over. Their blood soaks the ground as they slump, dead piled on top of the dead. Dante Wallace looks down and away, closing his eyes against tears. Clarke watches as well, face iron but eyes agonised. Abby yells, “No! NO!” until Anya hisses something to a stunned Jackson and he covers her mouth with his hand. She bites it and he winces, then she breaks down into sobs.

Lexa lets everything calm down once more before speaking again. Everyone waits for the order to begin Dante’s death. Instead, she takes Clarke’s hands, steps back, and sinks to her knees, then reaches for the piece of blue material that she has tucked into her belt. A gasp echoes around the area, louder even than the one for the destruction of the Mountain. The Commander does not kneel, not now, not ever. They literally cannot believe their eyes.

“Clarke kom Skaikru,” Lexa says, allowing her voice to carry. “Destroyer of the Mountain. I thank you for what you have done for our people. I thank you for the end of the Maunon, the end of losing our friends and family to this horror.”

Suddenly everyone is talking to each other in an undertone, shocked and confused. This is unprecedented behaviour, for Heda to kneel to someone, for Heda to thank someone using such
humility. And that is why it will work. They have gone beyond tradition, now, and into new territory. None would dare call Lexa weak when she entered the Mountain and survived to help bring it down, but it is also clear where she is placing the credit.

“In thanks for your actions, and due to the wisdom and strength you have shown, I ask that you become my official chief advisor, leader of the coalition in my absence, and second in power only to me,” Lexa says, raising her voice as the babble of shocked conversation grows. “The second in command of the coalition which Skaikru will soon join, the second in command of Polis and my armies, the second in command of all these lands. I ask that you act as an extension of my power and will and advise me on all matters, that you dedicate your life to our people and our lands. Do you accept this charge, surrendering all other allegiance but that to me and the alliance?”

There’s a long pause. The crowd’s frantic conversation is rising from a hum to roar. Abby’s face is a mask of horror and disbelief.

Clarke sinks to her knees so they are face to face, equals once more, “Sha,” she says loudly, “I accept!” And then her voice quiets, to a level only Lexa can hear, although the emotion in Clarke’s eyes already say everything. “I swear fealty to you, Lexa kom Trikru. I vow to treat your needs as my own, and your people as my people.” Lexa feels tears well in her eyes and blinks them away before anyone can see. She slowly and solemnly attaches the blue material to one of her shoulder-guards – the guards are not a pauldron like the Commander’s pauldron, but the sash is very like hers. It hangs to the ground, as bright as Clarke’s eyes, and flutters in the wind.

Surprisingly – or perhaps not so surprisingly, not after everything – Anya is the first one to sink to her knees. Then everyone is falling to their knees as Lexa stands upright again.

Lexa grips Clarke’s hand and pulls her up to stand again, then raises their joined hands in triumph. “Kos Kongeda!” she shouts. “For the Coalition!”

Everyone raises their weapons and cheers. The cheer lasts a long time.

“My mother is not taking this well,” Clarke says, wryly amused. Abby is one of the few who did not kneel, but thankfully with her visible injuries everyone most likely assumed she could not. Perhaps that is even the truth.

Lexa lets their arms fall, but does not let go of Clarke’s hand. “Let me know when your mother does react well to something. I would like to see that occasion.”

Clarke laughs. “You’re getting more sarcastic. I feel like I should blame Raven for that.”

“Or yourself. You could certainly blame yourself.”

“But where’s the fun in that?” Clarke wonders, and then looks at the four figures tied to their poles, her amusement and happiness fading. She squeezes Lexa’s hand tighter without meaning to.

“We will face it together, Clarke kom Kongeda,” Lexa says softly, knowing what Clarke is thinking.

“Together,” Clarke agrees, and manages a shaky smile again.
“Clarke, what was that?” Abby cries out, as soon as Clarke manages to drag her inside the tent. Jackson’s half-carrying her mother and she’s pale and sweating, but Abby still manages to look more vibrant than most people look uninjured.

“Are you talking about the executions or the position I’ve been given?” Clarke says. She doesn’t mean to sound cold, but she’s really tired of every adult from the Ark (well, apart from Kane and possibly Cole) questioning every decision she makes.

“Both,” Abby says flatly. They stand there for a moment, just staring at each other, and then Clarke steps forward and Abby grabs her in a fierce hug, abandoning the argument for the moment. “I’m so glad you’re okay, baby, you scared the hell out of me,” Abby says fervently into her hair. Jackson looks at Clarke and, when she gives him a meaningful look, he nods and leaves them with each other.

“You scared me too, Mom,” Clarke murmurs. “You scared me too.”

“I love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

They stand like that for a very long time until Abby pulls back, eyes wet. “Clarke, I don’t understand what’s going on. All those people, killing them like that, in cold blood…” She still leans on Clarke, unable to put weight on her injured leg.

“They killed Arkers for bone marrow,” Clarke points out. “They killed Grounders for blood. They didn’t object, they didn’t try and stop it, they enjoyed using our people as medication. On the Ark we would have killed them without a second thought.”

“That’s different,” Abby objects. “Up there we had to be ruthless.”

“Well, down here they have to be ruthless as well,” Clarke says. The swords flash again and again in her mind’s eye, and she feels a powerful rush of nausea. Should she have prevented it? Could she have prevented it? Did she agree to their execution because it kept the most people possible alive? Did she choose the coldest, most pragmatic route, wanting to avoid the impossibility of arguing on their behalf? Or did she give in to her hatred of the Maunon? She doesn’t know. But she knows that their blood soaking the ground will be in her dreams tonight, and her mother isn’t helping.

Clarke takes a deep breath. She thinks of Lexa, who judges herself just as harshly for her actions, and how much she wishes Lexa could see herself the way Clarke sees her. That Lexa could give herself a break. She knows Lexa wants the same thing for her, as well, and because she loves Lexa she tries to see in herself what Lexa sees. She loves Lexa for being willing to do what was necessary to compromise and keep the most people alive, and she knows Lexa loves her for giving their people justice instead of granting the Maunon undeserved forgiveness to make herself feel better. They did their best. They are both still doing their best. That will have to be good enough.

“We would never have condemned a whole people when all they wanted to do was survive. We’re better than that, Clarke, we’re the good guys. When we killed people on the Ark we killed them for good reasons. And it wasn’t like that, it wasn’t violent and cruel,” Abby continues heedlessly.

“You taught me medicine,” Clarke snaps, breathing in sharply and trying not to throw up. She closes her eyes for a second, struggling for control. “I know what happens when people are floated. It takes
them at least fifteen seconds to pass out, fifteen seconds of every exposed part of them swelling up
agonisingly, fifteen seconds of all the liquid on their skin and in their eyes and mouth boiling off into
space painfully. Don’t talk to me about cruelty. Being bloodless doesn’t make spacing people
merciful. Today, the Maunon died quickly. That’s the best we could do. And they killed our people,
Mom, they killed Alpha Station."

“President Wallace helped us,” Abby says stubbornly, though she looks wrong-footed by Clarke’s
description of decompression.

“And he hurt the Grounders,” Clarke says simply, forcing herself to remember that one truth. “You
heard Lexa, he was responsible for lots of deaths.”

“But he saved children, our children, surely we owe him for that,” Abby persists. “He was so polite
and kind, he was a good man. And the way of killing him… it was too awful. It was wrong. The
way he screamed, how long it took, all that blood, the way all of those warriors cut into him like
that… it was inexcusable, can’t you see that? He didn’t deserve that kind of death.”

“Hundreds, maybe thousands of Grounders died on his orders,” Clarke replies flatly. “So actually, he
probably deserved worse. The Grounders are part of the Coalition that we’re joining, Mom, so you
need to get used to the fact that every one of them is just as important as someone from the Ark.
However ‘polite and kind’ Dante was, saving a dozen Skaikru doesn’t make up for the hundreds he
killed.”

“We’re supposed to be the good guys,” Abby says again passionately. She tries to move back from
Clarke, apparently not wanting to lean on her anymore, but can’t manage it and winces. “We need to
be better than that.”

“Sometimes we need to sacrifice people,” Clarke says. “Even good people, even people who are just
trying to survive.”


“You did,” Clarke says.

“I never -”

“You told me that when you had Dad executed for the crime of honesty,” Clarke says, not cruelly,
just in a matter-of-fact way.

Abby’s entire face goes white. “Clarke, I didn’t know they’d kill him. I just asked Thelonious to talk
to him -”

“Maybe you didn’t mean for it to happen,” Clarke says, sighing. “I don’t know. But I do know you
were aware they’d probably float him, even if you hoped they wouldn’t. Dad didn’t die as quickly or
painlessly as the Maunon did, and Dad died for crimes that were nothing compared to what they did,
and Dad was a good guy. So don’t lecture me about what happened today, just don’t.”

There’s a long silence. “Clarke,” Abby says, and she’s never sounded so broken before. “Clarke,
baby, I never wanted that to happen. You have to believe me.”

Clarke feels suddenly awful. She knows her mother was just trying to do her best, she does know
that, and she loves her. But nevertheless, the words pour out of her. “I do believe you. But it
happened anyway.” She swallows hard. “I love you, Mom, I do. But if you’re expecting me to keep
looking up to you as a moral authority? I can’t do that. You’re not. I need to make my own
decisions.”
“I see,” Abby says through bloodless lips, face set and almost angry. “And your decision is to become some kind of… of Grounder warrior leader?” She blinks, something occurring to her. “Is this – is she forcing you to do this?”

“This isn’t an obligation,” Clarke says coldly, “This is an honour. I know you haven’t been down here long enough to understand what the Commander is.”

“What she is, is a child, Clarke, just like you are,” Abby snaps. “You should be enjoying your childhood, not rushing into high-pressure, high-stakes decision-making. There are lives at risk here. You don’t have any experience.”

“I’ve been in charge of our people since we landed, I’ve brokered deals between nations, I organised an attack on the most secure place in the world… I can’t be a child anymore,” Clarke informs her. She hesitates, then adds, “But I can still be your child. I’m still your daughter. And as your daughter, what I need is support, not orders or judgement. I need you to help me. Can’t you do that?”

“I’ll always support you, honey,” Abby says quickly, but not like she’s really thought about it. “I’m just saying, maybe you should think it through. You don’t know what you’re getting into. Do you even know what this means, what responsibilities she’s giving you? Or is this an ornamental position? She made it sound like you’ll be in charge of thousands of people.”

“Technically,” Clarke points out, “I already am.” She manages a smile. “I know exactly what I’m getting into, Mom, I promise.”

“Really?” Abby says, clearly thinking she’s about to score a point. “So have you checked that you can do your new job from where our people are?” She raises an eyebrow at Clarke.

Clarke coughs. “Um… no. No, I can’t.”

“Well, then how are you going to –” Abby gets it and inhales sharply. “Baby, no, you can’t do that. You can’t go live with a bunch of strangers.”

“I’ve spent more time with those ‘strangers’ recently than I have with anyone from the Ark,” Clarke says. “They matter to me. I promise, I’ll be safe there. There’s already sixty of our people settled in Polis, and Wells might even come with me.”

Abby opens her mouth, obviously about to say she’s coming too, and then hesitates.

Clarke gives her a crooked smile. Her mother might have her faults, but one of her strengths is how much she cares about the Ark. She won’t leave their people, not until she knows they’re safe and stable. “It’s okay, Mom. I’ll be coming back to Arkadia for a couple of weeks to sort out who’s in charge before I leave for Polis. And if Wells doesn’t agree I’ll have to decide on another ambassador, too.”

“Thelonious is dead,” Abby says. “That leaves the next member of the Council in charge. Since Marcus is also gone, I’m pretty sure I’m at the highest level out of the survivors.”

“It’s a long story, but Kane is alive,” Clarke informs her. Apparently Jackson hasn’t filled her in on this, even though he’d told her about Arkadia and about Dante’s actions. “I’m planning to put him in charge of Arkadia, I just have to talk to him first and make sure he knows what needs to be done. I also want to speak to Wells, tell everyone about the fall of the Mountain, and gather up all of the remaining guns to take with me to Polis.” She feels a pang at the thought, though, because she knows Lexa is going to have to go to Polis right after this – to talk with the ambassadors about Nia and to tell everyone there about the Mountain. She’s gotten so used to Lexa being within reach that it
makes her feel uncomfortable to be on her own for a couple of weeks.

“You’re planning to arm the Grounders?” Abby looks concerned.

“They’re already armed,” Clarke says. “They have spears, swords, bows, knives, everything they need for this world. We don’t need guns here either. If we have guns, we also have the temptation to use them, and we’re one accidental shot away from starting a war we can’t win.”

“But our protection…” Abby says thoughtfully, considering Clarke’s words.

“Our best defence is to make it so they don’t want to attack us,” Clarke retorts. “We’re keeping the bullets in Arkadia, and the guns in Polis, so nobody can use them. We can ask Lexa for guns if we need them for some reason, and even if they could find bullets the Grounders don’t use guns, they don’t believe in it.” Her mother still looks unsure, and Clarke sighs. “They’ve done nothing but help us, Mom,” she entreats quietly. “Why can’t you trust them?”

“Because they’ve done nothing but help us,” Abby says, equally as quiet. “They want something, they must want something, and if it’s not our weapons than I don’t know what it is. You’re too young to realise this yet, Clarke, but people don’t give you things for free.”

“They’re not giving us things for free,” Clarke says, struggling to keep her temper. “We’re paying for it. It will take time, but we’ll repay their help.”

“You don’t understand,” Abby says. “They’re being very helpful, they trusted you immediately even though you didn’t offer them anything of substance, they’re giving us land and food and teaching us things. But their kind of culture, one based around violence and brutality? People like that aren’t nice without an ulterior motive. They don’t do things without a reason.”

“Sometimes they do,” Clarke says softly. “Sometimes they’re good people. Lexa’s a good person.”

Abby looks unconvinced.

“And they’re not violent and brutal, Mom, not really,” Clarke continues. “What you saw earlier was Trikru gona – warriors – responding to the worst enemy they have. You saw the most militaristic part of their culture. There is so much more to their people than just aggression. They have their own music, language, traditions, art, celebrations, beliefs and so many other amazing things.” She smiles to herself, thinking about it. “You know, Arkers were stuck up in a space station, so we needed science to survive, the same as the Maunon did inside their underground complex. But the Grounders were down here with all of their technology wiped out by the bombs and nothing but radiation and mutated wild animals and plants to keep them company. So of course physical and mental toughness was more important to them. The fact that they didn’t get to start with the same level of technology as us certainly doesn’t make them stupid. They’re incredibly smart. Much smarter than Skaikru, I think sometimes.”

Abby is staring at her. “Skaikru’s what they call us, isn’t it?” she says slowly. “You’re talking like you’re not one of us. Like you’re one of them.”

“I ‘surrendered all other allegiances’, remember?” Clarke says wryly. “My loyalty’s to Lexa, now.” She looks down at the flowing blue sash she’s wearing, the sash that denotes her as Lexa’s second-in-command, the colour showing she is not quite equal to the Commander – water instead of blood – but as close as anyone really can be.

Her mother stares at her as if she can’t believe her eyes. “Clarke…” she says, but her voice drifts off uncertainly. She shifts her weight accidentally and then leans harder on Clarke, paling and making a
pained noise as she puts pressure on her knee. Clarke helps her sit on the sleeping mat. Abby opens her mouth like she wants to say something, her brow furrowed.

“I’ll go get Jackson,” Clarke says softly. She pauses, then adds, “I’m so happy you’re okay, Mom.” And then she leaves.
“I wish you weren’t going to Polis,” Clarke whispers to Lexa, as if it is a secret.

They’re lying against each other, Lexa’s front pressed snugly against Clarke’s back, both awake and dreading the morning. “You know I must, ai niron,” Lexa says softly into Clarke’s ear, though she runs through it again in her head to see if she can find a good reason to go with Clarke to Arkadia. She can’t. She’s required in Polis, to speak with the ambassadors, to discuss how to deal with Nia, to tell them of Clarke’s new position, to bring the news of the Mountain. She can’t put that off for Skaikru – everything she has done recently has been about Skaikru, in one way or the others. She owes the other clans her attention.

And – she loves Clarke, of course she does. She needs her. But she does not depend on her so much that they must always be beside each other. They can be strong apart as well. It makes her heart ache to think of sleeping in her large, empty bed in Polis without Clarke, and she does not wish to put off being honest to the world about what they are to each other, but – they will survive. They may not thrive, but they will manage. Lexa has people she cares about in Polis who she must check on, the same as how Clarke must make take care of her mother, Wells, Kane, even Raven, all of Skaikru. The Natblida will be missing Lexa, as she misses them, misses their eager young voices and optimism and fierce determination. To them she is a combination of hero and nomon, and they require her teaching, especially with Titus and Gustus absent. She has neglected them shamefully.

Perhaps she should teach them chess. She thinks they would like chess. And if Wells joined them, they could play against him.

“And Indra eventually lose that argument?” Clarke asks quietly. “Or did Indra eventually lose that argument?”

“We decided that Indra should remain in TonDC for the moment,” Lexa says, amused at the thought of Indra losing an argument to anyone, even Anya. “Aya will come to take on some of Titus’s and Gustus’s duties in Polis. Her unit will replace Tristan’s rangers as protectors of Polis for a time. They could use some stability, however brief, before we must deal with the Azgeda.”

“Will we be dealing with them that soon, though?” Clarke asks curiously. “With winter so close…”

“That is true,” Lexa admits. “Only a fool attacks the Azgeda in force during winter, and I do not know where Nia may have retreated to now, so I would not be able to direct them. But a small group, with Azgeda such as Zion to guide them, might be able to do something, might be able to locate her without being noticed and causing her to flee. We will have to see. Before anything else, the border will have to be closed to Azgeda, and Polis would have to be protected. I believe Nia’s only chance of lasting through this would be to attack Polis.”

“Attacking Polis is suicide,” Clarke scoffs.

“Sha,” Lexa says. She presses a light kiss to Clarke’s shoulder. “But it may be her only option. None of the other clans will aid her, after she allied with the Maunon. Even her own people might turn against her unless she makes enough of a show of strength that they believe they have a chance.” She swallows hard. “I fear that one of those shows of strength may be Gustus’s head. If they do not know that she simply captured him because he was visiting already, torturing and killing the Commander’s trusted bodyguard would show her power.” And she sent Gustus there. She may have caused his death again.

“They must know he was visiting,” Clarke says strongly, as if by sounding certain she can make it
so. “We travelled most of the southern half of Azgeda territory, we mentioned it a lot of times, and the messenger we sent must have stopped a lot of places on the way to her main palace.” She pauses, frowning. “You’re not worried about Titus?”

Lexa shakes her head. “He is the Fleimkepa,” Lexa says. “If she did manage to kill me and get the Commander spirit, Titus would be needed to give Ontari the Flame. He is much more useful alive than dead – though I do not discount the possibility of torture.”

“He’d help her?” Clarke sounds horrified.

“If he thought it was the only way for the Flame to continue, perhaps,” Lexa says, uncertain. “I do not know. Regardless, he is necessary for anyone to think Ontari has the Flame. People know the Commander’s spirit cannot be transferred without a Fleimkepa. If Nia had my body and the Fleimkepa, she could claim what she liked.”

Clarke sighs and twists in the circle of Lexa’s arms so that she’s facing her instead. “Then I wish I was coming with you, ai hodnes,” she says wistfully.

“You’ll be there in a couple of weeks,” Lexa promises, her heart doing the flip it always does when Clarke uses a Trigedasleng term of endearment.

“Yeah,” Clarke says, and kisses her lightly. “Hopefully Wells and Raven will be with me as well. Octavia’s going to TonDC with Indra and Lincoln, but I think there’s a pretty good chance Wells will come to be with us, and Raven will come because Finn wants space for a while and he’s staying in Arkadia.” She frowns again. “Though that might also depend on whether Raven’s trying to avoid Anya as well.”

“No doubt,” Lexa says dryly. She clears her throat a little awkwardly. “I have told Indra that you will need at least two hundred gona to escort you to Arkadia. I thought they could guard Arkadia and provide support to you while you settle things there, and also help transport the Maunon you are taking there. Do you really think Skaikru will accept the survivors?”

“I think they will,” Clarke says. The determination in her voice tells Lexa that if they don’t, Clarke will force them to. “The Maunon adults saved a dozen children, and I don’t think anyone’s going to harm the Maunon kids. The Mountain Men have similar values to Skaikru, a similar way of talking, similar customs, even similar tools and weapons – that should help a lot. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but my people have a tendency to be a bit xenophobic – narrow-minded, scared of anyone different from them,” she clarifies, voice wry.

“I had not realised,” Lexa says teasingly, pantomiming surprise. “Skaikru? Narrow-minded?”

Clarke laughs and kisses her again, pulling her even closer. “Well, I promise I’m not narrow-minded,” she says impishly. The tone of her voice tells Lexa this is some kind of double-entendre.

“Is that so, Clarke?” Lexa asks, smirking. “I do not wish to question your honesty, but claims like this require proof.”

Clarke grabs her wrists firmly and rolls so that she is straddling Lexa, flipping the blanket off them and to the side. Lexa takes a moment to be thankful that Raven is in another tent now. Clarke kisses Lexa long and deep, her weight pinning Lexa down.

When the kiss ends, Lexa is gasping. “I could throw you off at any time,” she comments, face flushed. “If I wanted to.” She hopes Clarke does not take that as a request to move off her, though. The feeling of slender fingers bracketing her wrists and the warm, insistent weight of Clarke on her is
making her dizzy with desire.

“If you wanted to,” Clarke says wickedly, and kisses her again passionately, fingers tightening as she presses against her.

The morning comes faster than it should. Lexa stands beside Anya, her face a mask of calm as she watches Clarke and her people leave. Only Clarke rides a horse, already with more assurance than she did just a couple of weeks ago. The Skaikru who are injured or who donated bone marrow ride slowly in the three Maunon vehicles they removed from the Mountain, though Clarke has told her that unless Raven and the other mechanics are somehow able to work miracles they will run out of the substance used to power them in only a few weeks, since the rest was destroyed in the Mountain with the other few working vehicles. They are to use them to help construct their new home then strip them for parts. The remaining Maunon are surrounded by the gonakru Lexa sent with them, and walk in odd little steps. Even with the gona blocking them in, they have never had so much space before.

“It is strange to watch them leave,” Linkon says quietly to Octavia, his eyes searching her face for any signs of unhappiness.

She doesn’t show any. “Yeah, it is,” she agrees readily. “So why are we watching? Wanna go train instead? Just standing here is boring.” Her still-raw injuries stretch in a painful-looking way when she grins up at Linkon, eyes sparkling.

Indra closes her eyes in a futile search for patience, then gives in and lightly slaps the back of Octavia’s head, prompting Octavia to give her a wounded look and Linkon to hide a smile. When Octavia glances at him and sees it, she promptly slaps the back of his head as well. “Do not speak so in front of Heda,” Indra says sternly.

Lexa looks at them, mouth twitching as she contains her smile. Octavia here seems much lighter and more easy-going than in the original world. Perhaps she carries less burdens than she did before, despite the red scars and still-black bruises on her face and her bandaged hand. “If all Skaikru Sekens are this enthusiastic, the gona remaining in Polis must be exhausted,” Lexa comments.

“No doubt,” Indra says dryly. “May I remind you that making Octavia kom Skaikru en Trikru my Seken was your idea?”

“Indra, are you reprimanding your Heda?” Lexa says, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Of course not, Heda,” Indra says, bowing deferentially. Her amusement shows in her eyes, however, despite her scowl. “I am merely stating a fact.”

“I can hear you, I’m right here,” Octavia grumbles, then subsides at a minatory glance from Indra.

“And I must be going,” Lexa says. “Spread my orders to all Trikru in the area, Indra. No Skaikru are to be harmed. The border is to be guarded, make sure no Azgeda gona pass through.”

“Sha, Heda,” Indra says.

Lexa mounts her horse. She hears Anya start to bark orders to her unit, organising them. The gona who are to come with them to Polis begin to ready themselves to leave, straightening and quieting as Anya glares at them.

Lexa looks down at Octavia, Indra and Linkon. “I have no doubt I shall see you soon,” she says to them quietly. “If we must declare war on the Azgeda, I suspect you will be an important part of that.”
Indra’s lips thin. “I remember you telling me war with Azgeda was coming,” she says softly. “We will be ready, Heda. We will not fail you.”

“You never do, Indra,” Lexa replies softly. “May we meet again.”

Octavia looks up, briefly surprised. Then she swallows and says, voice a little choked, “May we meet again.” She hesitates as Lexa starts to turn her horse, then says, “Commander, wait -”

“Do not waylay the Commander,” Indra hisses, looking annoyed, but Lexa twists her head to look at Octavia anyway.


Lexa doesn’t know exactly what Octavia’s referring to, and she doesn’t wish to ask. It’s enough to know that she has somehow earned the approval of this impetuous, fierce girl, gained the respect of one of Clarke’s friends. Instead she gives a sharp nod, and nudges her horse into movement. He tosses his head, snorting and prancing, full of energy, and Anya gives the order to move out.

And they are on their way.
Like Father

“Awesome speech last night,” Raven says as Clarke enters the room, not looking up from what she’s fiddling with – another grenade, it looks like. Raven’s been churning out far more grenades than they’re ever likely to need. She claims it’s because they’re easy to make and can be stuffed with anything as shrapnel, but Clarke remembers they weren’t really something she focused on in the other world, which makes her suspect that the compulsive grenade-production has more to do with Raven’s unresolved romantic issues than with anything approaching practicality. Anya was outspoken about her enjoyment of grenades, after all.

“How did you know it was me?”

“The way you walk,” Raven says absently.

“We may be spending too much time together,” Clarke says dryly in response. She looks up at Wells, inviting him to share the joke.

Wells is sitting on the bench beside the grenade-in-progress. These days, when he’s not with Clarke, he’s with Abby, and when he’s not with Abby, he’s with Raven. It’s like he doesn’t want to leave any of them alone. Like he’s scared what could happen. There’s a suddenness in the way he reacts to unexpected noises or movements that reminds Clarke of herself, and she knows it’s a response to his father’s death.

He hadn’t blamed her. Not for a second, even though she blamed him for a year for her father’s death and he was far less culpable in that. Clarke almost wishes he would blame her – or at least get angry at her for raising his hopes, suggesting that his father might still be alive. She’d be angry if it was her. But he’s reacting – really well, actually. There’s a gauntness to his cheeks that wasn’t there before, and dark shadows under his eyes, but otherwise he seems fine. He’s even been friendly to the Maunon, more friendly than half their people.

“Hey, you’re the one who keeps coming to see me,” Raven points out, looking up now to give Clarke a smirk. “You could be in the mechanical construction hut with the others, if you wanted to watch people fiddling with metal. But you come here ‘cause I’m hot.”

“You could be in the mechanical construction hut with the others too,” Wells says to Raven, smiling slightly. It doesn’t perfectly reach his eyes, which are still filled with exhaustion and grief, but he tries.

“They asked me to help hook up the surveillance system,” Raven says, looking disgusted. “Do you know how boring and simple that is after you’ve been making grenades and EMPs and radios pretty much from scratch? I told Sinclair to call me when he has something more worthy of my time.”

Clarke raises her eyebrows at Raven, well aware that Raven wouldn’t spend time apart from Sinclair – the closest thing she has to a parent – for such a flimsy reason. “Really? That’s really why you’re avoiding them?”

Raven flushes and bends her head over the device. “Okay, we’ve definitely been spending too much time together. You’re right.” She sighs and then says, “They’re trying to nag me into staying here instead of going to Polis. Appealing to my Ark loyalty like that’s an actual thing. Asking me how I can bear to leave Finn.”

Clarke grits her teeth. “You should tell Sinclair to get them to stop. That’s not okay.” Finn’s
continued insistence that he doesn’t want Raven around while he’s adjusting has hurt her considerably, Clarke knows. It probably hurts her even more that Finn already seems to have entered a casual relationship with the woman who’s supposed to be counselling him.

Over the past week, the little room Raven’s co-opted into her workshop has become something of a haven for Clarke. It’s pretty much the only place where she isn’t organising people or explaining rules or quelling arguments. Even conversations with her mother seem to have become a battleground, and that’s probably her fault—she’s different now. But she can duck in here and it’s just Raven building something and snarking, and Wells watching her build things and being amused by her snark. Clarke would never have pegged them as having anything in common, but all the time spent together, and their shared concern for and rejection by Finn, seems to have bonded them.

“So you liked the speech, huh?” Clarke says, changing the subject.

“It seemed very popular,” Wells says politely, face expressionless. Her speech last night had been officially passing the role of leader—Chancellor—to the reluctant Kane. It probably just reminded Wells once again that the former Chancellor is dead, and now she feels bad for mentioning it. It was a poor choice of subject change.

“So am I getting a title of some kind?” Raven wonders, breaking the tension. “Chief Mechanic of the Alliance. I could go for that. Everyone else has official jobs.”

“Maybe I can make you my assistant,” Wells offers, a flash of mischief in his eyes. “Assistant to the ambassador for Arkadia. I could use someone to handle all the paperwork. Run errands. Wash my clothes. That sort of thing.”

Raven turns and sticks out her tongue at him. “But wash your clothes in what? That’s the question.”

Clarke can’t help the grin that comes to her face. That’s another reason why she comes here whenever she has a moment to herself—it reminds her that she gets to take two of her closest friends with her to Polis. Jasper, Monty and Finn are staying here, Octavia’s staying in TonDC, and it’s very unlikely she’ll ever reach the same level of closeness with Bellamy that she had before (especially after allowing Octavia to get herself tortured to take down the Mountain). But she’ll have Wells providing support and advice and Raven making snarky comments. Wells might be struggling with grief, and Raven might have a tumultuous love life where grenades are a legitimate Valentine’s Day gift, but the acceptance and friendship they give her is amazing.

“Hey,” John appears at the door. He gives Clarke a brief smile—as always, even smiling he looks like he’s just barely containing his anger at the world, so it’s more of a grimace. “Heard your speech last night, that you’re heading back to Polis. You didn’t mention Sydney at all. Are you gonna take her out?”

Clarke blinks at him. “How did you find me here?” She’s been doing her best not to be followed when she slips in here, aware that otherwise her many responsibilities will follow her. Even today, with Kane officially in charge, people keep asking her for things.

For the first couple of days she’d been very easy to find, due to the two dozen gona following her around. But her mother had politely informed her that they were making everyone nervous, and suggested that they join the rest of the gonakru in patrolling around the growing city. Now none of them are inside Arkadia. Clarke would feel unsafe, but she’s fairly certain that since they don’t have access to guns, she can easily defeat anyone who tries to attack her.

“Followed you,” he says, no apology at all in his voice. “Listen, I just need to know if you’re planning to hit Sydney’s people, that’s all.”
“I’m not sure,” Clarke says. It’s the truth – the Azgeda are the priority. If they continued heading east for long, Diana Sydney and her followers will have ended up at the ocean. If they cross it, the Floudonkru will probably imprison them and contact Lexa. If they can’t cross it, they’ll probably die of exposure before anything can be done. They’re not the main threat here.

“Well, if there’s any chance, I want to ask if I can come too,” John says. Clarke remembers being surprised when he chose to come back to Arkadia instead of stay in TonDC, since he seemed to have made friends there. She wonders if this is why. “I can get into their camp, if you need a Trojan Horse or something.”

“Hopefully this doesn’t take as long as the siege of Troy,” Wells comments, a little sarcastically.

John looks at him, confused. “I was talking about viruses, man. What are you talking about?” They stare at each other in mutual incomprehension until Clarke clears her throat.

“What makes you think you could help?” she enquires.

John hesitates. He has the same kind of simmering fury that she always associates with Murphy, but in his case it’s like it’s been hammered into resolve. That kind of purposefulness took Murphy a long time to find, hampered by both cynicism and sadism. Although he disobeyed her order to stay a reasonable distance from the Mountain, Clarke realises she doesn’t doubt that if she orders John to stay here, he’ll do it. He obeyed every one of Anya’s orders when they attacked the Mountain. She doesn’t know if he was like this in the other world – if maybe what she dismissed as blind obedience to Murphy and then Bellamy was actually just loyalty – or if that discipline is something he developed here. But he does have discipline.

“I can help because they’ll trust me,” he says eventually, and then when Raven starts to say something, he continues, “And they’ll trust me because my father is one of them, and he’ll want me to come join them.”

Clarke contains her surprise. She hasn’t looked closely at the list of all of Diana’s people yet. “I see,” she says thoughtfully. “Listen, I understand that you must want to protect him -”

“Protect him? No,” John says flatly. “I want to see the bastard die.”

There’s a long and awkward silence. Wells breaks it. “Really?” he says, looking at John like he’s mad. “Your own father?” His father’s death is probably too recent for him to understand someone being willing to do that. Honestly, Clarke’s father’s death is also too recent for her to entirely get it.

“Yeah, my own father,” John says, face twisting as if he’s sucking a lemon. He sees their disbelieving expressions. “Why do you think I took off my wrist monitor straight away, and why I wanted to get the hell out of here with Murphy? Murphy was the only real family I had. I never wanted to see my dad again. But if he’s going to run off and maybe get us all killed by starting a war or some shit like that, it’s my job to deal with him however I can.”

Clarke considers him. He’s tall and strong, he’s trained a little with the gona in TonDC but can also fire a gun, he’s reliable within certain limits, he’s personable enough to have befriended Artigas and a lot of the other TonDC villagers, and he looks like he’s telling the truth – both about hating his father, and about being able to get Diana Sydney’s people to trust him. He wouldn’t be the worst person to take along with them. “All right,” she says decisively. “We’re leaving for Polis in less than a week, I’ll warn you before it’s time to go. You can come with us and be a part of whatever we end up doing.”

He gives her a nod, but stops when she holds a hand up. “But,” she enunciates clearly. “You obey
orders, whatever. You obey the Commander’s orders. You even obey Anya’s orders. All of them. You don’t run off again.”

John nods again. “I won’t,” he promises. Then he turns and leaves.

Raven sighs. “North again, really?” she says despondently. “You know, I only just got feeling back into all my toes.”

“I don’t know,” Clarke admits. “At this point we’re waiting on movement from Nia, or word from the Floudonkru that they’ve found Diana’s people. We might have to go north, we might not. If we do have to go north I think it might not be until spring, though. For the next few months we might just try and contain the Azgeda. Assassination’s always a possibility as well.”

“I don’t suppose you have any advice from The Future?” Raven says hopefully, pronouncing ‘the future’ as if it’s an actual location.

“Not really,” Clarke says. “Things happened a little differently last time.” She remembers the spear hitting Nia, remembers how watching Lexa’s victory in both political games and vicious fighting at the same time had thrilled her, and how she’d felt ashamed – not just to feel that way about something which resulted in someone’s death, but because she’d wanted to hate Lexa and couldn’t manage it however she tried. As many things as she’s failed at since she came to earth, that’s the one failure she’s happy about.
Think of the Children

Facing the ambassadors as a group is always draining. They debate every little thing. Even when not arguing against Lexa’s orders, they throw subtle insults at each other, always angling for a higher position, for a better deal. In this case, however, the news of the Mountain stuns them. They grumble when she announces the new position of the Mountain Slayer, second only to her and above them all, but they stop when she meets their eyes.

It occurs to Lexa she is more powerful now than she has ever been. From the ambassadors’ viewpoint, she controlled the stars falling from the sky, she helped take down the Mountain and recruited the one who destroyed it, she has traded little-used land for technological marvels and destructive weaponry, and her greatest opposition is now considered a traitor to be killed on sight. It is no wonder they quiet when she glances at them. She could kill them all and the people of Polis would raise no objection at all. Their clans would most likely not even object. They listen to her news in unfamiliar silence and at first she believes the meeting will be over quickly. Is it wrong of her to use their increased awareness of her advantage to hurry this?

Uzac is the one who extends it beyond that, as he did the day before. “We must attack now, surely. Surprise her,” he says. His narrow face becomes even more forbidding as he scowls.

“I am not sure we can surprise the Azplana anymore,” Lexa remarks. “We can block the border now but it may be too late to prevent anyone getting through. Even if we set up guards, they would be better suited to warning us of a gonakru than a single gona, and a single gona is all that is needed to work a radio. If Nia has any mind at all she will already have someone here to warn her of our actions.”

“Then we attack in force before she can martial her people,” Uzac says bluntly.

“My people will not side with one who helps the Maunon,” the Azgeda ambassador says hotly. Lexa tries to recall his name. Azgeda ambassadors do not tend to last long, being regularly recalled by Nia before they can develop what the Azplana considers to be “inappropriate sympathies” for the other clans. This one she remembers killing in the other world for his insolence towards her – but here, he seems more inflamed by Nia’s treachery than anyone else in the room. She supposes it makes sense. The only reason the Azgeda joined the Coalition to begin with was out of fear of the Maunon. Nia’s actions must seem even more of a betrayal to him.

“Of course they will,” Uzac growls. “Maybe not in malevolence, but in ignorance, they will. We must strike quickly before they have the chance.”

“Broadleaf clan is far from Azgeda,” Lexa remarks, eyeing Uzac coldly. “If we strike fast your people will not have enough time to come north.”

He flounders for a second, before regaining his footing. “That is beside the point, Heda. We cannot give her time to organise her gona and attack first.”

“So you advise that we head north at the beginning of winter?” Lexa says, raising an eyebrow. “So our gona die of the cold? That is not a battle plan, that is a suicide. The Azgeda know the terrain and how to survive the snow far better than our gona ever will.”

“And what if we wait, and she kills the Fleimkepa?” Uzac challenges. His pale cheeks are flushed with feeling. “We cannot risk it.”
“We can, if I say we can,” Lexa says flatly. “Remember your place, Uzac.” She stares him down. “Nia will not kill Titus, not while there is a chance she could use him. She is not a fool. And if she does kill him, the Commander spirit may still be able to pass without him. A Fleimkepa aids the spirit, but he does not control it. None control the spirit.”

She does not understand the spirit, herself. She experienced it being placed in her, she hears the voices in her dreams and when she meditates, and sometimes she knows a piece of the past she has never been told. But otherwise the spirit is something that dwells imperceptibly within her. She felt no surge of certainty or strength when the spirit entered her. Much like the ambassadors, the spirit gives her advice and arguments, but it does not make her decisions for her. Sometimes even when she asks for guidance it is like shouting into a void.

Clarke seems to think there is a way the spirit interacts with her science – perhaps if Lexa dies Clarke can find a way to give the spirit to Aden. Perhaps not. In any case, she cannot depend on Titus surviving. If Nia wishes him dead, he is probably dead already. If she wishes him to live he will be alive. Acting immediately or delaying for three months will not affect that decision. If Lexa begins receiving his body parts, perhaps there will be cause to discuss this. Otherwise it is irrelevant.

“I must return home,” the Azgeda ambassador says desperately. “I can tell my people that the Azplana is natrona, that she allied with the Maunon. We will handle it ourselves.”

“Ha!” Uzac spits. “We should lock you up, not let you go north to tell our plans to the natrona you serve.”

“I do not serve her!” the Azgeda yells back at him, pale skin flushing with rage as well. He rakes his long blonde hair back from his face with a frustrated hand, visibly trying to calm himself. “The Maunon are – were – our worst enemies. I would never aid them, nor serve those who aid them. If I can convince the rest of my people -”

“And how would you convince them?” Lexa asks reasonably.

He hesitates. “I, I would bring the Azgeda who told us…” he pauses and frowns. “…he looks up at her, and something in his gaze is that of a kicked pet, betrayed and disbelieving. His voice lowers and becomes dull. “They would not believe me. I would die long before I could convince any.” This realisation seems to break something within him, the strength in his blue eyes crumbling away to be replaced by horrified blankness.

Lexa almost wants to tell him that she is sorry. His belief is sincere, his desire to take down Nia unrelenting. But just like Uzac, he is blinded by those desires. She sighs. “We will continue this tomorrow,” she snaps. “Perhaps we will not be able to attack until spring. Or perhaps we can attack from Floudonkru land, or send assassins north to find Nia, or even just guard the borders so we choke the Azgeda lands until they bleed ice. But there is an answer, and we shall find it. There is a plan.” She wishes Clarke was here. Clarke’s plans are as unexpected as she is. No doubt when she arrives in a week she will have an angle Lexa has not considered, a ploy that Lexa would never come up with.

Lexa stalks out of the room and heads immediately for the only place she wishes to be. She is hardly through the door when they are upon her.

“Heda,” Aden is the first one to speak, a grin splitting his face in half, the leader of the pack as always. She knows all of them expect him to be the next Heda, except Aden himself, but she tries not to think of that because the thought of the Conclave saddens her. They are hers, all of them, the closest thing to children she will ever have – or would ever want. “Heda, it is good to see you.”
They are all well-behaved enough not to mob her like birds, but they still stare at her with something between the adoration given to deities and the affection given to family, crowding around as close as they can get without being too close. They brighten and straighten when she meets their eyes, glowing with pride. Clarke called them her ducklings, once, and some days she can see where Clarke got the expression from.

“Greetings, Natblida,” Lexa says formally.

“Greetings, Heda,” they chorus. Dazi the dreamer is, as always, a few seconds behind the group, and Saska elbows him to make him catch up. She often does such things, determined to make her closest friend and bro the best Natblida he can be.

Sometimes they break her heart. She reminds herself that at least she will not live to watch them die. That is the one mercy given to the Commander.

“Saska,” Lexa says, hiding her smile.

“Sha, Heda,” Saska says, trying to look innocent and only succeeding in looking guiltier. She expects Lexa to reprimand her as Titus so often does, telling her that these attachments will not serve her well at the Conclave, that she must sever them to survive.

“There are three pillars of being the Commander,” Lexa tells her. “Which were you just showing?”

There’s a long pause, then Saska’s smile returns, and she says, “Compassion?”

“Sha,” Lexa tells her. “But not just compassion. You show wisdom in securing an ally, and strength in risking a scolding to aid your bro.” She smiles down at Saska, and then includes the rest of the group in her pleasure. “I am lucky to have such a crop of Natblida that any one of you would make a worthy Heda.”

They all grin, some of them twisting on the spot with the exuberance of youth, before forcing their bodies into stillness and their faces into impassiveness.

“Aden,” Lexa says, snapping her gaze to him. He straightens further until he almost seems to be standing on his toes, trying to look strong. “How has training gone?”

“Os, Heda,” Aden says, inclining his head in a solemn way that seems bizarrely beyond his years. But then, like hers, his age does not matter. Those born to lead are also born old.

“The gona you ordered to train us have focused on our skills with a bow.”

“Better them than I,” Lexa says ruefully, thinking of her poor bow skills. They look shocked at her words, and she remembers they have spent no time with her since the advent of Clarke kom Kongeda into her life and are therefore unused to her slightly less serious attitude. “I am sorry I have been unable to visit since I arrived. I needed to speak to the ambassadors, organise defences for Polis and the alliance, check on the integration of Skaikru, decide a number of punishments for crimes, settle three trade disputes, and ensure my former Fos Anya was able to begin her duties here. But that is no excuse for neglecting you. I was very tired, but I should have made time.”

“But you are Heda,” Aden objects, looking at her in surprise. For a second she thinks he’s confused by her apology, but then she realises what he means and is unable to suppress her smile.

“But you are Heda,” Aden objects, looking at her in surprise. For a second she thinks he’s confused by her apology, but then she realises what he means and is unable to suppress her smile.

“Even the Commander is tired sometimes, Aden,” she tells him. “We give our lives to our people as surely as we ask them to give theirs to us, but giving that does not make us more than human. A gona becomes exhausted fighting a battle, but we must fight a war. A fisa becomes exhausted keeping a few people healthy, but we must keep the whole alliance healthy. A ticha becomes
exhausted teaching their class, but we must teach all of our people the way forward. We will always be wearier than any of our people. A Commander is given rights, power, knowledge, and dreams of the past, but we are not given the ability to survive without rest. Eventually, all must rest.” She thinks of Clarke, wishing she could be curled against her now. It is harder than she thought it would be to sleep without Clarke’s warmth beside her.

She smiles again, lightening the mood. “Now. Fetch your bows, and show me what you have learnt, Natblida.”

There’s a brief moment of uncertainty, and then they are all trying to bow at once, Dazi trips over himself and is hauled up by Saska, Aden pauses for a second to look at Lexa with blatant adulation in his eyes, Haran races off first to show off his greater running speed, Enja flips her hair back in the odd little gesture she always uses, and Lexa’s heart breaks a little again.

When she first met them, she accepted all but one of her Natblida would die. But since then she has done so many impossible things, everything from defeating the Mountain to travelling in time to beginning to implement ‘blood must not have blood’. Although falling in love has helped, Clarke has not taught Lexa compassion – she believes she knew that already, if not in quite the same context as the Skaikru define it. But Clarke has taught her that this world can be changed, the boundaries stretched and broken, the impossible achieved.

Lexa knows how she wishes to change the world. She will not let her Natblida die. Perhaps in the other world Aden survived and became a far greater Commander than she was, but she cannot accept that in this world if the price is the lives of the others, not when she has more power and support than ever before. In the other world her people were turning against her already and she could barely change anything. Here, perhaps this is something she can fix, so that even when she goes to her death she will not have to think of Saska’s eyes staring blankly or Haran’s blood seeping onto the floor.

She decides. Tomorrow she will not discuss the Azgeda with her ambassadors. Tomorrow she will discuss her children.
The Swerve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“At this rate I think we’ll run out of fuel in ten days,” Raven says, consulting a clipboard. There’s a smudge of grease on her forehead. “Or we could get rid of a couple of the vehicles, break ‘em down for parts, and keep just one of them going for a month.”

Clarke frowns. She can’t be as enthusiastic about the three vehicles – two army Jeeps and an armoured truck – as Raven is. To Raven, they’re interesting machines that as a bonus let you go extremely fast. To Clarke, they’re what enabled the Maunon to carry the remains of Alpha Station to their deaths. And who knows how many Grounders have been transported to the Mountain using them in the last few decades? “I don’t know if we want to keep them going for a month.”

“I think we need to focus on building Arkadia,” Kane says decisively, squinting at the vehicles. “Right now, the Jeeps are mostly being used as a prop, a way to make exploration and hunting easier, but we need to learn to do those without vehicles. The truck is much more useful for dragging wood here to build with, transporting essential supplies for winter, and helping clear a direct road to Polis – lasting things.”

Raven frowns. “But the truck’s the slowest,” she says mournfully. “I was hoping we could keep one of the fast ones for a little longer.” Clarke looks at the truck. It does look slower, somehow, even when they’re all parked. It also looks odd. There’s a line of strange things across the end of it, like someone chopped the heads off a dozen brooms and got creative with them – an odd device that definitely wasn’t part of the truck’s original design.

Kane’s mouth lifts in a wry smile. “Sorry. But we can’t afford to remove all of the trees around here and kill the ecosystem of the area, and we need the truck to get trees from further away if we want to be finished building the basics before winter really hits.”

Most of the trees they’re getting are from the path they’re clearing from here to Polis, with the full approval of Lexa. According to her it will be more than welcome, especially for the Glowing Forest people just south of them, who have always had great difficulty in getting to the capital through the thick forests. A quick, direct trade route between Arkadia and Polis will also be incredibly useful, since if the Skaikru ever want to trade Polis will be the best place to do it, especially if they’re trading technology. Indra’s people also have a reasonably clear path to Polis, so they can use Polis as a stopover when sending the supplies that will make up their payment for the land each season. It will keep the relationship between the Skaikru and the alliance close, and help the Skaikru keep in regular contact with the members of the 100 who still live in Polis, and a number of other good things.

It was Kane’s first idea as Chancellor. Before ordering it, though, he asked for Clarke’s opinion, and got her to speak over the radio to Lexa and Indra, making sure there were no objections. To Clarke, it felt like proof that she’d chosen well, that she’d done the right thing. Proof that Kane will be an excellent ruler. Admitting that she could hand responsibility for the Skaikru over to him felt like letting a weight slide off – she might have to take care of the alliance as a whole, but she doesn’t need to carry her people’s mistakes and poor decisions anymore, she doesn’t need to defend them when they’re indefensible. Kane will take care of them and guide them now. Her responsibilities lie elsewhere.

“Sure thing,” Raven says, sighing. “The truck’s bigger, though, so it’ll burn through fuel faster. We might not get a whole month out of it.”
“Did you attach that thing to the back?” Clarke asks curiously, reaching out and touching the mass of bristles with her hand. They’re muddy and wet.

“No, they were already there,” Raven says, frowning at them. “We’ll probably remove them, actually. I think Mount Weather attached them to stop it making tire tracks in the snow, with those brushes redirecting snow back into the tracks. But I actually don’t know. It’s on my to-do list.”

“Oh, okay,” Clarke says, understanding. That would explain how the Maunon were able to get Alpha Station without leaving an obvious trail in the snow for them to follow. She dismisses it from her mind. “I’ll radio Lexa later, let her know we’ll be using vehicles for a little longer than expected.”

The room with the main radio rarely has people in it, since it’s adjoined to the room with the nuclear missile, which seems to make people nervous. Clarke’s not sure if they should move one of them – the truth is, she’s not sure what they should do with the missile now at all. Drop it into the deepest part of the ocean with weights tied to it?

“You guys have the most boring phone sex ever,” Raven mutters into Clarke’s ear, just low enough that Kane can’t hear. Clarke flushes and glares at her, but Raven just smirks.

Raven’s been throwing a lot of slightly-too-pointed barbs at Clarke lately. At first she thought Raven must be angry at her for some reason, but then she realised Raven was trying to lure her into an argument because she didn’t have anyone to really argue with, and wanted to provoke Clarke into throwing back insults. Basically, Raven’s pissing off Clarke because she misses bantering with Anya. Since – even with their regular radio conversations – Clarke misses Lexa constantly, she can sympathise.

“Good idea,” Kane says to Clarke, wisely not asking Raven to repeat her comment. “Raven, could you see if any of the parts from the Jeeps could be adapted to help with the truck’s efficiency?”

“Sure thing, boss,” Raven says cheerfully and heads off to fiddle more with the vehicles.

“My mother thinks we should have gotten more fuel out before I destroyed Mount Weather,” Clarke comments.

“The vehicles were never going to be more than a temporary advantage, even if we’d gotten more fuel it would eventually run out,” Kane says. It’s a politician’s answer, not condemning Abby for her opinion or Clarke for her actions. “Mount Weather must have used them very sparingly for their fuel supplies to last a hundred years.”

“It was amazing of Lexa to let us take any of them,” Clarke says, a little challengingly. “Mom should be more grateful.”

“It was amazing,” Kane agrees. “The Commander has been very good to us. I’m looking forward to travelling to Polis and officially swearing loyalty to both her and the alliance.” He looks at Clarke and sighs, shoulders sagging. “Clarke, you shouldn’t be so hard on your mother. Abby hasn’t spent any real time with the Trikru, or with the Commander, and her first impression wasn’t a good one. Over time she’ll learn to appreciate them more. We fear what we don’t understand, but Abby is one of the most compassionate people I know.”

Clarke sighs as well. “I know. It’s just – all the gona I brought with me are camping outside because she thought they made people uncomfortable. I don’t think that’s giving them a very good impression of us, either.”

“You and I are both concerned about how the Trikru and the rest of the alliance view us,” Kane says softly. “Abby’s concerned about how our people view them. They’re different sides of the same
worry. The warriors were making people uncomfortable.”

“I know,” Clarke admits. Still, she thinks her people need to become used to having gona around, having Grounders around. She doesn’t want them to be a closed society. Perhaps she’s rushing things, though, trying to make the Skaikru accept a foreign army quartered inside their city with full access to everywhere so soon after they’ve come to the ground. And having all the gona on guard outside does make Arkadia considerably safer from bandits and the Azgeda.

Her latest argument with her mother had been two days ago when Abby found out the gonakru were searching people who left and entered Arkadia, mostly returning hunters and the people clearing the path to Polis. Abby had been right in a sense – while it was undeniably better security, it was also giving the Arkers the impression that their new home was under military rule by the Trikru.

Clarke had managed to find a compromise – Arkadia would post a dozen Skaikru guards who would search people coming in or out, handling this aspect of their protection themselves – but already the Trikru gona were complaining that the searches weren’t thorough and someone could easily steal food or weapons if they really wanted to. Clarke had pointed out to them that all their weaponry was locked up or in Polis, and that stealing food and attempting to run would be foolish, since once the food ran out they’d starve. But she knows that a significant amount of the warriors’ paranoia is due to the surviving Maunon in their ramshackle buildings at the south of Arkadia. Even if they know intellectually that the Mountain was defeated and all their weapons destroyed, they still believe in their souls that a Maunon set loose could do untold damage. Remembering Emerson, Clarke’s not even sure they’re entirely wrong.

Kane’s been watching her carefully. “You know, it’s not entirely about whether she trusts them, Clarke,” he says softly. “It’s hard for a parent to watch their child grow up and, by doing so, grow away from them. She thought she was going to come down and find her little girl, not the second-in-command to the leader of a nation and the destroyer of the Mountain. At least a part of Abby’s mistrust is just resentment because she thinks they’re taking you away from her. However irrational that resentment may be, it’s still a factor.”

“Why do I feel like she spends a lot of time complaining about me to you?” Clarke asks rhetorically. Her mother’s already emerged as the most dedicated of Kane’s council, staying late with Kane to argue every single small decision to death, and Clarke’s pretty sure that at some point every discussion turns into Abby’s favourite rant about how Clarke should not go to Polis.

“Abby loves you, more than anything,” Kane says simply. “She wants to protect you, but she doesn’t know how to do that down here, and she thinks you don’t even want her protection. I think she worries you don’t even want her anymore. You should try and spend some time with her where you’re not talking about politics or integration, remind her that you’re still her daughter, wherever you choose to go and whatever you choose to do.”

Back in the old days, she would never have considered Kane of all people to be the most insightful person on the Ark. But something happened to him, maybe in his time up there alone waiting to die, maybe once he got to the ground. Something that made him so calm and understanding that a little bit of that feeling infects whoever he’s talking to.

Clarke smiles slightly. “You’re probably right. I think -”

“FIRE! FIRE! ATTACK!” someone yells hysterically, and suddenly the area is full of moving bodies, people shoving by each other, screams. Dark wisps of smoke are drifting through the air lazily. Clarke and Kane glance at each other and, as one, fight against the crowd towards the source.

The hospital building seems to be burning fiercely, but there’s smoke coming from several building
nearby as well. Clarke frowns, trying to figure out how the fire could have spread so quickly. Kane grabs a guard standing nearby. “What’s going on?” he snaps.

The man tries to struggle away, terrified, the whites of his eyes showing. “I don’t – let me go -”

Kane nearly lifts him up by the front of his shirt, face furious. “Report.”

“The fire just – just started, sir,” the guard says quickly. “I don’t know how. Everyone inside is unconscious, we started trying to pull them out but then it got too hot, so we-”

Kane swears and looks around. “You, you, you and you,” he says, pointing at people. They stop milling frantically and listen. “Grab people and start four bucket chains from the nearest river to here. Two to the hospital, one to each of those buildings. Use every container we have, understand? And use every single person, if there’s anyone who doesn’t join the bucket chains, they better have a damn good excuse. Now!” He faces the guard again. “Get the other guards, grab every blanket you can find and soak them in the river, we can use them as protection against the heat. We’ll be going in.”

When the man disappears Kane looks towards Clarke. “This isn’t an accident,” she tells him, angry. “Three fires. Everyone being unconscious. This is a deliberate attack.”

“I know,” he says, face drawn. “They must have drugged the hospital food then started the fires. But we can’t focus on that right now.” Struck by a sudden thought, he looks at Clarke.

She nods before he can ask. “I’ll go tell Polis and TonDC we’re under attack.” The others need to know, in case it isn’t just an attack on them. If it’s the Azgeda, though, how did they get in to manage this? Not important, right now. What’s important is dealing with this. Part of her wants to stay and help, medically and otherwise, but it’s important she go and talk to Lexa and Indra. She’s been the main person to talk to them since she got here, contacting Lexa at least once a day even if nothing’s happened.

When she enters the room with the radio she knows something’s off immediately. There’s a guard inside, his face familiar, and it takes her a moment to place him, the way it often does when you see someone you recognise somewhere you never expected them to be. He’s a Prison Station guard, someone she saw often when she was there. He used to eat her food, or mess up some of it, just for the petty thrill, taunt her about being in solitary and ask if she wanted ‘company’. And he stayed in the Skybox, she’s sure of that, came down with Diana Sydney and ran off with her like the rest of them.

She attacks before he even realises she’s there, kicking him in the knee so hard she hears a cracking noise and backing him up against the wall. She holds a knife to his throat as he whimpers with pain. “What are you doing here?” she hisses, pressing it in deep enough that blood starts to drip down and soak the neck of his shirt. She should knock him out to question later and go to the radio, but when she glances at it she realises there’s no point. The radio has been ripped open, the insides torn out. There’s no way it will work. Maybe Raven has another one, but she’s been working on a lot of things lately so maybe not. Raven made it so the main radios could not be hacked, but that level of encryption also means the basic radios they have won’t work to contact Polis or TonDC.

Something stings her in the back of her neck. It takes her a second to recognise the sting and the wave of darkness that follows – someone behind her has shot her with a Maunon sleep dart. How do they have Maunon sleep darts?

Before the world disappears, she slashes the knife she’s holding against the guard’s neck savagely. The blood spraying into her face is the last thing she sees. She doesn’t even feel it when she hits the
I probably won't be able to update for the weekend, since I'll be in Sydney for Supanova (it's like comic-con).

Everyone's reactions are so fantastic! Thank you for the amazing reviews.
“It’s against our ways,” one of the ambassadors says, a thread of fear in his voice. Fear of the idea of more change, perhaps, or just fear of disagreeing with the Commander.

“Ways can change,” Lexa says. “But I think, if anything, my idea is more in line with our ways. In the Conclave we pit all the Nightbloods against each other, and hope for one survivor. But if someone challenges me we do not let them attack me with a dozen people and then crown the survivor.” She snorts. “Surviving is not the sign of a strong warrior – any coward can survive if they run or hide. I want our next Commander to be brave.”

“The Conclave is how the spirit chooses,” another ambassador insists.

“I have the spirit,” Lexa points out. “So whoever I choose as my successor is chosen by the spirit.” She shakes her head. “As I said, however, I have no intention of my choice being final and inarguable. I think for the week after my fight ends, all Nightbloods should be allowed to challenge my chosen successor in battle if they wish to. If they do not wish to challenge, would you really want them as Commander anyway? They could be weak, or afraid, or unwilling to sacrifice.” She sends a mental apology to her Natblida, who she knows would never be any of those things. However, she does also believe none of them would challenge Aden – they would seek to support him. They are his siblings and friends, after all. “After that period, either my chosen successor or the Natblida who has defeated him will be Heda.”

“Let me see if I understand,” the Broadleaf ambassador says hesitantly. “You would choose a successor. When you die, the other Nightbloods would have a week to challenge him. If one kills him, then they have earned the position of Heda. If none defeat him, he has earned the position of Heda. But you intend to make these challenges optional. What if none challenge him?”

“That it means every one of them believes either that he will be a better Heda than they, or they believe he could defeat them easily,” Lexa says. “A Natblida who believes either of those things could not be Heda. Certainty and strength is required to be the Commander.” She leans forward, face set and hand touching the hilt of her sword, threatening him with her own certainty and strength.

“It is… more elegant, then the current method,” the Rock Line ambassador says slowly. Rock Line, Lexa remembers from her visits there, have very few children. It is difficult for them to bear a healthy child and many are born deformed, disfigured or already dead. For that reason they consider the killing of able-bodied children more horrific than any other clan. “And it means if a Commander died within only a year or so of becoming Heda, the Flame would not need to pass to the next generation of Natblida, many of whom would be far too young – perhaps less than eight summers.”

Lexa sends him an approving glance. “Exactly.”

“What would become of the others if they do not die or become Heda, though?” the Azgeda ambassador asks. “What would their fate be?”

“Personal guard for the new Commander,” Lexa replies immediately. “They are loyal, excellent fighters, intelligent, will know the Commander well, and it ensures that if something unexpected happens there are candidates around who are able to take the Flame.”

The ambassador frowns. “What if the chosen heir died at the same time as you – as the Commander died,” he amends hurriedly. “Or if the Commander died before naming a successor. How would the heir be chosen then? Would we go back to the Conclave?”
“The ambassadors and the Fleimkepa would vote, of course,” Lexa says, smiling coolly. At once the ambassadors look more interested – there is nothing they like better than receiving more authority, even if it is for a contingency that is unlikely to occur. “With the Fleimkepa to have final say if the vote is not conclusive. Do any of you object?” She looks at each of them in turn and they flinch from her gaze like it is the sun. Not a single one objects.

It has taken some time to get them to this point, days of arguing and repetition, long hours of exhorting and promising and threatening. “Good,” she says softly. “Now that you know the general rules that will govern this, you must agree every tiny detail among yourselves, all of them, and in seven days’ time tell me what you recommend. If I consider your input acceptable we will then gather all of Polis and you will announce the rules, sealing in blood your agreement of these new ways and ongoing fealty to the spirit.”

She turns and leaves. Anya is waiting by the door, eyes worried, and Lexa gestures for her former Fos to walk beside her.

“Still no word?” Lexa asks her quietly, stomach churning.

“None,” Anya says grimly. “It’s been nearly three days now.”

“You do not need to remind me how long it has been,” Lexa tries not to let her shoulders slump. Why do the Skaikru not contact them? Why does Clarke not contact them? The radio has been silent except for when Indra contacted them yesterday, to let them know she also had not heard from Arkadia. “Even with the pathway between us only partially cleared, the messengers I sent to Arkadia yesterday should be returning soon.”

Anya’s face is set. Lexa knows she worries that there is no Arkadia to visit anymore, that somehow the Azgeda have snuck over the border and destroyed them, or that the Glowing Forest clan betrayed the alliance and killed the Skaikru, as impossible as that seems. But Lexa can’t believe that is the case.

“If the radio broke, they may not have been able to make another one that reaches us,” Lexa says, forcing herself to sound calm. “You know Raven did something complex with the main ones, something she called encrypting, to prevent the Arkadia hunters and guards carrying radios to be able to listen in on important discussions.”

“She said something of the kind,” Anya says. She frowns. “I do not like worrying about her safety. Or that of your Clarke. We should not have let them go back to Arkadia.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow. “As if we could stop either of them going somewhere they wished to be.” She feels no shame at admitting she does not command Clarke. In her experience, no one can.

“True,” Anya admits, though she still frowns. “Then perhaps I should have gone with them to Arkadia before coming here then.”

“I thought Raven kom Skaikru requested ‘space’, ” Lexa says, not entirely sure what this term means besides the obvious. The Skaikru seem to have attached more meaning to it than Lexa knows of.

“She said she wished for space to think, but she also said she wanted us to continue developing our friendship and see where that led.” Anya replies, also looking confused, though willing to go along with whatever her strange sky girl wishes. Then she changes the subject, apparently unwilling to continue discussing her relationship with the mechanic. “Any news from the north?”

“My people in Azgeda territory report to me only rarely, it is the only way for them to remain safe,”
Lexa says. “With the border blocked they are even less likely to travel south unless they have urgent news. They will wait and listen and spy until we enter Azgeda territory and will then attempt to meet me with whatever information they have. Perhaps one knows where Nia hides, but there is no way to know that until then.”

“I could go north with a couple of the Azgeda gona from Zion’s unit, or even Zion himself,” Anya suggests eagerly, apparently wanting something to distract herself. “If you tell us which villages they are in, we should have no problem finding them without being seen. It would be easy enough to disguise ourselves and avoid notice.”

“That is several weeks’ journey north, to get to the furthest,” Lexa says. “And they would not speak to you.”

“You could give me some sign, some token -”

“And they still would not speak to you. They would attack you the moment you told them you knew who they were,” Lexa says flatly. “Their orders are not based on tokens or code words. The best of them have orders only to report to Gustus, Titus or me.” It seemed the best plan at the time, she reflects. The Azplana has always enjoyed torture. Having spies pass on information to each other, or through the use of things like code words or tokens, would have led to all of them dying if one was discovered and made to speak.

Since she knew that even if they were captured and tortured neither Gustus nor Titus would ever reveal the location or appearance of a single person, it seemed the most secure way. She is still sure Titus and Gustus will give up no information, and that her people in Azgeda lands are safe.

“I see,” Anya says. She hesitates, then says, “If that is so, why did you send Gustus and Titus away? They are the only ones who could make their way north in secret and discover Nia’s location before spring. And you told me you knew war with Azgeda was coming.”

“I erred, I suppose,” Lexa admits. “But after what I knew of them I could not keep them here.” She stops walking and meets Anya’s eyes. “In the other world, Gustus died trying to prevent our alliance with the Skaikru. And Titus was the cause of my death, for the same reason. I know they were both trying to help. But I did not wish to suffer through their help again.” She sighs. “And I knew Nia had a hidden Natblida, a vicious girl named Ontari. I felt sure Titus could find her and perhaps return with her. It would have been something to accuse Nia of before she began working against me, a reason to order her to Polis for trial.” She should have told him Ontari’s name. Titus and Gustus could be back by now, instead of imprisoned.

“Heda! HEDA!” a messenger bursts in and throws themselves to the ground in front of Lexa. It’s a break of protocol, but she recognises him as one of the messengers she sent to Arkadia. She gave him orders to go to her at once when he returned.

“The Skaikru?” Lexa says, fear making her voice sharp. “Did they send a message?”

“Their leader gave me this message for you: ‘Commander, we were attacked,’” he says breathlessly. Anya stiffens next to Lexa. “The radio is broken. Twelve are dead. Clarke Griffin has been taken, and so has the ship I fell to earth in. We can’t tell which way our attackers went but our best guess is north. I have sent a message to TonDC to try and stop them crossing the border, but I don’t know if it can be done in time. We’re doing all we can to get them back. Regards, Chancellor Kane.”

Lexa feels like she stops breathing for a second. Clarke, taken. The ship Marcus Kane fell in… the nuclear missile? So Clarke has been stolen by people who are planning to use a nuclear missile. How ruthless must they be? “I must go to Arkadia,” she says through numb lips.
Anya nods, face pale. “I will accompany you.”

Lexa looks at Anya, wanting to point out that someone should stay in Polis to keep everything here under control, but the words dry in her mouth when she sees Anya’s face. Anya is nearly as scared as she is, and not as good at handling it. Anya cares for so few people, but when she does, it is absolute. There are twelve dead and no guarantee that Raven is not one of them. She finds that even in her own terror about Clarke, there is still a small amount of space left to worry for Raven and Wells. “Radio Indra. Tell her to get her gonakru to close the border absolutely and not let a single person through – Kane’s messenger cannot have gotten there yet. Then have her place Nyko in charge of TonDC and Tristan in charge of her gonakru and come to Polis. She can keep the ambassadors from foolish actions while we discover exactly what has happened in Arkadia. Send Tris to find a dozen gona to accompany us. I will organise the horses. We leave in half an hour.”

Lexa keeps repeating to herself that Clarke will be fine, Clarke will be safe, Clarke is clever and strong and survived the Maunon and can survive anything. But when she closes her eyes she sees Clarke beheaded on the inside of her eyelids, she sees Clarke tortured, she sees Clarke dead and gone. All the things she usually sees only in the worst of her nightmares.

And a new nightmare – Clarke burning alive as the nuclear missile goes off.
When Clarke wakes up, her back and side are pressed against a hard, cold surface, which seems to be vibrating. She can feel that her hands are bound in front of her – no, metal, not rope. Handcuffed. It feels like her wrists are encircled with ice. She’s shivering. Judging by the feel of it, she must have been doing that even while still unconscious. She’s still wearing her pants and her top, but no other layers, and it’s freezing – north, she thinks. For it to be this cold, we must be going north.

Clarke doesn’t open her eyes and look around, not right away. If someone’s watching her she needs to be able to surprise them, which means she can’t let them know she’s awake until she’s ready to do something.

This place smells of fuel and grease – one of the vehicles, she realises. That explains the vibrating floor, the noise of the engine. Since she’s lying down and stretched out, it can’t be one of the Jeeps, it must be the military truck. So she’s in the truck, tied up, heading north, captured by Diana Sydney’s people, using Mount Weather sleep darts.

Lexa’s too clever to have let anyone sneak out Maunon weapons after they took the Mountain. So they must have been taken from the Mountain earlier. Either the Mountain also made a deal with Diana Sydney’s people – unlikely – or they gave Nia some weaponry and she traded it to Diana Sydney’s people. Or maybe she didn’t trade it, maybe she just outfitted them for a mission to capture Clarke, because Clarke can’t see any reason why Diana Sydney’s people would want her. Nia, on the other hand… Nia might want her.

She opens her eyes just slightly, so that she can barely see anything through her eyelashes. It takes a minute to adjust to it, and then she can see the room, albeit blurry. There’s something very big right in front of her, tied down but still taking up nearly all the space. She realises what it is almost immediately – the nuclear missile.

Shit.

There’s also a guard standing beside it, sleep dart gun pointed at the floor as he leans against the wall. He’s not paying much attention to her though.

Several thoughts go through her mind quickly. The back of the truck opens from the outside, or can be opened from the cab – it was probably used to carry prisoners or something back in military days, just like it’s being used now. Maybe she can get it open, but if she can she still can’t jump from a vehicle moving at this speed – even if she survived she’d be too injured to get away effectively. That doesn’t change the fact that she has to get out of here soon. They might not be in Azgeda territory yet. Once they’re in Azgeda territory, her odds of survival go sharply down. Not just because of enemies, but because without her outer layers of clothing, she’ll freeze. She needs to be close enough that she can reach TonDC before that happens.

She lashes out with her foot, sweeping the guard’s legs out from under him so he hits the floor hard, then grabs desperately for his gun as he yells out. Her handcuffed wrists make it much harder, and he’s determined to hold on. He grabs her hair with his other hand, trying to yank her away. Clarke ignores the tears of pain that come to her eyes and manages to pull her head forward enough to bite savagely at his wrist. He cries out in pain and lets go of both her hair and the gun. Clarke scrambles backwards, nearly fumbling the gun in her bound hands, but manages to pull the trigger and hit him in the leg with a sleep dart. He collapses.

“Jase? We heard a yell. Everything okay in there?” Someone calls out from the cab. Obviously,
there’s no reply. Clarke can hear some urgent conversation in the front and then someone opens the hatch to look through. Clarke shoots him calmly in the forehead with a sleep dart and he keels over. The hatch slams shut again but rebounds open an inch because they used too much force, and the truck swerves hard, then stops.

They’re coming back here to check, Clarke thinks, almost amused by their stupidity. In their place she would have kept going and just left the hatch and doors shut, limiting the threat to the one unconscious guard in here. She looks at the gun. One sleep dart left. She finds the keys to the handcuffs in Jase’s pocket and undoes them.

She’s incredibly lucky they left the hatch slightly open. One of them wouldn’t be able to get through it, but she’s not as large as they are. Moving quickly, she manages to get the unconscious guard leant against the back door so when they open it, he’ll fall on them. She waits several seconds, listening to the slam of doors as they get out of the cab, then shoves the hatch fully open, sticks just the gun through and shoots in the direction of the driver’s seat. There’s a faint sigh and she wriggles through the hatch, falling through to the other side with a faint but painful thud.

Clarke scrambles upright and closes the hatch firmly behind her. They only left the driver here, apparently deeming her dangerous enough to need everyone else at the back. And now he’s passed out too, just her and two unconscious bodies in the cab. There’s a yell as they open the back and their friend – Jase – falls out on them, and Clarke uses those few seconds to open the driver’s door, kick his unconscious body out, and take his place. She slams the door shut and locks it, then looks at the controls.

She never learnt to drive. Why did she never learn to drive? Oh, right, because there were no cars in space. There was a driving simulation game up on the Ark but she never played it, not once. It just didn’t seem like something that would ever come in use – how could she have known there would be cars on the ground?

Still, she’s seen it in TV shows. One of the pedals is the accelerator and one’s the brake. Unfortunately, there seem to be three pedals. Right. Gears. She doesn’t know anything at all about gears.

Nevertheless, Clarke starts it, presses down on one pedal with her left foot and another one with her right, and moves the gear stick pretty much at random to the number three. If nothing else, she should at least be able to wreck the truck in a snowdrift or something, and she’s pretty sure she can go much faster than these guys on foot.

The truck bunny-hops, the whole of it lurching in a way that’s somewhere between comical and terrifying, and then one of the guards is at the driver’s side window, trying to smash through it with a gun that’s definitely not for sleep darts. Another guy is doing the same at the other side and she can hear someone in the back trying to open the hatch again.

Clarke moves the gear shift to one she definitely recognises – R for reverse – and then the whole thing’s flying backwards, and there’s a thumping noise – her running over Jase, she suspects. The whole thing tilts terrifyingly as a result and she takes her foot off what she thinks is the accelerator, but it’s too late, she hit a hill or something. Shit. She can see the guards’ panicked faces as they chase after it. She stomps on the remaining pedal, hoping it’s the brake, and the whole truck shudders as she does, trying to stop.

But the truck’s at an alarming angle by now and there’s slippery snow on the ground, so instead the brakes make the vehicle swerve a little, sliding downwards, and then the angle is much worse and then it’s tipping, the entire thing slowly falling on its side with an earth-shaking thud. Clarke’s thrown to the side, slamming into the window. Her right foot catches under one of the pedals and she
hears a crack as her ankle breaks. She feels blood start to flow down the side of her face and is suddenly, intensely dizzy, but still manages to get up. When she puts weight on her broken ankle a wave of pain floods her, so intense she nearly throws up.

I shouldn’t have tried to take the vehicle, she thinks numbly. Damn thing has to be cursed. She manages to climb to the other door at the passenger side using her hands and her good leg, and she opens it like a trapdoor. The guards are only metres away so she slithers over the side so that their shots – all sleep darts, she’s apparently still wanted alive – ping off the truck she’s now crouched behind. There’s trees nearby and she staggers towards them as quickly as she can, hopping more than limping and trying not to whimper with the pain, keeping the vehicle between them and her as she stumbles into the little forest.

The snow on the ground is thick, she realises. They’re definitely in Azgeda territory. Perhaps far into Azgeda territory. And that’s not all – this is one of the only clumps of trees in the area, and even they look skeletal and sickly. Everything else is just snow and hills, nowhere to run. She manages to yank herself up one of the bigger trees like it’s yet another training exercise for her, Wells, and Octavia, thinking frantically as she does, not putting any weight on her broken ankle.

They’ll find her. This is the best hiding place as far as she can see unless she wants to bury herself in the snow and die of frostbite, but there’s no way they won’t spot her. They’ll search the truck first, then the ground around here, but eventually they will look up. She can’t take them all out with no weapons. The thing the Maunon added at the back of the truck, the one intended to stop the truck leaving a trail in the snow, seems to have done its job well – she can’t even really tell which way they came from exactly. Perhaps Lexa could see some odd flatness to the snow and trail it by that, but Clarke can’t. Even as she watches the wind picks up snow and shifts it, making her realise that after an hour or so not even Azgeda trackers could successfully follow the truck. And she can’t just walk south, not in winter, not without warm clothing, and especially not with a broken ankle that’s throbbing with pain.

She tries to look at it logically. They have to be taking her to Nia. That’s the only explanation that makes sense, the only way they could have Mount Weather weapons. So, what is her value to Nia?

Her importance is the information she has, the power she has as the Mountain Slayer, and her relationship with Lexa. Unfortunately, two of those things are good reasons for Nia to kill her, and one is an incentive to torture her first just in case. That’s not value she wants.

What makes her valuable alive? Nia must know Lexa won’t trade anything she can use for Clarke. If Lexa tried to trade a pardon or something for Clarke then her own people would rise against her – they wouldn’t allow her to barter forgiveness, not even for the safety of her newly appointed second-in-command. There’s nothing Lexa’s people would allow her to give that Nia could want, and she must know that. So Clarke’s relationship with Lexa is a drawback right now.

What makes her valuable besides Lexa? She’s valuable because Arkadia listens to her. She’s valuable because she was made second-in-command of the alliance, which gives her sway over the Grounders as well. She’s valuable because she came up with the strategy that took down the Mountain. She’s a good fighter, an excellent advisor, and she knows a great deal about the Skaikru, the Trikru, the Maunon, and Lexa herself.

She’s valuable to Nia tortured for information and killed for power. But she’s even more valuable if Nia could get Clarke on her side. If even Heda’s second-in-command claimed that the accusation of treason was a set-up… if she was willing to help Nia lead her armies, convince the rest of the Skaikru to help them, fight on Nia’s side… then Nia would have an excellent reason to keep her alive.
So all she needs to do is convince Nia that that’s a possibility, that she might consider working with her willingly. She doesn’t need to give the woman anything too useful – all she needs to do is give enough that the Ice Queen thinks Clarke’s pliable. It’s too late to pretend to be stupid or weak, she’s travelled all around the Azgeda lands and she’s just taken out three people with three sleep darts, but it’s not too late to pretend that she’s arrogant, ambitious and grasping. That her alliance with Lexa is a means to an end, that they’re not friends or lovers but two leaders cold-bloodedly using each other to advance their own people. All she needs to do is stay alive for a while – Lexa will find her, whatever it takes. Clarke knows that. She might not be able to trade things for her, but Lexa will not leave her here. And she’s got some tricks up her own sleeve as well. All she needs to do is buy time.

Hands yank her down from the tree. Clarke lands partly on her broken ankle and smothers a scream as agony darts up her leg, fading to a dull throbbing ache after a few moments. Still, she’s grateful they didn’t shoot her, even with a sleep dart – she’s already injured enough.

The guards look angry enough to hit her, surrounding her like that. So she surprises them before they can, straightening her posture into haughty disdain. She limps two painful steps towards the nearest one and gives him a ringing slap. “How dare you!” Clarke says fiercely. “I told the Commander I’d be back in three days, and I meant it. Tell her that she can’t send some – some thugs with Mount Weather weaponry to get me back every time I spend time with my family!”

The guard gapes at her, then goes back to his scowl and says, “We’re not from your precious Commander -”

Clarke inhales sharply, widening her eyes, and takes a step forward to twitch open the nearest man’s coat to reveal the uniform beneath. The man stiffens but doesn’t stop her. “Wait – hang on – you have guard uniforms – you’re some of Diana’s people – I knew you hadn’t abandoned us! I knew she’d send people to help us!”

“What are you talking about?” one of them growls, shoving his sleep dart gun in her face.

“She’s forced us into this tiny territory, slaving away making roads and technology for her people, paying through the nose for the ‘privilege’ of living there, and we can’t do anything about it because she has an army surrounding us and lots of hostages,” Clarke lies, not sure what she’s even saying, but very sure she’s confusing the hell out of them about her allegiance. “I made a deal and now we can’t get out of it -”

“Enough of this,” one of the other guards snaps. He looks like the oldest. “Put her out. We can find out what the hell she’s talking about later. We need to get going and the truck’s not going to fix itself.”

For the third time in her life, Clarke Griffin collapses, a Maunon sleep dart in her.
When they enter, the first thing that happens is that Raven flies across the room to embrace Anya, hugging her tightly. The colour floods back into Anya’s too-pale face and she presses a kiss to Raven’s forehead. Lexa notes, distantly, that she’s glad Raven’s alive. And Wells is too, standing in the room, his face set and angry.

She gives Anya a nod, and Anya leaves to go organise the gonakru and find out any further information she can from them, reluctantly releasing Raven. Lexa will fill Anya in on the information she gets from this meeting later. Raven looks like she wants to follow Anya for a second, but then meets Lexa’s eyes and stays put.

The others in the meeting are Kane, Abby, Sinclair, a gona named Jora, and for some reason the boy John.

“Who did this?” Lexa says, her voice too quiet and controlled. She knows by the way everyone else in the room shrinks back that she is scaring them, and could not care less.

“You should be asking you that,” Abby snaps. “They certainly got to Arkadia without any trouble, despite all your warriors and your supposed border blockade.”

Kane puts a hand on her arm to quiet her. “Greetings, Commander,” he says to Lexa. His face is drawn but he still has a calmness the rest of them can’t quite match. “We’re not entirely sure who did it, but we suspect Prison Station, since one of them was found dead in the radio room.”

“I saw one of my dad’s friends, one of the ones who was on Prison Station, right before the attack,” John says grimly, which at least explains his presence to Lexa. “I think he’s the one who set the fires.”

“There were three fires set,” Kane tells Lexa. “I think they were a distraction. They knocked out everyone inside the buildings with – well, that’s where this gets a little more complicated.” With a light click, he places a used gas grenade on the table.

“Did you take weapons out of Mount Weather after ordering us not to?” Abby says, crossing her arms. Lexa notices her eyes are red and raw, and that deep shadows lurk beneath them, but she’s not in the mood to be sympathetic right now, not even to Clarke’s nomon.

“No, I did not,” Lexa snaps. There’s only one possibility. “If they used Maunon weapons, they must have gotten them from the Azplana, the Ice Queen. She had a deal with the Maunon at one point.” And that means Nia has Clarke. No. That cannot happen. Not again.

“That doesn’t explain how they were able to get through your blockade,” Abby retorts.

“I ordered that no Skaikru were to be harmed,” Lexa remembers, cursing herself. She had not realised the loophole that would leave for Diana’s people. Or for Nia, using Diana’s people, if that was what happened. “But I cannot understand how you allowed them in with weaponry -” she turns her head to pin Jora with her angry gaze.

“Moba, Heda,” Jora says, bowing nearly to the floor. His heavily lashed eyes are fearful, his smooth face worried, and it makes him look far younger than he actually is. “We were searching those who
entered and left, but we were commanded to stop.” The annoyed glance he sends towards Abby makes it clear whose idea that was.

“Anyway,” Kane says firmly. “This isn’t the time to be apportioning blame. What matters is it happened. Using the fires to distract everyone, they destroyed the radio and took the missile and Clarke. I don’t know if they planned to take Clarke from the start, or if it’s because she killed one of them, or even if they took her just because she was nearest to the missile. If they didn’t recognise her, they might think she could tell them how it works.”

“They probably knew her from Prison Station,” Raven points out. “She was there for a year.”

“Her father was the best engineer we had,” Kane replies. “Her mother is our chief of medical. If they didn’t know her well, it would be easy to assume she knew a lot of science. She was locked up for knowing Ark secrets and she was in the room with the missile, both of which also point towards her being one of the people who would know how our most dangerous weapon works.”

“I suppose,” Raven concedes grudgingly.

Lexa considers this point. She wants very badly to believe it, which is why she shouldn’t. If Clarke has just been taken to Prison Station to help out with the missile, then she is not with Nia. Clarke can easily escape from her own people. Escaping from Nia would be much more difficult. And her death with Nia would be much more agonising. Lexa would much prefer to think Kane’s idea is the right one.

“After they got Clarke and the missile, they loaded them into the military truck,” Kane continues. “They sabotaged the two Jeeps and took off. We couldn’t catch up on foot.”

“We didn’t try hard enough,” Wells says, voice harsh with anger and misery. “We didn’t notice she was missing soon enough. We were so busy with the fires.”

“It’s not your fault,” Raven says to him, voice gentler than usual.

“Once we’d dealt with the fires, we found the used Mount Weather grenades,” Kane tells Lexa. “Some of our people… overreacted. As did some of the gonakru.”

Lexa closes her eyes for a moment. Of course they did. “You attacked the Maunon here?” she says to Jora, voice deceptively calm. “Forgetting that your task was to keep Clarke kom Skaikru alive, not to avenge attacks on the people here?”

He flushes slightly. “We… we thought they must have her, hidden away. As they had hidden away their weapons. We thought they set fires and killed people! Of course we surrounded them.”

“By assigning guards like these impulsive idiots you almost caused more innocent people to die, as well as allowing my daughter to be taken,” Abby says viciously, glaring at Lexa. “Luckily, I stopped them before they could hurt anyone.”

“Just as you stopped them before they could discover Skaikru entering here with weapons,” Lexa retorts, barely managing to contain her own fury. “I would suggest you do not attempt to -”

“And you allowed a blockade to have all of the attackers listed as exceptions!” Abby says, voice rising almost to a shriek. “You convinced Clarke that she’d be safe in your capital, made her a target and told her your guards would protect her, and then you couldn’t even keep her safe here.”

“Enough,” Kane says firmly to Abby. “Stop it. This isn’t helping.” He turns back to Lexa.

“Anyway, we managed not to let fighting break out. But in all the chaos, it was a while before we
realised that Clarke, the missile, and one of the vehicles was missing. And it wasn’t until young John here found me that we realised it was Diana’s people. Before that, we thought it must be the Ice Nation, because they left behind hair that was braided Grounder-style in the radio room.”

Time seems to slow. “A braid?” Lexa manages to say.

“If you think the Ice Nation have Mount Weather weaponry and they’ve made a deal with Diana’s people, that could explain it,” Kane says. “At the time I wondered if it was just misdirection.” He pulls it out of his pocket and holds it up.

The braid is dark, silky, and intricate. She remembers making that braid, having gone over the memory so many hundreds of times that it’s a well-worn sequence, with a clarity to the moment that she hadn’t felt at the time. Her hands in Costia’s hair, Costia sitting before her – as always, keeping her hands occupied while Lexa braids her hair, adding detail to the carvings on her bow, tangled vines and smooth flowers whittled lightly into the upper and lower limbs of it with Lexa’s forehead sigil carved into the very centre of the grip. She said it helped her to aim.

Her bow was the envy of all the other hunters, all the other Trikru. She was the envy of all the other Trikru, to have the Commander’s love and favour, to be so beautiful and happy and fierce and young and talented. She was so skilled with her bow that it seemed she never missed. That was also due to Lexa, in a way, their lives so wrapped around each other that Costia joined in the extra hours of training with a bow which Lexa needed and she did not. So Costia became unparalleled with her bow and Lexa became passable, but it did not matter because she had Costia to shoot for her, just as Costia had her blades. After all, when would they fight without the other there?

“Out,” Lexa says harshly, taking the braid as if it burns her skin. “All of you! Out!” There are looks of concern, they mill about her, but she yells it again and goes as if to draw her sword. Then they’re gone and Lexa collapses to her knees with a painful thud, bringing the braid to her face. It does not smell of Costia, not anymore, not after all these years, but she pretends it does.

She’s sobbing now, wretched gasping sobs that she can’t hold back. It’s not just grief for Costia, it’s grief for Clarke. Nia has her, but more than that, Nia knows what Clarke means to her. Nia has sent this message, told her exactly what will happen to Clarke, the same as what happened before. She’s taunting Lexa with the knowledge that sometime soon a head will be delivered to her, Clarke’s head, with burns and cuts and signs of torture on every inch of it, so that it will be unrecognisable except to someone who knows Clarke as well as Lexa does.

Lexa can’t breathe anymore, her sobs turning into desperate pants, trying to force air into lungs that do not want any, like her own body does not want her to live long enough to see what is coming. It hurts and she can’t stop breathing far too quickly, far too shallowly. Her heart aches and burns, she’s sweating, she’s choking.

“Commander,” the voice is soft and Lexa looks up, but everything’s far too bright, shifting patches of colour as she fights intense dizziness. “Commander, you’re having a panic attack.” Gentle but firm hands help her to lie down. “Commander. Listen to me. Breathe slowly.”

She’s trying, of course she’s trying. She can’t. But something in the voice is helping anyway.

“Count backwards from a hundred.”

A hundred. Ninety-nine. Ninety-eight… Lexa focuses entirely on that, shutting her eyes, ignoring her body, just focusing on the numbers. She’s down to thirty by the time she feels like she’s breathing properly again. Her whole body aches with exhaustion, like she’s run too far and too fast. Her hands and feet feel odd, tingling and numb. She opens her eyes to find Abby looking down at
her. “I thought I told you to leave,” she croaks.

Abby stiffens slightly. “I heard a noise,” she snaps.

Then Lexa closes her eyes, feeling tears slipping out of them helplessly. She can’t do this right now. She can’t do any of this right now.

She feels Abby shift, going to stand up, then freezing. “That’s – is that Jake’s watch?”

Lexa had forgotten she was wearing the watch Clarke gave her. She struggles to sit up. “I -”

“That’s my husband’s watch,” Abby says. She reaches out and touches it, staring down, her face twisting with some emotion that Lexa cannot identify. Then she looks up to meet Lexa’s eyes and her own are swimming with tears as well. “How did you get my husband’s watch? I thought I lost it when Mount Weather took us.”

“That’s my husband’s watch,” Abby says. She reaches out and touches it, staring down, her face twisting with some emotion that Lexa cannot identify. Then she looks up to meet Lexa’s eyes and her own are swimming with tears as well. “How did you get my husband’s watch? I thought I lost it when Mount Weather took us.”

“Clarke – Clarke found it, and gave it to me,” Lexa rasps out.

Abby looks stunned, dazed, overwhelmed. “My daughter is in love with you, isn’t she?” her voice cracks. “She wouldn’t – this is the last part of Jake we have – Clarke’s in love with you. She has to be. Isn’t she? Do you love her?”

Lexa just looks at her, unable to reply. But Abby must see the answer in her face, because suddenly she wraps her arms around Lexa, pulling her close, body shaking with sobs. She clings to Lexa tightly, desperately, and Lexa finds herself crying again as well, accepting the embrace. The two of them just holding each other, for once unexpectedly on the same side, allied by grief and fear and love for Clarke.

Chapter End Notes

The credit for a lot of Costia’s characterisation in this fic definitely has to go to Cassy.
When Clarke wakes up again she’s not in the truck anymore. Instead she’s in an Azgeda house. She recognises the style of design, the comfortable wornness of the furniture, the animal skins everywhere. She’s on the bed, untied, and dressed in warm clothing. Her ankle still throbs with pain, but it’s a duller pain now. She must have been asleep for some time. Seated on a chair across the room, legs crossed elegantly, not a hair out of place, is Diana Sydney.

“It’s good to see you’re awake,” Diana says lightly, hazel eyes surveying Clarke shrewdly. Her gaze fixes on Clarke’s neckline for a moment, which is still patterned with the bruises Emerson left, turning brown and yellow as they heal. Clarke pulls her jacket closed to cover them. “You did quite a bit of damage to my people.”

“I didn’t know they were your people,” Clarke says, sitting up. She does up her jacket properly, wanting even more warmth. Her head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton wool. She realises suddenly that although they’ve taken her weapons, she still has the hidden knife in her hair. If she’d used that earlier, she might have been able to take out all of the guards, even with an injured ankle – but then she would have frozen trying to escape. She could use it now, as well, but she would still hit the same problems. No doubt the rest of Prison Station is outside. She can’t take them all on.

“Yes, they told me that,” Diana says, still looking at Clarke like she’s an interesting puzzle. “I find it surprising that you wouldn’t recognise some of the people who helped imprison you for a year.”

“I didn’t really notice them as individuals,” Clarke says. “And to be honest, I never expected to see anyone from Prison Station again. The Commander told me you’d freeze.”

“I’m sure the Commander thought we’d die. After all, she ordered the barbarian queen in charge of these parts to kill us,” Diana says.

“She didn’t tell me that.” She didn’t do that, thinks Clarke, though she fakes an angry frown at the supposed betrayal. So is this Diana’s lie or Nia’s?

“Luckily, the queen made a different call,” Diana continues, and Clarke decides it’s Nia’s lie. “Instead, she gave us this – somewhat primitive – village to live in. She’s supplied us with food and water.”

“That’s very nice of her,” Clarke says. “In return for what? None of these people do anything for nothing.” It’s important she sets herself up as opposed to Lexa as soon as possible. She can’t be another head sent to Lexa, another Costia. She won’t do that to her.

“Nia recognises we have a lot of assistance to offer,” Diana says casually. “Our weaponry, our ability to get into Arkadia undercover, and our understanding of technology, to start with. And you.”

Clarke glances down at herself and notices, with some incredulity, that they’ve bandaged her broken ankle carefully. They’re handing her over to die – but they want her to be in good condition when she does. The hypocrisy is sickening.

“Be careful,” Clarke says darkly, looking up at Diana again. “These savages only keep their word as long as it suits them. Even when they do keep to their word, they betray you in some other way. Look at what happened to our people.” She feels like she’s pretending to be Pike. It’s uncomfortable,
“What did happen to our people?” Diana asks, sounding only mildly curious. “My guards said everyone seemed fine when they went there to retrieve you and the missile.”

“They are,” Clarke says flatly. “For now. Kane’s keeping everyone calm by pretending the Grounders have been lovely to us, so helpful. They don’t realise yet that the ‘rent’ he’s mentioned is basically everything we’re able to produce, plus all of our technology. They’re planning to make us their slaves, supporting the whole region. They even put the survivors of Mount Weather in with us to work them to death as well.”

Diana laughs. “That doesn’t make sense, not even for the savages. Why would the Commander do that yet make you her second-in-command?”

“That’s just another way to make our people compliant,” Clarke says. “When we made our deal at the beginning I promised we’d help to take Mount Weather down if she found our people, gave them land, and made me her second-in-command,” she smiles sourly. “Well, she kept her word. She found our people, but only the ones who it wasn’t too difficult to save. She gave us the smallest slice of land possible. And she made me her second-in-command, but only because these barbarians have some mystic belief that by being the last person in Mount Weather I absorbed all their souls – it’s a power play, to show everyone she’s in charge of the Destroyer of the Mountain. Even as her second-in-command, I don’t become the Commander if she dies or anything like that.” She lets out a bittersounding laugh. “It’s an ornamental position at best, anything I say or do has to be cleared by her. She said she’d give me power and instead I get to be her pet, until she dies and I get to be someone else’s. I deserve so much more than this.”

Please, buy this, Clarke thinks. Fall for this. Don’t look any further than your own prejudices. Look at me and see yourself, petty and ambitious and cruel.

“You told one of my people that she had hostages,” Diana remarks.

“She does,” Clarke says, “A bunch of teenage criminals. I was innocent, of course, you know that, so was Jaha’s son, but most of them are worthless thieves and thugs. Jaha said they’re expendable and to be honest I think he had a point, but you know Kane and my mother, they’re sure there’s another way out. I was sure when your guards got me that it was some of them, come to drag me back to Polis because the Commander was annoyed I was taking too long – I bet half of those delinquents have been fooled into working for her by now.”

“Fascinating,” Diana says, in a tone which makes it clear she means the opposite. “The rest of the Ark aren’t really my concern anymore, though. They’ve made their choice. So did you, when you wrongfully accused me of attacking Jaha.”

“I didn’t,” Clarke protests. “That was Bellamy Blake. And besides,” she narrows her eyes. “That’s in the past. What matters now is the future, how we can help each other.”

“And how could we help each other?”

“You’ve managed to get me and the nuclear missile out, past the army of savages the Commander had guarding us,” Clarke says easily, “I have access to Polis and knowledge about the Commander. Our people will listen to me. I can hide the missile there, then we can use it to threaten the Grounders and get our people free of them, with you as the leader of all of us. Jaha’s dead and Kane’s weak, neither of them can oppose you. And my Mom would help you if you help me.”

She can see that Diana’s thinking about it by the way she looks at the ceiling and frowns. “Tempting.
But right now, my people are being treated like royalty. An entire village has been cleared out for us, and the locals have orders to bring us anything we request. I don’t feel like gambling that on the slim chance that I can take command of another thousand or so people. I think Nia – the queen here – will be more than happy to place me in charge of tens of thousands.”

“Tens of thousands of *savages,*” Clarke says. Her own fake personality is starting to make her feel vaguely nauseous. Trying to think like someone who has no feelings except ambition, bigotry and low cunning is depressing.

“Tens of thousands of *obedient* savages,” Diana corrects. “No, I don’t think I’ll turn my back on my deal with the queen. In return for you and our military support, she’s promised that I can be her second-in-command. One who does have power, and can inherit the throne.”

Clarke’s absolutely sure that Diana will ensure Nia dies quickly and of unnatural causes so she ends up in charge of everyone. She’s also sure that Nia will use and backstab Diana. It might almost be entertaining to watch these two snakes trying to bite each other if she hadn’t just been dragged into the middle of it, along with nuclear explosives.

“What military support?” Clarke says, raising an eyebrow. “You have a dozen small guns. The nuclear missile is incredibly powerful, but even if you could get it working it’s one use only. After that you’d be worthless to her.”

“But after that we’ll manage to get our hands on some of your people’s assault rifles,” Diana says, again making it clear she doesn’t associate herself with Arkadia. “That was the original plan this time, until we found you’d sent all of them off to Polis. The Commander’s idea, I assume?”

“She couldn’t have our people armed,” Clarke says bitterly.

“But then we heard about the missile, and it seemed even more useful,” Diana continues. “Nia was thrilled to hear about it, in fact. And I think your Commander – or her replacement, more likely – will be keen to give us as many assault rifles and guns as we want, once they realise we could set off a nuke and kill them all whenever we like.” She stands up. “So I’m afraid I have to decline your offer, Clarke. I’ve already had my people radio Nia. She’s sending some of her warriors to come and pick you up, and a few more to help out with the missile. So generous of her.”

Clarke can see from the slight shadow that crosses Diana’s face that she knows that the people Nia’s sending aren’t there to help, but to keep an eye on them. Nia wouldn’t just leave a powerful weapon in other people’s hands without monitoring them. The Azgeda might be all niceness right now, but the second Diana attempts to go against what Nia wants, the ‘helpful’ villagers will crush Prison Station under the weight of numbers. On the other hand, if Nia attacks first, whatever bombs and other weaponry Prison Station has will put a decent chunk in Nia’s forces, and if they chose to commit suicide by setting off the missile they could probably wipe out most of the Azgeda. Plus, any of Nia’s plans for using the nuclear missile would immediately be wrecked, since she’d be more likely to blow herself up than anyone else – the engineers and mechanics who came down on Prison Station might not know much about nukes, but they’re still significantly ahead of the Azgeda. So it’s a balancing act – two forces with individual advantages and disadvantages whose truce is tenuous at best. They both need to stay useful and cordial to each other to ensure their own survival. There has to be some way Clarke can use this, ruin their alliance.

“You haven’t met the Commander,” Clarke says. It’s the first honest thing she’s said to Diana since she opened her eyes. “She won’t give you anything, not when you’d just take the guns and keep threatening her with the missile.”

Diana’s lips purse. “We’ll see,” she snaps, “I’m sure we can outthink some savage on a power trip.
And even if she won’t deal with us, Nia’s sending people to take her out of the equation. Apparently her replacement will be a child. I’m sure they’ll be much more willing to negotiate.” She turns and leaves.

For a second Clarke worries about the assassins going after Lexa, then she reminds herself that Lexa’s been dealing with assassins for many years now and is well-guarded. Plus, there’s no point in worrying about something she can’t change. Sadly, these reminders don’t stop her worrying.

Another, colder, more pragmatic part of her notes that even if by some miracle Nia’s people managed to kill Lexa, Aden or whichever other Nightblood succeeds her probably wouldn’t make deals with Diana or Nia. Unless – would anyone be able to succeed Lexa without Titus there to pass on the Flame? Perhaps they could pretend to have the Flame. Maybe that’s what Nia was hoping for, to sow confusion about who was in charge, and use the chaos to stay alive longer. Maybe even to use the chaos to show up with Ontari and get Titus to give her the Flame.

In which case, Clarke reminds herself forcefully, Nia’s plan is doomed to fail. Because Lexa will survive. She has Anya and Indra and many gonakru. She’s the strongest person Clarke’s ever known. If Nia’s plan – if any of Nia’s plans – depend on Lexa dying, she’s screwed from the beginning.

Unless, of course, she sets off the missile while Polis is in the blast radius, easily killing off everyone there…

Clarke lies down on the bed and closes her eyes again. Her nausea is getting worse, and her ankle twinges again.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to have this finished by the end of August, when I'm going to Italy for five weeks and won't be able to post any chapters, but we'll see how it goes. It's already turned out much, much longer than I expected it to.
Lexa’s only moment of happiness after Clarke’s abduction is when the new rules for the Conclave are announced. Seeing the expressions of joy her Natblida wear is the closest she comes to feeling anything but the dull, pounding sadness in her heart. Otherwise, she spends her time alone, brooding, thinking up plan after plan and discarding them as selfish or wrong or foolish. She doesn’t even smile when Marcus Kane is branded and the Skaikru become the thirteenth clan, when Wells is appointed as ambassador. It is wrong without Clarke there, can’t they see that?

Anya worries about her, and so gives her space, avoiding entering her rooms and not seeking her advice on any decisions. Indra has remained for the time being, and has quietly taken over a lot of Lexa’s other duties, including handling the ambassadors – she also brought a few gona with her that could be spared from the borders, including Octavia and Linkon, and has set them to help Anya’s people guard Polis, which they all worry will be Nia’s next target.

Strangely, this means the person Lexa sees most often is Abby, who followed Marcus Kane to Polis and stayed when he went back to Arkadia. She brings Lexa food regularly, takes her temperature, and worries about her constantly – it’s as if she’s trying to take care of Lexa because she can’t take care of Clarke.

Today, however, someone besides Abby enters her rooms.

“Enough,” Raven says angrily. Wells stands beside her, for once not accompanied by his new assistant, a Skaikru hunter named Harper who volunteered for the position. “What you’re doing, this angst thing, enough.”

Lexa blinks at her, meditation interrupted. Of course, it was not a very effective meditation, since she was staring at Clarke’s blue sash in her hands. Kane gave it to her before she left Arkadia – when they took Clarke, they must have stripped it off her first. Leaving Lexa with a sash, a braid, her memories, and nothing else.

“Raven?”

“I get that this is bringing up some kind of major trauma for you,” Raven says. “I don’t know what that trauma is, Anya won’t tell me, but any idiot can see something more is going on here. You remained perfectly calm when we sent Clarke into Mount Weather, even though you knew she was in serious danger and would probably die.”

That’s true, Lexa admits. She coped better than this when Costia died, as well. But there’s something about knowing what’s happening to Clarke, what will happen to Clarke – her old nightmares from when she first received Costia’s head are ganging up on her, denying her sleep. She does nothing but make plans after plans, everything from attacking the Azgeda in winter time (suicide) to sending a squad of assassins (pointless, without a location) to trading Nia a pardon in return for Clarke’s life (her own people would rise up against her). This happening has left her weak and shaky, young and bereaved all over again. She could survive Clarke’s death, perhaps, if she had to – she cannot survive her torture and mutilation at Nia’s hands.

“You’re not the only one worried about Clarke,” Wells says in a low voice. “And you’re not the only one who has ideas. Maybe we can help.”

Lexa clears her throat. “Yes. I see. You’re right,” she stands. “Fetch Anya, Indra and Abby. We will discuss this.” She doubts any of them have come up with something she has not already thought of, but perhaps it is arrogant to think that way. She doesn’t tell Raven to fetch Octavia or Linkon, who are probably both on guard outside Polis with the rest of the gona Indra brought with her. It would
take a while to bring them here, and they can probably do more good at their posts than they can here, since while they are useful in the execution of plans they are not as essential in the creation of them.

Anya and Indra both eye her with considerable concern as they enter. They have known her long enough to be aware of why this is hitting her harder than it should. Anya in particular was there for every part of Lexa’s mourning, and loved Costia as well. It’s hard for her to see history repeat itself. Abby looks at her with even more worry, trying to distract herself from her own grief with Lexa’s.

“However much we’re worried about Clarke, I think we do have to admit that the nuclear missile is probably just as important,” Raven says once everyone’s there. “Or even more important. It’s incredibly dangerous.”

Abby opens her mouth to protest, then closes it, then opens it again, finding the right words. “They were taken together,” she points out, “So if we find Clarke, we’ll probably find the missile.”

“But we cannot be sure of that,” Anya points out. “For that matter, we cannot even be sure they can make the missile work. Raven could not -”

“Hey!” Raven objects. “I wasn’t trying to make it work, cheekbones. If I was I totally could have blown everything up.” She flushes as everyone looks at her, and mutters, “Well, I could have.”

“Not from a distance,” Anya says coolly, with a faint air of smugness. “You said that while you could make it explode, you would need to be there.”

“Does that really matter?” Raven says. “I mean, I wasn’t gonna blow myself up, but I bet some of Queen Crazy’s people would be willing to go all suicide bomber on us.”

“We guard Polis well,” Indra says impassively. “I doubt someone with a device of that size could enter the capital undetected. They might not even manage to make it across the border undetected.”

“The truck they stole could help,” Abby says thoughtfully, visibly forcing herself not to return the subject to Clarke. Duty first. “They should run out of fuel very soon, though. And even if they made it across the border with that they certainly couldn’t make it in here.”

“They wouldn’t need to. If they manage to set off the missile, Raven thinks it will decimate most of the country,” Wells says flatly. “It has a huge radius. As in, if they set it off across the border, everyone in TonDC and Polis would probably still die. They would too, but that wouldn’t be much comfort. Arkadia might be far enough south that we’d all die of cancer. If they manage to get it working and put it anywhere in Tree People territory, Polis will die. We’ll all die.”

“That’s my worst case scenario,” Raven says, sounding uncomfortable. “It might have a smaller radius. That’s just the maximum it could have.”

“I prefer to consider the worst case scenario,” Anya says calmly, though she’s paled slightly.

“Pessimist,” Raven grumbles. “But yeah, Wells is right. If they want to take down Polis, they can. If they want to kill us, they can. Two mechanics and an engineer fell down on Prison Station. None of them are as brilliant as me, but if they want to set the thing off it’s really just a matter of crossing wires and hoping – eventually they’ll figure out what to do. My best case scenario is them accidentally blowing it up before they figure out how to do it on purpose, killing themselves and most of the Ice Nation.”

“And Clarke,” Abby reminds her stiffly.
Raven closes her eyes for a second, struggling with her emotions. “And Clarke,” she agrees softly. “Which I don’t want to happen, I don’t want that to happen at all, she’s one of my best friends you know, but if it’s Clarke or every single other person I know or care about, then that’s still gonna be my best case scenario. So much so that I’m wondering if we should sneak into Prison Station’s base and set it off on purpose.”

Lexa considers this. They don’t know where Prison Station is either, so finding it has the same problem as finding Nia. Her spies might know, but they will only talk to Titus, Gustus, or Lexa herself. Those are their orders. She wonders if she could go north in secret – but no, her disappearance would only prompt Nia to do something drastic.

“Is there somewhere else we could go?” Wells wonders. “Hide people in bunkers or something?”

“We could not hide all of Polis, let alone everyone else,” Anya says flatly. “And removing the ambassadors from Polis would be likely to cause panic. Even if we did that, we would have to return eventually, and if your worst case scenario is accurate Nia could destroy Polis at any time.”

“It would give the Azgeda a considerable advantage to take out Polis,” Indra says tightly. “If Polis is destroyed, Heda dies, the Natblida die, the ambassadors die, and the alliance will fall. The clans would fight amongst themselves. All that the Azplana would have to do is wait out the winter in the north, protected by the ice, and then she could attack in spring once the clans have torn each other apart.”

“The Azplana would prefer to take Polis then destroy it,” Anya says after a moment. “I meant to tell you, Heda, that we caught Roan kom Azgeda attempting to enter your tower. He was holding a poisoned blade. It appears his mother promised him forgiveness if he ended your life, and since we have labelled him a natrona anyway for his previous assassination attempt, he decided to try again.”

Lexa is unmoved by this. “Keep him locked up,” she decides. “He may come in use.” Two attempts on her life, now, but it does not particularly bother her. Hunted by the whole alliance, with only one offer of forgiveness, it is not surprising Roan has become desperate. “No doubt there are more – she would not send just Roan. We can’t guard the border well enough to stop individuals coming across.”

She considers her own death dispassionately. Then she blinks, and keeps considering it.

Nia will destroy Polis. But she will only do that if she has no way to take it. So the best protection for Polis is to make Nia believe that she has a chance to take it instead. Then she will not use the missile.

If Lexa dies without Titus being there to pass on the Flame, it will have a similar but less drastic effect than the destruction of Polis. Aden, with Indra’s support, might be able to keep Polis and the alliance together for a time. But it would not last the winter, not without the spirit being passed on to him. They would not rally behind him.

If Lexa died, then who would be in charge? Who would have power? Aden, as her successor, would have a small amount of power, but he could not be her real successor without receiving the Flame. Indra is greatly respected as a leader, but her power has always been limited. Titus, as the Fleimkepa, would be powerful. Clarke, as Lexa’s second-in-command, would technically be in charge until the Flame could be passed to someone new, so she would have considerable power and authority.

If Lexa died, Nia would have a very good reason to keep Clarke alive, to keep Titus alive, and to keep Polis intact. No wonder Nia wants her dead. With Lexa dead, the alliance would start to splinter over the months – until the spring, when Nia would come in, kill the Natblida, use Clarke’s authority to make everyone follow her, and make sure the Flame is passed to Ontari. Clarke and Titus are both
clever enough to pretend they would assist Nia, she’s sure of that. Nia might threaten with the missile to keep everyone in line, but it would be more useful just as a threat. Right now it is more useful if she can use it to completely remove the threat of Lexa and the alliance.

Lexa’s death would make Clarke more useful alive. Lexa dead is, in fact, more useful than Lexa alive, for the safety of all in Polis, for Clarke, for the alliance, even for Titus. Lexa dead would give them three months to find the missile and remove it from play. Without the missile, Nia can be easily removed.

“I have an idea,” she says.

Raven eyes her. “Oh no. She has that expression again. The one she got when she kept yelling ‘this way’ until suddenly a giant gorilla was trying to rip out all our insides. The one Clarke gets all the time. That look is never followed by a good plan, it’s always followed by a completely insane one.”

“The gorilla plan worked,” Wells points out.

“He is correct. Shof op, sky girl,” Anya tells Raven in a superior tone. “The Commander is a famed strategist. Do not disrespect her by saying -”

“For the first step of the plan, I will have to die,” Lexa interrupts her.

There is a long, awkward silence. Abby inhales sharply.

“I hate it when Raven’s right,” Wells says shakily to no one in particular, trying to lighten the mood. He shifts on his feet, looking worried.

“I have never agreed with a Skayon more,” Anya mutters fervently. “Heda, please, you cannot sacrifice yourself, the alliance cannot survive -”

“Just listen to me,” Lexa says quickly, feeling hopeful for the first time in days. If Clarke is still alive – and it takes some time to travel that far north, so it is likely she is – then Lexa might still be able to save her. Nia must have people in Polis who would radio her immediately if something drastic happened. “Hear me out before you begin objecting.”
“So then you destroyed the Jeeps?” Clarke widens her eyes, visibly impressed.

“Uh huh,” he tells her proudly.

“You’re so clever,” she breathes wonderingly, and he inflates slightly, full of self-importance. What a moron, Clarke thinks.

The man with her is one of her old guards when she was in Prison Station, and also one of the ones she knocked out the other day. However, he’s also relatively young (mid-twenties), blushes when she smiles at him, and found it easy to forgive Clarke after an effusive apology and some blatant flirting. As a result, he’s become her most useful source of information about the village they’re in. She knows pretty much exactly how far they are from the border with the Trikru (too far), exactly when Nia is expected to get here (too soon), exactly how much progress they’re making on the missile (very little), and exactly what happened the day she was taken.

The last information is more for her peace of mind than anything else – from what she’s gotten out of him, she’s pretty confident that most of Arkadia is alive and healthy, and that they’ll have managed to figure out exactly what happened in order to tell Lexa. The gas grenades left there will have clued them in to the Ice Queen’s involvement, and the dead guard she left (who almost no one here seems to be mourning, suggesting he didn’t treat his co-workers much better than his prisoners) will tell them about Diana’s involvement. So they’ll know that the two are working together.

“First, we had to leave some hair where we found you,” the guard continues. He shrugs at her expression. “Yeah, I don’t know why, either. Queen’s orders apparently. Just some braided black hair. It was weird, but we did it anyway.”

Clarke inhales sharply, but manages to force down her rage. It isn’t hard to figure out whose braid it was, and why the Ice Queen had it left there. She was taunting Lexa. This is useful information, because it tells Clarke that Nia at least suspects that Clarke and Lexa are in a relationship. If she’s convinced of that, then Clarke will find it much more difficult to persuade Nia that Clarke will side against Lexa with her. More difficult – but not impossible. Clarke has experience manipulating people, and whatever Nia thinks she knows about Clarke, Clarke knows more about Nia. She’s met her, after all, in the other world she knew Roan and Nia and Ontari, even if only briefly. She has their measure. Whatever they’ve heard, they still don’t have hers.

But she’s not sure the information this knowledge gives her is worth the anger and pain it also causes her, knowing that the fucking Ice Queen left one of Costia’s braids for Lexa to find like they’re doing a demented scavenger hunt. She knows how much Lexa loved Costia, how much Costia haunts her still, how much this reminder will devastate Lexa. How the implied threat towards Clarke will devastate her more.

She won’t be a head in a box, used to break the strongest person she knows. The metaphors Monty used for hacking apply to Lexa too – she’s a rock with one fault line. She’s metal with one weak point. Clarke’s nightmares are the Mountain and Lexa dying. Lexa’s nightmares are Costia being tortured by Nia, sometimes with Clarke replacing Costia as the victim. Nia wants to literally make Lexa’s worst nightmare come true, hitting her fault line, her weak spot. And unless Clarke can find a way to manipulate her into believing that Lexa doesn’t care about her, Nia might manage to do it.

She could face being tortured to death. Face it with utter terror, sure. But still face it. She can’t face doing that to Lexa.
Another soldier sticks his head inside the hut. “The savages are here to pick up Prisoner 319,” he says coldly, looking at Clarke like she’s some kind of disgusting insect. He was the driver of the truck on the way here. Apparently he didn’t appreciate being knocked unconscious and then pushed into the snow. Which is probably understandable, but Clarke still feels no regret at all. Even if she couldn’t get away, at least she made them suffer, and it almost brings a smile to her face to think about how long it must have taken to get the truck upright and moving again.

“Oh,” the soldier she’s been flirting with says sadly, already looking bereft.

Clarke stands up, grabbing the walking stick she had the smitten guard make for her, setting her chin in determination and narrowing her eyes. “Good,” she says to the soldier at the door, “I’ve really been looking forward to meeting this Ice Queen of yours.”

She walks out in front of him, leaning heavily on the stick but not allowing him to either drag or carry her, even though every step is still agony. She wants to seem impressive, despite her injury. Strong and useful and vibrant, far better alive than she would be dead. Of course, Clarke considers that most people are better alive than they are dead, but Nia probably doesn’t think like she does.

Nia’s at the front of her gona, wearing the haughty expression she always has, covered in furs, wearing the small bony hair decoration that’s her crown. Clarke can’t imagine her ever pretending to be anything besides what she is – unlike Lexa, she doesn’t seem to have the self-awareness necessary to dial down the assurance she wears like a cloak. She radiates a kind of arrogant superiority that would mark her out in any line-up. Standing nearby, Diana seems comparatively out of place with her perfect hair and make-up, wrong against the background of snow and huts.

Ontari is standing beside Nia. She stares at Clarke like a predator looking at its next meal, and one half of her mouth lifts in a cruel smirk for half a second before she returns her face to blankness. Something about it makes Clarke uncomfortable.

All of them are mounted on tall horses with shaggy coats and big hoofs, which look untroubled by the snow. Clarke remembers Lexa telling her that there were few horses in Azgeda territory, as only the hardiest survived there.

“Greetings, Azplana,” Clarke says to Nia, ignoring everyone else, walking to stand directly in front of her and meeting her eyes without fear.

Nia looks surprised for a moment. “I generally prefer my prisoners not to talk until I ask them to.” She raises her eyebrows at Clarke, evaluating her.

“And I’m sure you ask very nicely,” Clarke says sarcastically. “However, you have an opportunity right now. For me not to be your prisoner, but instead to be your partner.”

“That seems more like an opportunity for you,” Nia points out. She smiles in what seems to be genuine amusement and Ontari scowls. “Also, I was under the impression you were the Commander’s partner.”

“I’m her second-in-command,” Clarke says firmly, allowing bitterness to creep into her voice. “For all the good that does me. But I’m not the kind of partner you’re referring to.”

“Yes, you fooled Diana with your little speech about how oppressed your people are by the big, bad Heda,” Nia says. Diana frowns, looking annoyed at the insult. “However, you travelled all around my territory. Do you really think no one told me of how close you are with Lexa?”

“I’m sure they have,” Clarke says. “But not by choice. She doesn’t feel the way you think she does.
The Commander believes love is weakness, you know. And she wants to be strong.” She opens the top of her jacket, showing the fading bruises ringing her neck. “She takes it badly when I disagree with her.”

Nia stares at her for a long second. “You could have gotten those anywhere. My people told me you have great influence over the Commander, that you mean a great deal to her.”

“But if I have so much influence over her, why don’t my people have their weapons anymore? Why are we building a road to bring them goods before we set up our own homes?” Clarke crosses her arms. “Why did we agree to give them so much technology, so much food, so much help? Why are my people hemmed in by guards and forced to take in criminals like the Mountain Men? I don’t have any influence at all over the Commander, no matter how I’ve tried to get it.”

“She shared a tent with you,” Nia remarks, studying Clarke. She looks less convinced then she did before, a small frown knotting her brow.

“Because she thought once we found my people, I could rally them and get away,” Clarke tells her. “It was her way of watching me. Trust me, I tried to use our sleeping arrangements to my advantage. That’s when I got these bruises. The Commander really doesn’t like it when people try and manipulate her.” She should probably feel bad about blackening Lexa’s name to this degree, but the truth is it’s so far from accurate that it makes her more amused than guilty. It would be like calling Raven passive, or Kane bloodthirsty. An insult that’s too absurd doesn’t really seem like an insult.

“I’m more than willing – my people are more than willing – to help take her down. All we ask for in return is to be left alone, allowed to use our land however we want.”

“And what use could your people be without fayogon?” Nia says, amused.

“Just because we don’t have guns, doesn’t mean we don’t have weapons. We have the material to make hundreds of bombs hidden below Arkadia,” Clarke says. It’s actually technically true, since they have so many old bullets stored there – Raven could extract the gunpowder and make as many bombs as she wants. Not that truth really matters at all here. “The only reason we don’t is because we’re being watched so carefully and our leader’s too afraid. If you allied with us -”

“She is lying, Azplana,” Ontari says dismissively.

Nia turns her head to look at her. “Shof op, Ontari. When I wish for your advice I shall ask for it.” Then she turns to Clarke again, studying her once more. “Anyway, there is no need to consider this now. Proper conversations require time. We will take her back north with us and listen to what she has to say. If it is interesting enough, perhaps I’ll listen. If it is not… well, then we will – how did you put it? – we will ask nicely.” Her grin is sharp and feral for a second, and Clarke feels her heart rate speed up. She keeps her face as expressionless as possible anyway.

“We have handcuffs,” Diana says. “We haven’t been using them since it was easy enough to stop her from escaping, but we can put them back on for your trip.” Her slight smirk as she says this tells Clarke this is a return of Nia’s barb from before.

“No, my gona are well able to guard one Skayon,” Nia says sweetly. “You need not fear she will take us off guard the way she did you on the trip here. Even though half the gona I brought will stay here.”

Diana starts in surprise. “Half? We have a radio. We’re more than capable of contacting you ourselves if we make any progress. You don’t need to leave so many people here.”

“Nevertheless,” Nia says, “I would hate for you to feel threatened by the villages around here. My
gon can provide protection.” Her smile becomes thinner, more threatening. “And when you say ‘if’ you make progress, you mean ‘when’, surely?”

Diana’s definitely losing this battle, Clarke decides. Diana’s used to political battles on the Ark, but Nia is used to political battles down here, and only one of those places regularly uses fights to death as a decider.

“Of course,” Diana says, voice cool. “I’ll let you know as soon as my people figure it out. It’s quite complicated, after all. I know your people don’t have much understanding of technology, but devices like this are very complex and dangerous. If we started just poking around inside, everyone in your territory could die.”

“That would include you,” Nia points out, deflecting the implied threat. “So I suggest you take more care than that.” She turns to look at Ontari again, effectively dismissing Diana. “Since you are so worried about her motives, you may be the Skayon’s guard, Ontari, and share your tent and horse with her.”

Ontari looks no happier than Clarke about the order, but yanks Clarke up behind her on the horse anyway. Clarke wonders if she can balance without touching the other girl. Up this close, though, she can see the many scars on Ontari’s face in vivid detail, and almost feels sorry for her. Would this girl be a better person if she’d grown up in Polis, as one of Lexa’s ducklings? Would she be like Aden, full of eagerness and affection?

Of course, it doesn’t really matter. This is what she is now. And what she is, is a threat.
“Alright,” Raven says, looking tense. “Anya says it’s sorted, she’s spoken to Roan and he’ll do what we’ve asked, he’ll go along with it when Indra announces that he’s guilty and has escaped – though I still have no idea why you trust him. This plan will probably get him killed. You know. Along with the rest of us.”

“I trust him from the other world,” Lexa says calmly. “I believe he wishes his mother gone more than he wishes her to be in charge. I have promised him a throne. He might not know where she is, but if he travels north alone, Nia will find him quickly. And if he tells her the lie, she will embrace him, but if he tells her the truth, she will kill him. I do not believe he will choose honesty over life.” She looks sideways at Raven. “And you did not need to volunteer to have a part in this.”

“I know.” Raven sighs in a very martyr-like way. “But apparently I’ve become addicted to these road trips. Besides, if I’m there I might be able to dilute some of the stupidity. Anyway, I’ve set up the device. We’re good to go.”

“Excellent,” Lexa says. She straightens her top. It looks clearly bulky to her, the plastic and metal against her skin sitting uncomfortably beneath the fabric, but she hopes no one else will notice.

“Excellent’, she says,” Raven grumbles, falling into step beside her. “Let me tell you, between the two of you, you and Clarke have taken twenty years off my life with your insane plans. At this rate my last words are going to be ‘is that really a good idea?’ Why do I have to be the cautious one? I just want to blow things up. Does that sound cautious to you? ‘Excellent’. Sure. I hate you all.”

Lexa hides a smile. “You worry too much, Raven kom Skaikru.”

“I worry – I worry too much? You’re injecting an unknown substance into your already creepy alien black blood,” Raven says. “Sure, maybe you’ll become Captain America. Or maybe you’ll die.”

“That is the plan,” Lexa points out calmly. She steps out in front of her people, gathered for her speech, and positions herself carefully in front of them. Abby is in the front row, eyes anxious but hopeful. Indra and Anya’s people are dotted everywhere, the most trusted towards the front, the rest around the edges and at the back. “People of Polis!” she calls out. “I stand here today because I know rumours have been rife about Azgeda. They are not attacking. They are not a threat. They are –”

She almost hears the noise of the arrow flying through the air, burying itself exactly over her heart. Raven’s work is good, Lexa notes in one small corner of her mind as she falls backwards – her device hit exactly where she claimed it would, and the noise of it clanging against the metal Lexa wears beneath the plastic and fabric is covered by her cry, as intended. The medical bag Abby taped below her top bursts in a spray of black, drenching her top with dark blood immediately, dark blood collected from her Natblida as well as her. A lethal amount of blood loss, had it not come from so many.

Lexa wonders if her scream was not convincing enough. Any further noises of pain would be drowned out by the reaction of the crowd though. One of her people is above her, about to try and put pressure on it, but Abby yells at him, “Get back, I’m a doctor, a fisa! I’ll handle this! Find whoever fired at her!” Abby leans over her and injects her in the neck, her hands shaking. “Okay, Lexa, just breathe,” Abby tells her.

Lexa considers pointing out that the plan involves her not breathing. However, she is suddenly
unable to talk or move, the strange substance, the paralytic, moving through her blood. Her breath starts to gasp and then everything’s dark, though she can still hear the screams of the panicked crowd for several seconds until it fades into a dull roar and then nothing at all.

She opens her eyes to the inside of a dark, underground room. Octavia is staring at her, frowning. “Oh good, you’re alive.” She says casually.

Lexa levers herself upright with a groan. Her whole body hurts. “You were concerned, Octavia kom Skaikru en Trikru?”

“Indra would have been upset if anything happened to you,” Octavia says, dodging the question, but the smile she gives Lexa has a lot of relief in it.

“No one noticed?” Lexa asks.

“Everyone was pretty freaked, from what I could see,” Octavia tells her. “They all saw that you weren’t breathing, and the fisa were completely losing it, then Anya just grabbed you up and said your body needed to be stored until they had the Fleimkepa. We took you through the passage then out here. This bunker’s the place Lincoln, Clarke and I once hid from acid fog. No one else knows about it.”

“Aden?”

“Successfully took control, with Indra’s support,” Octavia tells her. “He locked away all the other Natblida in their quarters, to be guarded by some of our people so they can’t get out – or, you know, so no one can get in. Same as he did with your ‘body’.” She smiles again. “He was pretty believably wrecked about your death.”

“I considered not telling him,” Lexa admits. “I did not know if he could manage that level of deception. But it seemed too cruel.”

“Lexa? You’re awake?” it’s Abby, sitting up at the other end of the bunker. It looks like she was napping on the cold floor. She has even darker lines than usual under her eyes. “Thank heavens. Octavia, go get the others. I’ll check her vitals.”

“Others?” Lexa tries to remember who she requested, but her mind still seems foggy. “Raven and Linkon, yes?”

“John, Anya, and three of Anya’s people, too, though I really don’t know why John is here,” Abby says, reaching out her hand to take Lexa’s pulse. “You came back sooner than I expected you to, with the amount of paralytic I gave you, even with the antitoxin.” She manages a smile, but it trembles. “I was worried I was going to have to tell Clarke I gave her girlfriend an overdose.”

“John?” Lexa struggles to recall the name, not addressing Abby’s other comments. “Sha, I remember, the boy who claims he can get into Diana Sydney’s camp, according to Wells and Raven. That is why he is here. If we are to go north -”

“We should not go north,” Anya says darkly, coming down the ladder. “You should simply lay low in this bunker for a few weeks while we deal with the Azgeda, not do something so impulsive.”

“I never do impulsive things, Anya.”

Anya raises her eyebrows, not budging an inch. “And I am sure you do not wish to start now.” Clearly, she still thinks she can persuade Lexa out of this. She can’t, of course.
Lexa looks at her steadily. “You could not stop me doing what I wish, Anya.”

There’s a long pause, and then Anya looks away. Lexa has seen the Plains Riders train horses, and sometimes they tie the horse by a very long chain to a stake in the middle of a flat bit of earth – her and Anya’s relationship is something like that. Anya is her older sis, her mentor, and her friend, and so she may run as free as she wishes. But then she hits the end of the chain. At the end of the day, there is no doubt which of them is in charge, and which of them is the subordinate. Anya cannot stop Lexa doing what she wishes. She can only be there to advise her against it. That is where her freedom stops, where she is jerked short and must obey. It is, at times, an uncomfortable edge to their relationship, similar to the ones that exist unseen with Raven, Wells and Octavia. Although she is their friend, she is not their equal. She is their Heda. “Sha, Heda,” Anya says softly.

Lexa clears her throat as Raven, followed by John, Lincoln, and Zion, climb down the ladder.

“Wells kom Skaikru?”

“Raven kom Skaikru gave him a radio to contact us if necessary, and I have a dozen gona guarding him,” Anya says. “He was already helping to calm the ambassadors and persuade them to support Aden, though I cannot imagine they will remain calm for long. His Skayon assistant, that blonde girl, told Uzac that if he spoke rudely to Wells kom Skaikru again she would stuff something unpleasant inside him. I believe they have them under control for the moment.” Her slight smirk at the Skayon’s comment is noticeable and Raven looks almost jealous for a second.

“Anyway,” Raven says hotly. “Looks like you survived. Well done. So are we leaving soon? The idea of hanging out here for weeks while you two debate whether Lexa should come sounds fun, but I warn you, I snore.”

“I don’t plan to hide out here,” Lexa says simply. Zion, realising this is the moment, hands her the bag she brought. Most of their bags contain food, sleeping mats, weaponry, Raven’s devices and tents. However, Zion’s also contains other things. Lexa draws out a long, grey, shapeless cloak, followed by several small pots. “I remain convinced that my plan is best, whatever the risk may be.”

She combs the braids out of her hair with her fingers carefully, so that it is a mess of curls instead of intricate braids, and wipes the dark warpaint off from around her eyes, then removes the sigil she wears on her forehead. She opens one of the pots Zion brought and smears some of the substance within on her face carefully. She has done this only rarely before.

Abby blinks at her, frowning. Alone of them, she only knows the first part of the plan, since she was only necessary to paralyse Lexa and then undo the paralysis, not what was to come after. “That looks just like old scars. I thought you were planning not to run into anyone, though? Why do you need a disguise?”

“As I said, I do not plan to hide,” Lexa says, throwing Anya a stubborn look, then returning her gaze to Abby as she winds the grey cloak around herself. “I plan to go north. Anya can get us across the border easily, if she would stop arguing. Zion will be my guide to the villages. My spies there will tell us the way to Diana’s people. John, Octavia and Raven can get into her camp. From there we should be able to track the Azplana, and find the missile and Clarke. They will not be expecting us to track the Azplana from Diana’s people, it is too indirect for them to watch too closely. Linkon will come to remove the spirit from me if my fight should end – he has fisa training and should be able to.” His limp seems fully healed so he should not slow them.

Anya closes her eyes for a second, mustering patience. She is still against the idea. “You could just send gona following Roan.”

“Nia is too clever for that, she will not have him taken to her if he can be followed, and she will have
him searched for a radio or a weapon. He is the obvious bait, especially if he wanders north claiming he killed the Commander. I am just sending him so that Nia will believe more strongly I am dead. Also, if she does forgive him and take him to where she is, he will protect Clarke until we can deal with the missile and reach her.” Lexa tells Anya, not for the first time.

She pauses for a second, suddenly caught up in guilt – this will hurt Clarke, if Nia tells her that Lexa is dead, if anyone tells her that. But Nia might tell her that even if Lexa had not taken this course of action, and she trusts Clarke to disbelieve the Ice Queen. And if Roan is taken to his mother, taken to Clarke, one of Lexa’s first orders is that Roan must relieve her mind of this worry, must tell her that Lexa is whole. It is all she can do to keep Clarke safe. If she had been able, she would have discussed it with Clarke first, but she could not.

Lexa sighs. “No, I must go north with the rest of you. My spies will speak only to me, Anya, and they will recognise me when I talk to them even if they now believe me dead,” she says to Anya quietly. “And I – I will recognise them, no matter what disguise or name they use. This is the only way to get that information.”

Zion nods soberly, in full agreement with her plan, although there is worry and protectiveness on his face as well.

“Heda,” Anya begins to say, face still uncertain.

“The time for arguing is done,” Lexa says simply. “We need to act quickly. It is a long journey north.”

Anya glances at Raven and frowns, clearly wondering if she has any chance with her. Lexa is just grateful Anya has finally giving up on persuading her. She can stop Anya’s arguments whenever she wishes, but it makes her uncomfortable to use her authority on a friend like that. And Anya’s concerns are valid, given the state of things.

“I’m going,” Raven tells Anya stubbornly, before Anya can even open her mouth, “There’s no chance of you talking me out of it. Octavia, John and I all have pretty good motives for abandoning Arkadia, what with the way the Ark treated us. That makes us prime Diana Sydney bait, especially Octavia. And I might be able to figure out a way to disable the missile, or at least a way to disable the Mount Weather gear they have. Something, anyway.”

“It sounds like fun,” Octavia says with a fierce grin. She looks at John. “Are you sure you can get us in, Johnny boy?”

“Yeah,” he says, “Pretty sure. My Dad will be thrilled to see me.” His ever-present scowl deepens.

Anya sighs and gives in. “Then I will go as well. To keep you all safe.”

“I could come,” Abby offers, a little desperately, “I’m a trained doctor. I need to help find Clarke -”

Surprisingly, it’s Linkon who replies. “The people of Arkadia need you, Abby kom Skaikru. I am also a fisa and will keep them healthy. My leg is fully healed, with only a slight limp, and I am used to long distances and the cold. I will be much faster.” He doesn’t add his main reason, but his glance at Octavia tells them all exactly why he’s going. After a second she takes his hand and squeezes it lightly.

“Anya brought two gona who wait outside,” Lexa tells Abby. “They will accompany you back to Arkadia. Indra will tell everyone in Polis that Anya, Raven, Octavia and the others are with you, and once the radio is fixed you must uphold that lie.” She meets Abby’s eyes. “Beja, Abby kom Skaikru.
Clarke would wish you to be safe.”

Abby pauses for a long moment, realising the value of their points, then finally says tearfully, “Okay. Fine. Please bring my daughter back to me, all of you. Please.”

“We will,” Lexa tells her softly, heart in her eyes. “We will bring Clarke home.”
Travelling north with Nia, Ontari, and Nia’s group of gona quickly hits a routine. Which is not to say it’s a pleasant routine. The gona regularly say rude things in undertones, apparently unaware Clarke’s pretty fluent in Trigedasleng. Ontari regularly says rude things, but in her case she says them in English and doesn’t bother with an undertone. Nia, meanwhile, asks uncomfortable questions, provoking Clarke whenever she gets bored with the journey, like a lazy, cruel cat batting at a helpless mouse.

Clarke’s ankle aches, the cold not helping it at all, and the constant riding even less. In addition to that, Clarke’s arms become stiff from leaning back on the horse instead of holding onto Ontari, and her back becomes stiff trying to keep her balance like that. The one time she gives in and clings to Ontari while they’re cantering, Ontari removes one of her gloves, pushes up Clarke sleeve to bare a tender part of her forearm, and then dig her nails into it until Clarke bleeds. Clarke decides never to do it again. She’s quickly realising that Ontari gets off on dominance and other people’s fear – and not in a perfectly-fine, S&M type way, the enjoyment of taking charge a little or giving in a little, of playacting. No, Ontari’s not into that stuff, she seems to be just into actually scaring and hurting people. It creeps Clarke out.

Not as much as waking up the third night to find Ontari leaning over her does, though. Clarke scrambles backwards so quickly she clonks her head on a tent pole. “What the hell?” she hisses. In one way, she’s glad to be woken up since she was having a nightmare, but frankly real life seems just as disturbing as the nightmare right now.

“You kept saying the Commander’s name,” Ontari says softly, a disquieting gleam in her eye. For a second Clarke thinks she’s been found out, that she’s been saying how she really feels about Lexa in her sleep because she can’t say it out loud anymore. Then Ontari continues, mimicking her in a high pitched whimper but still speaking quietly, “Oh, Lexa! No! Lexa! Don’t! Please don’t! Don’t do this to me!”

Clarke was dreaming of Lexa’s death again – hardly surprising, given she’s no longer sleeping pressed against her. After a split second of confusion, she realises what Ontari thinks she was dreaming about, and feels sick – because of the slight smirk on Ontari’s face as much as because of the idea she leapt to. If Ontari tells Nia, though, Clarke supposes this only helps her lies. But she doesn’t like it, anyway.

“Sounds like you and the Commander had so much fun together,” Ontari says, sounding amused. She traces a finger down Clarke’s cheek and Clarke pulls further back.

“Touch me again and I’ll scream,” Clarke warns her.

“And why would I care?” Ontari says, but her involuntary glance over her shoulder and the quietness she still speaks with give her away.

“We both know Nia’s still deciding what she makes of me,” Clarke tells her. “Whether she wants to work with me, or kill me. If you make that decision for her, I doubt she’ll be thrilled.”

Ontari scowls and pulls back, glaring at Clarke. “Fine, Destroyer of the Mountain. You get some sleep. I’ll keep watch.” She leans back against another pole, pulling out her knife to play with it and staring at Clarke intensely. “Close watch.”

Clarke realises Ontari is purposely trying to freak her out now, trying to make it hard for her to sleep.
Sadly, that doesn’t prevent it from working, that night and every other night they travel. By the time they reach their destination, Clarke is exhausted. Of course, Ontari doesn’t look particularly well-rested either. Like Lexa, perhaps her black blood helps, though, because she certainly doesn’t seem as tired as Clarke.

It becomes so much colder as they head further north that Clarke’s hands and feet hurt constantly and her bandaged ankle is agonising. No matter how many layers she’s wearing, she feels the chill to her bones. The horse they’re riding seems vaguely sympathetic to her plight, which is nice, because certainly no one else is. Sometimes the horse rubs his nose against her when they stop. The other horses try and bite or kick Clarke when she gets close to them, but Ontari’s just seems to be happy to have someone who pets him and coos to him, even if it’s not his actual owner. Clarke nicknames him Snowball, mainly because the name visibly annoys Ontari, who never bothered to name him.

Clarke notices that the horses leave trails of deep little holes in the snow – they have some kind of specialised snow shoes with spikes, making her decide she really doesn’t want to get kicked by one of them. At first, she thinks maybe someone will be able to track the group through that. But winter’s started and the strong winds blow the snow over quickly, so that even when they stop for only an hour or two the trail quickly disappears. She tries to leave scratches and things on trees when she can do it without being noticed, but she knows even as she does it that it’s futile. She can’t leave enough, not with Ontari watching her, and someone noticing the marks would be a long shot anyway.

She doesn’t even see the cave they enter – it’s just another part of an icy mountain. Then Nia utters a sharp command and one of the gona goes forward to a bit of ice that looks exactly the same and knocks on it like he’s requesting entrance. Instead of a door swinging open, though, the thin plane of ice hiding the cave cracks, bits falling off, and he clears all the ice around it. The entry is only just big enough for the horses to fit in, so they have to dismount. Clarke looks back at the last gona to enter, who has carefully taken out several waterskins he was keeping close to his body and is pouring them into one end of a pipe that passes over the inside of the cave opening. As she watches, the drips start hardening again and after only a few minutes the opening is blocked by ice once more. Clarke swallows hard. When Lexa told her that Nia had hidden palaces, this isn’t what she expected. This is extremely well hidden.

The place below is mostly made of rock instead of ice despite being inside a mountain, to Clarke’s relief, since she’s getting pretty sick of the uniform whiteness of everything, the way the snow half-blinds her in the light. It’s much warmer and more enclosed inside than she expected, but still unmistakably palatial – the bedrooms are small, but there’s a large throne room, and a huge dining room with a table, which Clarke is banned from for most of the day as Nia holds ‘discussions’ there over the radio. It’s also where Ontari brings her that night, telling her Nia will speak to her shortly, and when she leaves Clarke in the room there’s no Nia and no radio. Behind the table there’s intricate wall-hangings, and in the centre a beautifully carved bow above a door, and Clarke trains her gaze on the decorations while she waits for Nia to arrive.

Then she hears a noise behind the door. Frowning, sure she shouldn’t be doing this, Clarke opens it. And comes face to face with Gustus. He’s behind closely-set bars with a large lock on them, chains linking his wrists to the ceiling and making it so he can’t even remove the filthy gag they’ve forced on him, covered in bleeding wounds and burn marks, and not wearing nearly enough for the weather, but Clarke recognises him immediately. And he recognises her, she can see it in his face. He gestures with his hands as much as he can move them, making desperate grunting noises through the gag, and she realises what he’s trying to say – close it. Close the door. His eyes are swollen and red like he’s been weeping.

Clarke hesitates for a second, then she whispers, voice shaking. ‘I’ll get you out of here. I’ll get us
both out of here. Back to Lexa. We’re not going home in a box.” His eyes widen, and she shuts the
door, walking back to the table, heart thumping with shock.

When Nia eventually turns up, she’s grinning, and Clarke feels her heart drop. So far her journey
with them has taught her one thing – if Nia or Ontari are smiling, something horrifying is about to
happen. Maybe they’re about to get to the torture part of the evening. “Greetings, Azplana,” she
says anyway, bowing respectfully.

“Greetings, Clarke kom Skaikru,” Nia says, smiling her cat-like smile again. Clarke recognises this
look from the journey here as well. It’s when Nia is about to say something and watch for Clarke’s
reaction, so Clarke schools her face to perfect blankness. Nia waves a hand at one of the gona with
her, and orders lazily, “Open the door behind me. Our guests know each other, I believe.”

Maybe she wants to see Clarke’s reaction to Gustus, or perhaps Gustus is just there to intimidate
Clarke with how broken he is. Clarke keeps her face perfectly blank as she looks at him, and quips,
“No offence, but I prefer the wall hangings. I’m not sure he adds to the ambiance.”

“Oh, he’s not here to add to the ambiance,” Nia says, though she looks intrigued by Clarke’s non-
reaction. Clarke can see her smile spread slightly. Clearly, she’s working up to something. “I just
thought he could use some air.”

Meals are delivered to them. Clarke eats mechanically, though she supposes she should be grateful
to have food at all, since from the sound of it the Azgeda don’t have much stockpiled. It’s just hard to
enjoy her food when she can see Gustus, someone who matters so much to Lexa, bruised and
burned and chained.

“I got some interesting news from one of my people in Polis,” Nia says eventually, licking her
fingers. “They contacted me over the radio this morning. I thought you ought to know.”

Clarke can see Gustus frown under the gag, and then he widens his eyes at her, trying to
communicate something. She meets his eyes, and realises that Gustus knows what Nia’s going to tell
her, perhaps because she discussed it here earlier – the thought crosses her mind that if he’s been
chained here long, he probably knows a lot of information Nia wouldn’t want to get out. She might
have made a huge mistake.

He’s trying to tell her not to react, judging by his expressions. But she already knows not to react to
whatever bait Nia throws her way, so she tries to ignore him, wondering if Nia opened this to see if
she and Gustus communicate about whatever the news is. Once again, trying to think like a
sociopath proves frustrating.

The gona have moved to stand beside Nia, and Nia’s studying Clarke’s face waiting to see if she
looks at Gustus again, so no one’s paying attention to Gustus. As Clarke pretends not to watch, she
can nevertheless see in her peripheral vision as Gustus pulls his right arm downwards roughly,
managing to get it through the shackle though from what Clarke can tell he’s probably broken at
least one finger and his thumb and scraped most of the skin off the hand to do that. He pulls what
looks like a small bone out the side of his grey gag, and eyes Nia thoughtfully. He must have hidden
it there, waiting for the right moment. But what’s he so worried about? What does he think is going
to happen?

Nia leans forward, eyes on Clarke, lips still in that cruel smile. “My son killed the Commander
today.” She says softly.

Lexa. Lexa dead. Black blood, welling up, staining her hands. Clarke manages to hold her poker
face for only a moment before it crumbles utterly into agony.
Luckily, in that brief moment, Gustus flings the little bone through one of the gaps in his cage’s bars, letting out an incoherent roar of anger through his gag. It strikes Nia on the back of the head hard and she turns with snarl. Her two gona turn as well and move towards Gustus, one unlocking the cage and the other entering to kick Gustus viciously, repeatedly, in the stomach, until he throws up blood.

The entire sequence of events takes less than thirty seconds. But it’s enough time for Clarke to school her face to blankness again. There’s no way Roan could have killed Lexa, she tells herself, though even her mental voice has an edge of hysteria to it. No way. The entirety of Polis was on the lookout for him. Lexa is too smart to let him kill her. It couldn’t happen. It’s a lie, to get a reaction. She knows I have no way to check, so she’s lying, Clarke tells herself firmly.

“I see,” Clarke says coolly when Nia looks back at her. “Then we have much better chances of succeeding.”

Nia raises her eyebrows, face still flushed and angry. “We?”

“I’m Lexa’s second-in-command,” Clarke spells it out. “You have the… I forget what he’s called… the head priest or whatever, don’t you? The religious leader.”

“The Fleimkepa,” Nia says, an edge of condescension in her voice towards the stupid Skaikru.

“Right, that. Between the two of us, it should be easy enough for us to take control of Polis. If the Destroyer of the Mountain and your, um, Fleimkepa are on your side, then the ambassadors should definitely support you over whatever kid got handed the position of Commander. If we both say it was a setup, that the last Commander had it out for you, then they’d have to hear you out. Having him on our side could be vital.” She looks up at Nia innocently. “The priest is still alive and not too obviously damaged, right?”

“Yes,” Nia snaps, “He is alive and mostly unharmed. He is chained below.” She waves a hand at Gustus. “This filth is here because it entertains me to watch him slowly die as we reduce his food and cut into him and burn him again and again. He is learning, slowly but surely, that I am not to be opposed. The Fleimkepa is in the dungeons. I need his knowledge less than I need his authority.”

“You could say the same thing about me,” Clarke says calmly.

Nia smiles, the angry redness fading slowly from her cheeks. “Sha. I suppose I could. Very well, Clarke kom Skaikru, you will have your deal. Tomorrow you will begin telling me what you know, and when I go south you will accompany me. In return, I will leave your people alive and separate, and they can have the land they wish. It is Trikru land anyway and I do not intend for many Trikru to survive.” She leans back in her chair, and steeps her fingers contemplatively. “It will be safest to give the alliance time to break down under whichever Natblida takes charge, time for it to fragment and the clans to begin killing each other again. Then, we will act, sweeping in to save the alliance and take charge. For now, we wait. After all, your people need time to work on my missile, just in case I need another advantage.”

“Of course,” Clarke says, forcing a smile. Planning out an entire strategy around Lexa’s death makes her stomach hurt. Is Nia lying? She can’t be telling the truth. She can’t. But she sounds so convincing. Just another test, Clarke tells herself firmly. That’s all. It’s a lie. A good one, but still a lie. Once she starts needing information about Lexa from me, it’ll be really obvious that Lexa can’t be dead.

Nia gets up. “Now, I wish to rest. If you require anything, perhaps Ontari will assist you.” She smirks a little as she says ‘perhaps’ – Clarke’s pretty sure if she ‘requires anything’, she’s on her
own. Which is good. Less people watching her.

Clarke nods and gets up to go to the room they’ve given her, knowing it would be suspicious to stay there and talk to Gustus. Sometime when she can do so safely she’ll come back. She glances towards the prone Gustus as she leaves, though, and he raises his head and closes one eye slowly in a deliberate, painful-looking wink.

Clarke mouths ‘mochof’ to Gustus as she leaves. Gustus saved her – somehow, he knew she wouldn’t be able to disguise her expression when Nia said that. Whatever happens, Gustus is all about Lexa, so he must have realised somehow that she’s important to Lexa.

And she’s sure that just like her, Gustus believes absolutely that Nia is lying – and probably for the same reason.

Because neither of them can bear to think it’s the truth.
Lexa has travelled incognito for long periods before, but not for many years. It was something she had to do occasionally when she first began to organise the alliance, back when it seemed like half of her own people wished her dead just for daring to suggest peace. Back then, she normally pretended to be a wide-eyed Seken, or a merchant girl. Gustus was difficult to disguise, and Costia disliked having to leave behind her treasured bow in Polis, but both willingly accompanied her anyway.

This feels – odd, though. Her own feelings are strange to her. Perhaps it was easier to be Lexa the Seken when those memories were recent, easier to be Lexa the merchant girl when she still felt like a girl. Now she has spent years weighed down with her own power and authority, never shedding it for more than a day or two, and it feels strange to be so fully without it. It embarrasses her, that she is so used to the bows and automatic respect of others that its absence leaves her off-balance.

Or perhaps it is simply the lack of Clarke that leaves her off balance.

“Here,” Anya growls. “We’re nearly at the border.”

“I don’t recognise this place from last time,” Raven comments. “Last time was a lot more – I don’t know, creepy and quiet.”

“Because this is not the same place as last time,” Anya says flatly. “We are much further east. I do not care how well we disguise ourselves, going past the same villages as we travelled through recently would be an unacceptable risk.”

“Right,” Raven mutters. “Geez, no need to bite my head off.”

“I did not bite your head off,” Anya says, a slight smirk creeping onto her face. “I believe it is too big to easily remove.”

It takes Raven a moment to understand, and then she groans.

“What does that mean?” Zion asks curiously.

“To have a big head is to be arrogant, as Raven is,” Anya tells him smugly.

“She learnt that phrase from me,” Raven says, not sounding particularly insulted. “Of course the only Sky People idioms Anya can remember are insults.”

Lexa tilts her head thoughtfully. “The only Trigedasleng I have ever heard you use are phrases like ‘shof op’, ‘branwada’, ‘jok yu’ and ‘mokskwoma’,” she points out to Raven. “Anyway… shof op, both of you. For an hour or so at least. The last thing we need is our own blockade stopping us.”

“Sha, Heda,” Anya says quietly.

There is no sound for some time, just the steady crunch of their boots on snow. They are headed for an agent of Lexa’s who lives in a village east of where Prison Station originally fell. They did not stop at that village last time, though it is near enough to their original route to make Anya antsy, and Lexa feels sure that her spy will have noted hundreds of people passing through. There is no point trying to track the truck Clarke was taken in – Raven told Lexa when Clarke was abducted that the
truck had a Maunon device to hide its trail. Well, it might have such a device, but she saw the marks Diana Sydney’s three hundred people left, not just in the snow but in the surrounding trees and branches, and she is sure that between her spies and that trail they can find the people of Prison Station.

They have to.

Lexa’s face is covered with fake scars. In the old days, Costia would have applied the disguising makeup to her. Costia enjoyed making patterns with it, just as she enjoyed carving wood or making clever little devices, and the scars she created looked real. Lexa is not as skilled with her hands unless she is holding a blade, but she has managed to do a decent job, with the others’ help. She looks like an Azgeda. She makes sure she walks like a quiet merchant girl instead of a seasoned warrior, a good pace but not a cautious one.

For the rest of them Lexa thinks the small amount of facepaint and the concealing cloaks they wear will be enough. Raven, John and perhaps Octavia will have to remain quiet so as not to give them away, but since the Skaikru look to be the youngest in the group it will not seem remarkable to anyone that the merchants’ apprentices and trainees stay silent.

“We’re in Azgeda territory,” Zion informs them quietly.

“It doesn’t look any different than Tree People territory,” John remarks.

Raven raises an eyebrow. “What, you thought they’d spraypaint a line? And then on one side of the line it would be birds and bees and happy plants, and on the other side it’d be icicles and thorn bushes? Nature doesn’t give a flying fuck about clan borders.”

“It is no wonder I only know insults when the sky person I spend most of my time with is you,” Anya says, rolling her eyes.

Raven bats her eyes at Anya jokingly. “What, you’re saying I should teach you how to say sweet nothings, cheekbones?”

For once, Anya does not return her banter. “If there is a thing you would like me to say, all you must do is teach me the words,” she says sincerely, giving Raven an open smile that looks both strange and sweet on her sharply-angled face.

Raven tilts her head forward, letting her for-once loose, curling dark hair become a curtain in front of her face to hide her creeping blush, and looks at Anya through it. “I… um… you…”

Lexa can’t help but be amused. I will have to tell Clarke of this, when we find her, she thinks. Raven speechless – surely, the rarest of all things. It seems to her that Raven’s request to Anya, that they see where their friendship leads, will certainly lead to something more. The two are still all coiled tension – they step towards each other like they do not remember how to step away, and make weak excuses to touch each other. It makes Lexa ache for Clarke.

“We will reach the closest village soon if we continue in this direction,” Zion tells her quietly. “If we wish to avoid it, I suggest we head further west before continuing north. There is a dense forest where I believe we could camp safely.”

Lexa nods. “We will do as you suggest.”

She slows so that she walks beside him – unconsciously, he keeps trying to fall into place behind her, letting her lead. Zion’s respect for her is ironclad and she can see it makes him uncomfortable to even pretend that they are equals. Nevertheless, he is the eldest of them, and if anyone comes across them
it will seem strange that he defers to her so completely. Her people accept that age is no barrier to being a leader, but in most cases merchant groups are led by the eldest, as they have had the most time to accumulate the funds necessary to afford to stock up on goods to sell. And she would rather any travellers they encounter look closely at him than at any of the rest of them.

After a time, when the others have fallen behind a little way, he clears his throat quietly. “Mochof, Heda,” he says, his tone conveying fervent emotion.

“Pro, Zion,” she says in return, also quietly. “But what do you thank me for?”

“For bringing me,” he says simply. “For trusting me, after all that has happened.” He swallows hard. “You placed me in charge of a gonakru, and I led them to their deaths. You trusted me to help guide the Skaikru home, and I got them captured by the Maunon. I nearly caused your fight to be over. Thank you for this chance, Heda. I will not fail you again.”

She looks at him and feels a burst of sympathy. Zion seeks redemption, for the betrayal he allowed to happen with his foolishness, for the gonakru he got killed with his blind loyalty. The futile desire to right your mistakes is something Lexa understands intimately. “I know you will not,” she says.

If Roan becomes leader of the Ice Nation, perhaps she will recommend Zion to him for a higher position. He would do well as a personal guard or something of that sort. He could not be an ambassador, he has not the quickness or artifice necessary for it, but he is dutiful and loyal and utterly trustworthy. Those traits are valuable. The duty can be misdirected, the loyalty can be misguided, but the trustworthiness is priceless and inalterable.

“Heda,” Linkon says, inclining his head respectfully. It occurs to Lexa that she should school them to call her by a fake name before they encounter people. She decides they can spend the evening doing that before they sleep – they cannot continue to travel in the dark with so few people, but they will hardly need to sleep for all the hours the sun is down.

“Sha, Linkon?”

“There is a fire nearby,” he tells her. Linkon, as a former scout, has honed his senses to notice such things. Lexa had not spotted the slight drift of smoke.

She frowns. “A campfire?”

“Sha, Heda,” he says. “It is too controlled to be otherwise. And I can smell meat cooking.”

Lexa cannot, but then she is not as skilled in this area as he is. “We must avoid them,” she decides. “Which way?”

“The fire is ahead, perhaps a little to the right, judging by the wind,” Linkon says. “I think if we enter the forest, we should easily avoid it.”

Lexa sighs. “Then we shall.” She turns to look at the others and stops walking. In moments they’re gathered around her. “We must leave the open for a time. Linkon has spotted a fire.”

Raven eyes the thick forest of pine trees with annoyance, probably already imagining snagging her cloak on every thorn and running into every branch. “Oh, great.”

There’s a noise from the right, a loud laugh. They are in the open, and it is still daytime, and they are at risk. If anyone leaves the fire for any reason they could be spotted. People out this far from the village are likely to be either bandits or Azgeda gona, and they do not wish to meet either. “Now,” Lexa hisses, and strides quickly into the forest. In their grey cloaks, it is easy to blend in with the
trees and the snow.

Zion is, of course, quite at home in frozen forests like these, and is the quickest of all of them. Linkon, despite his size, seems to avoid the closely set trees effortlessly, keeping pace with Lexa silently, his time as a scout showing in his ease. It is clear Octavia has been learning from him as she manages to be almost as soundless, although not nearly as quick. John is not quite as good, but Lexa hopes that anyone overhearing the slight rustling will believe it is an animal or the wind. Anya takes Raven’s arm and pulls the mechanic after her, clearing the way for her sky girl and helping her to avoid making noise, which is difficult and slows her considerably.

It is slow going, frustrating compared to the simplicity of walking in the open. But far safer. It takes as long as it takes, Lexa reminds herself. It takes as long as it takes.

Chapter End Notes

I'm Australian, I don't ski or snowboard, I'm from the coast, and in my whole life I've spent one month or less in snowy places, most of which I spent indoors with schnapps. So setting half this story in the Ice Nation was a questionable decision. Thanks go to Cassy for patiently explaining various things about Canada-type weather.
It’s dark and cold, nearly all the fires extinguished for the night, though Clarke’s sure that the one in Nia’s bedroom still burns brightly. Her own bedroom doesn’t even have a fire. She’s decided that if she’s caught, her excuse will be that she was cold, so she was trying to find somewhere that has a fire, and thought the dining room would.

For possibly the first time since they arrived here, there’s no one with her. Ontari has been following her everywhere, eyes burning into the back of Clarke’s neck. She’s not sure if Ontari’s strange obsession with her is because of what the girl believes about her relationship with Lexa, or if she’s just enjoying the control she has over Clarke’s life. She doesn’t even think there’s necessarily anything sexual in it, and there’s certainly nothing romantic – it just seems like Ontari enjoys the effect she has on Clarke, enjoys trying to cause her discomfort.

But Nia ordered Ontari to do some extreme training today, pitting her against gona after gona apparently just for the amusement of it, and as a result Ontari crashed pretty early. This is her chance.

She limps as quietly as possible towards the door Gustus is behind, the clack of her walking stick making her wince. Then she pauses, eye caught by something that she hadn’t seen before – when the torches were lit, she hadn’t been able to see the carving on the grip of the intricately carved bow hanging above the door, since it had been in shadow.

It’s a cogwheel. The cogwheel Lexa wears.

It’s creepy that Nia has something with that patterned on it, Clarke decides. But then, what about this place isn’t creepy? A hidden palace in a mountain, an oppressive ruler, and a tortured guy as a centrepiece. And she thought Cage seemed like a Bond villain.

She pulls the door open as softly as she can. Gustus is slumped against his chains, sleeping uneasily, but he stirs at the noise. His eyes blink open. For a second he looks panicked, but then relaxes as he notices there’s no one behind her. Clarke reaches her hands through the bars and manages to loosen and pull down his gag.

“Mochof,” he says, voice raw.

“Pro,” she says, not sure what else to say. For a long moment she just stares at him. His right hand is still somewhat mangled – well, all of him is still mangled – and he looks even thinner than the last time she saw him. Remembering, she reaches inside her bulky jacket and pulls out some hard bread.

“It’s not much,” she says quietly, holding it out, “But it’s something.”

She holds it steady as he tears at it and swallows it painfully. He’s missing a couple of teeth, she notes, and feels her heart ache in her chest.

“What she said about Lexa -”

“I haven’t seen Lexa since they took me,” Clarke tells him. “But when they did, she was healthy and safe. I don’t know what they’ve told you, but we took down the Mountain -”

“I can hear things sometimes,” he says. “Even through the door. Not much though.” He grimaces painfully. “It is good to know the Maunon are gone.”

“What she said about Lexa -”
“Is a lie,” he says firmly, before lowering his voice again. “Her lie, or her son’s lie... it does not matter. Roan could not kill Heda. She is a marvel, and he is a branwada, a weakling, a worm. He is nothing to her and he could never kill her.”

Clarke breathes deeply, drawing strength from his certainty. “Yeah. I know.” There’s a long pause, then she says, “We need to find a way out of here. Do you know where the keys to this cage are? The keys to your chains?”

“The keys to the cage are held by the gona, so they may enter whenever they need to,” he says, face twisting. “But knowing the Azplana, she would not keep the keys to the shackles on her person, or give them to her gona. Probably they are hidden somewhere. When they shackled my right wrist again, it took some time for them to find the key for the chains. But that does not matter. You must not try and free me. You must leave without me.”

“I can’t,” Clarke says, quietly but flatly. “I have a broken ankle and no experience surviving in these temperatures, especially alone. They’d catch me within an hour.” She pauses, then asks him, “When you helped me before. When you threw that thing at Nia’s head. How did you know I’d need the distraction?”

“Perhaps I merely wished to throw something at her,” Gustus counters. She just stares at him, and then he admits, “You spoke of ‘going home in a box’. I know what you were speaking of. You would not know of Costia if the Commander did not care for you. And I have known Heda a very long time – I saw the change in her, when she met you, though I did not immediately recognise it for what it was.” He smiles again, thinly. “I knew what Nia planned to tell you and I wished to judge your reaction without her having a chance to judge it.”

Clarke smiles back at him, a little shakily. “Well, when you did that, you saved me. Even if I could get out alone, I wouldn’t. I’m not going to leave someone Lexa cares about so much be starved and tortured to death, not when I can do something about it.”

“You cannot do something about it,” Gustus says flatly.

“Don’t count me out yet,” Clarke tells him. “You’d be surprised what I can do.” She thinks. “This looks like very old steel,” Clarke says, looking at the lock, though she knows she’s not an expert. Raven would probably tell her that you can’t tell whether metal’s strong just by looking. “If I get snow from outside and pack the lock and the weakest point on your chains with it so they went brittle, and I got something to shatter them with, like a hammer, I might be able to do it. Failing that, I have a knife, I might be able to pick the locks – I’ve never tried, but I know the basic idea.” Neither of those ideas sound great, she has to admit. “Or I’ll come up with something else. There’s lots of possibilities.”

Unsurprisingly, this speech doesn’t reassure him. “You are determined not to leave without me?” he says eventually, gruffly, eyes wide and unbelieving. “What about the Fleimkepa? He is of more importance -”

“No,” Clarke says flatly. “No, he’s not.”

“He has no apprentice since the last was killed, and he is necessary for the Commander’s spirit to pass on,” Gustus explains.

“If I can get him out too, I will, but you’re my priority,” Clarke tells him quietly. She doesn’t comment on the stupidity of Titus not having an apprentice. It’s not like she had a high opinion of Titus to start with. “Screw the Flame. Lexa’s not dead, remember? You’re what matters.”
“Why?” he croaks.

“Because Lexa loves you,” Clarke says simply. “She loves you, and I love her, and we are getting out of here. Together. Understood?” She doesn’t wait for a reply. “I’ll start collecting supplies and find a place to hide them. We’ll both try and listen for information. I’ll sneak you whatever food and water I can to keep your strength up. I’ll need to see if there’s any chance of freeing the Fleimkepa as well, and figure out how to get out past the gona, and all that kind of thing – so it’ll take time. But we can do this.”

He stares at her. Then, eventually, he says, almost grudgingly, “I know someone in a village not too far to the south. They work for Heda. They will hide us.”

She notes that he doesn’t tell her what village or anything else about the person, just in case. It’s paranoid, but in this case maybe that’s understandable. “All right,” she says softly. “We need to get back to Lexa. If nothing else, we can tell her where Nia’s hidden.” Now that she’s seen the entrance, she thinks that without a guide there’s no way anyone will be able to find it. “We can keep our ears open while we’re here, get an idea of who’s loyal to the Azplana and who’s not.” She gives him the edge of a smile. “And if there’s the slightest chance she’ll listen to my advice – or even deliberately go contrary to my advice – then I’m sure I can keep myself occupied until it’s time to go.”

He gives her the same kind of brittle smile. “I can see why Heda likes you,” he comments. “Thanks, I think,” Clarke says. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. So I can give you some more food.”

“And so I can give you information,” he says, “In case you must leave without me.”

He means in case he dies, Clarke thinks. Not just that – she suspects if he thinks that his death will be more useful to Lexa’s cause than his life, he’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen. “Hey, I need you,” she tells him fiercely. “I can’t get back to her without you.” That’s the truth, she probably can’t get back to Lexa alone. But even if she could, she doesn’t want to. She doesn’t want to see Lexa again and have to tell her that another person she loves is dead. “I’ll see you soon.”

The cold has numbed her hands and feet, but it doesn’t feel like it’s done anything for her ankle. Broken bones take so long to heal, and even though it was a smooth break from what she can tell, it’s only since they got here that she’s really been able to stop using it. Nia’s preferred approach to strategy seems to mostly involve waiting so far – which is understandable to an extent, since she seems to believe they have months and she wants to see what the alliance will do, but Clarke can’t help but feel that Lexa would already have multiple plans and back-up plans.

There’s someone in her room. She knows just by the change in the air and nearly reaches to pull out the knife in her – increasingly messy – braids, but manages to stop herself in time. “ Couldn’t find your own room, Ontari?” she says into the darkness. She manages to find the long cord that pulls back the curtains surrounding her sleeping area and pulls at it, drawing them back. There’s much less light here than there was in the large dining room, but she’s sure it has to be Ontari.

“Oh, I could,” Ontari’s voice drifts over. “But clearly you could not, Clarke kom Skaikru, Destroyer of the Mountain. It is nearly morning. Do you wish to explain where you’ve been?”

“I was cold, so I went looking for a fire,” Clarke says, her eyes already adapting to the lack of light. Ontari’s leaning against the wall, just staring at her in that creepy way she has. “I didn’t realise I was out past my curfew. In fact, I don’t think I have a curfew. I’m working with Nia, not for her.”

“Oh, you’re working for her,” Ontari sneers, “You just don’t seem to have realised that yet.”
“I guess not,” Clarke says sweetly, “Let me know how long it takes to adapt to being a lapdog. Did it take you a month? A year?”

Ontari moves so swiftly she’s a blur and then her knife is pressed against Clarke’s throat. “Just give me an excuse,” she spits out the words coldly.

“An excuse to what? To ruin the Azplana’s plans? I think you should take a step back,” Clarke says, just as coldly. “We wouldn’t want Nia to give you any more scars, would we?”

Ontari hisses like a snake and steps back. “She’ll realise you’re a liar soon enough,” she says, voice filled with hatred. “And when that happens, maybe I’ll get a lapdog of my own. I look forward to teaching you to beg.” She turns and leaves.

Well, that’s incredibly disturbing, Clarke thinks. She wonders if there’s any way she can lock her room, because otherwise she feels like it will be another sleepless night.
“So your normal route is between here and the Rock Line clan?” The village leader leans forward, steepling his fingers, and surveys Zion with interest.

“Sha,” Zion says pleasantly, wares spread before him. All of Lexa’s coaching has paid off – he truly looks like a merchant, now, and is managing to talk like one too. “Everyone knows the Rock Line make the best steel weapons. Just look at these – and these ones are just what has been left over. We were headed back to resupply when the borders were closed and we became trapped here.”

The leader looks the rest of them over. “So you are Azgeda, clearly. From further north?”

“Further west, originally, but I have been travelling so long I barely recall,” Zion says. He gestures at Octavia and Lexa, who are seated to his right. “My daughters grew up on the road – they are as used to the Rock Line caves as they are to our snow. But I like to think their strength is all Ice Nation.”

With their similar colourings to each other and to Zion, and their facial scars (fake in Lexa’s case), it’s not hard for them to pretend to be Azgeda. Zion is a merchant, and they are his daughters. Anya, Linkon and John all appear tall and threatening enough that it is easy to claim that they were hired as protection. Lexa decided that Raven is to be a Rock Line weaponry expert, here to keep the stock in good condition for sale – that neatly excuses any oddities, as Rock Line is far enough from here for their ways to be strange to the Azgeda. Of course, they need not say most of this story to anyone. The leader of this village accepted without question that they were a merchant group, since merchant groups are typically filled with oddities and people of different clans, the better to make contacts with many places. But it is best that they have all the answers in case someone does pry further.

“Do you plan to camp outside the village?” the leader asks, a little absently, distracted by the stock Zion has laid out. He’s examining the wavy line down the centre of a sword, a sign it is one of the Rock Line’s most exclusive work. Few of their best weapons are sold outside of their territory. “Or do you have somewhere to stay?” He pulls a strand of his long hair loose, picks up one of the clever little knives in front of him, and tests the knife’s sharpness by sliding the hair lightly against it. It cuts through it without him having to pull the hair down, and he raises his eyebrows, impressed.

“We are looking for an old friend, actually,” Lexa says, flushing as she speaks up and glancing at the leader nervously. “We hired her for a while down south, and I thought she might let us sleep in her home. I do not know if you know her. Very tall, dark skin, a feisripa tattoo down her arm –”

“Keyza!” the village leader says, looking up from the knife, which he has been continuing to inspect. “Sha, I know Keyza, we all do. I did not realise she worked when she went south to visit her cousin.”

“Yes, Keyza,” Lexa says, a little relieved. This is the name she went by the last time Lexa saw her. “She did not work a great deal, but we struck up a friendship. Could you let us know where she is?”

“I can do better than that.” He turns to look at his small, skinny Seken behind him, ignoring the gona to each side. “Fetch Keyza here. Tell her that old friends have come to visit.”

“Actually, tell her that her former boss has come to visit,” Lexa says, stuttering a little. “It is an old joke between us, that I was her boss for a time.” She flushes even brighter, the joke of her ever commanding so strong a person as Keyza an obvious one for everyone here.
He raises his eyebrows again, clearly reaching a conclusion as to the nature of their relationship, but he gives a nod to his Seken and the boy runs off. “This is an excellent knife,” he says, switching his attention back to Zion. “I would be interested in considering a trade. You must need food for your journey.”

“Of course,” Zion says, glancing nervously back at the rest of them. At a look from Lexa, Anya moves forward to help barter, since the limited training in merchant affairs they gave Zion over the past few nights’ campfires did not extend to what to do if someone actually wished to buy one of his goods. But Anya knows the value of knives – she has always had a fondness for good-quality weaponry, though her love of sharp swords seems to have been overshadowed lately by her newfound love of devices such as grenades.

Lexa feels a moment of disgust that the leader would trade away food his village must badly need, but then she thinks of how little he ate while sharing his food with them, and realises he is trying to keep her merchant group alive as well as his village. He wishes to strike up a relationship with them and have them return – traders who come to small villages bring valuable news from the outside world, increase the variety of goods available, and can help a village develop connections with other areas to request outside aid against anything from wild beasts to feuds with other villages to future food shortages. She does not think he is a selfish man, he is simply trying to balance the needs of the moment with the ones of the future. Clearly, even though they are running short of food now, he thinks the situation will only worsen, and that he may need their trade connections outside the Azgeda when the borders open again. Concerning.

Lexa uses the moment to move away from the group a little, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness away from the fire. So she sees the Seken coming back with Keyza before the others or the village leader do. She moves quickly towards Keyza and gives her a bright smile that stretches her fake scars. “Keyza!” she says happily, “It has been so long!” She grabs Keyza’s hand and yanks her to the side before the woman can make a noise, pressing her against the side of the nearest hut.

The Seken flushes and averts his eyes, moving away from their lovers’ reunion. He does not notice that though they are pressed against each other and their faces are close, Lexa is holding a concealed knife so that the tip just pricks the skin of Keyza’s stomach, hidden by the folds of both of their warm loose clothing. “Hei, Keyza,” Lexa whispers quickly. “It has been a while since your last report.”

Keyza is already in the middle of pushing away Lexa’s weapon and reaching for her own knife to gut her attacker in return, but freezes when Lexa speaks. “It cannot be,” she breathes, peering at Lexa in the darkness.

“You know that it is,” Lexa says, discarding every bit of the shy merchant girl from her tone and posture. She stands straight and imbues her words with the steeliness that years of command has taught her.

“You are dead,” Keyza hisses. “Everyone says it. Such news spreads quickly.”

“As it was intended to,” Lexa tells her. “Take me somewhere quiet. We must speak in private.” She takes Keyza’s hand, continuing the earlier ruse of lovers. No one will think it surprising that they sneak off to share time together – bartering over as valuable an object as a high-quality knife can go for hours.

Keyza curses, but leads Lexa back to her home anyway, hand sweaty in hers. “You cannot be here. This is not safe, Heda,” she says once they get inside, face fierce, releasing Lexa’s hand as soon as she can. Something about Keyza’s uncompromising fierceness and protectiveness has always reminded Lexa a little of Anya, though in appearance they are very different.
“Why? Will you sell me to the Azplana?” Lexa looks at her, eyes stony. “The best reward you could hope for is a quick death.” Nia would never pardon someone for placing the alliance before herself, and all know it. She has no forgiveness for what she considers betrayal – ironic, given she has committed the greatest betrayal of their people.

“No, but someone else could,” Keyza growls. “Heda, please, let me escort you back -”

“I am where I need to be, Keyza,” Lexa tells her, effectively ordering Keyza not to question her reasons. Keyza stops speaking at once and bows to show both respect and contrition. “Now. I need to know what news you have.”

“Sha, Heda. The biggest rumour is of your death. Some believe you just to be injured or sick, but most…”

“The news spread quickly,” Lexa remarks, “Given the border is closed, I would have expected it to take longer.”

Keyza blinks, surprised. “Although the border is still supposed to be closed, the gona there are departing quickly,” she informs Lexa. Keyza used to be a scout and it is easy for her to overhear news that others would not. “It is easy enough for people to get through, now. At this rate there will be no gona there at all in a few days.”

It is Lexa’s turn to be surprised, though she conceals it. “Interesting. Have you heard why the border is opening?”

“Everyone says one of the Nightbloods has taken over Polis by force, supported by the Trikru,” Keyza tells her, falling back into the detached tone she has always used when she reports things to her Commander. “He needs every one of them to keep Polis under control. He does not have the Flame and he is inexperienced and foolish, they say.”

Lexa considers this for a moment. Even if Aden was foolish, and she knows well that he is not, he could not have lost control of Polis in such a short amount of time. Not while he has the ambassadors’ approval and Indra and Anya’s forces there. So this move is deliberate – it must be. He is using the tricks Lexa has taught him, feigning weakness. To what end? Does he wish to entice Nia into sending her people across the border? With Polis so close and no Trikru gona guarding the border, it is an effective bait. At the very least Nia will have to send a raiding party, as winter continues and her supplies grow thin – the Azgeda will not accept her hiding away when there is such a tempting target. It is not their way.

So Aden wishes to prove himself, Lexa thinks, pride in her Natblida flickering in her chest. He does not plan to sit and wait for my return, but instead will do as I ordered him to, and try his best to rule even without the Flame. If he incites Nia into sending a raiding party across the border, he may be able to kill or capture them. It will be a risky strategy, but well worth it if he succeeds.

“What do you know where the Azplana is?”

Keyza shakes her head apologetically. “She hides in the far north. My people grow more restless every day. If she does not take some kind of action by the end of winter, her hiding place will become her pyre. I do not know the exact location of her and her loyalists, however.”

Lexa comes to the most important question, taking care that her face does not betray her. “Three hundred people passed this way recently. Skaikru natrona, criminals.”

“Sha,” Keyza says. “I recall, although our orders are not to speak of them to anyone on pain of
death. The word is that they have settled in a village to the north of here. It is perhaps five days’ walk north and one day’s walk east. If you have one of those pictures of us – maps, I think they are called – that you taught me to use, I can mark the location for you.”

Lexa has prepared for this and takes out the map of the Azgeda territory she brought. It is more accurate to the south, with the far north much vaguer and speculative, but it is good enough for their current purposes. “Settled in a village?” she asks as she lays it out. “How did the village have dwellings and food enough to aid three hundred people at the beginning of winter?”

Keyza’s mouth twists into distaste even as she studies the map. “They did not. The Azplana ordered them to leave. The village is home only to Skaikru, now. The villages all around have received those forced out of their homes. Even my village has three who walked here seeking shelter – they wished to stay near their home village and would have slept on floors to do that, but found that in the surrounding villages there was not enough food. Not because of the start of winter. Because the villages all around those joken invaders have been commanded to feed them and care for them as well as we do the haiplana, in addition to concealing them from anyone looking.” She looks up, suddenly embarrassed. “Moba, Heda. I meant no disrespect, speaking so.” She bows again, even deeper than before, averting her face in shame. “Please forgive me.”

That explains how Prison Station has survived, at least. More than survived – thrived. On the backs of others. It sickens Lexa that Nia can use her people so. Her people help Arkadia to set up, but no one starves to do so, and the Skaikru are expected to learn to carry their own weight and eventually repay the debt. “There is nothing to forgive. My guards and I will stay the night here – we are pretending to be merchants who hired you once in the south, if any ask – and will leave tomorrow for the Skaikru village. If you require food, I believe your leader is about to give us some, and I can leave you a share of it.”

Suddenly, there are tears in Keyza’s eyes. She clears her throat. “Mochof, Heda. Mochof. What you do… the leader you are… the Azplana…” words seem to fail her. She shakes her head. “Mochof.”
Clarke’s in the room nearest to the entry, being stared at creepily by Ontari like normal, when Roan comes in.

He strides in so confidently it takes her several moments to realise that the gona at his side aren’t there to protect him but to bring him. His hands are tied behind him and he has no weapons at all. Ontari looks away from Clarke, eyes widening momentarily as they fix on him. “Roan,” she growls, drawing her knife.

“Down,” Roan tells her rudely. His hair and beard are messier than Clarke remembers, and he has several bruises on his face – of varying ages, but all still recent enough to be bright. “I am Prince Roan to you, and I have come to see my mother. Fetch her, will you?”

“Come to see her?” Clarke wonders, looking meaningfully at his guards. “Looks more like you were brought.” Her heart pounds too fiercely in her chest, so panicked and strong that every beat hurts. Roan might have killed Lexa. That’s what Nia says. He can’t have. But what if he has?

Roan shrugs, as if it’s all the same thing anyway. “Fetch the Azplana,” he says to Ontari again, as the girl hesitates. It occurs to Clarke that he could ask any of the gona with him to fetch Nia, or even if he hadn’t asked one of them probably would have gone and done that. But because he asked Ontari they’re all waiting. They don’t like that cruel, spoilt Ontari has a higher status than them, so they want to see her give in.

“Why should I?” Ontari snarls.

“Because I killed the Commander,” Roan says casually. He bares his teeth at Ontari in a savage grin. “Is that an accomplishment you can match, little Natblida?”

Clarke’s heart freezes. All of her does. Suddenly she’s completely numb. Everything’s a little bit distant. None of this can be real. Lying, she tells herself. He’s lying. But in her sluggish state it’s hard to make herself believe it. She can feel her own grief and fear, but it’s somehow unreal at the same time – it’s like when she would look into space and feel like it couldn’t really go on forever, like it was just a painted screen around the Ark instead. It was too massive to deal with, too endless to comprehend, and so she made it into something manageable. There’s no way to make this into something manageable except to block it out entirely.

There’s something so confident about Roan, in what he says, that makes her think he can’t be lying. But even as she thinks that, he glances at her, some unidentifiable emotion in his eyes. Is he sorry? Is that what the expression is? “Clarke kom Skaikru, I presume?” he says to her, still in that same casual tone. He looks at the walking stick she’s holding and a brief frown flashes across his face. Clarke manages a nod. “It is good to finally meet you. All I have heard is that you are both heartless and smart. No wonder you work with the Azplana. It will be interesting to see if you live up to your legend.”

Heartless and smart. You may be heartless, Lexa, but at least you’re smart. Words Clarke said a lifetime ago. Too significant to be a coincidence – no, it’s a message. A message from Lexa. Clarke feels like she can breathe again and turns away from Roan to study the wall, forcing herself not to cry, she’s so relieved. This is all part of one of Lexa’s plans, and this is a message from Lexa, and Lexa is fine.

Glaring at Roan, Ontari makes a gesture to one of the gona, who nods deferentially and moves
towards Nia’s quarters.

Clarke takes a deep breath and blinks back her emotions, making her face impassive. “So how’d you manage to kill Lexa?” she says, letting only mild interest enter her voice. “Did your mother lend you some of her Maunon toys?”

“Oh, she would never lend me anything of the sort,” Roan says, now addressing her and ignoring Ontari entirely. “I did not even know she had Maunon weapons.” He looks around. “I also did not even know the location of this little place of hers, although I have been north with her many times. The Azplana keeps her secrets.”

“The Azplana knows you are a traitor and a fool,” Ontari says, spitting the words. She’s always so pointlessly vindictive towards everyone, Clarke muses. She doesn’t think enough in terms of the future, she’s no good at making allies. Even Nia knows that sometime you have to deal with other people to survive. She sincerely hopes the girl never becomes Heda.

“The Azplana has not authorised you to speak for her,” Nia says harshly, entering, accompanied by her usual retinue of gona. “Nor am I likely to.” She looks at Roan. Her expression could have been considered affectionate if it wasn’t for the calculation in it. “It is good to see you, my son. Lexa is dead?”

“Sha, nomon,” Roan bows respectfully, but the bow is a little too deep to be anything but mocking, not that Nia seems to notice. Ontari does, and her lips tighten. “Her body is in Polis, protected by Indra of the Woods Clan and the whelp who claims to be her successor. They need only the Fleimkepa to make his ascendancy official.”

Nia frowns. “What of the Conclave?”

“One of Lexa kom Trikru’s final acts was the dissolution of the Conclave,” Roan says nonchalantly. “Replacing it with a system of challenges, so that no weak leader could ascend through luck or cowardice in the Conclave. All thirteen ambassadors agreed to it, even ours.” Clarke has to suppress a proud smile. Her Lexa managed to save Aden and the others, give them a way not to kill each other. She must be so happy to have done that. And thirteen clans – so Skaikru have officially joined, then. She wonders if Wells is the ambassador or if he refused to take the position after she disappeared.

Nia’s frown deepens. “I know of that,” she snaps. “But I did not expect that fool boy to be able to make them keep to it with her gone.”

Roan shrugs negligently. “Rumour suggests that Indra kom Trikru and the Skaikru ambassador are holding them to it,” he drawls, a gleam of enjoyment in his eyes. “If I may suggest, nomon –” Clarke thinks he uses the word ‘nomon’ like an insult. “-you would receive more news if you did not react violently to any information you dislike.”

There’s a momentary silence. Clarke’s not sure what the rest of them are doing during it, but personally she’s trying desperately to hold in laughter. It’s probably just because of the unfamiliar lightness caused by intense relief – Lexa’s alive – and the knowledge that now she has another ally here. Roan will help her, that must be why he’s here, that must be Lexa’s plan.

“If they do not wish for a Conclave, then there will be no Conclave,” Nia says coldly. “We will ensure that the streets run black with dark blood and Ontari shall be Heda.” She gives a smile that seems to have no real amusement in it, and Ontari echoes it. “If Lexa wished her Natblida to die without a fight, then she shall have her wish.”
“You have the Fleimkepa I take it?” Roan asks casually.

“A little damaged, but alive,” Nia says, like she’s talking about nothing important at all.

“How damaged are we talking about?” Clarke says before she can stop herself. “You told me he was ‘mostly unharmed’.” If Titus is being tortured too, she’s probably going to have to find a way to break him out as well. Regardless of her personal feelings about the man. But given she doesn’t even know where he is and she’s banned from most of the rooms here, this will raise the difficulty level of this escape attempt significantly. “I thought you said his authority was more important than his information.”

Nia scowls at her. “Do not question me,” she barks out. Then she seems to soften, apparently remembering that she wants to keep Clarke’s support, and gives Clarke a cold smile. “He was only harmed because he had a fayogon.”

“A gun,” Roan translates for Clarke, apparently unaware that she knows Trigedasleng.

Nia rolls her eyes. “The branwada tried to run, and then pulled the gun out when he reached the stables. I think he believed he could take a horse and escape.”

“A Fleimkepa, with a fayogon,” Roan says flatly. He spits on the ground disdainfully. “So much for his faith.”

“Did he hit anyone?” Clarke asks, trying to look like she cares. Clearly Titus didn’t manage to hit Nia or Ontari.

Ontari laughs, one of the first times Clarke’s heard her sound young. “Fool didn’t even know what to do with it. Tried to shoot it at us and the metal insides of the fayogon jumped out like he had thrown them in the air.”

Clarke tries not to grind her teeth, but really? When Titus was shooting at her and Lexa, he managed to work the gun just fine. From the sound of it, here he mixed up the safety and the clip release, a common mistake amateur idiots made with handguns. He managed to shoot Lexa fatally without breaking a sweat but he couldn’t even wing an actual enemy? Unbelievable. Okay, maybe she doesn’t care if he gets tortured anymore.

Nia eyes Roan. “We must speak,” she decides eventually, and turns to walk away, assuming he’ll follow.

Roan gives Clarke a wry look and does, only for Ontari to deliberately walk in front of him, making her opinion of his place clear. Even if Nia agrees to make Roan her heir for ‘killing’ Lexa, Nia’s plan still involves Ontari becoming Heda, so Clarke supposes it makes sense for Ontari to consider herself superior to Roan. However, she thinks Ontari’s also lucky that the gona who brought Roan in seem to have taken away his blades.

Clarke’s gotten charcoal from the fire and is drawing a picture of a horse on the wall with one hand and leaning heavily on her walking stick with the other when Roan returns – it’s the way she’s been filling some of her spare time, just sketching things and thinking hard about what steps she should be taking. When Roan taps her on the shoulder, it doesn’t surprise her, though. She heard his steps. She turns around and speaks so quietly that the gona at the doors couldn’t possibly hear. “Are you here to help me get out?”

“I am here because I had little choice,” Roan replies, just as quietly. “All other roads led to death. This one may also end my fight, but at least it offers a chance.”
what’s almost a smile. “I will do my best to keep you alive. But I have no weapons, no allies, and no intention of ‘getting you out’, as you put it. I am here to protect you as best I can. That does not involve helping you run out into a snowstorm.”

“Well,” Clarke tells him. “I am heading out into a snowstorm. With the prisoner in the dining hall. So if your job is to protect me, then you are going to be running out into a snowstorm with me.”

He looks at her and seems to see the stubbornness in her eyes, because he looks away and utters a quiet curse. “As I said, I have no weapons. If you go, I will follow you because I wish to gain my reward. But I will not help you with some foolhardy plan.”

“That’s good, because my plans are rarely foolhardy,” Clarke says sweetly. She returns to her picture, starting to add shading to Snowball’s mane. “I’ll let you know what to do once I’ve worked everything out.”

After a long moment, she hears him stalk away, and smiles at her sketch on the wall. She’s starting to get some ideas.
Ahead of the Pack

“We should reach Prison Station tomorrow,” Lexa says quietly. They’ve been making good time, even staying out of the open as much as possible. Right now, they’re sitting in a huddled circle around the small fire she has decided they must risk. If they are attacked by bandits, so be it. That is better than freezing to death. Several of their blankets are wet as well and need to be dried. The map is also open in front of her, lit dimly by the dancing flames.

“Good to know,” Raven says, teeth chattering. She has dark circles under her eyes and her hair is loose and messy. The pace has not been kind to her, much less the weather. “Let’s hope they have heating.”

“So what are we saying? What’s our story?” Octavia asks. She’s handling it better, probably because Linkon is wrapped around her in the nights to keep her warm and help her sleep. Even now, he sits close to her, sharing the heat of his body with her.

Anya would do the same for Raven, but she is trying to give the girl ‘space’, as asked. With her own love missing and in great danger, part of Lexa thinks they are fools for wanting any space between them when it is clear how much they care for each other. But then, Clarke once also needed time. It is better to wait and build something strong than hurry to create something that will only break.

John shrugs. “I wanted to join my Dad. You wanted to get away from the Ark. We keep it simple.”

“You could not have made it across the border and through Azgeda territory without a guide,” Anya says brusquely. “You are weak, unused to travel, and unfamiliar with this area. You have no skills that would enable you to survive.”

“Hey!” Raven says, shivering. “I resent that.” She manages a faint smile. “I mean, it’s totally accurate, but I still resent it.” Anya eyes Raven, then takes the driest blanket and wraps it tightly around her. Raven gives her another smile.

Lexa nods. “I thought you could claim Linkon aided you. You can say he is an outcast…” she stops. Raven is already shaking her head.

“Lincoln can’t come with us,” Raven says flatly.

Now it’s Octavia’s turn to be offended. “Lincoln would do a great job. He’s used to dealing with our people, he’s smart, he’s an amazing fighter -”

“He’s the size of a truck,” Raven says bluntly. “They wouldn’t trust him and they certainly wouldn’t trust us if we brought along a guy who looks like he could beat up the entire station.” She evaluates the others. “And Zion’s too old, there’s no way they’d think he’s not using us.” Zion blinks, looking surprised but not offended. “We could take Anya. Dress her up so she looks less threatening, have her act harmless…”

Raven trails off. Every person in the circle looks at Anya, her fierce eyes and angular face lit by the fire. Anya, to please Raven, attempts to make herself look friendly and harmless, spreading out her arms and smiling, widening her eyes and huddling a little to try and seem sweet.

“NO,” Octavia, John, Zion, Lincoln and even Raven all say at the same time. Lexa’s lips twitch but she contains her smile. Try as she might, Anya does not look harmless, she looks like she is barely containing herself from killing someone. She is not sure she has ever seen something as unnerving as Anya trying to look young and inoffensive.
Anya’s fake smile dissolves into a much more natural looking scowl. “Well, Linkon will have to manage then. Perhaps we can make him look less threatening.” She eyes Linkon. “If we injured his leg again -”

Octavia nearly chokes on the strip of meat she’s tearing into. “You mean pretend to injure his leg again, right? Please tell me that’s what you mean.”

“It would be a careful, deliberate stab wound,” Anya says earnestly, though Lexa can see the hidden mischief in her eyes. She sends Anya a stern glance, indicating she should stop deliberately aggravating Octavia. Anya sighs. “Fine.”

“I will go,” Lexa says. It is the obvious solution, even though Anya would prefer to dance around it. Lexa has experience pretending to be unthreatening, has spent more time with the Skaikru than anyone else, even Linkon, and is the youngest and most visibly harmless of them. Besides, a part of her aches to be there. She cannot wait outside the village to hear if Clarke is there. She wants to be in there, finding Clarke herself.

“You are Heda,” Anya says quickly. “You cannot -”

“At present, Aden is Heda,” Lexa points out. “I have the spirit, yes, but as far as the world is concerned, my fight is over. Do you truly believe any of Prison Station could recognise me? Let alone harm me.”

“But -”

“If you could somehow stop looking like you want to stab people, this wouldn’t even be a problem,” Raven tells Anya irritably.

“But I do want to stab people,” Anya says plaintively. “After all, Raven kom Skaikru, you have informed me multiple times that stabbing people is my only life skill.”

Raven can’t prevent her smile.

“Can I ask you something?” Octavia says to John suddenly.

He shifts uncomfortably. “I guess,” he says, in a tone that’s distinctly unwelcoming.

“How come you’re doing this?” There’s a long pause. Octavia looks around. “Oh, come on, I can’t be the only one wondering why you’re helping us screw over Prison Station. Or the only one wondering if you’re just gonna backstab us for your dad.”

John meets her eyes. “I wouldn’t spit on my dad if he was on fire,” he says, voice harsh and even angrier than usual. “Trust me, I’m not gonna do anything for him, I’m definitely not gonna betray anyone for him, not even you.”

“Even me? Listen to me, you -”

“Quiet,” Lexa hisses.

Octavia turns an irate expression on her. “But Heda, he was -” She sees Lexa’s face and stops speaking immediately. The circle is so quiet they all hear it. The sound of someone moving, as lightly as possible, over the snow. As soon as the sound comes it stops, whoever it is freezing.

Lexa breathes in and out carefully, sitting perfectly still. She meets Octavia’s eyes and flicks her own down deliberately at the wet blanket still drying in front of the fire, then to Raven and John. Octavia
hesitates, then nods sharply. Then Lexa hisses “Now!”

In one quick, fluid movement, Lexa grabs the wet blanket and throws it over the fire, extinguishing it instantly, so that the only illumination is that of the pale moon reflecting off the snow. Ashen trees claw towards the stars as if pleading for more light. Octavia grabs Raven and John by one arm each, yanking them along behind her, crashing through the forest like panicked animals. It is deliberate, of course, but no less convincing.

As if they’d practiced it, Anya and Zion head to the left, keeping pace with the deliberately noisy Skaikru easily, and Lexa and Linkon head to the right and do the same. They merge with the forest, staying hidden, slinking rapidly from one shadow to another, waiting for their pursuers to try and attack the Skaikru and show themselves. The bait must be very tempting – fools who seem to not know the forest at all.

Lexa can hear equally loud noises from behind them and to the side, and she moves further away from the Skaikru, deliberately distancing herself so she is outside the trap they’re drawing in. Their loudness is deliberate as well – they are driving the Skaikru in this direction. She considers whether they should veer off and avoid the trap, but that will not change the fact that there are people out here who know they are here as well. Better to deal with them. She can see someone with a spear moving through the forest to her left, not bothering to conceal themselves anymore, and she follows them.

Then she frowns as she hears a howl, worried it is a wolf – she has always known some in Azgeda territory had wolves as pets, but she has never faced them personally. And what if it is wild wolves, interest caught by the noise they have been making? She changes to moving through the trees as best she can. If there are wolves, she would be easy prey on the ground. She can’t go quite as fast like this, but that’s not a problem – the pursuers are deliberately moving at the same speed as the Skaikru. They won’t attack until they’re in the position they want to be.

Eventually the Skaikru are corralled at the bottom of a cliff, nowhere to run. Azgeda emerge from the forest, weapons held out threateningly. All the Azgeda are rangy and drawn, faces bony and filled with fury. Several skinny wolves follow them, pets of some kind, Lexa guesses. She waits, hidden behind a tree. She is only feet from the back of one of the Azgeda bandits up in her tree, and when she attacks, the others will as well. She is pleased to see they all had enough sense to spread out and avoid being caught as well.

“I don’t want you to take this as a criticism,” Raven calls out to the advancing figures, voice shaky but still sarcastic. “But you guys suck at first impressions.”

One of the Azgeda pauses, looking at the others, then raising his blade towards Raven. “Skaikru,” he hisses. “Frag em -”

He lets out a strangled cry and goes down, Anya’s knife in his shoulder. Lexa leaps into action, jumping from the tree to land on the nearest gona’s back, striking hard with her feet and pushing off again so that he falls to the ground. She grabs one of her knives and sends it flying across the clearing, hitting a gona facing Anya in the upper back and allowing her to finish him.

She slashes at the gona nearest her, forcing the woman to block Lexa’s sword with her own, and kicks out. The woman moves back, suddenly wary, and Lexa holds her off with the blade, confusing her with the tactic. Her face goes blank with shock as Zion stabs her from behind, severing her spine and piercing her heart with one thrust, killing her instantly. This allows Lexa to turn back to the man she leapt onto the back of before, who is struggling upright again, and remove him from the fight with a stab through the back of his neck. He pitches forward again, blood staining the snow.

There are ten gona and three wolves, as far as Lexa can tell. Or, there were – four lie dead already as
Linkon yanks his sword back out of one, and Octavia looks like she is managing well against a bowman who got too close. Three of them converge on Anya at once, apparently having decided she is the leader, and Lexa races forward, moving into a half-slide when a foot from them to knock two over, and reversing her blade to stab one as he falls.

The other lands on her, too close to effectively use her long blade or to get out her knife, and snarls in triumph. He tries to stab her in the throat but she manages to get out of the way in the nick of time so that it becomes imbedded in the snow beside her, slicing off a strand of her hair. She grabs that arm and keeps it down, not letting him pull the blade back, and rolls them so she’s on top. This places his arm at an impossible angle to use the blade, but Lexa loosens her hold and he pulls it out of the ground triumphantly, only for his triumph to fade into shock as she uses the momentum to redirect the knife towards his own throat, her hands covering his on the handle as she drops her own sword for the moment. He uses his other hand to try and stop it, but she can see in his eyes that he knows he will lose.

There’s a frenzied howl and before she can react there’s a blur of fur and rage launching itself at Lexa, burying sharp teeth in her left forearm, knocking her off the gona and to the ground again. She swears and hits at it, but it evades and tries to go for her throat. She blocks it with her already-bitten forearm, ignoring the pain, and scrabbles for her remaining knife with her other hand.

“HOD YU OP!” a deep voice yells, then says more quietly. “Hod yu op.”

The wolf releases Lexa’s arm, retreating with a confused whine. Once it’s backed away a few feet, Lexa stands, feeling dizzy for a moment from the pain in her arm, and faces the gona who spoke. She’s in her forties, with a square jawline and thick eyebrows, and a piercing gaze. She rubs a hand on her chin and speaks again, voice low and hoarse. “You are not Skaikru.”

Lexa takes in the other woman’s relatively clean clothing, good weaponry, and the slight amount of warpaint she is wearing. “No. And you are not bandits.” In fact, she looks like the leader of a village, the clothing too well cared for and belt too well made to be anything but an authority of some kind.

“No.”

The other gona standing around look uncertain about what to do. So does Lexa’s group.

“Why attack us then?” Lexa asks reasonably.

The woman hesitates and doesn’t answer, flushing slightly.

Lexa understands suddenly. “You thought we were from Prison Station… the Skaikru who took over the village.” She raises her eyebrows.

“Sha,” the woman growls eventually.

“You are trying to scare them into leaving this area by taking out any of them that you can. So that there is enough food again, so that you do not need to be servants. Or perhaps you are just getting revenge.” Lexa wonders what to do. There are only five Azgeda around them, and even with the three wolves, they could undoubtedly take them. It is a match of seasoned warriors against village hunters, not a fair competition at all. But she can already hear shouts and footsteps. More members of the village are coming, having heard the noise. Perhaps if they were lucky they could kill them and get away into the night – but even if they succeeded, word would most likely spread, and Nia would know her Skaikru had been found.

There’s a long pause, then the woman raises her sword. “Do you deny we deserve it, spy scum?” she
snarls. “Our Azplana will bleed us dry for these invaders. But you will not live to report this to her -”

Then she cuts herself off with a gasp.

Lexa looks down. The wolf’s teeth left deep punctures in her lower arm, punctures that are welling up with dark blood, slowly staining the grey of her cloak with black. The woman and her villagers stare in complete shock as a drop of Lexa’s blood rolls down her arm and splatters onto the white snow, staining it black.

“Natblida,” the village leader breathes.
It takes Clarke forty minutes after finding the empty cartridge to find the last bullet. A good half hour of that was just dealing with the two that had rolled into the nearest stall – several times she considered ignoring them, but the horse in there seemed to be mocking her cowardice with his eyes so eventually she had to. From a distance, of course. She spent the half hour poking in the stall with the end of the broom and yanking it back whenever the horse lunged for it.

While it’s inconvenient for those two bullets, she’s probably lucky that Azgeda horses are trained to savage anyone beside their rider who comes close. It means that each stall is cleaned by an individual gona, which has the side-effect of meaning the area outside the stalls has been cleaned by none of them, leaving all of the bullets Titus accidentally ejected scattered in the sparse straw.

Snowball whickers softly at her, sticking his head over the side of his stall and surveying her with his big soft eyes. Clarke wraps the last bullet in a scrap of fabric so that it won’t jingle against the others and stows it in the rip she made in the inner lining of her bulky coat, and goes to him, reaching out her hand to stroke his nose. He’s so much gentler than the others, even though they can all trust their rider and he can’t trust anyone at all. Or maybe that’s why he’s sweet, because he never expected anyone to treat him better. The thought makes her sad.

“You know if you proceed with your foolish plan, you will not be able to take the horse with you,” Roan says from behind her. He’s been watching the door for her grudgingly. So far he’s been obeying her instructions, but with plenty of sourness.

“Why not?” Clarke asks reasonably. “He can move much faster than we can.”

Roan snorts. “Not if we wish to go south over the frozen lake as I suggested. Even if you could persuade him to venture onto the ice, which not one horse in a hundred will do, he would leave a trail across it with the spikes on his shoes, and is far more likely to break through the ice. And going around the edge of the lake, even on a horse, takes a couple of days longer.”

“Then why doesn’t everyone walk?”

Roan shrugs. “Many do, if they do not have horses to worry about. It is risky with large groups, however, especially close to the shore – it is still early winter and the edges crack and break easily under too much weight. In a few weeks it will be far safer.” Clarke blinks at the thought that this is early winter, not wanting to consider how cold it will be in a few weeks. “But if you wish to avoid leaving a trail, and slow their search by forcing them to go around the lake to get to the south, this is our only option. And that means leaving the horse.”

Clarke considers this. “We’ll see,” she says eventually, though inwardly she admits he’s probably right. She returns to rubbing Snowball’s nose, cooing at him, then looks up at Roan again. “How are you going with the task I gave you?”

“I have been doing as you ask. The cook now believes I have a drinking problem,” Roan scowls. “I have six waterskins of fayowada hidden in my room, and I still do not understand this plan.”

“You don’t need to,” Clarke says coolly. She’s not telling Roan about her plans mostly because she’s still bringing it all together in her own mind, but also because some of what she’s doing she doesn’t want him to understand. After all, one part of her plan involves these bullets. As far as he knows, she’s gathering these just in case they can manage to also find Titus’s gun – she doesn’t want him to realise that bullets have a use without a gun. After all, the Grounder culture bans touching a gun, but
isn’t so specific about ammo.

Clarke kisses Snowball on the nose. She’s gotten quite fond of him – considering she used to be terrified of horses, that’s quite something. But he’s the only one here who she absolutely trusts. Gustus would sell her out if he thought it would be best for Lexa, Roan would sell her out if he thought he could survive it, Nia would kill her in a second if she stopped being useful, and Ontari would kill her if she could come up with an excuse for it, but Snowball just looks at her with his big dark eyes, broadcasting total adoration. She’s been visiting him often, Ontari following her and scowling, but today apparently Ontari was annoyed enough by these constant visits not to bother accompanying her. Hence the bullet-gathering.

“I should get back to my room,” Clarke says eventually, stepping back. “It’s nearly time for bed, after all.” She strides out of the room, Roan following her, scowl still on his face, and nearly runs directly into Ontari.

“Babying my mount again?” Ontari sneers, and Clarke eyes her impassively. “Our queen wants to see you.”

Clarke inclines her head and walks by Ontari like she’s just a messenger, which of course infuriates her. Nia’s in the dining hall, sipping thoughtfully at a drink and staring into the fire, guards surrounding her as usual. “You wished to see me, Azplana?” Clarke bows respectfully.

Nia turns to face her. “The skat,” she says coldly. “The one who would be Heda. He withdrew the border troops to Polis some time ago. His rule is weakening already.” She smiles – or shows her teeth, at least. “I plan to send a force through. With them, I will attack the Trikru villages close to the border, and replenish our supplies.”

“What do you require from me?” Clarke asks, a little surprised. Her mind races with thoughts. Why would Aden pull everyone back? That leaves most of Trikru territory undefended.

“With the gonakru guarding the Skaikru distracted by the attacks to the surrounding area, I will also attempt to send a messenger through to your people,” Nia says, looking down at Clarke. “Telling them to begin creating and stockpiling your kind of weapons, the bombs you promised me. You will send this message, using whatever codes your people use, and you will tell me the location of your village so my messenger can find it. I know it is south, near the Glowing Forest, but not the exact location.”

Clarke smiles back at her, though she can see the calculation in the queen’s eyes. “Of course, Azplana,” she says smoothly. “Do you know why the new leader ended the border blockade, though? What if it’s a trap? I’d hate for us to be outsmarted by a goufa. Especially one who doesn’t even have the Flame.”

This might be part of Lexa’s plan. If it is, then she must be hoping for Nia to be rash and short-sighted. Clarke will see what she can do to make that happen. Nia’s ego isn’t so fragile that she’s easy to manipulate, as Diana has been finding out – but then, Diana didn’t know enough about Nia to successfully use her arrogance against her.

If you know someone’s weaknesses, then you know how to control them. Clarke knows from Lexa that Nia has never been able accept that now there’s someone above her in the chain of command, someone who has more power than her, someone who can tell her what to do. She’s never been able to accept that she was forced to swear fealty because Lexa outwitted her. Lexa won. So Nia becomes much easier to steer by referring to the Commander, and even more so by referring to the possibility of the Commander outmanoeuvring her again. It makes her angry and reckless – and therefore vulnerable.
“I will not be outsmarted,” Nia snaps, face darkening with anger. “As I said, he removed the blockade some time ago. I have had scouts checking the length of the border, even going a little way into Trikru territory to check. There are no gona there. The border is clear.”

Clarke feels a momentary qualm, wondering if she’s guessed incorrectly, but quells it. If Lexa really was dead, maybe this would be something Aden was doing out of necessity or even naivety. But Lexa is alive and she wouldn’t leave someone in charge if she didn’t know they could handle it. If Aden’s pulling people from the border, there’s a good reason, and there’s a plan. She hopes. “If you say so. I just want us to be careful. If he’s anything like Lexa -”

“Lexa was weak, and died a fool,” Nia says harshly. “And her successor is the same. This is my plan, Clarke kom Skaikru. You will have the message ready by tomorrow to tell the messenger. Then it will be sent south.”

“And if your people do not respond as promised, we will know you for what you are,” Ontari says silkily.

Clarke glares at her. “Or, if they don’t respond, you’ll know the Trikru gona shredded the messenger before he got anywhere near Arkadia.”

“We will send a radio with him,” Nia says coldly, temporarily ditching the pretence that she trusts Clarke. “He will keep in contact and inform us when he reaches your people, so they cannot kill him and claim he did not make it there.”

Roan blinks. “How many devices did the Maunon give you?” he asks, sounding honestly curious. Nia thins her lips and does not reply – since she made him her official heir, she seems to trust him even less than before, perhaps because he now has yet another good reason to take her down. That’s why he’s still not allowed to touch a weapon and is watched nearly as closely as Clarke, as well as being banned from anywhere but his own room, the main part of the castle, and the stables, just like she is.

Nia’s gaze flicks back to Clarke when she shifts in her chair. “You may go,” she dismisses her, and Clarke nods and leaves. Maybe Nia plans to talk about the Maunon devices and doesn’t want her there to hear – although she thinks she has a pretty good idea of what Nia has already. If Nia has bombs, mines or sniper rifles, she hasn’t tried to use any of them. That (along with her eagerness for Skaikru bombs) makes Clarke suspect that the Mountain Men only gave her non-lethals, like sleep dart guns, gas grenades and radios.

When she gets to her room, Clarke closes the door and blockades it with the bed, like she’s been doing recently to sleep without worry. It means that it will take at least a little while for someone to get in.

She takes off her coat, shivering a bit, and upends it so that the bullets she’s collected fall onto the bed. If the message she sends tomorrow gets there, no doubt Raven will be doing the same thing in Arkadia, wondering if Clarke’s lost her mind. Clarke wonders if Lexa’s there as well – she has to be hiding somewhere, and Polis is too obvious. Staying somewhere out in the forest would be safest but she can’t picture Lexa just hiding herself away while everything’s happening. Maybe she’s in Arkadia, being hidden by Kane. Or in TonDC being hidden by Indra. Wherever she is, she’ll be on top of things, Clarke knows that. TonDC’s probably where she should try first, since it’s nearest to the border, and at the very least Indra’s people should have an idea where Lexa’s gone underground.

Pulling out her thin little knife, Clarke starts to carefully pry at the bullet. She’s seen Raven do this before – neatly and quickly. Of course, Raven’s an expert. Clarke is… not. Actually, she’ll be pretty lucky if she doesn’t lose a hand doing this. But as soon as she realised she had a source of
gunpowder she knew she couldn’t exactly leave it alone. Gunpowder for explosions and fayowada for fire, between the two she should be able to come up with a way to get Gustus out of his cell and a pretty epic distraction so they can get out together.

It takes some time, but she manages to get the gunpowder out without accidentally making a spark significant enough to set it off and lose a finger. She carefully centres the little pile of dust on a square of cloth on her bed. Once she’s got it all together, she’ll tie up the cloth and have her own little ball of gunpowder to carry around in her coat. She’s not sure if that’ll make her feel safer or more scared.

Of course, at this rate it will take her all night to get through the bullets she found. Clarke distracts herself as she works, considering the message she should send. She wonders if she should send some kind of warning code. Otherwise if she sends Kane a message that they need to do this Kane might actually listen – he might think she has some clever plan in mind, not realising that she’s just buying time until she can get out of here. The last thing Clarke wants to do is inspire Arkadia to turn their bullet supply into a stockpile of homemade bombs.

Nia’s expecting her to use codes to clue them into the fact that they should be siding with her. Clarke wonders if she can say something like ‘give my love to Jaha’ to let Kane know this message isn’t real. But on the other hand, if he does realise that she’s trying to warn him and either kill or imprison the messenger, she’s screwed. Maybe she’ll just send a real message, with a code of enquiring about her mother’s kneecap or something like that so they know it’s really from her, and hope that it doesn’t reach the destination. Then if it does… well, with gunpowder bombs the Azgeda might actually do more damage to themselves than the Trikru.

Hopefully the same doesn’t hold true for her.
“What are they arguing about?” Raven mutters to Lexa.

They’ve all been stuffed into a corner of the village leader’s house. They’re not tied up and have been given some food, but their weapons have been (very politely) taken from them and three armed guards stand by the door. “The village leader – Iryala – thinks we are Natblida assassins sent from Polis by the new Commander,” Linkon translates quietly, overhearing Raven’s question. He has better hearing than the rest of them. “But the man has heard rumours that the Azplana has a Natblida servant, and he thinks you are here from Nia to spy on them.”

Outside of Polis, many do not know the exact role of Nightbloods. They know that once a child is discovered to be a Natblida, they are taken from their family to serve the whole clan – Natblida are more resilient, less likely to become ill or die of injury, and learn to fight easily and well, so they become a useful tool for the clan leader. They are also considered lucky – in fact nearly supernatural – even outside of the Trikru Commander. Historically, they have been made guards or, yes, assassins, by the other clans.

Most Nightbloods have always been found near Polis, however, in Trikru territory, where the Conclave then kills most of them, leaving only their redblooded relations to pass black blood to their yongon. It was only once the twelve clans became allied that the few Natblida from outside the Trikru began to also be sent to Polis, since the Commander was no longer just Commander of the Trikru. Before that they belonged to their clan – now they belong to the alliance, and to the spirit.

So it is understandable that all some village Azgeda know is that Nightbloods are taken when they are young, that they are important, and that they do not live to become old.

“Then perhaps I should speak to them,” Lexa says calmly, and stands. She walks to the doorway to find three swords pointed at her. “Withdraw those or I shall make you eat them,” she advises the gona standing there. Something in her voice, soft and dangerous, must convince them, since they let her through.

Iryala has a knife to her throat a second later.

“I am Saska,” Lexa tells her, ignoring the blade. “I serve the alliance, not Nia. My friends and I are here to deal with your Skaikru infestation.” She meets the Iryala’s eyes.

“She killed our people. Slit her throat,” the man standing nearby growls.

“How long before you do not have enough food to satisfy the Skaikru? Three hundred people eat a lot, especially when they also take up your time expecting you to wash for them, clean for them, protect them from wild animals and enemies, and whatever else they ask of you, so there is less time to hunt and gather.” She meets the man’s eyes. “If you kill me and keep serving the Skaikru, you will starve. If you do not provide the Skaikru with food, they will shoot you. If I am Nia’s Natblida and you harm me, her gonakru will kill you. The only version of events where you survive is the one where I am telling the truth, and you choose to trust me. I suggest you go with that.”

There’s a moment where anything could happen, and then Iryala lowers her blade slowly, admitting defeat. “Stand down, Malus,” she tells the man beside her. “The Natblida is right. We must do something, or our fight will be over. I choose to believe her.” She looks back to Lexa, and her mouth twists wryly. “You are here to kill the Skaikru? Why? I do not believe it is to aid us.”
Lexa shrugs. “I do not need to kill them to bring about their death. They stole something Heda requires, and I am here to bring it back.” She hesitates, then says, “They brought it here in a large Maunon vehicle. Is that still here or has it gone north to Nia?”

“It is still here,” Malus speaks up, though his voice is filled with distrust. Lexa suddenly realises they have matching bonding tattoos on their necks – so this is Iryala’s houmon. Perhaps they lead the village together. “I have seen it when we bring food to the village.”

“Is there a blonde prisoner?” Lexa asks, her words slightly too eager and quick.

Malus frowns. “I believe they had a prisoner for a while, but the Azplana took her north some time ago.”

Lexa tries to hide her intense disappointment, and clears her throat. “Have you seen what is inside the Maunon vehicle?”

“I have not,” he says. “I do not think there is anything in it.”

If the truck is still there, though, presumably the missile will be. Lexa fights two competing urges – one to travel north as quickly as possible and find Clarke, the other to stay here and ensure that the missile cannot be used. Head versus heart, Heda versus Lexa. What would Clarke do? But that is not the question, really. The question is what she will do. For this trip she has had the freedom not to be Heda, to be Lexa, but she has found she can no longer divorce Lexa from the Commander – she has been Heda nearly a third of her life now, and certainly all her adult life. As the Commander, she will choose head over reckless heart. She must anyway, because travelling north and depending on her agents there to know Nia’s location is a foolish plan. That will have to wait.

Malus is watching her. Eventually he says reluctantly, “I did see what was inside it before they took it out. A giant thing, which took many people to carry. If that is Heda’s stolen object, it cannot be returned.”

“We shall see,” Lexa says grimly.

“You are very old for a Natblida,” Iryala says, looking at her thoughtfully. “I believed they were all goufa.”

“That depends on how long the previous Commander continues their fight. And I am younger than I appear,” Lexa says, a little evasively. She raises a hand and scrapes a finger down her face, cutting a line through her fake scars, showing them that she’s wearing a lot of makeup. “I was one of the oldest of us, as well.” She frowns and continues. “In any case, my friends and I will need a place to sleep for the night. Tomorrow, I and the three Skaikru we have with us will enter their village. We hope they will let us remain. Do you bring food every day?”

“Sha. Every day,” Malus says. His voice is a little higher than his houmon’s deep one, making him sound wary where she sounds confident. “The gona take it from us at the edge of the village most days.”

Lexa arches an eyebrow. “I see. How many gona are there? Are they from the villages around here, or are they Nia’s gona?”

“The Azplana’s,” Iryala replies. Their confidence in Lexa seems to be growing, perhaps because they think she cannot be working for Nia if she does not already have this information. “There are perhaps twenty of them.”

Lexa turns and gestures to the others, who all enter the room slowly. Anya comes to stand next to
her, baring her teeth threateningly when one of the guards considers stopping her.

“Can either of you use a Maunon vehicle?” Lexa asks Raven and John.

“Of course,” Raven says, at the same time as John says “Yes.”

“Then we can take the missile back the same way they stole it in the first place,” Lexa says.

“I don’t want to rain on your parade, but what if they’ve used up all the fuel?” Raven asks. “I mean, unless we can push it up a really big hill –”

“Then we are doomed to start with and may have to blow it up ourselves and die with it. I suggest we assume for the moment there is fuel.” Lexa says. They will need more people than they have to place it in the vehicle, however. She looks at Iryala and Malus. “We will need time to find it and prepare other things. One day when you bring food, one of us will raise our hand in greeting. That night you will send two dozen of your people along with Anya, Linkon and Zion to the village just before the sun is due to rise. You will aid us.”

“So that the Azplana takes vengeance on us?” Iryala objects. “She will raze our village to the ground.”

“She will not suspect you of stealing a weapon only the Skaikru can use, especially not by driving a Maunon vehicle to get away,” Lexa points out. “She will not suspect any Azgeda of it. She will believe it must be the Skaikru – the Skaikru here stealing it for themselves, or the Skaikru to the south stealing it back, it hardly matters. If the Azplana takes any action as a result of this, it will likely be to order you to kill the remaining Skaikru.” She gives a cool smile. “In any case, we will not leave any way for them to contact her.”

Iryala clears her throat awkwardly, removing some of the hoarseness from her voice. “May I ask a question, Natblida? I mean, Saska,” she corrects herself. Lexa nods. “There are rumours… that is, the Maunon…”

“They have been defeated,” Lexa tells her.

“All of them are dead?” Iryala asks carefully.

“No. They are not. Some eighty of them were forgiven by the previous Commander.” Lexa says, just as cautious.

“Blood must not have blood,” Linkon murmurs softly, echoed by Zion.

Iryala frowns. “This is not our way.”

“It is not our way to remain the same, either,” Lexa says. The three Skaikru – even Octavia, with her dual status as Skaikru and Trikru – stay quiet, apparently deciding not to interfere with a discussion of Grounder culture. “We changed to become an alliance and to defeat the Maunon. Trees that stop growing start to rot.”

“Our last Heda was very wise,” Anya says, voice as soft as it ever gets. “And she knew that this was a change we needed.” She gives Iryala one of her usual sharp smiles, but Lexa can see she’s choosing her words carefully. “Do you wish to know if the new Commander will spare you for aiding us? He shall. He shall spare any that side with us against Nia. The Azplana is a natrona, she allied with the Maunon, she stole from the alliance, she killed the last Commander, she lets her people starve to feed invaders… she has earned her death. You have not. Our Heda knows that. Tell all the villagers around here. If you do not fight the Commander, then you will not die. You will not
be blamed for your leader’s actions.”

“I see,” Iryala says eventually. There is something in her expression that wasn’t there before – hope.

Somewhat to Lexa’s surprise, Raven chooses to share with Lexa when they are placed in rooms. When Lexa is nearly asleep, Raven speaks.

“Was there ever… I don’t know… something between you and Anya?”

“She was my Fos,” Lexa answers, confused.

“No, I mean, something else.” Raven sounds awkward. “The way she talks about you sometimes…”

Lexa cannot help it. She snorts. “There has never been anything between us like that. She is my sis, my mentor. Why would you -” She remembers, suddenly, Raven’s angry look when Anya did something so simple as smiling at something Harper said, and she understands. “Anya is not Finn, Raven kom Skaikru. If you are avoiding a relationship with her out of fear that she will betray you, you do not understand Anya.” She rolls so that she is facing Raven in the dark. “And if this is more than a reflex, if you truly believe that Anya is like that after everything that has happened, then you not only do not understand Anya, you do not deserve her.”

“It’s not that I think that,” Raven whispers into the dark, for once sounding fragile. Perhaps it’s that she can’t see Lexa – that allows her to let down her guard. “It’s that I think… maybe it’s just the novelty. Infatuation. I mean, she cares about me, I know that, but so did Finn. And I think I know her, but I’ve known Finn my whole life. I’ve never loved anyone as much as him, or trusted anyone as much, and I thought he loved me. He must have seen something, some reason that I wasn’t quite enough.”

“Perhaps he did not see you at all,” Lexa says softly. “But Anya does. She sees you more clearly than she sees anyone else. She has never spoken of another person to me the way she speaks of you. She will wait as long as you ask her to wait, Raven, and she will not consider it a chore so long as she can be around you. So if you are waiting as a test of her, to see if she will notice some kind of flaw in you and no longer care, then the person you are most hurting is yourself.”

There’s a sound like a sob in the darkness, and Lexa feels her heart clench. That Raven could think she is not enough is like Clarke thinking she is a monster. It is so untrue that it would be laughable if their belief did not hurt them so much.

“So this is going to turn into an actual road trip?” Raven muses, transparently trying to change the subject, and letting out a sniffle. “You know, we take the missile, steal the truck, drive south to the warmth. Find a beach. Pina Coladas. I’ve never had a Pina Colada. Well, unless you count one made with liquor from the inter-engine fermentation system.”

“Some of us will go south,” Lexa says.

Raven studies her. “But you won’t.”

“No.”

“You’ll go north to Clarke.”

“Yes.”

To Lexa’s surprise, Raven reaches out and fumbles for her hand in the pitch-black room. “Then John’s gonna have to drive south without me,” she says fiercely, squeezing Lexa’s hand. “I brought
a pack full of grenades and bombs and I’m sure as hell not gonna waste ’em by heading home.” She manages a smile. “’Sides, can you imagine if I went back without Clarke? Wells would give me the disappointed stare of a lifetime for returning without his best friend after I promised to get her. And then he’d be understanding at me. Sympathetic, even. I can’t imagine anything worse.”

Lexa smiles, her own eyes tearing up against her will. Clarke is far away and in danger. But here in the dark, she is not alone. She has a friend.
“I think we should leave next week,” Clarke tells Gustus quietly, watching as he scarfs down the food she brought.

She knows he still thinks she should leave without him, but he just nods his head jerkily. He has fresh red cuts all up his arms that are oozing blood and she wishes she could bandage them. The food she’s giving him is holding off starvation, the water staving off dehydration, but his daily torture regimen is going to make him even slower than her with her healing ankle. What if they can’t move fast enough? Luckily, most of the wounds so far are superficial (probably deliberately so, since the goal is pain), so while he might have some scars they’re unlikely to seriously impair him if he can just have a few days to heal up.

“I’ve got nearly everything ready,” Clarke says. “A way to get you out of the chains, a way to distract everyone, a knife Roan can use to take out the people guarding the exit… then we head south to the frozen lake, cross it, lose them or at least slow them there. They might go the long way around, but even if they don’t they won’t have a trail so they’ll have to search all around the edge, and Roan has somewhere we can hide there, he says. Then we go to your friend in the village.” She frowns. “I just don’t want to go immediately because I need to know how Nia’s attack over the border goes.”

“If it goes badly, she may blame you,” Gustus points out gruffly.

“She might,” Clarke admits, feeling suddenly guilty. Can she really leave him to suffer for a week just because she wants to know if any of her friends have died? “But I did advise against going south, so it wouldn’t make much sense. Look, we can leave now…”

“No,” Gustus says, “You must find the Fleimkepa.”

“What if I don’t want to find the Fleimkepa?”

He studies her thoughtfully. “Heda did not trust him,” he says. “But she did not trust Roan, either, and yet he helps us. Trust is not required to work together.” He shakes his grizzled head. “And he is needed.”

“I told you, Lexa isn’t dead…” Clarke begins.

“You said your people had fierce weapons, weapons that can destroy this castle, leaving nothing,” Gustus says firmly. “If that is so, we cannot use them while he is inside. Heda needs him, not because she trusts him or cares for him or requires his advice, but because he must pass on the Flame. He is useful.”

“You don’t like him either,” Clarke realises.

Gustus looks like he’s flushed under his beard. “He… disagreed with Heda’s choice for me to continue as her guard. He thought our affection for each other weakness, and he thought I did not have the correct priorities.”

Clarke looks at him. “Yeah. He thought pretty much the same thing about me. I don’t really know how I feel about saving a trigger-happy hyper-religious idiot.”

“Trigger… happy?” Gustus says, brow furrowing.
“Oh. It means someone who shoots first and asks questions later.”

“Titus can barely use a bow,” Gustus scoffs.

“No, a gun, a fayogon,” Clarke says flatly. “He had a fayogon. He tried to shoot at Nia. He failed, obviously. He hates my people, he hated the Maunon, and guns are expressly against his religion – but he decided to use one anyway. I haven’t even used a gun since I got here. He’s a hypocrite and he’s a danger and I don’t want to bust him out.” She looks at Gustus and sighs. Over the time she’s been here, she’s gotten oddly fond of Gustus. There’s something about him that reminds her of Lexa, the impression he gives of being utterly supportive even when he disagrees, the way he acts as a solid, steady presence to lean on or bounce ideas off. And he’s so loyal to Lexa that he nearly seems to glow when he talks about her, pride and love in every line of his face. “But if we need him, we need him. I’ll do my best to find him tonight.” She turns to leave, but is stopped by Gustus’ voice.

“Hod op,” he says, in a slightly pained tone that he’s never used before. He clears his throat. “What you said about bows… it reminded me. What has Lexa told you of Costia?”

“That Lexa loved her. That Nia killed her.” She hesitates, then slides out the knife in her hair. “That she made this.”

Gustus looks at it, then tears come to his eyes and he glances away. When his gaze returns to Clarke, he has successfully banished the emotion. “Sha. She made that. She was always clever with her hands. She could not draw maps very well, but she could fashion leather or wood with great skill, she could carve, and her arrows never missed their mark.” He smiles sadly. “She was everything to Heda, and Heda was everything to her, and I have never seen Lexa allow another to touch anything Costia made… except Nia, who gave Heda no choice.” He holds her gaze meaningfully and then flicks his eyes up.

Clarke blinks back tears of her own. Suddenly she understands what Gustus is saying, a sharp and painful realisation, and she takes a step back, looking up at the bow over the door. The bow with its vines and flowers, its perfect cogwheel on the grip, every carved detail perfect and lovely and flowing. She thought the first time she saw it that she should draw it, but even with all the charcoal and time she’s had lately, she never has. Maybe somehow, deep inside, she knew. “This bow…”

“Her work,” Gustus says softly. “Years of work. Whether you take me with you, whether you take the Fleimkepa with you, you must take it back to Heda. Beja, Clarke. If anything beside that sheath had Costia’s soul in it, that bow does.” He gives her another one of those aching smiles. “If I die here… you must know, Clarke kom Skaikru. I am glad my Heda has found happiness again. I owe you more than I can say for giving her back what she lost. I have guarded Heda for years, and I have watched her grow cold and alone in an attempt to be strong. And I hoped she would grow stronger – but I never hoped for her to be alone.”

“She wasn’t alone,” Clarke tells him, stepping forward to help adjust his gag back on so that no one notices it’s been taken off. He allows her to. “She had you. And she’ll have you again, because I’m not leaving without you. Take the bow back yourself, Gustus kom Trikru.” She meets his eyes for a long moment, then when he inclines his head slightly, she closes the door.

Her nerves are thrumming. It’s time to go find Titus. She leans on her walking stick and thinks.

What does she know? She knows he’s ‘below’, wherever that is. She hasn’t even seen stairs going lower down. And wherever he is will most likely be heavily guarded. The only reason Gustus is in the central room is because Nia considers ‘tortured innocent’ to be a fantastic conversation piece.

She pauses suddenly. Thinks. Yes, wherever Titus is will be heavily guarded. That means she needs
to go in the direction guards have been inexplicably going. Through the kitchen, she realises. She’s seen many gona going there, but hadn’t considered it too closely. But what if they weren’t getting meals? What if they were going downstairs? She’s been in the kitchen before, but only with the cook watching her closely.

She’s extremely lucky that the cook seems to be asleep. As far as she knows, he never leaves the kitchen, preferring to doze with his head down on the bench. When Nia’s not here it’s his castle, really, but his loyalty seems to be absolute and his happiness at Nia’s presence genuine.

It takes her a while to figure it out. Clarke finds a pantry filled with flour for bread – she wonders how they made it, given the Grounders don’t plant crops and the Azgeda don’t exactly have the climate for it, as far as she knows. Maybe it grows wild in one of the other clans’ territories and they harvest and trade it. There’s also strips of salted, dried meat, frozen dead animals, and far too much fayowada. She finds two waterskins and fills them with the latter, thinking that despite Roan’s talk of being branded an alcoholic, he clearly hasn’t been really trying if it’s this easy to find. Maybe he hoped she’d call the plan off. From his point of view, waiting here is nothing but upside – either Lexa dies and Nia wins, in which case he’s the heir to the Ice Nation, or Nia dies and Lexa wins, in which case he’s the king of Ice Nation. He has no real incentive to want an escape except that if Clarke says he didn’t obey her, Lexa will turn against him.

The floor is stone and whole. There’s no passageways there. But then she realises that the decoration around the fireplace looks oddly like stairs – stairs going up. There’s a trapdoor above it. She pulls herself up, praying that there aren’t gona waiting behind, and finds no one there. But beyond the trapdoor there’s a long ladder – you have to go up to go down. Clever. She peers down it and sees no one.

Clarke climbs down as quickly as she can while still being quiet. And also while still hopping, because no matter how much she’s been resting her ankle, it’s still incredibly sore. Peering around the corner, she sees three gona. She also sees Titus inside his cage – three cages inside each other, in fact. And every limb is chained, but the chains are extremely long. Compared to Gustus, he seems unharmed. His eyes widen as he notices her, recognition following quickly.

She thinks about what she can do. She can try and fight and kill all three of the gona with the knife in her hair, but even if she succeeds, she can’t get him out. At least she knows where he is, though. Maybe she can find something to break him out.

He eyes her thoughtfully, then flicks his eyes to the dark corner near her. She frowns at him and doesn’t respond. Then he screams, and she darts quickly to it, pressing herself into the little nook. “Attack!” he yells, and all the guards jump into wakeful fear immediately. “I sense it! The castle entry! ATTACK!”

He manages to somehow turn his eyes so that only the whites show, and this apparently convinces the guards that he’s seeing some kind of vision. One of them snaps, “Check the entry,” and the other two nod and run to the ladder. The last one moves towards the three interlocked cages and scowls at Titus. “What do you see, Fleimkepa?”

“Stupidity,” Titus growls, and his hand moves so quickly it’s a flash. Somehow, by pressing against the smallest cage, he just manages to push his arm through, fastening on the gona’s throat. He holds on mercilessly as the gona struggles, until eventually he falls into unconsciousness. “Poor masters train poor guards. Nia has never been as clever as she thinks.” Then he turns his gaze to where Clarke is hiding. “Approach, Skayon.”

Clarke can’t help but be a little impressed.
“You will have to hide there again in only a minute,” Titus says, almost casually. “They will return quickly. Speak. Why are you here?”

“Gustus wanted you freed as well,” she says quickly.

There’s a pause, and then he lets out a little chuckle. “Of course he does. But you see how I am trapped? There is no way to remove all of this.”

Three strong cages, four strong chains, Clarke notes. No, she doesn’t have the gunpowder for that, she might not even have enough to take out Gustus’ one cage and two chains. Even when she returns with whatever gona Lexa can spare, she doesn’t have a great chance of breaking him out. This part of the castle is too secluded and well-guarded. As soon as they hear a noise, the guards can kill him. It will be easy.

He gives her a twisted smile, apparently understanding her thought process. “The Flame must survive. And the next Heda must not be Ontari. You are the new Fleimkepa.”

“What?” Clarke hisses.

“We have no time,” Titus says, almost resentfully. “You are the best chance I have.” He smiles again, still with no humour. “I pray you are not one of Nia’s ploys, though this seems too complex for her. You are Fleimkepa. The book, the journal of the first Commander, is in the stable. The paving stone three down and four to the left from the entrance, in the third stall. Take it back to Aden. Pass the Flame to him when he wins the Conclave, do you hear me?”

Clarke’s not sure what motivates her to say it. Maybe it’s that he’s showing her trust he never did in the other world. Maybe it’s that she’s pretty sure he’ll die soon, and that makes her feel sorry for a second. “I don’t have to give it to Aden,” she says impulsively. “Lexa’s fine. Okay? I promise, Lexa’s fine. She’s alive.”

His eyes widen again in surprise, and she can tell he believes her. Then he clears his throat. “Mochof,” he says, voice husky with emotion. “She was the wisest and strongest I have ever known, even before ascension.” He manages a smile. “Return to her as the Fleimkepa. Protect her as I have.”

It’s almost ironic, what he’s saying, him protecting the girl he killed, but his tone is too serious for her to disagree. Instead she just nods, and stumbles painfully back to hide in the nook again, repeating the location to herself again and again. So that’s why he was in the stable. He wasn’t trying to escape, just to hide the book. That was his whole plan.

She waits while the two gona storm past her. Then, when she hears the cries of pain echo from his cage, she drags herself up the ladder as quickly and quietly as she can, past the sleeping cook, and back to her room.

Three down. Four to the left. Third stall. That’s where it is. She won’t need it, but someday when Lexa dies of old age – the only outcome she’s willing to accept – someone will.
Malus offers to bring them along to Prison Station with the food, but Lexa declines. She doesn’t
want them to look like they have a crowd of people helping them – the plan is for them to stagger,
bedraggled and weak, into the village. Presentation matters. So instead, they go as a small, huddled
group, while the others remain in the village. Lexa is well aware that Anya, Linkon and Zion are all
unhappy with this, but it cannot be helped.

“You know, after we’re done with Prison Station, I’m burning these,” Octavia says darkly, plucking
at the Skaikru clothes she’s wearing. “I already burned the ones I had to wear into Mount Weather.
Why do all these plans involve me dressing up like we’re still on the Ark?”

“Hey, you didn’t have to come,” Raven points out. Just like the rest of them, she’s smeared in dirt
and shivering. Lexa wants them to look as pathetic and powerless as they can.

“According to Malus’ directions, we will get there soon,” Lexa says quietly. “John, walk in front.
Remember, you will do most of the speaking. Make it clear this was your idea.” This is for two
reasons – firstly, John has the best reason for wanting to be here, to be with his father. Secondly,
because John is the one Lexa wants Diana to be watching closely. The rest of them need to be able
to move around more freely.

It is odd to walk into a little Azgeda village and suddenly have guns pointed at them. Lexa raises her
hands, widening her eyes and letting out a little whimper. There are also several Azgeda gona,
raising spears and swords.

“Hey!” John steps forward, his scowl deepening. “My name’s John, John Mbege, I’m from the Ark.
I was part of the original 100 who got sent down. I’m here to see my father -”

“John?” a deep voice comes from behind them. Turning, Lexa sees a man lower his gun, his face
splitting into a smile. He looks a little like John but with a couple of noticeable differences, one being
his dark eyes where John has green. Another is that he looks like someone who smiles often, laugh
lines etched deeply into his face, unlike his gloomy son. “John!” He moves forward and embraces
John, who stiffens slightly as soon as they are touching. “I thought you were dead! Oh, it’s so good
to see you again, my son, my boy -”

A blonde woman steps out from a nearby house. “Mbege,” she snaps, flicking back a strand of hair
from her face and narrowing her eyes at the group. “Get back.”

After a second, he obeys, taking two steps back, but he looks at her like she’s crazy. “This is my
son,” he says, clapping John on the shoulder. John flinches at the touch again and Lexa forms her
own conclusions about their estrangement. “Chancellor, I thought I’d never see him again.”

“I thought I’d never see anyone from the rest of the Ark again,” Diana Sydney comments, hazel eyes
evaluating them one by one coolly. “Aren’t you Raven Reyes? I’m surprised to see you without
Abby Griffin, I thought the two of you were partners in crime.”

Raven shrugs, face sour. “That was while we wanted the same thing, to get down here.” She spits on
the ground. “Now we’re down. She’s part of the Council and I’m just a junior mechanic. Stuck
working eighteen hours a day in return for enough food not to starve.”

“When I told her I was getting the hell out of Arkadia and coming to find our people, she asked to
come with me straight away,” John tells Diana. He gestures to Octavia. “Octavia came because she
didn’t want to be trapped in Arkadia anymore.”

“I lived all my life in one cell or another,” Octavia says fiercely. “I’m sick of that. Being surrounded by hundreds of people who don’t let you go anywhere… I was done with it.”

Diana looks at her. “You’re the Blake girl,” she muses. “Your brother betrayed me, you know.”

Octavia shrugged. “Actually he didn’t. He told me all he said is Shumway gave him the gun. According to Clarke, the Council knew straight away you had to be behind it. Then later on I found out that was bullshit, too. Jaha set it up, had Clarke accuse you. I’m sick of their fucking game playing.” She touches the still-livid scars on her face with a hand that shakes. “Their games haven’t brought me anything but pain.”

“And you brought a native,” Diana observes coolly, her eyes sliding to Lexa, who shrinks under her gaze.


“Her English isn’t great,” John talks over her, as planned. “Name’s Saskia. She helped guide us here.”

Diana looks at Lexa. “And why would she do that?”

“Her people think she’s weak or something,” Raven says angrily, pulling Lexa upright and wrapping a protective arm around her. “Just because she didn’t want to go charging into Mount Weather. Let’s be honest, no one wanted to go in there, but just because she said that, her boss guy -”

“Fos,” Lexa says very quietly.

“Right, her First or whatever. He kicked her out,” Raven says, looking at Lexa affectionately.

One of the guys with guns chuckles, and not in a nice way. “You become a grounder pounder, Reyes? And here I thought you were all about the Spacewalker.”

“Oh, screw you, Hogan,” Raven growls, pushing slightly away from Lexa.

“No, come on,” the guy called Hogan says. “You visited him every time you could, and I remember some of those visits getting pretty conjugal.” Raven flushes as the guards around snicker. Hogan grins, clearly pleased with himself, and spreads his arms melodramatically. “So where is your Spacewalker now?”

“Screwing someone else,” Raven spits out the words furiously. “Thanks for reminding me.” The hurt in her voice is very real. “And if you mention Finn to me again, I will rip out your -”

“Enough,” Diana Sydney says coldly, and Raven subsides. Diana eyes her. “I suppose your defection makes more sense now,” she comments. “Abandoned by someone you risked everything for.” Lexa gets the feeling that she’s just drawing out the moment because she enjoys Raven’s humiliation about Finn. She had no reason to like Diana Sydney to start with, but her petty enjoyment of Raven’s pain makes Lexa’s dislike grow quickly.

“We came because we were sick of working our asses off so Kane and the others could schmooze with the Grounders and pretend to be royalty,” John says, his face darkening with anger. He doesn’t seem to be warming to Diana either. “You always used to promise you’d help working people. That’s us. We’re a package deal, though, all of us, we promised to stick together. Reyes is pretty good with tech crap, I can use a gun, Blake’s willing to do whatever, and Saskia just wants to not be
an outcast anymore. We’ll work, just so long as we get treated right. We were hoping you’d treat us
right.”

Diana’s gaze falls on Raven again. There’s no doubt which one of them she wants most. Lexa realizes that means that they can’t have figured out the nuclear missile yet, and feels relief roll
through her body. Then Diana’s gaze moves to John and his father. Lexa thinks she can read her
emotions there as well – she doesn’t want to alienate one of her guards by sending away his son.
Diana doesn’t bother to look at Octavia or Lexa, though, apparently deeming them irrelevant.

Good.

Diana smiles, and Lexa thinks it’s her attempt to seem warm. “Of course you can all stay. The
Grounder girl might be more comfortable in one of the villages around here, but if you’re a ‘package
deal’, then I’m not going to refuse sanctuary to some of my own people just because they’ve made a
strange friend.”

“They can stay with me, Chancellor,” John’s father says eagerly, turning his beaming face on them.
“Since my house is one of the largest. At least until we find somewhere else for the girls to sleep. It’s
amazing to have my son back after so long.” He cups John’s face in both hands and looks into it.
“You still have your mother’s eyes, boy,” he says, tears in his own eyes.

John flinches at the mention of his mother. “Yeah,” he says gruffly, trying to move his face away.
“Eyes don’t exactly change.”

For a second there’s a flicker of pure anger in his father’s expression, and his hands tighten on John’s
face so that the boy lets out a little huff of pain. Then Mbege lets go and smiles again. “I suppose
not,” he says cheerfully. “Come on, then. Is that all you have? Oh, you must be freezing, poor
things.” He continues to chatter warmly as he leads them to the house he’s in, but as charming and
welcoming as he is, Lexa can’t forget that moment of rage he showed. She tags along behind the
others.

That night they ‘settle in’, as Mbege calls it. They have an expansive meal of meat and Azgeda
plants. An Ice Nation woman from a different village than Iryala’s enters once, to replenish the stock
of wood for the fire and give them some warm furs, but otherwise they just get to listen to Mbege’s
chatter until they’re sent to bed shortly after it gets dark outside.

“You need rest,” he says paternally, surveying them, and then guides them all into separate rooms.
Lexa’s is the smallest, and the only one without an actual bed, just a heap of furs on the floor.
Perhaps he thinks she’ll be most comfortable there, though surely he can’t believe that Grounders
simply do not have beds, given he’s sleeping in a bed that belongs to one of her people.

Lexa finds the house unnerving. She has stayed in other’s houses before, of course – as Heda, quite
frequently one of the houses in a village will be cleared out for her when she visits. Generally the
occupants have volunteered to do this, though, and even consider it an honour. She always thanks
them, as well. Sometimes when she can she even leaves a waterskin of good fayowada, a nice
dagger, a pretty carving, or a small basket of food from another part of the country. Not as payment,
simply as a display of gratitude. The Commander does not live off her people – she lives for them.
To be staying in a house that was stolen from the family who built it makes her uncomfortable.

But they are here to get it back for them, she reminds herself. Once they have taken the missile back,
Nia will not protect the Skaikru anymore. She will not care if they live or die. In her eyes, they will
have failed her utterly with their incompetence. Of course, now that she knows Nia did not trust
Prison Station enough for them to know her location – if she did, she would not have left some of her
gona here – the first step is to take out the radio. That way, the gona Nia left here will need to find
her to tell her that the missile has been taken.

They will not be careful with their trail, because they know the Skaikru cannot track them. But they must know Nia’s location, since they are her most trusted people – they would have to be trusted, to have been left with the missile, to be entrusted with guarding it and learning its secrets from the Skaikru. So they will know where Nia is, and they will go there, and Lexa will follow them. However she can.

And she will find Clarke.
“We’ll go tomorrow night,” Clarke says firmly.

Gustus blinks. “I thought you wished to wait for news of the Azgeda gonakru that crossed the border.”

“I did,” Clarke says, then gestures at him. He’s got a few new bruises and burns since yesterday. “But the longer we wait, the more likely it is the guards will start inflicting serious injuries, ones that might make it impossible for you to travel. Besides, Nia should already have heard from the gonakru by now, maybe they’ve all been killed and can’t contact her, or maybe they have contacted her and she’s just not telling me. Whatever’s happened at the border, it’s safer to leave soon.” She smiles grimly. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

“I see,” Gustus says, though he looks confused by the phrase. “I will be ready, then.”

“Tomorrow night’s best because it’s the day Nia sends some of the gona to go get more food each week,” Clarke explains quietly. “Most of the remaining ones will be guarding her or Titus. We can block both those groups in by making – well, basically two walls of flame. Roan can take out the rest easily.” She smiles thinly. “All I need to do is get the book Titus told me to get tomorrow, set up these things tomorrow night, and then we’re gone.”

“Well, well,” Ontari says, appearing from the shadows suddenly. Too far away to have heard anything, but Gustus and Clarke still both freeze in panic. “Talking to the prisoner, hmm?” Her eyes glitter in cruel amusement. “I knew there had to be some reason you kept disappearing on me.” In a sudden, swift move, Ontari darts forward and pushes Clarke roughly against the wall, holding her by the throat. Gustus pushes against the cage door with an angry growl but is forced to watch helplessly. Black and white spots dance before Clarke’s eyes. “Let me go,” she chokes.

“No, I think it’s time we went to see the Azplana,” Ontari says, relaxing her hand a little so that Clarke can breathe again. She smirks. “We can tell her all about what you’ve been up to. But first…”

She moves forward sharply, and for a second Clarke thinks she’s about to hit her, but it turns out to be worse than that. Ontari moves her lips roughly over Clarke’s, in a painful, aggressive kiss. Clarke struggles against her grip and Ontari bites down hard on her lower lip. Clarke can taste blood and her mouth feels bruised by the time Ontari pulls away. “Average,” she says, licking her lips and tasting Clarke’s blood on them. She smirks. “Looks like the Commander didn’t teach you much at all.”

Gustus makes a rage-filled noise and slams his hands against the bars.

“You’d be surprised,” Clarke croaks, and knees Ontari hard in the stomach. Ontari makes a choked, surprised little noise, and Clarke twists away, breaking her hold temporarily.

Clarke backs away, facing Ontari, as she lets out an amused little chuckle. “You wish to fight,
Destroyer of the Mountain?” Ontari draws her sword, eyes gleaming. The sword gleams as well, so Clarke can see a waving line down the centre that seems incongruously delicate for a weapon. “Then we fight. It looks like I have that excuse I asked for.”

She darts in to slash at Clarke and Clarke moves back even further, just barely evading it. She considers pulling the knife out of her hair, but knows that against a sword it’s not going to be much use. She could throw it, but Ontari’s fast and good with a sword, Clarke wouldn’t be able to kill her like that, not quickly enough that Ontari couldn’t avoid it or bat it away with her blade. Lexa could, but Clarke isn’t Lexa. Against a sword – what did Lexa tell her to do against a sword if you don’t have one as well? Right. Get away, get a weapon. Not very useful advice in this case.

Okay. What should she do? What skills does she have that she can use? Ontari’s a better fighter, with a better weapon, and if she wants she can summon lots of back-up as well. Clarke needs some kind of advantage. The only one she can think of is that Ontari doesn’t know she has a knife. She needs to get Ontari to let down her guard. What skills does Clarke have? Her main skill – manipulating people using what they want.

What does Ontari want? To be in charge. To be the most powerful. To have people weaker than her to hurt.

Clarke puts her hands up, widening her eyes at Ontari. “Look, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have hit you.” She licks at her bleeding lip. “You just – you surprised me. Scared me.”

Ontari calms slightly, seeing Clarke’s fear. “No, you shouldn’t have.” She raises her sword so that it’s at Clarke’s throat. Gustus lets out a hiss but doesn’t say anything.

Clarke takes a step back so she’s against the wall again, trapped, and lets out a scared little noise. Once again pretending to be an ambitious, petty game-player, but this time one who’s realised she’s in over her head. “Ontari, please. Please don’t hurt me.”

“I told you I’d teach you to beg, you worthless Skayon,” Ontari says smugly, moving even closer. She angles her sword so that instead of the point being against Clarke’s throat, now the edge is along it. Clarke swallows hard when she feels the coldness of it slicing a line in her neck. Ontari’s not pushing, but if she does, Clarke will die very quickly.

“I know,” Clarke says. Tears come to her eyes. “Please, Ontari. Don’t – don’t do this – I’ll let you have whatever you want -”

Ontari presses her to the wall again, so there’s only the sword between them. Clarke’s hands are still up – she can’t bring them down with Ontari’s body in the way. Ontari kisses her again roughly, proving that she does have the upper hand, regaining the pride she lost when Clarke managed to get away from her before. It’s just as rough as the other kiss and Clarke whimpers in pain as Ontari’s teeth sink into the same spot on her lower lip again.

She kisses Ontari back, not as fiercely, but as if she’s yielding to her, giving in, promising to do whatever Ontari wants. After a few more seconds of kissing she lets one of her hands grasp at Ontari’s hair, burying her fingers in it and letting out a gasp as if she’s being driven by lust instead of cold hatred. Ontari pulls back with a laugh, and opens her mouth to deliver some kind of taunt, probably about how desperate Clarke is. She never gets the chance to say it.

Before she can, Clarke moves her hand – the one with her knife in it – down quickly into the space Ontari’s just given her and slices the Nightblood’s throat in one swift, desperate move. She uses her unarmed hand to push back the sword blade from her throat, causing it to cut deep into the tendon of her palm. Black blood sprays out as Ontari tries to mouth something then just tries desperately to
She slumps to the ground, the sword she was holding against Clarke’s throat clanging against the stone floor, loud in the sudden silence.

Blood is coming from Clarke’s lips and her hand. She thinks in a detached sort of way that she probably needs stitches. She can’t focus on that right now, not as she watches red blood and black swirl together on the floor. She’s drenched in Ontari’s blood. She spits out the taste of cold metal, blood and something sour that has to just be Ontari, trying to get rid of it from her mouth.

“Clarke kom Skaikru,” Gustus says urgently. “Clarke. Clarke!”

She jerks her head up, looking at him, coming back to herself. “What?”

“You need to hurry,” Gustus says slowly, like he’s speaking to someone in shock. Maybe he is. That moment of panic when Ontari first assaulted her – when she just froze in shock – it’s a miracle she isn’t dead. “Hide your knife. Drag her body over here, and give me her sword. Get some water and clean yourself. Then bandage and disguise your wounds as best you can. I will daub some of her blood on me, fake a wound of my own to explain the red blood here. She came too close to my cage, to taunt me, she injured me, and I took her blade and killed her. You were not here. Do you understand? I killed her. You were asleep in your room. That is what happened. Go!”

“They’ll kill you,” Clarke says numbly. “Nia will kill you straight away. I can’t do that!”

“That is the only thing you can do.”

“No,” Clarke says stubbornly, regaining her usual self-possession. “We have a plan, the plan’s in place, we’ll just – we’ll do it tonight, instead.” It was an insanely risky plan when only half the gona were here, she thinks. With them all here it might be suicide. But she’s not staying here, and she’s not letting Gustus die. This is the only option. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, okay?” She grabs Ontari’s sword, pulling from her stiff hand, and rushes from the room, ignoring Gustus’ protests.

When she enters Roan’s room, he slams her against the wall instantly, then stops and loosens his grip. “Oh. It is you, Clarke kom Skaikru.” He looks her up and down, frowning. “You are covered in blood.”

“Thanks, good to know,” Clarke says breathlessly. “Let me go.” He does, and she straightens up and tries to catch her breath. She’s really sick of people pushing her against walls. “We’re leaving now,” she tells him unceremoniously, shoving the sword into his hands. “Clear the way from the dining hall to the stable and to the exit. Where’s the fayowada?”

“Just do it,” Clarke snaps. “You’re a good fighter. Prove how good. I’ll be along to help soon. Just try and stay as quiet as possible. I’ve got a distraction coming in ten minutes, take out as many as you can – quietly – before then.”

He looks at her in disbelief but gestures to his bed. “That is far too many -”

“Just do it,” Clarke says. “You’re a good fighter. Prove how good. I’ll be along to help soon. Just try and stay as quiet as possible. I’ve got a distraction coming in ten minutes, take out as many as you can – quietly – before then.”

He eyes her for a long moment, then swears and vanishes into the darkness. She moves over to his bed and finds the waterskins filled with alcohol hidden at the base. There’s ten of them. She has six in her room as well, and goes back to get those. While she’s there she unties the cord for the curtain around her bed, and undoes the knot in the middle from where she cut it a while ago – she used gunpowder and alcohol on it to make the cord into two slow-burn fuses.

After a moment’s thought she pulls down the curtains around her bed and manages to pull the coverings off her bed as well. She lumps them into the corridor – Nia’s bedroom’s at the end, with her guards all there. She grabs more things from Roan’s room and Ontari’s, anything that looks like it
will burn. Then she sloshes half the fayowada around it. She puts one end of the longer piece of cord into the fayowada and the other away, then lights that end using the torch nearby. Hopefully it should take a little while to set off the alcohol, but she leaves quickly anyway.

The cook’s asleep in the kitchen again. She was planning to get him drunk tomorrow so he wouldn’t wake, tonight she’ll just have to hope he stays asleep. Clarke quietly pours the remaining fayowada around the room, including to the flour. She’s heard that flour can explode through pressure and heat. She supposes she’ll find out if that’s true. Whether or not it is, the wooden things in here should burn, and so should all the food. She grabs a few things she thinks will last and stuffs them in her coat. Then finally she puts down the shorter fuse, hiding it behind the counter so no one will see, and uses a torch from the entryway to light it. Clarke feels a pang of guilt when she realises how unlikely it is that the cook will survive this once the fayowada catches.

Then she takes a deep breath, and heads back to Gustus, still clutching the torch. It’s time to break him out.
“I’ve found the radio,” Octavia says triumphantly, managing to keep her voice low, though she looks like she finds it hard.

“Excellent,” Lexa says, also in a whisper. “How?”

“Oh, the youngest guard will tell you anything if you smile at him and lean over a bit too far,” Octavia tells her casually. Raven rolls her eyes, but smiles anyway. They’ve both seen Octavia with the guard, acting saccharine but letting out occasional barbs of vicious sarcasm that seem to go over the man’s head.

They’re sitting in Lexa’s room. It’s the middle of the night, but it’s their best chance to talk. John’s father has a shift standing guard over the missile, and John’s gone to ‘keep him company’ – actually to provide a warning system if his father should return. Having to spend more time with his father has made John even sourer than normal.

Of course, the past few days have not been fun for any of them. Well, except perhaps Raven – she’s getting to spend her time working on something that interests her, with people who respect her, all of the rooms are warm (apart from the shed containing the missile) and there is plenty of food. If it weren’t for Anya and Clarke’s absence and the exploitation of the villagers Raven could probably settle happily into this place. Meanwhile, John is steadily picking up bruises from his father’s brief but extreme flares of temper, Octavia appears to be gradually going insane trying to pretend she’s a sweet, harmless teenager, and Lexa… well, Lexa…

Lexa is bored. It’s an embarrassing thing to admit, and does not feel like it should compare with the others’ problems. But besides Raven, none of them have duties, everything is taken care of by the Azgeda villagers. The rest of Prison Station seem to be here purely to become soldiers one day when they get their hands on more guns. Lexa is used to being served – but normally that is because she is far too busy to do those things herself. She has never before had a day where she had to do nothing and go nowhere. She cannot even train because her skills would be suspicious. She cannot talk to the Azgeda gona because she needs to be as invisible to them as possible. The Skaikru guards avoid her, and when she listens in on their conversations she hears nothing of use.

Raven tells her to relax and enjoy it as a holiday, but Lexa has realised she finds having nothing to do far, far more stressful than having too much to do. When she had too much to do she organised and prioritised and ordered and acted and fixed the world piece by piece, and there was a fierce sense of accomplishment and, yes, pleasure in that. She never considered before how much she depended on having a purpose, having something to work towards every day – being without one, even briefly, has left her feeling empty. So much of herself is bound up in her duties, she does not know what to do without them.

“The radio’s in that house on the east side, the one with the tallest roof,” Octavia says. “So now at least we know where both our targets are. That’s something.”

“We haven’t gotten very far with the missile yet,” Raven reveals. She’d been pulled to working on it immediately. “The others are being very cautious, instead of going with the tried-and-true ‘poking things’ method. Our orders are also to make sure that Nia’s guys have no idea what we’re doing. Because apparently if they see us playing around with wires they’ll realise that nuclear science is so easy, and then they won’t need us anymore.” She rolls her eyes again, this time more emphatically.

“Can you disable it, do you think? Now that they have opened it more?” Lexa asks.
Raven hesitates. “It doesn’t really work like that. I can make it blow up on purpose, or I can make it harder for them to blow up at all, but I can’t magically make it not a nuke. There’s nuclear material inside. The only thing which makes that less dangerous is time. And I’m talking thousands of years of time, here. I still think our only choice is for me to sabotage it as much as I can and then load it in the truck and take it as far away as possible.”

“The truck has fuel – the clock-like device you told me to look at was at halfway,” Lexa remembers. “I was able to get close enough to check, perhaps since they believed I knew nothing of vehicles.”

Octavia gives a wolfish grin. “So now all we need is wreck the radio, take out two dozen or so elite gona and ten guards with guns, and load the missile into the truck. Easy.”

“All the bombs,” Raven says, a little regretfully. Lexa had to order her to leave them behind in the village, a decision she stands by. Having a pack full of weaponry would not have gotten them a warm welcome – or perhaps it would have, but they would not have been able to keep hold of the weapons in that case. “Of course, even when she brings them here, we’re gonna have to be really careful. If we hurt the missile it could start leaking radiation.”

“Uh, yeah, I vote ‘no’ to radiation,” Octavia says. “Maybe we can find some way to draw everyone away from it and then blow them up.”

“How?” Raven asks sceptically. “We just go up to them and say, ‘hey, everyone! Come this way if you want free pudding, I promise, it’s right over here’? Is that your suggestion?”

“Not with free pudding!” Octavia objects. “With… something else. I don’t know what. Something valuable.”

“Oh, right. We’ll tell them we’ve discovered the magical money-tree.”

Lexa clears her throat, cutting off their bickering as politely as possible. “We do not need to take down all of the gona or guards,” she points out. “Normally, only five gona and two guards are with the missile at night-time. We know they had Maunon weapons, perhaps they still have a gas grenade we could use.”

Octavia’s eyes brighten. “I’ll ask my guy.”

Raven raises an eyebrow. “Your guy? Should I be warning Lincoln -”

“Oh, shof op, Raven,” Octavia says. “Flirting just for information is allowed, Lincoln would understand. Anyway, my guard was on the mission to get Clarke, he’ll know if they have any leftover gas grenades. He might even show me one, if I tell him that looking at non-lethal weaponry gets me hot or something.”

Raven makes a face. “Too much information, thanks O. But yeah, if you can find a gas grenade, that could probably take down everyone around the missile.”

“Then all we would need to do is slit their throats, quickly get the missile into the truck with the help of Iryala’s people, and drive away,” Lexa says with a nod. “If we can set up a few bombs to go off once we have left that should also slow down any response, giving us time to get far away.”

“And it’s basically the same as what they did, but in reverse,” Raven says, a smile creeping onto her face again. “I like it. Yeah, I can easily hide some explosives around the place if we get Anya to bring my bag of bombs. Then we can trigger them as we’re driving away.”

“We will also need to damage the radio,” Lexa says thoughtfully.
“It normally has only two people with it, two Skaikru guards,” Octavia says immediately. “If we do this on a night when the guard I flirt with is on duty, he could definitely be persuaded to let us inside to keep them company.” She looks at Lexa and gives a flinty smile. “The two of us could easily take them out before they can make a noise.” If she’s bothered by the idea of killing the man she’s manipulating, she doesn’t show it. Perhaps she, like Lexa, is picturing him throwing Clarke’s unconscious body in the truck and taking her away.

“Awesome,” Raven says, grinning and also looking at Lexa. “Then after we’ve gone a little way, John will drop us off and we’ll come back and find somewhere to lay low here.”

There’s a momentary pause. “Wait, what?” Octavia says. “We’re coming back here?”

“I must follow the trail to Clarke,” Lexa reminds her.

“What about the rest of us?” Octavia asks.

“John will go south, he will be needed to drive the truck,” Lexa says. “I think Anya will have to go with him – she has some authority over the Trikru gona between here and Arkadia, and if they are not ordered to stand down and protect it they would attack the truck on sight instead. After all, as far as they are aware, our enemies have the vehicle.”

“I call dibs on not being the one to tell Anya she doesn’t get to go with us,” Raven says, wincing at the thought. Lexa knows she doesn’t like the thought of Anya not coming with them, and the truth is Lexa does not like it either, but it cannot be helped.

“If Nia does have more Maunon technology, Raven may be necessary to disable it, so she must come north,” Lexa continues. “Zion knows these lands and people, so he will as well. Linkon -” she hesitates.

Octavia looks at her thoughtfully, concern in her eyes. “You want him to go north too. ‘Cause he’s a scout, and knows how to track?”

“Because he is a fisa, and knows how to heal,” Lexa says very softly. “Zion and I both know how to track quite well. But we cannot heal. And we do not know what state Clarke will be in when we find her. Nia enjoys… hurting people. Especially those who matter to me.” Lexa starts in surprise when she feels Raven place a hand gently on her shoulder, but then gives the other girl a look of gratitude for the attempt at comfort. She continues, “He may be needed.”

Octavia swallows hard. She reaches a hand up automatically to touch the scars on her face, then pulls it down when she realises what she’s doing and twines both hands together into a knot on her lap. “Right,” she says, a little shakily. It is the first time Lexa has seen her show anything but bravado when it comes to her torture at the hands of the Maunon, and it tells her that however proud Octavia may be of her actions, Mount Weather left scars on more than her body.

“Right. Then he definitely has to go north. What about me?” she meets Lexa’s eyes.

“Go with Anya and John as far as the border. Then, I wish you to take news of Prison Station and the missile to Polis,” Lexa says. “Indra and Aden both need to know what has happened so they can adjust their strategies. You are Indra’s Seken, they will let you through to speak to her at once. Radios are no longer safe to use, so there is a great deal of detail that cannot be shared over them. Indra and Aden must know of the villages that have agreed to go against Nia, of the location of Prison Station, that the missile is being returned to Arkadia, and that the rest of us continue north. It is vital.”

After a long moment, Octavia nods. “Sha, Heda,” she says softly. “If Lincoln and I are gonna be
more useful apart for a while, then we’ll be apart. It’s not the first time. Besides, Indra’s probably lost without me.” She manages a watery smile.

There’s a noise and John appears at the door. “He’ll be back here in five,” John says impassively, though Lexa can see his cheek is swelling up and darkening.

“Your dad’s a dick,” Raven says, frowning at him. “What happened this time?”

“Usual,” John says. “Mentioned my Mom.” There’s a slight hint of satisfaction in his voice, though, and Octavia picks up on it, scowling at him.

“If you get your eyes swollen shut you’re not gonna be able to drive us anywhere,” she points out. “Why do you keep deliberately pissing him off? Just act nicer.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Raven and John say in unison, and then glance at each other in surprise. Raven clears her throat and continues. “If they want to pick on you, they’re gonna come up with an excuse whatever, O. Trying to be perfect doesn’t help, you just panic about everything you do ‘cause any screw-up could be the excuse.” She shrugs, in a deliberately casual, uncaring way, but her posture is stiffer then it was.

“Yeah,” John says. “Same results either way. But this way, at least I get the enjoyment of pissing him off.” He manages a grim sort of smile that fades into his usual scowl almost immediately.

“I can’t believe you had to live with that guy,” Octavia says, the anger in her face becoming more pronounced. “I mean, I know that we’re sort of living with him now, but he doesn’t seem to do anything when we’re with you at least. How did you live with him alone?”

“I didn’t,” John says stonily. “I got arrested, remember? I got put in the Skybox when I was thirteen, pretty much straight after my mother died.”

“You got along before that?” Octavia asks curiously.

“When she was alive he wasn’t so bad – to me, anyway. He hates me because I know it was his fault Mom killed herself.” John spits out the words, almost, his usual control over his emotions disappearing. Only now can Lexa really see how difficult he is finding this, having to spend time with his father and pretend that their relationship is salvageable.

Raven sucks in a breath. “Shit -”

John’s mask has slipped entirely by this point, face twisted into pain and rage as he finally releases the words he’s been holding back. They spill out of his mouth unchecked, wild with anger and agony. “And back then I told him that, so he hit me, and I hit him back harder, but guess whose story the Ark believed? Guards are so trustworthy, right? And he’s so friendly, nice, charming, no one could believe he’d hit his wife and kid. But moody, troubled teenagers… they lie, right? So I got blamed and I got arrested and I’m pretty damn sure I would’ve gotten floated too. The bastard won. He always does.”

“John, that sucks -” Octavia says, expression melting into sympathy.

John physically jerks away from Octavia’s pity as if it stings him. “Get what you wanted, Blake? Does this mean you’ll finally stop interrogating me?” he snarls.

“Does this mean you’ll finally stop being an ass?” Octavia snaps, quick temper sparking. “I was just trying to empathise with you, jerk. It’s not my fault your life is crappy.”
“Yeah, it’s crappy. But at least I didn’t grow up under a floorboard, right?” John snaps in return, his face hard.

Octavia takes a step back, as if John had hit her. “Right,” she says, anger turning back to a deep sadness. “I guess so.”

John clears his throat. “He’ll be here soon,” he says, voice gruff, as close to an apology as he can manage. “We should go.” They all fall silent and start to disperse. Lexa watches them leave her room, thinking about them, these children the Ark failed. Young but scarred.

Lexa was taken from her family too young to recall their faces. The other Nightbloods became her siblings, Titus her uncle, and they were her new family. Even these relationships were somewhat tainted by the immense pressure they were all under, though, so that the Nightbloods were her rivals more than her friends, and the former Commander and Titus more like strict taskmasters than guardians. She was lucky to have Anya, Gustus and Costia to give the true, steady affection the others could not.

Then the Commander died and the Conclave was called. She won – and lost, at the same time. She was taken from her first family, and she caused the deaths of most of her second. Now she has her third, made up of the tattered remnants of her last family, a few injured and abandoned Skaikru, and the girl she loves.

She will not lose them too.
A Song of Ice and Arson

Ontari’s body on the floor looks smaller than it should. It’s the first time Clarke’s actually realised that Ontari is shorter than her, slighter than her, and younger than her. Splayed out like that there’s nothing menacing about her. Clarke doesn’t let herself wallow in guilt though – she did what was necessary. It was self-defence.

“Hei,” Gustus says, keeping his voice low but urgent. “Clarke kom Skaikru, there is still time to -”

“A lot of things are about to explode, and Roan’s out slitting throats,” Clarke says, matching his tone. “There’s no cover-up for this. Either we survive together or we don’t. I vote survive. Hold this.” She hands him the torch through the bars. “Hold it as far back as possible, too.”

She gropes through the inside lining of her coat – currently containing lots of dried meat – and manages to find the little tied-up bundle of gunpowder. Carefully, she tips about half of it into the lock on the door. She ties up the bundle again and stows it away carefully, then moves to the very left of the cage and holds her hand through the bars again. “Pass it back to me. And go as far into the corner of the cage as you can. Make yourself as small a target as possible.” He hesitates but obeys.

Clarke manages to wedge the torch against the bars so that the very tip of the flame is nearly touching the lock. Then she moves back and around the corner. It takes longer than she expects – probably only twenty seconds, but it feels like a dozen times that – and she nearly leaves her cover to check what’s happening and move the torch closer. She’s glad she didn’t when there’s a flare of heat and light that feels like it dries her skin instantly. There’s no loud explosion though and she remembers Raven never used just gunpowder by itself to try and break things, she always had multiple ingredients.

The lock’s cracked and blackened, but not broken. Gustus looks a little burnt and shocked as well. Clarke yanks at it and the lock jangles but holds, then Gustus growls “Back,” to her and heaves against it. Even tortured and malnourished, he’s stronger than her, and the heated, battered lock cracks apart, finally allowing the door to open.

“Right,” Clarke gasps, winded. “Now your chains.” She stares at them. They look even tougher than the lock. “I don’t know if I can…”

He looks at her and lets out a quiet curse. “Whatever you have remaining to weaken it, use there,” he says shortly, pointing at the place where one of the chains joins to the ground. “This one I can get out as I did before.” She winces as once again he manages to pull his hand out of the manacle, scraping off skin and seemingly breaking his thumb. As she watches, though, she realises he’s not breaking it – he’s double-jointed in that hand and is using that. One of his fingers is definitely injured though and the scabs of his last attempt are torn off.

She hastily pours the rest of the grey powder around the base of the other one, then grabs the torch and angles it towards the flame so she doesn’t get blinded, but she still hears the tortured whine as Gustus manages to detach the chain off the ground. He loops it around his neck tiredly so it doesn’t get in his way, avoiding the still-hot end of it.

“The stables,” Clarke says, grabbing Costia’s bow down without looking at it and hooking it over her shoulder. Gustus nods, already looking exhausted. They stagger that way together. Behind
Clarke, there’s a sudden loud noise, a bang. The flour, maybe. Someone yells. Glancing back Clarke can see the warm glow of raging fires.

In the stables she uses her dagger to lever out the stone the book’s under. As soon as she’s got it, she shoves it into Gustus’ hands. “For you,” she says, “You’re the new Fleimkepa.” She’s Lexa’s second-in-command. She’s not the Fleimkepa, she doesn’t want to be. Gustus will do a better job than her anyway, she’s sure. She ignored his protests and goes to the far wall where some tack is hanging, and grabs the three horse blankets there. Gustus isn’t very covered up, and this is the best option they have. Snowball sticks his head over and makes a noise of friendly greeting.

Clarke pauses suddenly. The fire’s spreading. It probably won’t reach here, it’s too cold for the blaze to spread quickly and there’s the snowy passage between the two places. But it might. She can’t leave him here to burn to death. At the very least, she can set him free. She pulls open the door and grabs his rope, pulling him after her. He follows docilely. She throws the horse blankets all over him so she doesn’t have to carry them.

Out in the corridor they meet Roan. He’s covered in blood and grinning, and he whirls the sword around and nearly hits Clarke before he recognises her and stops. “Oh. You again.”

“Yeah, me,” Clarke says. “Got any extra swords?”

He nods and opens his coat, pulling two out that he’s wedged in his belt. “The gona I met were kind enough to lend me some.” His ferocious grin widens. “They do not require them now.”

Clarke keeps Ontari’s sword for herself, partly because it’s too small for the others, and partly because it really is beautiful. She passes one of the gona’s ones along to Gustus, who straightens. “How many?” he says hoarsely.

Roan shrugs. “Perhaps half a dozen, not counting the ones who will come at us from behind. And with the noise they certainly know we’re coming.” He looks at Snowball and quirks an eyebrow. “I thought I told you to leave the horse.”

“Good thing I don’t follow your orders,” Clarke says, leading Snowball along behind her.

“It will not go on the ice willingly,” Roan says. “Even their riders cannot make them. That is one reason why the frozen lake will slow our followers. And even if he did, the extra weight will break through the ice and we will drown or freeze.”

“I have a plan,” Clarke says flatly, and talks over him when he starts to speak again. “Hurry up.” He sees the command in her face, scowls, but eventually nods.

As it turns out, Clarke doesn’t actually have to do much the rest of the way. She stabs one gona in the throat as he struggles to pull himself upright after a cut to the leg from Gustus, but otherwise Roan and Gustus annihilate the gona between them and the exit, with Roan dealing with anyone who appears in front of them and Gustus easily managing to spot anyone attempting to surprise them from behind or the sides. Roan doesn’t even look tired by the time they’re at the exit. Gustus, on the other hand, his body devastated by weeks of torture, looks ready to collapse. On the bright side, Roan doesn’t have any compunction about stripping warm clothes off corpses, so Clarke ends up with a couple more layers of blood-stained, overlarge garments. Gustus’ don’t fit as well and have to be ripped, but at least he no longer looks like he’ll immediately get frostbite.

The light outside is blinding, but also cold. It’s nearly morning, Clarke realises – the sun’s rising, she can see it through the thick swirl of snow. She feels suddenly tired and weak, her ankle aching fiercely, so that she can barely stand on it. If anyone catches them soon, they’re doomed, she realises.
“On the horse,” Gustus says gruffly, pushing her up onto Snowball.

“You too,” she manages to say.

When Gustus starts to shake his head, Roan says coolly, “Good thinking. Get on as well, Gustus kom Trikru. I will lead the horse and we can set it free once we reach the ice lake.”

“No,” Clarke tries to object, but her words are lost in the howl. Gustus moves so that she is pressed between the warmth of Snowball’s body and his, and wraps them both in the horse blankets, and then all she has to do is cling on. Her face is covered so she can’t see, but she can feel Snowball’s gait below her and knows they’re moving quite quickly, that Roan must be running against the snow as he pulls Snowball along.

Her hand where she cut it against Ontari’s sword is hot and wet, and she realises it’s still bleeding. The droplets slide down Snowball’s flank, dying him with lines of red, and fall to the ground to occasionally splatter wetly in the snow. She should probably bandage it but it’s not leaving any more of a trail than they are at the moment. Gustus’ injuries are doing the same, after all.

It must be hours later when they start to slow. The world outside seems to have become less cold and the wind less fierce. “Skayon,” Roan’s voice comes. “We will get to the lake soon.” He sounds far wearier than he did before. Gustus moves away and Clarke’s hit with the cold as he slides off Snowball. She follows, careful not to land on her injured ankle. Every part of her aches, rattled by the uncomfortable ride and her lack of sleep.

Roan looks at her, frowning. “There is a cave to the far side. If we release the horse, perhaps it will go in another direction, and they will track it instead of us.”

“No,” Clarke says. “Snowball will follow us if we try and leave him.” As if to prove her point, Snowball licks gently at her hair, apparently thrilled to have run into a mild blizzard with his new best friend.

Roan nods, face set, and starts to draw his sword. Clarke realises what he plans to do a second before he can and steps between him and Snowball. He sighs, letting the sword slide back into the sheath. “They will find us in minutes,” he tells Clarke. “We can walk on ice without leaving a trail but the horse cannot with the spiked shoes he wears, and I do not even think he can walk on the ice without his weight breaking it and killing us all. You say he cannot be used to lay a false trail, that he will follow us, and if he does we will die.”

“He can be used to lay a false trail,” Clarke says, teeth chattering. “If you take him.”

“What?” Gustus and Roan both say at the same time.

“You tell us where the cave is,” Clarke says. She starts working to rebandage the injury left on her hand by Ontari’s sword. “We go there. You take Snowball and head in the opposite direction, going around the lake the longest possible way, leaving a clear trail over the snow. You can go fast enough to get away, without us there. They’ll follow you and that will buy us the time we need.”

“You should go with him,” Gustus suggests. “The horse can carry two -”

“Not fast enough to survive,” Clarke says flatly. She moves onto bandaging Gustus’ wounds as best she can without removing any of the layers protecting him from the cold, and he flinches but allows her to. “Especially not if one of those two people is me. I can’t ride that well. Roan can.”

Roan frowns. “They will go the shorter way and wait for me,” he points out.
“Which is why I suggest after leaving a clear enough trail you head back north and find somewhere
to hide out,” Clarke says, voice cool. “They’ll probably keep following you for a while but realise
eventually that neither of us are with you. I’m sure you can figure out how to evade them for long
enough to get south somehow. You know this area, know these people, know how to survive here,
and I doubt the cave you’re sending us to is your only hiding spot.”

He hesitates, but at her look, finally nods. “The lake is shaped so that there are two long spikes of ice
going out into the snow south-west of here,” he tells them. “If you walk west from the spike to the
left for twelve minutes -” he considers their condition. “Twenty minutes, you will find the cave
opening. It is behind a large half-dead pine tree and sometimes becomes blocked by a small amount
of snow, but never much.”

“Okay,” Clarke says. “We can hide out there for a little while, then once you’ve drawn them far
enough away, we can head south to Gustus’ friend.” She holds out her hand. Roan looks confused
for a second, then reaches out to clasp it with his. Clarke, casually and without hesitation, tightens
her grip on it and brings down the dagger in her other hand, slicing a long cut along his forearm
through several layers of material. He lets out a surprised noise. “To give them a continued blood
trail,” she tells him coolly.

He pauses, smiling at her oddly, then inclines his head and leaps onto Snowball, who looks at Clarke
for her reaction and when Clarke pats his nose allows Roan to stay there. “You are one of the most
interesting people I have ever met, Wanheda,” Roan tells her, leaning down. Clarke jerks in surprise,
hearing the title – she hadn’t realised it had come to this world as well. “I hope you survive.”

“You too,” Clarke says, and moves so that she and Gustus are supporting each other as they stagger
off in the direction Roan indicated. “Take care of Snowball for me.”

The meandering, painful journey across the ice is a nightmare. Even with the snow, Clarke’s sure
Nia will be able to see far enough across the flatness to find them. They slip easily on the ice, falling
over again and again, and Clarke’s worried she’ll never be able to use her ankle completely again.
Between the falling snow and the strange ringing in her ears from the cold she can’t hear anything
properly. They have to stop once to rebandage one of Gustus’ wounds. The air is so cold Clarke’s
nose starts to bleed but the blood soon hardens and she doesn’t leave a trail. They cover their faces
because it’s too cold to do otherwise, peering out through layers of cloth so that they can just about
orient themselves by the hazy outlines of mountains, and Clarke’s terrified they’re going the wrong
way. When they do find the spike that Roan described – a mile-long thin strip of ice that Clarke
thinks must have been a river that used to flow into the lake – she doesn’t know if it’s the left spike
or the right one.

She prays it’s the left and follows Roan’s directions. When they come to a half dead pine tree she
sobs with relief, and because she had to uncover her head to check that it was a pine tree, the tears
freeze on her face, closing her eyes shut with ice. It’s Gustus who manages to dig through the pile of
snow, drag Clarke in, and pile it up behind them. Then he moves back to Clarke and wraps his arms
around her, sharing the body heat neither of them really have anymore, wrapping the spare horse
blankets around them both once more.

Clarke’s exhausted and freezing cold and she’s lost a lot of blood. Shivering violently, she falls into
a half-dream world, where she’s a small child again and Jake’s holding her close. “It’s okay, kiddo,”
she thinks he says. “It’s all gonna be fine. Want me to tell you a story?”

When she wakes up much later, her first feeling is disappointment that she doesn’t remember the
story he told her, and sadness that she didn’t get the chance to tell him her story in return.
“Ready?” Lexa asks softly.

Octavia nods, face determined. Despite her Skaikru clothes, she has never looked more like Trikru to Lexa than she does now. It’s in her eyes, the curl of her lips, even in her stance. In the knife she’s carefully hiding.

Lexa hopes that Octavia is correct, that the Maunon weapons are in the radio room. Otherwise this will be considerably more difficult. Anya and the others are due to be here in roughly an hour – she gave the signal to Malus earlier today – but knowing Anya, Lexa suspects they may arrive early just in case. They want to take out the men in the radio building first as they will take the longest to be found, followed by removing the sentries around the village so that the others can enter safely. Then they will wedge shut any doors they can and deal with the missile.

“Okay,” Raven says. She takes a deep breath. “All right. We’ll see you soon, then. Uh… break a leg?”

Lexa blinks, puzzled. “I will aim higher,” she says slowly.

“Right. Right. Good idea. It’s an expression. I was trying to wish you luck.”

“We will be back as soon as we can,” Lexa promises. Sky People and their strange phrases. “And if we do not return soon, set fire to several houses and flee in the confusion.”

“We will,” John says, a little too promptly. He seems to like the idea of burning down his father’s house. Lexa wonders briefly if his account of the illegal act he did to be thrown in the Skybox in the first place was incomplete, then dismisses it as irrelevant.

She and Octavia go out into the dark night. Octavia follows behind Lexa willingly, merging with shadow after shadow. They press against a wall, barely breathing, as one of the sentries walks past. He looks around lazily, moonlight gleaming off his gun as he fiddles with it, then walks on unaware. They make it to the radio building quickly – it’s a small village, after all.

“Hey,” Octavia says quietly, knocking on the door. “Hey, hot stuff, it’s me.”

Lexa realises that Octavia never uses the name of the guard she has been playing for information. Perhaps so it is easier to kill him.

“Occy? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Octavia says throatily. “I… I know you said you were busy tonight, but I just had to see you. I missed you, babe. Come on. Just for a minute.”

There’s the sound of quiet argument from inside, and then there’s a click as the lock is undone, and the door slides open. The guard’s smirking face shows in the door. “Come on in – hey, wait, who’s this?”

“My friend Saska,” Octavia says brightly, pushing past him. Lexa follows. Octavia winks at the guard. “I thought she could keep your friend company while you and I… you know… talk
somewhere. Privately.”

The guard’s face brightens even more. The other one, at least five years older, lets out a groan. “We shouldn’t be letting people in here,” he snaps at the other one. “Get laid on your own time.”

“It’ll only be a minute,” Octavia says persuasively. “You can hang out with Saska.” She grabs the younger guard’s hand and tows him into the nearest room. Lexa can hear her exaggerated giggle at something he says.

The other guard and Lexa glare at each other in mutual disdain. “You’re not my type,” he informs her brusquely.

“I am distraught,” Lexa says politely. She glances at the radio behind him and does a double-take. “Should… should all those red lights be flashing like that?” she asks, sounding confused.

He whirls around to look at it and Lexa darts forward, grabbing his hair with one hand and slicing his throat swiftly with the knife she holds in the other. He lets out a dismal gurgling noise and collapses to the ground, blood forming a swift pool beneath him. Lexa has gotten a few flecks of it on her hands, and needs to clean her knife on his clothing, but otherwise still appears as harmless as she wishes to. She hopes Octavia remembers they need to stay clean of blood just in case.

The radio does not have any blinking lights. In fact, after she’s pried it open with her knife, removed everything inside, cut the wires and smashed everything else to pieces, it does not have any lights at all.

Octavia emerges from the other room, blood free. Her face is a little blank, but when she sees Lexa she forces a smile. “Hey, my first kill that isn’t an ally,” she says, sounding slightly brittle. “Maybe it’ll break my curse.”

Lexa tilts her head, realising what Octavia means – she killed some of Zion’s gonakru, and they turned out to be innocent. She killed some of Iryala’s hunters, and the village decided to aid them. It was all in self-defence, but it is understandable that it would bother Octavia. Everyone is bothered by some things they could not have helped. “You also helped kill the Maunon,” she points out softly. “Your actions there led many of them to their deaths, and they were assuredly our enemies. And by your actions against our ‘allies’, you protected Wells, Linkon, and the rest of us. You fought well.”

“Mochof,” Octavia says quietly after a long pause. She clears her throat, blushing slightly. “Time to go kill everyone on patrol?”

“Gas grenades?” Lexa asks.

“Only two,” Octavia says, pulling them out. She passes them to Lexa, who stows them away with a nod of thanks. “There might be more but if there are, they’re locked away somewhere.”

“Time to go, then,” Lexa says softly.

The first they come across are two Skaikru walking together. “Distract one,” Lexa orders Octavia in a hiss. Octavia nods, eyes narrowing.

Then she races up to them, sobbing wildly. “Please help me,” she whimpers piteously, throwing herself into the closest one’s arms.

The other one raises his weapon as both stiffen. “What is it?” he snaps, clearly only a few seconds away from yelling for help.
“I lost my bracelet hours ago and I still can’t find it,” Octavia sobs, hiding her face in her hands as she leans against the man’s chest, presumably so they can’t see there are no actual tears. “It’s the only thing I have left from my mother. Please, help me, it’s so dark and what if I’ve lost it forever? What if it’s gone?”

In a quick, darting move, Lexa strikes the one Octavia is not sobbing against, stabbing him in the heart from behind. He makes a little noise and falls as Octavia stabs her one in the throat. He dies just as quickly. Lexa yanks Octavia away as she pulls out her knife and blood sprays, trying to keep her from becoming covered in it. “Hide them as best you can,” Lexa commands. “I will find the next.”

There’s normally only half a dozen people at most guarding the place in the dark. Between that, the two guarding the radio, and the half dozen also guarding the missile, they must feel they are secure. They are not.

Lexa moves swiftly between the huts, looking for light that isn’t spilling out of a window. Then suddenly she’s being slammed into from behind, all the breath leaving her lungs as she’s borne to the ground painfully.

“What are you sneaking around for, bushhada?” an angry voice growls from behind her, hot breath blowing into her ear as he presses her against the ground.

Lexa curses silently. Recently, she has fought Skaikru, Maunon, and village hunters. Perhaps she has gotten too used to having a clear advantage. Right now, she has a clear disadvantage. The gona twists her arm behind her back painfully, forcing her face roughly into the dirt. “I – I – I have not done anything, beja, I did not mean – I was just -”

“Just what, coward?” the gona sneers. His voice is full of contempt. “Yu lufa au jak som op?”

“No,” she chokes out. It is the truth. She is not looking for something to steal.

He snorts, tone mocking. “Mebi yu lufa au ses som op?”

Lexa flushes with rage at the inappropriate and offensive suggestion. Her anger gives her the strength to twist sharply and elbow him hard in the throat. He doesn’t let go but he makes a choking noise and moves back slightly. She hears him draw breath and realises he’s about to call out –

Then he pitches forward, landing on her heavily, impaled from behind by Octavia. Lexa shoves him off her, with the help of the other girl, and rolls over and up to her feet again. “Mochof,” Lexa says.

“Thank you,” Octavia says, with a little smirk. “For the distraction, I mean.” She rolls her eyes. “What an utter douchebag.”

They drag him into a ditch, the best cover nearby, and return to quickly checking the place. The next two are alone and Lexa kills them each in turn by throwing her knife, hitting the first in the throat and the second in his left eye. She takes the second one’s swords and stows them.

Then Anya’s there, standing above the corpse of what is probably the last guard. “Hei, yongon,” she says to Lexa, taking a step forward and reaching her hand as if to touch Lexa and make sure she is alright, then dropping it before she makes contact. “The others are in the forest, waiting for me to tell them it is time. Is it?”

Lexa hesitates, then nods. “Check for any other guards,” she says. “Block whatever doors you can, quietly. I will get our Skaikru. You have Raven’s bombs?”

“Of course,” Anya says smoothly.
“Then go.” Lexa turns and, followed closely by Octavia, makes her way back to the house. When she opens the door she finds Raven and John standing there waiting.

John has blood on his face. He gives Lexa a rare, grim smile. “I found a gun,” he says casually, holding it up.

“Did you knock him out?” Octavia asks. “’Cause the last thing we need is your dad waking everyone up -”

“I didn’t knock him out,” John says shortly, and something in his face stops Octavia from asking more.

“Do not use it unless you have to,” Lexa cautions. She tightens her fingers on her swords reflexively, pointing them down. “We cannot afford the noise.”

“But once they know what’s going on…” John starts.

“Sha,” Lexa says, giving him a sharp little smile. “Then, you can do as you like.” She looks at Raven, who seems exhausted and is leaning against the wall. “Anya is here with your devices,” she informs her.

“Awesome,” Raven says, face lighting up as she pushes off the wall. Lexa is not sure if this is because Anya is here, or because she now has her explosives back, but she guesses that it is some mix of the two.

“Anya will be by the big tree to the left of the frozen stream,” Lexa says. “The two of you can begin setting the bombs up. Octavia and I will deal with the guards around the missile.”

Raven’s smile is vicious. “Let’s blow this joint, then.”

Lexa gives her a cold smile back, and they get to work.

Chapter End Notes

I love how most of the reviews for the last chapter were about how much people liked Snowball :)
First Impressions

Clarke wakes up aching all over and covered in sweat. She realises, with some surprise, that she’s actually extremely warm, and starts shedding the blankets around her. Eventually she sits up.

There’s a fire crackling nearby, with Gustus tending to it. No doubt that’s why the cave is much warmer than it was, although also a bit smoky. “How long have I been asleep?” Clarke croaks, throat scratchy and sore from inhaling ice-cold air. She misses her watch, the one Raven made for her, the one taken from her when Diana’s people kidnapped her.

“It is nearly dawn,” Gustus says calmly.

Clarke blinks, surprised. “But it was past dawn when we got -” she stops. She’s been asleep nearly twenty-four hours? “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“The snowstorm worsened,” Gustus says simply. “We could not have gone anywhere. It seemed best to allow you to rest.”

“Thanks,” Clarke says gratefully. She sheds a couple more layers and finds herself staring down at her coat, black and stiff with Ontari’s dried blood. She swallows hard and looks up again, fighting back the memory. It’s not guilt that makes her uncomfortable about Ontari’s death – it’s that she almost got herself killed by being too stunned to react when Ontari assaulted her. Normally, she’s the one who knows how to react, always. The only times when she hasn’t…

Don’t think about Lexa’s death. Just don’t.

She clears her throat. “Is it still going?”

“Skaikrusha wan down nau,” Gustus says absently, starting to look for something in the pile of blankets and tools next to him.

“Good,” Clarke says, relieved and concerned at the same time. The storm winding down is good news because it means they can get going, and bad news because it means Nia and her gona will be out looking for them.

“Here,” Gustus says, finding what he was looking for. He passes her some dried meat wrapped in cloth.

Clarke suddenly realises she’s ravenous. She takes the meat and tears into it. Halfway through following her second mouthful, she pauses. “Have you eaten yet?” she asks indistinctly.

Gustus shrugs. “It is your food, Clarke kom Skaikru.” He pauses and corrects himself. “Clarke kom Kongeda.”

“It’s ours,” Clarke says firmly. “Eat something.” She sees his mulish expression. “I am Lexa’s second-in-command and in her absence, I’m in charge. And I’m ordering you to eat something.”

“We do not have much,” he comments.

“We’ll get more,” Clarke replies. “I mean, unless you pass out before we can. Then I’ll starve or freeze without your help and you’ll have gotten us both killed.”

His stubborn look slowly fades to a smile and he reaches out to take a strip of meat. “I do not believe
anything could kill you, Clarke. You are far too fierce for that.”

She smiles back at him. “Yeah, let’s hope so.” She closes her eyes against the sudden surge of emotion. “I want to go home,” she says, her voice sounding dangerously close to a sob. “I want to see Lexa and Wells and Raven and Octavia and my mother and I’m sick of snow … I want to see Lexa. I really, really want to see Lexa.”

Gustus simply watches her, eyes calm and understanding. “I too,” is all he says.

Clarke swallows some more meat and takes a few gulps out of a waterskin Gustus passes her, and forces her emotions back down. “Then I guess we should get going, huh. If Nia and her gona were forced to head back inside because of the snow we have a head start.”

“Sha,” Gustus says, standing as well. “The storm did not become truly bad for some time, however, and the weather has been slowly improving for several hours. I think they must have at least made it to the edge of the lake. Hopefully they will head after Roan instead of leaving the horses behind to go across the ice.”

“Fingers crossed,” Clarke says, only for Gustus to give her a strange look. Right. Not a Grounder expression.

Gustus ties the spare blankets into a neat bundle and slings them over his shoulder, then wraps one of Nia’s guard’s jackets around the top of her coat to give her more warmth without slowing her down. Clarke gratefully shrugs into it, the warmth from her cocoon of blankets starting to wear off. He gestures towards her hair and when she nods, braids it neatly and efficiently. He slows slightly, almost reverently, when he rebraids Costia’s sheath into her hair.

Clarke picks up Ontari’s sword to take with her. When she picks up Costia’s bow, she pauses for a few moments – it seems almost like sacrilege to wear it, especially when she’s also wearing Ontari’s sword. But she’s already wearing the sheath Costia made for Lexa in her hair. And she knows that if it were her, if she had died and Lexa fell in love with someone new, then she’d be unimaginably grateful if they carried her most valued possession back to the woman she loved. For a second she runs her hand down it admiringly, wishing she knew how to properly use a bow. Maybe Lexa will teach her someday.

They smother the fire and get moving quickly. The air outside is cold and there’s some falling snow and slightly-painful wind that whips it into their faces, but it’s nothing like it was before. The sun’s starting to come up and it dyes the snow orange, every step makes a subdued crunching noise, and the crisp coldness of the air makes Clarke feel very awake and alive.

Gustus is also wearing one of the Azgeda jackets, and he’s twined the chain attached to his wrist up his arm over the sleeve of it. It looks like a strange metallic snake curling around him. Clarke wonders if they should try and get it off – if anyone sees them it’ll be obvious he’s a runaway. But she doesn’t have any way to remove it and it’s pretty strong metal, she’s not sure what to do about it. He’ll just have to use one of the blankets to cover his arm if anyone approaches them – but even as she thinks that she knows it won’t work. On the other hand, who are they likely to run into out here besides Nia or one of her gona?

She finds the answer to that question three hours later, when Gustus freezes suddenly. “Wait here, beja,” he says quietly, then looks at her.

It’s the fourth time he’s done this, so she knows he’s waiting for a response – no, not a response, her permission. She gives a slight nod and he disappears into the icy forest. Clarke waits, huddled into herself, watching her breath turn to little huffs of condensation. That’s something the Ark never told
them about, really. But Earth Skills never taught them much that was helpful about the world. It was a class based around the belief that they were important, they were unique, and that the earth was waiting just for them. When all they needed to do was look at the window to see that it was still spinning on.

Clarke starts to get worried after a few minutes. Gustus hasn’t left for more than a minute or two previously – the first time she actually thought he was going to handle the call of nature, only to realise when he came back and reported that it was ‘just wolf tracks’ that he’s making sure the way ahead is perfectly safe for her. With another person she might think he was assuming she was fragile, but that’s not it. He just considers her safety more important than his.

He arrives back. “Hunters,” he says in a low voice, lips thin. “They are not looking for us, they are searching for food. But there are ten of them at least and they are spread out. They know this area far better than us. I was very lucky they did not see me – if we try and get by them, they will. And I do not think we can move fast enough to avoid them.”

“Alright,” Clarke says, forcing herself to calmness. They can’t know about her or Gustus, otherwise they wouldn’t be looking for food, they’d be looking for them. She looks at Gustus. “Let me guess, you’re about to suggest you attack them as a distraction and I get by.”

Gustus stiffens slightly. “It is the best option,” he says, almost pleadingly. “You must return to Heda. Tell her that she is the greatest of all the Commanders, that it has been an honour to serve her, that she must stay strong -”

“Together or not at all,” Clarke says firmly. Her mind races. “Hold out your hands.”

He doesn’t hesitate, or frown at her, or question. He simply sticks out his hands. Either he’s mad or he believes in her. Perhaps both.

Clarke unwinds the chains from his arm and loops them around his wrists to tie them together awkwardly, leaving her holding the end of it. She reaches out and pulls open his jacket, letting all of the bloodstains on his clothing show – there’s a lot of them, since Roan stabbed the man he took this top from several times. Then she grabs his two swords and shoves them besides Ontari’s one.

“Stoop,” she orders him quietly. “Limp. Look as injured as possible. And afraid, too. Look as scared as you can.”

She turns and yanks him several steps after her. They haven’t made it far when a voice cries out from high in a tree, “HOD YU OP!”

Clarke stops and bares her teeth. “Down here, now!” she yells. She stands up straight, looking as proud and arrogant as she can. “All of you! I am here by order of the Azplana!”

There’s a long pause. Then suddenly someone drops from a tree to land directly in front of Clarke. They have long curling hair with only a few braids, a feminine, catlike face, skin darker than any Azgeda Clarke has seen before, and they’re holding a bow. When the hunter raises their head, dark brown eyes survey Clarke cautiously. “Chon yu bilaik?”


“Seken kom Azplana?” the hunter says doubtfully.

“Sha,” Clarke says, then raises her voice to yell, “I command you all to show yourselves!”

There’s another long pause, and then the hunter lets out an ear-splitting whistle and other hunters
start to appear, spread out as much as possible but all visible, all arrayed around the first in a loose semicircle. “I am Orion. Chit yu gaf?”

“What I want,” Clarke says coldly. “Is an escort.” Channelling Ontari, she looks Orion up and down dismissively. “And I suppose you will have to do. My gonakru were attacked by wolves. I managed to save myself and our prisoner. You and your hunters will accompany us south.”

Orion blinks and says sourly. “Will we?”

One of the other hunters hisses “Shof op!” She turns to Clarke and gives her a brittle smile. “Excuse my houmon, he speaks without thinking,” she apologises. This second hunter is pale, with very blue eyes, and unusually bright red hair. Clarke wonders how on earth she and her husband can be effective hunters when they’re both so bright against the white snow – but then, she hadn’t seen them before they stepped in front of her, so perhaps they’re simply very good at what they do. “We must discuss this.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Clarke says. “I need to go to a village in the south. All of Ice Nation depends on the safe delivery of this prisoner. So you’ll provide us with shelter, food and assistance. You’ll be our guides and our guards.” She smiles icily. “Or you will deal with the disappointment of the Azplana.”

Orion and his wife have a very quiet and quick argument. Clarke catches the words “Azplana”, “Seken”, “danger”, “food”, and “Natblida” multiple times.

Eventually Orion clears his throat. “We have all heard rumours of our Azplana’s brave Seken,” he says, and the words are coated with a thin layer of mockery. Clarke can only guess what they’ve heard about Ontari – it can’t be positive. “There is a simple way to prove if you are who you claim to be.” He pulls a knife out of his belt and takes a step forward.

Clarke draws her sword immediately, realising what he’s talking about. Nia hasn’t kept her Nightblood quite as secret as she thought. “Back off,” she says dangerously. “I’ve lost enough blood to wolves, I’m not losing anymore to you. If you hurt me, the Azplana will raze your village to the ground.” With her other hand she pulls open her outer jacket, revealing the dried black blood all over her coat. “Does this answer the question you were about to ask? I am Natblida.”

Orion’s wife mutters something that sounds a lot like “I told you so” to him, and Clarke almost feels bad for making him lose an argument when he’s absolutely correct to be suspicious.

Orion looks at her sword. “A very fine blade,” he says blandly. “Rock Line’s best work, I see.” He raises his gaze to stare into her eyes like he’s trying to figure out her game.

“A gift from the Azplana,” Clarke says sweetly. She yanks on Gustus’ chain, pulling him forward a step. “I am very glad to have run into you. Travelling alone is so much effort, especially with a prisoner to deal with.”

“We are glad to assist,” Orion says dryly. He smiles thinly, eyeing Clarke shrewdly from beneath his thick eyelashes. “Well, then, let us go south. We will take you to whatever village you wish, and be sure to inform the village leader that the Azplana’s Seken requires his hospitality.”

In other words, deliver them to someone who almost definitely has heard by now that Nia’s looking for some fugitives. Also, now they have guards on the way – excellent against wolves, bears or bandits, but if they run into Nia’s people the hunters will turn on them immediately. Clarke wonders how the hell she’s going to get out of this one.
Lexa still takes care to remain hidden as they make their way to the place the missile is kept, skirting around the truck. They have taken down the usual number of guards, but that does not rule out the possibility that for some reason there are extra Skaikru or Azgeda wandering around tonight.

She has avoided the missile, mostly, not wanting anyone to notice her interest in the building. But she has managed to glance at it when she walks by and she does have a plan. Throwing the gas grenade in via the door would be extremely tricky, as the large door is always locked and barricaded. “Octavia,” she says instead, and cups her hands for a moment meaningfully. Octavia looks confused for a few seconds and then understands. She cups her hands in the same way, crouching slightly for balance. “Two steps to the left,” Lexa clarifies quietly, and Octavia obeys. Lexa drops her two swords on the ground.

Then she is running towards Octavia. She leaps at the last second and pushed her foot hard against Octavia’s hands, so that she hits the branch hard with her middle and is able to cling to it, gasping. She pulls herself up and into a standing position, pushing up on her toes to grasp the branch high above. Her arms ache with the effort as she slowly pulls herself up, muscles clenching and straining, and then she is straddling that branch as well. It’s not a strong branch but she is light and fast and she makes it onto the roof of the building before it can do more than groan ominously.

She steps onto the roof lightly and carefully, trying to be as quiet as possible, but it’s impossible to walk on the metal roof noiselessly and she can hear the sound she’s making. Luckily, it is not unusual for small animals to scamper across the roofs of the building or even try to scratch their way inside, seeking food and warmth. Lexa crouches and uses her knife to carefully lever off the weakest-looking part of the roof. The building is just one giant shed, really – that is how Raven described it. Perhaps once the village used it as a storage shed. It was not used a house, certainly, since a normal home could never have fitted the missile inside. As a result, there is only one room, it is not very well insulated, and the roof is quite thin. Once she’s pried up the metal scale there is some straw and wooden ply board beneath it, easily cut through. It is probably not good for her knife’s sharpness, but she does have her swords as well, safe on the ground.

She can see the instant she makes a small hole and the light winks through it. Someone below says something, sounding confused, and Lexa realises sawdust must be drifting down. She slams her knife through quickly, enlarging the hole until it is just big enough, and then pulls out one gas grenade to drop through it. Someone beneath starts to yell, but Lexa is already rolling down the side of the roof to get away as the gas grenade explodes. She ends up at the edge, staring at the sky and waiting.

Wisps of smoke puff out of the small hole she created. The yelling inside has stopped almost as quickly as it started. Lexa looks to the side to see Octavia’s upturned face below her and gives her a nod. She needs to make a bigger hole now, go inside and unlock the door from the inside.

Lexa takes a deep breath and hopes the smoke clears quickly. She wriggles back to where she was before but keeps her face well away from the hole she made, widening it by hacking away with her knife at arm’s length. She covers her mouth and nose with the sleeve of her other arm, uncertain if it will help, but willing to try.

Then when it is large enough she takes another deep breath and slides in.

She lands on painful bits of metal. She lands and is entangled in wires.
She lands in the middle of a nuclear missile.

Her immediate instinct is to struggle her way out of it, but she forces herself to lie still. She has wires wrapped around her limbs, if she struggles, she could pull them out. While Lexa does not completely understand Raven’s explanation of electronics, she understands enough to know that pulling out wires does unpredictable things to devices such as this.

Lexa slowly disentangles herself. In the end, only one wire detaches from the inside – it causes her to flinch, but no deadly explosion engulfs her, so she manages to climb off the open missile. She hopes the missing wire will not cause the missile to make people ill, which Raven and Clarke have both explained can sometimes happen. However, she feels perfectly healthy, slightly dizzy from the last wisps of gas but otherwise fine.

Luckily, everyone in here appears to be unconscious. She pauses for a moment, surveying the bodies around her. There is the guard who smiled at her the other day, there is the one who lived near Raven on her station, there is the one who always whistles, there is the gona who practices throwing knives with unerring accuracy. She slits their throats calmly and unemotionally. If she leaves them alive, they are a threat. They have already been a threat to Clarke. They took her. They will not survive to take another person Lexa cares for.

She unlocks the large door from the inside and opens it, only to have to dodge to the left to avoid the slash of a sword. It is one of Nia’s gona, staring at her, face a mask of shock and anger. He must have been patrolling and heard a noise. He takes a step forward and slashes at her again. Lexa dives to the side and rolls, finding where she left her swords and grabbing them up again. His next slash she deflects with crossed swords, twisting them so that his sword is nearly pulled from his grasp.

Where is Octavia? Has he killed Octavia?

She takes a step back and manages to see Octavia on the roof, pale face just visible in the darkness. She must have been concerned when Lexa took such a long time – untangling herself from wires – and climbed up to check on her. Lexa lets out a relieved breath, then raises the sword in her left hand to block another swing.

Lexa moves forward, starting on the defensive, and slashes one sword at his stomach while guarding with the other. He jerks back to avoid it and then tries a double-feint that fails because he unintentionally signalled the move with his eyes first.

She feels a fierce glee burn in her dark blood. Fighting someone who is also trained to it, experienced in it, and talented at it is rare for her these days except in training. There is nothing like the sense of pride that comes with defeating a worthy opponent in battle – it is not joy in killing, but instead satisfaction in her hard-earned skill.

Lexa slashes towards him with both at once, distracting him with the wildness and recklessness of the move, and when his eyes flash with triumph and he starts to slide his sword from blocking her to a savage, fatal thrust, she hooks her foot behind his leg and pulls it back rapidly, sending him falling backwards. He lands hard, breath knocked out of him. “You did not brace properly,” Lexa says, almost to herself, and goes to stab him through the heart. Then she hesitates, and instead hits him with the hilt of the sword, knocking him unconscious. They need at least one gona alive to lead them to Clarke. With his fighting skills and age, she is sure this one has been one of Nia’s personal gona for a very long time, and that means he will have her trust.

“Saska?” it’s Malus, appearing from the darkness, flanked by a dozen strong villagers. He looks at her, face set. “We have barricaded all the houses we can.”
“Ogud,” Lexa says. “Then it is time to deal with the missile.”

Octavia lands with a thump beside her, nearly falling but managing to steady herself. She looks at the unconscious gona and winces, then draws her knife. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have gone up there. I got worried -”

“It is fine, Octavia,” Lexa assures her. “Do not kill him. Leave him.” She did not actually order to Octavia to remain on the ground, and if she had been in danger inside, Octavia’s intervention could have been very useful. Besides, in some small way it warms her to know that Octavia was concerned. “Can you find John or Raven? We need to get the truck started.” Octavia nods and disappears. Lexa turns to the villagers. “We will carry it to the vehicle.”

By the time they have moved it outside of the shed Anya and some of the others have returned, including Raven. “Bombs are all set, boss,” Raven tells Lexa. “But I think some of the people are starting -”

A scream of anger comes from a nearby house, and the sound of someone thumping on a door. A few seconds later it’s followed by more yelling from other houses, which spreads. Zion draws his sword and everyone else who did not already have a weapon in hand follows suit. Then one of the doors is forced open and Zion falls on them, accompanied by several of the villagers, easily managing them.

“starting to realise something’s up,” Raven finishes, rolling her eyes. “We should get out of here. The bombs should be pretty distracting.”

“How many do you think will survive them?” Lexa asks.

Raven shrugs. “Maybe half. And I made sure the bomb in the radio room was positioned so it’ll make it really hard to tell we destroyed the radio on purpose. Hopefully they’ll think it was just collateral damage.”

“I see,” Lexa says, a little impressed. Despite her previous experiences with them, she cannot help but find the damage Raven can do with her bombs impressive every time she witnesses it. There is the sharp noise of a gunshot and everyone flinches but no one falls and Zion calls out hoarsely that everything is fine.

“I got Anya to move the horses a bit away,” Raven says, a little guiltily. “I just – I didn’t want them to die, you know?”

“Good,” Lexa says firmly. “That is for the best.” The she turns back to the villagers. “Lift. We need to get this into the truck now.”

Then Zion is back with them. Lexa blinks at his appearance, the graze of a too-close bullet across his scarred cheek, half-burn and half-slash, immediately recognisable to anyone who has dealt with the Maunon often. “They have been dealt with,” he says, showing no pain, though it must hurt fiercely. Lexa wonders if she can disguise it with make-up – she will not be the only one able to tell that it is caused by a bullet. But then, they are not planning to go near villages again in their trip north.

Octavia appears again. “John’s got the truck started,” she reports.


“We will deal with the rest of the Skaikru,” Malus says, meeting her eyes. “You have Iryala’s word, my word.”
“I know,” she says. “I have your word, and the new Commander has your loyalty. He may well ask for your assistance soon.”

“He will have it,” Malus promises, and helps his villagers heave the missile into the truck. The sun is coming up behind them.

Lexa climbs in after it and helps Raven, Octavia and then John up after her. As promised, the truck is already vibrating, and the sensation is very strange. Octavia helps Linkon inside and leans into him, allowing him to wrap his arms around her tightly. Zion and Anya yank themselves up into the truck, looking unnerved by the vibrations, and Zion wedges himself into a corner like that will help.

Octavia slams the door shut behind them, cutting off their view of the villagers, and Raven walks to the other end and pulls a panel open. “Time to go, dude,” she says through it, and then with a sudden jerk they’re moving. Even without being able to see the outside, Lexa can tell they’re going quickly, too quickly. It’s unsettling and she closes her eyes to try and ignore the sensation.

“How long?” Raven murmurs to her, coming close again. The truck lurches and Raven winces and leans against the side, looking dizzy.

“A few minutes,” Lexa says tightly. “Then we will need to go. This vehicle is moving south – that is good for those going south, but I think we should wait to the north of the Prison Station village, hidden. We know the gona will have to head that way and we can pick up the trail there once they have passed. They might try to hide their trail while close to the village, but by then they will assume there are no followers and be aiming purely for speed.”

Anya frowns, mouth twisting. “Those going south? Heda, you cannot intend -” Her voice dries up when Lexa meets her eyes.

“I can,” she says very softly. “And I will. Raven, Zion, Linkon and I are headed north.” Linkon starts in surprise and looks down quickly at Octavia, then at her resigned smile looks back to Lexa and inclines his head. Zion just looks thankful to be joining them. “You, John and Octavia will head south. John to drive, you to get the missile back to Arkadia and ensure it is properly guarded there this time, and Octavia to go to Polis and tell Indra and Aden what has happened. They need to know.”

Anya growls, looking like she wants to pace but doesn’t dare to move around while the truck rumbles and lurches.

“These are my orders,” Lexa says, her voice getting a little colder. Then she softens and says, “I will do my best to bring them back, Anya.” They both know who she’s talking about.

Anya clears her throat. “Bring yourself back as well, yongon.”

“Of course,” Lexa replies with the ghost of a smile. She turns to Raven. “The bombs?”

“Oh! Right!” Raven pulls out a strange device, flips open part of it, and pushes down a series of small buttons. Then there is the echoing distant noise of explosions – they have come quite far already.

“Boom,” Raven says softly, one corner of her lips twisting up into a faint, tired smirk.
Hunted

Orion might disbelieve her story, but his wife, the less-sarcastic Nyssa, shows no signs of doubting Clarke. Instead, she seems almost reverential in her treatment of ‘Ontari’. It unnerves Clarke considerably.

“We are honoured to be aiding the Azplana,” Nyssa tells Clarke, apparently genuinely, as she walks a few paces back from her to be respectful. Orion rolls his eyes. “Would you like us to bind the prisoner more completely?”

Clarke clears her throat. “No, it’s fine. I can deal with him.”

“Sha, I saw that earlier, when you shared your food with him,” Orion remarks, a little bitingly.

“I need to keep him strong enough to walk,” Clarke says coldly. “And I will not be questioned by you.”


“Sure,” Clarke says. She doesn’t want to look like she’s hiding anything.

“What is the Azplana like?” Nyssa asks, tone worshipful. “I have heard all of the legends. How she survived the Trikru Commander’s betrayal and stole her pet monster, how she made us the greatest of the clans, even how she stole the Maunon’s weapons so they could be defeated… but I have never met her. I have never even seen her. Is she truly the most beautiful -”

“Nyssa,” Orion interrupts suddenly, interrupting while Clarke is still stunned by Nia’s cover story. And more than a little concerned that she could be the ‘pet monster’ Nyssa’s describing – of course, it might be the missile. She decides to believe that it’s the missile. “I think I heard something ahead to our left. You are the swiftest of us, could you go ahead and look? Beja, ai niron.”

Nyssa looks surprised, but her open, eager face transforms into a professional one and with a nod she darts off.

Clarke glances at Orion. “Did you actually hear something?” She feels a yank on the chain she’s holding and looks back worriedly at Gustus, but he nods to let her know she’s not moving too fast.

Orion ignores her question. “Nyssa was born here, in the far north,” he says quietly, voice colder than the snow around them. “She grew up on tales of the Azplana’s splendour. I? I am from the south, from the Sankru. I travelled north to see what snow was like four years ago, met Nyssa, and never left. But my clan were not fed your queen’s propaganda. If you manipulate my wife by her beliefs, I will kill you where you stand, Azplana or no.” Despite his androgyny, his slightness and prettiness, he suddenly looks like a real threat, eyeing her like that.

“I’m not going to manipulate her,” Clarke says, just as quietly.

“No? But you already are.” His lips curl into a sardonic smile. “You are manipulating all of us to some end, Ontari kom Azgeda. I only hope that the end you desire is not the destruction of the alliance.” He meets her eyes again and spits contemptuously on the ground. “I could never have come north if not for the alliance, never have met Nyssa. Nyssa believes the Azplana will do whatever is necessary to protect the Ice Nation. To her people, the Azplana is a goddess, ruthless but all-knowing and wise. To my people? She is scum. And you are scum, for killing in her name.”
Clarke swallows, fighting the urge to agree with him. If she reveals who she really is, he might help her— but the rest of them probably wouldn’t. And what the hell is he thinking, talking to her like this? If she was the actual Ontari he’d be dead. Him, his wife, his village… Ontari wasn’t exactly known for her good temper. “I don’t want to destroy the alliance, I promise.”

“No? You want to rule it, then?”

“No,” Clarke says vehemently before she can stop herself. He gives her a surprised look and she sighs. “I could kill you, you know. Whether you started out Sankru or not, you’re Azgeda now, and you’re talking treason about the Azplana.”

“Perhaps you could,” he allows. “But then Nyssa would turn on you. And Nyssa is beloved by every hunter here. They would kill you, hide the bodies, and hope the Azplana never finds out.”

“Well,” Clarke says, smiling thinly. “Good thing I like honesty, then. I’d hate to stain my pretty sword with blood.”

“I appreciate your forbearance,” he says, a little dryly.

They continue to walk. Clarke darts frequent glances back at Gustus, who isn’t as covered up as she is. It can’t be comfortable pretending to limp and be weak, letting himself be pulled along a bit by the chain, and she’s sure his wrists will be swollen and maybe even bloody by the end of this. But he doesn’t show any signs of discomfort.

They stop for the night in a small cave that Clarke’s sure she couldn’t have found by herself. It’s warm and feels very secure with its narrow and easily defensible entrance. Like before, the hunters haven’t found more than couple of small animals and some half-dead vegetation, but Nyssa directs most of it towards Clarke. She doesn’t listen when Clarke demurs, insistent that the Azplana’s Seken deserves nothing less than the best, and Clarke can feel Orion’s glare burning holes through her.

She gives some more to Gustus and takes the opportunity to check his wrists, hiding in the shadows at the back of the shallow cave. “It’s pinching the skin here,” she says to him, a little annoyed. “You should have told me, I could have fixed it hours ago.” She starts to rub at the whiteness with one of her hands, then manages to find a strip of material in her bundle of possessions to tie around his wrists to protect them.

He raises an eyebrow at her after looking around in case anyone is watching. “No, I should not have told you. A captive who complains? Any Azgeda would strike me down. You should not even be giving me food.”

“We’ve had this argument,” she reminds him, tying the knot and reaching down for some more meat.

“We have,” he admits, and opens his mouth for her to feed him another bite. After he swallows, he says abruptly, “Do you have a plan to escape these Azgeda?”

“Not at all,” Clarke admits. “I might be able to convince them that this is top secret and they can’t tell anyone, not even the village leader. But even then all they’d have to do would be to talk to anyone in the village and they’d probably find out we’re fugitives. In fact, even if we left them now, hanging around here, some of Nia’s people are bound to check this area, and then they’ll get told exactly where we’re going.” She scowls. “I shouldn’t have told them which village we were going to. It’s the only one I knew the name of, though.”

“You did well,” Gustus says firmly. “You kept us alive for now.” He looks at his bound hands, clearly thinking hard. “If we wish to kill them, the first step is to keep them gathered. They are
hunters, best with a bow or thrown knife. Close together they will be easier targets. This cave may be
the best place. I could grab one of your swords and surprise them. Then while they converge on me
you could manage take a few of them unawares as well.”

“There’s eleven of them,” Clarke points out. “Plus neither of us are exactly in great fighting
condition.” She looks down at her hands as well, one still painful and bandaged tightly from cutting
it on Ontari’s sword. She’s trying not to flex her hands much because when she does it starts
bleeding again – she can feel the hot wetness against the inside of the bandages even now.

Clarke raises her head and meets Orion’s eyes. He’s staring at her longingly, and for a second she
almost jerks back, but then she realises he’s not actually staring at her. He’s staring at Costia’s bow,
still slung over her shoulder.

Noticing her, he comes closer. “That is a thing of beauty,” he comments.

Clarke takes it off and holds it out, propelled by instinct more than anything else. It is beautiful, and
somehow she likes him more for noticing that. She wonders if Costia, herself a hunter, would have
liked Orion and Nyssa and the others. “It is,” she agrees.

Sometimes Costia is so plainly a ghost standing beside Lexa that Clarke nearly thinks she can see her
– she wishes she could talk to her, know her. She wants to be able to picture Costia clearly, to
understand her, to be able to put a face to the name. Instead she gets little titbits from Lexa, one tiny
detail at a time, and tries to build a picture from that. She knows Costia was amazing, that she made
incredible things, that she loved Lexa absolutely. But apart from the sheath, the bow, and the pain in
Lexa’s eyes, there’s not much left behind to tell Clarke who Costia was.

She gets it. It’s not like she’s told Lexa too much about her own ghost, her father. But sometimes
Clarke closes her eyes and tries to imagine what Costia would think of her. What Costia would say
to her. Would they talk about art, Clarke’s painting and Costia’s carvings? Would they talk about the
alliance, about Nia, about their people, about war? Or would they only talk about Lexa, the girl who
they both loved but that only one of them may ever have the chance to be bonded to?

Orion runs his fingers over it carefully, almost worshipfully, as if he’s touching a great work of art.
“It must have taken a very long time. You will have to show us your bow skills while you travel with
us,” he comments, not looking up. There is an undercurrent of challenge in his voice again.

“I don’t think we have time for showing off,” Clarke replies. “We’re gonna have to walk pretty fast
as it is.”

He nods, looking up now. “I see.” There is something thoughtful in his eyes. “You have an
interesting accent, Ontari. And the way you speak – the words you choose.”

“Mochof,” Clarke says coolly. She holds out her bandaged hand. “I’d like my bow back now.”

He looks back down at the bow for a moment. “I recognise the symbol on the grip,” he says. “A
reminder of what to aim for? But I thought you did not plan to become Heda?”

“My. Bow.” Clarke says again through gritted teeth, still holding her hand out.

Orion slaps the bow down onto her open hand hard. It is probably just to annoy her further – he’s
been foolishly blatant with his dislike of her – but instead Clarke gasps and bends over as the wound
on her hand splits open fully again. She lets out a little whimper and drops the bow.

It takes a long moment for her straighten again. The blood is blossoming on her hand, a crimson
flower that tells anyone watching that she’s a liar.
Orion’s eyes widen looking down at it. Gustus makes a little noise and goes to stand up, probably to garrotte Orion with the chain between his wrists, but before he can Orion covers Clarke’s hand with his own. “You should bandage that again,” he says, and suddenly all the antagonism is gone from his voice. “Here, I have some darker fabric.” With his other hand he rummages in his bag and yanks a strip of black fabric out. He positions himself so he is between her and the rest of them and wraps it around her hand again and again until every bit of blood is covered.

Clarke watches him, surprised. “Mochof,” she says eventually, uncertain.

“Pro,” he replies, voice still hushed. “You are covered in black blood, but you are not Natblida.”

“No,” Clarke admits.

“So you either held one as they died – unlikely, given the way the blood is sprayed across you – or you killed one.”

“I killed one,” Gustus starts to say quickly, trying to take the blame like always. “I killed one and she was stained with the blood -”

“Yes,” Clarke replies, speaking over him and meeting Orion’s gaze with her own steely one. “You’re right, I did.”

“Was it Ontari kom Azgeda?” he asks quietly.

“Sha,” Clarke says softly, bracing herself. Gustus lets out a displeased noise at her honesty.

Orion gives her a brittle smile. “I have heard many rumours of her since I came here. Even when Ontari was a child, the rumours were of horrifying things. I was surprised when I met you and you did not seem to match the descriptions of her, especially in your compassion for your prisoner.” He looks over at Nyssa, far away enough that there is no way she can hear them, busy helping cook one of the other small creatures. “I have grown to love the Azgeda. But when you are brought up as they are, brought up with a belief in cruelty and necessity, sometimes it is hard to remember that lives matter. The best of them, like Nyssa, grow to learn this, but they have trouble applying it to the woman they were brought up to revere, or to her servants. So instead they create excuses. She has many excuses for Ontari. I have none.”

“There are excuses,” Clarke tells him, thinking about how awful Ontari’s upbringing must have been. “But at a certain point, I don’t think excuses are enough to justify what’s been done.”

“Who are you?” he says quietly.

“You should not -” Gustus begins to say quickly, but Clarke speaks over him again.


He looks at her, stunned, then bows his head and says, very quietly. “Then I will help you however I can.”
“We must get off the pathway,” Lexa says decisively. “They are likely to come this way.”

Raven frowns. “What if they know that we know that they’re going to go north? Then they could not use the path. You know, to confuse us.”

It takes Lexa a moment to untangle what Raven means, already successfully confused even without the Azgeda’s interference. “That is possible,” she acknowledges. “But not here, not if they plan to travel quickly. There is a frozen river ahead, and the only bridge is along this path. If they are riding their horses they will have to use it.”

“I have found a cave nearby,” Linkon says, appearing suddenly. Zion is already finding somewhere near the path to hide, his light grey clothing making him blend easily with the snow. “We can hide in it – or at least hide Raven kom Skaikru in it.”

“Hey!” Raven objects.

Linkon looks apologetic. “You are the loudest and most noticeable of us,” he says. “The rest of us will be able to watch without being seen. You will not.”

Lexa almost smiles at the look of pique on Raven’s face. “I will stay in the cave with her,” she says. “That way Raven will have a guard.” She looks at Linkon and raises her eyebrow. “And I am more likely to be spotted than either of you, as well. I should hide also.”

Linkon avoids agreeing with her, and instead just says, “As you wish, Heda.”

It is the truth – Linkon’s sharp scout hearing and sight will be useful and help him both find and avoid the Azgeda gona. Zion is used to this terrain and more effective in it. Here, in fact, he is just as good a tracker as Linkon. Raven, on the other hand, has no skill in this, and Lexa has concentrated far more on combat and strategic skills in recent years than on abilities such as tracking or hiding.

He leads them to the little cave swiftly and Raven ducks inside. “Homey,” she comments, voice echoing. “So how long do we expect to be here?”

“It could be hours or even days,” Lexa says serenely, though inwardly she hopes it will not be long. Every part of her body is crying out to rush north, to find Clarke. The idea that her niron could be in pain, could be being tortured, is terrifying to her.

“Great,” Raven mutters.

“We will report as soon as we see them,” Linkon promises, and turns to leave.

“Linkon kom Trikru,” Lexa says, stopping him. “I… I apologise for once again separating you from your Octavia.”

“Duty comes first, Heda,” he says quietly.

“You guys should go on a holiday together when we get back,” Raven suggests brightly. “Find a beach somewhere, get some sun -” she shivers. “Definitely some sun.”

“A honeymoon,” Lexa says, proud she knows the Skaikru word for this. Raven makes a choking noise, surprised.
Linkon frowns. “A… a honey moon?”

“It is a Skaikru tradition. It is when you go away somewhere with only your partner. It does not matter where, but it must last a week.” Lexa says knowledgeably. She looks at Raven. “That is correct, sha?”

“Um… sha,” Raven says, a little weakly. She looks at Linkon and a strange expression comes onto her face, like she’s desperately suppressing a smile. “Yeah, it’s a tradition. You have to do it regularly or you’re a bad partner. You know, when you get back to Polis and see Octavia, you should totally suggest it. Ask her to go on a honeymoon with you. Actually, you should do it in front of her brother, that way he’ll know you’re being a good boyfriend by our standards. It’ll help you get his approval.”

“Mochof,” Linkon says, looking grateful. With a quick nod, he turns to go back to the road.

Raven sags back against the cave wall and buries her face in her hands. “I’m a bad person,” she says, voice muffled.

“Raven?” Lexa says, confused. “Of course you are not.” She frowns suddenly, thinking. “Hod op. If you need to go on a honeymoon regularly, and it must involve going away, where did you go when you lived in the sky?”

“Uh, couples mostly just locked themselves in their rooms,” Raven tells her, showing her face again. It’s slightly too red, like she’s still trying to contain her emotions. Lexa wonders what the matter is. “It’s the aloneness that matters.” She looks at Lexa closely, sobering a little. “So… you and Clarke are planning to go on a honeymoon, huh?”

“Sha,” Lexa says, voice wavering a little as she worries about Clarke. Clarke must be alive, she must. Lexa will accept nothing else. “After we are bonded.”

“Bonded, huh?”

“Sha. That is what I said,” Lexa says, a little testily.

Raven pauses, considering. “Okay, as a close friend to both of you, I better be a bridesmaid. And also, I absolutely insist on being there when you tell Abby. That’s part of the duties of the bridesmaid, in our culture,” she tells Lexa sagely, and covers a cough.

“If it is part of your culture, of course,” Lexa says, slightly puzzled by Raven’s odd manner. “Clarke is willing to have a Trikru ceremony, but I would not ask her to give up any part of your customs, especially not if they can be easily combined with ours. I will be grateful for whatever advice you can give about your ways.”

Raven nods and looks away. She folds her head into her elbow and shakes for some time, as if she is laughing or sobbing. Eventually she raises her head again and takes a deep breath, then swallows hard. “I’m honoured,” she says, voice somewhat croaky.

Lexa simply inclines her head in response and they fall silence. After some time she sits cross-legged on the cold ground and closes her eyes, starting to meditate. As they have done every time she has attempted this recently, the past Commanders slam into her mind like a swarm of angry hornets, chasing her thoughts relentlessly and attacking them.

*You cannot do this.*

*You have abandoned Polis, you have abandoned our people!*
Love is weakness, did you not listen, did you not understand?

And the oldest, faintest voice: *The missile’s the priority. You need to keep it safe. She can’t get it. She can’t.*

She sorts through the voices, quells them, hears their concerns, disagrees with them, reassures them. It takes some time. She wonders what she will be like when she is a voice whispering in Aden’s ear, what she will say. She wonders if they feel like they still live, if they watch through her eyes and hear through her ears, feel the ground under her feet and Clarke’s warmth against her lips, or if they merely exist as the echo of old opinions. Will she be an echoing voice, chanting the lessons she taught her Natblida, or will she be herself as she has always been?

Lexa opens her eyes with a faint sigh.

Raven’s leaning against the other side, body slumped eyes closed, but she opens them when she hears the noise. “Having fun? Did you achieve inner peace?”

“I tried,” Lexa says mildly. “Peace is always difficult, however. They seldom agree with each other.”

“Yeah, the voices in my head are like that too – wait. You’re not kidding, are you?”

“No,” Lexa says. “The past Commanders speak to me. As someday I will speak to Aden, or one of the other Nightbloods.”

Raven eyes her, but apparently decides not to question that bit. She moves onto another topic. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. You have black blood, right?”

“You have seen it,” Lexa reminds her, confused by the foolish question.

“So how come you aren’t blue?”

“Blue?” Lexa looks at her in complete perplexity now.

Raven strips off one of her gloves and holds her hand up like it is a vital point. “Right. See, our blood is red, so we get all this nice pinky-brown skin. But your blood is black. So you should be blue, or maybe grey, I’m not sure. Something like that.” She shivers and puts the glove back on, curling into herself against the cold, and blinks like the world is too bright.

“I am not,” Lexa says as politely as possible. Of course she is not blue or grey.

“I know, but why?”

Lexa tries not to look at Raven as if she is being strange. “I am Natblida,” she says slowly. “My blood is black. My skin is not. They are two different things.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Raven says, frustrated. She brightens, getting an idea. “Okay, maybe, maybe, your blood is red.”

“It is not.”

“Hear me out. It’s red, but then *something* in it reacts to air,” Raven says. “The air makes it turn black. If we have a closer look when we get back -”

“I have never seen it change colour,” Lexa replies flatly. As much as she cares for Raven, there is no denying the girl is odd. Of course her blood is black, she is Natblida. And of course she is not grey – corpses can be grey on occasion, depending on what they die of, but she is not a corpse. She is
Natblida. Sometimes Skaikru seem so ignorant as to be almost children. “You cannot always turn
spirits into science, whatever you believe.”

Raven smiles crookedly. “A while back, I would’ve disagreed with that,” she admits, expression
pained, voice weak. “Said that we could analyse your blood, figure out whatever gives you your past
Commanders, that kind of stuff. But now there’s time travel involved. That’s impossible. It’s all
impossible! You and Clarke travelled in time, and there’s people on the ground, everything I thought
I knew was wrong, and I can’t trust Finn. I can’t trust anyone. I can’t even trust my own mind
anymore because every time I try and use logic the world turns and it doesn’t work anymore.” She
looks away. “You know, I thought I could figure out everything, and all of a sudden I don’t
understand anything.”

Lexa understands now. It is not about Finn. It is not even about Anya. It is about Raven’s entire
worldview, everything she trusted, disappearing in an instant – she lost not just the only person she
really depended on, but her belief in the way the world worked, all her understanding of science and
people and herself vanishing in the space of only weeks. She has lost faith in everything she ever had
to cling to, every tenet she built her personality on so confidently.

Lexa pauses for a long moment. Then she speaks, replying to a moment of weakness with one of her
own. “Her name was Costia,” she says softly. Raven blinks and opens her mouth, then closes it
again, content to let Lexa keep talking. “I believed… when I had her, I believed she was my destiny.
I believed I would live forever, even with the Commander’s spirit in me; I believed nothing could
harm us; I believed we could fix everything; I believed her love made me strong. And then Nia killed
her and everything I trusted, everything I believed in, crumbled in moments. Her head was delivered
to me in a box, burns and cuts all over it, hair shorn so I was not even allowed a braid as a
keepsake.”

She smiles bleakly. “I did not just lose her in that moment, I lost myself. Since I won the Conclave I
have been Heda as much as Lexa, but when I saw that, I lost Lexa entirely.” She meets Raven’s gaze
deliberately. “But eventually I found myself again, built a new understanding over the wreckage of
the old. Eventually you will too. Your beliefs are not gone, Raven, simply lost. You will find what
you are looking for. Whatever it is.”

Raven looks at Lexa, mouth open in surprise, and then she scoots over to her on the ground. For a
second Lexa stiffens as Raven swoops towards her, the angle making it appear as if Raven is about
to kiss her, but instead Raven buries her head in the crook of Lexa’s neck, wrapping her arms around
her tightly. “You’re pretty amazing, you know that, Lex,” she says indistinctly, her voice sounding
like a sob.

“So are you,” Lexa says softly. She means it absolutely. “And you definitely will be a… what was
it? A maid of the bride.”

“Heda?” Linkon sticks his head into the cave and flushes when he sees their embrace. “They are
using the bridge. If we wish to keep up with the trail the horses are leaving, we must hurry, otherwise
we will lose them when we need to rest.”

Lexa is not sure what prompts her to do it, but she tucks an errant strand of hair behind Raven’s ear
and places a light kiss on her forehead, as if the mechanic is the younger sister she no longer
remembers. She jerks back a second later. Raven’s forehead is hot, very hot, against her lips. Raven
glances up, surprised, and Lexa realises that her face is flushed as well. She thought it was the cold.
Now Lexa remembers the tiredness Raven has been showing, her occasional dizziness, her difficulty
walking quickly, how she has been more emotional and open than she would normally be.

It’s not the cold. Raven is sick.
For a second Lexa thinks about sending her back, perhaps with Linkon to guide her. But she knows the girl will not go. So she stands and helps Raven up, squeezing her hand for a second, and before Raven can stop her grabs the other girl’s pack and slings it across her shoulder. “Then we will hurry,” she says to Linkon simply. “And I wish you to check Raven as we go. I think she is coming down with something.”
Orion is as good as his word. Nyssa seems surprised by his sudden change of heart, but doesn’t question it.

“Well, you’re not going to tell her?” Clarke asks him once quietly.

“And make her choose between me and her culture?” Orion raises an eyebrow. “I know what she would choose. She has chosen me before. But I will not force her to make that choice again. There is no reason to put her through that.”

“What is the plan?” Gustus says lowly from behind them.

Orion doesn’t look back, but it’s obvious he’s addressing Gustus. “We will leave you before we reach the village. Clarke will announce that your mission is vital and secret, and I will tell our hunters that in return for our assistance ‘Ontari’ told me that there is better hunting far to the west, where the Azplana and her gona will not be. We will avoid the town and go into the wilderness for at least a week so that none can talk of having seen you. That should buy you enough time, sha?”

“Sha,” Clarke says. She feels a rush of gratitude. “When I get home, I’ll tell the Commander about your people, I promise. If we can, we will get food to you. We’ll get food to everyone. I know there’s lot of extra food stored in Trikru and Trishanakru territory in preparation for winter.”

“Then I hope the new Commander comes north before we all starve for the Azplana’s pride,” Orion says flatly.

Nyssa appears beside them, running through the snow swiftly and silently. “Jossan went to the north,” she reports. “There is a gonakru searching. Perhaps for you?” she directs the question at Clarke.

“Perhaps,” Orion says immediately, intercepting the question. “But I do not know that we should risk it.”

Nyssa looks at him strangely. “Risk it? What risk?”

“The Azplana has enemies,” he points out virtuously. “Who is to say it is her gonakru? It could be deserters or natrona. We know that we will defend Ontari and her prisoner with our lives. Who can say that they will do the same?”

“He is correct,” Clarke says, trying to pull back up her façade of cold arrogance and failing. She’s been pretending for so long that she’s exhausted by it. Instead she lets her face fall into the emotion she actually feels, gratitude. “That’s not a risk worth taking.” She smiles at Nyssa when the other woman frowns. “Besides, your hunters are doing such a fine job, I don’t think a dozen gonakru could do better.”

Nyssa flushes with pride and inclines her head. “Mochof,” she says softly but with great feeling.

“You don’t owe me any thanks,” Clarke says honestly. “I should be saying that to you. You’ve kept us safe and fed.” She expands her smile to include Orion. “And your houmon is very selfless to keep guiding us even when he could get rid of us easily.”

“It is my duty,” Orion says smoothly. But for a second he glances at Nyssa and his expression reveals his guilt and worry. He might talk about wanting to keep her protected, but Clarke’s sure a
They reach the village by nightfall.

“Here,” Orion says quietly, passing his quiver to her as they part. “Take this. There are perhaps twenty arrows inside it, and a couple of spare bowstrings since the one you are using now is far too old and loose. There is no point in having a bow without arrows.”

“No, you’ve got a bow without arrows,” Clarke points out.

“I will be fine,” he assures her, glancing back at Nyssa. “My houmon will share her arrows with me.” There’s a momentary pause and then he reaches out, takes her hand, and squeezes it hard. “I wish you luck,” he says.

“I’ll need it,” Clarke says wryly. The other hunters start to gather around her and she raises her voice so they can all hear, and gives the speech Orion told her to give, embroidered with gratitude and praise, but still essentially the same. That this is a secret, that they are to tell no one, that there is better hunting to the west, that she will ensure the Azplana knows of their service. They disappear into the growing darkness and then it is just her and Gustus. The last she sees of them is Orion, natrona to his people and his partner but loyal servant to the Commander, raising his hand in a lonely farewell. She hopes he survives.

“Okay,” Clarke says quietly to Gustus, removing the chains from his wrists. “Just us now.”

He looks her in the eyes. “You were amazing,” he says, softly but fiercely. “You saved both our lives.”

“And now you have to keep them saved,” Clarke says with an uneven little smile. She’s a little flushed from the praise. “I’m guessing we should wait until dark before finding this guy. Do you know where he lives?”

“No at all,” Gustus says calmly. “But it should not be a problem to find out.”

“Gus, they’re looking for us,” Clarke points out. The shortened name just rolls off her tongue, she doesn’t think it through before she says it, but he doesn’t react negatively so she decides it’s probably okay.

“Ogud,” Gustus says, face twisting into a worrying smile. “One at least will find us.”

Clarke shakes her head. “Listen, I don’t know if we should -”

“Clarke,” he says firmly, looking her in the eye. “This is the only way I know of to find who we seek. We cannot search throughout the village for him, we must know exactly where to go. This is the way with the least risk. Do you have any objections besides your scruples?”

There’s a very long pause. Clarke clears her throat, trying to remove the sudden lump from it. She let most of the Maunon die in this world, and she doesn’t regret it, but every single one of the people executed had committed crimes, had let Grounders die so they could live. She manipulated Nia to send her gona south to what she was pretty sure was an ambush or trap of some kind, but they chose to march against the alliance. She caused men and women in Nia’s castle to die but they were part of a plan to get a nuclear missile and attack her and Lexa’s people. All of those things seem very different to what she knows Gustus is talking about here – abducting a person at random, just
because they stray towards the edge of the village alone, and torturing them just to find out a man’s address. Then disposing of them afterwards. There’s a very real chance whoever he finds will be an innocent civilian.

But what’s the alternative? If they stay out here for long, then a scout or hunter will find them. Once the sun comes up, they will have nowhere to hide at all. They can’t wander through the village and hope they run into the spy and he invites them to his house to lay low – they’re both obviously wounded runaways, and Nia probably has the whole place on high alert.

“I don’t want to kill an innocent person,” she says eventually, and feels ashamed of the uncertainty in her voice.

Gustus inclines his head. “And I am not asking you to. Wait here.” And then he disappears as if she’s given him an answer.

She thinks that maybe she did.

Clarke curls into the trunk of a nearby tree – it’s hollowed out a little, and as good a place to wait as any. She runs her fingers over the carvings on Costia’s bow again and again, like there’s a secret story that her precursor might have whittled into it. But instead there’s only vines and flowers and plants twining around and around it, beautifully detailed and heartbreakingly incomplete. Clarke’s not sure anyone but another artist would notice, but the bow was definitely done by someone who thought they had years to make the top half just as perfect as the bottom. Veins are missing from leaves there and the flowers aren’t as intricately perfect as they should be. Someday when she dies, will Clarke also leave drawings unfinished?

The top is interesting for another reason, though – it’s not just pointed like the bottom is, but has actually been sharpened to the point where Clarke thinks you could probably stab someone with it. Costia must have done that in case someone came too close for arrows to be effective. If the gona who attacked her back when they first found out Nia had allied with the Maunon had been as clever, he would have gutted Clarke instead of just winding her and giving her a bruised stomach. She detaches the current string and realises that Orion was right, it’s far too loose to have been able to fire an arrow. She’s actually not sure if you’re supposed to leave bows permanently strung though so she doesn’t put on another one. Odds are she’d just accidentally cut her hand open while trying to navigate the sharpened tip, anyway.

No screams split the night air, but when Gustus appears in front of her again some time later he is dispassionately wiping his bloody hands against his coat.

“Is the body -” Clarke starts to say, then stops. She trusts Gustus, or at least trusts his professionalism – she knows that he won’t have left any evidence behind, that the body will be hidden or disguised somehow. And she doesn’t want to know anything more than that. She doesn’t want to know what he did. “Never mind. Did you find where he is?”

“North side of the village,” Gustus says. “If we go to the back of his house, we should be able to avoid being seen.”

Clarke follows him a little numbly. Since they ran into Orion and his group, she’s been taking the lead and handling everything. Gustus has just been pulled along, a pretend prisoner, all his responsibilities and agency stripped from him and given to her. She took on everything, and she finds that now she’s tired mentally as much as she is physically. Her healing ankle aches and her mind feels soupy and strange. So she lets him take the lead now, pulling her down tiny village streets to hide in dark corners, leading her through shadowy alleys and into the crooks of trees, and eventually to an unlit door that he raps on harshly.
The man who opens it is middle-aged but muscular, a little hunched, with narrowed thoughtful eyes and very long blonde hair. Clarke only gets a glimpse of him though before he registers Gustus’s face and tries to slam the door again. Gustus forces it open, dragging Clarke in after him. “Greetings, Assan,” he says, one side of his mouth curling up into a smirk. “We seek sanctuary.”

“The Commander is dead,” Assan growls, face flushing. Clarke notices that the Azgeda scars on his cheek are shallow and small compared with most, as if he’s been carefully nicked with a razor instead of slashed with a sword. “I have risked more than enough to help her. And it was all for nothing, now she is gone, and all of you are natrona -”

Gustus growls in return. “Say that again,” he invites lowly. “I dare you.”

Assan takes several steps backwards, and clears his throat, becoming more cordial. “I mean no offence to the former Commander, none at all, and none to you as well. But you must see -”

“I see that you have more than enough space for us,” Gustus raps out. “I see that you will hide us here, or when we are captured yours will be the first name I list -”

“Threaten me with what you like,” Assan says, face flushing further, anger growing. “My loyalty -”

“Your loyalty should be to the woman you owe so much to,” Gustus says softly. “And now to her chosen successor. But I tell you something, Assan – if you feel your loyalty to the Azgeda to be all-important in these times of war, more important than your vows to the Commander, then I can respect that.” He smiles, but there is nothing friendly in it. “So yours will be the second name I list. How is your daughter? Does she still live in the village? She must be proud her nontu has such principles.”

“Hey,” Clarke says, finding her voice again. “Enough, Gustus.” She turns to look at Assan. “We’re not here to hurt you or anyone,” she says clearly. “All you need to do is hide us for a few days, so we can sleep in the warmth, heal, and build up our strength. And in return we’ll leave, we’ll never mention you to anyone, you’ll be safe, your daughter will be safe. I promise, Assan. Just a few days.”

Assan meets her eyes, then finally nods slowly. “Sha,” he says, voice harsh. “A few days.”
Raven does not get better. Her bursts of strength get shorter and further apart in the following days. She shivers violently whenever they are outside, teeth chattering loudly, and after a whispered conference they wrap her in every available blanket and Linkon carries her as much as possible, while Zion and Lexa (both around Raven’s height and therefore unable to carry her quickly) carry all of their supplies. At least Raven can cling enough to be carried piggy-back, though Lexa can see the exertion exhausts her. She coughs harshly and painfully. When they stop for brief rests she sleeps lightly, thrashing against the blankets, waking to disorientation. Sometimes she complains and snarks at them and Lexa breathes easier. But sometimes instead she sobs weakly, apologising for slowing them down, for having to be carried, and from Raven that scares Lexa more than anything else.

“We cannot continue like this,” she tells Linkon softly one night, huddled in the little windbreak Zion has made them out of snow because they could not find anywhere better. They are barely keeping pace with Nia’s gona as it is, the horses are slowed a little by the weather but the gona are not expending half the energy their followers are and it shows in their pace. Zion is out right now in the sharp wind seeing if he can pick up the trail again.

“Moba, Heda,” Linkon says, face crumpled with tiredness and worry. “I am doing all I know how to do, but illnesses such as this take time -”

“Time we do not have,” Lexa says flatly. “I think you will have to take her south again, to Abby.” She looks at the shifting mass of blankets Raven is hidden in. “We may all have to go south. I cannot justify the risk of taking the Flame north without a fisa to take it back to Polis if the worst should happen, and without Raven and her bombs I see no way to take the Azplana by surprise and recover Clarke.”

“It is your decision,” Linkon says dutifully, but she can see the relief in his face plainly, as well as the regret. Linkon would never want to do something that could endanger a patient. And their mission has been a partial success – they brought the missile home.

But they have not brought Clarke home.

Raven apparently has the same thought and manages to struggle so that her head is outside her mass of blankets. “Not happening,” she croaks, face flushed and sickly-looking. “We’re in this until we get Clarke. That’s the deal.”

Lexa shakes her head. “We will lose them at this pace, and I do not know how to go faster,” she tells Raven bluntly. She gives Linkon a look and he turns away, pretending not to hear their argument as he starts searching in his pack for some more herbs for Raven.

“So I’ll start walking again,” Raven says, just as stubborn even though she looks barely able to sit up. “Or we’ll steal a horse. Or you can leave me somewhere to wait for you, maybe with one of your spy friends – I can give you a quick rundown on how to use bombs so you don’t blow yourself up. But we’re not going back, not yet.”

“Raven -” Lexa starts to say.

“Please,” Raven says, hoarse voice cracking. “I’m asking you as my friend, please don’t do this.
Don’t make me the reason we fail. We are friends, right?” She widens her eyes at Lexa, who recognises that Raven is trying to manipulate her.

“Of course,” Lexa says immediately anyway. “Of course we are friends -”

Raven manages a smile, her first in a while, and interrupts again. “Exactly! Good friends, best friends even. Friends with benefits, in fact. The benefits in this case being my awesome advice. You should listen to your friends. And my advice is that we shouldn’t go back. I don’t care if I hack up a lung, we need to keep going, we need to find Clarke.”

Lexa sighs and closes her eyes, thinking. Her insides twist at the thought of abandoning Clarke. Every part of her wants to race north, to find Clarke, to do something, her own desires echoed in Raven’s determination. But there are no villages nearby to hide in or steal a horse from, nowhere to leave Raven safely, and no way to keep pace with the riders they are tracking with Raven sick and slow.

Then Zion appears next to her, face troubled. “Heda, we have a problem,” he says uneasily.

“Zion, Raven and I are in the middle of -” She breaks off at his expression. “Report,” she says sharply instead, own worry growing. “What is it?”

“They went towards the west,” Zion informs her. “West and a little to the south, so they met and then followed the bank of the last frozen river we crossed but avoided the rough ground just to the north of it. I tracked them for a while to see why, to discover the reason for them going off course.” She nods at him to go on. “There…” he hesitates again, then forces it out. “There was a gonakru.”

Lexa pauses as well. “A gonakru? How many?” Nia has waited longer than Lexa thought she would once she heard the border was open. She expected a gonakru to be sent south weeks ago.

“Hundreds,” he says flatly. “Hundreds and hundreds, a line of camps stretching along as far as I could see, just a little north of the river bank, so that they nearly reach us. It must be nearly half the gona in Azgeda territory. And the way they headed straight for them – the gona we are following knew that they would be there.” He swallows hard. “It looks like… it looks like the gonakru are set up to head north.”

Lexa blinks. “North,” she says slowly. “Why would they head north?” Forgetting that question, she moves onto another one, a more pressing one. “Scout towards the south,” she tells Zion rapidly. “As quickly as possible. To the last bridge we crossed.” It’s at least two hours’ away, but Zion nods and does not question her. In a moment he is gone.

Lexa stalks over to where Raven is still sitting. “Raven kom Skaikru. Raven. We need your assistance. Now.”

“Heda?” Linkon says doubtfully.

She ignores him and addresses Raven. “The radio you brought. The one so Wells could contact us as a very last resort.”

Raven blinks at her. “In my pack.”

Lexa gestures to Linkon and he goes to her pack. “You can use it to listen in on other conversations,” Lexa says. “You told me that once. You can, yes?”

“Yes,” Raven says, trying to sit up again and failing. “But – but if they’re any good with them -” she coughs, wearing her voice thin. “If you listen in,” she manages to say eventually, voice a thin thread
now. “They can tell where you are, or at least that you’re listening.” She struggles to think, closing her eyes for a second, then opening them wearily. “But without Mount Weather or Prison Station – yeah, okay. I don’t think they could find us.”

“Then I need you to see if you can find the conversation Nia’s gona will be having with her any minute,” Lexa says quietly. She takes the radio from Linkon and holds it out as Raven stares uncomprehending.

Linkon looks at her, confused, then understands. “For them to stop heading north -”

“They have a faster way to tell her of what has happened. Yes.” Lexa frowns. “If nearly every gona in Azgeda territory is gathering there, it makes sense that they will have a radio.” How many of the devices did the Maunon give Nia? She is squandering them quickly, however many she has.

Raven doesn’t question it, just takes the radio and slides down into her cocoon of blankets again. The noise of coughing and the harsh static of the radio meld together to Lexa after a while as she sits and tries to think what must be happening. Why would Nia tell so many to gather and march north? Is she trying to protect just her own corner of Azgeda territory, throwing the rest to the Trikru and hoping it satisfies them? That would be foolish and short-sighted, but more than that, it would show more weakness than she thinks Nia would be willing to show.

“Got it,” Raven croaks out, and a hand emerges to hand Lexa the now-speaking radio. Raven curls herself back into the blankets and listens.

“…the Skaikru are proving to be worthy foes,” a man’s voice comes hesitantly.

“No, Wilfrid.” Lexa recognises the cold voice immediately – Nia. “They are not. You are proving to be worthless fools. That is the problem. If they were worthy foes they would also be worthy allies, and that is clearly not the case. Did you at least kill them before you left?”

Wilfrid clears his throat. “No, Azplana. We wished to ask for your orders first.”

Another man, voice deeper and gruffer, lets out a snort. “Of course you cannot so much as draw a bow without express permission,” he says so quietly Lexa can barely understand it through the static.

“Shof op, branwada,” Nia commands. “You are not any more in my favour than this fool, with your fanciful tales -”

“I tell you, that is what those at the border say!” the second man objects. “The gonakru went south but then when they tried to return the earth became angry and threw fire at them. They reported it themselves to you as well as us on the device you gave to them -”


“Before they stopped answering you at all, Diefen, from what you say,” Wilfrid interjects at the same time. “Instead of braving the border to return to us, the bushhada you picked kept running south and -”

“Em pleni!” Nia cuts him off viciously. “You have both displeased me and you will suffer for it. But for now, are you ready to march north?”

“We are waiting for several of the villages from the south west, the way he and his fellows just came,” Diefen says, a little sourly. Lexa is somehow sure that the two of them are glaring at each other. “They will block off that bridge and then we will start making our way north. No one will
escape our search.”

“They had better not,” Nia says, voice threatening. “Do not allow a single person to go south unless you are sure of who they are, and do not be fooled by disguises, every person must be checked closely. Search every cave and village and tree. If they are not found, I will have all your hides.”

The radio goes silent, leaving Lexa, Linkon and Raven staring at it.

Eventually Lexa raises her eyes. “Perhaps they are searching for Clarke,” she comments, trying to keep her voice steady, although she knows she is not quite managing. A part of her is fiercely sure that it is Clarke, that only her sky girl could cause this level of panic in Nia, but another part of her cautions that perhaps she believes that only because she wishes to, because if it is true it means Clarke is not dead or being tortured. Of course, Clarke out in the open alone in the frozen north is probably in as much danger as Clarke locked away with Nia. “In any case, I know what Zion will report when he returns, now – the bridge to the south will be blocked by the stragglers from there joining this army, completing the chain from west to east. We cannot escape through a large gonakru searching every inch of the place. We are trapped here, and there is nowhere to go but north.”

Linkon swallows hard. He looks at Raven, who stifles another coughing fit that leaves her gasping. “Then I suppose we must go north.”

“Sha,” Lexa replies, a little hollowly. She also looks at where Raven is huddled and feels her heart clench in her chest. She desperately wanted to go north, and now she can – but the cost has made it useless. An Azgeda army on Azgeda territory, heading relentlessly north… they will either be found or freeze eventually, even with Zion’s help. She has no way to locate Clarke, no idea where she could be – they will not be able to find where Nia is now that the gona they were following have joined the gonakru, and if Clarke has escaped Nia than she could be anywhere at all. Lexa’s plan was as rash and foolish as Anya claimed.

It was one thing to cross the border north, in disguise, with no one looking for them. If they try and head south now and end up searched, they will die. Linkon has Trikru tattoos, Raven has no tattoos at all, and Lexa has the marks of the Commander. Zion might be allowed through, with his facial scars and Azgeda tattoos – but not if they notice the wound the bullet left on his cheek, or make-up used to hide this. And the rest of them will have no chance at all.

Enough, Lexa tells herself firmly. Perhaps they will be able to see a weak point in the gonakru and exploit it to get past, perhaps one of her spies has a place secret enough that even so many Azgeda gona searching will not find it, perhaps they will find a way. The plan to find and kill Nia is doomed, but that does not mean they are also doomed.

They will head north and locate one of her spies to help them. And they will survive.

Chapter End Notes

In two weeks, my girlfriend and I are heading to Italy. In case you can’t tell, there is no way I'll be able to wrap up this story by then, so I'm afraid there's going to be a break of at least five weeks while I'm away. I'm really sorry about this! Please be patient, I promise I'm not abandoning the story.
“You are not eating enough,” Gustus grumbles, fretting over Clarke as she forces down the last of the bread. “I will tell him to bring more later.”

Clarke rolls her eyes. “I’m sure he’s bringing everything he can, Gus.” Frankly, she’s not so bothered by her hunger as she is by her frustration. She and Gustus are both healing up well here, and it’s reasonably warm, but lying around quietly in a hidden basement twenty-four hours a day is going to drive her mad pretty quickly.

“I am not so sure,” Gustus says, voice a rumble of displeasure. “He should go without food if you need more. He made vows to the Commander and the alliance. As her second-in-command, those vows are to you as well.”

“Well, I don’t need more food,” Clarke says reasonably. “I’m fine. I don’t want him to starve for me, regardless of what vows he made to the alliance.” She looks at him in the half-darkness. “Why did he agree to be a spy for Lexa, anyway? If you remember.”

Gustus sighs, some of the annoyance going out of his frame. “For this one, I do remember. Years ago, when Azgeda and Trikru were still at war and Heda had only just ascended, he lived near the border. His daughter was a Seken and her unit was attacked by one of ours and nearly all were killed. The rest were taken to Polis as prisoners to be interrogated. Lexa gave orders not to harm the girl because of her youth, Assan came south and promised his service for her life, and she was returned to him.” He looks lost in memories. “After that Assan moved north, and since then he has been tireless in seeking information for Heda, even though his daughter is now grown.” He glances at Clarke and his lips quirk into the ghost of a smile. “Did you ask this story so I would remember his past loyalty and be less critical?”

“That depends,” Clarke says jokingly. “Did it work?”

“Perhaps,” Gustus says evasively, though even in the darkness she can see the amusement in his eyes.

“I guess that means it’s my turn to tell a story,” Clarke comments. “I think I’m running out, though.”

The floor above them is too close for them to even really sit up, so for training they’ve been limited to things like push-ups and half-sit-ups. Apart from the food Assan brings to them and the regular brief trips above to do things like go to the bathroom and breathe fresh air, there’s really nothing to do here. They quiet when there’s the sound of conversation above as someone visits Assan, but they’ve been filling the rest of the time with whispered conversation. Gustus’s stories are terse and non-descriptive, and Clarke’s are filled with self-interruptions as she clarifies what different things on the Ark are, but it’s better than nothing.

Of course, she could tell him the greatest story she has. The story of travelling in time. But if there’s anyone who should get to decide whether to tell him that story, it’s Lexa.

“I have been meaning to speak to you about something more important,” Gustus says, suddenly grave. He passes something into Clarke’s hands.

She realises what it is from the texture more than the look of it. “The book Titus told me to get,” she
“Sha. You are the Fleimkepa. It is yours now.”

“No, it’s not,” Clarke says, trying to pass it back to him.

“Titus gave it to you.”

“And I gave it to you,” Clarke points out. “I don’t want to be a religious leader, especially not of this religion. And I already have a job. And a relationship, for that matter – I’m guessing the Fleimkepa dating the Commander wouldn’t be allowed.”

“I cannot be the Fleimkepa,” Gustus insists, an edge to his voice. “I cannot -”

“Why not?”

Gustus hesitates, then says flatly. “Reading is common among your people, from what you have told me. It is not common among mine.”

Clarke blinks. She knew that already, but for some reason, this is the first time the fact really connects. “You can’t read the book.”

“No. A letter here or there, perhaps – Heda has taught me to recognise a few of them just in case,” he says gruffly. She realises, surprised, that he’s embarrassed by his lack of knowledge. “We have used the letter ‘S’ as a symbol of trouble, for example. Because it looks like a snake. But as for reading – knowing what they do together, all of them – no. It would take years of learning before I could guess a single word.” He lets out a bitter laugh. “We cannot be scholars and geniuses like Skaikru are. When we are goufa, we must learn to fight, we must learn to hunt, learn to skin, learn to build, learn to survive.”

“Sorry,” Clarke says softly, realising she’s hurt his feelings, made him feel like he’s failed even though he could never have foreseen her handing a book to him and calling him Fleimkepa without warning. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like that. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you. If you want to learn, I can teach you how to read. Otherwise, we can definitely find another person to be Fleimkepa when we get back. Now that the Nightbloods won’t have a conclave maybe one of them could even be Fleimkepa for a while – they know how to read, right?”

“Sha,” he says, relaxing again. “Sha, they do.”

Suddenly there’s noise from above – multiple footsteps, accompanied by urgent voices – and they both go silent. Assan must have more people over. Out of his guests, at least one group so far were there to search the place, but they hadn’t found the door to the hidden basement. Clarke’s not even sure she could find it and she’s seen it be opened multiple times, heard that little squeak of resistance as it’s pulled up. The Azgeda are apparently just really good at making hiding places – which is probably a reflection of Nia’s ruling style.

Clarke moves to press her ear to the ceiling – well, the floor, but it’s the ceiling for them. She can hear Assan speak, just barely. “There… thing I must… ow you,” she manages to make out. Gustus stiffens at the exact moment she does. Something he needs to show them – it can’t be them, can it? No. He wouldn’t do that. It can’t be.

Then it comes. The little squeak of the door, followed by the flood of light above them. Assan’s decided his loyalty doesn’t extend this far, apparently. He’s giving them up. Clarke realises she’s shaking with fear and tension.
“Natrona,” Gustus spits quietly and hauls himself out, swords already moving.

Clarke’s blinded by the light but she follows anyway, swinging her sword at the hazy figure to her left. She hears Assan cry out and block Gustus’s blow as the man she aims for staggers backwards in surprise. His reaction calms her a little. Her eyes clear enough to notice the shock on his face only a second or two before she notices who he is.

Recognition is swiftly followed by doubt and confusion as she pulls back. “Zion?” she says dumbly. It’s been quite a while since she last saw him, heading off for Polis with the other Azgeda survivors from the Maunon ambush, and his facial hair is somewhat more extreme now, but she’s sure it’s him.

His eyes widen in turn. But it’s a gasp from behind him that pulls all of Clarke’s attention immediately.

Lexa steps past Zion. Clarke hears the clunk as Gustus’s swords hit the floor, hears his shocked exclamation of “Heda!” She doesn’t look around though, doesn’t focus on anything but the vivid green eyes that have haunted her dreams, the solemn face framed by dark braids, even as her eyes become too filled with tears to see her properly.

Lexa’s expression breaks down, usual impassiveness turning into a kind of stunned joy, eyes shining with new tears, and she abandons all of her usual calm façade as she launches herself at Clarke at the same moment Clarke runs towards her. They slam into each other, embracing so tightly and forcefully that it feels like they won’t ever be able to separate, twirling around in amazement and disbelief. For a second someone starts to say something – possibly thinking they’re wrestling instead of hugging, which would be understandable – but then someone else shushes him.

Clarke presses her face into Lexa’s neck, her lips against it, feeling the softness of it, but even more than that feeling the steady pulse of life, the warmth flowing through her. She thought she was cold in the snow and the basement would help her get warm, but she knows now that she would be cold no matter where she went, because the coldness was since Lexa wasn’t with her and Lexa needed to be with her.

Every little pain in her body goes away, her ankle’s slight throbbing dying down immediately, her headache easing, the hole inside her knitting itself shut because Lexa is here. She wanted to go home so badly, but home came to her, home is here, it’s Lexa, it’s always Lexa. Clarke finds herself saying fervently and incoherently “Lexa, Lexa, Lexa,” into Lexa’s neck over and over again, tears tracing their way down her face as she rubs it against her fiancée. She used to think you couldn’t belong to people but she is Lexa’s and Lexa is hers and she needs her.

Lexa seems no more controlled, sobbing “Yu nou stedaun, yu nou stedaun”, chanting it as if it’s a prayer: you’re not dead. You’re not dead.

Eventually they manage to pull apart, even if only so they can look at each other’s faces.

“You are alive,” Lexa says, voice choked.

“Yeah,” Clarke says, reaching up to touch Lexa’s cheek lightly. “So are you.”

“Sha. Ai hod yu in, ai niron.”

“Ai hod yu in,” Clarke echoes, feeling a smile split her face. She leans in and kisses Lexa joyfully and passionately, fisting a hand in Lexa’s hair to ground herself and nipping at her bottom lip before pushing her tongue in, feeling her heart start to pound faster –

There’s a series of loud, hacking coughs from behind her, and Lexa pulls back from Clarke, flushed
and panting. She clears her throat and takes a further step back.

“Get a room, guys,” Raven says croakily, and Clarke blushed bright red in realisation and embarrassment. She’d completely forgotten anyone else was there.

She turns to glare at her friend, only to be taken aback by her appearance. Raven’s face is also flushed, but not healthily, and it’s obvious Lincoln is holding her upright. Beneath her sweat her skin is waxy, her eyes are dull, she’s shivering, she seems to find it difficult to breathe properly, and Clarke can nearly see the heat radiating off her. Looking at Clarke she tries to force a smile but fails and falls into a coughing fit. “Lie her down flat,” Clarke orders, immediately forgetting about everything else. Raven is sick, she can see that just by looking at her.

“I like a little more romance than that,” Raven manages to say before she’s caught by another coughing fit. Lincoln helps her to lie down.

Clarke presses her ear against Raven’s chest and sighs in relief. No crackling hoarseness to it.

Not pneumonia, at least.

Probably just a really bad, untreated cold, Clarke guesses. Untreated by Skaikru medicine, anyway, and Raven wouldn’t have realised she had to tell someone when it was getting worse and it wouldn’t just gradually pass like colds on the Ark normally did, disappearing as the sufferer went a bit slower and stayed a bit warmer. Raven was unaccustomed to weather like this, unused to this kind of exertion, and had been wearing herself down gradually since she came down from the Ark – if it hadn’t been for the work done to them up on the Ark to make them more disease resistant, she probably would have gotten sick much earlier. She’s been exhausted and cold and had no real rest, so her body’s reacting far worse than it would normally.

Well, she’s in a warm place now.

Lexa’s looking at her, eyes wide and worried. “We have been doing all we can,” she says, clearly forcing her voice to stay calm. “Especially Linkon. But it was not safe to go any direction but north, Linkon has limited supplies, being carried is not the same as truly being able to rest, and it seemed like we did not have enough blankets to keep her warm.”

“Liquids,” Clarke says firmly. “Wrap her in as many blankets as possible and we’ll force as much water into her as possible. Lincoln, can I have a look at your meds?”

“Can you stop talking about me like I’m not here?” Raven snaps crankily. “Jeez, a girl gets the flu and suddenly everyone -” she starts coughing convulsively again.

Clarke pauses just for a second as she goes to grab Lincoln’s medical bag, and presses a swift but fierce kiss on Lexa. “Mochof, ai hodnes,” she says quietly. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“Thank you for being here,” Lexa says back.

Chapter End Notes

I can do a few more chapters before I head off but after that it's all cliffhangers, and I don't want any of you yelling at me as much as Cassy did.

(Kidding. Cassy is wonderful. EVERYONE THANK CASSY. And send good vibes
her way.)
“Gustus,” Lexa says, surveying her old friend with pleasure as Clarke and Linkon start to bustle around Raven. “I thought your fight was over.”

“As did I,” Gustus admits with a shrug. “Perhaps I have a little more fight left in me.”

After a moment she reaches out her hand and clasps his forearm firmly in a quick gesture of greeting and affection. “I am glad,” she tells him, then steps back. “The sick girl is Raven kom Skaikru, who has skills with technology rarely seen, and you may remember Linkon, who is a fisa and scout from TonDC. This here is Zion, my guide in these areas. He used to lead an Azgeda gonakru.”

Assan frowns, apparently recognising the name. “Wait. You were given command of Rathan’s unit after his death, were you not?”

“Heda gave me command,” Zion says stolidly. “Though I confess I did poorly with it.”

“A few of the gona in the group were from our village,” Assan says, a little coldly, raking his long pale hair back from his face. “Rumour says the Skaikru turned on our people and slaughtered them all with the help of the Maunon. It is becoming known as snapwor, the shortest battle, because the few survivors who returned say it took only minutes for nearly all the Azgeda gona to be killed.” He glances at the closest door as if judging whether he could get away, then he returns his darkening gaze to Zion and reaches slowly to touch the hilt of his sword. “And yet you survived—”

Lexa intervenes. “Most gona died from the Maunon and Ripa, who attempted to kill Azgeda, Skaikru and Trikru alike.” she says coolly. “Zion did not cause what happened, it was the fault of the Azplana for giving information to the Mountain, and the fault of an impulsive Skayon who is now dead. And perhaps my fault for allowing that Skayon to be there, so that he could begin the unnecessary fight with a foolish threat to Zion. You can ask Clarke and Raven kom Skaikru as well if you like, they were also present and can confirm what I say. Zion’s only fault was serving the Azplana.” Zion looks an odd mix of grateful and guilty. She knows he believes it absolutely to be his fault, but he will not argue with her.

Assan frowns again. He looks over at Clarke and Raven and his brow furrows further, but then he removes his hand from his sword and inclines his head respectfully. “Moba, Heda,” he says in a conciliatory way, “I should not have threatened one of your people. If you say the deaths of our people are not this man’s fault, I believe you.”

“I regret every life lost, but those losses enabled us to destroy the Mountain and prevent others from experiencing that pain,” Lexa tells him softly. “Now the few survivors of that attack honour their fallen by aiding me against the Azplana, who continues to cause war between our peoples just as she did that time.”

“Sha, Heda,” Assan says deferentially.

Lexa returns her attention to Gustus. “You must tell me how you survived. You and Clarke both.”

“That was more Clarke’s work than mine,” Gustus replies. He smiles very faintly. “She is nearly as stubborn as you are, Heda. And as wise. You have chosen well.”

“Mochof,” Lexa says, smiling back at him wryly. Their gazes meet, conveying their shared happiness and relief at each other’s safety.
“There are two important pieces of information we have for you,” he says, clearing his throat, dropping some of his warmth and straightening, business-like again. “Firstly, we know where the Azplana is, or at least where she is now. In a hidden mountain castle in the north, nearly impossible to find.”

Lexa blinks, then nods. “Come,” she orders him, and strides over to stand beside Raven’s makeshift sickbed. “We must talk,” she tells Clarke, “All of us. We have very little time.”

“Very little?” Clarke says, stopping fussing over Raven and standing up. She studies Lexa thoughtfully. “When you said it wasn’t safe to go any direction but north—”

“It is not,” Lexa replies. “An army is coming north. We have been staying ahead of them only because of how thoroughly they are searching each village and forest—probably for you and Gustus.” Clarke blinks, Assan inhales sharply and Gustus growls. The others, already aware of this information, don’t react at all.

Clarke pauses, just breathing and thinking for several minutes, looking at all the angles. “So we’ll hide in the basement here, then when they’ve gone past—”

“They would find us,” Lexa tells her. “We have been listening on the radio. They have measured homes to see if the walls and floors are correct, they have interrogated and sometimes tortured anyone who has ever been south of the border like Assan has, they have set places on fire when they thought the owner seemed dishonest, they even have some trained wolves using their noses and ears to find human prey in empty houses. Whatever you did to escape, you have certainly given Nia a great deal of respect for you.” She smiles wryly. “Or a great deal of fear.”

“Aww, don’t be jealous,” Raven interjects hoarsely, “I’m sure she’s scared of you too.”

Lexa forces herself not to smile. She has gotten used to Raven’s sense of humour as they have travelled together, and although she does not always understand it, when she does it is hard not to show her amusement. Jokes have not been common in her life. “In any case, I do not know how we can get south. But Gustus tells me you know Nia’s location, so I think we should go north.”

Gustus blinks in surprise. “I thought we could take the information south, send assassins against the Azplana,” he protests. “A small gonakru, perhaps, striking—”

“We are already here,” Lexa says firmly.

Clarke looks at her. “Yeah, we are,” she says thoughtfully. “Would they really give in and let us through if we killed Nia, though?”

“Perhaps if we had Roan,” Lexa proposes. “Do you know where he is?”

Clarke shakes her head. “He was busy laying a false trail for Nia the last time I saw him,” she says regretfully. “He could be anywhere by now, but I’m betting he went as far as possible, and Nia is much more likely to find him than we are.”

“Maybe we could just blow a hole in their army and run through it,” Raven suggests weakly from her spot on the floor. “I’m not sure I have enough bombs for that though. Maybe if we gathered them all in one place, like a village or something. It would have to be a small village though.”

“Gus and I could lure them there?” Clarke says doubtfully. Lexa can see she knows that would be unlikely to get enough of them.

Zion shakes his head. “You did not see them, Raven kom Skaikru. They would not all fit in a small
village even if they were standing on top of each other.” He smiles humourlessly. “If that is all the bombs you have, you could not remove enough of them for us to head south again without being chased and caught.”

“I’ll have a look at the arsenal,” Raven decides. “See what I can do, if I can MacGyver us something better, or join them all together, or… something. I’ll come up with something. Grab my pack, will you, Link?” Linkon obediently goes to the other side of the room and fetches it.

“How far behind us are they?” Clarke asks.

“We have been using Raven’s device to listen in to theirs,” Lexa tells her. “They report to Nia twice every day, at sunrise and sunset. Zion has been estimating their speed based on that, and believes we have perhaps two days, and that only because they are moving slowly.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Clarke frowns. “You told me it’s possible to track unauthorised people on your channel sometimes, Raven. Couldn’t Prison Station -”

“Prison Station is no longer in a position to do anything,” Lexa says bluntly. “We came through there on the way to here. The missile is headed back south.” suddenly she stops, inhales sharply, and looks at Raven. “Mines,” she says, trying to contain her horror. “You think that Nia’s first gonakru, the raiding party, were trapped south by mines. What if the others run into them?”

There’s a long, horrified pause, then Clarke says, “Wait, do people in Polis know that you’re here? Aden, Anya, whoever else is there?”

“Aden, Indra, and Wells,” Lexa corrects. “Anya and Octavia went with the missile, helping John drive it south. Your mother and Kane are in Arkadia. And all of them know we are here.”

“They’d never risk blowing you up,” Clarke points out, colour returning to her face. “You’re the Commander. They must have somebody watching and ready to turn off the mines just in case. Some kind of signal. Wouldn’t they?”

“I suppose we will find out,” Lexa says dryly. “There is not much we can do about it now. They will have reached the border long ago with that vehicle. If we had thought of this earlier we could have used the radio.”

“We didn’t know there were mines then,” Raven points out. “You can’t keep beating yourself up over everything, Lex.”

“She’s right, ai hodnes,” Clarke says, reaching out and taking her hand. Lexa supposes that after their earlier display there is no point in hiding what they are to each other. She does not want to hide, anyway. Clarke’s touch spreads warmth through her and she nearly sighs with happiness just at having her back.

“It’s not your fault. We need to concentrate on what we can do now.”

“We do have two days,” Gustus says reasonably. “You and the others look like you need sleep, Heda, and this house is warm. We can start north tomorrow to put more space between us and the gonakru, and make plans on the way – the noise will soon attract attention if we continue talking through the night here, anyway.”

Lexa hesitates, then nods – not for herself, but for Raven, who certainly needs a proper rest. Then she remembers. “Hod op, Gustus, you said you had two important points. What is the second?”

Gustus looks thoughtful for a second, then says, “Clarke kom Skaikru has a – a gift, from an old friend who could not come himself.” Titus, Lexa realises.
She looks at Gustus for a moment, then glances at Assan. “We will need a space to talk privately,”
she tells him imperturbably. “Just Gustus, Clarke and I. The rest of you may sleep.” Also, the rest of
them should not know all the mysteries of the Fleimkepa. *She* should not even know all the mysteries
of the Fleimkepa, but apparently there is no hope for it.

Assan nods and gestures for them to follow him. “I have a spare bedroom that you can speak in,
Heda,” he says respectfully. “You can also have it as your own for as long as you wish, to rest and
recover from your journey.”

Clarke frowns at him. “You put *us* in the basement,” she points out, and Gustus snorts.

“Because I did not wish to take the risk of having you in the open,” Assan replies harshly, respect
disappearing as he looks at Clarke instead. “But now you will not all fit below and I must take that
risk. If someone from my village comes in and sees you, they will burn the place down just in case
there are more fugitives, so there is no more safety to be gained by hiding anyone in the basement. If
someone sees you, we are all dead, regardless of what I do.”

“You are doing a great service for the alliance,” Lexa says quietly. “It will not be forgotten.”

“I do this because of my debt to you,” he says tightly. “Not because of the alliance. So long as you
draw breath, Heda, I owe you for my daughter. It is enough that you do not forget my actions. May I
speak with you in private after you are done with this meeting?”

At her nod, he leaves them in the small, dingy bedroom. Without Gustus looming it would probably
seem less tiny, but with him there it barely seems large enough for the three of them.

“Titus?” Lexa asks softly once the door is closed.

“Captured,” Clarke answers. “I couldn’t get him out like Gus, he was pretty comprehensively
chained up.”

So they know where Titus is, at least. If they go after Nia – but they should not go after Nia, they
should be trying to go south again, it is their best chance. But if they did, they could also try and
retrieve Titus. While she does not trust him, and the memory of his betrayal still stings, Lexa does
miss his presence and even his advice. He has been beside her for so long perhaps it would be
strange if she did not.

“What ‘gift’ did he give you?” Lexa says.

Clarke pulls it out of her bedraggled coat. “This book,” she says.

Lexa blinks, and looks at it. “I see,” she says, relieved. “Then we have all we need. Obviously, I
would prefer to deal with Nia and retrieve Titus, but if we can get home with the book and the
Flame…” she pauses, thoughtful. “Perhaps we can send Zion south with the book at least. The
gonakru might let him pass.”

Gustus shakes his head. “You said they were searching people. He has that wound on his face, it is a
Maunon wound, a very recent one. It is suspicious. They would certainly search him.”

“A bullet wound,” Clarke corrects absently. “Prison Station, I’m guessing. And what do you mean,
get home *with* the Flame? I hope you mean get home safely.” She scowls at Lexa. “You’re not dying
and leaving me to act as courier service for a chip, ai hodnes. We’re all going home *together*.”

“Of course,” Lexa says soothingly. “That is the preferred outcome.” She is confused when this does
not lighten Clarke’s scowl, and so reaches out to pull her closer. “All of us, together,” she says, more
firmly. “I promise.”

Clarke relaxes slightly, then looks down at the book. “You know, I actually don’t even want to know what this is or what it does. I’m glad we’ve got it if it’s that important, though.”

“All you need to know is that it is necessary for the Commander to ascend,” Lexa tells her. “We will have to see if we can find another way to send it south. Perhaps Assan – but no, he has an accent from the south since he used to live by the border, they will definitely search him as well.” She barely stops herself from yawning.

“I will leave you to rest now, Heda,” Gustus says, bowing his head slightly and waiting for Lexa’s nod of dismissal.

“Tell Assan our private discussion must wait,” Lexa says absently, staring at Clarke, eyes filled with love.

Clarke stays, and after the door closes behind Gustus, pulls Lexa even closer and kisses her fiercely. Lexa presses against her, distracted from her tiredness, and pulls Clarke down onto the bed.
“Why are they taking so long?” Raven scowls, staring down at the radio as Clarke enters the room. It’s just past sunrise, and already Raven and Lexa are by the radio, waiting to hear the gonakru’s update to Nia. Zion and Lincoln are still asleep, Gustus is guarding the door just in case, and Assan has gone out to try and find more food in the forest for his growing number of guests.

“It takes as long as it takes,” Lexa says serenely.

“Lex, if you say that again -” Raven says hotly, glaring at Lexa. She looks much healthier now she’s had some proper rest in the warmth, though still not great. Lexa also looks much more rested, though Clarke can attest that between telling each other their stories since they separated and – other things – she didn’t get quite as much sleep.

“You will attempt to blow me up? That seems a waste of your bombs,” Lexa replies, voice and expression still perfectly calm.

“No, but I’ll,” Raven struggles to come up with something. “I’ll… I’ll be really annoying.”

“That will of course be completely out of character,” Lexa says in her politest tone.

Raven tries to glare at her and then cracks up again, eventually dissolving into a coughing fit. “One-nil,” she says eventually.

“You guys seem to have grown closer,” Clarke comments idly, sitting down next to where Raven is lying. Deep inside, though, she does feel suddenly a little bit left out.

Lexa and Raven have been together strengthening their bonds, having adventures, making up private nicknames and jokes, while she’s been spending her days with people like Nia and Ontari. It makes her feel apart from them and she hates it.

Then she remembers Lexa’s look of surprise when she called Gustus ‘Gus’ the previous night, and feels kind of like a hypocrite. So Raven and Lexa have become closer, so what, she tells herself firmly. That’s good.

“Sha,” Lexa tells her, sharp eyes studying Clarke like she can read her mind. She gives Clarke a small, private smile and takes her hand, playing with her fingers, and Clarke feels like she’s been drawn into their circle again and smiles back. “Raven tells me we are now…” she searches her memory, then clearly comes up with the right words. “…friends with benefits. This is the greatest friendship, she tells me.” Raven cackles.

Clarke closes her eyes, counts to ten, then opens them again. “Raven. Why. Why would you do this.”

“Animal attraction,” Raven deadpans, well aware that’s not what Clarke’s asking, and Clarke glares at her.

Then she turns to look at Lexa. “Whatever else Raven has told you about Skaikru phrases and culture, forget them now,” she enunciates slowly.

Lexa blinks. “So… ‘friends with benefits’ is not a good thing?” Raven snickers.
“I… well… it’s just not what you two are,” Clarke finally settles on weakly.

“I see,” Lexa says, a glint of mischief lighting her eyes. “So… it is not something I should tell Abby about? Raven suggested -”

Clarke chokes. “No. No. Raven, why?”

“I was travelling with a bunch of stoic warrior people,” Raven defends herself. “I had to make my own amusement! Trust me, she doesn’t have it half as bad as Lincoln’s going to when he gets back and starts coming out with this stuff in front of Bellamy.”

The radio crackles into life before Clarke can respond to that one.

“Azplana?” one voice says.

“Speak,” Nia’s cold voice comes through.

“We have been… held up,” the gona says uncertainly. “Reports are coming in from the south. May we contact you at midday instead, once we have had time to discover their truthfulness?”

“For your sake, I hope it is good news.”

The radio cuts out, leaving Raven staring at it in dismay. “I got up early for this,” she says sadly, voice still somewhat croaky. She smothers a cough.

Clarke looks to Lexa for orders. “Are we still going to head north now? We can listen to the update on the road.”

“No,” Lexa says, frowning. “I think we need to know what the news from the south is first. If it is the other clans attacking across the border, Nia’s army may well have to turn around, and then we will be able to go south instead of north. I do not wish to exert ourselves, cause Raven to become sicker, risk being seen by someone, and be going in the wrong direction. We wait.”

“Then I really could’ve still been asleep right now.” Raven mourns.

“You seemed like you might be having a nightmare when I woke you up,” Clarke comments hesitantly.

Raven slumps back down, pulling her blankets up to her chin again. “Not a nightmare, exactly,” she says, voice a little muffled as well as being thinner than usual. “I just – I keep dreaming of the last time I saw Anya. You know what our epic goodbye was?”

“What?” Clarke asks, wondering how the two of them are going.

“I said ‘see you soon, cheekbones’. Not even ‘may we meet again’.” Raven rolls her eyes at herself. “You know, the truck engine was still running, and our group was starting to head north, but I still should have come up with a better line then that. ‘See you soon’. Bleh.”

So it seems like they’re going on as normal, then, Clarke thinks dryly.

“And that is the nightmare?” Lexa asks, looking like she understands that. Clarke wonders if she’s thinking of the last time she saw Costia. It could also be Anya, or Gustus, or Titus, or even Clarke herself after she was kidnapped, though. It’s not like Lexa doesn’t have considerable experience farewelling people only to discover later that she might have already said the last words to them she would ever say.
“I said ‘sort of!’” Raven defends herself. “The nightmare is that it’s the last thing I ever say to her. Which is the kinda morbid dreams you get when there’s an army looking for you and you have pneumonia. I didn’t even say goodbye at all to Sinclair or Finn, sometimes that’s in the dream as well. They get super-teary and never get over it.”

“The army’s looking for me and Gustus, and you have the flu,” Clarke says. “You can talk to all of them when we get back.”

“Yeah, but then I’ll actually have to come up with what to say!” Raven says plaintively. “Hey, Lex, do you have a speechwriter? A speechwriter I can borrow?”

“A… what?”

“…Never mind,” Raven grumbles. “Of course you just come up with all these rousing speeches and wise sayings off the top of your head. I’m going back to sleep. Wake me when the next disaster happens.” She turns over and pulls the blankets over her head with finality.

Lexa looks at Clarke and reaches out her hand to pull her onto her feet. “Perhaps we should get some more rest as well,” she says noncommittally, but her eyes shine at the thought of more time together with nothing to do but focus on each other. “I could certainly use some.”

“Perhaps,” Clarke allows.

She wonders briefly if they should radio Wells after all, now that most of Prison Station and their radio has been taken care of, but decides against it. While the Azgeda might not have the technology to trace their signal, anyone with a radio could accidentally hop to their channel and overhear them if they contact Wells. There’s nothing important they could tell him that wouldn’t also be incredibly useful to Nia. It’s best not to risk it without a very good reason.

As they pass the pack leaning against the door of their temporary room Lexa pauses and untangles her fingers from Clarke’s. “Just a moment,” she says, and rummages through it. After a minute she pulls out Clarke’s sketchpad and several pencils.

Clarke feels her face split into a smile. “You brought those for me?” she asks. She knows it’s a stupid question, but she feels ridiculously touched. “Weren’t you worried someone would search your pack?”

Lexa shrugs. “There was already that risk for the radio and bombs,” she says. “And there were other things I was not willing to leave behind as well.” She carefully pulls out bright blue fabric, and unfolds it to reveal Jake’s watch wrapped safely in the centre. It takes a moment for Clarke to realise that the blue square of fabric is also her sash when she reaches out to touch it softly before picking up the watch. It’s still ticking away, counting the seconds, cleaned so thoroughly and carefully that it looks as new as it ever has.

“You knew I was alive?” Clarke asks, feeling tears swell up even as she fights them back.

“No,” Lexa admits. “I hoped. And at first I did not even do that, I just – I fell apart. I did not know how to be Heda without you there, I did not even know how to be Lexa anymore. It took the threat of the missile to bring me back to myself, and even then it was only because I somehow believed that if I could save everyone from the missile I would find you safe. As if it was a deal with the spirits.”

Clarke pauses, considering her next action. “Wait a moment,” she requests quietly, and goes to open the secret trapdoor. Raven lets out a muffled curse from the next room as the squeal of the hinges wakes her, but doesn’t comment further, and the noise of animals and people beginning to wake up
and start their day outside should more than cover it up. It takes her only moments to find it even in the dark, her hand seemingly drawn to the ornately carved wood.

“Clarke?” Lexa looks confused for a moment when Clarke holds the bow out to her, and then she focuses on it and every drop of colour drains out of her face. She reaches for it with numb, clumsy hands, then cradles it as she sinks to the floor, ceaselessly tracing the carvings.

“Lexa, I’m so sorry,” Clarke whispers, her own heart aching as she sees Lexa’s pain.

“No,” Lexa says quickly, then, “No,” a little more calmly. “Mochof, ai hodnes. I am glad to have it back.” She runs her fingers over one of the flowers. “She was always best at making flowers and trees and vines out of wood. I used to bring her flowers for her to work from, and she would put them in her hair whenever she was done carving, so that her hair was always strewn with flowers. I would climb trees to find the most beautiful ones,” she looks up at Clarke, eyes filled with tears. “It was foolish.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Clarke says, putting an arm around Lexa. Lexa leans into the comfort gratefully.

“She was the best hunter by far, especially when she used this bow, her favourite,” Lexa continues, still staring at the bow. “She would take down any animal she aimed for with one shot. She refused to wound them, she never wanted to cause a moment of pain. Costia hated causing pain – that is why she became a hunter instead of a fisa, as she first planned. She said she was grateful she spent a few years learning those skills, though. She said I required them often, with the risks I took. Costia was present for nearly all my lessons, all my trips, everything I did, even as a Seken, because she said I might need a limb bandaged or an enemy shot with arrows.”

“I can’t imagine Titus being thrilled about that.”

Lexa lets out a watery laugh. “Not at all,” she confides. “Once I ascended he had no choice but to allow me to do as I wished, of course. And before that when I was a Seken my Fos had final say and she loved Costia like a strosis, a little sister, just like she loved me. Just like she now loves Tris. Anya has always – well, I suppose Titus would say Anya has always been weak, beneath her pretence of indifference.”

“Not weak. Strong.”

“Sha. Strong.” Lexa kisses Clarke’s shoulder and is silent for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

I reckon I’ll publish one more chapter before I head off, just because I really like round numbers :)
“I hope you bring me good news from the south,” Nia’s voice echoes and crackles through the radio. Clarke puts her sketchpad aside in the middle of shading something and straightens, listening. “So far you have failed to bring me anything else of worth.”

The man on the other end, who Lexa recognises as Diefen, clears his throat nervously. “We will find them, Azplana, they must simply be further north. You have already said you believe Pri - the natrona Roan has abandoned the blonde Skayon and the former Commander’s thug. They will not be able to hide so easily without the help of that mokskwoma.”

Lexa wonders if he is not allowed to refer to Clarke as the Destroyer of the Mountain, just as he is not allowed to refer to Roan as a Prince. It is very like Nia to refuse to recognise anyone else’s titles or status.

“We are not discussing your failures at present, but news from the south,” Nia snaps. “Report.”

“Messengers say that the raiders you sent to the south have returned,” Diefen says quickly. “Only half were able to survive the traps set for them, but they have made it back across the border, and they managed to steal a great deal of food from the Trikru for our people as well. I believe if we ration the food and direct it to the places most in need, we can keep the nation fed for another week, perhaps a week and a half.”

There’s a long pause. “So much for the other clans coming to save us,” Raven grumbles in an undertone. “It’s totally unfair that they get two armies and we -” Clarke shushes her as Nia starts talking again.

“Excellent,” she says. “Have them bring the food north as quickly as possible.”

“…All of it, Azplana?” Diefen says uncertainly. “Villages in the south are also -”

“They are nearer to the border,” Nia snaps. “If we raid again, we may be able to find food for them. But this food, these gona, they must come here now. Do not question me. Our priority is the far north.” Diefen sucks in a breath, causing the radio to crackle, and Lexa is sure that he can also see the message in her words. The two Azgeda in the room draw back as well, horrified, and Gustus lets out a huff of disgust.

Nia has realised that without the missile and Clarke on her side, she has very little chance of taking Polis, and is fortifying the area she is in instead. With all the spare food and warriors sent there, the Azgeda to the south will be more likely to starve and be easily defeated if it comes to war – but she will be able to hole up in the north for much longer. In warmer months when the lake melts, she might be able to use the gona to blockade the relatively narrow path created by it, protecting the tiny tip of Azgeda lands where she hides. If she finds enough food to survive until next winter, any alliance gonakru besieging the north would be forced back into Trikru territory by the cold, leaving her to retake the conquered areas. Nia could turn this into a protracted, messy affair causing the deaths of thousands of Azgeda as well as thousands of the other clans’ gona. The sheer selfishness of the strategy leaves Lexa breathless.

“Sha, Azplana,” Diefen says, voice tight, and Lexa wonders if he has family in the middle or south
of Azgeda territory.

“Good. Order them to make haste. Also, send Wilfrid. Tell him that he is to take charge of three dozen gona and have them bring as much food as they can carry, not to my location but to the usual place we have villagers deliver food, and then to send the gona back to their kru. He will know the place I mean,” Nia commands.

“Sha, Azplana,” Diefen repeats.

“And find the three natrona quickly,” Nia continues. “Make sure you take them alive, they could be useful. No more burning houses. If you fail me again, I will not be so forgiving.”

There is a click as the radio goes silent, and Raven blows out a breath. “Jeez,” she says. “That woman. She’s actually almost scarier than the news we have another army after us. How come we never get good news?”

“This does not make sense,” Lexa says slowly. “If the raiders made it through the mines by attrition, there should have been reports of the explosions brought to Nia long before now. For that matter, if that is all they did, why did it take so long? And why did it cost so many lives?”

“Maybe they spent a few days stealing that food, and our gona took a lot of them out?” Clarke suggests.

“That… is a great deal of food,” Linkon says, his brow furrowing. “We do not store that much food so close to the border. A couple of days’ food, perhaps, if they were very lucky and knew the area – but so much?”

“Perhaps they went further south,” Lexa says, but that does not seem likely either. Further south they would have been unused to the territory and weather, and it would have been easy for the Trikru to have surrounded them. And Aden must have had a plan – what could it have been? She stiffens as she thinks of something. “Or perhaps the food was not very hard to steal. In fact, perhaps they were supposed to steal it. Who knows what poisons it may be laced with?”

Would Aden have employed a plan that could cause so much collateral damage? It seems unlike him. But if he suspected Nia would insist on the food going to her and hers – it is very typical of Nia, after all – it would be a very clever gambit. The question is, how clever has her Natblida been?

“Well, let’s hope it takes them out before they reach us. Two armies. So unfair,” Raven grouses.

“We are not in more danger from two armies than one,” Lexa says practically. “Right now, they are travelling quickly, so they will stay as a group and will not search for us, making them easy to avoid. Once they have joined the others we will be facing one army again, and that army already outnumbers us hundreds to one – adding more gona will not make them any deadlier.”

Raven stares at her incredulously. “Was that supposed to be comforting?”

Clarke breaks in. “Okay, so that doesn’t change our plans, then. But we still need a plan.” She meets Lexa’s gaze. “I have an idea.” Raven groans loudly, then quiets when Lexa looks at her and raises an eyebrow. While always joking, Raven still attempts to return to seriousness when Lexa indicates it is not the time.

“Please continue,” Lexa says soberly.

Clarke coughs. “Raven… how many bombs do you have?”
“Eleven,” Raven says immediately. “Overall, we got three grenades, one gas grenade that Lexa’s holding onto, and eleven bombs. Only one trigger for the bombs, since those are hard to find, but if we’re using all eleven at the same time that shouldn’t be a problem. Alternatively, they all have manual timers.”

“How close do you need to be for the trigger to work?” Clarke asks quickly.

Raven shrugs. “Not too close. The signal’s pretty strong. I normally prefer to be within seeing distance, but that’s just for timing.” She pauses, then adds, a little shamefaced, “And also for the thrill.”

“Zion,” Clarke says, turning to him, “A few weeks ago Roan told me that soon the lake would be frozen enough for anyone, even large groups, to walk on. Is that true? Will the gonakru cross it instead of going around?”

Zion considers this for a moment. “Sha,” he says eventually. “It is much faster.”

Lexa realises what Clarke’s plan is a moment before she asks the most important question. “And if we used the bombs to blow up the ice on the lake, how long would it take for it to be safe to walk on again?”

There’s a long pause, and then Zion inhales sharply. “Days,” he says slowly. “Five days at the least… if they were cautious, not willing to risk it, it could even be a week.” He looks at Clarke admiringly, and Lexa feels proud of Clarke’s quickness. “You wish to slow their way north.”

“No,” Clarke says, smiling at Lexa. “The opposite. I want to trap them in the north. We hide in the cave Gus and I used on the way here, wait until they’re at least halfway across the lake, then blow all our explosives. The ice will weaken and crack. Some will fall in and either drown or freeze, and the rest will be trapped to the north of it.”

“Giving us several days head start as they either wait for the lake to freeze or go around it,” Lexa says, impressed. “We can go south. They will need to move quickly to catch up to us, but if they move quickly they will not be able to find us… so we will be easily able to make our way to the border. And the raiders heading north have no radio and cannot be contacted.”

“I like it,” Raven enthuses, brightening. Her voice is still scratchy, but she seems to have improved very quickly from the warmth and rest. She may not even need to be carried anymore when they leave.

Linkon clears his throat diffidently. “They are searching very thoroughly,” he points out. “They will likely find the cave you hid in.”

Clarke opens her mouth then closes it again. “Maybe,” she admits, then sighs. “Probably.”

“Not if we distract them,” Lexa says coolly. “If they were chasing the fugitives across the lake, for example, I doubt they would stop and look for caves.”

Raven stares at her. “That would leave Clarke stuck on the north side with a bunch of psychos,” she protests.

“I will protect her,” Gustus says firmly. Then his face clouds over. “But… I do not think she could outrun a gonakru. The last time we had a head start, Roan’s assistance, snow to cover our tracks and a false trail to aid us.”

“My ankle’s much better,” Clarke protests. “And you’re the one who was tortured, for that matter.”
Gustus snorts. “Superficial wounds,” he says. “She wanted me to live long and painfully. I will have new scars, yes, but I am mostly healed. You are not. You are able to walk on your ankle now that you have wrapped fabric around it for support, yes, but you could not keep up a run for long. And if we need to make it across the lake while being chased… we need you to be able to run.”

“I am not suggesting Clarke goes,” Lexa says. The very thought makes her cold. “Gustus and I could go. He is necessary because not even Lincoln is anywhere near him in height. But I am not so different in size from Clarke that it is noticeable.”

Zion clears his throat. “You should not be trapped north either, Heda,” he says firmly. “You are needed.” He flushes slightly under his beard. “I am not so different in height from Clarke kom Skaikru either. With a cloak and a great deal of warm, loose, covering clothing, and if Gustus is the one they see closely…”

Gustus gives him a warm glance of appreciation. Lexa should have realised the two of them would get along well. “Sha, we could do it,” he rumbles. “And he knows the north far better than anyone else here, does he not? Together we might be able to survive a few weeks in the north once the gonakru is fractured, trapped and reduced.”

“You’ll have an army attacking you!” Raven protests.

“An army injured and confused by explosions,” Zion says stolidly. “An army with orders not to kill, only to capture. An army of raiders from further south who have probably never crossed the lake before as Gustus and I have. I believe we have a chance. And even if we did not… this would be a good way for my fight to end, I think.”

“It would be,” Gustus says, equally as impassive, and he and Zion lock gazes and nod at each other, apparently firm friends now.

Lexa looks at both of them thoughtfully. “For them to be close enough to see you and come after you, they will also be close enough to catch you,” she remarks. “If we wish them to immediately assume you are the fugitives and follow, we must give them something to follow. We could leave a trail so they can track you to the lake. Then let them see you from a great distance – two figures, the correct size, out in the middle of the lake – they will give chase. You might have time to get across.”

“Even if we do not, we can still lead them onto the lake,” Gustus says stolidly. “That is all that is required.” He meets Lexa’s eyes and she has to swallow a sudden lump in her throat at the loyalty and affection in them. Gustus would die to give the rest of them a chance. She hopes he will not have to. “The trail, though – what should we use? Footprints are too obviously a trap.”

After a long moment, Clarke says, “My hair. They described me as ‘the blonde one’. We leave a trail with my hair.” She touched her braids thoughtfully. “There are blondes here, obviously, but not many, and it would be more believable I’d be the one to accidentally leave a trail than Gus.”

Assan reaches his hand up to his own long blonde locks for a second, then puts it down again with a shrug. “There are some blondes here, sha,” he says gruffly. “But none who would snag their hair in branches regularly and be easily tracked, if that is the trap we intend to lay. If they see blonde hair they will likely assume it is yours.”

“We shouldn’t need much, right? Just a few strands?” Clarke asks.

Lexa nods. “We do not want it to look like a deliberate trail, but an accidental one made by a careless Skayon who does not know how to avoid being tracked.”
Assan pulls his knife out and hands it to Clarke, who pauses for a moment. Then she saws a braid off at the nape of her neck and hands the long blonde plait to Zion. “That should be more than enough,” she says nonchalantly.

“Well, then,” Lexa says, clearing her throat. “We have the food Assan brought us. We should leave. Zion’s disguise can be created later.” She turns to Assan. “Thank you for all your help,” she says formally. “I will not forget it.”

He stares at her, then takes a deep breath and says, “If you will allow me to, Heda, I wish to come with you.”

Lexa raises her eyebrows. “I see,” she says, surprised. In his years of spying for her, he has never expressed an interest in more active missions than simply listening and talking to people. She thought he regarded their presence here as an unwelcome and risky intrusion, though he allowed it out of duty.

“Why?” Gustus asks suspiciously.

Assan looks at Lexa instead of Gustus as he answers. “I owe you, Heda… for my daughter. I do not wish you to be killed by the Azplana or her gonakru. If I come with you, I can pay off my debt, sha?” Lexa searched his eyes for any sign of deception but he meets her gaze steadily.

“Sha,” Lexa says. It is not a bad idea to have one person with them who is not obviously untrustworthy to the Azgeda – without makeup, all of the rest of them are visibly foreign because of their lack of scars except Zion, and he has his bullet graze marking him as suspicious.

Instead of four, they are now seven. They will be five, once Gustus and Zion lure the gonakru north across the lake.

Lexa hopes all seven survive, but she doubts they will be that lucky.

Clarke takes her hand briefly and squeezes it, and Lexa knows she’s not the only one thinking about the dangers ahead. It helps, knowing she is not alone, that the responsibility does not lie solely on her shoulders as it so often does.

Chapter End Notes

A hundred chapters... wow. Or as I prefer to think of it, at least two hundred hours, fifty litres of wine, every Tuesday and Thursday in recent memory, and far too many times accidentally calling random people at work or friends by character's name. I hope everyone's enjoying it. Personally, I think it's helped me more than any of you - it started out as a way to work through my grief about Lexa's death. Now, it's a fun hobby, and all of your reviews are a wonderful and integral part of that. Logging onto my email and seeing someone saying how much they love it or mentioning their favourite line has made my mornings since I started this just a bit brighter, Cassy's alternate ranting and squeezing always makes me grin, and overall this has made me remember why I always used to love writing.

Anyway, I'm off to Italy for five weeks now, but I'll return to this when I get back and have rested up, I promise! I hope you haven't all forgotten the plot by then :)}
“How did you find this place?” Lexa wonders, looking around the little cave.

“How did you find this place?” Lexa wonders, looking around the little cave.  

“Gustus and I stayed here on the way to Assan’s,” Clarke says just as she did earlier to Raven, swallowing the piece of meat she’d been chewing. They have enough food to last them a couple of weeks if they’re careful – when Gustus and Zion briefly split from the rest of them earlier after a murmured conversation with Lexa, she suspects they went to the nearest village and stole whatever they could find. They’re guarding the cave entrance right now, as loyal and professional as both of them always are. “We were travelling with some hunters. They use this cave regularly.” She smiles to herself.

Lexa looks up, apparently recognising the note in Clarke’s voice. “Ai hodnes,” she says, sounding a little suspicious. “What are you planning?”

“How did you find this place?” Lexa wonders, looking around the little cave.

“How did you find this place?” Lexa wonders, looking around the little cave.  

“What won’t work out?” Raven asks, plopping down next to her. “Ooh, nice drawings. That’s a good one of Indra. Really portrays that air of ‘I’ll beat you to death with your own dismembered arm’ that she gives off.” She flips through the sketchbook without asking and lands on one of Anya. Raven inhales sharply, which causes her to fall into a coughing fit, and then puts the sketchbook down again and says croakily, “Right. That one’s – that one’s good too.”

“Nothing,” Clarke says, slightly defensive. “Well, nothing really. It probably won’t work out.”

“You seem much better,” Clarke comments.

“Well, this cave is pretty warm, that helps,” Raven says. “There were a few times today in the snow when I felt pretty bad but I think I’m finally over the worst.” She looks around the cave. “So you and Gustus stayed here, right?”

“You seem much better,” Clarke comments.

“Sha,” Gustus appears, face stern. His hand is clamped on the upper arm of a slight, pretty young hunter, who rolls his dark eyes at the rough treatment. “A little over a week ago.” Gustus looks at Clarke, his expression not accusing but definitely concerned. “Was this an accident?”

He releases the hunter, who rubs his arm and glares at him. “On my part, certainly,” Orion snaps at Gustus, then gestures towards Clarke. “On yours, I doubt it. You told me a week would be long enough, and now I find you here! The rest of the hunters will come soon, I pretended I had seen a wolf and sent them after it but that cannot distract them for long.”

“How did you know to distract them at all?” Gustus asks, sounding frustrated.

Clarke clears her throat. “I stuck one of his arrows on a tree nearby. I knew if they came back here at the right time he’d see it.”

Assan and Linkon have come from the back of the cave now to see what’s happening, while Zion stays on guard at the front just in case. “For what purpose?” Assan says, face reddening with annoyance. He goes to draw his sword but stops at a look from Lexa. “Just so we would have to leave the warmth and find somewhere else to sleep to avoid these hunters? Or do you wish us to kill them all?”

“I need to talk to Orion in private,” Clarke snaps. “Everyone but Lexa and Gustus, go over there, I
don’t want you overhearing.” Raven raises her eyebrows at that one but still goes. Assan pauses but another glance from Lexa makes him decide to obey.

“Well, Clarke?” Lexa asks softly. “What is it?”

“He’s trustworthy,” Clarke tells her, then looks at Orion. “I need you to take this south,” she says bluntly, and pulls out Titus’s book and hands it to him.

He looks at it in total confusion. “What is it?”

“Congratulations, you’re the Fleimkepa now,” Clarke says. “Until you get to Polis and hand it off to one of these people, anyway.” She passes him the sketchbook as well. “I’m sure you can figure out a way to hide both in your hunting supplies somehow, or pass them off as something else if they are found.”

Gustus makes a choking noise. Clarke’s not sure if it’s because she’s trusting Orion, or if it’s because she’s treating the highest religious position in the Coalition as a game of pass the parcel.

Orion still just looks confused.

“There’s an army to the south. They’re headed north, looking for us,” Clarke explains. “But we need this to get south, do you understand me? Get it past the army. They might not search you, but if possible, I’d say hide it in Nyssa’s stuff,” Clarke continues. “Nobody’s going to search her too closely, she practically radiates Azgeda. And after you get past the gonakru, you get it to Polis as quickly as you can.”

Lexa nods slowly. “Good thinking,” she murmurs. “If our plans go wrong, if we are captured, brought to Nia – we cannot afford to have her find that as well. Even with Ontari dead, there is still risk she could find another. Titus will very likely refuse to tell Nia how to do the ritual, but a book has no loyalty. If she gets her hands on me, on the Flame, I do not want her to have any way to control it.”


Clarke wonders if he’s seen Lexa before – maybe from a distance or something. But then, right now Lexa’s not wearing a mask, she’s not pretending to be anything other than what she is, and that means she exudes quiet power and authority. Maybe anyone seeing that could tell that she’s the Commander. Long ago when Clarke walked into that tent and saw Lexa for the first time, she definitely knew that now she was dealing with a force to be reckoned with, someone more clever and dangerous than anyone she’d ever met before. She’d met those vivid green eyes and been hypnotised as Lexa played with her knife and smirked and challenged her like no one ever really had before.

Well. She wasn’t wrong about Lexa being dangerous. But she was entirely wrong about where that danger lay.

“Sha,” Lexa says, looking down at Orion. “Will you take the book to the south, to Polis? Will you keep it safe until you can pass it on?”

“Of course,” Orion says worshipfully. “Anything for you, Heda.” He fumbles to stow the book in his satchel, presumably deciding to hide it properly later.

“Mochof,” Lexa says, and gestures for Orion to stand again. He does, still staring at her like she hung the moon. “Now. Your hunting group. Is there any way to keep them away from this cave for
the rest of the night? Or a way we can disguise who we are to avoid suspicion?"

Orion hesitates, thinking hard. “I do not...” he starts to say uncertainly, then stops and keeps thinking. Then he lets out a deep sigh and pulls out his hunting dagger. Slowly, he reaches up and drags it across his chest in curved line. Clarke winces just watching him. He does it three more times, leaving dripping lines of red, then repeats that in a smaller way on one of his arms. Finally he smears some dirt on his face, arms, and legs, slices another cut into his knee, and carefully cleans his dagger before sliding it back into its sheath.

“You look like you got attacked by a bear,” Clarke comments, impressed.

“Ogud,” Orion says, stretching his leg and wincing at the discomfort. “That is just what I was aiming for. A bear at this time of year will be very slow, about to hibernate, and its meat and fur will make it a very valuable target. Which way did the bear run after it injured me, Commander?”

“South, I think,” Lexa says serenely. “You know these forests better than I. Choose whichever paths you believe will work best.”

“I will get them as far south as I can,” Orion promises. “And then once we are past the army, when I cannot convince them to go further...” he pauses, and a brief look of pain comes over his face, so Clarke knows he’s thinking about Nyssa. “Well, then I will continue on alone.”

“Go,” Lexa orders, and with a final bow Orion dashes out the cave entrance. Clarke can hear him yelling for the others, yelling that there’s a bear. Lexa turns to look at Clarke and tilts her head slightly to the side. “This was your plan, I assume.”

“Sha,” Clarke says, feeling slightly guilty. “I should have told you, but honestly, it was such a long shot I didn’t want to mention it. If he’d been a day off...” she shrugs. “Sticking the arrow into a tree nearby was more of a just-in-case than anything else.”

“It was very good thinking,” Lexa compliments her.

Gustus frowns. “Provided he manages to get to Polis,” he points out.

“He has a better chance than us, in any case,” Lexa replies. She frowns, a shadow moving over her face. “Whether he makes it to Polis – whether we make it to Polis, for that matter – I worry for the alliance. Nia holing up in the north like this...” she shakes her head.

“You don’t think she could win, surely?” Clarke says, surprised. “Not in the long term.”

“No, I do not believe she could,” Lexa says, voice certain. “But she does not have to win for the rest of us to lose. If she can draw this out, she could not only harm the strength of the alliance, but the balance between the clans. The Trikru will take the greatest casualties of any attacks by us or by the Azgeda, since they are the gona most able to quickly gather at the border. The Azgeda themselves – if she goes through with this madness and abandons all but one tenth of Azgeda territory, leaving all villages south of the lake without food or gona, then lawlessness and starvation will be rife. They will rip themselves apart and attempt to rip the rest of us apart.”

“Not if we take them over,” Clarke says. “If we come marching in with food, if we get them on our side...”

“Then we would succeed,” Lexa says simply. “It depends on how loyal they are to Nia. If they cling to their loyalty for too long, they will die, whether from us or each other or lack of food. If they abandon her they will save themselves. Then we can provide supplies to the southern area and some of our gona can aid them against the north. And then it will depend on how loyal the northern
gonakru are. They are better fed, so the loyalty should last longer, but not forever. Whatever happens, though, I do not know how many hundreds or even thousands will die before we can pry Nia out of her hiding place."

“If most of the gonakru are on the lake when we destroy the ice, that should help,” Gustus points out quietly. “No army is able to keep morale when half their number has died. Especially not when they have lost so many warriors to so few enemies, and the enemies have powers they do not understand.”

“And they don’t have loyalty to Nia,” Clarke adds comfortingly. “What they have is a kind of blind faith she’s conditioned them to have since they were kids. When they realise she’s leaving most of them out in the cold – pun not intended – that she doesn’t care who dies… I don’t think blind faith can last when you see the object of it clearly. They’ll realise what Nia is, and they’ll abandon her.”

Lexa smiles, and it lights up her whole face. “I am so grateful to have you both back,” she murmurs. “I can speak of my worries to you, and you do not reply with empty optimistic words. Instead you come up with logic and strategy. I have needed you both… I have missed you both. So much.” Her voice breaks a little as she says the last two words, and she looks at Clarke like she’s never wanted to see something more.

Sometimes Clarke forgets about the weight Lexa carries around so patiently, the weight that gives her the calm authority and gravitas Clarke admires and loves so much. But then other times, it’s all that she can see. So she reaches out to hold Lexa and tries to take as much of the weight as she can.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, I'm back :) 

I considered doing a "Previously On" at the top of this but the idea of summarising everything so far was exhausting. I'm still recovering from nearly forty eight consecutive hours on taxis, planes, and buses to get home. By the end of it my girlfriend and I both starfished just out of a desperate need to not feel like we had to share our space with three hundred people. Anyway, I hope you remember enough of what happened before for this chapter to be comprehensible!

Italy was wonderful, by the way. My gf knew more about history and art than most of the museum tour guides, we learned how to use corkscrews (only really fancy wine has corks in Australia so we didn't know), I managed to resist the urge to steal any of the puppies or kittens we saw although I missed my cat excessively, and the weather and pasta was lovely.
“After long and careful thought,” Raven says dramatically, “I’ve decided: Winter sucks. Snow sucks. You know what else sucks?” She slips slightly and Lexa catches her arm before she can fall again.

“Let me guess,” Clarke says. “Ice. Ice sucks. You know, I walked across this lake when it was snowing so hard I could barely see, and I still didn’t complain as much as you.”

“Maybe you should have,” Raven replies, stifling a hoarse cough. “Because all this complaining is really keeping me motivated.”

Both girls’ voices are muffled by the scarves wrapped around their faces. By Lexa’s private estimation each of them is now wearing three times as many layers as anyone else in the group, which at least has made Raven’s frequent falls on the ice rather less painful than they would otherwise be. It also makes them clumsy and slow – but then, with Clarke’s weak ankle and Raven’s lingering cough, it would probably be necessary to go slowly anyway.

Gustus looks impatient at the pace however – they have been walking around the lake for hours now, setting Raven’s bombs to go off when she uses the trigger. Yesterday they spread five bombs from south to north on the eastern part of the wide lake, and there was no reason to rush. Since the others reported how close the gonakru was getting last night, today they have much less time, and Gustus has much less patience, especially with Raven.

Perhaps Lexa should have assigned their roles differently. But when it comes to scouting the enemy’s location and leaving a false trail, two Azgeda citizens and a former scout were the best choices. Raven wished to set her own bombs, and Lexa knows none of them would have as much confidence in this plan if someone else took charge of that task. And out on the frozen lake, with only a little snow drifting idly down, if someone came to the edge of the lake they might see Raven, so she, Gustus and Clarke are here to provide protection from any potential attackers. So it is the best configuration. Raven’s complaining is definitely grating on Gustus, however.

“We are almost finished,” Lexa assures Raven – and Gustus too, indirectly. “The cave is just over there.”

Raven squints. “Beats me how you can tell,” she remarks. “It looks like any other heap of snow to me.”

“Someday when we have time I will teach you tracking,” Lexa promises her, then looks at Clarke. “Both of you.”

“Sounds good to me,” Clarke says. Lexa can’t see her mouth through the scarf but she sounds like she’s smiling.

Raven looks in her bag again. “Two left,” she reports. “Do you want me to put both bombs out on this stretch or put just one more and we can keep the other in reserve?”

Lexa considers. “We have the grenades,” she says thoughtfully. “And no more triggers.”

“Timers, though,” Raven points out. “And these bombs are more powerful than a couple of grenades. I’d feel better if we didn’t blow them all on one crazy idea.”

Clarke glances at Lexa and shrugs. “At this point I don’t think one bomb more or less will make a difference,” she opines. “Either the ice is still thin enough for this to work or it’s not.”
“Keep one, then,” Lexa says firmly. Raven lays the last one down on the ice almost reverently and starts fiddling with it, no doubt attuning it to the trigger. Lexa turns to Gustus. “So… it is time for you to join Zion,” she says, and is unable to suppress a slight quiver of emotion.

“Sha,” Gustus says softly, “We decided on the right place to lead the scout group yesterday, if you recall. Far enough east that they will not come anywhere near the cave.”

“What if the scout group just goes after you and doesn’t call in the cavalry?” Raven asks curiously.

“They will not,” Gustus says firmly. “Nia’s orders are to take Clarke and I alive. A small scout group might be able to catch up to us quickly, but they could not surround us, and if we attacked and they had to defend themselves…” he shrugs. “They cannot risk it. They need enough people to capture us outright.”

“And once they inform the others they have seen Gustus and Clarke, no one from the gonakru will choose to remain behind,” Lexa adds. “If the gonakru fail to capture them, Nia is quite capricious enough to consider a unit remaining behind to be proof that they are disloyal and caused the failure. So they will act as a group unless they are certain they cannot fail.”

“So they will chase Zion and I as a group, and they will die as a group,” Gustus says, baring his teeth with vicious pleasure.

Raven frowns. She worries about the plan, Lexa knows. Specifically, she worries about the part where she presses the trigger. Nevertheless she stands and starts walking back towards the cave, leaving them to their goodbyes.

There is no way for Zion and Gustus to signal from so far away. They will not be able to tell the others when they are safely across, when the lake can be blown without sending them to a painful, icy death with the Azgeda. Once the entire gonakru arrive the plan is for Assan to merge with their group – in the panic that should be easy enough to do – then detach from the back when everyone is onto the ice and come back to inform the rest of them. Once all are on the ice Raven will trigger the bombs and all the gona will be blown away, drowned, frozen or trapped to the north of the lake. Hopefully Gustus and Zion will be across by then, safe from it all, but there is no guarantee.

To tell the truth, Lexa is worried about that part of the plan as well.


Lexa gives him a wry look. “That is something no one can promise, and you know it.”

“I promised it,” Clarke points out. She takes Lexa’s hand in hers and squeezes it. “When I went into the Mountain. I promised to stay alive and I did, remember?” She looks at Gustus and the smile on her face dies. “I owe you a lot,” she tells him.

He smiles grimly back. “I owe you more,” he says in kind. “Stay safe, Clarke kom Skaikru.” He looks back at Lexa, gaze drawn to her as always. “If I do not return to you in this life, Heda, I will serve you in the next, and in all that come after.”

“I could not ask for a more loyal guard,” Lexa says, keeping her face and voice even with effort. However, her mask cracks slightly as she adds, “Or a better friend.”

She reaches out her spare hand to him and he bows and presses it to his forehead, a brief blessing. Then he gives a sharp nod, eyes full of tears he would never admit to, and turns to leave.
Lexa watches him go for a long moment. “If we get more than one bridesmaid at our wedding, can he be one as well?” she asks Clarke, closing her eyes against his disappearing form.

“Sure,” Clarke says, voice gentle. “We get as many bridesmaids as we want, pretty much. But he’d be called a best man instead. He’ll be your best man, and Wells will be mine. Raven will be my bridesmaid. I’m guessing Anya will be yours?”

“Yes,” Lexa says huskily. She turns and pulls Clarke close to her, resting their foreheads against each other.

She does not know what a Skaikru ‘wedding’ looks like, exactly, especially not one which seems like it will be melded with Trikru bonding customs. But when she pictures Gustus and Anya and Wells and Raven all gathered around them as they speak vows to each other, she cannot imagine their bonding ceremony will be anything but perfect. Abby will probably be there as well. Indra, Octavia, Linkon, maybe Kane, perhaps even Zion. Perhaps many more. No matter how many are there she will find it hard to tear her eyes away from Clarke.

The cave is relatively warm. Linkon is already waiting. “I set the trail,” he reports professionally. “Assan has gone for one last check, and Zion has gone to meet Gustus.”

“The bombs are also set,” Lexa tells him. “Now all we can do is wait.”

After a time Assan joins them. “The scout group seemed to be picking up the trail when I left,” he tells her tersely.

“Ogud.” Lexa looks at him and then suddenly remembers something. She had forgotten it in the rush of events and plans. “Back at your home, you wished to speak to me in private,” she recalls. “Do you still need to?”

“No,” he says gruffly. “I… it would have been a mistake. I do not wish to question my Heda.”

Lexa blinks. “Tell me anyway,” she suggests. He looks away and does not respond. “Tell me,” she repeats, this time making it a command, and takes several steps away so the others cannot hear.

He looks embarrassed. “At the time, I wished to speak to you further about… well, we call it the snapwor, the shortest battle. When I first heard the Skaikru turned on our people, I did not realise…” he looks at Clarke then away.

“You did not know Clarke was there,” Lexa realises.

“I could not imagine how a Skaikru you made your second in command could possibly be involved,” he admits.

“You think I should have punished her for her presence?” Lexa raises her eyebrows at him. “The fault was not hers.”

“No,” Assan agrees readily. “I have seen enough of her and Raven kom Skaikru now to understand that. You told me where the fault lay.” His expression darkens, thinking of Nia. “I am pleased to be able to repay my debt to the Azplana at the same time I repay my debt to you.” He takes a deep breath and forces himself to calm down. “Moba, Heda,” he apologises.

“You clearly feel strongly about this,” Lexa comments.

“None of the gona killed were my friends, but they were – they were my people. And they had no need to die. A foolish Skayon’s error, the Azplana’s greed, the Maunon’s cruelty, and so many are
dead. And now I go to kill more.” He smiles humourlessly. “Just for the slim hope of paying my debts, so that by the time my fight ends I am free of them.”

Lexa senses the change in the air more than she hears the movement, and swings around, taking several steps back from the tiny, well-hidden entrance to the cave. Clarke and Raven glance up in surprise and Linkon draws his sword, apparently feeling it too. “Gona,” he mutters, face paling. “Outside.”

“How many?” Lexa says, mouthing the words more than speaking them.

He hesitates, then mouths, “Perhaps two dozen.”

A scouting party, then. Why come here? There was an easy trail to the east. They left no marks here. Is it simply bad luck? Did they lose the trail and are just attempting to find it again?

Two dozen is not many, but they are scouts, highly trained, used to fighting alone. Survivors. If the scouts find the cave entrance – the five of them will have no chance against two dozen Azgeda fighters. They will be cornered, easily defeated and even more easily killed.

Lexa draws her sword too, although she knows it will make no difference if they enter. She cannot fight her way through that many, not even with the help of the others. One enemy at a time she can easily defeat, two she can manage, three she could perhaps hold off – but five opponents for each of them will be a short, bloody battle. They have no space for tactics or stealth. They have no chance.

Her worried thoughts are interrupted as suddenly snow is pushed aside from the entrance. She considers using their slight advantage of surprise and attacking, but this is not the right time. They need to get out, where their inferior numbers will be less of a disadvantage. If she wounds one and they decide to attack out of self-defence, Lexa and her group will die.

But then the Azgeda are inside, four entering at once. Arrows are pointed at each of them. “HANDS UP!” the man in front bellows, and Raven immediately raises hers. Assan takes a step backwards but then releases his sword, leaving it in the sheath and raising his hands as well. Clarke looks at Lexa steadily, not drawing her weapon or putting her hands up, and waits to follow her lead.

Linkon gives her a panicked look as more enter, swords raised, until the cave is full of snarling Azgeda. Snarling, well-armed, well-armoured, and well-rested Azgeda “Orders?” he asks quietly.

“Protect Raven,” Lexa says, a sour taste in her mouth. A part of her wants to tell him to protect Clarke as well. But Clarke can protect herself and where she cannot she has Lexa to watch her back, and vice versa. Raven has no skill at fighting.

Then she blinks. The woman next to the gona in front – it is Keyza, tall and lean and dark, face twisted into a vicious scowl but nervousness and a plea hidden in her eyes. As Lexa watches, Keyza crooks her hand so that it is flat, a gona’s signal – the signal that the unit should pause, should stop. Keyza is telling her to wait, not to fight. She has a split second to decide whether to trust her spy.

Then Lexa raises her hands, letting her sword fall into the snow, and hopes Keyza has a way out of this.
Clarke tries to think about her options.

Okay, she’s looking down the business end of a lot of arrows. The way out of the cave is blocked by multiple rows of vicious looking gona. She’s huddled in a corner with the others, hands raised.

Option one: attack with a sword. She can use Ontari’s sword hanging at her waist, or she can grab Lexa’s off the ground and surprise them. Of course, she’ll be shish-kebabed in seconds if she tries this.

Option two: attack with a bow. Get Costia’s one off Lexa’s back, along with an arrow, and a string – who is she kidding? She doesn’t even know how to string a bow. She’ll get shish-kebabed.

Option three: get Raven to pass her a grenade. They have three, after all. Then she can throw it at their attackers… who will deflect it back towards them. When something comes flying through the air that’s the natural response, after all. They might knock it aside with their sword or their arm, but either way, whatever she throws could end up anywhere in this cave, and that’s not a story that ends well.

Plus, raising her arm to throw? Will get her shish-kebabed.

All right. Maybe she doesn’t have options. Maybe her only option is to wait for a better opportunity. No doubt that’s why Lexa’s going along with this.

Assan takes several steps so that he’s in front of Clarke, right next to Lexa. As she watches he reaches down for his sword as subtly as possible, hand trembling, probably about to try some foolish and suicidal attack on the enemy to defend his Heda. One of the gona makes a tutting noise and Assan’s gaze flashes up to the arrow still pointed at his throat. With a growl he raises his arms again.

“You left quite a trail,” the gona at the front – presumably the leader - drawls, holding up a few curling white-blonde strands. He looks along the row of them, gaze flicking over Lexa’s dark head immediately and coming to rest on Raven and Clarke.

Both of us have our hair covered, Clarke remembers.

Lexa is looking at a tall woman beside the leader. Her eyebrow moves infinitesimally, but Clarke recognises the question in them anyway. Lexa’s asking what the woman’s plan is. Instantly Clarke feels a rush of relief. They’re not alone. They have an ally.

“That girl is a brunette, and Wanheda is a blonde,” the leader says dismissively. “Check the other two and frag -”

“Hod op,” the tall woman beside him interrupts, and the leader turns to scowl at her. “She is around the right height, just as the others are. We do not know how old the hair we found is and hair colour can be easily changed. We should keep them all alive just in case.”

“Mind your tongue,” the leader warns her softly. “You do not lead here.”

“We would not wish to ignite the Azplana’s wrath,” the woman continues speaking anyway. “After all, she will be infuriated enough when she discovers the southern gonakru have been stopping at their home villages to pass out food against her orders, and that this has delayed them so they will not reach us for another day. I do not think she will react any better to our unintended betrayal than she
will to them falling prey to selfish affection for their families. Do you wish us to meet whatever fate she has in store for them?"

A message, Clarke thinks. The woman’s trying to tell them several things – one of them is that there’s a second gonakru, because she had no way of knowing they’re already informed of that, secondly she wants them to know exactly how far that gonakru is and that the villages won’t be safe to stop at when they run, and lastly that Nia’s hold on her people is slowly slipping. Right now the gona risk Nia’s cruel punishments to stop their families starving, but they wouldn’t do that unless they doubted her ability to keep them safe and fed without that food. It doesn’t make the second gonakru any less likely to try and use Lexa, Clarke or the others as bargaining chips to reduce their punishment, but in the longer-term it does mean that the stalemate between Azgeda and Trikru can’t last. Nia’s own people will turn against her eventually.

“Speak again and I shall slit your throat,” the leader hisses to the outspoken woman, but seems to concede her point anyway. He turns his attention to Lincoln and Assan. “Well, height cannot be changed, and the male gona we seek is supposed to be taller even than these two. Kill them and we will take the others.”

There is a frozen, horrified pause, and Clarke looks at Lexa again to see what they should be doing, and Lexa looks at the strange woman as if waiting for a sign. Before anyone else can step forward and do anything, however, Raven does.

“I’m Clarke Griffin, the girl you’re looking for,” Raven says fiercely, voice quavering only slightly, like she’s trying to look as tough as she can. “The Mountain Slayer. And if you kill these guys, I’m not coming with you.” Clarke stares at her, stunned. By trying to protect Lincoln and Assan, Raven’s going to get her and Lexa killed. If the gona don’t think there’s any chance they’re Clarke, they’re superfluous.

The leader blinks, surprised. “You have no choice,” he points out, as if to a child.

“Like hell I don’t,” Raven tells him, broadcasting cocky bravado with every movement and word. Clarke can see she’s shaking, though. She nearly steps forward and puts a stop to it, but then sees that Raven’s let one of her hands go slightly behind her back as she strides forward, so they can see it but the gona in front can’t.

She’s got her fingers crossed. As Clarke watches she uncrosses them then starts to move her hand slowly up to her pocket.

What the hell is her plan? And how will it clash with Lexa’s friend’s plan?

“You really think you can take me anywhere I don’t want to go?” Raven says to the leader. “I brought down a freaking mountain. This is just a little cave. You do the math. If you kill my friends, I’m not coming with you, and I’m certainly not helping you look for the big guy. This is your one chance to -”

The closest gona grabs Raven by her shoulders and drags her forward, yanking her stumbling until she’s surrounded by them closer to the entrance, easily ten feet from the rest of them. Raven inhales sharply and falls into a coughing fit, bowed over by the force of it, her body curved so that no one can see her front or hands.

The man growls at her, squeezes her upper arm painfully, and fists one hand in the material wrapped around her hair as if to tear it off and check her hair colour just in case. Assan reaches for his sword again, glancing at Lexa and scowling.
Clarke holds her breath and stays silent, not wanting to interrupt. If they want her alive – well, she wants Raven alive, if that’s the choice, so she wants the pretence to go on just a little longer. Assan starts to draw his sword, moving so that he’s even further away from Lincoln but closer to Clarke and Lexa.

Then Clarke gapes at Raven. Noticing suddenly what Raven used the brief distraction for.

She has a grenade in her hand. She must have groped a hand to her pocket and managed to wiggle it out during her coughing fit. Now she pulls the pin and lets the grenade drop soundlessly to the ground. Gives Clarke a wistful, watery smile. Closes her eyes. And waits.

“NO!” Clarke screams. “NO, RAVEN! NO!”

Assan is between her and Raven – she tries to shove him aside but she can’t do anything - the gona are looking confused, raising their weapons towards her, unsure why she’s reacting with such fear – a tear runs down Raven’s face –

The leader stiffens, realising something is going on, and spins to raise his sword to Raven’s throat, but the female gona who stopped them killing Lexa knocks it away with her hand. Then the two are fighting, the others paused in shock, not sure who the traitor is or why Clarke is screaming like the world is ending.

Lincoln slams through the gona like a runaway train. They were all watching Clarke as she yelled or the two gona as they fought, and weren’t paying enough attention to him to hit him with the arrows, and the way he ignores them and doesn’t attempt to take out his weapons or actually attack them leaves the gona uncertain what his ploy is. Two slash at him anyway, leaving red stripes on his clothing, but he ignores them to tackle Raven to the ground. The tall female gona yanks the leader back by his hair as he attempts to detach and follow Lincoln and Raven, teeth bared, sword raised to end both their fights, and he howls at the pain of the attack and turns to face her again.

The unexpected direction and force of Lincoln’s tackle throws the gona off and Lincoln starts to roll desperately, arms and legs wrapped around Raven to cover as much of her as possible, and then he slams them into the wall so that he’s between the grenade and Raven, though still way too close to the grenade for anything resembling safety. The gona, completely confused and somewhat alarmed, start to back away, looking around for this unknown threat. One sends an arrow at Lincoln but the others are too busy searching for whatever caused the reactions. The female gona stabs the leader through the heart and Clarke can hear the yells from the others as they try and process what’s going on. One notices the little dark globe on the ground and opens his mouth in shock just as Lexa pulls Clarke roughly to the ground.

Clarke flattens herself as best she can, huddled, but when it goes off it still feels like the world’s ending. The noise is deafening and an acrid smell fills the cave as tiny bits of metal embed themselves in her arms and back agonisingly. She thinks she hears Lincoln let out a low groan of pain, but it’s hard to tell through the explosion-induced ringing in her ears and the screams the scouts let out.

Before Clarke can even figure out which way is up again, she feels Lexa shift back to her feet and charge forwards. Her hearing comes back to the dull noise of blades on flesh and when she raises her aching head she sees nothing but bodies. Lexa seems slightly off balance and is bleeding from her right arm but otherwise looks far better than the rest of them. Then she crouches by Clarke and starts to pull her upright.

“Clarke,” Lexa says frantically. “Clarke, are you hurt, how bad is it, will you be okay?”
“Fine,” Clarke manages to say, coughing. The cough worsens until she’s throwing up, heaving until her stomach is empty, but then she forces herself upright again, feeling dizzy and sick, purple lights flashing disconcertingly against her eyelids whenever she closes them. “I’m fine.” She touches numb hands to her wounds and judges that yes, she is. Lexa pulled her down quickly enough. She manages to pull out two bits of metal from her left arm and one from her right. Superficial wounds, she notes distantly – they’ll bleed a bit and they’ll hurt, but nothing life-threatening. She has a piece in her back as well but given she’s moving it’s probably not too bad. “My back…” she says, made strangely anxious by it, “Please, my back, get it out, get it out -”

Lexa obeys immediately, carefully but quickly easing it out, and the pain is only a twinge. Clarke notes she really should bandage it but then moves onto more important things, helping remove the tiny sliver of metal from her niron’s arm. Assan’s standing already, having followed their lead, and has a cut that will probably scar on his forehead that he seems unconcerned by. Less than a minute after Clarke stands up, all three of them are fine, barring the threat of infection.

At first glance, Clarke thinks Lincoln is dead.

His back is – well, shredded. He was very close, and although an obliging Azgeda gona blocked some of the worst of it, he’s bleeding extremely badly. That’s the first thing that tells Clarke he isn’t dead, in fact – the volume of the blood. If his heart wasn’t pumping it out thickly anymore than it would be much more sluggish.

With Lexa’s help she manages to move him off Raven, who is relatively unhurt except for a sharp bit of shrapnel in her calf since Lincoln managed to get in the way of the rest. Since she was so close, she’s still deafened by the noise of it, and sobs loudly, “I used my smallest one… I didn’t think he’d… I’m so sorry… is he gonna die, Clarke, just tell me…” until Lexa drags her away so Clarke can work. Raven stumbles and falls as she tries to stand and come back, metal in her leg making it hard to walk, but Clarke ignores her because Lincoln could die of blood loss if she doesn’t.

Lexa leaves Raven slumped weeping in the corner, and goes to the tall, dark gona who narrowly stopped her death, and who was torn apart by the grenade when it went off due to her closeness. She closes the woman’s eyes carefully and mutters the ritual Trigedasleng phrases. Then she takes Assan to go check the outside of the cave and deal with any threats there.

Clarke’s sewed wounds using Grounder supplies before. Using Lincoln’s supplies, in fact, like she is now: and on Lincoln, also like now. She knocks him out first with the sedative in his pack, shoving away the panicking part of her to concentrate on being a healer. She removes piece after piece of shrapnel, cleans the wounds, puts pressure where it’s needed, sews up the worst of it until his back is a crisscrossing map of stitches. Some of the wounds are deep and there’s nothing she can do but pray they haven’t hit a lung, organ or artery. If there was medical care nearby, proper medical care, she’d leave the shrapnel in until they could find help – but there’s no point here. Any big pieces she leaves in are just one fall or hit away from potentially puncturing something necessary. She can leave a few of the smaller pieces, where they’ve lodged deep enough that she’ll only do more damage to him by trying to pry them out, but most of it she has to get out.

She doesn’t know how long she’s been working when Raven crawls over and starts to help, quietly and quickly doing whatever tasks Clarke hands her. She pours medicine over the cuts, she wipes blood away, she places one of the gona’s jackets on his back and then packs snow against it to cool the skin.

Eventually, she’s done. Clarke looks up into Raven’s teary, stunned dark eyes.

Clarke grabs her by the shoulders and shakes her hard. “What the hell is wrong with you,” she cries, not even realising she’s sobbing until her face is wet. “What the hell, Raven. You could have died.
What the *hell*. Oh my God.”

Raven pulls back, looking even more shocked, slapping Clarke’s hands away. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she snaps back. “You fucking hypocrite. How many of your suicidal plans have I helped with? They were gonna take you and kill the rest of us and you know it! I did the right thing! I didn’t ask Lincoln to pull a Superman and come flying to my fucking rescue!”

“Oh, don’t you dare blame -” Clarke starts, too messed up and horrified to even come back to rationality.

“Ai hodnes,” Lexa says sharply, suddenly beside her. Clarke looks at her wildly. “Ai hodnes, we have perhaps half an hour. When the scouts do not return, the others will move forward, and we have been here a long time already. They might have heard the explosion and then we have even less time. We cannot hide in a cave wrecked by a grenade, standing on snow stained bright with blood. You need to see to Raven’s leg and we need to move. *Now.*”

Clarke breathes easier. Something about Lexa’s certainty, her willingness to take control over the situation, allows Clarke to regain her own. Lexa’s right. They can’t hide here. And she can’t yell at Raven just because her friend scared her so completely. “Sorry,” she says guiltily, looking at Raven, forcing herself to speak levelly. “I’m… I’m really sorry, Raven. Really. Show me your leg. Do you think you can walk on it?”

“Not quickly,” Raven says after a moment, stretching it towards Clarke. The shrapnel’s buried fairly deep in the muscle, but Clarke judges that once she’s taken it out and bandaged the wound, with rest and recuperation Raven should be fine. Of course, she’s not likely to get any rest and recuperation, so Clarke does what she can and then crosses her fingers for luck.

Raven reaches out for Lexa’s hand when Clarke pulls out the shrapnel and Lexa lets her take it with surprising gentleness. “You are never allowed to complain about our plans again, Raven kom Skaikru,” Lexa tells her with grave humour.

Raven winces, squeezes tightly as Clarke finished extracting the metal, then lets Lexa’s hand drop. “Lincoln,” Raven says, not able to return the joke as she normally does. “Is Lincoln – I mean, what are we going to do?”

“The only thing we can do,” Lexa says firmly. “Assan is finding pieces for a stretcher of sorts, and together he and I will carry Linkon as best we can until the sedative wears off. Once that happens, perhaps he will be able to walk with our help. Blood loss and his injuries will slow him, but Linkon is tough. You will lean against Clarke – between you, you have two good legs. We will go north across the lake as fast as we can before they can find us again. Perhaps Gustus and Zion will see us and rejoin our group to help. You still have the trigger, sha? The plan has not changed. It has simply become a little more difficult.”

It takes Clarke a moment to completely understand the resignation in Lexa’s eyes. Even if they get across fast enough not to be caught, which is unlikely, they’ll be on the wrong side of the lake. The ice will be gone and the southern raiders bringing food north will block their only other path south. They’ll have nowhere to go except further north. Further and further, until they’re caught or they freeze, whichever comes first. Lexa thinks there’s no way out, that their fight is over, and all they can do is try and delay the end for a few more days.

She meets Lexa’s eyes in shock, before Lexa bows her head to look at the snow-covered ground.
Lexa has never crossed the Azgeda lake before.

She has been to it, of course, even ridden along the bank back when she first forced Nia into the alliance. It was too much of a risk for her to attempt to cross the ice at that time. Any Azgeda fool with salt, a saw, and a grudge could have made the whole thing into a trap. Nia herself might have even attempted it if she could be sure her actions were untraceable. Since then she has only seen it on maps – a jagged, stretched shape, slicing through Azgeda territory as if trying to behead it.

She never imagined crossing the lake like this.

Linkon is heavy and the makeshift stretcher is unwieldy. There would be no point leaving him to increase their speed, though – Raven is just as slow with her leg wound, and there is no chance of Clarke leaving both of them behind. If Lexa chose to pragmatically focus on her own survival, then it would be at the expense of all three of them. There are worse things than dying. She will not abandon her niron and friends, though Assan’s expression when she glances back at him suggests he wishes she would do exactly that.

“What’s the plan?” Clarke says in an undertone, shuffling so that she’s next to her. Raven angles her head to listen but does not say anything.

“I do not know,” Lexa says flatly, shifting slightly to distribute the stretcher’s weight. “Perhaps we should contact Wells, call for aid.”

“The radio’s wrecked,” Raven informs her. “It broke when Lincoln tackled me.”

“I see,” Lexa says, after a pause. “The trigger?”

“Looks fine. So does the last bomb and the grenades.”

They keep walking, slowly and grimly, slipping occasionally on the ice but righting themselves, no sound except their soft breathing and the light patter of snow. Lexa darts a glance at the shoreline. No one is there yet. They will be, though, and soon. Armies wait for their scout reports, but this army cannot afford to wait long, not with their orders.

“That woman,” Raven says, abruptly changing the subject. “You knew her, didn’t you?” Clarke raises her head and gives Lexa a look filled with compassion, and Lexa knows that Clarke recognised her silent communication with Keyza as well. Being Clarke, she probably understood more of Lexa’s attempted message than Keyza did.

Lexa considers asking which woman, but does not feel she should evade the question. “Sha. I did. She worked for me.”

Raven swallows hard. “Right. Right, that’s why she tried to… she was…”

Their party needs to pause for nearly a minute as Raven throws up everything her stomach holds, unheeded tears streaming down her face, her vomiting interspersed with hoarse coughing fits. Then Clarke pulls her upright again and they stagger on. The snowfall is still light. They will be seen as soon as the gonakru reaches the lake’s edge.

“It was not your fault,” Lexa tells Raven gently. “She was trying to keep us safe, just as you were, but neither of you could manage it alone. If you had not acted Linkon and Assan would have been
killed — perhaps the rest of us as well. You did the best you could. You saved us. She would not blame you.” The words are meaningless, she knows, so soon after a death. Perhaps this is the first time Raven has been truly close to the effects of her devices, for all her joking comments about enjoying the destruction. It is one thing to watch a flare of fire, another to witness a person burn; one thing to enjoy the power of a grenade, another to see someone’s skin shredded and sliced. And the knowledge you have killed an ally, however unwittingly… it can eat at you.

She shifts again, the stretcher’s weight uncomfortable. Despite the cold, sweat from the exertion is dripping down her forehead and stinging her eyes. Linkon lets out a low moan from behind her. Perhaps he is waking up — but when she looks back, he still seems to be unconscious, so while he may be waking up he is certainly not awake.

“How did they find us?” Clarke wonders out loud. “Do you think maybe I accidentally snagged an actual hair and led them to us?”

“You’re hair is covered, Clarke,” Lexa says firmly. “And we would have noticed if one was on your shoulder or back. No, it is simply poor luck.”

“Do we ever have any other kind?” Raven asks, sotto voce.

Lexa is pleased to note Raven seems to be recovering from her shock and nausea, but ignores her anyway and continues, “Perhaps one knew of the existence of the cave and decided to check. Or perhaps they somehow failed to notice Gustus and Zion and so headed west.”

“Perhaps it is the snow,” Assan suggests, apparently catching their words. “From what I could see of the ground before we headed this way, it may have picked up for a short time while we were inside the cave before slowing again. Thicker snow would make it harder to spot them.”

Lexa frowns. She knows enough about snow to track people through it, and to make herself hard to track, but she cannot read the history of snowfall in the depth of it as an Azgeda can. She can tell how much it has snowed but not whether it has been snowing at a consistent rate or varying between heavy and light. If Assan is correct, though, it still does not explain why Gustus and Zion would not react to that change and come closer to shore and be spotted there. Both would be willing to sacrifice themselves rather than risk their Heda, and Zion is an Azgeda and should know whether they would be visible through the snow.

“Should we go east?” Raven says, slipping and struggling upright again. “Find the others?”

“It will take too much time,” Lexa replies. “If they see us and angle their way across the lake so our paths intersect, that will be useful. But we need to get across as quickly as possible or we will have to break the ice with us still on it.”

“How will we survive that?” Raven objects, looking over at Lexa like she’s crazy and leaning more heavily on Clarke’s arm. It is hard to tell if her colour has returned to normal under all the layers she is wearing, but she sounds much more lively than before.

“We wouldn’t,” Clarke says shortly. She reaches out her free hand and touches Lexa’s arm for a brief moment, imparting the small amount of comfort they can give while maintaining their respective burdens.

“Oh, Right,” Raven says, looking wrongfooted. “Okay. We get across as fast as possible. Then what?”

“I don’t know,” Clarke admits. “We can’t go south, and we can’t survive in the north the way Zion
and Gustus might be able to – they’re used to the cold. We’re not. Our clothes have holes from the shrapnel, we’re nearly all injured, and we gave most of our supplies to Gustus and Zion because we thought they’d need them more. In fact, even if we catch up with them, we’ll run through the supplies so much faster we’ll run out in less than a week.”

Raven hesitates, paling, then rallies, though Lexa can see she lets Clarke take even more of her weight for that brief moment as if she can’t hold herself up. “Okay, so we’ll get our hands on another radio. Get the others to come north and get us.”

“It takes at least two weeks for an Azgeda army to move from south to north,” Lexa informs her. “It would take longer for an army of the other clans, just as it took longer for us. Most would not survive the journey north without assistance. Even those who could live long enough to reach the lake would probably perish here – if the ice was stable enough to cross by then, they would be easily shot by Azgeda archers who are far more used to this environment, or bottled up in the pass to be slaughtered. If we manage to make it across this lake and destroy the gonakru following, there is another behind it which we can do nothing about, one that will trap us in the pass as well. There will be no surviving this.” The long speech makes her breathless and she stops talking, concentrating on continuing at the same pace. Her arms ache with helping to carry Linkon, even though she thinks Assan is probably taking more of the weight.

“So you’re saying there’s nothing we can do?” Raven says incredulously. “You’re really just gonna roll over and let them kill us? Why the fuck are we even walking across this stupid lake if -”

Lexa interrupts softly. “We cannot survive, Raven, that is what I am saying.” She pauses and takes a deep breath. “That does not mean there’s nothing we can do.”

Clarke blinks, but then continues for her when Lexa stops speaking. “Yeah. We can do our damnedest to take out this army. And once we’ve done that, we go for Nia. We take her out and we might have a chance. She’s the real threat.”

Raven laughs, hoarsely and sceptically, a tinge of hysteria to it. “Do you even hear yourselves? We have one bomb, two grenades, one gas grenade, a bow, and a bunch of swords. You said yourself we’re nearly all injured, we have two armies after us, and we’re pretty much guaranteed to die. And you want to attack the most well-guarded person north of Polis? That’s what you’re saying here?”

“Sha,” Lexa says simply, and smiles at Clarke. Clarke grins back at her, fiercely determined. In her eyes Lexa sees acknowledgement that if death must come, then they will meet it with their heads raised, backs straight, and blades out. And more than that, gladness that if their spirits must pass on, they will do so together. They will not be separated again. Their fates may be written, but they wrote it themselves, they chose their paths, and they walk together.

There’s a very, very long silence, lasting minutes. Then Raven pulls down the scarf like Clarke has, exposing her face to the cold so that Lexa can see it properly, can see the slow smile spreading across her lips. “Okay then. Just so long as I know. Let’s do this.” She shoots them a quick glare. “But I call bullshit on the idea of it maybe being a suicide mission. We’ll figure out a way. We always do.”

How many years has Lexa dreamed of killing Nia? How many times has she thought she would gladly sacrifice herself for the chance to kill Nia, if she could guarantee it would not hurt the alliance? Well, now it will not. Now she gets her wish. It is, perhaps, a touch hollow, now that she has Clarke, such an excellent reason to live. But she can think of no better way she could die than getting justice for someone she loves – except protecting someone she loves, and with Clarke here, she will do that as well. It will be a good end.

“Okay,” Clarke says, suddenly business-like. “I know where Nia is. I’m sure once we get across we
can make a more detailed plan. I’ve got some ideas. I know you’ll have some more. Hopefully Lincoln will be in good enough shape to help. We have a bomb and some grenades and we’re smarter than them. We might not be fast right now, but we don’t have to be.”

“I am not sure that is correct,” Assan says gruffly. He’s been quiet for so long Lexa would have forgotten he was there if she wasn’t matching his pace to carry the stretcher. She looks back and sees what he does, sees his face pale slightly as he stares behind them.

The shore of the lake is thick with dark figures, gona, so many the mass of them can be seen even with the distance they’ve managed. Now that she listens Lexa can hear the hubbub of conversation and argument, the volume gradually increasing, the sound drifting across the clear lake. If there are more to the east, closer to where the false trail lay, she cannot see them – but there are so many perhaps they are massed so thickly all along the southern edge of the lake. A war cry bounces across the ice and Lexa thinks she can feel the frozen lake vibrate with the force of footsteps as Azgeda start moving quickly, spilling across the lake like ink spreading through water.

Assan is right. They will have to be very fast indeed.
Clarke’s first trip across the ice was like a hazy nightmare. Weak from blood loss, numb from not enough layers, trapped and blinded by heavy snow, very little of the first time felt real.

This time she sweats under her layers and she almost thinks she can feel every bead of it. Her injuries from the shrapnel sting and ache with cold. The faces of the others seem almost unbearably vivid. Even the ground under her feet seems more solid than it did last time.

Sadly, this enhanced sense of reality doesn’t make the journey any more pleasant.

She wishes Gus was here to help again. Due to the wide and flat shape of the lake, though, he’s probably further away than the gona are. A position they originally had him and Zion take deliberately because it was far away from them, to keep them safe Gustus and Zion lured the gonakru across the lake. Clarke’s not sure if that’s ironic or merely another example of life kicking them while they’re down.

She and Raven help each other along as fast as they can, leaning against each other, but with an injured calf and a weak ankle they’re not nearly as fast as Clarke would like. Still, their head start is considerable, and the gona are being very careful and therefore reasonably slow – understandable, since by the sheer number of them, they’re risking breaking through the ice even without the help of the bombs. Clarke concentrates on moving and breathing, moving and breathing, moving and breathing. She doesn’t allow panic in, although she can feel it pressing at the edges of her mind.

They’re about a hundred feet from the northern shore of the lake when the first gona reaches her.

He grabs at her arm roughly and makes her stumble and nearly fall. Then he releases her with a cry of pained shock, slumping to the ground, an arrow in his chest. Clarke looks over to see Lexa wielding Costia’s bow. Lexa must have restrung it at some point, perhaps before she started carrying Lincoln or perhaps right before starting to shoot. She’s let go of Lincoln’s stretcher to do it, though, and as Clarke watches she shoots twice more, taking the next two gona in the thigh and stomach respectively.

“Raven,” Clarke says hurriedly, “Can you walk yourself, can you -”

“Sure thing,” Raven says, face pale and sweaty as she tries to force a smile. “No problem.” She pulls away from Clarke and stumbles forwards, smacking to the ground on her hands and knees and crawling instead of walking.

Clarke’s ankle aches as she moves back towards the others. She stabs a man about to slice into the prone Lincoln with his sword, then picks up the side of the stretcher Lexa was carrying. “Keep shooting,” she yells at Lexa, because there are enough gona now that she has to yell to be heard over the roar of them, and she pulls the stretcher along. After a moment Assan, who put it down to see off a female gona with a berserker roar and a sword to the face, notices what she’s doing and picks up his side.

They move as fast as they can. People manage to grab hold of Clarke twice more, and several times she hears Assan’s furious roar as he’s attacked, but Lexa shoots mechanically as she backs away – arrow after arrow after arrow – and they fall before they can do any damage. They’re probably still afraid of killing Clarke and crossing the Azplana, anyway. With their numbers the gona probably think they can easily wear down the party. And Lexa’s shots aren’t as well-placed as they would be with a knife – she aims for the legs and lower body, injuring more gona than she kills, perhaps
worried she’ll hit armour if she aims for their chests and miss if she aims for their throats.

Lexa has seven arrows left. Four. Two. They’re at the edge of the lake, just. One.

And then the whole world lurches. It’s not like the grenade going off, a sharp slash of noise and pain, and it’s not like the Mountain’s fierce but contained explosion of heat and finality. It’s more like Clarke imagines an earthquake would be, except started off with a series of ‘bang’ noises that seem strangely distant and tinny, like firecrackers going off, gradually getting louder. Then there’s sharp cracking noises echoing around the place, the ice giving up against the explosions and the warmth and the weight of people on it.

Clarke stumbles forward until she can’t pull Lincoln’s stretcher any further – Assan must have dropped his side – and then she turns to see what’s happening.

What meets her eyes is pure chaos. Assan and Lexa are slashing at the closest gona, the ones who made it across, taking advantage of their surprise. The gona seem to have given up trying to keep them alive and are fighting for their lives and losing. Behind them their comrades scream to each other and to themselves and to the sky. Some of those in the water thrash uselessly but are dragged down in moments, while others just sink immediately, paralysed by the cold and weighed down by weapons, armour and soaked clothing. Some were lucky enough to be on stronger parts of the ice, but most of these were still knocked over as the ice cracked – and the cracks are still spreading as desperate gona try and yank themselves onto the intact parts. A few are frantically trying to reach shore before all of the ice gives way. The cracks aren’t just between where the bombs were but instead branch off like lightning to head towards the weakest parts. At this point the lake is a series of ice islands barely managing to stay together in the frigid water.

“Help them,” Raven bellows to be heard over the screams. She limps towards Clarke, eyes fierce and snapping, then pushes Clarke aside to grab onto the stretcher. “Now! I’ll deal with Lincoln!” She leans against the weight of it. For a second Clarke thinks she won’t be able to shift it at all – Lincoln weighs quite a bit, and she’s pulling up a hill – but then she manages to drag it an inch and just keeps pulling.

Clarke joins the fight against the gona staggering up the side of the lakeshore by cutting one’s throat, splattering herself with his blood. The next one is soaked and freezing – it’s no effort at all to stab him in the stomach and move to the next.

Seeing them up close, Clarke notices that few of them are wearing even as much clothing as Assan is – because he’s from the very north, she realises, used to this climate. He owns clothes specifically designed for the coldest of the cold, the clothes they’re all wearing right now. Because the gona are from all around Azgeda territory, some don’t have the same warm clothing. Most look underfed due to the food shortages. Some are clearly village hunters, if that, and don’t know how to use their weapons, as if they’ve had even less training than Clarke.

Very few make it to the shore. Many of the ones that do are so frozen by the water and out of it that stabbing them feels more like saving them from a slow death by hypothermia. Others don’t even try to attack but just crawl or stagger away to the sides, trying to hide from the people who used to be their quarry.

Something about it makes Clarke cold. It’s a success for them, a resounding one, but at the end of the day all these people were doing was obeying their leader. Some are warriors, but most are just villagers, and she’s sure they wish they were at home with their families instead of called up to scour the Azgeda territories and journey to the frozen north at Nia’s order. Their culture values loyalty so highly that the majority of them probably never even realised there was a choice. They’re dying, coldly and painfully, for a woman who will care less about their deaths than about their failure.
What’s her death count up to now? How many hundreds of people just died?

Soon the attack stops – everyone’s drowned, or frozen, or run. Lexa and Assan disappear silently to scout the sides, see how close the others are, check if they’re being hunted or if the enemy has too many injured and dead to mount any kind of search.

Clarke can’t help them. She feels exhaustion swamp over her, a numb tiredness that nearly blocks out the bone-deep cold. The dead are ugly, somehow unreal, piles of corpses like broken dolls, bodies littering the water impossibly still and silent. There’s almost no blood, since what little was shed has already frozen into hard scabs. Somehow that makes it less real but more disturbing.

“Clarke,” Lexa’s beside her, suddenly, voice impossibly soft. “Ai hodnes, it is done, it is over. They are focusing on their injured, but many still remain. We must use the time we have been given to get as far ahead as we can.”

Clarke blinks at her, unable to really focus. The last gona she stabbed must have been a Seken, he looked young, horrifyingly young. His body is nearly blue with the cold. From the look of his clothes, he was from the south, he probably never expected to go north, never expected to die like this. “Em gonplei ste odon,” she murmurs.

“Clarke,” Lexa says, more insistently. “They are helping their injured. We must do the same. Linkon needs you. Come on, Clarke.”

This time it gets through to Clarke, as Lexa must have known it would. She has a patient. She has to help her patient.

She staggers over to Lincoln. He’s half-awake and still hazy and unfocused from the sedative Clarke gave him, pale under his dark skin from the blood loss and pain. He’s on his front on the stretcher since most of his injuries were on his back. Raven’s beside him, holding his hand, speaking to him in a low voice. From the anguish on her face Clarke knows exactly what Raven’s saying.

Lincoln looks up when Clarke crouches beside him as well. He manages a smile. “So you have saved me again, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

She smiles back, but it feels brittle and fake. “For the moment, anyway.”

“I am starting to believe Sky People are especially dangerous to you, Linkon,” Lexa comments.

“Sha,” Linkon says. As Clarke and Raven watch, horrified, he detaches his hand from Raven’s and holds it out to Lexa, who helps pull him up to his feet. Judging by his wince, it’s reasonably painful. “But my first injury helped us to make the first alliance between Trikru and Skaikru, when I brought Clarke kom Skaikru to you. If my second saved the life of Raven kom Skaikru, so she can help to bring down Nia, then I consider every scar worthwhile. Octavia admires scars, you know.”

“Lincoln -” Raven says uncertainly. “I did say -”

“That you are worried there will be no return trip,” Lincoln says, admirably composed. For a second, sad resignation shows in his eyes, but he quickly banishes it. “But if we do not come back, then when our people come to find our bodies – as they must, since they will need to find the Flame – well, then she will know. If I could erase all of this and return to her, I would not. At least I will die for a reason, a cause. I will die doing what is right. Octavia will have that to comfort her.”

Clarke wants to tell him that knowing that is very cold comfort, that it doesn’t make the pain sting less, but she would be lying. Immediately after the loss it doesn’t matter, of course, but months later – well, months later, you look back and feel a small twinge of warmth along with all the pain, and
pride and love chokes you for a moment. Senseless deaths are the hardest to survive.

“You probably shouldn’t be walking,” she says instead. “You’re still quite injured -”

“I can manage,” he assures her.

“Assan,” Lexa says, as the Azgeda man appears. “Many survivors to the east?”

He shakes his head. “Very few,” he reports. “And no signs of Zion kom Azgeda or Gustus kom Trikru. Perhaps they were caught by the explosion.”

“Unlikely,” Lexa says crisply, even as Raven pales and opens her mouth. “They can move much quicker than we can. If they did not realise we were also on the ice, they probably believe the plan went as originally intended. They will be to the north. We should head north as well. If we can reach Nia before any of the survivors, we may be able to surprise her – provided they do not still have the radio. How far is her hideout from here?” She directs the question at Clarke.

Clarke struggles to remember the time spent racing through the whirling snow, Gustus next to her on Snowball, pulled along by Roan. It had been – what, a couple of hours, maybe? But they’re not going to be able to move nearly as quickly. “Maybe four hours’ walk,” she says hesitantly.

Concern flashes in Lexa’s green eyes, but she simply says, “Then we should get going.”
Lexa has Assan take the lead, since he will be most able to detect trails in the snow, and he seemed to recognise the mountain Clarke described to him. After him Lexa places Linkon in their line of bedraggled people, so that if he falls there will be several people behind him to notice. Then Raven, supported partially by Clarke. Lexa herself takes the rear since it is the second-most dangerous position and along with Assan she is the least injured.

None of them have enough energy to talk. They barely have enough energy to move. They have been awake for many hours – with the exception of Linkon, who is still drowsy from the sedative – have been hit by shrapnel, have moved at high speed over ice for hours, have been close to a number of bomb blasts, and have taken part in a short battle. Lexa considers allowing them all to rest, but knows there is nowhere they can do that safely, even though Assan offered to stand watch. Struggling on half-dead with exhaustion is still safer than remaining near the lake, especially since they do not know of any caves or other places to hide.

After all, there is plenty of time to rest when you are dead. She does not subscribe to Raven’s optimistic view or to Clarke’s tentative hope that some way out of this may still be found. They walk north to their deaths. They will freeze long before any of the Coalition clans can march north safely, long before Roan can convince the Azgeda Nia is dead and establish control over them.

Eventually Lexa summons the energy to say to Clarke, “You know how to get into Nia’s palace. Just one entrance?”

“Yep,” Clarke says grimly. “As far as I know, anyway, and I spent quite a bit of time searching that place for useful things. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I believe so. Is the bomb powerful enough?” Lexa asks Raven.

Raven blinks, looking far more out of it than anyone else, and hides a cough. “Enough for what?”

“We need to be able to bring down a tunnel,” Clarke explains. “Mostly built of snow. Very narrow and the ceiling’s too low to stay on a horse inside it. We need it to bring down enough snow and rocks that it will be pretty much impossible for them to dig out of.”

“Oh, I get it,” Raven says, tired eyes brightening. “Trap ‘em like rats. Yeah, should be enough to blast the passage at least. I don’t know what it will do to the rest. It’s a mountain with a whole castle in it, from what you’ve said, so if we start a chain reaction we could accidentally collapse the whole damn thing.”

“Even better,” Clarke replies, forcing a smile.

“I’ll set the timer,” Raven says.

Assan intrudes on the conversation. Lexa had not even realised he could hear them. “Is there any good reason to do that? Our fights will end whatever happens.”

“There is a good reason,” Raven responds, looking annoyed. “The good reason is, ‘I don’t want to die blown to pieces or crushed by snowfall’.”

“She is right,” Lexa says calmly. “We will not survive it, most likely, but I would prefer to outlive Nia. Just so that I know that we have done what we set out to do, and have brought justice to her. Also, if we destroy the castle the gonakru will not be able to get any further orders from Nia, so
organisation may dissolve. They will still be blocking the way to the south but one of us may be able
to survive in the far north long enough to give the Flame to our people when they arrive. Assan – or
Zion, if we can find him – might have a chance.”

“Or Roan could arrive,” Clarke suggests, though she sounds doubtful. “Take over leadership. Save
us. It’s possible he stayed close enough. So we set a timer and try not to blow ourselves up or trap
ourselves inside.”

“The castle is a secret,” Lexa comments. “But a few Azgeda will know of it. When they stop hearing
from Nia, they will arrive to investigate. We cannot let them call in the whole army – if they have
enough people they might be able to dig Nia and the others out.”

“So,” Raven starts to summarise, “We set a timer, blow the passage, wait outside for a few days to
see if anyone shows up to investigate or manages to dig their way out, and take them out if they do.
After all, we’ll have a gas grenade, two actual grenades, and lots of pointy things remaining. What
can’t we kill?”

“I suspect we will soon know the answer to that, Raven kom Skaikru,” Lexa says soberly.

She cannot help comparing this to their plan for the Mountain. That plan involved multiple different
groups with different tasks, the best Skaikru and Trikru weaponry, advanced knowledge of their
enemy’s set-up, resources and reactions, and people planted inside to surprise the enemy and add to
their advantage. This plan – well, this plan is a ragtag group of five walking wounded, a plan that is
barely a sketch, inside knowledge that is restricted to what the place looked like weeks ago and how
many people it had then, and there is always the possibility Nia has added extra defences or even
moved to a totally different place in reaction to Clarke and Gustus’ escape.

The one advantage they have is that Nia will never expect them to do this, because it is a thoroughly
reckless plan. Not to mention that out of their group, she does not understand Clarke at all, she
believes Lexa is dead, she has probably never even heard of Raven and her skill at making bombs,
she would consider brave, skilled Linkon to be beneath her interest, and Nia did not know of
Assan’s existence and could not understand why he would help them. Every facet of their plan is
unexpected, and they are prepared to die in its execution, that will have to be enough.

“Lexa,” it’s Clarke, she’s dropped back, leaving Raven to lean on Linkon. “Here, ai niron, eat
something. You need to keep your strength up.”

She’s holding out some dried meat. Lexa takes it and tears into the meat gratefully. She had almost
forgotten that food existed, that it was required to continue. This close to the revenge that she has
craved for half a decade and her mind is becoming like an arrow, aimed at one thing and one thing
only. An arrow like the ones Costia sent unerringly into creatures’ and enemies’ eyes and throats,
killing them instantly.

Nia will die.

A pang of guilt shoots through her, realising how single-minded she has been for the past hours. She
did not even remember to check if Clarke was well after the battle. “How are you dealing, Clarke?”
she asks softly. “Are you… are you alright?”

Clarke reaches out and touches her face lightly with a gloved hand, stopping for a moment. “I’m here
with you, Lexa,” she replies, just as softly. “Can’t get much better than that.”

“I know the battle before -”
“I’m fine,” Clarke assures her. “It was… unpleasant, definitely. But when it gets warmer and our people come north, a lot less of them will die now. I’m trying to think of it in terms of people saved as well as people killed. After all, someone told me I couldn’t blame myself for the deaths I cause without crediting myself for the lives I save.”

Lexa smiles at her. As tired as she is, Clarke can always make her smile. “That sounds wise indeed. Whoever suggested such a thing to you?”

“I don’t remember,” Clarke says mischievously. “She mustn’t have been that important. I do know she was a terrible shot with a bow, though.”

“I hit everyone I aimed for,” Lexa protests, wounded.

“Yeah, but I’ve seen you throw knives,” Clarke says. “You hit what you aim for, no matter how small the target is, no matter how far away it is. But with the bow you were shooting people only a few feet away and there were still a few bad shots. Comparatively…”

“I should give you the bow,” Lexa grumbles. “We can see how you do, ‘comparatively’.”

“You shouldn’t give anyone else the bow,” Clarke says, voice going quiet and expression growing serious. “And you know it.”

“No,” Lexa agrees, a little choked. “No, I should not.” She reaches over her shoulder to touch the bow on her back, then lets her hand drop. “I have one arrow left. Perhaps Nia will be outside her castle and I can use it on her. That would be – fitting. Very fitting.”

“It would be,” Clarke agrees.

“It is a shame life is rarely that neat,” Lexa says.

“It’s fine with me that life is messy and complicated,” Clarke replies. “We were messy and complicated at first, after all. In a neater world I would probably never have met you. Meeting you makes all of this worth it.” She hesitates. “You know, when you talked about taking the Flame back… I mean… did you ever think…”

“What?”

“Everyone thinks you’re dead,” Clarke says bluntly. “Did you ever think about getting my Mom to try and remove the Flame? Then when you found me, we could have – I don’t know. Gone off somewhere together. Be just regular people in one of the other clans. Go hunting, make a little home, be happy. We could have done it. We could still do it, maybe.”

“No,” Lexa replies after a pause, voice sure. “No, we could not.”


“We still could not have done it,” Lexa says honestly. Every part of her rings with the truth of what she is saying. “Hunt animals instead of armies? Make huts instead of treaties? Some people are destined to lead, Clarke. Not just because of what they owe to their people, not just because they are good at it, but because it is what they need to do. I have been Heda for so long that I do not know where it ends and I begin. It is not just what I do, it is who I am, and I would not change that if I could. I do not believe you would, either. You could not live as anything other than what you are, ainiron, and you will never be able to stop yourself from taking charge and trying to lead our people somewhere better. It is part of what I love about you.”
There is a long, long pause, and then Clarke takes Lexa’s hand as they walk.

“I really wish you weren’t always right,” Clarke eventually says, very quietly, no real amusement in her voice although she tries to sound jovial. “It means you’re probably gonna be the kind of spouse who says ‘I told you so’ all the time and I’m going to be the one going ‘I know, I know’.”

Lexa clears her throat, forcing back tears. “And I really wish we could have had the chance to find out what kind of spouses we would be. I do not dream of being hunters in a hut somewhere, but I have lived through so much war with you, Clarke kom Kongeda, that I do dream of living in peace.”

“Hey, you never know, we could get out of this,” Clarke says. “And even if we don’t get to live in peace together this time, maybe we’ll get to in our next lives.”

“Sha. Maybe then.”

They’re in the shade of the mountain, now. Lexa wonders what it is about mountains – mountains and towers and space stations. It is like high places are somehow inherently more dangerous to her. She is of the Tree People, not the Boat People or Desert Clan or Plains Riders. High places should be her home.

“I love you, you know that,” Clarke says, staring at the icy mountain for a moment and then looking at Lexa, pain in her gaze. “So much. More than you could ever imagine. More than I’ve ever loved anyone before. You are my home, Lexa kom Trikru, and my heart, and my love, and my lover, and my everything. This – this extra time with you, even though it’s not enough, even though it’ll never be enough, it was the greatest gift I can imagine getting. Maybe after this we can go find some more lightning, maybe that will give us more time. Another chance to get it right.”

“We have done as well as we could,” Lexa says, squeezing Clarke’s hand convulsively. “I do not think we will get another chance, ai hodnes. But I owe you more than I can say, and love you even more than that. Our friends – well, Raven will not get to see Anya again, and Linkon will not see Octavia. But I was allowed to see you, and say all the things I wished to say, and it still does not feel like enough but I know it is more than I ever deserved. You are more than I ever deserved. Ai hod yu in, Clarke kom Skaikru, ai hodnes, ai kwelnes, ai niron. I will search for you in my next life.”

And so they go to attack another mountain.
The Path Less Travelled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The area is treacherous, with steep slopes and most flat paths petering off quickly. They take the same path as Nia’s group used when she brought Clarke back because there are no other options. It unnerves Clarke, but Lexa points out that there would be no logic in keeping a place so secret and then having gona visibly guarding the place for such a significant stretch. A square mile covered with guards wouldn’t remain secret for long, not even so far north.

Surprisingly, it’s Clarke who notices the problem first. Of course, it’s because she’s the only one who’s been there before, not because of some innate snow survival skills, but she thinks it still counts.

“Hod yu op,” she says suddenly, every instinct she has shrieking with alarm and suspicion. It’s something to do with the large white tree in front of them, the one she remembers thinking had a branch that looked like a dragon the first time she went this way, riding on Snowball with Ontari.

Lexa frowns. “What is it, Clarke?”

She doesn’t know what it is. The ground is white and clear with snow, the frozen trees hunched over, icicles dripping from their branches. There’s nothing new around, nothing there that wasn’t there the last two times she followed this path. But something’s wrong.

“We cannot stand around like this for hours,” Assan growls, and Lexa fixes him with a fierce glare.

“Shof op, Assan,” she says coldly. “When I wish for your input, I will ask for it. But you should not hold your breath waiting.”

There’s nothing new here. But there’s something that’s missing. The smooth perfection of the snow…

“There was a branch here,” she murmurs, “A branch that fell from that tree. A big one. Snowball balked at it and Ontari swore at him and yanked on the reins so hard it hurt him. And when we were leaving Roan had to persuade him over it as well. There were other things as well… other smaller branches, old animals’ burrows, that kind of thing.”

Lexa’s eyes widen. “I see,” she says quietly. She gives Assan and Lincoln a nod, which they return, and then they move forward cautiously, staring at the snow like it’s going to come alive and attack them. Raven leans on Clarke as they watch.

“This reminds me of the time my mom lost one of her favourite earrings,” Raven considers the accuracy of this, then adds fairly, “Of course, her search involved a lot more drunken stumbling.”

“Found it,” Lincoln says grimly, clearing away the upper surface of the snow. They all come to stand beside him when he beckons.

“It must be fishing line or something – so transparent it’s nearly invisible even without the snow covering it. Clarke follows the path of it with her eyes to two trees on opposite sides of the path. “A tripwire,” she says unnecessarily. “What’s the trap though? Does it make sound, alert the guards, throw something deadly at us, what?”
“If they are attempting to keep this place a secret, a loud noise would not aid them,” Lexa points out, but there’s a note of uncertainty in her voice that probably only Clarke can hear.

“I think what it does probably depends on who they think is likely to trip it,” Lincoln says thoughtfully. He straightens, wincing at the pain in his back. “They cannot expect an army, not yet.”

“So?” Raven asks impatiently.

“They probably expect Clarke,” Lexa says. “The gonakru Nia had searching could not find her. If she assumes they are being effective, then she must know Clarke could only be in the far north. And Clarke used gunpowder to get out – perhaps they believe she has a stash of such weaponry.”

“Maybe. Or they’re worried about Roan,” Clarke says. “I could see Roan deciding to put it all on the line and just straight-up try and assassinate his mother, if he thought he had no other choice. What with my ‘weaponry’, and Roan and Gustus’ combat skills, maybe she thinks we’ll come back and try and deal with her in a more direct way.”

“Why did you not?” Assan asks bluntly.

Clarke shrugs. Maybe she should have tried to – but no. “We wouldn’t have succeeded. They were ready for me or Roan to go for Nia, half-expecting it I think. Nearly all the guards were around her at all times. But they weren’t expecting us to run out into almost certain death. That’s the only reason escaping worked at all.”

“She must know Gustus has contacts like Assan, even if she does not know who the spies are,” Lexa muses. “Perhaps she thought you would find them and tell them of the location. If they passed it south – well, Nia could be afraid of a group of assassins.”

“Then she’s right to be afraid,” Raven says cockily.

“We can avoid this trap, anyway,” Lincoln says firmly. “Provided we stay alert, we should be able to avoid others, as well. Whatever traps she has – blades, nets, gas grenade, poisons – we do not need to know how they work, just how to avoid them.”

“Sha, Linkon,” Lexa agrees, though there is still worry on her face. “We will go carefully.”

Most of the traps are easily avoidable, just little holes for someone to turn an ankle, but others are more tripwires and once what seems to be a pit with poisoned spikes. None are very elaborate – understandably so, since they were probably made in a rush after Nia realised her manhunt wasn’t turning up any of the people she was looking for.

Lexa quickly carves an ‘S’ on the closest tree whenever they find a trap, as a warning for Zion and Gustus in case they decide to come back this way. It’s unlikely, but possible, and since it doesn’t really cost them anything except a small amount of time Clarke thinks it’s probably worthwhile. It also reminds them where the traps are, which is just as useful, since they are planning to come back this way if they can.

It feels too easy, the trip to the door. Much, much too easy, Clarke thinks. Little, primitive snares to avoid by stepping over or around. No guards. An easy hike up a snowy slope. It feels like a trap. Or maybe Nia has run out of tricks – she’s expecting two armies to show up any day, so perhaps she didn’t think she needed to guard her secret lair too closely right away. Or maybe she has everyone and everything lined up in the passageway immediately after the entrance, where it would be most effective, where they can just kill people one by one as they enter. If people get there, the secret is already out, after all.
Or maybe Nia’s not here at all. Maybe they’re walking into an empty castle.

Not knowing is the most terrifying thing.

Clarke’s not sure if it’s a relief when they reach the entrance, or even more unnerving. “We’re here,” she says, voice a little shaky, pointing out the door so the others can see it. They squint, searching. Even knowing it’s here, Clarke feels a pang of doubt when she searches for the doorway, so she understands their confusion. She has to blur her eyes instead of focusing on the side of the mountain, so she sees the features around it instead of just bland, unrelenting ice and snow.

Lexa and Raven have been talking quietly for a while, Lexa helping Raven to climb the hill while Lincoln searches for traps. Now Lexa comes forward. “Raven says I should place this device as far back in the tunnel as possible,” she says, face set, lips barely moving as she speaks. “That will collapse the whole tunnel, so she has informed me how to set the bomb for different times, and I can choose the one I require. I will be back soon.”

“What?” Clarke stares at her. “Lexa, I’m not leaving you. You can’t go in alone.”

“I will not,” Lexa says. “Assan is also uninjured, he can guard me as I set it. But it is a small tunnel, from what you have said. Multiple people will not help. This mission depends on speed. We will run in. I will set the device while Assan holds them off. Then we will flee. While we are doing that, you should move down the mountain as quickly as you can. If we set off an avalanche – well. I hope we will not set off an avalanche. But if so, you require as much distance as possible.”


Lexa sighs, and suddenly she looks much older and as exhausted as Clarke feels. “Ai hodnes, you, Linkon and Raven cannot move as quickly as Assan and I can, not right now. You are still healing. You are favouring your ankle, I can see it. You could barely keep the walking pace. I cannot go into a tunnel filled with enemies and set the timer for long enough for you to get away. They might take the bomb and throw it outside, or figure out how to disarm it, or find some other way to deal with it. We cannot give them time to react.”

“I can run,” Clarke argues. “For a short distance, at least.”

“You are more likely to render your ankle completely unusable,” Lexa says flatly. “Listen to me. You will fall, I will stop to help you, and we will both die as the tunnel collapses. Take Raven, take Linkon, and go. We will run and catch up to you.”

This plan is stupid, Clarke wants to say. And it is stupid because there’s a million ways it could go wrong. But it’s also smart, in a strange way, and it’s smart because Nia doesn’t know that they have a bomb. The gona won’t know how to deal with the bomb. They won’t understand what the timer is. By the time they figure it out, the bomb will have gone off.

But the plan depends on Lexa surviving long enough to set the timer. Then being able to get away – far enough away that the collapse of the tunnel doesn’t kill her. So that whoever chases her doesn’t catch her. And Clarke can’t be there to slow her down.

She pulls Lexa into a heated kiss. Her lips are so numb that for the first few seconds she can’t feel her at all, but then some of Lexa’s warmth seeps through to her and she pushes closer because that’s what she always does, with Lexa, Clarke’s never been able to step back from her, and right now she wants more of the warmth Lexa’s giving her because she can’t keep going without it.

But eventually she releases her. Lincoln’s looking away politely, but Raven’s watching them with a
smirk, and Assan’s scowling at them, which Clarke thinks basically summarises their respective personalities. “Keep her safe,” Clarke tells Assan, not caring if it’s impolite, or if she’s making Lexa sound like she needs protecting. “Promise me.”

“I will do whatever it takes to repay my debt,” Assan bites off the words, eyes nearly glowing with the strength of his emotions.

And then they’re gone, Lexa slashing her sword in front of her to clear the doorway, the ice falling in a tinkling, cracking chorus that is at odds with the seriousness of the moment.

“We need to go,” Clarke grits out to the others, and then they’re moving quickly, half-sliding down the slope they spent so much time walking up, apparently just so Clarke could tell them which way to go, Raven could give advice on munitions, and Lincoln could spot traps. It makes her feel oddly – well, used, even though she knows that Lexa’s just protecting everyone…

Then a realisation hits her like a bolt of lightning. “Oh, shit.”

“What?” Raven gasps, slithering down a small incline, Lincoln supporting her as carefully as he can.

“The tunnel splits,” Clarke says, horrified. “I didn’t think to mention it because I thought we were all going in. One fork goes to the castle, but the other’s to the stables. If they go that way, they’ll be trapped, the gona can come from the castle and cut them off easily.”

“Shit,” Raven echoes her. “Okay, we’ll turn back -”

“No,” Clarke decides immediately. They haven’t gone far, but she can already tell how slow Raven is compared to her. “Lincoln, follow your orders from Lexa, keep Raven safe. Get her out of here. It’s my fault, I’ll handle this.”

And then she turns and races back.

Chapter End Notes

I know you're all worried about the ending, and I understand being a bit wary after everything the show did to us - but I am not JRoth. I love happy endings, Clarke and Lexa, and all of you, and the fact that I also love making things seem tense and hopeless doesn't change that at all, so please guys, have some faith! :)
The tunnel is long and narrow, just as Clarke said. She did not mention there was a split to it.

“I will go that way,” Assan suggests, “And you can go that -”

“No,” Lexa snaps in a low voice. They’re moving quickly and quietly through the tunnel, Assan in front. “Quiet.” No one has heard them yet.

Even as she thinks that she sees a guard just ahead, walking down the tunnel split to the left. She gives Assan a hand signal and he nods and flattens himself against the side of the tunnel just as she does, so that he cannot see them from his current angle. Then he’s walking in front of them, gapes at the sight of intruders, and taken aback for just a second too long as Assan slashes his throat. Assan turns back to Lexa as if expecting another attacker from behind them, sword still raised, then stops when he sees she has her own out as well.

“I expected many more,” Lexa comments. She wonders if Nia has sent her warriors to the lake, to find out what has happened, or if Roan, Gustus and Clarke killed so many on their way out she has been left shorthanded. Perhaps both. Lexa glances down at the gona and then sniffs the air, though the cold makes her nose run and she is barely able to smell. “Straw on his boots, smell of horses. That way’s the stable. Clarke mentioned a stable, I should have realised it must also be under here.”

Assan frowns. “Separate from the rest, though? Risky. They would need their horses.”

Lexa smiles grimly. “Nia would not be able to tolerate the smell, it would not seem queenly enough for her. The arrogant branwada.” Assan inclines his head in agreement.

They go the other way. Another gona sees them and opens his mouth to yell a warning, only to choke when Lexa’s dagger strikes him in his open mouth, stabbing through the back of his head and killing him instantly. She would normally have aimed for the throat but he had a metal piece there – a wise precaution. She takes her dagger back as she passes him to be used on the next.

Soon she sees it. The tunnel carved out of snow and ice giving way to stone and rock. The air almost seems visibly warmer ahead. There is a wooden door after a few feet of the stone. Lexa decides it is not worth the risk of going that close, though, and puts the bomb down. “I will set it now. Warn me the moment any gona appear,” she orders Assan, and bends over her task.

There is a pad with numbers to set the time, but first she needs to do something called ‘inputting a passcode’ – Raven’s way of ensuring that enemies who get hold of her devices cannot just use them immediately. She referred to it as making them less ‘user-friendly’, just like the encrypted radios. Lexa hopes this works out better than that.

Numbers could spell words, Raven had told her when they originally discussed the bombs while at Prison Station, and that was how she had chosen her passwords. Raven had been unable to really explain how numbers could become letters so Lexa had just memorised the actual numbers instead. Raven used 2692 as the code for all the recent devices, and 3466 for all the older ones. This one is newer, so Lexa types in 2692 slowly and painstakingly, not wanting to get it wrong, then presses the green button.

A set of angular zeroes flash up and blink at her, and Lexa stares at them, quietly marvelling at
Raven’s skills. Then she looks around and types in 3, 0, 0, which places the timer at three minutes, and presses the green button again.

2:59. 2:58.

Lexa opens her mouth to tell Assan it is time to go, and shifts her weight so her centre is a little lower, the better to start sprinting from.

Shifting her weight means that the blade goes through her shoulder instead of her heart.

It is more painful than anything Lexa has ever felt – more painful than a bullet in the stomach, even. When the sword slides through her upper left shoulder it is as cold as if she were being stabbed with a sword made of ice. The aftereffects slam through her body, tendrils of fierce, icy pain shooting out, every part of her connected to her upper body, every part of her connected to the pain. Black blood drips down, staining her shirt, oozing its way to the ground. Lexa stares, uncomprehending.

She looks up, head spinning, expecting to see a gona, a silent one who took down Assan and reached her. But it is, of course, Assan who looks down at her, face twisted with rage and hatred and something less easy to define.

“Why?” Lexa says, or thinks she says – it feels like a puff of air leaving her lips instead of a word. The world is so cold, the cold is enveloping her, overtaking her, her entire left side clawed and shredded by a beast with teeth made of icicles.

Assan tries to pull his sword out of her but it seems to be stuck in her. With a grunt of effort, he raises one foot, places it against her collar bone and yanks his sword out like that. She does not feel the boot against her compared to the flare of agony from the sword exiting, almost more painful than when it slid in, cutting at the sides of the entry wound it made, where she is most vulnerable.

He raises it again and this, Lexa recognises. Someone going for a second attack, a kill wound. Old reflexes take over. She rolls to the side and her body screams its objection, her blood spurting out at this new movement, purple clouds scudding across her vision. The nearby torch on the wall seems too bright, the snow too cold, the colours too fierce, her blood too dark. The pain too agonising. But the sword misses and she staggers upright, barely able to stand, supporting herself with the wall.

“For my daughter,” Assan whispers, face pale and bloodless, answering the question she’s still not sure she managed to ask. “For my daughter, I pay this debt. For the shortest battle. For her foolish, unnecessary death.”

She stares at him, wide-eyed.

He gives her a humourless smile, raising his sword again, but keeps talking. Perhaps he has been holding this inside him too long, travelling with them. “You told me where the fault lay. A Skayon who is already dead. The Azplana, who will die soon, when that device explodes. And you, who dies now. At first I thought I would kill you and be brought before the Azplana in honour so I could surprise her, but this – this works as well.”

A lot of things suddenly make more sense. Assan furiously exclaiming about the battle where his people died, telling her a few from his village were in Zion’s unit. She never made the connection that his daughter had been a Seken in that village, and must have grown to be a gona there as well, to join the nearest unit. She never thought twice about Assan trying to speak to her in private, Assan edging closer to her in the cave as they were surrounded by the gona he probably drew there by laying a trail of his blonde hair, Assan talking of the debts he owed to her and Nia as if they were the same debt. She has been single-minded to the level of blindness, and now she is – how would the
Lexa raises her sword but she is not a good stance, she is not quick enough what with the blood loss and pain, and her balance is off because she can barely move the left side of her body. He smashes the sword out of her numb hand and raises his own again. She is defenceless, stunned and wide-eyed.

They have made a lot of noise, however, apparently. Or perhaps someone noticed the guard never came back after he went to the stables. Whatever the reason, the wooden door bursts open and several gona pour out, raising weapons and shouting guttural cries. One yells “Natblida!” when he sees her blood and then they are all yelling it.

Lexa staggers towards them because there is no point trying to get away. A quick glance at the timer shows her that there is one minute remaining. Even if she were able to run, and she ran as fast as she could, she would be caught in the explosion now as the tunnel collapses. Assan will be as well. Somehow that is cold comfort.

Lexa meets Assan’s gaze squarely and does not look away, green eyes challenging grey. His face tightens, apparently reading her mind, and he looks away first. He ignores the approaching gona and slashes his sword down towards her again.

Another sword blocks it.

Clarke. Why is Clarke here? How did she know Lexa needed her? She cannot be here, she will die, why is she here -

“What -” is all Lexa manages to say. It doesn’t matter, though, because Clarke is already in the thick of battle, fighting Assan to a standstill, screaming cries of wordless rage at him. A nearby gona stabs Assan through as they fight and then holds his sword to Clarke’s throat, unwilling to go against orders and kill her but quite willing to threaten to, so Clarke kicks out at his knee and then slashes his throat. Lexa manages to fumble her dagger into her right hand and throws it overarm at the next gona, who falls with a cry.

“Come on,” Clarke yells over the sudden noise. Gona seem to be pouring into the passageway now. Clarke yanks Lexa up by her right arm and throws herself recklessly through the gona with Lexa pulled behind her. Most step back, not wanting to kill her and face the Azplana’s wrath, but several try and block them. Clarke elbows one in the throat, leaving him gasping, and stabs the other through the gut – which would be a slow death if not for the explosion that must be only seconds away.

Then Clarke and Lexa are through the wooden door and inside a stone room, gona behind them and in front of them, completely outnumbered, and they grab Clarke’s arms and pull them apart. One pries her hand off the sword, and Clarke cries out as they pull back her fingers too far as they do it. They’re grabbing at Lexa, too, though she presses her left shoulder to the cold stone wall because the insistent painful press of it is better than the thought of them yanking at her left arm.

“Ground,” Clarke manages to gasp out. “Low, get low, the stone -”

They thought the passageway would give way but the castle might not, Lexa remembers. They thought stone would hold where snow did not. And now they’re in the stone part. But still very, very close to the passageway. She tries to shrink down, trusting Clarke’s belief that this will somehow help, but the guard forces her to stay upright.

Then the world shatters, the force of it smashing Lexa hard against the guard and nearly causing her to pass out from the intense pain. She is picked up and thrown by the force of it, suddenly
weightless, a rag doll flung about, the screaming and crashing noises of stone and snow and fire twining together to become nothing but painful, overwhelming sound. She ends up sprawled on the ground, bruised and winded and bleeding harder than before, the earth still lurching like the thick stone blocks are only pebbles. There are aftershocks and she can feel it, but she’s relatively fine, though the blood’s coming thicker and fiercer now and she’s on the ground and she doesn’t think she is strong enough to stand ever again.

Bits of snow fall on her. Some cascades in through the doorway to the passage, thick and white and unstoppable, smashing into the closest guard with a force Lexa has never before associated with snow. If such a small amount can kill a man so quickly, she hopes they have not accidentally started a real avalanche. The torches go out, but Lexa feels the crash of stone nearby. The floor shudders as a large piece of stonework slams into the ground near her.

It takes several minutes for the panicking guards to stop swearing and yelling and manage to find and light a torch again. The doorway to the passageway is blocked by tonnes of snow – the doorway to the rest of the castle is blocked by snow and some large fallen rocks, the doorframe looks like it split in half. The ceiling is tilted. Lexa blinks against the light and confusion and dizziness. Her ears ring painfully so that she can barely hear anything, the yells are muffled as if by thick cloth. She reaches her right hand up to her ear and it comes away bloody, but she does not know if the blood is from her ear or if it was already on her hand from her left shoulder. Or maybe her hand itself is just bloody.

Clarke’s bending over for the moment, even as the guards stand up beside her. Trying to put something around her shoulder. Pressing so painfully that Lexa nearly yells out, trying to stop the bleeding with pressure.

“No, Clarke!” Lexa manages to say, voice hoarse with pain and weakness. “They will – do not let them -” She should be trying to get away from the gona, somehow, not wasting her time trying to stop Lexa’s bleeding.

Clarke ignores her, though, and has just managed to tie the blue material tightly around her shoulder – Clarke’s sash, Lexa realises dimly, she must have been carrying it around with her once Lexa brought it here – when the guards pulls Clarke back again and one slams her hard against the wall. Even without being able to hear it properly, Lexa knows the sound is loud.

They are caught, trapped, dead. Lexa has no knives, no swords, no weapons…

Hod op. That is not true. Lexa has one weapon left in reserve.

“Ai hod yu in, Clarke,” she says as loudly as she can. It must be loud enough, since every face swings towards her, the badly wounded and defenceless Nightblood on the floor. A small object next to her, smoke already wafting up from it.

She has always wondered if her black blood would help her against a Maunon gas grenade. It helps a little against most things, she’s found – alcohol, jobi nuts, sleep darts, even Abby kom Skaikru’s paralytics wear off faster than they do with others. When they found gas grenades as they invaded the Mountain she knew it was not the correct time to check if she had any immunity to them, however. Then they destroyed the rest and she thought she would never know. Today, she will find out.

The world goes dark and she slips quietly away from it.

Chapter End Notes
Congratulations to everyone who figured out Assan ages ago, you guys are awesome!
Digging Yourself Deeper

When Clarke wakes up, the first thing she notices is the strange scraping noise, the way it seemingly follows her from sleep to consciousness. She keeps her eyes closed but light presses against her eyelids, light and heat, and for a second she thinks she’s back in the cave they slept in. Then she remembers that the cave is destroyed – shrapnel in the walls, bodies on the floor, the entrance half-destroyed. A Raven Special. She’s somewhere else. Memory floods back.


Clarke’s eyes fly open and she struggles to sit up, desperate to see that Lexa’s okay, that she’s still alive. That she hasn’t bled out or died from complications or just not woken up.

Her quick visual sweep of the alcove they’re snowed into stuns her for a second. There’s bodies everywhere. Their throats are sliced, the floor wet with blood – not so different to the cave Raven wrecked after all.

“Ai hodnes,” Lexa says with a relieved sigh, and Clarke’s gaze swings to her fiancée, who’s sitting against the wall just behind her. Lexa’s left arm hangs limply and she looks worryingly pale and sweaty, but she’s okay.

“You’re alive,” Clarke breathes. She can’t see any fresh blood – but then, of course she can’t, if Lexa had continued bleeding while she was unconscious she would already be dead. Clarke knows enough about wounds to feel sure that this is only a temporary fix, though – one tight bandage to deal with being completely run through. The second Lexa lifts something heavy, moves too quickly, hell, *breathe* too deeply, she’ll probably start bleeding again.

Lexa gives her a crooked smile. “Sha,” she confirms, just as obviously. “I woke from the gas nearly an hour ago, and dealt with the gona.”

Clarke resolutely blocks out an unfair nausea at her mental picture of Lexa calmly and coolly slitting the unconscious guards’ throats. They were the ones who attacked, and would have attacked again if Lexa hadn’t taken care of it, so it was self-defence, in a way. Just like the Azgeda they killed at the lake. But then, when you defined it like that, what couldn’t you justify as self-defence?

“They would have died anyway,” Lexa says quietly, her green eyes piercing Clarke’s soul and apparently reading her mind. “I do not believe they could safely dig out through the passage.”

Clarke frowns, taking in the light and warmth she didn’t question before. Lexa’s managed to find five torches – presumably from the gona she killed – and has lit them all, creating a circle at the edges with them. It’s not warm enough to make the snow melt, but it’s enough to feel warm compared to what they’ve been out in lately. “Torch? Fire… ai hodnes, this is a small room. We need to put those out or we’ll run out of air.”

Lexa frowns. “It will not melt the ice, Clarke. We will not drown. Do not worry.”

“No, I mean – look, people breathing uses up oxygen. It leaves carbon dioxide. Fire does the same. If these have been burning for an hour, they must have eaten up a lot of it already.”

“And this causes death?” Lexa asks thoughtfully.

“Uh… eventually, yeah,” Clarke replies. “We’d get dizzy and breathe faster and then we’d pass out.”
“That sounds more pleasant than freezing to death in the dark,” Lexa states. “I have seen gona freeze many times and I think I would prefer to keep the torches lit, if that is alright by you?” She raises an eyebrow questioningly.

“Right,” Clarke manages to say through the sudden lump in her throat. Lexa’s calm assumption that their only choice is in the manner of their death fills her with fear. “Keep them lit, then.”

Clarke takes a moment to the little space they’re in – as always, searching for a way out. The stone walls stand on two sides, and continue to support the ceiling, though by her estimate it’s half a foot lower than it was before – this room had a much higher roof than the passage, but the drop is still noticeable. She can see that it’s tilted now as well. The roof is highest over the wooden door, which has now fallen off its hinges from the explosion and is half-covered in tonnes of snow. It’s the way to the passage and Clarke understands what Lexa means – she saw the explosion too, after all. The whole passage must have come down. It would take an army to dig out through that and even then they’d probably collapse it on themselves unless they were very careful.

Lexa is slumped against the wall opposite that, where the ceiling is lowest, against the other exit blocked by a pile of snow. One of the two supporting pillars of stone which previously made up part of the doorway to the main castle collapsed in the explosion but managed to stay connected to the arch at the top. Clarke blinks when she notices that the space under the two pieces of connecting stone has been partially cleared of snow.

“It is the safest path out, I believe,” Lexa says calmly. “The stone arch should help support the weight of the snow so our tunnel does not collapse on us. I have investigated with the longest sword the dead gona had with them to work out how thick the snow is. I managed to scrape out a deep hole above – there, you see it? – and when I reached my arm into it and thrust the sword as far as I could then waited a minute and brought it back, the point was not as cold as the rest of the blade. I think it reached the other room beyond the stone archway. Based on that, I believe it will be possible to scrape our way through below. It will have to be a very small tunnel, as you can see, but I think we can get out –”

“Out?” Clarke sputters. “Lexa, that doesn’t lead out, it leads in…” she trails off, suddenly understanding. “In to Nia…”

“There is no way out, Clarke,” Lexa says, resignation in her voice and her heart in her eyes. “Not out of this mountain, in any case. But we can leave this little room, this antechamber – we can ensure that if Nia’s army miraculously arrive at this secret place and begin digging, then they will find nothing but the corpse of their queen. Even if our fight is over, we can end Nia’s first. She might already be dead. But if we can, I would like to see for myself.”

Clarke stares at her, turning the idea over in her mind, as Lexa starts working at the little hole again, loosening the snow with the sword lying next to her then scraping away the loose snow with her gloved right hand. Every time she moves too quickly and accidentally shifts her body she flinches, and Clarke realises this work must be agony what with her wound. She should have realised that already, though – if Lexa was at full strength she wouldn’t be lowering her body temperature by leaning against the snow fully like that. Either she doesn’t have enough strength to sit up or she needs the cold to keep her shoulder numb.

“How are you feeling?” Clarke asks, clearing her throat.

Lexa shrugs with her right shoulder, as if to say it is what it is. Even that small movement makes her left shoulder shift a little, though, and it seems like Lexa’s face goes a shade paler as a result. She looks bloodless, small and pale in her bulky warm clothing, curled into herself.
“You’ve been digging for a while,” Clarke says. “Let me help.”

The hardest bit seems to be loosening the snow with the sword – basically stabbing it repeatedly – so Clarke takes over that. The rest in between scooping out snow seems to do Lexa good.

Clarke tells herself that this isn’t her giving up on finding an actual way out. No, she’s doing this because they’ll need more air soon, and if they break into the nearest room they’ll get more. Then from there they can look for the back ways out Clarke never managed to find before. She’s not going to admit Lexa’s probably right and they’ll die in this place, because right now she doesn’t want to face that. She never thought the next time she really got to be alone with Lexa would be in a tiny caved-in room, surrounded by dead bodies, trying to dig her way towards the place she never wanted to return to and the woman she never wanted to see again.

If these really are their last hours, she’d prefer to spend them curled against Lexa, talking to each other about anything and everything, until when the lights finally go out it seems like they’re just drifting off to sleep. But if Lexa needs to get justice for Costia, then that’s what Clarke needs too. Not just because Lexa gave her closure with the Maunon and she needs to return the favour, but because she is Lexa’s and Lexa is hers and Costia was Lexa’s too, so Clarke needs to be part of getting justice for the girl she never got the chance to meet. The girl who was used to break Lexa.

With the two of them working on it they make quick progress on the little tunnel, the little hillock of piled snow beside Lexa growing swiftly. Still, Clarke is panting and tired by the time she feels the sudden give when she pushes the sword through to the other side. “Got it,” she mutters, grimly happy. She starts enlarging it until she can wave the sword around easily and meet nothing but air. She starts to flatten herself but Lexa stops her.

“I will go first,” Lexa states.

Clarke blinks, then understands. It’s dark on the other side. Here they have torches. So if there is anyone out there who’s alive and conscious, there’s no way they could fail to see that there’s now a hole through the snow. Someone could be waiting to ambush them. “No, you won’t. You’re injured.” Clarke forces a smile when Lexa opens her mouth to argue and barges on, “I have a better chance if someone attacks. Come on, how often do I get to say that? Plus, I’m the one they don’t want to kill, remember?”

“Clarke,” Lexa says dryly. “Trust me, they definitely want to kill you now.”

Clarke acknowledges that point with a nod. “Alright, probably, but you never know. They might hesitate.” She doesn’t give Lexa a chance to argue again and flops onto her stomach to start wiggling her way through the opening.

It feels even longer than it did when they were digging it, and a great deal tighter. A clump of snow falls down the back of Clarke’s neck and she holds back a curse. When it gets dark for a second she thinks she’s fully out but when she raises her head she knocks off another, harder clump of snow and it bangs painfully onto her back. “Ow,” Clarke mutters, the sounds seeming to echo.

Then she manages to straighten. She’s on the other side. The only glow of light is from the little room she just left. She glances around anyway and strains her ears but hears nothing, no signs of anyone living, so then wriggles a little way into the passage from this side. “Pass me a torch, please,” she requests. After a moment Lexa does and Clarke takes it and uncomfortably pulls herself backwards out of the hole again.

She raises the torch. The room is empty, but relatively undamaged. Of course, she thinks, all the gona here must have rushed to the passageway when they heard us. Anyone who didn’t is probably
guarding Nia in her room – or maybe Titus in his prison.

Then she hears a moan.
Lexa’s left arm, shoulder, and the whole left side of her torso burn with pain as she forces her way through the hole. It’s nowhere near as bad as it was before, though, and Clarke’s makeshift bandage seems to help. Now the weakness bothers her far more than the pain. Before Clarke woke up she tried to see if her left arm could still be made to work, but found it could not hold so much as a torch without dropping it, and she cannot even raise it above a certain point. Her right arm is the dominant one she uses, of course, but still… she is used to using both. She is used to being balanced. She is used to feeling strong. Pain can be an asset, sometimes, focusing your mind and sharpening your senses. Feebleness and slowness cannot be.

For a moment after she saw how incapable her left side was, she worried if she would ever be able to fight properly again. The next second she realised how foolish that thought was. ‘Ever again’ in this case is probably only hours, a day or two at most.

“There’s someone here,” Clarke mutters to her, glancing around and holding the torch higher as Lexa forces herself to her feet again through pure determination. “I heard a noise.”


Clarke shrugs helplessly. Spotting a torch on the nearby wall, she lights it as well, then tries to give it to Lexa so they can search together.

“I am fine,” Lexa says quietly. “I can see well in the dark.” She needs her right hand for her sword. It is more important than seeing, now that they know someone else has survived.

It is not a surprise, really, that another person survived, now that she looks around – a castle designed to sit under the weight of a mountain is a sturdy thing. There are the odd fallen stones and piles of snow, some still trickling down the sides, and the middle of the ceiling is sagging worryingly, but this area is still quite intact.

By unspoken agreement Lexa and Clarke do not split up. They follow the wall, so that there is one direction they can’t be attacked from.

This time Lexa hears it too. A moaning noise. She gestures to Clarke to follow and heads in that direction unerringly. Then stops at a large, fancy table, uncertain where to go from here.

The noise comes again. Clarke gasps. “That door,” she says, voice returning to normal volume in her worry. “That’s where they had Gustus, where they were torturing him -”

“They cannot have found him again so soon after we separated,” Lexa says, but she can hear the uncertainty in her own voice and both of them move too quickly to the door. Clarke is the one to yank it open and they both inhale sharply at the sight inside.

For a second all Lexa can register is that it is a man in the cell, smaller than Gustus (not that this is unusual), and gravely injured. It is impossible to find a piece of skin without a burn or cut, but that is inconsequential compared to the stones that have fallen on him, leaving him facedown, half-covered with rocks and snow and with a visible dent in the back of his head. He has chains attached to his hands but they have come loose.

“The whole ceiling came down,” Clarke says, sounding sick.

“No,” Lexa says. “This was part of the wall. Someone hollowed it out to make this – this little cell.
This castle is old but this room is new, because someone – Nia, I suspect – weakened the wall and ceiling here to create this space.”

“Because the actual cells were too far away for her dinner entertainment,” Clarke says, her voice filled with disgust.

Lexa stops paying attention. She feels cold – inside, this time, not outside. “It is Titus,” she says.

One of his hands is half-buried in the snow, she notices distantly, and is black with Azkwel – ice weakness, the damage which comes from spending too much time too cold. Has that happened while they were unconscious, with nobody able or willing to reach him and light the nearby fires to keep this room warm and help him off the ground so he is not touching the snow? Or has he been here for weeks, punished for Clarke’s and Gustus’s escape, his flesh gradually freezing away as he waits for help that does not come?

Before she can stop herself Lexa is kicking at the cell door hard, desperate to get him out of there. The lock is new and strong, most likely a replacement for the one Clarke and Gustus damaged, but the falling rocks that hurt Titus also weakened the cell. She ignores the sharp pain to her shoulder every time she kicks out and in under a minute the cell door gives up with a squeal of metal and she is inside.

Clarke helps her clear the rocks off Titus quickly and wordlessly, then helps her turn him over. Titus moans again, eyes wild and unfocused.

“Titus,” Lexa says, cradling his head as if he is not the man who once killed her. As if he is the loyal companion and wise advisor she once believed him to be. “Titus.”

He seems to focus with great effort. “Heda?”

“Sha,” Lexa says, a lump in her throat. “It is me, Titus.”

“Heda… I dreamed you were dead…”


For a second she thinks he is choking, but then she realises it’s a chuckle. His eyes slide closed. “No Heda I served… ever… ever needed me less…” He coughs and some blood spurts out.

“Internal injuries,” Clarke says softly and a little sorrowfully. “Head trauma. Shock from pain and blood loss. Severe frostbite on his hands and his face. Lexa, even if we’d found him immediately after the explosion… even then… I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.”

“There is somethin, you can do,” Lexa says quietly. She meets Clarke’s eyes. After a moment, Clarke nods, her mouth twisting, and she pulls out her knife. Lexa presses her forehead to Titus’ cold one for a second, and Clarke readies the knife, waiting for the right moment. “Titus. Fleimkepa.”

“Heda?” he says in surprise, as if he’d forgotten she was there. “Moba… ai… ai gaf riden in… moba… Heda…” His eyes slide closed.


He makes another little choking sound as Clarke slides her knife into his throat in one swift stroke, then is silent. His face relaxes, the tension leaving it, so that he looks like he really is just resting. She has never seen Titus wear an expression such as that before.
Clarke pulls Lexa into her so that Lexa can bury her face in her niron’s shoulder. She breathes deeply and thinks of nothing at all. Nothing but the warmth and steadiness of Clarke against her, anyway.

Eventually she pulls back and stands. Clarke follows suit, reaching out to help steady her again.

Costia used to give her targets mercy whenever she could, Lexa remembers. Like Clarke, she could not stand to cause pain and she believed that when death was necessary or inevitable, it should be quick and painless, whether it was the death of an ally or an enemy. Lexa looks down at Titus, who had been, in a strange way, both of those things to her.

Mercy was one of many things Lexa lost faith in when Costia was killed. She distributed justice instead of mercy after that, sentencing people to long deaths without a qualm, subscribing to blood must have blood and never challenging it. Then one day a fierce Sky girl stepped forward with a knife and prevented pain, risking her own safety and her own peace of mind to do so, and for one moment Lexa had been reminded of what mercy looked like. Mercy was not delivered by weak, protesting cowards, but by the strongest and bravest of souls, strong and brave enough to stand against anger and fear. Something Titus had never understood.

Then Lexa turns and leaves the cell, closing the door carefully behind her. They cannot burn his body, not in this cold, not effectively.

“Which way?” she asks Clarke.

“I think she’ll be in her room,” Clarke says softly. “I could never get in there to search it because she always had too many guards.”

“Could there be a passageway out of there?” Lexa asks, feeling suddenly worried.

“I don’t think so,” Clarke says. “I tried to map the place out in my head and I don’t think – it’s up a bit higher, you see. Any passageway down would be blocked by all these other rooms, there’s not enough space between them to have a secret passageway from there. The passageway could head up but from what I can tell there is no way to get down safe from any higher than we entered.”

“That high the cold itself would probably kill her and her guards, or at least weaken them considerably,” Lexa says thoughtfully. “Especially without food and water supplies, without them all dressed in preparation for the weather, and without any mounts to ride.”

“Since Lincoln’s still outside, even if there was some extra secret passageway in the already extra secret castle, Nia still probably wouldn’t make it,” Clarke observes.

“Sha. And this was never made as a place to hold out against a real attack, or some kind of siege. Its only defensive advantage ever has been its secrecy. So if an enemy knew about the front door, they would probably believe all chances of survival were gone. No, I do not think there is another way out. I think Nia is trapped here.”

“Then let’s go deal with her,” Clarke says fiercely. “Follow me.”

Lexa reaches back to touch Costia’s bow. Through her gloves she cannot really feel the intricate carvings, but that does not matter. Even if she cannot feel it against her skin the way she feels the watch Clarke gave her as a token of love, it’s enough to know that some part of Costia is with her. Just as Clarke is. She wishes Clarke was somewhere safe, but at the same time is so fiercely glad to have her here that her joy makes her ashamed.

But she is sick of feeling shame, just as she is sick of feeling guilt, and even sick of feeling grief. She
has been weighed down by those emotions for far too long. They are not what she wants her life to be distilled down to in these final hours.

For years, she has thought of her own death more than she has thought of her life, and that is because she thought of Costia’s death more than Costia’s life and her and Costia were twined together in her mind. Mercy was not the only thing Lexa gave up on in the darkness after she no longer had Costia. The loss of her lover was so violent and destructive that Lexa had been unable to remember the happiness that had come before except as a cruel foreshadowing of the eventual pain. In her dreams she had seen Costia’s decapitated head instead of her smiling face, touched her roughly cropped hair instead of the silky braids she had in life. Lexa had thought the time she had with Costia could not possibly outweigh the agony of her death, that it had not been worth it.

She never realised how cruel that was – not just to herself, but to Costia. No one deserves to be remembered for their death more than their life, to have their existence seen ultimately as a loss instead of a gain, every quirk and expression and emotion reduced to nothing more than a dead body in the mind of their loved ones. But Lexa had done that, anyway, she had turned Costia into a ghost instead of a gift, made a stone mask of command for herself and seen only death in her dreams. She closed herself away, she listened to Titus, and she knew that her love was weakness.

Then she met Clarke.

Clarke smashed through her carefully built up walls. Clarke challenged her, pushed her, backed her against tables, argued with her, cared about her, broke her, fixed her. Clarke made her question everything she knew.

Falling in love with Costia was steady and sure and sweet, the taste of fresh fruit, the smell of flowers on the wind, a love that grew with the long summer days. Falling in love with Clarke was nothing like that – falling in love with Clarke was fragile alliances, bloodstained blades, desperate schemes, winter beginning to freeze the world around them. But for all that, it gives Lexa the same feeling that loving Costia once did, a feeling that somehow the world had fallen into place again, that some part of her soul has quieted into unfamiliar and impossible happiness.

“Lexa?” Clarke says, looking at her, frowning, wondering why Lexa isn’t following her. Neither of them look back at the cell where Titus’ body lies, the last link to ‘hodnes laik kwelnes’ dead and closed away forever so that finally, finally, Lexa can leave that belief completely behind.

Lexa feels the quiet, inexorable pull of her heart, and follows Clarke.
A Gut Feeling

Things are never as simple as they should be.

Case in point: the passageway they’re supposed to go down is behind a tonne of snow.

“We could dig through it,” Clarke says uncertainly, but she can see even from looking at it that it’s not likely to work. Even as she watches, more snow spills down from the cracked-open ceiling.

“Interesting,” Lexa murmurs, peering up at it. “This part – the ceiling, the walls from here on – they are new as well. Weaker. Nia has expanded on this place a lot.”

Clarke closes her eyes for a moment in pure contempt. “She turned what was supposed to be a bolthole into a fucking underground castle, you mean.”

“Sha,” Lexa says. “A castle that is not properly supported. The original areas are all still intact – the main rooms, for example – but the rest is half-destroyed. I think the effects will spread in time, as well. The weight of the snow.” she shrugs, then pales as the movement jars her injury.

“So if she was in her fancy set of rooms, past this giant pile of snow, she’s probably dead.”

“Probably.”

“But not definitely.”

“No,” Lexa says quietly. “Not definitely. There is still the slim possibility she could survive until her remaining army gets here, if the snow has merely trapped her.”

“Very slim,” Clarke points out softly. Then she frowns. She can hear something, the faintest imaginable noise but still there. She looks at Lexa questioningly and Lexa nods, a frown wrinkling her face. Lexa can hear it too. Another cascade of snow falls onto the pile and slides down to bury one of Clarke’s feet, so she moves back a step.

Lexa, instead, steps forward, and reaches out her right hand to place it against the side of the snow. She closes her eyes. “Movement,” she says finally, opening them again. Her voice is hushed. “I think someone is clearing the snow from the other side. In great amounts, too, since we are able to feel and hear it from this side.”

“I guess that answers our question,” Clarke replies, swallowing hard. Nia and her guards are still alive. And they’re trying to dig their way out.

“They must be shoring it up somehow so more snow does not fall down,” Lexa says thoughtfully. “They are doing far better at getting through it than we would. I suggest we wait, and then face them as they exit.”

“It could take hours,” Clarke points out.

“This room has plenty of air,” Lexa says, maddeningly calm. “And we have nowhere else to go in any case.”

“Yeah, we do. For a while at least. I bet the kitchen’s still intact.”

It is, thankfully. There’s very little food in it and the place is covered in scorch marks, reminding Clarke that she kind of set it on fire last time she was here. But they do find some water that hasn’t
frozen, which is nice, and a couple of scraps of smoked meat. Clarke eats and drinks ravenously. She hadn’t realised how long it was since she’d done either.

Lexa eats barely anything. The pain from her shoulder seems to be making her nauseous. Frankly, it’s not surprising she finds it hard to eat after being impaled, it’s amazing she’s even alive, let alone conscious and functioning. Clarke surreptitiously looks for some fayowada – alcohol’s not the best painkiller, but it’s better than nothing. Unfortunately, where the barrel of alcohol previously was there’s nothing but charred splinters of wood now.

Then they return to the passageway and wait. Clarke takes first watch, telling Lexa to get some sleep. It’s dark – they’ve extinguished all the torches so they can surprise the gona when they’ve finished burrowing through – but Clarke still thinks she can see Lexa’s face in the gloom. Without the fire nearby, the cold feels like its stabbing her over and over again.

Eventually the gona are so close to getting through that Clarke can see tiny fragments of light through the snow. She thinks about moving Lexa away and dealing with them on her own, since she’s worried how Lexa will be able to cope when she’s so severely injured, but Lexa pulls herself upright with a wince before Clarke can decide. Maybe she was never sleeping at all, just lying still and waiting.

Then Lexa latches onto Clarke’s arm, pulling her to the side of the growing hole.

“You want to surprise them?” Clarke mutters as quietly as she can.

Lexa shakes her head and gestures towards the top of the hole. Clarke squints and is just able to make it out. Wooden supports, made out of pieces of bedframes, she thinks. Blankets at the top stretched between the supports to help prevent the ceiling from collapsing. They’ve shored up their own passageway. “Like the pauna,” Lexa says, just as quietly, and Clarke understands suddenly.

Since they’re to the side, they’re outside the flood of light coming from the newly-opened passage, piled snow between them and anyone’s line of sight, probably nearly invisible to people unused to the gloom. Clarke obligingly presses against the wall, making herself as small as possible, and waits as the hole is widened and widened. From this angle, all she can see is the ever-growing pool of light. Then it’s becoming brighter and brighter.

The room lights up fully as several gona step into it. Clarke waits, nerves thrumming, as more move outside. She can see the first one clearly now, holding his sword out and looking suspicious. When his gaze starts to wander towards them, Clarke grabs Lexa’s right wrist and yanks her towards the tunnel. She slashes at the gona closest to the mouth of it and he yowls, causing all the others to turn around, but it’s already too late.

Lexa and she move quickly through the tunnel, pushing at wooden supports as they go. Clarke takes the time to stop and kick one of the most central ones out of alignment, only to be pulled away by Lexa only moments before great chunks of ice and snow from the ceiling start to smash where she was standing. They have to throw themselves the last two feet as the whole thing comes down.

Clarke lets out a pained moan as chunks rain down, striking the lower part of her legs, and claws herself forward as quickly as possible. Then she shrieks in agony as a particularly large, hard piece of ice hits her still-swollen ankle, probably breaking it again, and breaks down into mindless sobs. Lexa’s yanking at her again, pulling her further away, and Clarke manages to overcome her pain and help with the task when she hears Lexa’s own sobs of pain as pulling Clarke’s weight reopens her wound. Clarke can no longer even tell that the sash she used as a bandage is blue, it’s too drenched in fresh black blood. So much that she can barely believe that any is left in Lexa.
As quickly as it started the collapse of the ceiling stops and Lexa slumps to the ground, moaning. Clarke wonders dully if the gona died in the snowfall or are now trapped in the other room, then gives up on thinking about it and collapses next to Lexa. Her ankle is shrieking with impossible pain, so much so that she can’t really move at all. The break’s more severe than it was before, a distant voice in her mind notes. Much more severe. Being broken again so violently when it was still healing – she wonders if she’ll ever be able to walk again. Purple spins in front of her eyes and she pitches to the side and throws up everything in her stomach.

Then she rolls over so that she’s on her back, and sees the other occupant of the passageway.

The little part they’re in is blocked in on both sides, a lone hold-out against the collapse. There’s a door to the side which still seems to work, judging by the person coming out of it, though from what Clarke remembers of the place it leads to the smallest room, her former room. Because of that for a second she can’t really comprehend Nia emerging from it.

When everything was collapsing she must have tried to get out and been trapped here, Clarke thinks muzzily. No, wait, there was the wreckage of more than one bed used for those supports, and blankets as well. They were trapped here first when the ceiling fell at the join between the old structure and the newer additions, and then the ceiling started gradually collapsing from the other side as well. Rooms caving in. They chose to try and dig out instead of shore up where they were.

Then she becomes a little more aware and pushes the pain to the back of her mind, realising how completely screwed they are. “Nia,” Clarke croaks, fresh tears pouring down her face. She looks at Lexa, who is trying to force herself to sit up – still so determined, even with everything going so wrong. Lexa’s pallor is much worse and she lets out a little wheezing moan as she tries to move. Nia could have already killed them with the sword in her hand if she wasn’t frozen in shock. “Lexa?” she says, stunned, sounding almost childlike in her complete incomprehension. “You are dead. You are supposed to be dead.” She frowns, dark anger rolling across her face, and almost spits the word. “Roan. I should have known that branwada lied.”

Lexa tries to raise the sword she’s still got in a death grip but Nia almost casually steps forward and pries her fingers off it. Then she throws it behind her. “I suppose it is better like this,” Nia says spitefully. “More poetic. You can meet the same end as that pet hunter you used to have. What was her name?” The taunting smile Nia flashes tells Clarke that she remembers Costia’s name perfectly well. She plucks the one remaining arrow out of the quiver Lexa’s still wearing and tosses it after the sword. Too far away to reach in time even if either of them were able to move.

Lexa forces herself upright. But she has no weapons apart from the bow on her back which she can’t use without an arrow, and they all know it. “Clarke,” is all she says, her grey face filled with pain and regret. As well as awareness that they’re both about to die, and self-recrimination for making the choices that led them here.

“It’s okay,” Clarke whispers, and tries to force a smile. It quivers and falls off her face, though. “I’m here. It’s alright. Ai hod -” she cuts herself off, but it’s too late.

“Oh, so you are the Commander’s bedwarmer,” Nia says, her malicious smile widening. “I did wonder if that was also a lie. That makes this even better.” She takes a step towards Clarke and raises her sword to draw a thin, deliberate line down Clarke’s face with it. It stings, but compared to the throbbing agony of her ankle, it’s a minor nuisance at worst. “Let us see how long you can hold in a scream.”

“You will die whatever you do,” Lexa says harshly, clearly trying to distract her. Her voice trembles slightly. She’s managed to get fully into a standing position now, though. “You are trapped here.
There is no way out.”

“My people will save me,” Nia snarls, spinning to face Lexa. “They are loyal to their queen.”

“Some were, foolishly,” Lexa says, tone hard. “They are now dead. The lake is thick with the corpses of your warriors. The survivors will fall apart without your stick at their backs forcing them onwards. The village you gave the Skaikru is ash and ice. The missile is far away from your grasp. The south hopes for a new ruler to rise. The north prays for trade to reopen before they starve. The clans dream of your death. This castle crumbles. No one is coming for you, Nia. No one will save you.”

“We shall see,” Nia says dismissively, though for a moment her smugness wavers and it’s clearly an effort for her to control her expression. Clarke can sense her fear. Nia raises her sword again, this time moving towards Lexa, clearly done with the conversation.

Nia presses against Lexa, trapping her against the wall like Ontari once did with Clarke, so that her sword cuts a thin black line into Lexa’s throat. Nia stares into Lexa’s face, hungry for any sign of fear, any sign of weakness, as she gradually increases the pressure. She fists her other hand in Lexa’s hair and pulls it so that tears spring to Lexa’s eyes. Clarke watches helplessly from the floor. When she tries to move, to help, pain shoots up her leg and she has to suppress another scream. This can’t be happening. She can’t watch Lexa die. Not again.

“Sha,” Lexa says softly. “We shall see.”

Lexa moves so quickly she’s a blur, her one good hand reaching to twist the bow at her back as far around her front as she can. Nia shrieks with rage and pain as the sharpened end of the bow stabs into her stomach, and presses her blade forward just as Lexa moves her head to the side as quickly as she can, so the tip of the blade cuts the side of her throat but she survives.

The bow makes an unpleasantly organic sound as Lexa jerks it to the side, gutting Nia crudely and roughly, and Nia collapses with a low, agonised noise, sounding more animal than human. Lexa collapses to her knees, winded and badly injured, but alive. Clutching Costia’s bloodied bow to her chest.

They’re alive.
Lexa crawls over to Clarke painfully. “Clarke? Ai hodnes?”

“You’re alive,” Clarke says, a little weakly. She looks terrible – well, beautiful, of course, because she is Clarke, but terrible in the sense that there are dark bruises under her eyes, her skin is too pale, and her ankle is swollen to easily twice its normal size.

“Sha,” Lexa says, aware she probably looks worse. She can still feel the sticky wetness trickling down her shoulder as her reopened wound continues to bleed. Her neck is bleeding as well from where Nia’s sword nicked it. “So are you.” She glances over at Nia, still curled up and moaning on the ground. “So is she.”

Clarke looks over at her too, then returns her attention to Lexa, placing pressure on the wound, an action she must know is futile at this point, regardless of Natblida healing. No one is coming to provide warmth and stitches. Clarke hesitates then pulls off her jacket to tie around the wound and give it more pressure than just the sash can give, ignoring Lexa’s protest. She tears off another layer, heedless of what this will do to her, and adds it as well, doing everything she can to prolong Lexa’s life. “Stomach wounds can take hours to kill people.”

Her words are matter-of-fact, with no emotion at all attached. She knows what Nia is. She knows what Nia took. So Clarke will let her die by inches, allow Lexa to enjoy her revenge, sit here with her and watch as Nia gets back just a little of the pain she gave out.

But Lexa isn’t enjoying it. She doesn’t even feel satisfaction. She just feels – hollow. Clarke helps. Having Clarke here always helps. But she can’t even really bring herself to look at Nia, writhing with agony, dying slowly.

Lexa wonders why Clarke does not think less of her for this cruelty. Torn open, her blood smeared on the floor, letting out keening sobs of agony, Nia seems less like a monster and more like a person. Clarke gets a very specific look sometimes, when she reacts to a ruthless action Lexa has taken, a kind of stunned hurt, as if she is unwillingly horrified. She wore that face with Finn’s death, TonDC’s destruction, Lexa’s betrayal at the Mountain, Pike’s murder, the Maunon’s execution, and even when Lexa killed some of Nia’s gona while they slept. As if for a moment she is not seeing Lexa, or even the Commander, but seeing a kind of monster. It always fades from Clarke’s face, but never from Lexa’s memory. Will Clarke someday look at Lexa with that expression forever? Will she someday see Lexa only as a monster instead of the girl she loves?

No, surely not. Clarke can be shocked, she is human, but she is not weak and she will never see Lexa as only a monster. Clarke’s love is not so fickle. And she loves Lexa just as fiercely as Lexa loves her. They may not have the bonding tattoos, but they are bonded, and what they have is stronger than what they must do. Even if it were weaker, they have days left, perhaps only hours given their injuries, so the ‘someday’ Lexa fears will never come, any more than the someday she hopes for.

But – is this how Costia’s story ends? It started with sunlight and flowers, then it became about torture and beheading, and now it ends like this – a cruel, worthless excuse for a human being made animalistic by pain, lying gutted on the cold stony ground of a crumbling palace.
Costia was a good fisa, when she trained at it. An even more impressive hunter. But she stopped being a fisa because she hated seeing people in pain. And sometimes she lost animals when she hunted, animals another hunter could have gotten, because she refused to slow them down by wounding them. If she could not kill them cleanly, she said, she would not kill them at all. Through the eye or in the throat, a quick kill. For animals, for allies, for enemies. For everyone.

Costia believed in justice. But Costia believed in mercy more.

Lexa wants Nia to suffer. She wants it so badly she can taste it. No, Clarke will not judge her for it. If Costia were here, she would not judge her for it, either. Nia deserves this.

Nia deserves this, to die painfully and humiliatingly and gruesomely. But Costia does not deserve to have this be the end of her story. Costia was better than this. So is Clarke, her bright blue eyes watching Lexa with worry, blonde hair hanging bedraggled and dirty against her face. Both of them so much better than this world, better than this ugly place, their souls shining and clean while Lexa’s spirit is caked with a century of old blood.

Maybe if she keeps pretending, someday Lexa will actually be better than this as well. Like Costia was. Like Clarke is.

It takes her a painful few minutes to retrieve the arrow. Clarke does not question it, holds the bow firmly when Lexa tells her to, angled exactly as Lexa asked, so that Lexa can use her one able arm to pull back the string.

The arrow strikes true. A clean shot to the middle of the throat. An impressive shot, given their states, and Lexa wonders if the spirit Costia carved into her bow guided the arrow to its home. Nia stops moving, dead. A far cleaner death than she deserves.

“Yu gonplei ste odon,” Lexa murmurs.

“My room?” Clarke says faintly, gesturing towards the door. Lexa nods.

She helps Clarke up with a whimper, and Clarke sucks a breath in as her ankle is jolted. Together they stagger and stumble painfully into the bedroom. Clarke grabs the one torch on the way and lights the one inside as well so that there are two giving the room a soft glow. Lexa lowers Clarke gently onto the mattress that was left there when the bedframe and blankets were torn apart. Clarke sinks into it with a choked sigh.

It’s only one step to the door. Lexa takes it, stands there for a moment, then lowers her head to spit contemptuously on Nia’s corpse. “I gave you mercy, for Costia,” she whispers. “That – that was for me.” Then she closes the door and moves to collapse next to Clarke, curling up into her. The room warms slowly from the torches’ fire, but most of their warmth is from each other.

“I didn’t think it would end like this,” Clarke murmurs eventually.

Clarke is so close Lexa can feel the puff of air from every word. “How did you think it would end, ai niron?”

“I hoped it would end better,” Clarke admits, “But I thought it would end much worse. It ended worse before.”

“You lived before,” Lexa points out. Her shoulder has stopped bleeding. She can feel it. Anyone else would be dead already, would have died after they dropped the gas grenade. But Assan’s stab must have been a very lucky one, and Clarke put pressure on it almost immediately, and the cold must have slowed the bleeding and caused it to scab, and her black blood must be working hard against
the injury. And... perhaps the Commander’s spirit wants her to have a few more hours. Perhaps it feels it owes her this much, for all she has done, for all she has given. “You lived.”

“No,” Clarke says. “No, I didn’t. I survived before. This... this is living. Even if there’s only a little of it left, it’s worth it. It’s all been worth it, every moment. I wouldn’t give it up for anything.”

“Sha, I feel the same. Every single moment with you has been worth it.”

They’re silent for a long time, just breathing each other in. Clarke’s eyes slide closed. “Tell me a story,” she requests sleepily. “A bedtime story.”

Lexa smiles against Clarke’s hair. “Of course, ai hodnes.” She thinks for a moment. She does not know many stories, so she makes her own. “There once was a beautiful hunter who lived in the forest. She had eyes the colour of the sky and hair the colour of the sun and all the people around thought she had the warmth of summer in her veins. She had a hut she lived in alone but people came by every day. They came to talk and laugh, sometimes, or they came to trade for her food, but often they came to ask for help. Because it was well known that the hunter would give food to the hungry and would heal the wounded with her fisa knowledge and would give the very saddest the greatest gift of all: her smile.”

“And then she met another woman, a gona. One with dark hair and thoughtful green eyes and a solemn face. A woman who stood straight. She saw the woman walking by and called out to her, asking to paint her,” Clarke interrupts, stifling a yawn. She smiles at Lexa.

“When she saw the hunter calling out, the gona came to her at once. She felt dizzy just looking at the beautiful hunter, but it wasn’t just because she was beautiful. The gona could see the sadness in her eyes. The gona could see that the hunter had been hurt by life, again and again and again, but she still smiled as if the world was wonderful. It was the most amazing thing the gona had ever seen, that smile, strong in the face of all the hunter had seen and done.”

Lexa shifts a little and winces at the pain in her shoulder. Her face feels flushed and strange and she realises she’s breathing more quickly than normal. Perhaps this is what Clarke was talking about. Perhaps they are running out of air and her body is trying to get more. How strange, she never thought of air as something you could run out of. It was simply there, surrounding you invisibly.

“And the hunter saw the same thing in the gona’s eyes,” Clarke says, sounding barely awake anymore. “She saw someone who had carried the burdens no one else could manage, someone who sacrificed more than food or healing or smiles. Someone who had given nearly everything they had. Someone who was tired. So she invited the gona in, and the gona sat down, and the hunter began to paint her.”

“She painted for hours and hours,” Lexa says softly. “They had all the time they wished, because it was a great time of peace in the world so the gona had no one to fight, and the hunter closed the door to show that she was far too busy for visitors. So she painted and painted.”

“And then when she finished, she showed it to the gona, and it wasn’t just a picture of her. It was a picture of both of them together, bonding tattoos covering their skin, matching smiles on their faces. Smiles with no sadness in them.”

“And the gona kissed the hunter.”

“Or the hunter kissed the gona.”

Their lips pressed against each other, more tentatively than ever before, but lingeringly, as if they
really did have all the time in the world.

“It’s a good story,” Clarke murmurs. She’s breathing too quickly as well, but Lexa can sense she’s falling asleep anyway. Or drifting away, passing out, perhaps, how is Lexa supposed to know? She did not even know you could run out of air while above water, let alone what happened if you did.

“She, ai niron. It is. The best. Well, second best.” The real story is the best. Hers and Clarke’s. A story that starts with a strange blonde invader entering her tent to try and prevent a war and protect her people, but still ends with a kiss just like the story she made up.

“Ai hod yu in, Lexa.”

“Ai hod yu in, Clarke. Reshop.”

Lexa drifts into her dreams with a faint sense of relief, letting go of everything cold and hard to travel towards a sunlit hut in the forest, where a beautiful girl paints a picture of her. She can feel the rough, sun-warmed fabric of the chair she sits on, smell the flowers dotting the cosy little room, hear the background twittering of birds and the steady strokes of paintbrush against canvas, drown in the heartbreaking blue of the bright eyes meeting hers, feel the current of joy running through her as the girl flashes her a smile.

Then she feels nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

When Cassy was first beta-ing this chapter, I joked that I would put 'The End' at the bottom and then press enter for a page or so before adding 'Just kidding!' But given how much trust everyone lost through the show (understandably), I just don’t have the heart to do that. This story isn’t over, I promise. This is pretty much the lowest, most dangerous point. Trust me. Clarke and Lexa deserve a happy ending.
```
“I found them! They are here! Las Heda en Wanheda! They are here!”

Clarke sleeps.

“She’s breathing… she’s still breathing! Clarke? Clarke!”

Clarke sleeps.

“We need to get them down as close to sea level as possible. The air’s too thin up here to be helping. Hurry! Now, all of you!

Clarke sleeps.

“Come on, honey! Wells, pass me that mask -”

Clarke… stirs.

The world is bright and unpleasant, and she’s tempted to stay asleep, but people seem to be yelling at her and she should probably deal with that. There’s something on her face but she doesn’t remove it, just reaches up to touch it, and realises it’s some kind of breathing mask.

Oxygen. They’re giving her oxygen. To counteract way too much carbon dioxide. Makes sense.

She feels nauseous and dizzy, but she blinks a few times and her vision swims into focus. Wells. Her mother. Both leaning over her, faces worried. Behind them armed gona stand, eyeing her with barely-concealed nervousness.

Her body reacts before her mind does and she’s suddenly surging upright, ignoring the stab of pain to her ankle, yanking the mask off, reaching for her sword, but her weapon’s not there and Wells and her mother try and stop her, pressing her down inexorably.

“Honey! Stop!” Abby says. “It’s alright! You’re alright!”

She subsides for the moment, sinking back onto the comfortable mattress she seems to be on. She’s in a tent, she realises. And still in Azgeda territory, judging by the coldness of the air and the scarred faces of the warriors. “How many of them?” she manages to choke out.

“It’s okay, Clarke,” Wells says earnestly. “They’re with us.” He turns to the gona. “Out, please. I’ll call if we need you.” The gona exchange glances then disappear out the tent flat.


“She’s fine,” Abby says firmly. “I promise, honey.”

Clarke ignores her, though, looking to Wells instead for the truth. “Where’s Lexa?”

“Just outside,” Wells tells her. “She woke up before you. The gona all thought she was dead when they saw her, she was covered in so much blood, but apparently they didn’t get even halfway down the mountain before she sat up, got off the stretcher and walked the rest of the way herself.” He
smiles crookedly. “Holding your hand, too, for that matter. We really need to stop underestimating her.”

“And she really needs to start following medical advice,” Abby mutters.

“She got stabbed,” Clarke remembers suddenly, horrified. There’s no way Lexa could have walked down a mountain after that. Everything Clarke did to try and help was nothing but a stopgap, a desperate way to run out the clock, and Lexa should be dead. “How is she – did you -”

“She let one of the healers bandage her up quickly while I was giving you some oxygen, and Wells donated some blood for her after she told us that red blood wouldn’t react badly with hers,” Abby says. “It’s a patch job, at best, and she really should be lying down, but she’s not in imminent danger of bleeding to death provided she actually says something if she reopens that wound. I can check her later after you’re feeling better. She’s fine for now.” Clarke suspects her mother would be far more worried about Lexa’s injury if she didn’t have Clarke here, also injured.

“Then why isn’t she here?” Clarke says, and it comes out more plaintive than anything else.

Wells coughs. “Her waking up like that basically made my entire army panic. They thought she returned from the dead to kill them for their betrayal of her. She’s – well, she’s keeping them from rioting and running for the hills.”

Clarke blinks. She thinks she might still be dreaming. “Your army… Uh… Wells? How long have you had an army?”

“About two weeks,” he says, a little sheepishly.

“Clarke, maybe you should relax for a while -” Abby starts to say, smoothing a strand of Clarke’s hair back from her face.

“Ogud,” Clarke says faintly, focusing on Wells, though she manages to give her mother a weak smile. “And how did you get this army, exactly?”

“He pinched it,” Raven says cheerfully, entering. She’s limping slightly, but otherwise looks pretty healthy for someone Clarke never expected to see alive again. “He literally stole the second Azgeda army we were so freaked about. And we all thought Wells was the token non-delinquent member of our little crew. Turns out he was just waiting for something worth stealing.”

“I didn’t steal anything,” Wells protests, but Raven ignores him and continues anyway.

“All this larceny makes him so much more attractive.” She shoots Wells a mischievous glance. “It’s no wonder his Girl Friday can’t stop eye-sexing him.”

Clarke refuses to gape at the new shock of Raven being here. She’s already spent too much of the past five minutes gasping at everything. “…Hei, Raven.”

“Hey?” Raven rolls her eyes dramatically. “That’s how you welcome me? No ‘I love you, Raven, you are the light of my life, my dearest friend, my future brides-’” Raven cuts herself off, realising what she’s about to say, and shoots a panicked glance at Abby.

Luckily, Abby doesn’t seem to have been listening, busy fiddling with Clarke’s hair and staring lovingly at her face. “Oh, baby, you scared me so much. I thought I was never going to see you again.”

Clarke refocuses on Wells, who seems her best shot of getting any kind of rational explanation.
“You… stole an army?”

Abby intervenes. “Maybe we should leave Clarke to rest for a while,” she says, with quiet, motherly authority. “We can save the explanations for later.”

“No, we can’t,” Clarke disagrees, forcing herself not to sound upset or overwrought. She takes a deep breath and makes herself to calm down. “Mom, go get Lexa and tell her I’m awake, please. Wells and Raven can explain to me what’s going on while you do that.”

“Honey, I’m not going to let you -”

“Mom,” Clarke says, letting steel enter her voice. “Now, please. I’m second-in-command of the Coalition. You’re part of the Ark’s Council, which means that in the chain of command, you’re several levels below me. You don’t get to choose whether to let me do anything. I appreciate you coming all this way to help, and I love you, but right now I need to know what the tactical situation is, and I need to speak to Lexa. Wells and Raven will fill me in on what’s happening. Go get Lexa now. That’s an order.”

Abby couldn’t look more shocked and wounded if Clarke had actually slapped her. Even Raven flinches at the cold little speech, and Wells studies the ground expressionlessly. After a long, frozen moment, Abby turns and leaves the room.

“Harsh,” Raven says, sounding impressed.

“I need to know what the situation is,” Clarke says, refusing to feel guilty. There’s a part of her that wants to fall into her mother’s arms and sob out her happiness at them being safe and together again, but that’s a secondary concern. She needs to know what’s going on – find out if they actually are safe. And she really, really needs to see Lexa. Now. “So, tell me about this army.”

“Remember how the Azgeda sent that first army south to raid and they got trapped in Tree People territory by mines?” Raven asks lightly. She’s practically grinning ear to ear. “Lexa thought they were trapping them there to kill them. But get this, Wells persuaded the kid she left in charge -”

“Heda Aden,” Wells corrects. “Or – I guess he’s Natblida Aden again now.” He gives a little shrug. “And I didn’t persuade him of anything. We discussed it, and came to the conclusion that it might be better to take them alive. So we did. Then we spoke to them for a while. We had the remainders of Zion’s unit testify about Nia’s alliance with Mount Weather, I told them about everything from my point of view, and we even had one of the Mount Weather survivors come and tell them what happened.”

“And that worked?” Clarke says incredulously.

“They were very reasonable,” Wells says earnestly. “Aden gave them some food to bring home as an advance payment for giving him Nia, and the other half of the Ice Nation warriors are back in Polis acting as surety. I came north with them because – well, we needed someone who knew that Lexa was still alive and would be able to recognise you, and none of the Ice Nation warriors wanted a Tree Person taking command.”

“My Mom also fits both those categories,” Clarke points out. “And she came along anyway. So why not -”

“Kane felt that she might not be the right fit to command the Azgeda, since she hasn’t spent much time with Grounders,” Wells says diplomatically.

Raven’s not as diplomatic. She snorts with laughter. “You mean Kane thought she’d start another
war. I bet you anything the only reason he let her come north in the first place was because she was driving him nuts panicking about you, Clarke.”

“That’s why there was no report of the mines going off,” Clarke says slowly, mind racing as she pieces things together. “That’s why the army was giving out food to the villages on the way north. They weren’t scared of Nia’s punishment because they were planning to depose her anyway.”

“I tried to tell you what was happening,” Wells says earnestly. “I tried to contact you by radio every day.”

After a moment, Clarke flushes. She stares at her feet – her broken ankle’s been splinted, she notices. Judging by the lack of pain, she’s probably been given some kind of local anaesthesia as well. Then she glances up at Raven, to see her equally as flushed and awkward.

“We – um – we had it on a different channel,” Raven says eventually, shooting Wells an embarrassed glare that dares him to comment on this. “And then it broke.”

“Oh,” Wells says, diplomatically not adding anything further. “I see.”

Clarke clears her throat, trying to change the subject. “So you got their support and headed north. How did you know they weren’t just going to kill you and take the food? I know you took the others as hostages…”

“Collateral,” Wells says. “Not hostages. And I actually thought the chance of them killing me was about fifty-fifty once we got across the mines. I’m sure they were considering it. But when we crossed we met Anya and the others headed south with the missile so the leader knew that Nia’s biggest advantage was gone…”

“Wells told me Anya hid the truck and waited for someone else to cross to be sure it was safe,” Raven says proudly to Clarke. “Apparently she saw the effects of the mine the army first set off and she recognised what it was. Probably because she spent so much time with me. Genius is catching. And when Octavia saw Wells they knew it was safe to come and catch him up.”

“I hadn’t hidden or disguised myself yet,” Wells says, sounding faintly apologetic, as if he’s made some great mistake. “It hadn’t occurred to me that we might run into anyone so soon. Anyway, they saw the truck and missile, and then they heard that Nia had lost Clarke and Lexa’s bodyguard as well, and then Nia gave orders that their families weren’t going to be fed – I think at that point they let go of any idea of betraying me.” Wells smiles.

“How on earth did you find us, though?”

“We weren’t even looking for you, not really. I thought you must be holed up somewhere,” Wells admits. “We came north to get past the other army and find Nia. I thought we were going to have real trouble since they outnumbered us by so many. Then we found a trail of bodies, shrapnel, craters, and smoke. So I thought to myself, who could cause this much damage? And you know what, I somehow just knew it had to be you guys.”

Raven flutters her eyelashes. “You say the loveliest things, dude.”

“I thought I was going to die before we got to the lake,” Wells says frankly. “But then instead of having to fight a bunch of losing battles, we literally just followed the noise of explosions the whole way to the mountain. You guys even marked the traps so we didn’t have to worry about them, though I still don’t understand what the S stands for. And then Raven and Lincoln were waiting outside the mountain. They took out five people before I got there to explain what was going on –
and that’s actually the most danger anyone was in. Honestly, I was almost glad to find out you needed our help, even if it was just digging, because otherwise I would have felt like I brought an entire army north and risked my life and your mother’s just to give you guys a really nice honour guard home.”

Clarke smiles at him, tears springing to her eyes. Every part of his description tells her that he thought that this was a suicide mission, for him at least, but he’d still done it – because he thought it was the right thing to do. Because he cared about Clarke, sure, and the others, but also because he cared about the people as a whole, about the alliance, even about the Azgeda warriors they could have easily killed instead. “You saved us. You gave Lexa your blood. Thank you so much. I never expected – I just – you did – thank you. Thank you.”

He moves closer to the mattress and she wraps her arms around him and squeezes. He still smells the same way he did when they were ten, hanging off each other’s shoulders as they tried to win a three-legged race down a corridor. Like he did when they were thirteen and she kissed his cheek under the mistletoe, when he was fifteen and he comforted her after her grandfather died, when they were seventeen and she hugged him after they first got down to earth.

Now they’re eighteen and he’s big and strong and scarred with the things they’ve been through, but he’s still her Wells, still the closest thing she’s ever had to a brother.

Chapter End Notes

Wells to the rescue! The character literally no one guessed, with the second army that seemingly no one remembered... I can't tell if that means I'm excellent at subtlety or crap at foreshadowing. Maybe both. Oh well.

I was surprised by how many people said they could have lived with it if the last chapter had been - well, the last chapter. The truth is I couldn't have lived with it. But if you prefer the tragic and deep over the fluffy and sweet, feel free to consider the previous chapter as the end.

Possible alternative chapter title, based on Cassy's comments: The Eagles.
Lexa stands as straight as she can. Every part of her hurts. She cannot feel her feet or hands, and it is not from the cold. Nightbloods heal faster, but no one can heal quickly from being run through: she’s not even sure anyone can survive it. It is a miracle of the spirit that she is breathing, let alone standing, but she will stand straight as long as this miracle lasts. “Has Nia’s body been recovered?”

“Sha,” the scout in front of her whispers. Then he clears his throat and repeats it, nearly at the same level. “Sha, Heda.” He cowers from her whenever she moves, as if terrified by her very breathing, but strangely at the same time seems to try and press as close to her as he can, bowed down as he is before her. Like someone reaching out their frozen hands to warm them on the fire but afraid of being burnt by the fierceness of it.

“Good,” Lexa says. Her side screams with agony as she raises her left hand to dismiss him, but she doesn’t allow herself to flinch, even when she feels her wound start to reopen. She can’t raise her hand above her waist, has not been able to since Assan stabbed her, but it’s important that she looks like she can. She is surrounded by gona who only a few weeks ago were her sworn enemies. She cannot allow herself to show any weakness. At the moment, they fear her more than they ever have – her apparent resurrection has caused them to believe her all-powerful. But they will soon realise that the woman they considered divine, Nia, turned out to be nothing more than mortal, and that Lexa might be the same.

Any one of them could decide to try and take control while the situation is still fluid. There only needs to be one fool who does not approve of her decision to name the absent Roan ruler, and their position of safety will become a battlefield.

She glances sideways at Linkon, standing next to her impassively. Well, perhaps it would take more than one fool. But she still does not remotely believe that every gona in this army marched north with Wells because they wanted to improve the lives of their nation. Some will have done this to grab a position of power, or to find weaponry in Nia’s stronghold, or even just to steal food. Lexa is willing to bet at least a hundred deserted on the way north with as much food as they could carry, returning to their families and bargaining that no one would remember them in the upheaval, not caring if the gona remaining in Polis were killed when the mission failed.

She is also willing to bet that if they did, Wells never pursued any of them, and perhaps never even realised they were gone. Skaikru are used to consistent food – not a lot of food, but a consistent amount of it. They were fed on the Ark, and have still been regularly fed since they fell to earth. It would not occur to Wells that the food they were carrying would be a worthy reason to risk the revenge of whichever group won the war.

They should return the same way, then, and see if they can discover any who took food and ran. The food must be distributed to those who need it. “Linkon,” she says out loud, voice rough.

“Sha?”

“Find the leader of the gona and tell him. We must find deserters on the way back. They should not receive the usual punishment, I think, because they did not harm Wells or our cause. But we cannot allow them to think stealing and desertion has no cost.”

Linkon nods. This is probably the tenth thing she has asked him to do for her, and she feels a pang of guilt because he is also injured. Lexa herself can barely stand between the pain and blood loss, but she needs to handle all of this. She needs to do everything she can to ensure that the gonakru do not
Lexa needs to keep herself distracted and busy. On the way down the mountain she had barely felt her wound even as it bled and bled, too distracted by Clarke’s pale and motionless form. If Clarke has died while she lives, none of this has been worth it. She cannot exist in a world without Clarke. She will not. If Clarke is dead, she will tell Linkon to return the Flame to Aden.

“We must locate Gustus,” she decides abruptly, mind flinching away from the thought of Clarke’s death and settling on other things. Gustus will be able to help Linkon protect Clarke’s mother and friends on the way south, and will protect Aden after that. “Gustus and Zion.”

She turns to the nearest Azgeda guard now that Linkon is not here to take her orders. Many of them have stayed around her, far enough not to hear what she says but close enough to stare at her with that same strange fearful yet worshipful expression. Most are hunched, half bowed, and some are even completely on the ground, their foreheads nearly pressed against the snow in veneration. This one has come closer than most dare to, but is bowed the lowest, perhaps to show he is no threat.

“Have one hundred gona gather wood,” she says, loudly enough for him to hear.

He stays bowed before her, trembling, and then crawls forward quickly along the ground to press his forehead to the top of her left boot for half a second, shocking Lexa into immobility. As Heda, she is respected, feared, the commander of many, but an act of such naked and abject reverence is unusual. Then he scuttles backwards as fast as he can, still pressing his forehead nearly to the icy ground.

“He stayed bowed before her, trembling, and then crawls forward quickly along the ground to press his forehead to the top of her left boot for half a second, shocking Lexa into immobility. As Heda, she is respected, feared, the commander of many, but an act of such naked and abject reverence is unusual. Then he scuttles backwards as fast as he can, still pressing his forehead nearly to the icy ground.

“Go now,” she commands, and he flees towards the main encampment as Linkon reappears beside her. She can hear him calling out. “What is the fool saying?” she asks, quietly enough for none of the unnervingly silent, bowed gona around her to hear.

Linkon tilts his head to the side and listens. “It appears to be… ‘she touched me. The Commander touched me. My skin is holy now.’” His lip quirks.

“I see,” Lexa says wryly. Another rip of pain makes her gasp and she automatically moves her right hand to her wound. She stops herself just before she touches it, and clears her throat. Linkon politely ignores her moment of weakness. “They seem to have transferred their worship of the Azplana to me,” she guesses, trying not to let on even to Linkon that their actions have deeply unsettled her. The greedy pull of their eyes, the naked fear and reverence they show – it makes her uncomfortable, somehow.

“No, Heda,” Linkon says, possibly the first time he’s openly disagreed with her. “This is an entirely new worship, I think. They believe you were killed in Polis, then killed again here, and came back to life both times. They have heard Trikru legends that the Commander is immortal – I think now they believe them.”

“I see,” Lexa says again, more thoughtfully. She closes her eyes for a moment. The world is moving in and out of focus. Her wound is bleeding again. Who knew that she had blood left? Black blood stains the snow in Iryala’s village, stains the floor of Roan’s cave, stains the passages of Nia’s castle. Black blood stains Clarke’s sash. Black blood stains the backs of her eyes when she closes them and when she breathes it almost feels like black blood is choking her with the weight of pain and fear she cannot let go of. She should be bleeding red, with Wells’ warm red blood in her, but perhaps the coldness stabbed through her shoulder turns anything inside her dark.

“Heda? Heda!” Linkon moves to catch her and pull her upright before she falls. “You need to sit, to rest,” he says, quietly enough that there is no chance the watching gona can hear. She leans heavily on him and tries to persuade herself to push away and stand straight again. “That wound – it would
end most gona’s fights. It is not surface, like the injuries on my back, and even after those I required several hours to be able to stand again. If you keep moving about.” he cuts himself off.

“Lexa?” Abby says, appearing beside her as well. She glares at the snow like the cold personally offends her. “Clarke wants to speak to you.”

“Clarke?” Lexa says numbly. “Clarke is – Clarke is alive? Awake?” She moves away from Linkon and heads for the tent Clarke is in. He catches up to her after a second and takes her arm, helping her to stay upright and walk straight.

“Lexa!” Clarke starts to struggle off the thin mattress she is lying on, but before she can Lexa falls to her knees and collapses into her niron’s arms.

“Ai hodnes,” Lexa says, but her throat seems filled with gravel and she knows it’s barely comprehensible. “Ai hodnes…” She presses her face into Clarke’s shoulder. And finally gives in fully, as she has been wanting to for more than a month, ever since Clarke was taken from her and she did not know if she would ever get her back. Ever since she was casually handed a dark, silken braid, ever since her worst nightmares took form, ever since she realised fully and awfully that Nia was alive and that Nia could still find things to take from her. The feelings that grew as she held Costia’s bow, as she realised she had Clarke back but two armies hunted them, as she began to believe that there was no way out alive.

Lexa cries.

It is not like the tears she has cried before, leaving little tracks of moisture down her face, restrained and simple. This is as much like those as an explosion is like a campfire. This is as if she is destructing from the inside. Her body shudders with the force of her sobs, and she can hear the weak, awful noises she is making as her eyes burn with a seemingly endless flood of tears. Clarke strokes her hair and she sobs because Clarke is here, and Clarke is alive, and it seems they get one more chance after all.

Her world stopped when Clarke was taken. She folded up. It felt like her heart was stone in her chest, like her love for Clarke was fire in her veins immolating her from the inside out, like she would never be able to breathe again. It was worse than the sword going through her. It was worse than anything. And then she found her but she knew all they could do was die together, knew it almost from the moment she saw her, in spite of all their plans. Because there were armies and Nia was hunting them and they were weak. For a second when they hid in the cave she thought they might make it south – a long shot, an unlikely dream, but the slight possibility was so seductive she had not allowed herself to dwell on it. The Commander is never promised a future, she is promised death, but worse than death was the promise of Nia getting hold of Clarke once more. A part of her believed that even if they made it south Nia would snatch Clarke away again unexpectedly – she did it once, why not twice?

Eventually, the sobs hurt, slamming through her like every one is a punch, dragging through her throat like barbed wire, burning her lungs with their intensity, and she gradually subsides. Her face is swollen and red and her side is nothing but hot pain and every part of her mask has been washed away and she lies limp and boneless in her love’s arms.

Clarke kisses the top of her head softly. With gentle hands, she starts pulling open Lexa’s top and the bandages below, and with careless disregard for the blanket presses it firmly against Lexa’s still-bleeding wound.

Lexa looks up. Everyone has left the tent but them. Clarke is staring down at her with an expression so full of love that it makes her heart lurch.
“Thank you,” Clarke whispers. She turns her face from Lexa for a moment, searching for something, and pulls up a Skaikru satchel Lexa recognises as her mother’s medical bag.

Lexa makes a noise that is half-laugh, half-sob. “For what? Are you thanking me for surviving again?”

“Well, that too,” Clarke says, and kisses her cheek. “Hold still. I’m going to start sewing this up, that should help a bit with the bleeding. I can’t believe my mother didn’t do it, she must’ve known it was risky to just leave it like this. If you don’t listen to my medical advice and rest I’m going to tie you down, you know.”

Lexa gives her a watery smile. “Is that a promise, Clarke kom Skaikru?”

Clarke raises an eyebrow. “Hmm, maybe. Anyway, what I was saying was, of course I’m thankful you survived. But I also meant… thank you for being strong enough to be weak for me.”

Lexa blinks swollen eyes. “What?”

“I was there in the first world when Gustus told you to stay strong, and you were strong before that, and you’ve been strong since,” Clarke continues, voice soft. She pulls back the blanket and starts to smear a clear liquid onto Lexa’s wound. “You stand straight and you protect everyone and you manage the world and we all lean on you. But there’s these little moments sometimes when you lean on me instead, when you let the mask fall, when I can do something to repay you for it all, when I really get to see you, and they never last long enough for me. The moments when you let me really be your partner, when you trust me to love all of you, not just the strongest parts. When you let yourself bleed and cry and feel. I love you so freaking much, Lexa kom Trikru, you have no idea.”

“Clarke -” Lexa starts to say, but she’s interrupted.

“I love you when you’re ruthless and when you fight and when you laugh and when you give orders and when you cry and when you get this adorable puzzled expression like you’re trying to figure something out. I told you once that I wanted the bad as well as the good, but the thing is? I don’t think any of that is bad.” Clarke gives her another smile and there are tears in her eyes now as well. “You’re my lover and my Commander and my friend and my partner and my protector and I can’t wait for you to be my wife as well.” She pushes the needle into Lexa’s skin neatly and swiftly, drawing the ragged edges together.

Lexa catches her breath, the pain in her side disappearing as she registers the word. “Your wife,” she echoes, suddenly amazed. They are alive. The future stretches out before them. So many wonderful experiences she never thought she would have, holding Clarke’s hand as they receive their bonding tattoos, going on a Skaikru ‘honey moon’, quiet moments with just the two of them together, returning home to Clarke every evening, waking to Clarke every morning, holding Clarke every night.

“My wife,” Clarke says firmly, ties the short line of stitches off deftly, and kisses her again. She rips open some kind of plastic sealed container and presses a thick white square against the wound lightly. “Now turn over, I need to do the other side as well. And then a bandage. And a sling. And bed rest for as long as practical – though I know we’ll have to head south soon. A week at least though.” She grins down at Lexa. “This is where you say ‘yes, dear’.”

“Yes, dear,” Lexa parrots obediently, smiling back up at her.
Lexa isn’t the only one who needs bed rest, Clarke finds, although Lexa certainly needs it more. The weeks of stress and injuries and cold have left her physically, mentally and emotionally drained, sleeping sixteen hours a day, and focused on nothing except food and cuddling against Lexa’s warmth. She’s happy to huddle inside the little tent that has become their world and leave everything outside to someone else. She’s uncharacteristically eager for Wells to take on the responsibility of leadership for the time being, and he seems to manage just fine.

Between managing things, though, he does find the time to come see them often. Raven’s there nearly all the time they’re awake, too, chattering eagerly about everything and nothing. Leaning her head against Lexa’s uninjured shoulder, bundled up in blankets, Clarke smiles sleepily up at them and doesn’t say much, preferring to let the world just slide by.

Her mother’s visits are more problematic. It seems like she and Clarke can’t talk without arguing. It’s like now that they don’t have Jake to balance them out and act as mediator, they can’t even discuss things like the weather without the conversation becoming a downward spiral towards Clarke’s life choices and the changes in her personality. And worse than that, far worse…

“So then she said ‘I can get it myself, Mommy!’” Abby laughs.

…Is that now, her mother and Lexa seem to be getting along like a house on fire. Clarke keeps her eyes closed, pretending that she’s still asleep and desperately wishing for Abby to leave. Despite her hopes, the story continues.

“I let her reach for it, and next thing I knew, our entire monthly supply of flour was all over the kitchen,” Abby continues. “Kids are so stubborn at that age, sometimes all you can do is let them make their own mistakes.”

“Dazi, one of my Natblida, was much like that,” Lexa agrees. Clarke feels the tension in her muscles, as if she wants to gesticulate as she makes her point, but she manages to restrain herself – under Clarke’s command Lexa has been nearly motionless since they were ordered to rest. “He was very determined to master a full staff a few years ago. Of course, he was not even half the height of the weapon. I let him practice with one for four days and he gave it up, returned to a shorter one, and never spoke of it again.”

“Exactly!” Abby says warmly. “With Clarke that approach always had mixed results, though. She’s always been so stubborn. For example, even after the flour incident, it was only a few days later that she was sure she could fix the television just like her father. If I hadn’t caught her she probably would have blacked out our entire station -”

Clarke sighs and gives up on getting back to sleep. She opens her eyes and fakes a smile. “Hei, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetie,” Abby says, smiling down at Clarke.

“Did you come to check on Lexa’s wound?”

“No, I checked it only an hour ago,” Abby gives Lexa an approving look. “She’s healing incredibly fast. I’m not going to risk checking her range of motion just yet, since I’m worried about her rotator
tendon and want to give it another couple of weeks at least, but I think immobilising her arm has helped a lot.” Then she looks back at Clarke and her smile dims a bit. “I should probably check your ankle again, honey.”

“You checked it yesterday,” Clarke points out. “Broken bones take time, it’s not going to change daily.”

“I suppose,” Abby says. “But better safe than sorry. It’s a nasty break. Although I think it might actually be good that it got broken a second time – I don’t think the first was set quite right, and it could have caused problems down the line.”

“It wasn’t exactly my first priority at the time,” Clarke replies, a little coolly.

Abby pats her shoulder. Clarke thinks the motion is slightly patronising. “Of course it wasn’t. And you did a marvellous job with what you had available at the time. Honestly, though, I don’t think you’ll ever get full strength and range of motion back into your ankle whatever we do.”

Clarke focuses on Lexa. “Any sign of Gustus and Zion yet?”

“The third fire was started this morning while you slept,” Lexa says, obedient to the subject change. “I did not watch, but Wells assured me that the five puffs of smoke were very distinct. If Gustus is alive, he will see it, and he will come. We have used the signal many times before and he will know it immediately. If they do not arrive by tomorrow, I think we will have to accept that they died on the lake.”

Clarke bites her lip. “Raven’s – Raven’s not going to deal well with that.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” Abby says firmly. “Raven’s been through a lot, but she’s strong. She’ll cope.”

“So us killing hundreds of Grounders is perfectly fine by you, but the execution of the Maunon was too far?” Clarke says sourly, unable to stop herself. Lexa makes a little noise under her breath.

Abby pulls back slightly and glares at her daughter. “There’s a big difference between actions taken in the heat of the moment and killing done in cold blood, Clarke.”

“Both resulted in the death of hundreds,” Clarke replies. “Both were deliberately planned. You could argue that killing the Grounders is even worse than killing the Maunon, because at least the Maunon were guilty of something. Are you sure the ‘big difference’ you’re thinking of isn’t that the people executed back at TonDC seemed more like Arkers?”

Lexa intervenes before Abby can reply. “Both were done to save lives,” she says in her grave voice. “And with the best of intentions. And both are now done, and cannot be changed, regardless of our thoughts on them.”

Abby stares at her for a moment, clearly on the verge of replying angrily, then clears her throat and says. “I suppose that’s true. You’re very wise for your age, Lexa.” She gives her a thin smile.

Clarke waits for Lexa to verbally eviscerate her mother like she did with Jaha when he dared to comment on her age, but instead Lexa simply says, “Mochof.” Clarke feels unreasonably betrayed by this.

“The – well, I can only call it a cult that is building up around the two of you is showing no signs of fading,” Abby says, changing the subject with a frown. “It’s based on the beliefs of the flame cult the Grounders already have, but Lincoln says it’s grown beyond that already – quite a bit beyond that.”
“What is a cult?” Lexa says curiously.

“A religion,” Clarke tells her.

Abby frowns. “Not exactly the same, honey. A cult is – well, it’s – a cult has a lot more negative connotations than –” she cuts herself off, apparently realising that if ‘cult’ is meaningless to Lexa then ‘negative connotations’ is unlikely to be comprehensible. “It’s – a cult is bad,” she eventually continues lamely. “Religions can be good.”

“You just called my people’s belief in the Flame a cult,” Lexa points out, and Clarke winces.

Abby flushes. “I’m sorry,” she says, then immediately moves to justify herself, like she always does when she apologises. It never ceases to annoy Clarke. “You need to understand, my people aren’t like yours, it’s partly that we’re much more advanced scientifically and partly that we still have so many ties to before the bombs fell. Of course some of your beliefs are going to seem strange to us, even a little fantastical.”

In the old world, Clarke desperately wanted her mother’s approval for all of her actions. Her mother’s support. But when she thinks back to it now, she was like that with all of them – she didn’t have a real place in the world, so she felt lost and scared all the time, and she compensated for that by clinging to the familiar and relying on that. She relied on people who spoke down to her, who criticised her and judged her unfairly, who didn’t listen to her when she told them the truth, who did terrible things and passed the blame to her, who watched her do terrible things on their behalf and condemned her for them.

In this world, she has a steady place to stand. She knows who her people are. She leans on Lexa. She leans on Wells, on Raven. Even on Anya, Lincoln and Gus. She doesn’t need to rely on people whose approval is impossible to get.

Even if one’s her mother.

“Fantastical?” Clarke says incredulously. “On the Ark there was a religion based around a tree.”

“Even Vera Kane doesn’t actually believe the tree is magical,” Abby says, then hesitates. “I’m… almost sure, anyway. But Lincoln says people out there honestly believe that the two of you are some kind of deities in human form. Can’t you see how disturbing that is? Do you want to be worshipped like that?”

“Want? No,” Clarke says. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t use it.”

“We have not asked them to form these beliefs,” Lexa adds. “But their belief ensures their loyalty to us, and therefore the alliance as well.”

“Political capital,” Clarke clarifies. “We can discourage it later. Right now, we need to use whatever we can to hold the clans together.”

“It’s a lie,” Abby objects.

“So was Unity Day,” Clarke snaps back. “But we celebrated it every year anyway. And like Lexa said, we haven’t lied to these people, not at all.”

“You’re using them!”

“And the Ark used us!” Clarke says, voice rising. “All of us. The 100 most of all.”
“You can’t use that as your argument all the time, Clarke!” Abby says, voice rising as well. “You were sent down to keep you alive!”

“We were sent down as lab rats,” Clarke shifts so that she’s sitting perfectly upright, glaring at her mother from inches away. “With bracelets to monitor if we died. Jaha even told us we were expendable on the way down. What a lovely final message from our people.”

“Hey, guys?” Raven pops her head into the tent grinning, oblivious to the strained atmosphere. Clarke distinctly hears Lexa give a relieved sigh at the interruption. “Guess what! Zion and Gustus turned up! I gotta say, though, that wandering around up north has made Gustus even more of a -”

“Are they healthy?” Lexa interrupts. She’s already moving awkwardly to stand, and Raven steps forward to pull her up by her good arm. Clarke chokes back an objection, though she really wants to stop Lexa. If it were anyone else, she would – but Lexa always surprises Clarke with her toughness and her ability to heal. “Are they able to move?”

“Yeah, looks like,” Raven says cheerfully. “They were gonna charge right in here – it’s like they didn’t trust me when I said you were okay, can you believe that? But I thought I should come get you instead so they didn’t interrupt anything.”

“I am doing nothing that cannot be interrupted,” Lexa assures her, and Clarke can hear the fervency in her tone. Lexa looks back at her fiancée. “I must go see to Gustus and Zion. If they are indeed well, we should begin making plans to go south. Staying this far north cannot be doing the gonakru’s health or food supplies any good, and now we have them back there is no reason to linger. Are you coming with me to greet them, Clarke?”

“Sha,” Clarke says. “Mom, can you get me those crutches you got Lincoln to make? I owe Gus so much, you have no idea. He saved my life.” Abby looks like she wants to protest – perhaps Clarke’s plan to start walking again, even with crutches, or perhaps Lexa’s plan to head south and end their bedrest – but instead she just stays in the same place, shifting her weight as if not sure what to do.

“And you saved his,” Raven says, mock-thoughtfully. “Also, I saved all of your lives, so I think I’m up on points. Except Lincoln saved mine. And Lexa saved yours. I’m preeetty sure Lexa saved mine at one point, too, but I’d need to start working it out incident by incident to make sure. Anya’s definitely saved my life before. Octavia saved Wells’ life once, I remember that one vividly. Also there was that time that -”

“I get your point,” Clarke cuts her off. “You can graph it all out later if you really want to and figure out who owes who. But right now can we please go see our miraculously-alive friends?”

“Sha,” Lexa says, holding out Clarke’s makeshift crutches as Raven helps her up. Clarke’s mother is looking at her, a disquieted expression on her face, as if she’s realised something new and unpleasant. Clarke wonders wearily what it is now.

“I get your point,” Clarke cuts her off. “You can graph it all out later if you really want to and figure out who owes who. But right now can we please go see our miraculously-alive friends?”

“You’ve been in danger so many times,” Abby murmurs as they exit. She lags a step behind them uncertainly and Clarke narrowly misses hitting her with her crutch. “And I haven’t been able to help. Not a single time.”

“I don’t need that kind of help from you,” Clarke tells her, but Abby’s already swerved away, walking blindly off in a random direction, perhaps to find somewhere to be alone. Clarke sighs. Why is it that she and her mother just can’t seem to speak the same language anymore?

Lexa reaches out to lightly touch her back, and Clarke sighs, releasing the tension Abby always seems to cause these days. Then she brightens, seeing the hulking form of Gustus beside the shorter,
slender Zion, the two men beaming through their beards.

It’s sad that she trusts two people who have known her only a couple of months to give her the approval and support her mother never seems able to. But it is very good to see them again.

Chapter End Notes

My heart goes out for all the people who read this and live in America, what happened depressed us enough, I can’t imagine how you guys are doing. :(
Passing the Torch

“I still think you should have gone with Abby’s idea of a litter,” Raven grumbles.

“A litter for the injured, Raven,” Lexa says severely. “Even if I had decided Abby kom Skaikru was correct and I could not handle riding, you would not have been in the litter. She has declared you perfectly healthy.”

“Perfectly healthy? Sure,” Raven says. “Petrified of horses? Completely. Besides, I don’t know about this sharing business,” she adds, now addressing Lincoln, who she is riding with. “I just wanna make it clear again, big guy, Octavia is my friend. I don’t care how much time I spend wrapped around you on this trip, it doesn’t mean that – ooh, muscles.”

Lincoln just gives a small smile, by now inured to Raven’s ways. “I shall try to resist if you try too,” he tells her. “If you begin to feel faint, Wells and I can switch.”

“Oh, no,” Wells says, for once too emphatic to be really polite. “I’m barely managing to stay on even with Harper’s help. With Raven I would fall off immediately.” His riding partner, the Skaikru hunter-turned-ambassador’s-assistant that Lexa has only hazy memories of, smiles and flushes, leaning backwards into Wells a little too much for correct riding posture.

The Skaikru make a strange group, Lexa thinks, amused. The few available horses have been given to the Skaikru and the wounded, as it is the only way to allow them to keep up with the rest. Raven looks down at the horse with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity, as if it is some kind of dangerous machinery. Wells huddles down against the horse too much, trying to hold onto it instead of the girl in front of him, though Lexa suspects that is more to do with his natural propriety than a dislike of touching her. Harper herself seems able to ride – as she should, after being trained as a hunter in Polis – but is allowing the horse to zigzag wildly, though it is anyone’s guess whether she is simply unused to the fiercer Azgeda horses or whether she is trying to encourage Wells to hold onto her properly. Abby sits on the horse primly, holds the reins gingerly, and in general acts as though she is desperately avoiding contact with it, as well as with Gustus.

Then there is Clarke, a nearly-perfect rider despite her late start to it, sitting in front of Lexa holding the reins loosely. Even though Lexa has only one arm to hold onto her niron, and the construction of bandages and wood about Clarke’s ankle spooks the skittish horse whenever she touches its flank, she is willing to bet the two of them could beat any of the others in a race. Certainly they are the only ones who have not come close to falling off.

Not that this is the right time for a race, of course. Sadly.

Clarke clucks her tongue and the horse steps forward quickly. Gustus follows suit, trying to keep his horse only a step behind theirs, eyes wary for any possible attacks. He ignores Abby as she lets out a sharp noise of shock at the increased speed. Lexa releases Clarke to gesture to Wells and Harper, who move their horse forward as well. They stopped here on the way north, on the basis of Octavia’s advice, sent south by Lexa.

Their coming has caused a commotion. Villagers talk frantically. The village leader stands in the centre, her face impassive, though her concern shows in her eyes. When her gaze falls on Wells, she subtly relaxes and inclines her head. “Wells kom Skaikru,” she says. “It is good to see you again. I take it your mission -”

Suddenly, almost comically, her voice peters out as she gets a proper look at Lexa. “Heda,” she
breathes, taking in the eye make-up and cogwheel Lexa now wears, and falling to her knees. Then she looks even closer. “Saska? How can you – are you – you won the Conclave? But -”

“I won the Conclave years ago,” Lexa tells her. “I won the last Conclave there will ever be. I am Lexa kom Trikru, Commander of the Thirteen Clans, and I thank you for your services to our people. Without you we may not have been able to retrieve what Nia stole. A theft she has paid for with her life, I must tell you.”

Iryala’s eyes are wide with shock. “Heda,” she manages to say, and bows deeply from her kneeling position. The rest of the villagers follow suit, the hum of frantic discussion quieting. “We – we believed you dead.”

“As you can see, I am not,” Lexa says lightly.

“Rumours of her death have been greatly exaggerated,” Raven says in an undertone as Lincoln catches them up.

Lex ignores her, keeping her eyes on Iryala. The horse prances beneath her but Clarke pulls lightly at the reign and it quiets. “The woman who shares my horse is Clarke kom Skaikru, Wanheda, second-in-command of the alliance. Your messengers reached us only yesterday.”

“Wanheda,” someone from the village mutters in surprise, to be echoed by his fellows. Then a woman from the gonakru behind Lexa whispers, “Lexa de Newanen,” and the two titles become a whisper of noise filling the air, almost a chant. “Lexa de Newanen, Clarke de Wanheda…”

Wells’ brow furrows. It amuses Lexa to see that although he’s spent more time with the gona than any of them, this is apparently the first time he’s heard her new name. By the way Clarke stiffens, it seems to be the first she’s heard of it as well. “Clarke the Commander of Death,” Wells manages to make out with his rudimentary grasp of Trigedasleng. “Lexa the – Not Dead?”

“Lexa the Undying,” Lexa supplies. She can feel Clarke breathing too fast against her, although she cannot see her expression.

“The Undying,” Clarke says, voice shaking on what seems to be laughter as much as tears. “The Undying. Oh God, Lexa.”

“Shh,” Lexa says softly. She moves away Clarke’s hair and presses her lips to the back of Clarke’s neck gently. “It is fine, Clarke. We are fine.” Abby looks concerned but doesn’t dare reach out from her precarious position behind Gustus.

Clarke gets her breathing back under control and says to Iryala, “So, you sent a messenger north looking for Wells. You must have known that would be risky.”

“Not as risky as sending one south through a minefield,” Iryala says bluntly.

“The Azplana could have caught him,” Clarke points out. “You didn’t know she was dead.”

“The news could not wait,” Iryala says. “I believe the Azplana has sent assassins to Polis. At least one group, well-armed but disguised as hunters. We caught them but there may be others. The leader had you as one of the targets, Wells kom Skaikru.”

Wells dismounts awkwardly at a gesture from Lexa, nearly falling, and Raven snorts. Lexa sends her a quelling look and she manages to restrain herself from whatever she wanted to say. “Who else were the targets?” Wells asks. “We can radio ahead, give warning.”
Iryala passes him something. From this angle Lexa cannot see what.

There is a long, tense pause as Wells stares at it, and then he laughs.

“What?” Raven asks grudgingly.

Wells turns, his gaze finding Clarke, and his expression is filled with nothing but amusement and relief. “Your work, I believe,” he says dryly, holding up a detailed sketch of his own face.

Lexa blinks. “Is your captive named Orion?” she asks mildly.

Iryala looks just as surprised. “…Sha, that is what he says.”

“Perhaps you should take us to him,” Lexa suggests, and swings herself down from the horse. The landing jars her arm as always and she restrains a whimper. Then she helps Clarke down and hears her do the same. Lexa detaches Clarke’s crutches from the back of the horse and passes them to her.

Given Lexa has a sling and walks awkwardly and slowly, unbalanced by her injury and the blood loss it caused, and Clarke lurches along on crutches as though she is intoxicated, it amazes Lexa that anyone has been able to look at them and see deities. Perhaps the Azgeda think they are pretending weakness, or that it takes time for Lexa to fully recover from dying, or that for Clarke bringing death to people requires a sacrifice of her own pain. Whatever the case – and Lexa has been avoiding prying too deeply into this strange new system of belief, although eventually she will have to investigate further – whatever the case, it is apparent they do believe them to be somehow more than human.

Orion is injured, but not too badly, one of his long-lashed eyes purple and swollen but the rest of his face undamaged. “Heda,” he murmurs worshipfully as she enters, and tries to bow as much as someone can when they are chained to the floor.

“Hei, Orion,” Clarke says.

“Clarke kom Skaikru,” Orion says, respectfully but with none of the same awe he showed for Lexa. “It is good to see you safe. I must admit I did not believe I would see you again at all.”

Malus works to undo his chains, at an imperious gesture from Iryala, though from his scowl it is clear he is concerned their captive will take revenge. He sends wary glances at Lexa as he works, unsure where he stands with her now, his previous blunt comments worrying him now he knows they were addressed to his leader.

“It’s good to see you too,” Clarke tells Orion sincerely. “I’m sorry you got hurt helping us.”

“It is fine,” Orion says. “It was for the alliance. Most of the other hunters are also imprisoned. Could you organise their release, beja?”

“Sha,” Lexa says, directing her gaze sharply at Malus, who flushes and leaves to obey, not even waiting for her to verbalise the order. Then Lexa returns her gaze to Orion. “You did not get as far as I expected, Orion kom Azgeda.”

“I got the whole way, Heda, with respect,” Orion says, bowing his head. “But they said the border was impassable. One of my hunters tried to brave the border anyway and the ground exploded. If Nyssa had not pulled him back at the last moment he would have died. As it was, it was all we could do to stop his bleeding and keep him alive.”

“Sorry,” Clarke says, though Lexa is not sure how she can consider herself responsible for this.
Sometimes Clarke takes the blame for too much.

“So I left Nyssa and some of the others at the border to keep watch, and followed the rumours of Skaikru to here,” Orion continues. “I thought perhaps one of the people you wished me to find lived in the Skaikru village I heard tales of. I planned to watch but not approach.”

“Then these villagers found you,” Lexa finishes the story for him. “So the others still wait at the border? We can meet them on the way. Do they have the book Clarke gave you with them?”

“Wait, Nyssa?” Clarke goes on a different tangent. “I was under the impression she was loyal to the Azplana.”

“At the end of the day, Nyssa is loyal to me,” Orion says flatly. Lexa thinks that it is less that he is prioritising Clarke’s question over hers, and more that any question about his houmon is first priority to him. “As the rest of the hunters are loyal to her. As I am loyal to her, despite my decision to do as you asked. She may not approve of my choice to betray the Azplana and sneak south, but she would rather help than let me die doing it.” He looks at Lexa. “And no, she does not have the book. It is buried a day’s walk to the south. I can accompany you there.”

“Mochof,” Lexa says. Outwardly her face is impassive, but her mind is churning.

They will have the book back. Skaikru can read. Natblida can read. Trikru believe in the Flame. Now so do Azgeda. All of the other clans believe in the Commander, even if they do not believe in or know of every single other detail of what Abby would call a ‘cult’. There needs to be a Fleimkepa.

She has a choice to make.
Homecoming

It doesn’t seem real that she’s been gone for over a month until she sees Arkadia.

The – city? Town? It’s too big to be a village, surely – is as different from it was when she left as it is from its iteration in the previous world. Gone are the dirty paths and basic, nailed together sheds, the ragged fences of sticks and wire. The buildings show some signs of decoration, now, a few of the doors painted or carved, the edges smoothed. There’s something vaguely futuristic about some of the designs, obviously inspired by space or by the aesthetic of the Ark. A few electric lights glow but warm, flickering firelight provides nearly as much illumination. The trees, bushes and flowers surrounding the buildings keep it from looking too separate from the world around it.

At a signal from Lexa, their group dissolves, people dismounting and leading away horses. Most of the gonakru were left behind in Azgeda territory, but a few dozen still accompany them. Lexa gets off the horse and helps Clarke down, eyes on Kane. At another gesture everyone backs away so that they’re in a bubble of isolation for their greeting. Even Abby, going to greet her friend, is gently but irresistibly pulled away by Gustus. Raven, riding with a random gona now that Lincoln has struck out for Polis (ostensibly to deliver word of their arrival but actually to see Octavia as soon as possible), rolls her eyes as he obediently backs up the horse.

“Greetings, Commander,” Kane says, bowing his head respectfully. Then he turns slightly to face Clarke, a smile lighting up his face. “Clarke, it’s good to see that you’re safe. I’m sorry that you were endangered on my watch.”

“It’s not your fault, Chancellor,” Clarke assures him. “It was Diana Sydney’s fault.”

“I see. Is Diana…?” He must see the answer on her face, because he nods sharply and turns back to Lexa again. “I’ve had a house built for you and your retinue, Commander, for this and future visits. I hope you find it comfortable.”

Lexa blinks. “I do not need a house,” she protests. “Certainly not one that will be empty nine-tenths of the time.”

“I don’t wish to contradict you, Commander, but yes, you do,” Kane says, just as firmly. “My people are still learning about rank in this world. To the other clans, the signs of the Commander are clear indications of authority, but to my people they aren’t yet. But the most elaborate house in the village being set aside for your use, and the use of anyone you deem appropriate? That’s authority.”

Lexa hesitates, then sighs and nods. “I suppose I should not give you command of your people then balk at how you use it,” she remarks dryly.

“Well,” Kane looks momentarily wary. “I needed to speak to you about that. I have taken an action that – well, I hope is within my powers. I know that the current members of my council were chosen with your permission and endorsement.”

“You fired someone?” Clarke asks with interest. “Wait – it wasn’t Mom, was it? Is that why you sent her north?”

“No, your mother is still one of my advisors,” says Kane, though he looks like he’s suppressing a smile. “I sent Abby north because I couldn’t have stopped her.”

“You’re in charge.”
“Being a good leader means knowing which battles *not* to fight,” Kane tells her, once again suppressing a smile.

Lexa raises an eyebrow at him, recalling them both to the actual issue at hand. “So how have you changed your council, Marcus kom Skaikru?”

“I had to replace Jay,” he says. Clarke struggles to remember who Jay was, then manages to conjure up an image of Pike’s angry second-in-command. “He died from the aftereffects of smoke inhalation a week after your kidnapping, Clarke.”

“Of course you can replace them if one dies,” Clarke says, then recognises the callousness of her own words and winces. She’s become too desensitised to all of this, really.

“The issue is more about *who* I replaced him with,” Kane says, mouth twisting into a worried frown. “I’ve asked one of the Mount Weather survivors to join the council.” He blinks, suddenly realising something. “But we can talk about all of this tomorrow. You must be exhausted. Allow me to show you to your house, Commander. Clarke, will you be staying with your mother, or -?”

“With Lexa,” Clarke says firmly. Lexa passes the horse’s reins to Gustus, quietly telling him to find her later, and they both turn to follow Kane. She looks back at the last second and adds, “Raven, Wells, Zion, you guys should join us.” If they have a retinue, she thinks that’s it.

“And Harper,” Wells says clearly, “If there’s room.”

Kane nods.

“Mom, I know you have your own place here…” Clarke starts to say.

Abby looks at her, and somehow manages to force a smile. “You’re right. I do. I’ll – I’ll speak to you tomorrow, honey.” She turns and leaves, shoulders slightly hunched, and Clarke knows she’s hurt her mother’s feelings again. But the truth is, Abby does have her own place here, and Clarke just isn’t up for whatever argument they’ll manage to come up with tonight.

Kane walks slowly to avoid outpacing Clarke’s hopping pace. “So who did you add to the council?”

Clarke puffs out after a minute, trying to distract herself from her mother. “And why someone from *Mount Weather*?”

“They’re a faction of our people, now,” Kane says, reaching out to help Clarke when she nearly stumbles. “They need someone to represent their interests. Miss Vie has taken the lead with her people since the destruction of their home, and relations between the Mount Weather survivors and the rest of the population of Arkadia would be a great deal worse without her influence.”

Clarke can’t help the smile that spreads across her face. Maya, a member of the council? She likes that. She also likes that Kane is clearly beginning to adopt some Grounder ways, choosing to promote the best person to a high position regardless of age or other unimportant details.

There are still quite a few people hanging around in the streets for this time of night. Clarke wonders if they’re here to see her or Lexa. She does notice that Kane gives anyone staring a meaningful look, causing them to start with remembrance and bow their head at Lexa.

“Then it is a wise choice, Marcus,” Lexa says calmly, though she glances at Clarke for agreement first. “I will not interfere.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Kane says, bowing his head again. “Ah, here we are.”
Clarke stares at it. The house is beautiful, clearly made by the best people Kane could find. Either that, or made last, when everyone had started to improve their skills. A larger version of the insignia Lexa wears on her forehead is above the large double doors at the front. Several gona stand outside, on guard, and they bow when they see Lexa. She’s willing to bet it’s both fancier and larger than Kane’s house – actually, she’s willing to bet Kane has one of the smallest and least comfortable houses in the village. Lexa isn’t the only person who lives for her people.

“HEDA!” a figure detaches itself from the guards and moves forward quickly and purposefully to bow in front of Lexa. Clarke catches a blur of blonde braids and dark shadowed eyes before Anya straightens and moves the last two steps to embrace Lexa. “You frightened me, yongon,” she says so quietly that only Clarke and Lexa can hear, voice cracking.

“Anya?” Raven says, still about ten feet behind Clarke and Lexa, voice unsteady. “Cheekbones -” She sounds like she’s uncertain of her reception but steps forward anyway.

Anya releases Lexa and takes several steps towards Raven. She clears her throat, eyes swimming with emotion she tries to fight back. “Ah… Raven kom Skaikru… it is… I mean, it is… a pleasure to -” she lets out a surprised, undignified noise when Raven slams into her and kisses her hard, clinging to the warrior.

Raven pulls away a few seconds later, but instead of letting go like Anya clearly expects, she chokes out, “I love you, cheekbones,” and then covers Anya’s mouth with her own again. Anya tries to pull her away for a second, presumably to return the sentiment, then apparently decides to delay this for later.

Clarke can’t help her smile.

Lexa clears her throat and says to Kane, “Thank you for leading us here. We should get some sleep.”

The others follow Clarke and Lexa in, all except Raven and Anya, who seem oblivious to the existence of houses in general. Zion disappears immediately – probably to check that the rooms are safe for the rest of them and that there’s no well-hidden assassins or bombs – but the rest of them just look around in awe.

“This place is lovely,” Wells says, running a finger across the surface of the massive, imposing table that fills the room. The edges of it are detailed and beautiful, a geometric pattern that is nothing like Costia’s flowers but oddly hypnotic anyway. “Look at the carving on the furniture, it’s so ornate. It must have taken someone -” He stops suddenly. “Oh. Huh.”

“What is it?” Lexa asks.

“Nothing important,” he says, staring down at the corner nearest him.

Clarke moves closer, her crutches clacking against the floor, and looks at what he’s examining. Surprisingly, she recognises it, although she’s not even sure when she saw it before, the stylised F. Did he draw it once with the pencils from the bunker? “That’s Finn’s signature,” she says, surprised.

“Yes,” Wells says.

“Wow,” Harper says, running her finger over it as well. She shoots a slightly nervous grin at Wells as she moves closer to him. “This is – this is really good. I mean, especially for…” she cuts herself off, then stumbles to finish the sentence differently than planned. “For someone who’s never worked with wood before. Which I guess none of us have, but, you know, this work is still very good.”

“He’s good at making things,” Clarke says. “He’s always been good at making things.” She wonders
what Raven will say when she sees this. But then, Raven seems to have things figured out, judging by her display with Anya outside. Maybe knowing that Finn is also figuring things out will make it all easier on her. Knowing that Finn’s managed to keep something he cares about, even if it’s not in the same form.

“I bet he volunteered to do this because he knew you’d be staying here,” Harper says. She casts a sideways glance at Wells. “One of us should go thank him.”

“Yes,” Wells says shortly. “One of us should.” He moves away, suddenly distant from Harper and the rest of them in a way he wasn’t before. “I’m going to go find somewhere to sleep.”

Harper sighs. “I meant you should, dumbass,” she says to the empty air.

“It was a good try,” Clarke tells her. “Finn cutting off contact with Wells and Raven – was rough. For them.”

“I know,” Harper says. “I’m sure he meant well, but he was kinda a massive dick to them. I just think Wells would feel a lot better if he’d talk to the guy.”

“I’m planning to go see how Finn’s doing sometime while we’re here,” Clarke says. “I’ll thank him for the woodworking and bring up Wells and Raven if I can find a good opportunity to do so.”

“We will be here a few days, I think,” Lexa says calmly, reaching out to tuck an errant braid behind Clarke’s ear. “We need to decide what to do with the missile, now it has been proven that it is not safe here. There is no reason to rush back to Polis. Aden and Indra have things under control there.”

Harper doesn’t look too thrilled by that, probably missing her home, but she says, “Sha, Heda,” anyway, and leaves to follow Wells.

“Wells clearly matters greatly to her,” Lexa says softly.

“What?” Clarke runs Harper’s actions through her head again. “You think she likes him?” Then she considers Wells’ actions, but doesn’t reach any conclusion. “How come I never notice these things? I didn’t see Anya and Raven coming either.”

Lexa smiles crookedly. “You are one of the cleverest and most observant people I know, Clarke, but everyone is allowed a blind spot. You analyse people’s motivations very well – unless they are your friends and family. No one can see those close to them with an impartial eye.”

Clarke looks at Lexa, wanting to point out that she’s wrong because Lexa sees everything clearly – friends and family included. Clarke’s pretty sure the only person Lexa doesn’t see clearly is her, because the way Lexa’s face shines with happiness when she looks at her seems to suggest that she’s someone much better. In the lantern-light her skin seems to glow, still pale from her recent blood loss but getting healthier. Her green eyes are warm but weary and as Clarke watches, she stifles a yawn that makes her strangely adorable. Wells’ love life abruptly becomes less important to Clarke, her priority shifting at the sight of such unguarded cuteness. “Want to go find a room, Heda?” she says softly.

“I thought you would never ask, Clarke kom Skaikru,” Lexa says gravely.
It is past noon the next day when Lexa meets with Clarke, Gustus, Zion, and Anya around the carved wooden table. This is partly because they all needed rest, partly because Lexa wished to prolong her time entangled comfortably with Clarke, and partly because Lexa does not think Anya could have been drawn away from Raven before now even by threat of force.

Besides Clarke, who remains seated at the table resting her ankle, the Skaikru who travelled with them are out in Arkadia, speaking to people and organising things – Lexa requested that they leave for this meeting. Most of the Skaikru do not understand the Flame, let alone believe in it, and the position of Fleimkepa is a matter of unimportance to them.

It is the first time Anya and Gustus have seen each other since they returned. Gustus was away dealing with the horses and double-checking that Arkadia had sufficient defences when they reached the house, and Anya was ensconced in Raven’s room by the time he found the place. Their greeting is typical for them.

“Anya,” Gustus says, reaching out to clasp her hand in welcome. “You have not changed at all since our last meeting.” He squeezes her hand tightly and she returns the grip even more fiercely, meeting his eyes with a challenging glint as they try and out-grapple each other subtly. “Except perhaps to grow in stubbornness.”

“Stubbornness and strength, kriken lukot,” Anya says smoothly, increasing the pressure until her hand is white and her arm trembles with the strain.

After a long moment, Gustus laughs with his eyes and releases her, clapping her shoulder lightly with his other hand. “Everything but wisdom, then, Anya kom Trikru.”

“What use is wisdom to a warrior?” Anya jokes, one side of her mouth twisting up very slightly. Lexa thinks the Skaikru would probably have trouble telling that Anya and Gustus have been good friends for many years, despite their light words, because the way they express their affection is so foreign to Skaikru ways. But it warms her heart to think that in a year’s time, perhaps they will be able to tell, just as in a year’s time perhaps her people will have begun to understand Skaikru words and ways.

Lexa clears her throat and both are instantly silent. “I believe it would be best to appoint a Fleimkepa before we return to Polis,” she says bluntly, not spending any time on small talk. “Deciding on one there will make the ambassadors think they should be involved in the decision. To save having that argument, I would rather go back with the matter settled.”

“What is your decision, Heda?” Gustus asks respectfully, but she sees a flash of concern in his eyes. Her Gustus would not welcome being Fleimkepa, she thinks.

“It cannot be a Skaikru,” Lexa says flatly. “They can read, but even if one came to believe in the Flame, I have raised the Sky People too far and too fast to give them more power. The other clans see I have made them one of us, I have allowed them to rent our land, I have given them food, I have given their children homes in Polis, I have made one my second in command.”

“Of course the Fleimkepa cannot be Skaikru,” Anya agrees, looking at Lexa in confusion. “The
“The Fleimkepa was Trikru when we were all Trikru,” Lexa replies. “We are thirteen clans now. Most Natblida are from Trikru territory, the capital is in Trikru territory, a Trikru native rules the alliance. We cannot act as if Trikru is the ruling clan, as if the others are lesser. It is time to spread the power to others.”

“But these are our ways,” Anya objects. “Our people’s ways. You cannot give them away.”

“It’s not giving them away,” Clarke says firmly. “All the clans work to keep the important parts of their culture alive. But in creating the alliance, you’ve made a system of government which is ruled by someone chosen by the Trikru religion, and the other clans have become part of that religion. Their belief in their leader is partly belief in the Flame. You can’t act like that belief is less important when it affects their lives every bit as much as the Trikru’s.”

Gustus speaks up. “So not Trikru,” he says. “When Clarke kom Skaikru and I were hidden, she suggested one of the Natblida could take the role. They can read, they are wise and trained for greatness, and they are not all Trikru.”

“But that creates a situation where the Fleimkepa has a way to make themselves Heda,” Lexa says, laying out the facts. “I do not believe any of our current Natblida would do such a thing, but I am wary of creating a world where any Natblida could kill his Commander and take their place so easily.”

“Then which clan do you think to honour, Heda?” Gustus says. She can see from the way his gaze slides to Zion that he has already figured it out.

Anya understands a second later. “An Azgeda? You cannot make an Azgeda Fleimkepa!”

Lex raises her eyebrow and Anya flushes, realising she was too blunt.

“Moba, Heda,” Anya apologises, shamefaced, but then rushes on. “The Azgeda just rebelled. You would honour one of them after that? Even if it is Zion you are thinking of, the Azgeda will take it as a message to all of them!”

“Sha. It will send a message that forgiveness and honour will be given to any who remain loyal to the alliance, regardless of what their people do,” Lexa says. “It will tell them once more that blood must not have blood. And apart from that -” she hesitates for a moment, then continues. “Apart from that, it may help bring the clans into balance again.”

Gustus blinks, and makes a low, thoughtful noise in the back of his throat.

“We killed nearly half of Azgeda’s trained warriors on our journey north,” Lexa says flatly. “We killed their leaders, their Natblida, their Azplana. If Roan does not appear within the next week, I may well have to choose someone to act as regent until we can locate him or the next heir, so they will not even have a leader who is of their people. The Azgeda are not just shamed, they are weakened. The other clans will look at them as an easy target – they may even believe I will forgive attacks against the Azgeda due to their recent disloyalty. We need to make it clear that they are still part of the alliance, still under our protection.”

“That’s going to be even harder since we also want to make it clear there’s a price to rebellion,” Clarke adds. “Right now, we’re going to have to give them food. Trikru and Trishanakru food, in all likelihood. We can’t expect people in those two clans to have less just because the Azgeda decided to break their oaths and got decimated for it, but we also don’t want the Azgeda to starve. So we
were thinking that we need to come to an agreement with Roan or whoever else the leader turns out to be. The Azgeda receive food now, but they make reparations later. Significant reparations, perhaps not in food but at least in goods – furs, leathers, weapons, labour, whatever they can spare.”

Lexa sighs. “Unfortunately, that will make them look even weaker in the eyes of the other clans. We cannot give them free food and have it look like they are being rewarded for turning against us, but we need something that will make it clear they are still equal to the rest of the clans. Giving one a high post demonstrates that but does not give them any material advantage.”

“I see,” Anya says stoically, although she still doesn’t look happy. Gustus, on the other hand, is nodding slowly, apparently in agreement. Zion just looks stunned.

“You -” Zion pauses, chokes on the words, then clears his throat and tries again. “You wish me to be the Fleimkepa?” Then he flushes, clearly thinking he’s assumed too much. “No, of course, you only told us that it would be an Azgeda. Moba, Heda. I can bring a message to any you desire -”

“I wish you to be the Fleimkepa, if you believe you can do your best in the position,” Lexa interrupts him firmly. “You will have to be taught to read, of course, but Clarke assures me that she can teach you herself.” Zion is hardworking, methodical, and very loyal: ideal for this position. He believes in Lexa, in the Commander, in the Flame. It is not in his nature to be like Titus, or even like Gustus, choosing to believe in his own wisdom and rightness over that of the people he serves. Lexa cannot ever imagine him trying to manipulate a future Commander, or trying to wrest power from one, but she has no doubt he will always try to do his duty and will serve the alliance to the best of his ability.

Compared to Gustus and Anya, Zion is very expressive. So Lexa can watch as the emotions flow across his face one by one. First, there is fear and awe, then a slowly rising wave of joy and amazement, swiftly followed by a sudden pause of uncertainty. After only moments he is frowning, doubt shadowing his face. “Heda, this is a great honour,” he says carefully, his voice thick with emotion. “I – I cannot thank you enough for the – for the honour -” Zion realises he is repeating the word ‘honour’ and cuts himself off, taking a different direction. “May I have some time to consider it?”

Everyone in the room stills, as if the air itself is frozen in disbelief at his response. Lexa tries to remember if Zion has ever questioned a request of hers before except to ask for clarification.

“Is this about learning to read?” Clarke asks abruptly. “It’s not very hard, I promise. It will be a pain and it might take a while, but your gonasleng is very good, all you’ll need to figure out is the letters and you should be able to learn those easily.”

Zion flushes, his scars showing white on his face. “I – mochof, Wanheda. I do not fear to learn this. I only wish for – but no. Heda, your wishes are all that matter -”

“Let me know if you wish to be Fleimkepa by the day after tomorrow,” Lexa says simply. “I do not want an unwilling Fleimkepa. I would like someone eager to help our people and protect the Flame.”

“There is nothing I would rather do than serve you and the Flame, I swear it,” Zion says fervently. “I just need – time. To consider. I will tell you by tomorrow night. Mochof, Heda. Mochof.”

Lexa frowns, but gives him a nod anyway.
When I wrote this I was like "Haha, look how smart and foreshadowy I am, giving Zion a religious name then having him be offered a religious position!" except of course I originally created him just to have someone there creating a sensible counterpart to Rathan (a character I bet almost everyone has forgotten by now) and made up his name by mashing the keyboard and getting "ZNN". So, not that smart. But definitely fortuitous!
With This Dagger Sheath

“Do we have a second choice?” Clarke wonders. She’s in the middle of getting ready for bed, loosening her braided hair. She accidentally creates a knot and lets out a growl of frustration.

Lexa smiles slightly and comes to sit next to her on the bed, reaching out practiced fingers to untangle the knot. Even with her left arm still in a sling and only able to use one hand, she’s quicker at it than Clarke would be. “Sha, there are a few Azgeda we could consider, though none I trust as much as Zion. I have spies still in Azgeda, and when – if – Roan appears, he may have a suggestion as well.”

“None of the village leaders we met can just take off and move to Polis,” Clarke says thoughtfully. “I trusted Orion, but he was born Sankru and I don’t think he’d want to be Fleimkepa anyway. Wells trusts a few of the ones in the gonakru, I know that, but even though they came to our side I really don’t want to give the position to anyone who actually attacked Trikru territory.” She sighs with pleasure at the feeling of Lexa’s delicate, deft fingers combing out her braids. “Oh, that’s lovely.”

“I believe Zion will accept the position,” Lexa says, although Clarke can hear a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

“He looked pretty thrilled at first,” Clarke agrees, leaning back into Lexa. “Maybe he’s just freaking out a bit and needs to really think about it. That’s understandable.”

“Maybe.”

Lexa kisses Clarke’s neck lightly, and Clarke shivers at the feeling of it. “Mmm… oh, okay, keep doing that.”

Lexa kisses her way further up Clarke’s neck and then starts her way back down, and Clarke abandons any idea of continuing to discuss important issues. She presses back against Lexa and closes her eyes, savouring the ripples of pleasure that go through her at every light, soft touch, her senses heightening until even Lexa’s shallow breathing feels like a caress. She shifts so that she’s facing her fiancée and kisses her lightly on the mouth, running a teasing finger down Lexa’s exposed collarbone. Lexa sighs with pleasure and deepens the kiss, pulling even closer to Clarke.

It’s so wonderful to finally have a room of their own, a real room, with guaranteed privacy. There are no guards standing outside like when they were in the tent together, no uneasy sensation of occupying another person’s home like whenever they’ve stayed in villages. Until they leave for Polis, they have this: when they get to Polis, they have Lexa’s room in the tower, their room.

It’s just as wonderful to wake up besides Lexa. For the first second she’s awake, Clarke nearly jerks up, alert and ready to reach for a weapon, the way she does every morning. Then she forces herself to lay still again, curling back up in Lexa’s arms and letting her breathing slow down again.

She can vaguely remember Lexa waking her in the night at one point, poking her and sleepily muttering “nightmare,” as an explanation, just like another couple might wake each other because one of them was snoring. Her nightmares don’t completely disappear with Lexa there, any more than Lexa’s disappear just because she’s there. They aren’t some kind of magical cure for each other’s painful memories. Being beside each other does help, though – Clarke’s nightmares are never as vivid or awful with Lexa beside her. She strains to remember and decides last night’s nightmare was about her father dying at the ice lake – a new one in the rotation.
Clarke snuggles back against Lexa and yawns.

Lexa opens her eyes and smiles. “Good morning, ai niron,” she says sweetly, pressing her face into Clarke’s shoulder so that her voice is muffled. She yawns as well.

“Good morning, ai hodnes,” Clarke says, putting an arm around Lexa – careful of her wounded shoulder – and closing her eyes. A second later she opens them and makes a protesting noise when Lexa kisses her cheek and starts to disentangle herself from Clarke’s arms. “Nooooo. Sleep time,” Clarke whines.

“I have messengers I need to send off this morning if I wish them to reach TonDC and Polis today,” Lexa explains, kissing her cheek again and lingering this time. “And if you recall, your mother requested your presence this morning for a medical check-up.”

Clarke scowls, aware she probably looks like a sulky child. “Right. That’ll be fun. Do you remember if she was supposed to come here or I was supposed to go to the Arkadia hospital?”

“I am afraid I do not,” Lexa says apologetically, with a last, loving kiss. Then she goes to pull on her clothes. Clarke watches sadly as smooth, tanned skin and white bandages are swiftly covered in layers of dark clothing. Somehow Lexa manages to dress quickly and neatly despite still being barely able to move her left side.

Clarke feels a pang of concern she struggles to dismiss, wondering if Lexa’s arm is really healing. Of course, it takes a long time to heal from being literally impaled, but she’s never seen Lexa so unwell for so long and it worries her. She decides that when she goes to see her mother she’ll ask if there’s anything more they can do. If they have any leftover medicines from the Ark, they shouldn’t save them for later, they should use them now to ensure Lexa makes a quick, full recovery.

After Lexa’s gone it takes Clarke a while to get enough motivation to pull herself up and get dressed. She makes a mental note that she should take a bath soon – she had one spongebath when she was still bedridden after being dug out of the ground, and a couple while she was staying in Nia’s palace before she escaped, but now that she thinks about it she hasn’t had a proper wash since she was kidnapped. She hasn’t really noticed, though, since everyone was fairly unwashed. Lexa probably needs a bath as well – perhaps they could save water by sharing, Clarke thinks, dwelling on the mental picture for a second.

When she enters the main room she realises almost immediately that she’s interrupted something important.

“My opinion should not matter,” Gustus growls, glaring down at Zion from his extra foot of height. “Heda has given orders.”

Zion glares back, striking the table with his fist in frustration – considerably surprising Clarke, who’s pretty sure she’s never seen him angry before. And it’s bizarre that he’s angry at Gustus, since they seemed to hit it off the moment they met and Clarke doesn’t think they’ve exchanged an unfriendly word since that moment. “Heda has given me a choice.”

“If Heda wishes something, there is no choice,” Gustus says flatly.

“Zion glares back, striking the table with his fist in frustration – considerably surprising Clarke, who’s pretty sure she’s never seen him angry before. And it’s bizarre that he’s angry at Gustus, since they seemed to hit it off the moment they met and Clarke doesn’t think they’ve exchanged an unfriendly word since that moment. “Heda has given me a choice.”

“If Heda wishes something, there is no choice,” Gustus says flatly.

“And if there were a choice, what would you -” Zion breaks off suddenly, spotting Clarke at the doorway, and flushes bright red. “Wanheda,” he says tightly, “Please excuse me.” He turns and stalks away, every line of his body tense.

Gustus flushes slightly too, although it’s less noticeable. “Good morning, Clarke kom Skaikru,” he
“Morning, Gus,” Clarke replies cautiously. “Can you tell me what that’s all about?”

Gus flushes even redder. “It is nothing of importance,” he says stiffly.

“Really? Because it sounded like you were taking about whether Zion should be Fleimkepa,” Clarke points out. “That’s definitely something of importance. To me, to Lexa, to… well, everyone.”

She stares at Gustus. He’s the one who looks away first. “Zion kom Azgeda wants to know if I wish him to become Fleimkepa,” he finally says. “Or if I wish him to return to Azgeda, or to join a gonakru near Polis, or to take another path. He wants to know if – if I want him near.”

Clarke blinks. “Wait. Are you two -?” She can feel a smile pulling at her lips.

Gustus shrugs restlessly and turns away. “Perhaps,” he admits roughly. “But that only complicates matters. We both agree our first loyalty must be to the alliance and that we cannot be distracted by such things. I am Heda’s bodyguard. What I wish for does not matter.”

“Sounds like it matters to him,” Clarke says practically. “For that matter, I’m pretty sure it matters to Lexa too. I think she’d be happy for both of you. I mean, unless the thing with Zion is just a fling, then I guess it could make things awkward when you break up.”

“A… a fling?”


“No,” Gustus says thoughtfully. “I do not believe that is what it is. But we both have other priorities. Heda must be my first priority.” He gives her the smallest possible smirk. “And we do not all rush to be bonded as quickly as you do.”

Clarke looks at him. “Lexa told you?”

He gives her a confused look. “You told me, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

“What? No I didn’t,” Clarke disagrees.

He continues looking at her like she’s slightly mad. “You showed me the sheath you wear in your hair. Heda’s sheath.”


Gustus shrugs. “It varies by clan. But the Trikru suggest bonding by offering up the item that matters most to them, something that is truly a piece of their soul. The one they have offered it to accepts this and gives them a similar item in return. I know that nothing matters more to Heda than the last gift Costia ever gave her. And she wears a Skaikru contraption on her wrist that I thought came from you?”

Clarke casts her mind back. “Oh. Oh, wow. I gave my father’s watch to her… and she gave me the sheath…” And I told her she was the person I loved the most, as well, Clarke remembers. A bunch of other small details – Lexa’s nervousness when she put the watch on and her unwillingness to leave it behind even when she came to Azgeda territory again, her immediate, matter-of-fact acceptance when Clarke brought up marriage before the Mountain, the reverence Gustus showed when he braided the sheath into her hair…
I even thought at the time that it felt exactly like a wedding ceremony, Clarke thinks, torn between amusement at her stupidity and the desire to go find Lexa right away and kiss her again.

“Normally bonding occurs soon after the offer,” Gustus says, eyeing her. “Often it is done as soon as a skilled tattooist can be found to do the bonding tattoos. Since it is between Heda and Wanheda, though, it is understandable that you have delayed until the alliance is secure.”

Clarke flushes slightly. “I’m working on drawing the tattoos right now,” she admits. “I’ve noticed there’s a lot of variation in design, although they all have the same basic concepts, and I want to come up with something that utilises elements from all of the clans instead of just Trikru or Skaikru -” she breaks off. “And you brought this up to distract me from what our conversation was actually about. If you want him to be in Polis, tell Zion that.”

“I do not know how Heda would feel about a relationship between her bodyguard and the Fleimkepa,” Gustus reiterates.

“Well, I do,” Clarke retorts. “She’d want you to be happy and she’d tell you that sometimes duty and love can coexist. I can ask her to confirm if you like – but since I’m not only her second-in-command but her soon-to-be wife I think I can state pretty confidently she’s going to side with me on this one -”

“Her soon-to-be WHAT?” A shriek comes from behind Clarke.

Clarke closes her eyes for a moment, then swings around and tries to smile. “Hi, Mom. What are you doing here?”

“Check-up, remember?” Abby grinds the words out. “When you didn’t turn up at the hospital I came to find you. But don’t you dare try and change the subject, young lady. Did you just say you’re getting married?”

“Um,” Clarke knows her smile is weak, but it’s the best she can manage. “Surprise?”
Lexa has stopped to speak with Anya on the way back to the house when she first becomes aware that something has happened. Skaikru stop in the streets to look at her. The Trikru guards standing near the missile stay in position but their focus seems to have shifted. It is not the awed glances they gave to her before, stunned to discover that she was alive, but instead something – more personal, somehow. Something knowing.

Anya notices it too and breaks off in mid-sentence to scowl at the nearest Skaikru. “Well? What is it you want, Skayon?” she snaps.

The Skaikru woman flushes and gives a sort of half-bow. “I just… I just wanted to congratulate you, Commander,” she stutters. “I hope you’ll be very happy.” Then she gives another odd bow and scurries away.

Anya looks after her, perplexed. “Was that… was that about killing the Azplana? It did not seem…”

One of the men on the council, Fuji, steps in front of Lexa. He smiles at her. “Congratulations, Commander! I hope you’ll consider holding the ceremony here, but I understand the capital might be more appropriate -”

“You’re about the age I was when I married my Rosie,” another man nearby talks over him. He’s elderly and hunched over, but gives Lexa a very sweet smile. “Most wonderful day of my life. Congratulations to you, and please pass my congratulations on to Clarke as well.”

“Heda?” Anya hisses. She blinks, then her gaze slides down to Clarke’s father’s watch and she goes blank with the realisation. “You… is that…”

“I have been wearing it for months,” Lexa points out quietly, nodding to the nearby Skaikru and starting to stride back towards the house.

“Yes, but Clarke kom Skaikru has one as well, one that Raven made for her! I assumed they were common among Skaikru! I did not realise it was a token!” Anya pauses to take a breath, matching her pace, and then has another realisation. “And you – you gave her – it must be the sheath. That is why I did not see it.” She frowns. “But I saw you braid her hair once, after the Mountain fell. You did not braid the sheath into it -”

“Neither of us wished to wear our tokens on the day of the executions,” Lexa replies, still staying quiet. She inclines her head as a nearby Skaikru calls out a congratulations. “Though to tell the truth, I am not sure Clarke even realised that they were bonding tokens at first. She needed me to confirm our promise before the Mountain.”

“If they do not have bonding tokens in their culture, how can all the Skaikru know?” Anya asks, still looking shocked, although she is now smiling. Then they reach the house and both stop walking immediately. “Never mind. I think I understand now.”

Abby’s voice rings out perfectly audibly, cutting through the wooden walls as if they are made of cloth like a tent. “You’re much too young! I won’t give you permission for this!”

“I’m over eighteen now, I don’t need permission!” Clarke yells back.
“Well then I won’t give you approval! I won’t attend! Are you really going to get married without me there?” Abby shrieks.

“Why not? I’m already getting married without Dad there! And whose fault is that?”

Lexa winces.

“I wish you the best of lives with each other,” Anya says to Lexa, smiling at her. It has a wicked edge. “You, your houmon, and your houmon’s nomon.”

“ Clarke, you’re acting like a child. Marriage isn’t something to take lightly!”

“I know that! Stop patronising me!”

“How long do you think they have been discussing this?” Anya wonders.

There’s a boy, perhaps ten or eleven, sitting nearby throwing a ball against the front door of the house beside theirs. At Anya’s question he looks up. “Bout an hour,” he answers automatically, then realises who he’s addressing and turns scarlet. “I – sorry – I didn’t think – sorry, Commander,” he finishes lamely, and flees before Lexa can tell him it’s fine. He tries to bow as he goes and nearly falls flat on his face.

“I did not think Clarke would tell her without me,” Lexa comments, then remembers something. “I have missed a Skaikru custom,” she says regretfully. “Raven said that she needed to be present for this, as a maid of the bride. You are to be a maid of the bride as well, do you think that will suffice? I hope we were not supposed to be here earlier. I got caught up speaking with you.” Lexa realises she’s babbling slightly and stops. It makes her feel worried and nervous to know that she has already failed at one of the Skaikru traditions. She wishes this bonding to be perfect for Clarke and acceptable to her people.

“I am a – what did you say? A bride’s maid?” Anya asks, wrinkling her brow. She takes a step closer to the front door before her courage fails her as Abby starts to yell the next part of her tirade.

“A maid of the bride,” Lexa corrects. “At least, I think that is what they call it. Gustus and Wells are to be best men.”

“Best? Why do they get to be best and I get to be a maid? Does that mean they are above Raven and I?”

“I… no, I do not know. I do not think so. Raven requested being a maid.”

Anya relaxes. “Good. Raven would not request it if it was not the best,” she says, with some smugness. “Maids of the bride must be more important.”

“Clarke, I supported you with everything else, but this is too far -” Abby yells.

“When did you ever support me with anything?”

Lexa takes a deep breath and opens the door. Two heads swing to face her, both flushed and panting. “Greetings, Abby kom Skaikru,” Lexa says politely. “I see Clarke has told you that we are planning a bonding ceremony.”

There’s a long, awkward pause, then Abby also takes a deep breath. Clarke leans back from her mother, where previously she was only inches from her as they yelled. They both relax slightly – if they were jaguars, Lexa would have described it as their fur settling.
Clarke’s crutches click against the floor twice as she comes to stand next to Lexa. She leans them against the table and takes Lexa’s hand, forming a united front against her mother. “I was just telling her about it, ai hodnes,” she tells Lexa.

“And I was just explaining to Clarke that I’m not sure if it’s a good idea to take such a big step so quickly,” Abby says, voice cold but much quieter than before. Lexa wonders if they even realised they were yelling before she entered.

Lexa tilts her head slightly, curious. “We have promised our souls and lives to the creation of a better world, we have sworn ourselves to each other’s people and to the clans, we have bound ourselves to the future of the alliance. We will never be without each other. She is Clarke kom Skaikru, Wanheda, second-in-command of the alliance. I am Lexa kom Trikru, Heda kom Kongeda, de Newanen. Bonding is a bigger step only to the two of us, because it is a private pledge created from love instead of a public one created by honour and duty. To everyone else, it is of little matter.”

“Not to me,” Abby says fiercely. “When Clarke gets tired of all the stress of being your second-in-command, or when she gets homesick and wants to be with her people again, she can quit and come home. Divorce is a lot harder to sort out.”

“Divorce?” Anya says, brow furrowing again, beating Lexa to the question.

Abby stares back at her, perplexed. “When you end a marriage.”

“Bonding does not end,” Lexa says, also confused. “You are bonded, your spirits are joined throughout time, that is the purpose of it. It does not break when your fight ends. It certainly does not break before that.”

“You don’t have any way to divorce?” Abby cries, horrified. “You’ve only known each other a few months. Clarke, you’re only eighteen -”

“Could you please stop acting like I’m a five-year-old?” Clarke says passionately. “Mom, I’ve been through so much, I’ve done so much, I’m not a child by anyone’s definition, not anymore. You need to trust me to make my own choices!”

“Listen to me!” Abby says. “I know you think you’re in love, and maybe you are. But marriage takes a lot more than love and it’s not something to rush into. You’re in incredibly high stress positions, you’ve been through a lot lately, you’re young and full of hormones – this isn’t a decision you should be making. Not for a few more years.” She turns to look at Lexa, tearful eyes pleading. “If you’re both sure that this is going to last forever, what’s the harm in waiting a few years?”

“There is no guarantee that any of us have a few years,” Lexa says matter-of-factly. “Besides, you were bonded, were you not? If it does not matter when it is done, why did you not wait another ten years, or twenty, or even forever?”

“You did it because it mattered,” Clarke chimes in, voice nearly coaxing. “It mattered because you wanted to be able to call Dad your husband, like I want to call Lexa my wife. It mattered because you wanted to stand up and declare to the world that you loved him. It wasn’t because it mattered to other people, it was because it mattered to you, right? To show everyone how you felt? To show him how you felt? To wear his ring and feel like you had a part of him at all times, something to look at when you couldn’t look at him? Well, Lexa and I will have our bonding tattoos. I want that. Please, can’t you just -”

“Tattoos?”
Mother and daughter stare at each other in a frozen tableau of mutual confusion and desperate pleading. Lexa squeezes Clarke’s hand tightly but sends a helpless glance at Anya, who is hanging as far back as she can without actually being outside the house. Anya makes a worried face at her.

“Mom,” Clarke says finally. “I’m doing this. With or without you.”

There’s a long pause, then Abby says, voice shaky. “Then you’re doing it without me. I’m not going to enable you, honey. This is a huge mistake.” They stare at each other again, frozen once more, and then Abby abruptly turns and is out the door.

Anya clears her throat. “I hear I am to be a maid of the bride,” she says, smiling awkwardly but genuinely at Clarke. “I am sure Raven will advise me on my duties.”

“Don’t trust a word she says,” Clarke says darkly. Lexa can see she is fighting back tears, but she manages to give Anya a watery smile anyway.

Lexa kisses her niron’s forehead gently. “Your mother will come around,” she says quietly.

“Yeah,” Clarke says, relaxing into Lexa. But she does not sound convinced. “I hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

Despite all of Cassy’s furious ranting at Abby in this chapter (and the fact that I'm writing Clarke and Lexa's POV so the text is naturally not going to be too nice to her in this instance), I'm actually quite sympathetic to Abby's side, since she doesn't have the privileged viewpoint that we have. In fact, she has absolutely no idea what's going on. From what she's seen, her eighteen-year-old daughter has uprooted her life and put herself in danger multiple times because of her first romantic relationship ever, and has now decided to make an unbreakable commitment to that person without telling her. Try and remember that and don't yell a lot in the comments, please?
“Please, Clarke,” Monty says, looking at her pleadingly. “He cut himself earlier when he was helping to skin something, and it looks pretty bad, but he won’t go get medical treatment.”

“Why not?” Clarke says plaintively, looking across at Lexa. They could be in bed already. Alright, it’s probably a little too early for that, but they could at least be spending time together. As much as she loves Jasper, being called out into the cold night air so she can listen to him whine as she bandages up a cut is not her idea of a good time.

“You know Jasper,” Monty says, with a heartfelt sigh and eye-roll. “He has a crush on one of the girls from Mount Weather – actually, the one Chancellor Kane put on the Council. She used to work in the medical area there so he wants to get her to patch him up. And he hasn’t been able to find her so he’s putting it off. But I’m sure he’d listen to you.”

Clarke toys with the idea of sending him to ask her mother for help, but right now she’d personally rather bleed to death than ask her mother for help so she can understand why Abby wouldn’t be Monty’s first port of call. Plus, they are delinquents, part of the 100, just like she was – she’s not sure any of them will ever trust authority fully again.

“I will come with you, a ni ron,” Lexa says calmly. “It would be good to see Jasper kom Skaikru again.”

“Yeah! Good!” Monty says, looking unreasonably relieved. Perhaps he realises Jasper’s not going to whine nearly as much with Lexa in the room. He’s still kind of terrified of her.

They run into Raven in the street, surprisingly. Clarke thought she’d be curled up with Anya by now, since Anya tends to go to bed quite early so she can get up before sunrise and take a guard shift.

“Hey, Lexa, Anya asked me to come -” Raven starts, but then notices Monty. “Oh! Hey, Monty!”

“Hey, Raven!” Monty says with excessive cheerfulness, like they’re two bad actors in a poorly-written play. “Just going to see Jasper! About his injury.”

“Oh, right!” Raven says, nodding exaggeratedly. “Anya’s thing can wait, then.” She falls into step beside him, and Clarke can just barely hear her muttered, “I was supposed to be the one to come get .”

“Shhh!”

Lexa gives Clarke a sideways glance. “It is hard to believe any of your friends have ever managed to hide or spy, even though I have seen Raven do both,” she comments wryly. “Even harder to believe Monty and Jasper kom Skaikru managed to commit crimes.”

“Well,” Clarke says, voice dry. “In total fairness, Monty and Jasper and the others didn’t successfully commit crimes. There was a reason we were imprisoned.” She’s gotten so used to her crutches now she doesn’t find it at all difficult to keep pace with the others.

The little home Monty and Jasper share – much to the disapproval of Monty’s mother, who has
apparently spent the last month petitioning Kane to forcibly return her son to her – is strangely asymmetrical. It looks like Jasper and Monty designed it themselves and decided halfway through that they needed more room, and so tried to add an extra room on the side and then one on the top. The room bulging strangely out of the left side of the building has a ceiling only a metre and a half above the ground, and judging by the size of the second floor sitting uncertainly on the first one there’s no way there can actually be stairs up to it (in fact, she finds out it actually has a ladder with uneven rungs). It suits them, though, in its quirkiness.

It takes both Monty and Raven yanking at it to successfully open the oversized front door so that warm light floods out.

“Surprise!” a number of voices yell at once.

“Chit em sei?” Clarke distinctly hears Gustus mutter to Anya, who says back “shof op!” and then haughtily calls out “surprise!” as well ten seconds after the others like it’s a perfectly ordinary thing Grounders yell whenever someone enters a room.

Clarke blinks, taking it all in. Wells, Anya, Gustus, Harper, Jasper, John, Kane, Zion, Sinclair and even Maya (though she looks uncomfortable and keeps glancing at Jasper) are all squashed into the small main room. Poorly applied dark paint across the wall says “HAPPY ENGAGEMENT CLARKE AND HEADER”. Several mismatched bottles and intricately carved wooden cups are stacked on a wooden table, with flowers strewn around them as decorations.

Octavia, Lincoln, Indra and the Natblida aren’t there, because they’re in Polis. Finn isn’t there because he’s continuing to avoid Wells and Raven (and perhaps Clarke as well). Clarke’s mother isn’t there because she wishes they weren’t getting married. But still, to have so many people she cares about in one place makes Clarke choke up with emotion.

“Congratulations!” Raven says brightly, grabbing a bottle immediately and pouring a hefty amount into one of the carved cups and shoving it at Clarke.

“Mochof,” Lexa says, inclining her head as Raven passes her one of the cups. Then Anya grabs her arm and Lexa says “Wait -” before she’s dragged away. Apparently being Commander counts for less at an engagement party. As Clarke watches, Anya brings her before Zion, who says something and bows low. Clarke remembers that he said he would give his answer by tonight. From the slight smile that touches Lexa’s face and the happiness Gustus and Zion are attempting to repress, Clarke knows what his answer was. They have a new Fleimkepa.

“The cups are yours by the way,” Monty says helpfully, drawing Clarke’s attention back. “An engagement gift from Finn.”

Clarke opens her mouth to ask why Finn keeps working so hard to give them things but avoids saying a word to any of them, then closes it again with the question unasked. That’s something she should ask Finn himself. Instead, she says, “Thank you so much, this is amazing, you didn’t have to!”

“Everyone needs an engagement party,” Monty says.

“I mean, we can’t get really wild until the old people leave,” Jasper butts in. “But -” He breaks off, wearing a comical expression of dismay, as Kane clears his throat.

“I’m sure I’ll leave soon enough for you to have – what is it you call it?” Kane says, sarcasm dripping from his tone, “A ‘rager’? Us old folk need our sleep, after all. It’s good practice for our burials.”
Clarke snorts, and Kane gives her a smile as Jasper starts falling over himself to try and pretend he didn’t mean the Chancellor. “I’m very happy for you, Clarke,” he says, ignoring Jasper to focus on her. “And the Commander as well, of course. I can’t imagine two people who are better suited.”

“We’re very lucky,” Clarke says, smiling back at him. She sips at the cup Raven handed her, wincing at the burn of Monty’s moonshine. Across the room, Anya seems to be egging Lexa into drinking the entire cup in one go by making it a race – a competition Lexa’s sure to win, given her Natblida semi-immunity to alcohol.

“I planned to introduce you in a slightly more formal setting, but this is Maya Vie, the newest member of the Council,” Kane says, gesturing to Maya, who takes a step forward and smiles nervously at Clarke.

“We’ve met,” Clarke says, giving her a smile as well. “But it’s good to see you again. I’m glad to hear your people are settling in.”

Maya nods, and says in her soft, well-modulated voice, “Most of them are, anyway. There have been some teething troubles, of course, but I think things are improving.” She shrugs. “It was never going to be easy. Most of your people see mine as murderers and vice versa.”

“Yes,” Clarke says thoughtfully, remembering the uneasy alliance between the Skaikru and Grounders in the first world. “I can see how that would make things difficult.”

Maya sighs. “One of the biggest problems is that most people here view us as lazy, because we’re consuming more food than we’re providing. When really it’s just that we have so many children to take care of it’s hard to find time for anything else.”

“There isn’t a child-care centre here?” Clarke says. “There was one on the Ark.”

“Yes, but it’s difficult to persuade my people to trust our children there.” She sighs again. “A lot of them just want to pretend things are the same as they were before, as if we’re still inside Mount Weather. I wish they’d realise that the situation has changed.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Clarke says fervently.

Maya flushes slightly. “Sorry, this isn’t exactly engagement party conversation. I’m very happy for the two of you, truly.”

Are you? Clarke wonders. Are you really happy that the two individuals most responsible for the execution of nearly all your people plan to settle down and live happily ever after? Regardless of her people’s crimes, something like that would be nearly impossible to let go of. Something about Maya’s shining eyes tugs at Clarke’s heart, and she thinks that if she could believe anyone was that forgiving, it would be Maya. “You should come to our bonding,” she says without thinking. “As a representative of the Council if Kane’s not able to come, or as Jasper’s date, or just on your own… you should come,” she finishes lamely. “At the very least the ambassadors will be there, so we’ll have people from every clan to witness. It would be good to have someone from the Mountain as well. Because you are a part of this alliance, all of you.”

Maya flushes and smiles again, nods, and changes the subject to something less emotionally charged.

“Clarke!” Raven cannons into Clarke and nearly knocks her over right when she’s in the middle of discussing drainage systems with Maya. “You should sit down! This can’t be good for your ankle! And we need to talk!”

“You’re drunk,” Clarke accuses, although she does sit down and accepts the healthy slosh of
moonshine Raven adds to her cup. Maya, eyeing the booze in alarm, manages to back away quickly.

“Nooo!” Raven widens her eyes in exaggerated innocence and collapses ungracefully beside Clarke, beaming and clearly wasted already. “Of course I’m not! Are you gonna have a bachelorette party? I wanna organise a bachelorette party. Anya says she’s organising Lexa’s.”

“Lexa’s having a bachelorette party?” Clarke says in complete disbelief.

“Well, I think the Grounder warrior version is you go out hunting with your old First and bring back furs to be blessed for the marital bed,” Raven waves her hand as if this is a small difference. “Pretty much the same.”

“That’s not even remotely the same. Can’t we do that too?” Clarke says pleadingly. Hunting sounds pretty nice compared to whatever horrifying ordeal Raven will come up with.

“We’re not copying Anya’s idea!” Raven says. “She’d never let me live it down.” She gets a wicked smile on her face, mind clearly drifting elsewhere.

“I noticed you guys seem to have worked things out,” Clarke says teasingly.

“You have no idea,” Raven says fervently. “I could tell you stories. In fact, I’m going to tell you stories.”

Clarke blanches. “What? No you’re not.” She really, really doesn’t want to hear anything that personal about Anya. Partly because Anya would probably murder her.

“I listened to one – hundred – percent of your stories about Lexa,” Raven says sternly. “All the dirty details.”

“I never told you any stories. Or dirty details!”

“Exactly. So I’ve listened to a hundred percent of them,” Raven says proudly.

“That’s not how numbers work! You can’t have a hundred percent of zero,” Clarke argues. She takes a long drink of her cup to fortify herself, sure that this is an argument she’ll lose.

Raven points an unsteady finger at Clarke’s face in an accusatory way. “Hey! Who’s the genius here?”

“Raven -”

“Exactly,” Raven says again smugly. “I am. I know things about percentages that computers don’t even know. So you are going to listen to my stories. Anyway, I would have listened to your sexy stories if you’d been less discreet about. I would have loved to hear your stories! And it’s the thought that counts. So it’s payback time!”

“Please,” Clarke says weakly, but Raven’s already casually moved her crutches out of reach. She’s trapped in the corner. She can’t see an escape. She has no weapons. She wonders if she can somehow signal Lexa for help, but her fiancée seems to have gone up to the other room with some of the rest of the group. “No, Raven, you can’t do this -”

“Wanna bet?” Raven says brightly.

Clarke takes the bottle off her friend quickly, and pours a generous helping into her already empty cup. She drinks deeply, ignoring the burn of it against her throat. Then she gives in and looks at
Raven, facing her fate with as much bravery as she can muster. “Okay,” she says guardedly, and
drinks another sip to encourage herself to keep going. She’s not sure she’s ever been so successfully
cornered before. “Go for it.”

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter clearly stressed out some people (you know who you are). Here, have
some Drunk!Raven to cheer you up! :)


“Finding a nuclear power station,” Kane echoes thoughtfully. “That’s your suggestion?”

Raven manages a nod, although she still looks faintly queasy and hungover. “Yeah. That’s my vote.”

“How will that help us?” Lexa asks, frowning slightly.

Raven shrugs. “I told you before that I can’t magically make it not a nuke,” she says bluntly. “That’s still true. So our options are bury it, blow it, or blast it into space.”

Lexa tilts her head slightly, curious. “And of these you recommend…?”

“None of them,” Raven says flatly. “You said yourself that Diana proved we can’t just keep it here long-term. I’m not sure if there’s anywhere we can bury it where there’s no chance of anyone finding it – and even if we could find somewhere like that, maybe by dropping it into the middle of the ocean, I’d be worried about it leaking radiation into the surrounding area, something we really don’t want.”

“What about detonating it?” Abby puts in, frowning slightly. Although she is directly across the table from Clarke and Lexa, she avoids both their eyes as she has since she arrived. The chill in the air between mother and daughter is nearly palpable.

“Raven just said we don’t want to leak radiation,” Clarke reminds her, frowning.

Abby still doesn’t meet her daughter’s eyes, but says coolly, “Yes, I heard, thank you, but if we did it in the middle of the desert or something -”

“No, Clarke’s right, blowing it up has the same problem,” Raven says, intervening hurriedly. “I just don’t know enough about how much damage it’s likely to do, and if something happened like the wind changing while we did it, we could turn this entire place into a nuclear wasteland. Um. Again.”

“Space?” Lexa prompts as Raven trails off.

“Blasting it into space would use up a lot of supplies and if something went wrong we could end up scattering nuclear material over a very wide radius.”

“So you think there might be something we can use at a nuclear facility?” Clarke says doubtfully. “What? As far as I remember from our classes, even before the bombs fell no one was exactly sure how to deal with radioactive material.”

Raven sighs, and suddenly looks older and more tired. “I know. But I’m not a nuclear scientist, guys, I’m a mechanic. This isn’t my area and I can’t work off what we know right now. I’ve spoken to the two Mount Weather scientists who survived and they say that they can make devices to find radiation or block it out, but disposing of nuclear waste isn’t something they ever tried to do. What I’m saying is – I need guidance. I need more information. I need supplies, proper supplies that are specifically for nuclear material. Maybe even specifically for this kind of nuclear material.”

Lexa considers this. “And you might find those at one of these places,” she says thoughtfully. “If you give me a description, I suppose I can send out scouts to search -”

“No,” Clarke says immediately. “Too risky. I don’t think they’ll find more nuclear weaponry, since it was all used up when the bombs fell, but if we send people off searching for nuclear power plants or
something they could definitely get radiation poisoning.”

“That’s where I think the Mount Weather guys will be able to help,” Raven replies. “No one knows how to detect radiation like they do. If we give them some supplies I think they can build us a few Geiger counters or whatever. They might even be able to make them sensitive enough that we can use them to find the nuclear facilities. And hopefully there they’ll have advice on the best ways to dispose of nuclear material – containers that we know won’t leak, places where it would be safe to bury it, maybe even some kind of testing area where we could actually blow it up partially without poisoning the whole place.”

Lexa looks at Raven, considering, and then shares a glance with Clarke. Despite Raven’s joking comment about this being her vote, they all know that this is no vote. Raven has never led her wrong before when it comes to science. “Then we will find one of these places. Chancellor, please take the two Maunon scientists off whatever they work on now and place them on making these radiation counters. When we return to Polis I will send gona to here, perhaps Tristan’s rangers from TonDC, and they can split into as many groups as there are working counters.” She looks at Clarke again. “Perhaps I will send some of my Nightbloods to lead the excursion now that the situation with the Azgeda has calmed. They could use more command experience and will be able to read any signs at the facilities.”

Clarke nods. “Good idea. They should have better resistance to radiation than the average gona but they’re also smart enough not to keep going if the Geiger counter says it’s dangerous. Nuclear facilities normally have warning signs, as well. They can take radios and contact us as soon as they find one.”

“When they do, I suppose you will need to go to it, and take the missile,” Lexa comments, turning to face Raven again. She turns her whole body instead of just her head because her neck aches – perhaps a side effect of her shoulder injury, or perhaps because of the immobilising sling she wears dragging at it.

“We should send the Mount Weather scientists as well,” Kane suggests quietly. “We’ll have to be careful that they don’t test their new radiation-immunity too severely, but Raven’s right, no one knows radiation like them. They could be very useful.”

“Anya should go with you as well as some of her former unit as guards,” Lexa decides. “I am sure my Natblida would not be so impulsive as to act without waiting for word, but I would feel better if Anya were also there to guard the missile. It will be slow to transport using a cart and horses.”

Raven smiles slightly, probably at the idea of Anya coming with her. “Okay, but whatever they find, I’m not leaving until after the wedding, alright?”

Abby makes a little noise like an angry jaguar cub.

“My Natblida will wish to attend as well,” Lexa says casually. “We plan to hold the celebration nearly immediately on our return to Polis, however, so it will do no harm to wait until after before sending them off.”

The same sound again, except louder: when Lexa looks at her, Abby is glaring at the side of Clarke’s head. Clarke pointedly ignores her.

Lexa thinks this situation cannot continue.

Kane nods. “Alright. Until that time we’ll do our best to protect the missile here, centre the guards around it as much as possible, and maybe come up with a way to chain it down and make it more difficult to move. I’ve had Sinclair coming up with some traps and codes to make it very hard for someone to get to it, and even harder for someone to try and use it, but better safe than sorry.”
“Then I think we are done here,” Lexa says. She waits as most of the others exit the room, then turns to Clarke. “Ai hodnes? I need to go have my arm checked.”

“Jackson will help,” Clarke says. “I know where he lives back from when he worked on Finn. I’ll come with you -”

“He is still away in TonDC,” Lexa reminds her. Jackson has been there since the fall of the Mountain, helping Ryder and his unit at the temporary camp Raven calls ‘Reaper Rehab’, though their last message to Kane a week ago stated that less than half of the Ripa recovered have survived so far. “I will find someone to help me at the hospital, Clarke, do not worry.”

Clarke scowls. Lexa knows Clarke wants to come with her to see how she is going, but doesn’t want to run into her mother.

“I will be fine alone,” Lexa states firmly. She kisses Clarke on the cheek and walks away swiftly at a pace Clarke cannot follow. She wants to speak to Clarke’s nomon without Clarke there. They leave tomorrow for Polis, and if Abby does not join them, she will not see her daughter’s bonding. It is past time for the two of them to talk.

Abby looks up as soon as Lexa walks into the main rooms, then looks away when she sees who it is.

“Abby kom Skaikru,” Lexa says politely. “You said to come by regularly to have my injury examined. May we go to the room you do your work?”

Abby looks like she wants to disagree, but can hardly refuse privacy to a patient who may need to take off her upper clothing to be treated.

As soon as Abby closes the door, Lexa says, “So you are not planning to come to Polis for our bonding ceremony?”

Abby sighs. “Lexa, please don’t take this personally. I just can’t give my support to this. Clarke needs to think about what she’s doing. For that matter, so do you. I like you, I really do, even though you’re far too young to get married.”

“And I like you, Abby kom Skaikru, even though you are self-righteous and hypocritical,” Lexa says, the polite respect in her tone never wavering despite her words.

“What?” Abby jerks back, eyes wide. “Lexa, all I’m saying is that you and Clarke aren’t old enough for such a big step. You haven’t known each other long enough. You’ve both been through so much, so many traumatic things, it’s not a good way to start a marriage.”

“How old were you when you were bonded?”

Abby glares at her. “I was years older than you.”

“And you knew him a long time?” Lexa persists.

“A decade, practically,” Abby says, expression a mixture of frustration and triumph.

“When you were bonded, your people were at peace?” Lexa asks. “You were calm and sure?”

“Of course. We made -”

“And you were happy?” Lexa talks over her, not allowing clarifications.

“Very happy. Is this -”
“And now he is dead,” Lexa observes. “Through your actions.” The words echo around the suddenly silent room. “How something begins does not necessarily foretell how it ends.”

Abby is pale. “So you blame me for that too? You didn’t even know Jake.”

“No, I do not blame you for it,” Lexa says honestly. “I did not know him. I do not know what your home was like then. But I do know what it is like to sacrifice those you love for your duty. I know that better than you ever will, Abby kom Skaikru. I have lived that pain many times.”

“Then what’s your point?” Abby says, frustrated again.

“My point is that if you could travel back, forget your self-imposed rules and be with your husband earlier, I believe you would,” Lexa says. “My point is that you do not know how our bond will end, since you did not even know how your own would. My point is that you do not know everything.”

“I never said I did.”

“But you act like you believe you do,” Lexa replies swiftly. “You did not trust your husband to know what was best. Now you do not trust your daughter, despite her wisdom.”

“It’s puppy love,” Abby says bluntly. “It’s teenage hormones. You need to wait and see if it’ll last before you enter into something so final.”

“When has Clarke ever been driven by childish desires?” Lexa demands. “For that matter, do I seem like someone who cannot tell the difference between an enduring love and a short passion? Young does not mean foolish, Abby, and we are old in pain and in perception. But let us pretend that you are right. Let us say that Clarke and I go to Polis and have our bonding ceremony – for your disapproval will not stop us, you know – and we both survive to wish that we had not. What then? Will Clarke return here to tell you that you were right, will she thank you for your smugness and highhandedness?”

Abby turns away and does not reply.

“Every time you object to a part of the life Clarke chooses, you take away a thousand conversations you could have had with her,” Lexa says softly. “You objected to her living in Polis, so she did not tell you about the tower we live in or the markets on the streets below or the Skaikru goufa learning trades there. You objected to the execution of the Maunon and now you may never know of our history with the Maunon and the full story of why Clarke believed it necessary. You objected to her taking the position as my second in command and so she does not tell you about the ambassadors she will argue with or the ceremonies she will take part in or the Natblida she will help to train. Now you object to our bonding, the only bonding either of us shall ever have, which is to reject our feelings for each other and our dreams of the future. You push Clarke further and further away from you, and if someday she no longer tries to reach across the space, it will not be Clarke to blame.”

Abby still doesn’t reply, but Lexa can see her shoulders shake.

“You think that you will lose Clarke through the dangers she faces, through the distance she chooses, through the new life she has made for herself independent of you,” Lexa continues. “But you are wrong. That is not why you are losing her.”

After a long moment, Lexa sighs, and turns to go. “I hope you ride with us tomorrow, Abby kom Skaikru. I do not expect it, but I hope.”
“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Clarke says abruptly. “Do you care?”

He doesn’t turn around, still concentrating on the piece of wood he’s whittling, but his shoulders tense up. After a long moment, he says “Hey, Princess.”

She wonders if he expects her to reply with ‘hey, Spacewalker’ and pretend he hasn’t done his level best to emotionally destroy one of her best friends. “I asked you a question. Raven’s coming to Polis, it could be months before she comes back here again, years even. Do you care?”

Finn’s shoulders slump and he lets the piece of wood clatter back onto the table, putting the small knife carefully beside it. She can see that his hands are crisscrossed with small scars and fresher cuts – clearly, learning to make art out of wood without his sight has been hard on him. That there are dozens of marks makes her feel a flare of pity that dulls her anger.

His voice, old and weary and lost, takes away the rest of it. “Of course I care. You think I don’t want to go see her? Wells, too. There’s nothing I’d like more.”

Clarke hesitates, then takes a seat next to him on the bench, awkwardly clacking into it once with her crutches before she manages to stow them beside her. She reaches out and touches his shoulder. He flinches in surprise for a second but then relaxes again. It’s hard to see his expression with the length of cloth still wrapped across his eyes and she wonders if he ever takes it off. “Then why not go and see them? They want to see you, I know they do, they’re just… trying to respect your wishes.”

There’s a long period of quiet and Clarke’s nearly decided to repeat herself when he finally speaks. “Rae’s my best friend. I’ve known her my whole life, nearly. She’s more than my best friend, actually. She’s family.” He smiles, but there’s nothing happy about it. “She likes to say that I saved her life. She leaves out the part where she saved mine too.” Finn sighs, and he doesn’t sound like Finn at all, nothing like the boy she used to know. He’s not a boy anymore, she thinks, he’s grown up like the rest of them now – damaged like the rest of them.

“What do you mean?” Clarke asks.

“My parents were better than Raven’s, they fed me, at least, but they weren’t really – present. You know? It used to feel like Raven was the only person who saw me. And then we got older and older and other people saw me, but Rae was the only who saw something worthwhile. I was a dropkick and she was a genius but she thought I was her knight in shining armour. And then one day when we were still just kids, she turned to me and said she was in love with me, and I didn’t know that there were different kinds of love, so I said it back.” He rubs his thumb across the piece of wood he was carving, and Clarke realises it’s a bird – not a detailed, realistic bird, more like the outline of one in flight. He reaches his hand up to touch his blindfold but drops it before it makes contact. “So I kept trying to be her hero instead of a loser, and she kept trying to be my girlfriend instead of my best friend, and then I went to the Skybox and she really was the only person who saw me. It was like I only existed when she was visiting, you know? We grew up wound around each other so much I didn’t know who I was when she wasn’t there. I don’t think she knew who she was without me either.”

Clarke thinks suddenly of Wells, their lives so close and parallel that they’d never really been without
each other until her father’s death. She’d never felt like she needed him to be, though, not like what Finn describes. But Wells – the way his eyes used to brighten when she spoke to him, how quiet he always was until she asked his opinion, how much he seemed to need her to lead so he could follow – maybe he felt like that, back then. “I guess I know what you mean. But the way you -”

He talks over her, the words flowing out of him as if he’s been waiting to explain. “And then I was falling to earth and she was a whole world away. And I could be – I could be me. I got to figure out who that was. I missed Rae, but at the same time, I didn’t. It was such an adventure. I could make my own choices.” This time he does touch the blindfold, ruefully. “I guess I didn’t do that great a job at it.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Clarke says. “I’m so sorry it happened.”

“Yeah. I know.”

They sit in silence again. Finn slowly starts carving again. After each touch of the knife to the wood he pauses and carefully feels the whole thing.

“So that’s what this is about? You’re trying to figure out who you are without Raven?” Clarke asks.

“Trying to figure out who I am when I don’t have Raven, when I’m blind, when I’m on the ground, when I don’t have any of the things that made me who I was,” Finn says. “I guess I hope if I keep looking I’ll find someone better than I used to be. I can’t be the same person I was, and that’s who Raven wants when she looks at me, not just because that was the guy that she loved but because if I’m who I used to be she can be as well. She doesn’t get that there’s no going back.”

Clarke squeezes his shoulder. “I think she gets it now.”

“Yeah. I was kinda trying to let her figure out who she is without me, too.” He gives a crooked smile. “I hope she does. And I hope I do. And I hope eventually we can be friends again, family again – not like before. Different. But still good.”

“I’ll give her your love, I guess,” Clarke says, surprised to find that nearly every vestige of her anger has gone. Not just her anger from his treatment of Raven here, but her anger about his treatment of her in the other world, the nightmares he’s caused. She hadn’t let herself be angry at him when he died but the anger was still there.

“Let her know I’m doing okay,” Finn says. “Say hey to Wells from me, too. Tell them both – tell them both I’ll see them next time.”

“I will.” Clarke pauses and martials her thoughts. “The girl you’ve been seeing – that hurt Raven too. It was so quick.”

“You know the worst thing about this?” he asks, gesturing to his eyes and turning to face her as if he can actually see her.

Clarke blinks at the non sequitur. “…no.”

“Waking up,” he says. “Every day, waking up is the worst part. I open my eyes and I think I’ve woken up early because it’s still dark. Every single time, I expect to open my eyes and be able to see. And every single time I can’t. It feels like I’m the only one in the world – it feels like there isn’t a world at all, like there’s just some sort of empty void, like nothing’s real and it’s all just blackness. But if I’m touching Lila? If I wake with the warmth of someone else against me? It makes it easier. And yeah, Princess, I know that’s pretty selfish, but Lila knows we’re casual, and I didn’t lie to Rae this time, and at this point anything that helps me cling on I’m going use, okay?”
“If you need someone there, you could have -” Clarke breaks off, not even sure why she’s arguing.

“What? Asked Raven? Asked Wells? It’s hard to ask an ex to share your bed *platonically,*” Finn says, a sort of bitter self-mockery in his voice. “And let’s be honest, Clarke. I think I’ve done enough damage there, don’t you?”

Clarke hugs him. He stiffens for a moment, then twists to wrap his arms around her too with a sound like a sob. He smels nothing like how she remembers – back then he smelled of the forest around them, of leaf matter and sweat and musk. Now he smells like wood shavings and ointment and traces of moonshine. He’s not the same person, any more than she is. But the way he shakes against her reminds her of him in those last days, when guilt and fear broke him down until he was unrecognisable to her.

He pulls away eventually. “Good luck to you and the Commander with the whole bonding,” he says, voice choked. “Tell Raven I hope she and Anya work out too. Also, tell Wells to just man up and ask Harper out, she’s totally into him.”

Clarke gapes at him. “You haven’t spoken to them in weeks! Where are you getting all this from? With Wells, I didn’t even realise -”

For the first time since she came in, he laughs, and he sounds exactly like Finn as she first knew him, carefree and cocky. “Princess, for the most observant person I know, you are incredibly oblivious to love.”

“Hey!” Clarke protests, before mentally reviewing all the things she hadn’t realised until it was shoved into her face, and realising he has a point. People had to tell her (or in some cases, show her) when it came to Wells’ feelings for her, Finn having a girlfriend on the Ark, Anya and Raven’s feelings for each other, Gus and Zion’s burgeoning relationship, Harper’s crush on Wells… the list is a long one. She tries to come up with an example of a romantic relationship she spotted without having to be directly told and can’t think of one off the top of her head. How embarrassing. Maybe she should start paying more attention.

“I bet the Commander had to hit you with a brick to get your attention.” Finn teases her.

Clarke remembers that first kiss with Lexa. “…Metaphorically, she kind of did.”

“I was kind of cheating with the Wells one, though,” he admits. “Harper came by and yelled at me. In the Skybox I always thought she was really quiet, one of those people who tries not to take up space. I guess not.”

“There’s more space here,” Clarke says. “I think we’re all growing to fit it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Finn says. He puts the carved wooden bird down on the table again. It captures the feeling of motion really well.

“Come to Polis,” Clarke says impulsively. “Not straight away, not if you don’t want to, but sometime. We were only there overnight on our way north, you didn’t have time to see -” she breaks off again. “You didn’t have time to experience all of it.”

“Experience?” he says, and she thinks he’s raising his eyebrows at her under the fabric.

“They have some excellent food,” Clarke offers. “From all of the different clans, too. There’s some wood-carvers there as well, leatherworkers, even sculptors. Lots of tactile art. Some incredible musicians, too, songs and instruments you can’t hear anywhere else. And the smells -”
Finn laughs. “You’re selling this hard,” he says. “Smells and all. It’s a total rip off, but did you know you don’t get super-senses just for being blind? My sense of smell is pretty much divided into ‘food’, ‘flower’, and ‘gross’. That’s it. But this ‘food’ idea sounds good. I do like food.”

“Good,” Clarke says, feeling better somehow. “The radio’s been up and running again for a while, so just – give me a call, I guess, when you want to come stay.” She smiles slightly. “We have a few spare rooms.”

“Sounds good,” he says again.

She hugs him one more time and then retrieves her crutches and starts to swing her way out. At the door she pauses and looks back at him. Nothing about him is familiar and yet she knows every inch of him.

She’s not in love with him. She’s not sure if she ever was. But he’s a part of her, buried beneath the surface, unchangeable and ever-present. They all are, the people she struggled with and against, the ones who left marks on her soul she couldn’t scrub off and had learn to live with instead.

When she held that knife she felt like a murderer. But caring about him, fighting for him and then killing him didn’t turn her into a murderer even if it made her feel like one. Instead it turned her into something else. It turned her into a strong enough person to do what was necessary, to do what was right, to fight for something good and lasting in a chaotic and often cruel world. Even if it hurt.

And it all led here.

Chapter End Notes

For the people who wanted to know how Finn was doing. There must be at least two of you.

...okay, I may be overestimating his fanbase.
Abby joins their group at the very last second before they go. Raven blinks in surprise and opens her mouth to make a sarcastic comment, but Lexa shoots her a glare and she pouts instead. Kane does not look surprised at all, and in fact left Cole in charge while he and Maya attend, leading Lexa to suspect he always believed Abby would come with them.

Clarke gives no sign that she has seen her nomon, but Lexa can feel a little of the tension leave her niron’s body at the sight of her. Despite her anger at her mother, Clarke wishes for her to be by her side at their bonding.

“I still don’t approve,” Abby warns Lexa in an undertone when they stop for a meal. Clarke is deep in a heartfelt discussion with Gustus and does not notice. “I just don’t want to miss the wedding, even if I think it will end badly. If you hurt her -”

“If I hurt her, there is nothing you could do to make me regret it more than I already would,” Lexa tells her honestly. “But I am glad you have come.”

“Are your parents going to be there?” Abby asks.

“I am a Natblida,” Lexa informs her. “That means I have no family. I was taken from my parents too young to remember them. I do not even know what their names were.”

Abby looks shocked, then saddened. “I’m very sorry to hear that, Lexa,” she says, and the sympathy seems to be genuine.

Lexa shrugs. “You cannot miss what you have never had,” she says with brutal simplicity.

“Really?” Abby gives her an odd smile. “Sometimes I think the things I’ve never had are what I miss most of all. I missed this planet even though I grew up on the Ark. I missed flowers and trees.”

“I cannot imagine growing up trapped,” Lexa says softly.

“And I can’t imagine growing up without a family,” Abby says, her eyes falling on Clarke again. “I’m sorry you did.” She turns back to Lexa and gives her a watery smile. “I think you’ve got a family now, though. I see it, with some of the others. Your bodyguard and Raven’s girlfriend, for instance. Maybe even with some of our people.”

“Mochof -” Lexa starts to say, but Abby barrels on.

“And I see how devoted you are to my daughter. I hope you realise that – that my objection to this wedding isn’t because I don’t want you to be part of my family as well,” Abby says earnestly. “Even though I don’t always agree with your views any more than I do my daughter’s, I understand that you’re a product of your culture, and I know you’re an incredible young woman. Clarke’s always my priority, but I also worry about what will happen to you if this relationship goes badly. I remember you after Clarke was taken. I never thought the news could destroy anyone more than me, and I don’t want to see you like that again.”

“I thank you for your concern,” Lexa says softly. To her surprise, she means it. “And I would like you to be a part of my family as well. That is why your anger and disbelief hurt me. You have not spent much time with Clarke and I together. Perhaps if you do, you will realise that what we have is more than what you think it. It is something deep and lasting.”
“I hope so,” Abby says, and smiles at her tentatively, though there is still discomfort and worry and even a hint of resentment in her eyes. Perhaps that will fade in time, perhaps not. What matters is that she is here. “What you said yesterday – you’re right. I can’t risk losing Clarke, no matter what the reason. And she’s not my little girl anymore. She’s grown up so quickly here that when I saw her again it was like seeing a stranger, one who doesn’t listen to me or respect me the way she once did. It’s been – hard. But she’s still my daughter, even if she’s not my little girl.”

“So, did you bring a mother of the bride dress?” Raven says cheerfully, appearing behind Abby suddenly.

Abby starts. “I – no, Raven, I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s okay,” Raven says, giving her a bright smile. “I thought that might be the case so I spoke to Anya about it. They have a wonderful traditional costume for the mothers of the people getting married.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Abby says politely.

“Anya says that since you’re not actually Trikru, you don’t have to kill the bear yourself;” Raven continues helpfully. “The cloak of bear’s fur is easy enough to find at the markets. The headdress is harder, but they have a supply of bear’s hearts in the kitchens at the tower and she thinks they’ll lend you as many as you need. You should probably find the boar tusks yourself, though, because otherwise Clarke’s bloodline will be seen as weak and she’ll have to eat a raw snake to prove it’s not.”

Abby blanches, and stares closely at Raven, waiting for some sign that this is a joke. Then she looks at Lexa, who meets her gaze squarely. For a moment, Abby clearly considers saying something, but then she remembers Clarke and Lexa’s usual reaction to her criticising Trikru culture and chokes back her words. “Well, that’s…” she says, voice failing her. “I should go check my bag. I might have a nice top I could wear with my black leggings. That way I won’t need to take advantage of your generosity.” She turns and leaves.

Lexa raises an eyebrow at Raven, amused. “That was cruel,” she reproves her.

“Hey, I didn’t catch you telling her the truth,” Raven points out. “Face it, this time, you’re an accessory.”

Lexa is not sure what jewellery has to do with this, but Skaikru ways are always strange and she has grown tired of questioning them. Sometimes it seems they speak an entirely different language than the gonasleng she is fluent in. “I have had not had the chance yet to tell you how happy I am for you and Anya.”

“I’m pretty happy too,” Raven says, smirking to herself. “Actually, I owe you some gratitude. I might not have gone for it if it hadn’t been for what you said. About finding what I’m looking for.”

“No,” Raven says. “But what you said made me realise that what while I have all kinds of doubts about everything, I don’t really have any about Anya. I’m trying to find some certainty about myself and the world – maybe it’s not the worst thing to have someone helping me look.”

“No. It is not. It is a good thing, I think.”

“There’ve been a lot of those lately,” Raven observes. “By the way, can I have some of your blood?”
It takes Lexa several moments to reply. “My blood?”

“Not straight away,” Raven says reassuringly. “You’ve lost enough lately as it is. But in a while, once we’ve dealt with the whole missile thing, yeah. I can get Abby or Jackson to help me examine it – whoever’s closer. I want to figure out how it works. Also, I’m hoping you’ll let me have a look at the roof of the tower. I’m going to get Clarke to tell me exactly when and where the lightning hit and set up whatever remote sensing devices I can find in the facilities we go to. Maybe see if I can get some data.”

Lexa cannot stop her smile. “You think you will solve religion, Raven kom Skaikru?”

“Maybe not,” she admits. “But I can get some data on it, at least. And even if I don’t figure it out – well, so what. Do you know how long it took people to figure out exactly how gravity worked? But the first people to start working on it are still remembered. I might not understand it all now, but that doesn’t mean that someone someday won’t be able to use what I get to solve the whole thing.”

“So you believe in science again,” Lexa says.

“No, Lex,” Raven says, in the dramatic tones of one having a revelation. “Not just science. I believe in me again. I’m not going to abandon everything I am just because I can’t make sense of one or two data points. I’ll make it work.” She grins at Lexa. “After all, I am a genius.”

“So I have heard,” Lexa says dryly. “Of course, I have heard it most often from you.”

“Is my niron bothering you, Heda?” Anya says, walking up to them, a wicked glint in her eyes. “Skaikru are so impertinent.”

“Hey!” Raven says, outraged. “I’ll give you impertinence, cheekbones! I’m not the one interrupting a private discussion! You’re the impertinent one, jerk-face.”

“My mistake,” Anya says smoothly, lips twitching with mirth. “Skaikru are filled with politeness and grace. So well spoken, it is like the song of birds, in fact it is nearly poetry to hear them…”

“Oh, you just wait until you hear my poetry,” Raven snarls, though Lexa can tell she’s enjoying the argument despite her exaggerated annoyance. “Give me a minute to think of some rude words that rhyme with ‘Anya’ and my limericks will leave you breathless!” She pauses, suddenly lost in thought. “Actually, wait, that reminds me.”

Anya blinks at her, wrong-footed. “Reminds you of what?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, how’s your poem for the wedding going?” Raven asks innocently. “I’ve gotten stuck on the seventeenth line for mine. It’s so ridiculous that the bridesmaids’ poems need to be at least thirty lines, the last five lines always end up being so filler-y. I just really don’t want to let anyone down. I mean, can you imagine how badly Kane and all the rest of them will react if our poems aren’t good enough for the wedding to be blessed by the Star-lords?”

“Raven -” Anya stops and squints at her partner. After a long pause, she says confidently, “You are lying.” Then, after another pause, with much less confidence, “You are lying, sha?”

Lexa leaves them squabbling and makes her way back to Clarke. Wells has joined Gustus and Zion beside her, all of them in serious, thoughtful discussion. They break off as Lexa arrives and Clarke smiles at her.

“We’re just discussing our honeymoon,” Clarke says, putting a hand on Lexa’s knee with a casual intimacy that feels impossibly wonderful to Lexa.
“What about it?” Lexa asks.

“Just considering how much time we can buy you,” Wells says, giving her a smile as well. “If you ask Indra to stay, she can continue managing enforcement and protection in Polis while Aden and the ambassadors handle the day-to-day decision-making.”

“I will go with you, but my guarding will be done from a distance, so that you are private as well as safe,” Gustus says firmly. “I will bring only the most trusted gona and your location will be secret. I have suggested a small grove I know of near a waterfall, as there is only one way in so it will be easy to guard. It is also very beautiful,” he adds as an afterthought.

“As Fleimkepa, I should take over religious instruction and the overall sentencing of criminals as soon as I can,” Zion says. “Sharing the story of your return from death and defeat of the Azplanan should keep the clans quiet for some time. I can continue to train whichever Nightbloods are not sent out on Raven kom Skaikru’s search, and speak to the others over the radio.”

“I think we should have the wedding in three days,” Clarke says. “That gives us enough time to organise it, and also enough time for all of Polis to see we’re both alive and well, but means we won’t waste any of the time we could be honeymooning.”

Lexa blinks. “This is a lot of organisation for us to spend one week away,” she points out.

“At least,” Clarke corrects her. “I said honeymoons had to be at least a week.”

“A week’s much too short,” Wells says, “I think we can get you a month.”

Lexa is suddenly struck dumb by the fierce warmth in his expression. In all of their expressions. It is shocking and humbling, how much everyone here wants her and Clarke’s happiness. How unclouded their smiles are as they look at her.

A family, Lexa thinks, remembering what Abby said before. This is it. This is a family.
The most noticeable thing about arriving at Polis is the sudden cessation of noise. The rustling leaves and small noises of bugs and animals gives way to a deliberate silence, as if every person in the city is holding their breath. Clarke thinks that may actually be the case. Someone must have heard their arrival and run on ahead to the city – that’s the only explanation for the reception that awaits them. Everyone they see is perfectly quiet, foreheads pressed nearly to the ground. They sneak quick, disbelieving glances up at Lexa, but lower their heads after only a second, as if afraid to be caught staring.

It unnerves the horses, making them grow restive. It unnerves their riders as well, but they hide it better as they ride towards the tower.

It’s a small child who starts it, probably only three or four, too young to fully understand the awed silence. “Heda,” she burbles when she sees Lexa, pulling her head up from the ground. Her father, horrified, attempts to silence her, but stops when Lexa inclines her head solemnly towards the little girl. “Nontu, chek Heda au! Heda!”

The chant is picked up by the crowd. There’s the occasional cry of Wanheda or de Newanen as well, but they’re greatly overwhelmed by the crowd calling out for their leader by her best-known title. Polis is Lexa’s home, after all, and she’s spent years there compared to the few days Clarke was in occupancy. Her arrival is interesting to them, but Lexa’s survival is wondrous, impossible. They have their Heda back. Their world was picked up and shaken but now it has, amazingly and unexpectedly, righted itself. “Heda! Heda! Heda!”

The guards beat their spears against the ground in time with the cries. Lexa only raises her good arm slowly in greeting, then lowers it and continues to ride, face proudly set and chin tilted. The cries intensify.

And then they’re in front of the tower. Aden stands at the head of the rest of the Natblida. As one, they kneel and then bow to the ground as well. Lexa smiles for the first time since they entered and calls out, “Natblida Aden!”

The chanting softens, going to whispers and then to that expectant silence again, but this time their heads are raised instead of facing to the ground. Aden stands up and takes several steps forward. “Heda,” he says, bowing his head for a moment once more. “I give you greeting. You have been greatly missed.”

“You have managed Polis well in my absence,” Lexa says. Her voice travels across the sea of faces. “Mochof, Heda.”

Lexa nods regally. “Let us speak inside,” she commands. Then she turns the horse for one brief moment, raises her arm again and calls out, “Kos Kongeda!”

“KOS KONGEDA!” the cheer echoes around the city. Clarke is almost surprised she isn’t pushed off the horse by the force of it. But instead Lexa helps her down and in seconds they are inside.

“I will doubtless have to say more to them later,” Lexa comments quietly. “But that should do for now.”

“I see no reason to explain anything to them,” Anya says. “Let them make their own stories of what happened.”
“For much of it, I will,” Lexa replies calmly. “But I must assure them that Nia is dead. I must also tell them that Titus is dead. And I need to confirm Clarke’s position, Roan’s position, Zion’s position – even my own position, in case some wonder if Aden will still command Polis even without the Flame. I will tell them how the world is now, but there is no reason to repeat all the details of how it came to be that way. What do you think, Clarke?”

Clarke nods. “That sounds good to me,” she says. “I don’t want to outright crush this new belief that’s sprung up – if they want to believe you’re immortal, that’s fine by me – but I don’t want to encourage it by lying either. The less said, the better.”

They’re followed in by the Natblida, and inside there are the rest of the ambassadors besides Wells, so that in the crush it takes Clarke a moment to see Indra, Lincoln and Octavia towards the back. Clarke can’t do more than give them a grin though because all of the official greetings and discussions seem to begin at once. She doesn’t even try and pull away until the questions and comments begin to become repetitive, and even then she gives Lexa a questioning look and receives a hand-squeeze before she allows herself to sidle into a nearby room.

Raven follows her. “They’re really not any good at brief discussion, are they?”

“We’re from the Ark,” Clarke points out. “The Council wouldn’t even have managed roll call for one of their meetings by now.”


“Thanks,” Clarke replies dryly.

Anya and Lincoln appear in the room at the same time, and Raven darts forward to hug Lincoln tightly. “Hey, big guy,” she says, voice muffled against him. “Long time no see. Where’s O? Still fighting her way through the crowd?”

“She is following her duty as a good Seken and remaining by her Fos, until she can request to leave Indra’s side,” Lincoln says. His face is grave – even more than usual – and he detaches from Raven’s embrace. “I must speak with you, Raven kom Skaikru.”

“What about?” Raven says, moving to lean against Anya. However, Anya glowers down at her and also pulls back slightly, though she doesn’t move away completely. Raven looks at her in confusion.

“You deceived me about the meaning of the Skaikru term ‘open relationship’,” Lincoln says, voice uncharacteristically harsh.

Raven’s grin wilts under the combined hard stare from the two Trikru. “Hey, listen, I’m sorry, it was just a joke.”

“Bellamy kom Skaikru drew a blade on him when he heard Linkon speak of this thing,” Anya says coldly. “Raven, do you know what you have done? A citizen of Polis, a lowly ticha, drew a blade on a gona. This is a thing not allowed.”

“Not allowed?” Raven blinks. “Is he – is he okay?”

“Oh, no,” Clarke whispers. “No, you can’t be serious.”

“We must fight to the death,” Linkon says, voice flat. “He has shamed me as a warrior and our people do not accept that. Honour demands a fight. That, or a quick execution. And how will your
people react? Will the alliance withstand it?"

“No, they won’t,” Clarke says. “No… I can’t believe it. Raven, how could you?”

By now all of the colour has drained out of Raven’s face, leaving her pale and horrified. “I – I didn’t mean to… I didn’t think…” She swallows hard and says, “Is there – I mean, if I apologise officially or something -?”

The note of futile hope in Raven’s voice proves to be too much for Clarke’s composure. She can’t help it.

She cracks up.

Anya starts snickering a second later, and even Lincoln manages a little smile.

The colour floods back into Raven’s face. “Oh, you jerks. You complete asses. That wasn’t funny at all! Too far! Much too far!”

“I’m sorry,” Clarke manages to get out, unable to stop laughing. “I couldn’t resist going along with it. Oh my god, your face.”

Lincoln crosses his arms, still smiling. “Do not ever try and trick me again,” he tells Raven. “Or I will pay you back in kind.”

“Blood must have blood,” Anya says wickedly.

“Honour demands it,” Clarke quotes, trying in vain to keep her face straight. “He has shamed me as a warrior!” She can’t help but crack up again at the look of outrage on Raven’s face.

“I hate you all,” Raven says darkly.

“Did you actually say that in front of Bellamy? The thing about the open relationships, whatever it was?” Clarke asks.

“Sha,” Lincoln says placidly. “He tried to punch me.”

“Ow,” Clarke winces. “Is he all right?”

“I would not harm him,” Lincoln says. “He is Octavia’s brother.”

“Yes, but is he all right?”

“Octavia blackened one of his eyes,” Lincoln admits. “But I am confident they will be on speaking terms again soon.”

“Clarke! Raven!” Octavia enters as if summoned, grinning broadly. “You’re alive!” She hugs Clarke fiercely and Clarke can feel the taut muscles in her body, muscles that didn’t use to be there. Then she embraces Raven the same way. “I mean, Lincoln said you were, but from his stories I was expecting you to be much more banged up.”

“I have your arm candy to thank for my survival,” Raven says. “Well, maybe. I’m still working on a chart to figure out who owes who.”

“I am so glad you’re both okay,” Octavia says, letting go of Raven as well. “I mean, I kept picturing you guys in a dungeon somewhere being tortured.” She reaches up and touches the scars on her face before realising what she’s doing. She lowers her hand and flushes slightly.
Clarke feels her heart lurch. “I’m sorry about those, about the Mountain,” she says softly. It’s the first time she’s really seen Octavia since then, she realises. “And about how much danger you went through by going north. About all of it.”

“Don’t be,” Octavia says roughly, and something hard and challenging enters her voice, reminding Clarke of another Octavia, one who stared at her with fury in her eyes. “It wasn’t your choice, it was mine. You can’t take all the credit for my awesome battle scars. It was your plan, sure, but we beat them. As a team. All of them. That’s worth a few scars.”

“Sha,” Lincoln says, reaching out and putting his arm around her. Clarke can see a brief flash of discomfort on his face as the motion stretches the still-healing wounds on his back. “It is.”

“Clarke kom Skaikru?” Gustus enters. “You must see the ambassadors. It is time.”

“Time for what?” Raven asks.

Anya blinks and straightens, moving away from Raven. “Of course. They were not present for the original ceremony proclaiming you Heda’s second-in-command. It will be necessary to do another small one to make it clear now that you are meeting them for the first time.”

Clarke searches her memory. Is it the first time she’s met them? It must be. She was only in Polis for a few nights after they first got here, and then an even briefer stay on the way north to find the fallen stations.

She realises with a faint sense of surprise how very long it’s been since saw Bellamy, and how little she’s missed him. Once upon a time she thought she couldn’t manage without him, but now she wonders how much of what she saw in him was transference of her sisterly love for Wells, or was just from the relief of having someone else share the blame for the horrible decisions they were making. The horrible decisions she was making. When Clarke sees him again, she thinks maybe she’ll just see Octavia’s brother, a troubled and hot-tempered screw-up who is nevertheless a damn good teacher, instead of seeing who he used to be to her. It’s been months since then, after all.

It’s been months since she slept in Lexa’s room here, as well. Their room. Strangely, it doesn’t matter how long she’s been away, every part of her body still thums with the feeling of home. This is where she first realised she loved Lexa. On the one hand, this is where Lexa died, but on the other, it’s where Clarke went up to the roof and got a second chance with her. It’s the first place she really kissed Lexa properly, the first place they made love, the first place she slept beside Lexa and woke up beside her and knew she never wanted to leave. So many of the best and worst parts of Clarke’s life have taken place here, in the candlelit opulence of the Commander’s tower, but when she thinks about falling asleep tonight beside Lexa, the worst bits seem hazy.

“Okay,” Clarke says, smiling briefly at the others. “I guess I’ll go get officially made second-in-command, then. Again.”

“Won’t getting hitched make you equal?” Raven wonders, looking at Clarke. Octavia inhales sharply and Clarke realises it’s probably her first time hearing about this.

“No,” Clarke said. “Just like my Dad marrying my Mom didn’t make him a doctor or a council member. It doesn’t work like that. I don’t have the Flame, I’m not Heda.”

“But you are Wanheda,” Gustus says. “You are the Destroyer of the Mountain and the Defeater of the Azgeda. You are Heda’s chosen houmon. Your personal relationship may not make your position equal to hers in the alliance, but the ambassadors will not dare treat you as her lesser. They will show respect.”
“Good,” Wanheda says. “They better.”
“So,” Lexa says, watching her Natblida spar with each other. They glance over at her so regularly that they are doing poorly at it, but the grins on their faces at the sight of her are so relieved and proud that she cannot bring herself to reprimand them. That is also why she is here this morning, instead of still tucked away with her sleeping niron. “Report.”

Cenn kom Sankru is a well-known drunken gossip, has lived in Polis since the beginning of the alliance, and happens to be the most effective spy Lexa has in the capital. “About the state of Polis?”

“No,” Lexa says. “I have gotten enough reports on that, I think.”

There were two riots during Lexa’s time in the north, the first of which Aden was able to convince to lay down their weapons, the second of which ended in Indra’s gona handling the matter in a more final way. Transitions of power are never easy, and the leader of the alliance changing is unprecedented, so this was not unexpected. From the reports, however, Lexa does believe that Aden had the capital well in hand by the time they were on their way back. She thinks that even if she had not survived, most of the alliance would have remained intact, if weakened. That is good to know.

“On the other matter,” Lexa prompts him.

Cenn hesitates. “It changes by the day,” he warns. “It is… developing, I suppose. Or they have begun to find more accurate information…?”

Lexa eyes him blandly, though she stores away his question for future reference. That even Cenn – who has reported to her personally for years now – should wonder if she and Clarke truly are deities… that is interesting.

In a way, it is a report of its own. It tells her that these beliefs are spreading fast, and are very convincing.

“Anyway,” Cenn continue, accepting that she is not going to tell him the truth of the matter. “They have realised – I mean, they have decided that you have power over life, Heda, just as Wanheda has power over death.”

Lexa frowns. Those seem like two sides of the same thing, to her. “Explain.”

“Well,” Cenn says, eagerness growing visibly. “Wanheda need only speak a word and the world itself obeys. The Mountain falls. The ice cracks. The Azplana’s castle collapses. She chooses when life ends.”

“She sounds powerful indeed,” Lexa says, a little dryly.

“Sha, she is,” Cenn says, and there is a glow that is uncomfortably like worship in his face now. “But they know – they believe, moba, Heda – they believe you are more powerful still. Wanheda can tear their spirit from their body, but only you can choose where it goes, just as you returned your own spirit to its favoured home. You are Keryonheda, commander of the soul. You can bring them back to life, if you wish, but that would be to refuse the gift of spirits that Wanheda uses to court you. Since you do not wish to offend her by returning her gifts, you choose new homes for the spirits, sending them on to new children – if you wish.”

“If I wish?” Lexa questions. “And when I do not wish?”

“When they are natrona, when they have failed you,” Cenn continues earnestly, bowing again. “That is when you send them – elsewhere, Heda. They say you freeze the spirits in the northern ice if they
have displeased you, or if they have truly angered you, you allow the spirits to burn with the body, never to return. They say you called Wanheda’s people from the stars by sending our spirits to their newborn babes to tell them of us. They say she came because she was amazed by your powers, and that the spirits of her people who died when their world fell were her bonding gift to you, and the deaths of the Maunon were your bonding gift to her. They say when you are bonded, spirits will touch this world for a moment, and the sky will be lit by the memories of our lost ones.”

“I see,” Lexa says slowly, storing all of this away. “So this is what the Azgeda believe.”

“No, Heda,” Cenn says. “This is what we – this is what they all believe, all the clans, not just the Ice Nation. Tales of what happened are spreading east, west and south quickly, going everywhere but the Floukru – they are too hard to speak with. Already messages are coming back from the Sankru, Trishanakru and Delfikru seeking more. The demand for paintings and sculptures depicting what has happened is far greater than any artist can meet. Boudolankru begin to engrave images of your sign and Wanheda’s on their weaponry to bless the user. Last night I heard three new songs at the tavern asking for Wanheda’s mercy for their lives and your mercy for their spirits, Heda. Polis natives travel to their home to be the first to tell their clans of what we now know and what they have seen. There are rumours Trishanakru is considering sending all the supplies they can spare to you and Wanheda as an apology for disbelieving Trikru legends of your divinity.”

Lexa stares at him. She will have to speak to Clarke about this, she thinks dizzily. It is very likely that they will have to speak to others as well. What he is talking about is not a story casually told around a fire, but something more. He is talking about a whole belief system, one like the Trikru’s but far more serious and widespread. Even Cenn, standing here before her, fully aware of her mortality and humanity, is half-convinced she can decide on his spirit’s destination.

She should not have faked her death in front of so many. But then, how to change destroying the Mountain? Wrecking the lake? Collapsing Nia’s castle? With this view, even the mines Sinclair set up at the border begin to seem like they are done purely through their will. Among the Trikru, explosives are known, but not widely – only by those who lived near the Maunon and had a friend who ventured too closely, and even then, the fog was used more than explosives. Bullets were used more than explosives. Among the other clans, they are known among those who try to find the City of Light, but even they ascribe the mines set across that expanse to a supernatural cause. In the other world, teenage Skaikru using explosives recklessly had robbed them of much of their mystery; here, that is not the case.

Lexa cannot think of a way to spread knowledge of explosives so that all of the clans – even those far away – accept that they are just machines of the type Raven kom Skaikru is so fond of making. The only way might be to give them explosives, and that is not something she wishes them to have. Bringing explosives and demonstrating to their leaders would be seen as proof of her and Clarke’s powers, not a refutation of them.

They will have to hope this belief dies out. As useful as it is, the idea of being viewed as not just Heda, but the Undying, the Commander of Souls… it unnerves her. She has command of her own soul. That is all she has ever wished for.

“Mochof, Cenn,” she tells him. “Leave me now.” He does, but that reverence does not fade from his eyes.

She sees Saska look up, distracted, as Enja strikes Dazi across the ribs. This nearly allows her own partner to strike her. Aden keeps one eye on Lexa, but is still winning his own bout seemingly effortlessly.

Lexa raises her voice. “Natblida! Here!”
They gather around her in moments. “Heda?” Aden asks. As always, leading the rest, and that recognition of the usual pattern strikes fondness into her.

“As you know, I am to be bonded in a week,” she tells them. “There is a Skaikru tradition of aloneness with one’s new partner that requires I be away for nearly a month.” She sweeps her eyes along their row. “During this time, Aden will have command of Polis, due to the good job he has done so far and due to his position as my heir. Truly, Aden, you have exceeded all I could ever have expected. I have chosen a worthy heir. I am not sure I could even have held the alliance together through such a thing.”

“You could have,” Aden says, eyes bright. “You can do anything, Heda.”

“Anything? No,” Lexa says softly. “But I do what I can to help our people. And you chose some paths that I do not know if I could ever have thought of. You made peace with some of the Azgeda and trusted them where I could not have. I truly believe you will be a Commander for a new time, a better one, and that when you have the Flame you will do greater things than I could ever have done.”

“If I have the Flame,” Aden says stubbornly. “You are Heda. You may still be Heda when my fight ends.”

Lexa raises her eyebrows. “Are you planning for your fight to end soon, Natblida?”

“No, Heda,” Aden says, meeting her eyes steadily. “I am planning for my fight to end when I am so old I need a stick to walk, and my hair grows from my ears instead of my head – unless I die in defence of my Commander before then. But however my fight ends, I still hope you will be Heda when it does.”

“I… I see.” Lexa feels a traitorous flush of emotion move up her face. “Mochof, Aden.” She clears her throat and turns to the others. “The rest of you I also have tasks for. Enja and Linon, you will spend the time with Indra, learning how to protect Polis. All of the rest of you except Saska and Dazi will be aiding Raven kom Skaikru in her search for something called a ‘nuclear facility’, and will be given gona and information to assist with this.” She nods at them as they bow. “You may return to your sparring now. Saska and Dazi, remain.”

Saska and Dazi stare up at her in worried silence as the others disperse.

Lexa turns to Saska. “What did you do wrong in that bout before?”

“I… I was distracted, Heda.” Distracted by her emotions, as Titus always warned against.

There is a long moment when Lexa just stares at her. Then she says softly, “Saska, when I was away I could not give my name, because I was supposed to be dead.”

This is so far from what Saska expected her to say she just looks blank. “…Heda?”

“I used yours,” Lexa tells her. Saska blinks, and a smile spreads across her face, so proud that it hurts Lexa’s heart. “I used yours because you are in some ways the strongest of my Nightbloods. But you are also in some ways the weakest. I have always known you could never win the conclave.”

Saska winces, smile fading, and starts to pull back, withdrawing into herself, but Lexa reaches out a gentle hand and takes her chin, holding it so that Saska continues to meet her eyes.

“Winning that requires a ruthlessness I hope you never have,” Lexa tells her solemnly. “You are as you are supposed to be. You could not win the conclave, either, Dazi.”
Dazi blinks. “What… are we not…” he starts to say uncertainly. “Heda…”

She can see the fear in his eyes, the worry that she has decided he and Saska have no use at all. “I am giving the two of you an important task I fear I can give no one else,” she tells him. “I wish you to see an old friend of mine. I need you to visit the Floudonkru.”

There’s a long pause. “The Floudonkru?” Saska says, eyes wide.

“Their ambassador joined us in Polis long ago when they joined the alliance, and I am aware he barely communicates with them,” Lexa says bluntly. “They have made themselves separate to the rest of us, for all that they are part of the coalition. But times of change are now here and if they do not take part they will be left behind. Luna grows more set in her ways by the year, more unable to bend or change, more certain in her separation. I need you to persuade her to rejoin us properly. I need you to tell her that she can either spend her life trying to make her small part of the world perfect and pretend the rest does not exist, or become part of this and help us make the whole world better. Her isolation puts her people at risk, and it denies the truths she should be facing.”

“I… I see, Heda,” Dazi says, wide eyes making it clear he does not.

Lexa sighs. “I am placing Aden in charge of the alliance because he is the best of you at ruling,” she says softly. “Enja and Linon will be the greatest at protecting him and Polis. The rest of the Natblida – all of them fight well, track well, command well, all of them are honourable and clever, all of them are Nightbloods any Commander or Fleimkepa would be proud to have trained.”

Dazi flushes and looks down, clearly thinking she is excluding him from this description.

“As are you both,” Lexa continues firmly, setting his mind at rest. “But Dazi and Saska, you are also the kindest. That is a great gift, one that Luna will see the value of. Tell her that the conclave is gone, that blood must have blood is dying, that it is time for her to start helping those in need even if they cannot make it to her. Right now she aids those who have enough strength, supplies and bravery to reach her people, but that is all, and that is rare. Her people can easily find fish but they do not have the medicines the Trikru have, or the furs of the Azgeda, or the devices the Skaikru can trade. It is time for her to stop turning up her nose at her own people and start trying to improve this world instead of hiding from it. Past time.”

She wonders if she could defeat Luna in a fight now. Probably. She has fought for years and years, now, and practice changes everything – she has fought the fight that Luna abandoned. The one she could not face. Luna would have been a terrible Commander, she thinks, as well as being one of the briefest ones. She would never have been able to create the alliance, she would have tried to force the Trikru into acting peacefully towards their enemies and gotten them slaughtered, she would have acted as though the world was the way she imagined it instead of trying to coax it gently towards that vision.

But the truth is that the Boat People are better at finding food than most clans, which can be useful, and worse at defending themselves, which can be dangerous. They are a weak spot the rest cannot afford and a dissention that makes the alliance look weak in turn. “This is a real task, not one I give you because I think you cannot handle another,” Lexa tells her two softest Nightbloods quietly. “I truly believe you can do this. At any rate, you have a better chance than the rest of us. Will you try?”

“Sha, Heda,” Dazi says quickly, speaking more sharply than Lexa has ever heard him speak before. His eyes shine with something that takes her a moment to recognise – purpose. Real purpose. He has known all his life that he would not be Heda, that for all his half-hearted study and sparring that it was not his destiny, but now she has shown him that he has value still. Saska’s eyes glimmer with the same.
"I wish you luck, then," Lexa says, and lets her gaze dwell on their face before moving it to rest on
the others behind them, the Natblida who spar. They are somehow blinding in their youth and hope,
in their faith and affection towards her.

They truly are her children, as she told Clarke once. Children matter because they are the future, but
they matter just as much because of the way seeing their small, determined faces makes your heart
twist in your chest. They matter because of how they will change the world but also because of how
they change you.

And her children will change the world, and although they might not have changed her as much as
knowing Clarke or Costia did, they are still part of what made Lexa into someone that Titus could
neither understand nor approve of. Someone who believed the world could be better. They changed
her, too.
Clarke bites into the brown square and nearly moans her appreciation.

“Dis wuh,” Raven says fervently, spraying crumbs. She swallows and says more clearly. “This one. This is a good wedding cake. I approve.”

“Why do you think Clarke and Lexa need a wedding cake, anyway?” Wells asks Raven. “I mean, quite apart from the fact that I don’t even think this is really a cake, neither of our people have wedding cake as part of the tradition. That’s a tradition from before the bombs fell, and I don’t understand why you want to revive it.”

Clarke glares at him. This is part of the compromise she agreed to with Raven – the one which means she doesn’t have to have a bachelorette party, even one like the kind Lexa’s on right now – and she won’t let him endanger it by challenging every activity they’re being forced to do. They’ve already pushed back the wedding for Lexa’s trip, she doesn’t want to push it back further.

“You haven’t tried it yet,” Raven says, taking another square from the wide-eyed vendor and nearly forcibly shoving it into Wells’ mouth. “That’s why you don’t understand why I want to revive it.”

“Wanheda?” Gustus appears next to Clarke, scowling. She hadn’t even noticed he’d disappeared. He elected to stay behind from the hunting trip, partly because it was traditionally something done with the person’s Fos, and partly to lend Clarke authority and protect her. He trusted Anya to keep Lexa safe in the forest.

Clarke looks up at him. “Is Lexa back?” she asks immediately, face splitting into a hopeful smile. Lexa only left the evening before for the ritual hunting trip and should be gone for days, but after so long apart from her, it makes Clarke anxious to be separated again. She itches to just walk out into the forest and find her. It took all her self-control to remain in the tower last night.

“No,” Gustus says. “Roan is.”

Clarke stares at him. “Where?”

“The central square,” Gustus tells her. “A guard just came from there to let us know. Roan desires to speak to Heda. In her absence -”

“In her absence, I’m in charge,” Clarke finishes for him. “So he’ll speak to me.” She looks back at the elderly vendor and says “Mochof, komfoni. Yu dina os.” The woman flushes under her wrinkles and bows creakily.

Clarke turns and strides away as best she can while still leaning extremely heavily on her new walking stick, leaving one of her guard to arrange payment for the food, if he can. So far every time Clarke herself has tried to pay for something she’s been refused. She thought at first it was purely from their absolute love and worship of Lexa, until the last one had whispered ‘kos Maunde’ and she’d realised they were grateful to her as well. Maybe the guard will have better luck paying.

A crowd is gathered around the square – in Polis people always gather around any sign something is about to happen. In the middle Roan stands, tall and proud, his clothing bloodstained, gripping the reins of –
"Snowball," Clarke breathes out, trying to stop herself from beaming at the horse.

"Snowball?" Raven asks, looking confused.

"Snowball," Gustus confirms dourly. "You do not wish to enquire further, trust me."

"Of course I do," Raven replies with a smirk. "I always wish to enquire further."

Gustus looks annoyed – his normal state around Raven. Clarke knows he finds her sense of humour too strange and impertinent, and since the two-day effort of laying bombs on the lake he also thinks she complains too much. In return, Raven views him as a stolid, humourless stick-in-the-mud. Some people just don’t get along. Clarke recalls they didn’t get along in the other world either, but that was a little more serious.

Roan walks forward, still holding Snowball’s reins in his hand, until he is only a few feet from Clarke. Snowball notices Clarke and jerks against the reins, letting out a little, happy whinny of greeting.

"Let him go," Clarke orders quietly, so that none of the watching crowd can hear them. Roan obeys at once and Snowball trots forward, happily nudging at Clarke’s head with his nose and pressing against her, nearly knocking her over. Clarke smiles and reaches up to pet him, and he whuffles contentedly. "Mochof, Roan kom Azgeda, for bringing my horse back."

"I believe I am the Azhefa now," Roan comments, face impassive. "You should call me by that title, Clarke kom Skaikru."

"I don’t recall anyone giving you the title," Clarke replies, recognising a deliberate challenge when she hears one. Though, knowing Roan, it’s probably just to rile her up. "And by right of conquest, I think it’s mine and Heda’s to give."

"By right of inheritance -"

"You were disinherited," Clarke points out. "I also very much doubt that Nia got her position entirely through an honourable means like inheritance, so your ‘right of inheritance’ is virtually meaningless in this case." She smiles at his annoyed expression and tangles her fingers in Snowball’s mane, pressing the side of her face against the horse’s. "Don’t give me that look. Lexa promised you would be king if you helped me, and you did help me. So you will be king."

"Then why are you -"

"All I’m saying is that you need to be given the title first," Clarke says softly. She gestures to the ground and sees comprehension dawn on Roan’s face.

She is Wanheda, second-in-command of the alliance. Whatever she may think of him personally – and she does quite like Roan – nobody is going to ride into her and Lexa’s capital city and talk to her like they’re equals before she’s given them that right. He’s king because she and Lexa decided he could be king, and she intends to make that clear. If these past few months have taught her anything, it’s that authority is entirely where people perceive it to be. She needs to show people – to show Roan, the Azgeda, all the clans – that the leaders of individual clans do not outrank the Commander or the second-in-command of the alliance.

She won’t be a dictator. But she’s also done being treated like a pawn.

Roan kneels, staring up at her. He wears a small, amused smirk, but there is also respect in his eyes, and Clarke thinks that if she hadn’t made it clear that he couldn’t just come into Polis and claim
ownership of one of the clans without their blessing, he actually would have thought less of her. He’s an interesting person, and to some extent even a trustworthy one, but that doesn’t mean he’s above scheming and power plays – he was raised by Nia after all.

“Greetings, Wanheda,” he says, loudly enough that it can be heard over the whispered chatter of the crowd.

“Greetings, Roan kom Azgeda,” Clarke replies, at the same volume, letting her voice carry. She tries to remember Lexa’s words when she first made Clarke second-in-command and echoes those. “I thank you for what you have done for our people by providing assistance against the former Azplana – your nomon, Nia kom Azgeda, natrona to the coalition and us all. You helped to defeat her and bring back peace between the clans. In thanks for your actions, I ask – with the blessing of the Commander – that you take on your mother’s burdens as leader of the Azgeda. Do you accept this task, swearing fealty to the alliance and its Commander, and promise to rule wisely?”

“Sha, Wanheda,” Roan says, after pausing just long enough for the crowd to start talking frantically among themselves. “I swear fealty.”

Drama queen, Clarke thinks, amused. She pulls one of her braids away from Snowball, who has started lipping at her hair, then reaches down to pull Roan to a standing position again. Luckily he climbs to his feet without expecting any actual effort from her, because she can’t exactly do a strong stance with one leg all but out of commission. “Then I name you Azhefa!”

The cheering is subdued. The Azgeda aren’t exactly popular at the moment, and the people of Polis have recently celebrated the impossible survival of Heda and Wanheda, and expect to celebrate their bonding ceremony tomorrow. When Roan returns home, no doubt he’ll get a better reception.

“We have some of your gona with us still, but most are at the border,” Clarke says quietly to Roan. “We can send them back with you to make sure no one challenges your position.”

“That will be useful,” Roan replies. “Mochof.” He reaches out a hand to latch onto Snowball’s reins again and draw the horse gently away. Snowball gives a great heave of disappointment but allows himself to be led.

Clarke studies the horse. He seems uninjured, but - “He looks exhausted. Have you been pushing him too hard? He’s covered in sweat.”

“That is because he is used to snow,” Roan tells her. “He is an Azgeda horse, nothing like those weaklings the Plains Riders sell. The weather here – bah, it is like summer in the far north. It will take him time to get used to the warmth.” He bows his head. “I should see to him, however, now that we have arrived.”

Clarke raises an eyebrow at him. “I assume you know where the stables are.”

“Of course,” Roan says. “This is not the first time I have been here.”

“It’s probably the first time you’ve been here without killing anyone, though.”

“My stay is not over yet,” Roan says innocently, though his mouth twitches. He pulls Snowball away. The horse gives one sad backwards look that wrenches Clarke’s heart before turning back to Roan and trying to eat one of his braids.

Clarke turns to her side. “Gus. Do we need to send word to Lexa? Get her back here soon? I’m not sure how official Roan’s position is without her seal of approval.”
“When Heda is not here, you have her authority,” Gustus says. “Her approval is always assumed to
be given. Roan is king.”

“Then I’m going to go after him to the stables and spend some time with Snowball, keep him
company while he rests and – I don’t know, gets washed, or however else horses are cared for,”
Clarke says with certainty. “I’ve missed him. Did you see how adorable he is, Raven?”

“I… what? He looks…” Raven trails off, shaking her head. “…Like a horse. He definitely looks
horse-like. Horse-shaped, too. I counted four legs and a tail, so that’s good. And a head. With large
teeth.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. He has those big wise eyes,” Clarke says. “He has more – more soul
than most horses, you know? He’s smarter.”

“No. No, I can honestly say I have no idea what you’re talking about. Horses are terrifying and it’s
weird you like one enough to let it try and make out with your hair.”

“He was showing affection,” Clarke says.

“Rather you than me,” Raven says.

Clarke rolls her eyes and leans on her walking stick as she makes her way to the stables. Her mother
didn’t approve of her moving from crutches to a stick, but her foot is well and truly encased and held
motionless, so it ought to be alright. Also, while it was one thing to be seen regularly on crutches in
Arkadia, it would be another thing entirely for people to see her hopping about clumsily in Polis.

The guards let her into the stables immediately with bows and she makes her way down to the far
end. Then Clarke pauses, hearing Roan’s voice floating her way, but the words so crooned and
cressing that it stuns her momentarily.

“…have already eaten the sugar, you foolish thing. No, of course you cannot have more! You are
such a greedy beast. Oh, that offends you, does it?” Roan makes a little clucking noise and as Clarke
watches, nonplussed, pats the side of Snowball’s neck affectionately. “I know you have worked hard
for your food, foolish one, all I am saying is you must stick to healthier things some of the time.
Eating only sugar will make you fat. We have spoken of this.”

Clarke stifles a laugh that makes Roan look up sharply. He flushes slightly under her amused gaze.
“I’m amazed you didn’t hear me coming,” she comments. “Too distracted by Snowball?”

“Perhaps I did hear you,” Roan says haughtily.

Clarke raises her eyebrows, making her disbelief obvious, but then gives in and just smiles. “You’ve
looked after him really well,” she tells him honestly, limping forward so she can reach out and pat
Snowball as well. He looks delighted at the attention from both of them and whickers softly.
“Honestly, I think you’ve lost more weight than he has.”

Roan waves a hand dismissively. “It is easier to find food for horses than men,” he says.

“You know, king or not, you’re going to have to talk to Lexa about repayment for the food to feed
your people,” she warns him. “She’ll want the Azgeda to pay it back over the next couple of years.”

Roan considers this. “Then I will bargain for more years in return for slightly more repaid, persuade
my people to trade any excess furs and weapons to the south, and work to make sure that only those
who can spare their goods give them to the repayment,” he tells her.
“That won’t make you popular.”

“Leaders are rarely popular,” Roan says. “It took the Commander years to gain the approval and worship she has, and she knows that she is still always at risk. You are as well. I can defend myself, and perhaps, if I am lucky, I will find a guard or two I can trust. I will manage.”

Clarke looks at him thoughtfully. “I’d start with where the Ark stations fell, if I was you,” she suggests. “We were only able to salvage a fraction of the useful things there. My people will definitely trade for more parts of the stations. The rest of the clans might be interested as well. That could help with your repayment.”

“Mochof,” Roan says, but his eyes are shadowed still as he strokes the side of Snowball’s long face. He sighs almost imperceptibly.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I am thinking that I am glad to bring Snowball back to someone who will care well for him,” he says quietly. A dark rage enters his eyes. “He will bear the scars of Ontari’s cruelty forever. I am glad she is dead. If she were not, I think I would kill her myself, Natblida or no.”

“You care for him,” Clarke says softly, and swallows hard. “Make sure you bring him whenever you come here, okay? I’ll want to see him at least once a year.”

Roan freezes. “You… you will…”

“He’s an Azgeda horse,” Clarke says. She can feel her voice wobble and swallows hard, but she knows this is the right thing to do. “You said it yourself.”

Snowball was her only friend when she was captured by Nia. But Clarke’s duties will take her all over, including places much warmer than this, and Snowball’s already having trouble in winter in the second furthest north clan. He couldn’t handle anywhere warmer. She’d be able to come and pet him and give him treats when she was home in Polis and nothing serious was going on, but she wouldn’t be able to have him with her when she travelled and she’d never be able to spend much time riding him. Unlike Roan, who will be riding all over Azgeda territory for the next year at least, if she’s any judge.

And the truth is that Clarke has friends, here – she has support, she has family, she has the love of her life, she has her people. Roan won’t have anyone to help him when he goes and tries to fix the war-torn, defeated Azgeda. He loves Snowball, that’s obvious, and while having a horse to depend on isn’t the same as having a person, it’s the best she can do for him. It’s the best she can do for Snowball as well.

“Take care of my horse,” she tells Roan, like she did once before. Actually - “Take care of your horse, I guess. And be a better ruler than your mother.”

“That, I think, I can do,” Roan says, the open smile on his face making him look so different to Nia that Clarke almost can’t believe they were related at all.

Chapter End Notes

Just to let you know, there’s about five chapters left, and then the story will be over. Any
reference to future adventures is just to give you an idea what people will be doing afterwards. Sorry for anyone who that was confusing! (I can see why it would be hard to tell whether I was serious about finishing the story, given my estimates of it's length have been changing wildly since day one: "Oh maybe twenty chapters. Forty chapters. A hundred chapters?")
Reunited

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Anya makes a little warning noise in the back of her throat as Lexa guides her steadily cantering horse between two narrowly set trees and over a thick branch. The horse, a sturdy mare Lexa has ridden often over the years, does not even slow. “Heda,” Anya says, voice a little higher-pitched than normal with annoyance, beginning to fall behind on her own horse, and Lexa sighs and pulls gently on the reins, allowing Anya to pull beside her again.

“You should not risk yourself like that,” Anya says severely. “If you had reopened your wound, or if the horse had tripped -.”

“You used to race me down these pathways,” Lexa points out. She wants to keep at the faster speed. The forest is beautiful, the trip has been lovely, the hunt was challenging, but Clarke is in Polis and Clarke is more beautiful and lovely and challenging than anything her forests can provide. Evening is already upon them and she wants to be home. They have furs enough in their bulging packs to swathe whole rooms in them, though they left the meat as a gift for the nearest village in each place. Her left arm aches. It is much weaker than it used to be. She could not pick up a sword in it now. She could not even hold a dagger steady, let alone throw it. It is difficult just to hold the reins – she is lucky this horse is obedient and used to her and has a soft mouth. But Abby says her shoulder wound is healing at a very fast rate, faster than she’s ever seen, and she does not believe it will reopen now. Perhaps Lexa will never be as strong or fast in a fight again, not even when she has healed as completely as she ever will – but on a horse, on this horse at least, she can still move just as quickly, just as recklessly. The feeling of speed and strength is a joy. The feeling of returning to Clarke, even more so.

Anya sniffs. “In my foolish youth.”

Lexa’s lips quirk slightly, the ghost of a smile. “You were around the age I am now.”

“Exactly,” Anya says, an answering smile lighting up her face. “Foolish youth.”

“Whereas now you have become staid and settled,” Lexa says provocingly. “Responsible.”

“No,” Anya says haughtily. “Wise. Clever. Cunning.” She steers her horse so that she is slightly ahead of Lexa, then in one fluid movement spurs it into full gallop, calling back, “And that is why I shall win!”

Lexa laughs, and digs her heels into her mare’s sides, sending it after Anya’s full speed along forest paths she raced when she was as young as Tris and as silly as a Skaikru. Back then she wished for the forest to be her home. She felt part of them, connected to them, a Trikru to her core. But she never once considered doing as Luna did and vanishing into a different life – even when she was Lexa kom Trikru, she thinks some part of her soul was waiting to be Heda.

Just as it waited for Clarke.

She was incomplete, without the Flame. Her people were incomplete without the alliance to join them together. The alliance was incomplete without the Skaikru, though they did not know it, and were being steadily chipped away by the cruelty of the Mountain and the spite of Nia. Now as Lexa races through the forest she is not missing those pieces any more. She is not part of just the forest, but
so much more. Tomorrow, she will receive her last piece, her soul finally whole and healed, her love by her side and in her arms and inked onto her skin.

Anya beats her to the marker they used to use, but only just, and they are both laughing when they slow the heavily-breathing horses. Lexa leans forward to pat hers with her right hand, her laughter fading to a small smile. She thinks she has smiled more in the past week than she did in her whole life before that. “Mochof,” she says to Anya softly.

Anya raises her eyebrows. “For defeating you, yongon? You are very welcome -”

“For giving me something I would not have had otherwise,” Lexa says simply. “Not just a Fos. A childhood. A sister. A friend.”

Because Natblida were potential Commanders, not children. They did not play in forests or joke with friends or fall in love. Anya gave Lexa all of that, despite Titus, despite the Conclave, and despite the weight that was already descending. Lexa tries every day to pass the same gift on to her Natblida.

“I gave you far less than you deserved,” Anya says, her voice a little choked. “But you did more with it than anyone else I have ever known. The spirits owed you happiness, yongon, and the stars have paid the debt.” She swallows hard, and says unevenly, “I always believed I would take you on this trip, that I would stand beside you at your bonding ceremony.” Costia’s ghost is gone, but the memory of her shines in Anya’s eyes, and Lexa can feel her own throat close at the thought.

“I still miss her,” Lexa admits. “It sounds odd to say so, but I wish she could be here for my bonding. I wish she could meet Clarke.”

The pang of sadness and lost love she always feels when she thinks of Costia is still there, but gone is the intensity of it, the rage and the agony. Now it is just that – a quiet memory of how she loved Costia and how she misses her. It pales in comparison to the fierce need, desire, desperation, connectedness, amazement, hope and love she feels when she thinks of Clarke – and she is always thinking of Clarke. All those emotions swirl together with Clarke at the centre, the image of her always printed against the back of Lexa’s eyelids when she closes her eyes. The past giving way to allow the present and the future more room, as it should.

“She would be grateful beyond words to see you so happy again,” Anya tells her. “Just as I am.”

“I am also grateful,” Lexa says. “Not just for my happiness, but yours. I am very happy for you and Raven kom Skaikru.”

Anya snorts, her horse shifting beneath her at the unexpected noise. “You should instead pity me for having found such an exasperating partner. I have never met anyone more infuriating. She could drive a spirit to madness, that one.” Anya looks extremely satisfied with this state of affairs.

“And you love her.”

“Well, of course,” Anya says matter-of-factly, though she flushes slightly at the admission. “What has that to do with anything?”

Lexa smiles slightly, amused.

“HEDA! HEDA STE HOU!”

She hears the yell even from this distance – one of the sentries has seen them and is warning the others. She looks at Anya. “We should continue move quickly,” Lexa says with a barely audible sigh. “Otherwise the crowds will be too thick to move easily through by the time we are at the
Anya gives her a mocking grin. “It was your decision to unite the clans, take down the mountain, die and return from the dead, destroy most of the Azgeda forces and their leader, and through this become a legend,” she says provocatively. “You have only yourself to blame for being worshipped.”

Lexa uses a phrase that she has not used since she became Heda to indicate her disagreement with Anya’s advice, then digs her heels into her horse’s side and takes off to the sound of her friend and old First’s laughter. The crowd is still thin enough to ride through by the time she reaches there, though she inclines her head and calls a greeting to the crowd of the devout already gathered there before riding on.

Anya has still not caught up when Lexa bursts into her area of the tower and finds Wells sitting at her meeting table. She blinks at him. “Wells?”

He looks up from the book he is staring at, surprised, face falling into his usual smile. “Oh! Hi! You’re back! Sorry, Clarke said I could use this space for the evening to have a look at this – it’s a book discussing ways to purify unhealthy water, by the way – I would use my own room to do it, but the lighting here is better.”

“It is alright,” Lexa says. “Where is Clarke?”

“Oh,” Lexa says, disappointed. Some part of her expected to slam open the doors here and find Clarke waiting. She would have pulled Clarke into her arms and through to her bedroom and they would have collapsed into her bed together. Her patience seems to be sorely lacking these days, now she is so close to holding Clarke in her arms and joining their spirits and lives together fully and officially.

Wells closes the book and smiles wistfully up at her. “I’ve been wanting a chance to talk to you alone, actually,” he comments, looking even more serious than usual.

Lexa stiffens slightly. She does not want to hear another Skaikru imply she will hurt Clarke, even if it comes from a place of caring.

“It’s so strange to think you’re getting married tomorrow,” he continues. “Even stranger to think that Clarke is getting married tomorrow.”

“To me, as well. For a long time I did not expect to ever be bonded,” Lexa admits stiffly.

“For a long time I expected me and Clarke to get married,” Wells says, his words hanging in the air between them. “I was so sure we were meant for each other. I thought I’d hate anyone who came between us.” He smiles wryly. “And then I met you.”

“And now?” Lexa asks.

“And now I know Clarke and I weren’t meant for each other. Clarke was meant for someone else, and I’m so glad that she found you. That’s – that’s what I needed to talk to you about.” He swallows hard. “Because I know, in the beginning, I came across as – I mean, I was - I was jealous. I just need you to know I’m not jealous now. I’m happy for you. Relieved, even.”

Lexa blinks again, surprised. “Relieved? Why?” How could anyone be relieved to lose even the
chance of having Clarke be theirs?

“Relieved for both of you, because otherwise I think Clarke would have lived her whole life missing pieces of herself – but also relieved for me, because now I know there’s something more out there than what I felt for Clarke and I might never have realised that otherwise.” He smiles again. “I’ve gotten to keep my best friend instead of messing everything up by trying for something more. And I’ve gotten an amazing new chess partner out of it, as well. I just needed you to know that what I felt for Clarke, or thought I felt for Clarke, isn’t there anymore. I’m not waiting for your relationship to fail, or hoping for it, or quietly resenting you, or – or anything like that.”

“I never thought you were,” Lexa replies quietly.

Wells coughs, slightly awkwardly. “Oh. Good. I just wanted to, you know, make sure -”

Lexa clears her throat, cutting him off, because he appears to be becoming tangled in his sentences yet again. Wells is good, and wise, and clever, and loyal, but he is not good at talking about his emotions. “Mochof, Wells kom Skaikru, thank you for your blessing. And thank you for – for all that you have done. For Clarke’s life and my own. For agreeing to stay as ambassador. For teaching me chess. For many things. For – for being my friend. The other world was emptier for not having you in it.”

“Heda!” Anya enters the room, eyes flaming in anger. “You cannot wander about Polis unprotected.”

“I came straight here,” Lexa says calmly, though she can admit to herself Anya is right. To most people, the forest would be more dangerous, even if they were not there alone. To her, nothing is more dangerous than crowds, because any person in the crowd could be a threat.

Gustus follows immediately behind Anya, scowling. “You should at least have allowed Anya to keep pace with you. I would think recent events would tell you that you’re too valuable to risk yourself,” he pauses for a moment, seeming to remember protocol, and says, “Welcome back, Heda,” almost grudgingly before launching back into his lecture. “Commander, I must respectfully remind you that you have a duty to Polis, to the clans, to the alliance itself -”

“Speaking of duties, aren’t you supposed to be guarding -” Wells starts to say, a frown marring his face, but then Gustus is pushed gently but firmly aside and Lexa finds herself moving swiftly forward.

“Clarke,” she breathes, pulling her Sky Girl to her.

Clarke kisses her deeply and passionately, then pulls back to say “Lexa” in the same tone. She presses her forehead against Lexa’s, closing her eyes and letting out a deep breath of relief.

They have been apart such a short time compared to before, less than a week, but there is a part of Lexa that felt the distance in the same way. She had found it difficult to sleep away from Clarke. Last night she had woken up shocked and disoriented, reaching for her weapon, filled with irrational fear – Clarke is missing, she had thought in a panic, I must find Clarke!

At every village they had briefly stopped at she fought the urge to send a runner back to Polis just to check that Clarke was still there, still safe. But the trouble is that she has lived in danger too long to trust anywhere as safe anymore. For the rest of her life, Lexa knows that in every moment she cannot see her niron beside her, a part of her will be wracked with fear. She will have nightmares where Clarke has disappeared even as Clarke sleeps fitfully beside her, trapped in nightmares of Lexa’s death. But they will wake and pull each other close. Love cannot take away the things they have
seen and done and felt, not completely, but it can banish those memories to the darkest, ignored corners as they fill their days with bright sunshine and their nights with warm candlelight.

Wells makes an awkward little coughing noise and says, “I’m – I’m having a problem understanding one of these diagrams. I should go ask Raven.” Lexa pulls away from Clarke, watching in amusement as Wells gives Gustus a meaningful look and says, “I could use some guards on the way, just in case. You and Anya, maybe.”

Gustus blinks at him, confused. “Why should you need a guard presence? Raven kom Skaikru lives in this tower, and my duty is to Heda and Wanheda -”

“Maybe Raven’s outside the tower right now,” Wells says persistently. “And this room is already guarded from outside, Lexa and Clarke will be fine.”

“I wish to go see Raven now anyway, so I can go with you, but I was hoping to see her alone,” Anya says, frowning. “I have been away some time and would like to spend tonight in private with my niron. Is the question urgent? Could you not -”

“It is a ruse,” Lexa explains, cutting the conversation short as Wells press his palm to his forehead in mute exasperation. “He is trying to subtly remove everyone from this area so Clarke and I can spend time together without interruption or awkwardness.”

“Oh,” Gustus blinks. “In the future, you should simply inform me I am dismissed, as you did before when you wished for time alone.”

“Skaikru ways are odd,” Anya tells him sagely. “They can never be straightforward. They must talk a thing into tangles.”

“I was trying to be discreet,” Wells says patiently, unoffended, and walks out with a nod to Clarke and Lexa. “Good night.”

Gustus and Anya follow. From the echoing sounds of their conversation, they have found themselves in complete accord for what is likely only the second time in their acquaintance. The first issue they agree on and always have is that Lexa’s safety and happiness are of paramount importance, and this new shared point of agreement seems to be that Skaikru are strange and, for the most part, useless. Lexa wonders if Anya will continue expressing that so loudly as she approaches the quarters Raven has claimed as her own, or if she will not dare.

“Time alone,” Clarke says, her smile starting to widen, her eyes fixed on Lexa’s. Even though after tomorrow they will have a full month alone, a honey moon, an additional evening with nothing but Clarke is still enough to make Lexa feel blessed.

“Time alone,” Lexa agrees happily, and leans in for Clarke’s kiss.

Chapter End Notes

The only time in this story when titling a chapter 'Reunited' is really not a spoiler at all.
Clarke knew Lexa had to come back tonight at the latest – their wedding is tomorrow, after all. That’s why she’s had the strip of thick, opaque black fabric in her pocket all day. It would have spoiled the whole thing immediately if Lexa had gone into their room before Clarke could stop her, but she’d gotten back from settling the dispute over the tannery area guard just in time.

“Can you see?” she asks.

“I cannot,” Lexa says patiently. Answering the question for the third time.

In Clarke’s defence, no one else could so easily navigate these corridors blindfolded. All the years that Lexa’s lived here probably help, sure, but even so she’s so graceful beside Clarke’s clumping limp that it’s hard to believe the cloth is actually blotting out her vision.

Her left arm still looks very stiff though. It’s interesting, Clarke thinks, that the damage done to them is in some ways consistent. The injuries and the scars that don’t heal, the emotional ones as well as the physical, are received in the same ways.

Lexa’s greatest injuries are always caused by the few people she trusts and should be able to trust – Gustus with poison, Titus with a gun, and now Assan with a sword. Only one has left a scar that can be seen, but in some ways it’s the least serious wound of them, because while Lexa placed some trust in Assan it’s nothing to the trust that Gustus and then Titus betrayed.

Clarke’s broken ankle was self-inflicted, like most of the things that have caused her the greatest pain, apart from her father’s death. Nearly all her injuries come when she’s trying to do the right thing and most times ‘the right thing’ has meant killing people. Her ankle might never fully heal. But her worst scars are from when she killed Finn in the first world, and when she destroyed the Mountain, and those deaths hurt considerably more than the deaths of the Prison Station guards when she first broke her ankle trying to escape. And when she broke her ankle again – well, her ankle may not heal perfectly, but she has no guilt or pain to deal with at the thought of Nia’s death. For once she knows, deep in her soul, that the ruthless and reckless action was the right one to take, that the people she had to kill to get there were not killed in vain.

So now she walks with a limp, and Lexa keeps her left arm unmoving so that her graceful walk is a little less graceful than usual, and Clarke thinks that the price they paid this time was worth it. She’d pay it a hundred, a thousand times over to have Lexa here beside her, wounded or not.

Then they’re in the middle of the bedroom.

“I haven’t totally finished yet,” Clarke says, a little nervously. “It seems like there’s always someone calling me out to settle something. Lincoln’s been helping, otherwise I couldn’t have gotten this much done in a few days…”

“This much of what?” Lexa asks.

Clarke swallows. “You told me how much you loved the forest at night. How much you missed being a Seken, being able to sleep out in the woods, instead of inside a tower. So – I -” She pulls off the blindfold.

Lexa inhales softly.

Clarke’s spent hours working on this – so many hours she’s not sure she can judge it impartially
herself. But then, she’s never been great at judging her own work. She’s proud of this one, though – as proud as she’s ever been of anything she’s done, with the exception of the bonding tattoos she drew. The walls are now a painted tangle of vines, dark lush leaves, pale flowers glowing in the candlelight. In one direction you can see just far enough through the latticework of vines and branches to a tiny moonlit hut that is woven into the woods like it is part of them.

On the ceiling the moon glows faintly, sprinkled stars break up the dark serenity of the night sky, and there’s a single out-of-place larger star. It could be the pieces of the Ark still up there, drawing lonely figure eights in the stars above them. It could be the drop ship falling down, leaving a faint burning trail as it speeds the hundred towards where they’re meant to be. It could even be a spirit – Jake’s, or Costia’s, or the Commanders that have come before – if you believe in that kind of thing, which normally, Clarke doesn’t.

Like so many things Clarke’s discovered since she came to the ground, with this you have to open your mind, and you have to look closer, and then the possibilities are endless. And this is a discovery more than it is a creation – some parts, like the cottage, are her imagination and her work, but the rest was just down here, glowing with life and beauty, waiting for her to find a brush and create her own version of it.

Lexa, standing in the middle of the room, glows brighter than any part of the painting. More beautiful, more meaningful, and more alive.

“It is incredible, Clarke,” Lexa whispers, still staring around herself with wide eyes, taking in every twisting branch and hanging vine. She reaches out a wondering hand toward the little hut. “The one from the story…”

“Yeah,” Clarke says. “I imagined it when you told me that story. And then when I thought we would both die, when we ran out of air, I saw it in my dreams.”

“As did I.” Lexa’s smile is crooked and painful. “When I woke up, I thought I would rather sleep and dream forever than live in a world you were not in.” She swallows hard, and says, “You are my world, Clarke. I hope that you know that. I think I have been waiting all my life – all of my lives – for tomorrow, to stand beside you and have our spirits joined for the rest of time. There is no else in the world who is as bright and beautiful and wise as you are, and I think that is perhaps because the world does not deserve more than one such gift. Certainly I do not deserve you. But I love you more than I have words to say.”

Clarke also doesn’t have the words to say how she feels right now, not with her throat stopped by emotion and her eyes tearing. So she leans in and kisses Lexa to communicate her feelings instead, fisting her hands lightly in the impossible silkiness of Lexa’s braids and savouring the equally impossible softness of her skin. Lexa’s hands are roughened and callused with years of fighting and climbing and working, but her lips are warm and smooth and fit perfectly against Clarke’s. Her delicate bones and her velvety skin and her brilliant green eyes are such a contrast to the strength of her body against Clarke’s, just like her tenderness is the antithesis of what Clarke thought she was the first time she saw her.

She thought Lexa was fierce and cruel and violent. The memory is almost laughable now when she compares it to the leader who was the only one ever to lead them all towards peace, the girl who was broken and rebuilt herself into someone even more beautiful, the woman who she clings to in the darkest parts of the night and wakes to in the morning.

One of Lexa’s hands rubs her lower back soothingly and then travels up, while she presses the other – the weaker one – to Clarke’s face for a moment as she leans in to share another sweet kiss. Then Lexa’s pulling back and there’s something on her face and Clarke opens her eyes in surprise and sees
nothing at all.

She’s blindfolded.

… She’s blindfolded.

“Clarke? Is this -”

“Yes,” Clarke says immediately, almost embarrassed by how husky her voice comes out. She tries to clear her throat and adds, “Yes, it’s fine.”

Lexa lets out her own throaty chuckle, which is one of Clarke’s favourite sounds in the world.

She trusts Lexa completely, and she knows Lexa trusts her completely. But they always check carefully when it comes to things like this – mostly because both of their memories are minefields and neither of them could live with themselves if they triggered the others’. Plus, it’s not as if they’ve really had much time or privacy recently, what with everything that’s been happening.

She wants this honeymoon. She wants it desperately. Not just to have time to explore each other’s bodies more fully than they’ve been able to in tents and shared houses, but to have time to explore the rest of each other. She wants to hear the Trikru names for the stars, the flowers, the trees. Trigedaslang is a very practical language and so Clarke’s gotten by on the vocabulary she has, but she wants to hear Lexa’s soft voice saying pretty and impractical words. She wants to curl up with Lexa and waste days just lying around, telling each other stories about their pasts, making up fantastical and ridiculous plans, just lying there and enjoying the sound of each other’s breathing. She wants to play the worst games of chess she’s ever played because Lexa’s sweet smile is too distracting for her to focus on strategy. She wants Lexa’s arms around her all the time. She wants to feel safe.

The truth is… Lexa is the only person she trusts completely, anymore. The only person she’d let blindfold her. Oh, she’s sure that if Wells or Raven wanted her to wear a blindfold it would be for a good reason, and they wouldn’t hurt her, but it would still make Clarke too anxious and panicky – the thought of not being able to see the threats coming. She trusts Lexa to keep her safe. And Lexa trusts her – would the great Commander let anyone else blindfold her without a word of protest or caution? Lexa’s spent her whole life knowing that even with her guards, her tent isn’t safe, her tower isn’t safe, her world isn’t safe. But with Clarke she feels safe enough to accept another handicap, to let herself be blind, to let herself be led.

If she hadn’t found Lexa – if she’d lost Lexa – Clarke would have never felt safe again. Or complete again. She would have tried to find ways to feel happy again – but even if she succeeded, it couldn’t ever be the kind of fierce joy she feels with Lexa, it would have been a watered-down, forced attempt. A desperate forgery of what she has now.

She’s so lucky.

Lexa pushes Clarke gently back until Clarke is half-lying on the bed, already breathing a little faster with anticipation.

“One more.” Lexa instruction Clarke, voice low.

Clarke does. And waits. And waits. And – is that Lexa’s breath in her ear? She’s sure it was. Lexa’s lips on her neck – oh. Then the quick touch of lips is gone, leaving only the air cooling the place where the warm, insistent press of Lexa was only moments before. Goosebumps prickle all over Clare’s body and she moans in want, her whole concentration taken up with trying to sense where
Lexa is, anticipating every possible touch and desperately yearning for any of them.

It’s okay to be blind. It’s okay not to see what’s coming. Lexa’s here. For the longest time Clarke felt only dread, sure the unknown future contained nothing but threat after threat. Right now, though, she can’t see anything – but Lexa is here, so she’s safe, and the future is nothing to fear.

Tomorrow she’s getting married, and the tomorrow after that she’ll be with Lexa, and the tomorrow after that, and the tomorrow after that. Now, no matter how far she looks, the future seems filled with wonderful things.

The near future, especially…

Clarke shivers as Lexa’s fingers ghost up her sides, lifting her top slowly and sensually, then lets out a surprised whimper as Lexa kisses her lower stomach and nips the angle of her hip lightly, grazing her teeth along the skin.

She rises up to Lexa’s touch and lets the future come.
The slow, careful creak of the door wakes Lexa and she is out of the bed with her sword held threateningly in her right hand before it is halfway open. Clarke is on the other side of the bed, a knife in her hand, but has the presence of mind to pull the blanket around her with the other so that she is not fully exposed when Raven edges in.

“Wake up, you’re getting marr—” she starts to say loudly and cheerfully before noticing that Clarke’s naked except for a blanket, and Lexa’s naked except for her bandaged shoulder, and they are both already awake and holding weaponry. “Gah!”

“Raven?” Lexa says, lowering the sword.

Raven tries to back through the door again, eyes wide, and crashes into Gustus, who was following her into the room, landing uncomfortably on the ground. “I didn’t see anything!” she lies quickly and unconvincingly, voice high-pitched, covering her eyes. “Nothing!”

“I told you that you should let me announce you,” Gustus says with quiet smugness, unbothered by Lexa’s nudity. He calmly passes her one of her robes and Lexa pulls it about herself out of deference to Raven kom Skaikru’s feelings and her own dignity, though nakedness is not as significant a taboo among her people as it seems to be among Clarke’s.

“Raven, what are you doing?” Clarke asks patiently.

“I was going to come in and wake you up to start getting ready, Clarke, since – you know – you’re getting married today,” Raven says, uncovering her eyes cautiously. She shoots a glare at Gustus. “He said you were in here and offered to announce me. He didn’t mention that Lexa was as well.”

“You did not ask,” Gustus says calmly. “It is Heda’s room, of course she is here.”

“Normally she’s out helping train the Nightbloods just after dawn!” Raven objects. “It’s nearly ten.”

“I decided to allow myself to rest longer since travelling to the area for our honey moon will take some time and we cannot expect to leave before dusk given the celebrations,” Lexa explains, glad she does not blush easily. In addition to this perfectly sensible reason, she is quite tired from last night. She can see one corner of Clarke’s mouth twitch upwards in mischievous amusement at her censored explanation. When she gives her niron an exasperated glance, Clarke gives her a sultry look in response.

…So much for Lexa’s belief that she does not blush easily.

“Right. Right.” Raven says, still speaking too quickly. “Very sensible. I was just explaining why I didn’t expect you. Not that it’s not great to see you, Lex. I mean, not that I saw you! Though if I had,” Raven adds as a quiet aside to Clarke, sounding uncannily like Jasper kom Skaikru, “If I had seen her naked, I would say congratulations, because she is smoking.”

Clarke rolls her eyes, still clutching the blanket around her. “Good thing you didn’t see her, then, because that would be the worst maid of honour speech ever. Especially in front of my mother.”

“Oh.” Raven frowns. “We should probably get her up here as well, I’m pretty sure the mother-of-
the-bride is supposed to be involved in the whole dress-and-make-up process. Even when the ‘dress’
is leather armour and the ‘make-up’ is warpaint.”

“I will fetch her for you,” Lexa says, casually shrugging off the robe and beginning to pull on her
own outfit. Raven makes a little noise and stares for a moment then abruptly pivots to face the wall,
as uncomfortable as Lexa has ever seen her. “Along with Marcus kom Skaikru, I placed her on the
floor set aside for visiting leaders. I assume Roan’s rooms will be on the same floor? I must speak to
him before we are bonded and leave for our honey moon, it would not be respectful to ignore the
new Azhefa.”

Gustus is nodding already. “His quarters are very close to Abby kom Skaikru’s, Heda,” he says. As
always, he will have memorised the location of every visitor, and organised guards for each. Guards
ordered to protect valuable allies, but also to watch them. While the Fleimkepa traditionally handles
the management of the Commander’s personal servants, Gustus has always been devoted to ensuring
Lexa’s protection, inside the tower and out.

She has considered sending him away again. She loves him, but he betrayed her once, and that
means there is a risk he will do it again. But whatever happens, she knows he is no longer a threat to
Clarke or her friends, and he has never been a threat to Lexa herself. He would die for any of them.
So Lexa has decided it is a risk worth taking.

She kisses Clarke quickly before she goes, but then Raven pulls her away and begins interrogating
Clarke about which outfit she plans to wear for her bonding ceremony now that there is more to
choose from than there was on the Ark, and Lexa decides to leave them to it.

When Gustus announces her and she enters Abby’s quarters she raises her eyebrows in momentary
surprise, seeing Kane and Abby embracing closely. Then they pull apart and Lexa realises that Abby
has actually been sobbing desperately into her friend’s shoulder.

“Commander,” Kane says, stepping forward to avert an argument as always. “This is a very
emotional day for all of us who know and care for Clarke, I’m sure you understand. Especially her
mother.”

“Of course,” Lexa says politely, inclining her head to Kane, though she doesn’t believe him for a
moment. “Raven has sent me to summon you to our room, Abby kom Skaikru, to aid her in
preparing for the joining.” She hopes Abby does not upset Clarke with her weeping.

Abby nods immediately, determinedly forcing her face to calmness and trying to rub the tearstains
away with her sleeve at the same time. “Oh, I’d better go, then. See how I can help.” With a rather
pathetic forced smile at Lexa she rushes out.

“Commander,” Kane says quickly and quietly as Lexa turns to leave as well, and she pauses.

“Yes, Marcus kom Skaikru?” Lexa says, a shade coolly.

The warm sympathy in his eyes banishes her annoyance, though. “It wasn’t about you,” he says. “It
wasn’t even about you and Clarke.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Clarke’s father,” Kane says simply, and the last bit of Lexa’s displeasure disappears. “Abby wishes
he was here. She never imagined this day happening without him.”

“Clarke misses him too,” Lexa tells him. “Every day.”
Kane smiles crookedly. “In some ways I think it’s harder for Abby. Clarke mourns him. If Abby would just talk to Clarke about it, then… but she won’t. She feels like she’s not allowed to mourn him, because she blames herself for his death. But at the same time she can’t face that responsibility. She tells herself it was Thelonious’s fault, or my fault, that she was the only one of us who cared about him, that we betrayed her and caused his death.”

Lexa meets his sharp eyes. “And was it your fault?”

“Yes,” Kane says simply. “It was my fault, and Thelonious’s, and hers, and the Ark’s laws, and even Jake’s own fault in some ways, and every single one of us was just trying to do what we thought was the right thing. He wasn’t the only innocent person who I caused the death of, either. But I deal with my own guilt every day.”

“And I deal with mine,” Lexa tells Kane, leaving the subject of Abby behind.

Kane smiles. “I can’t speak for before we came down, Commander, but as for what you’ve done since we got here – I don’t believe you have anything to feel guilt for. You should be proud of the things you’ve accomplished.”

Gustus shifts behind her and Lexa looks back at him, remembering her real purpose for being here. “I am afraid I must leave you, Marcus kom Skaikru,” she says politely, and he bows to her. “I will see you later at the ceremony.”

“Of course,” he says.

As it turns out, Roan is not in the room allotted to him. They find him down near the stables, speaking to a harried-looking Azgeda messenger who is carrying a basket. As soon as they see her, both men bow, though Lexa notes that Roan’s bow is not quite as deep or reverential as his subject’s. “Greetings, Heda,” he says. “I am thankful for your safe return.”

“Are you indeed, Roan kom Azgeda, Azhefa?” Lexa raises a sceptical eyebrow.

“More than anything on this earth,” Roan assures her, a glint in his eye. “After all, I cannot believe that my new position would remain secure without the support of the Commander.”

Lexa nearly smiles at that. “You will have to develop more diplomacy in your new role,” she comments lightly. “Walk with me.”

He takes the basket from the messenger and dismisses him. “I am already developing such skills,” he says, keeping pace with her easily. “I hold in my hands a bonding gift from the Ice Nation to our Commander and her houmon, what could be more diplomatic than that?”

“I am surprised you had the time to acquire one,” Lexa admits.

“I could not allow the other nations to provide better tributes simply because they knew of the bonding ceremony a week before I did,” Roan scoffs.

“Given the distances involved, I am sure most of the ambassadors will simply offer a note of promise, or use a gift they had planned to save for Ascension Day,” Lexa says. “Most of the thirteen clans are too far to even know I am to be bonded yet.”

“A great challenge for them, then,” Roan says with a flash of white teeth. “But the Azgeda meet all challenges more effectively than other nations, I have always thought.” He holds out the basket for her to take, but Lexa waves it away.
“Save it for the marking ceremony,” she advises.

He raises an eyebrow. “Not the official feast?”

“No,” Lexa says. “As you pointed out, Azhefa, not all the clans will have had time to prepare, and this is not their fault. Asking for a gift they cannot provide in front of all Polis will simply make them appear foolish and disrespectful, and me weak. So they shall give whatever they have managed to find at the relative privacy of the marking ceremony beforehand. If it were not for the disrespect it implies, I would tell them to give no gifts at all.”

“You have all you need, do you?” he says, still with that faintly amused air. Lexa can feel that Gustus, standing loyally behind her, is glaring at Roan for his light mockery.

“And all I could want,” Lexa replies swiftly. “Though I am of course grateful for the gifts that will be provided from the clans. I should leave to prepare for the marking ceremony soon, since barely an hour remains until it.”

Blessings for a bonding are normally given during the marking ceremony – the ceremony is only attended by close friends and family, and in this case leaders and ambassadors, and while the bonding tattoos are inked on they drink, tell stories of the couple, give gifts, and share their gladness at the union. Souls are merged together with the prick of needles while the room fills with talk of hope and happiness, so that those good wishes sink into the skin as the ink does.

“You must be nervous,” Roan says provocingly.

“Of course not,” Lexa says, deliberately misunderstanding him. “I have received many tattoos before. Compared to wounds I have received in the past, it is so little pain as to be meaningless.” She gives him an innocent look of confusion, as if wondering why he fears tattoos.

He nods, lips quirking as he recognises her jab. “I am sure your new houmon feels the same. I have not known her long or well, but I know she has a skill for both attracting wounds and surviving them. Nothing to yours, of course, since rumour tells me that death itself cannot claim you however it tries…”

“Death does not claim any of us for long,” Lexa says calmly. “Our spirits go where they may.”

“It seems my mother’s attack could not keep you in the grave any more than mine,” he continues, ignoring her comment. “One could say that my attack, however false it may have been, gave you the reputation you enjoy today.”

“I had a reputation long before I let you live in return for your services, Roan kom Azgeda,” Lexa tells him. “I did not enjoy it then and I do not enjoy it now. I use it, as I use all tools to my hand. As you will use all tools. That is what you are doing now, is it not? Trying to improve your position by presuming upon the assistance you unwillingly offered?”

“Not entirely unwillingly,” he demurs.

“So you chose your actions, and now you rule your nation as a reward,” Lexa says flatly. “You remain a clan in the alliance, your borders are respected, you are given food, one of your people is honoured as Fleimkepa. If you are attempting to use my personal gratitude for your help to reduce what the Ice Nation owes as repayment for their disobedience and disloyalty, you should save your breath. The new Fleimkepa and the ambassadors will begin negotiations for repayment of their food and supplies while I am away with my houmon, in any case.”

“As always, it is impossible to manipulate the Commander,” Roan says, a mix of laughter and
reluctant admiration in his usually-gruff voice. “Not that I would dare try.”

“See, you are already learning diplomacy,” Lexa says dryly. She meets his gaze and knows he is wondering if any of his knowledge of her activities is worth something, and coming to the conclusion it is not. He can tell people she fooled them and planned her own death, but although he knows she planned it he does not know how she faked it or how she survived it. Telling people would do nothing but add to her reputation and make him appear disloyal.

Roan always looks for an advantage, however slight. Strangely, it is one of the things she most likes about him, since she is the same. Nevertheless, he will not find one here.

Lexa inclines her head to Roan as a farewell. “It was… pleasant to speak to you again, Roan kom Azgeda. Now I must leave you to prepare for my bonding.”

“I will see you in an hour then, Heda.” As she turns to leave, she hears a high-pitched little noise come from behind her and spins back, only to see him holding the basket up close to his face, shushing the creature inside.

“I suppose I should feed you before then,” he murmurs to the wolf cub.

Chapter End Notes

QUANTUM REALITY MADE THIS STORY A TVTROPES PAGE!!! I did an embarrassing excited dance around the room when I found out. It's so beautiful! THANK YOU QUANTUM REALITY YOU ARE AMAZING.

http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/LightningOnlyStrikesOnce
“So explain to me why Wells isn’t here?” Clarke asks. “He’s part of my wedding party too.”

Clarke watches in the mirror as Raven twines two of her plaits together, then gives up and lets the intricate plaits sit with a sigh. One of the guards outside had brought in someone from Polis to do Clarke’s hair, frustrating Raven, who had been sure she could do it better.

Long story short, she couldn’t. They’d had to call the woman back. Clarke hopes Raven doesn’t mess up her hair again, sending her guard to fetch an expert for the third time would be verging on embarrassing.

“He said he was busy,” Raven says, rolling her eyes at the mirror. “Handling the ambassadors, making sure none of them will bicker through the ceremony, that kind of thing.”

“Does he take charge with them that much?” Clarke asks, frowning, already expecting trouble. The other ambassadors won’t like being bossed around by their newest member. Abby, reacting to the note of concern in her daughter’s voice, gets up to stand beside her and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Clarke resists the temptation to shrug it off – things are still strained with her mother, but she’s very glad to have her here.

Raven considers it. “No, not exactly, not from what I’ve seen. He just says everything really calmly and reasonably and then they sort of just end up going along with it. He says it’s because they haven’t had time to develop the grudges against us that they traditionally have with each other’s clans, but I think he’s learnt hypnotism and doesn’t want to teach me.”

“Thank god,” Clarke says under her breath, and Raven meets her eyes with a playful glare. Even Abby manages a smile at that one.

“Anyway,” Raven says. “Apparently, to Wells, sorting out the ambassadors is more important than getting you ready for the big day.”

“It’s not that big a day,” Clarke says, though she can feel a silly smile forcing its way onto her face.

“It is a big day,” Abby agrees with Raven. “You’re making a lifelong commitment to another person.”

Her mother’s face in the mirror, the doubt in it, prompts Clarke to speak. “I’ve already made that, this just makes it official. What I feel for Lexa is real, and it’s forever. I need you to understand that.” It comes out harsh and uncompromising.

Raven lets out a surprised little noise, and says rapidly, “You know, I have eyeliner in my room. I’m gonna go fetch that.” She exits quickly, leaving mother and daughter staring at each other’s reflections in the mirror as they speak.

“It’s just… you’re so young,” Abby says softly.

“No,” Clarke says shortly, stiffening further, not willing to go through this again. “I’m not. Why is it so hard for you to admit I’m an adult now?”
Abby lets out a long sigh, almost like a sob. “Because if I admit you’re an adult, then I have to acknowledge that it’s my fault you’ve grown up so quickly.”

“Mom -” Clare starts to say, but Abby talks on, the words bubbling out of her like she’s been holding them back for too long.

“It’s my fault that Jake died. My fault you were kept in solitary for a year, my fault you were sent down here as ‘expendable’…” Tears spring into her eyes. “My fault that you’ve grown up so fast, that you’re so hard, that you’re the kind of person who can order executions without blinking.”

“It’s not your fault, Mom, this is who I am,” Clarke says helplessly, even as she pulls back from the harshness of the words. “You didn’t -”

“And my little girl – my idealistic, optimistic little girl – could forgive me for that, for all the terrible things I’ve done, for what I’ve done to her. She needed me,” Abby continues, so quietly Clarke strains to hear. “But I look into your eyes and I don’t always recognise the person staring back. You don’t need me at all, now, and I’m afraid you’ll never forgive me. I’m losing you.”

Assurances that she forgives her, that she still needs her, trip onto Clarke’s tongue automatically, but she closes her mouth and swallows them. They need the truth more than they need comforting lies. “We all do horrible things when we’re trying to do what’s right,” she says instead, just as quietly. “I understand why you did the things you did. Forgiveness will take time and effort, but it will happen, I promise. I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, baby,” Abby says, but her voice still sounds tight and her eyes still look lost.

“You’ve done good things too,” Clarke tells her, trying to find something to take that look out of her mother’s eyes. “Lexa told me that people need to think of the lives they’ve saved as well as the ones they’ve taken. You saved all the people who would have been killed to conserve air. You sent Raven down here. You looked after Lexa when – when I wasn’t here.” Her voice stumbles over the last sentence.

“She’s a wonderful girl,” Abby says, then corrects herself shakily. “A wonderful woman.”

Clarke smiles at the effort. “You should stop thinking of this bonding ceremony as losing me. I’m not a child anymore, but I’m still here and I’m still your daughter, and now you get to have an amazing daughter-in-law as well.”

“That’s true,” Abby says, and now a tentative smile spreads across her face as well. “I hadn’t thought of that. Another daughter.” She kisses the top of Clarke’s head gently. “I’m sorry I’ve been so… difficult. I do like Lexa, and I know she loves you, and you love her, and if you believe that it’s the kind of love that lasts forever than I’m happy for you both. It’s just hard for me to see you setting up a life, a family, that doesn’t seem to include me.”

“There’ll always be a place for you in my family, Mom,” Clarke promises. “In our family.”

“Good,” Abby says, regaining her usual confidence and composure. “Then I suppose it’s about time I gave you these.” She takes hold of Clarke’s hand and enfolds something into it.

When Clarke opens her hand to see what she’s been given, a pair of simple gold rings sit on her palm. “Mom,” she breathes.

Gold rings were rare on the Ark – any gold jewellery was. Gold was an excellent conductor, useful for wiring and computer issues, so there was a small annual supplies tax for keeping any to yourself. Some families had managed to hold onto a pair of wedding rings anyway, to pass down each
generation when their child got married. It hadn’t even occurred to Clarke that her mother would still have the ones that she’d exchanged with Jake, that her mother had exchanged with her father, that her paternal grandparents had exchanged with each other, all the way back to when the bombs fell. If she had remembered that, she would never have expected to be given them.

“It doesn’t seem to be a Grounder thing, and if you don’t want to have these as well -” Abby starts to say, voice a little anxious in response to Clarke’s silence.

Clarke turns, stands and embraces her in one quick movement. “Thank you,” she says, inflecting her tone with every bit of gratitude and love she can manage.

“I don’t know if I can say that every couple who wore them have been happy,” Abby tells her, looking a bit tearful again. “But I can honestly tell you that every single couple who exchanged them loved each other more than they ever thought was possible.”

Raven re-enters the room just as they pull apart. “Would you believe it, I already have the mascara here. Weird, huh?”

“Raven,” Clarke says flatly. “Have you been waiting outside the door the whole time?”

“Noooo. Of course not. Why would you think that? Would I do that?”

“You left for eyeliner, not mascara,” Clarke ticks off her points on her fingers. “Your room is much further away than the five minutes you’ve been gone. You’ve already used eyeliner and mascara – on yourself as well as me.” She pauses for a moment, then finishes with, “And yes, that’s absolutely something you would do.”

“I was being tactful,” Raven says loftily.

“And that’s something you wouldn’t do,” Clarke says, but can’t stop her smile from pushing its way across her face again. It’s impossible to stop smiling today.

“Hey,” Wells comes into the room, smiling at her, his whole face lit up with happiness for her. She gets up again and throws herself into his eager hug. “Clarke, you look beautiful.”

“She does, yes,” Raven studies Clarke’s outfit thoughtfully, the hard leather, the belts, the zips and buckles, the many knife sheaths. “But she also looks like she’s about to stab someone.”

“And here I thought that was your type,” Wells says, so innocently that for a second Clarke’s not even sure he’s joking. Before she can be sure, he turns his attention back to her and says, “Sorry I’m so late, I was with the other ambassadors. There was some debate about how many people from their clan they each should bring, because according to them, I’m bringing about a dozen Skaikru. I pointed out that only Kane is really there in an official capacity, but it took a while to get them to see my point of view.”

Raven mouths the word ‘hypnotism’ at Clarke, raising her eyebrows in an exaggerated way.

“I’m glad to see you before the ceremony,” Clarke admits, hugging Wells again.

“Looking forward to getting your first tattoo?” he says, sounding a little amused.

“I offered to whip up a proper tattooing needle,” Raven says, sounding a little sulky. “But everyone turned me down. It would’ve been such an interesting challenge, too, I’ve never made one before.”

“No offence, Rae, but we weren’t crazy about the idea of being your test subjects,” Clarke tells her.
“We’re only getting the outlines done today, anyway. The full designs will take at least forty hours each.” She looks proudly down at the two pieces of paper with the designs.

They had taken a long time, although not as many hours as it had taken to paint the room. But they’re done now, and Lexa loves them, and she loves them, and even thinking about having the bonding tattoos etched onto them for life gives Clarke a warm glow.

The designs aren’t identical. Bonding joins your souls, as Clarke understands it, but they are still different souls. So her and Lexa’s designs are different in some ways.

Both are a simplified, slightly abstracted landscape, with the skyline of Polis featured starkly. The composition is identical, but part of Clarke’s tattoo depicts dark clouds, white stars winking through them, and lightning branching off in different directions as it joins ground and sky. In Lexa’s tattoo, in the place of the clouds are thick set leaves, instead of the stars there are little white flowers strewn in amongst the leaves, and in place of the lightning is the pale trunk and branches of the tree.

If Clarke blurs her eyes just enough they look like the same picture, but they’re not – they’re very similar and very different at the same time, perfect for her and Lexa. Their individual tattoos show where they’re from, but the picture of Polis that’s framed by Clarke’s stormy sky and Lexa’s tangled forest shows where they are and where they’re going – it shows their home.

“Wanheda?” one of the guards politely enters the room, head bowed respectfully. “It is time.”

Clarke stands, picking up the pieces of paper, although she knows there’s already a copy waiting there for her. The two best tattooists in Polis volunteered to do their bonding tattoos – actually, all the tattooists in Polis begged for the chance, but Gustus had chosen the two best and respectfully turned the others down.

“Good,” she says to the guard, unable to believe it’s really time, finally. “I’ve been waiting forever.”

Chapter End Notes

Only two more chapters remaining (a short ending chapter than a longer epilogue) but I'm afraid it will be a few weeks before I can post them, I'm travelling south (to gf's family) then north (to my family) then moving (with internet disconnected). Sorry!
The tattooist pricks Lexa’s upper left arm with the needle so quickly and expertly that she cannot feel a thing. In an hour or so, perhaps she will – it is her left side that is injured, after all. Perhaps the others believe she is getting it on that side just because her right arm already bears one of the Commander’s tattoos, or even believe it is foolish to get the bonding tattoo there while still injured, but Lexa thinks it is fitting.

Her lingering injury means her left side will always be vulnerable in battles, just as Clarke’s broken ankle may weaken her right side. Lexa will strengthen her right arm further and grow used to fighting more fiercely with it, but her left arm will never be quite the same. However, this does not matter. This tattoo is a symbol telling the world that she will always have someone fighting by her side, so the injury that appears to be a weakness is in fact a strength. Clarke will cover Lexa’s weak left side. She will cover Clarke’s weak right. They will still be far stronger than if either of them fought alone.

Clarke holds her right hand tightly now, the other tattooist working steadily away at her design. Despite the prick of the needles, the drinks and food spread around them, and the bright chatter of stories and blessings provided by their guests, they cannot look away from each other. Every part of Lexa’s focus is on Clarke. The heat of her body, the curve of her smile, the smell of her hair. The stories are simply background music to it.

“I’ve known Clarke my whole life. Once when I was five, some older boys were bullying me, and Clarke stepped in front of me and said ‘how dare you hurt my friend!’ and glared them down like they were nothing. She was so tiny and pretty that she shouldn’t have been threatening at all, but she had this look in her eyes as if she could face down armies. I think some part of me knew, even back then, that someday she would face down armies. But I never imagined that there was someone in the world who could match Clarke’s intelligence, her fierceness, her desire to do what’s right, her belief in people, her sheer force of character – not until we came down here. Back when we were up on the Ark, I never realised that she wouldn’t be facing down those armies alone. Now I know she’ll never have to face anything alone, because she found Lexa, and Lexa found her.”

The gifts from the clans are piled before them now, a haphazard assortment of carved chess pieces, lizard wine, finely made saddles, dried ocean delicacies. A wolf cub snores in Clarke’s lap, creating a picture Lexa finds as heartwarming as she does amusing – Roan claims the beast is well-trained, but she has her doubts. She attributes its easy affection towards Clarke as being because – well, it is Clarke. How could anyone, even a wolf cub, fail to love Clarke?

“Heda was the smallest Natblida when she arrived, as well as the quietest. Because she was silent, because she watched and did not speak, she saw more than anyone else could see – when she first looked at me I thought she could see my spirit and it swore allegiance to her before I did. I still believe that to be true. At times I could see flashes of her spirit as well, not just the Commander spirit that chose her, but the spirit that Lexa kom Trikru had before she ever won the Conclave. A true spirit, a wise spirit. Nearly always she held it quietly within her, like so much else, but when you watched her fight or speak or smile you could see the edges of it. I believe she could not let us see more without blinding us. In Clarke kom Skaikru she has found someone not blinded by her spirit, but willing to meet it and match it. She has found someone who does not just understand her burdens but shares them…”
The tattooist takes a moment to wipe away the excess ink and blood. Lexa is always more difficult to tattoo accurately than other people, her black blood mixing with the ink and making it difficult to tell the two apart. Clarke’s tattooist is finding it easier, her red blood bright against the dull grey of the needle and black of the ink.

“…So my brother came staggering out of the tent, all white-faced, talking about the Commander like she was the most terrifying thing he’d ever seen, some kind of demon or whatever. We thought Clarke would be coming out of that tent in pieces, the way he was talking. The minutes just kept ticking by and everything was so quiet we could hear our own breathing and all the Trikru around us started muttering quietly to each other and putting their hands on their weapons just in case. Then Anya kom Trikru went inside to check, and the next thing we knew, Clarke and Heda walked out together. They were standing close to each other and for the next week I never saw them further apart than twenty feet, I swear. And the way they talked, it was like they could read each other’s minds. Like they were the only people who got each other, and the only ones who could make the kind of choices they make, and make them so well. It still seems like that. It’s incredible.”

Clarke raises Lexa’s hand to her lips for a brief moment, looking deeply into her eyes. She does not say a word. She does not have to.

They have declared their love for each other a thousand times, in a thousand ways, and will continue to. It is a truth that is set in stone, engraved into the heart of them even as it is being marked onto their skin now. And like all such truths, it bears repeating. The truth does not wear out by being told again. This truth is one Lexa wishes to hear and feel and say and share and know, every day of their lives.

A soft kiss to the back of Lexa’s hand is just another way for Clarke to say she loves her.

“I first saw them coming across the border into our territory, when we were ordered by the false queen and natrona Nia to waylay them. My unit’s leader did not see the brightness in their faces nor the wisdom in their eyes. He disrespected the Commander, but he could not shame her – her dignity shamed him instead. When he tried to harm her, she merely ignored him, as if he were a rude, ignorant child tugging at her sash, which is truly what he was beside such greatness as they both have. Then he came towards Clarke, the Wanheda-that-would-be, and she gazed at him with ice in her eyes that would not thaw even as he bled before her. When he reached for her niron, Heda became a whirlwind of justice and vengeance, striking him down for foolishly daring to touch what was not his and would never be his. Heda and Wanheda were both fire and ice and death, more than human, more even than spirits, and I knew in that second that they would destroy mountains together as easily as they destroyed Rathan.”

The tattooists pause to mix more ink, allowing Clarke and Lexa to shift slightly.

“I knew Heda had an affection for Clarke kom Skaikru almost as soon as they met. I have known the Commander since she was my seken, after all, and although she guards herself far more than when she was a goufa I can sometimes still read her eyes. But I do not think I understood how much she cared until the fall of the Mountain – I thought after all her experiences she would keep her niron far from all danger, locked away, and protected. But she allowed Clarke kom Skaikru to go to Azgeda territory with her, and put her in danger. She treated Clarke kom Skaikru as her confidante and advisor, and made her a target. And then she sent her into the Mountain alone and left her to walk out alone. But when we went to defeat the Mountain Heda looked at me and said she could not die, for she had promised Clarke. They had promised each other. It was then I began to understand that it was Lexa’s strong feelings for Clarke that allowed her to risk her hodnes. She would not hide Clarke away as if shamed by her, or protect her as if she were weak. Long before any of us understood the truth, Heda saw that Clarke kom Skaikru had an unconquerable spirit, and treated her as an equal.”
Clarke takes Lexa’s hand again. This time she folds something into it, and when Lexa looks down at it, she sees it is a ring on a length of chain. The ring is warm like Clarke’s skin and golden like Clarke’s hair and when Clarke gently places the chain around Lexa’s neck it sits against her chest, close to her heart.

“I know it’s – I know it’s not news to any of you that I wasn’t thrilled when I met Lexa. I didn’t have the chance to really get to know her at first, so all I saw her as was a stranger, a Grounder, and a ruthless leader who didn’t hesitate to execute her enemies – in other words, as someone who could be a threat to me and my people. A threat to my daughter, especially, since it seemed like Clarke changed overnight when she met Lexa. But then when Clarke was taken I saw a different side to Lexa. I saw how much she loved my daughter, for one thing – I saw that I wasn’t the only one destroyed with fear and grief at what could be happening. I focused on little tasks and tried to distract myself, but Lexa thought of a way to bring my daughter home, and when she told me she would save Clarke I believed her. I didn’t understand at the time that she wasn’t just bringing my baby girl home, but that she’d actually made her a home as well. I’ve found it difficult to come to terms with Clarke making such a serious commitment – watching her commit to her work, her cause, her home, her partner, all of it forever! - but the truth is, if it was anyone besides Lexa, I couldn’t come to terms with it at all. Because if there’s anyone out there who I could happily watch my baby girl spend the rest of her life with – it’s the woman whose hand she’s holding right now.”

Clarke passes Lexa another ring, not on a chain, and Lexa somehow knows what to do – she slides it onto Clarke’s finger gently, then brings her houmon’s hand to her lips and kisses it just as Clarke did to her. Her eyes are blurry with tears. She does not need to ask to know that this is a Skaikru version of the Trikru ceremony they are doing right now.

“I have fisa training, and as often as I am asked to scout or to fight, I am also asked to heal. But since I came to know the Skaikru I have seen that some of them have ways to heal that I do not understand. I do not speak of their potions and pills – I speak of the first time Clarke kom Skaikru healed me. At the time I thought she was fixing my leg, but she was fixing far more, because she brought Octavia to me. There is more than one kind of healing. I have never seen so clear a sign of that as when the Commander opened a door inside an Azgeda ally’s house and Clarke kom Skaikru came out. It was as if a great, choking weight lifted off our Heda, as if she could breathe again, to see her niron alive and know that they both survived. I was foolish. I feared until that moment that we could not rescue Clarke, that we would find only her body, if that. But she rescued herself and then she saved our Commander – I saw it in Heda’s face, that she was saved. I have never known a greater fisa than Clarke, and I do not think I ever will, for she heals souls and hearts as well as bodies.”

Clarke is joined to her by a dagger hidden in her hair, a tattoo carved into her right arm, a broken ankle gained trying to return to her, and now a ring on her finger. Lexa is joined to Clarke by a watch sitting loosely on her wrist, a tattoo carved into her left arm, a scarred shoulder gained trying to keep her safe, and now a chain looped around her neck with the meaning pressed against her heart. But that is all just physical – the visible, outward signs of what has been a core-deep merging, the joining and melding of two kindred souls.

“So I’m pretty sure I spend half my time with Clarke and Lexa telling them their plans are suicidal and insane, but they definitely took it up a notch when they decided to bring down like a million tonnes of snow on their heads. Me and Lincoln were waiting around outside and he turned to me and wondered what we would do if they were dead. And I told him, they can’t be dead. Because neither of them would ever let the other one die. They’re there. They’ll come back. They always do… So then Wells turns up with an army but a serious shovel shortage and we spent way too much time digging. I mean, I was injured, but I supervised. And panicked, obviously. But mostly supervised. Everyone dug and dug and found dozens of dead bodies but nothing else, and I started to wonder as
well – what will we do if they’re dead? Who’s going to keep us all safe? Who’s going to lead us? Who’s going to make me laugh, prop me up, be my best friends in the world?... ‘cause I’m selfish like that. And then I started to get angry, really angry, this time not for me, because it seemed like the suckiest thing in the world that they didn’t get the ending they deserved. I couldn’t stand the thought of the best, most loving, insanest, awesomest people I know not even getting a wedding, let alone a full-on happy ever after lasting decades. They deserve that and more. And you know, I can’t think of a happier moment in my life - well, maybe one or two, but – no, wait, that was definitely the happiest, sorry, cheekbones – anyway, I was so happy when we found them. And they were in each other’s arms. I was even happier when I realised they were gonna get that happy ever after.”

The tattooists finish at the same time, outlines complete, souls bonded together. Some people move or leave or come up to Clarke and Lexa to speak to them, to give them small gifts, to just share in their joy. There is enough joy to go around.

Outside, the world explodes with light and noise, but there is nothing threatening in it and for once Lexa does not flinch or tense. Perhaps Raven kom Skaikru has organised fireworks, perhaps it is the citizens of Polis beginning their celebrations, perhaps it is even spirits touching this world as the believers avowed. Clarke and Lexa do not notice, however, absorbed as they are with each other, lips on lips, fingers pulling at braids, bodies pressed close together.

Their story ends with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the insane delay! My partner and I moved and the internet company swore it would be on by the time we moved in. Then they swore it would be the first week. Then the second. Now they say mid-February, but luckily my gf is amazing and lent me her phone’s internet plan from her laptop (because I’m technologically incapable and don’t have the kind of phone that gets internet). To apologise, there is no delay between this short chapter and the longer epilogue.
Epilogue: To Ascend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is an expectant hush in the air. A sea of faces spreads out from the tower as far as can be seen in every direction, jostling in silence for a slightly better position, a slightly closer one. The most ardent believers make the holy sign, a closed fist pressed against their forehead, exactly where Heda’s cogwheel sits.

Lexa the Undying, the Commander, Leader of the Thirteen Clans, Creator of the Alliance, Commander of Souls, breathes out. And sends the weighted knife flying to the centre of the target.

Clarke can’t help the smile that spreads over her face when Lexa glances back to see if her houmon is watching, just as the crowd explodes with enthusiasm. She wonders if someone testing the knives before a knife throwing competition has ever been the object of such intense devotion and attention before. Probably not. It warms her that she’s the only one whose reaction Lexa cares about despite that.

The competitions started a week ago. Ascension Day has always had fights between individuals, challenges between the gathered people, arguments between drunk gona that turn physical. This year, however, in honour of the peace that shows every sign of being lasting (despite a few troublesome issues that are still being dealt with), Clarke had the idea of a more thorough set of events, pitting the best of each clan against each other. Running races, climbing, knife throwing, and of course all kinds of fighting. Winners to receive glory for their clan. Lexa told her that a lot of them are getting more than that – runners getting offered positions as messengers for important people, climbers as scouts or sentries, and fighters as guards or gona.

The final rounds of each competition are happening today to honour the Ascension. So far the Sankru are winning overall, though the Trikru are making headway. Skaikru are, of course, coming dead last. They haven’t had long enough to build up the muscle mass and swiftness of the Grounders. Besides Octavia, the few who knew how to fight without guns only know Ark-style fighting, which means they’re used to very flat and steady ground and to small enclosed spaces. It doesn’t really bother Clarke that her people are losing any more than it seems to thrill Lexa that her people could win. They’re all just – people, to both of them, now. It’s comforting.

It’s different. But good.

Clarke glances over at Gustus and sees he’s tapping the fingers of his left hand rhythmically against the side of his spear. To anyone watching, it looks like a nervous habit, even he doesn’t seem to be aware he’s doing it. However, because of Clarke and Lexa’s near-continuous company of guards, worshippers, worried citizens, Natblida, and various other people, they have a lot of quiet signals for different important things – and this specific pattern of tapping is one of them.

Lexa retreats back to the seat next to Clarke, inclining her head to give the competitors permission to begin.

Lexa takes Clarke’s hand and kisses the back quickly. “This was a good idea of yours, ai niron,” she says softly. “Indra has reported only four fights between the clans outside these events, all easily dealt with.” The enthusiastic catcalls and cheers as each clan’s representative takes their turn perfectly covers anything they say to each other.
Clarke lets her eyes drift over to Gustus casually, and Lexa immediately tenses, so imperceptibly that no one but those closest to her could tell. She observes the pattern as well.

It means – important message from Raven. All messages from Raven are urgent and top secret these days, but this one has been especially anticipated.

Lexa continues to stare out at the competition, offering nods of approval and respect at particularly good throws. There’s a particularly loud cheer as the Azgeda representative sinks his third knife into the exact centre of the far-away target. Clarke can see Roan across in his seat, clapping almost resentfully – if he’d only been going by his own wishes, he would have represented Azgeda in every event, she’s pretty sure, and that thought makes her smile briefly.

Clarke feels something brush against her leg and look down to see the half-grown wolf Roan gave them pawing at her in annoyance. For all of Roan’s claims that he was perfectly trained, Clarke and Lexa leaving him in Raven’s care while they went on their honeymoon had the inevitable effect – they returned home to a sulky, bratty, over-dramatic little monster named Megabyte. He chews on table legs. He bares his teeth threateningly just because he enjoys watching people recoil in shock. He’s unbearably offended when Clarke and Lexa pay too much attention to anything besides him, even if it’s each other they’re paying attention to.

Half the time neither of them even know where he is – he just takes off and wanders around Polis, gorging himself on meat sold by hunters and chasing around anyone willing to run, full of too much energy and attitude to stay in one place. Frankly, Clarke thinks if he didn’t officially belong to Wanheda and Keryonheda he’d be an appetiser and a pair of gloves by now – but of course, their exaggerated and ever-growing reputations act as a shield, leading to otherwise quite hard-headed Polis citizens nervously offering the choicest titbits they can find and the most credulous assuming that Lexa and or Clarke see through Megabyte’s eyes and will judge their actions. Basically, he’s the most spoiled animal in the thirteen clans, even more so than Snowball is now.

She waits as the last throw of the first round is made, then stands and beckons Roan over. They’ve been dividing overseeing these events between all of the leaders and ambassadors in attendance, ostensibly to share the honour, but actually because even in a week of celebration Clarke and Lexa can’t exactly spend all day watching sporting events, they have too many duties to attend to. The crowd are used to them leaving after the main event and most just bow deeply in response, though some repeat the same worshipful gesture they always use.

“Of course, leave me to the torture of watching them throw knives like they are playing catch with their children,” Roan complains under his breath as Clarke gestures to him, passing over responsibility.

Roan’s been busy these past months, even busier than Clarke and Lexa. It’s no wonder he wants to blow off some steam. He’s put down two minor uprisings with borrowed alliance gonakru fighting alongside his own gona, received oaths from what seems like every second village in Azgeda territory, and threats from half the remaining. Nia left a mess. His monthly restitution payments to the surrounding clans arrives exactly three days late every time as a show of unconcern, which amuses Clarke and annoys her in equal measure. But his people are starting to fall in line slowly, and the other clans and the alliance appreciate his fighting skills and his charm, so the Azgeda are rebuilding.

He’s made use of some of Clarke and Lexa’s contacts, as well as his own. His spies include Orion and Nyssa, the hunters, his allies include the village closest to the place Prison Station took over.

Clarke suppresses her automatic eye-roll at his complaint. “They’re hitting the centre nearly every time, you whiner.”
“Only to the untrained eye,” Roan says haughtily. “And look, that Sankru man – his knives travel far too slowly. I could deflect that easily in a fight!”

“If he overhears you, we could have the opportunity to find out if that is true,” Lexa comments. “I look forward to it.” She gives him a slightly-taunting smile and takes Clarke’s arm as they leave.

Zion’s waiting in the primary meeting room and Clarke has to stop herself from forcibly ripping the leather bag out of his hands. Instead she waits as he bows, passes it carefully to her and leaves before she yanks open the bag and pulls out the small grubby papers within. Gustus also takes up a position outside, closing the door, used to their incomprehensible secrecy by now. It doesn’t mean they can’t be heard – but it does mean it will be harder to hear them, provided they talk quietly.

“One from Anya, one from Raven,” Clarke says, eyes scanning the coded jumble of numbers and letters quickly. Raven and Anya have been gone for so long, and Clarke misses them even more than she thought she would. She knows Lexa does as well. But they’re needed – Raven’s messages make it clear how necessary her actions are. In a weird way, too, she suspects Raven is enjoying this immensely. Pitting her mind against malfunctioning nuclear power stations and a rogue AI is exactly the kind of challenge she enjoys. Meanwhile Anya seems to be taking a visceral pleasure in destroying anyone who dares threaten her lover, whether they have a chip or not. They took so many bombs and grenades they could barely carry them all, which also seems to be a factor in their enjoyment. Clarke suspects if they ever end up having a honeymoon of their own it will pale in comparison to this for both of them.

“Raven says she’s dealt with the problem at that nuclear facility is heading for the next, and that she’s nearly dealt with the leader of that weird cult. That she’s found a way to destroy her city without destroying yours.”

Lexa blinks, unconcerned. “Destroying mine? Does she mean there was a chance she would destroy Polis? And Raven kom Skaikru criticises our plans.” For once she doesn’t dryly observe that Raven’s focusing on every threat but the question of what to do with the nuclear device, the one issue she was actually sent to resolve. It’s under guard continually and has been weighted down so much it’s impossible for anyone to move without weeks of work to take the weights off, but it’s still a concern.

“No Polis,” Clarke clarifies, dropping her voice still further. “Her message specifically says the Commander’s city.”

Lexa tilts her head slightly. “Raven is not normally so formal.” They exchange a complicit look, neither willing to broach the topic of what the Flame could actually be, or could actually do, questions neither of them know enough answers to. The meeting room is relatively secure, but there are still guards outside and people on the floors above and below who could be listening in, so it’s still too unsecure to discuss what the chip in Lexa could actually be and could actually do. These days, with more of those chips showing up, Clarke’s not sure any area is secure enough to discuss that. “If she expects to defeat this woman – did she ask us to relax the kill order?”

“No, she didn’t,” Clarke says, a little grimly. Her and Lexa’s official stance on those with the chips is that they’re similar to the Reapers, and should no longer be considered the people they once were. She doesn’t think they can reverse the kill order until they’re absolutely sure that whatever Raven is planning will work.

Aden is out there now leading a force to sweep through the forests and clear out any remaining ones he can find. His honest grief means that the local villagers, even ones who’ve watched him execute the people who used to be their friends or family, accept his judgment. More than ever, Clarke can see why he’s Lexa’s heir – making these decisions breaks his heart, but he makes the right one.
anyway. He doesn’t choose his own comfort or happiness over his people, and his loyalty and belief in the alliance shines through his face whenever he speaks to the villages.

Several weeks ago, they received a coded missive from him speaking of the outcast families, the ones with deformities and mutations, people he’s run into out to the west who he thinks deserve better. He wants to begin the conversation about stopping the practice, asking if there wasn’t some other way to prevent them passing their mutations on – could the Skaikru and remaining Maunon perhaps help somehow with their science? It could be a real step towards their further acceptance by the clans, and a way to increase the outlying villages’ loyalty to the alliance and the Commander. Lexa’s teachings were all over the message, the mix of clever political logic and real empathy. They’ve started working on the issue, but between Ascension Day, the chips, Raven’s nuclear stations apparently starting to break down, and a host of other issues, progress is slow.

“Did Anya say whether she thought the plan would work in her message?” Lexa asks. It’s a reasonable question – Anya’s much less optimistic than Raven, although just as determined.

“Her message is pretty short.” Clarke glances down at the crumpled paper. “All it says is ‘I will ensure Raven kom Skaikru does not get herself or the rest of us killed’.”

Lexa laughs shortly, then sighs. “I said that Raven is not normally so formal, but Anya has never been so informal before. I am happy for her and Raven, but in some ways I think they are terrible influences on each other.”

“They’d probably take that as a compliment.”

“No doubt. What is that fabric with the letter?”

“A response to our… other request.” Which means it has a dot of Raven’s blood and a dot of Anya’s blood on it. Clarke makes a face. “Raven specifically added a really overblown message that seems to be in Shakespearean English and begs me to carry it next to my heart, which just goes to show that no matter how busy she is she can still find time to be ridiculous.”

“So they did remember what day it is,” Lexa says softly. “I was beginning to think they would not make it in time.”

Clarke’s suggestion of athletic competitions for the clans may have eased matters between them, but the flood of strangers from all clans into Polis has made this week continually stressful. It’s never easy for Clarke and Lexa to talk without anyone nearby, but the increased threat level means that this week nearly every conversation they’ve had has been heavily lacking in content, with triple their usual number of guards hemming them in, and groups from all clans coming every few minutes to profess adoration or ask for favours.

That had made the task harder, but not impossible – Wells had deliberately grazed his hands earlier and gotten Clarke to bandage them, leaving a couple of copper smudges on her sleeve. Lexa had accidentally-on-purpose nicked Gustus with her knife at training this morning, then cleaned it on her pants. Clarke had gone to Lincoln to discuss what he was learning from the other clan’s fisa and he’d managed to pass her a handkerchief similar to the one Raven and Anya have sent.

Lincoln and Octavia are in Polis at the moment accompanying Indra – well, Octavia is accompanying Indra, Lincoln is accompanying Octavia. They have dinner with Bellamy and his current girlfriend every second night. Bellamy’s girlfriend is from the Glowing Forest originally and spectacularly unimpressed by his ‘charm’, according to Octavia. She approves of how well he’s teaching her little bro, and considers that as evidence he can’t be a total waste, but anything more positive than that is an uphill struggle. O says that it won’t last but that, while it does, it’s doing her
brother a great deal of good.

When Octavia and her Fos return to TonDC in a week, Lincoln is only accompanying them part of the way. He and his new apprentice Dazi are heading to the far south, where there is supposedly a type of moss that can be dried and used as a far more effective antibiotic than any known of in the northern clans, even better than the red moss. He plans to see if it works and, if it does, try and grow it in the north. Monty is interested in trying to grow it in the Skaikru greenhouses. Jasper has requested that Lincoln keep an eye out for any ‘more interesting’ substances, although these days he’s so busy as one of Arkadia’s resident tech experts that Clarke wonders when he’ll find the time to smoke it.

Octavia will miss Lincoln, and vice versa, but they both know that sometimes they can do more good apart, and she’s incentive for Lincoln to hurry back. They’ve been at each other’s side for months now, though, so it will be difficult. Indra’s been snappier ever since Lincoln told her about the planned trip, and resolutely refuses to admit that it’s got anything to do with him leaving. Indra didn’t talk to him for three days when he politely refused her order to take a unit with him, until Lexa intervened and agreed with Lincoln that taking so many soldiers so far south could be seen as aggressive, and instead ordered Lincoln to take ten. With Indra, his Commander, and his formidable girlfriend all staring him down, Lincoln gave in.

Clarke’s noticed that lately Octavia has been subtly probing for details about Trikru proposals. She thinks Lincoln will be hearing one soon.

“It is nearly time for our weekly meditation on the tower,” Lexa comments, raising her voice slightly.

“It’ll be nice to get the fresh air,” Clarke replies. She trusts Raven and Anya to deal with whoever this crazy computer woman is – she and Lexa have their own problem to deal with right now. And depending what happens on the roof of the tower tonight, the threat of ALIE could be months away again.

They go up there once a week, and have for several months now. That wouldn’t be notable except for the order they give that the top five floors of the tower be emptied. Their informants suggest the public think that they’re communing with the spirits, or possibly casting some kind of protective blessing over all of Polis.

The truth is, of course, far more mundane. Lexa leans her head against Clarke’s shoulder and points out different constellations. Clarke tells Lexa fairy tales from the old world. They often bring up dinner, sometimes even drinks, and sit there as the sun dies into a red glow and disappears completely, as the bustle of Polis in the day mells into the quiet murmur of night. It’s a kind of meditation, Clarke thinks, but more than that it’s her favourite time of the week. Lexa’s too. Keeping the alliance steady and the clans in balance is a full-time job for both of them, stressful and rewarding and exhausting and wonderful and terrible. There’s never a moment Clarke regrets their positions or wishes the alliance didn’t exist, but it’s lovely to have a few hours every week when everything else slides away and it’s just the two of them.

Of course, they also have their time curled around each other at night, often quietly discussing their day and the decisions they have to make. But that time includes conversation about all kinds of official leadership things. Their hours on the roof of the tower are the only time when they’re not Wanheda and Keryonheda, just Clarke and Lexa, talking about anything they want and nothing at all.

Despite how much they both enjoy their ‘meditation’ sessions, they started out just as preparation for tonight. If lightning strikes, it will strike them and them alone. There will be no one in the higher parts of the tower. There will be no one else at risk if the lightning strike is deadly this time, but also
nobody but their friends will keep their memories if it happens like it did before.

And her and Lexa? They’re in this together. Whatever happens.

On their way up Wells is waiting by the elevator. He takes Clarke’s hand and squeezes it for a moment. “If you want company…” he says, for the third time.

“I know you have a lot to do,” Clarke tells him. It’s honest – he does have a lot to do. Frankly, she’s glad she’s not the Skaikru ambassador. Trying to keep all of the Skaikru in Polis (including the remainder of the original 100) from doing anything politically disastrous is a full-time job. Bellamy is surprisingly helpful, Harper even more so, but new minor disagreements and incidences of discrimination pop up multiple times a day anyway. Quite a few Skaikru have made the move to Polis, and for a depressing number of them the allure seems to have been that there were already houses, infrastructure, and excellent food merchants all around. That means that the Skaikru population in Polis tends not to be the most shining examples of their people. But Wells handles it all with so much aplomb and determination that even Clarke can barely tell when he’s annoyed with his people or his fellow ambassadors. Clarke would never say it, but every time she watches him, she’s struck by how unlike his father he is. How much better.

She’s not exactly sure how his relationship with Harper will turn out. Harper admitted to her that she wasn’t used to taking things so slowly, or treating them so seriously. Whereas Wells doesn’t want to rush it and has no desire to enter a relationship that’s at all casual. But, step by slow step, date by tentative date, they seem to be making their way towards something. Clarke thinks that despite their vast mismatch in terms of experience and attitude toward romance, they’ll find their way – and even if they don’t, well, she’s here for the boy who’s been like her brother for as long as she can remember. They all are.

Wells frowns, aware she’s not just talking about tonight, but also about the possibility of being left running things without Clarke or Lexa there if lightning strikes and they don’t survive. That’s one of the possible outcomes Raven outlined when they discussed it before she left. Of course, there were about a hundred outcomes, ranging from them both ascending to a different plane of existence to dying immediately to being sent back to kill Hitler. Raven had pointed out that when the question is ‘What could magic lightning do?’ the answers were of course diverse. Death is as unlikely as most of the other outcomes – well, nearly as unlikely.

“By the way, Kane sent some packages as his Ascension Day gift,” Wells says abruptly to Lexa. “Machines, mostly. Little but useful – some pumps and water filters to help with our plumbing upgrades.”

Arkadia is growing swiftly with Kane at the helm, but more importantly, communication with Polis and most of the other clans is constant and friendly. The Blue Cliff and Broadleaf people are still unwilling to open up direct trade, still insisting the Trikru act as a middle-man so none of the strange contraptions kill them, and the rest seem to see them more as curiosities than tools, but he’s making headway. The Maunon are also integrating slowly but surely into the rest of Arkadia. The younger children barely remember living in the Mountain, but the adults and teenagers are slower to forget. Except for Maya, of course, who keeps them all together while simultaneously politely holding off Jasper’s advances. She’s befriended him and Monty and she seems interested, but she’s waiting until things are more settled. Clarke thinks she’s also waiting until he matures a bit.

Clarke’s also pretty sure Kane is trying to date her Mom, but much like Wells and Harper, they’re taking it slow. She visited Arkadia a month back and noticed how different her mother was around Kane. He seems to be able to reason with her when she gets fired up more successfully than Clarke ever has. Sometime their interactions remind Clarke of watching her parents, her Dad so much steady
reasonableness, her mother all passion and certainty. But there are differences, too, and that stops it from stinging as much as it could. Right now, her mother’s taking a break from the Council, to focus on being a full-time medic as the Skaikru run into new venomous creatures and poisonous foods nearly every day, but Clarke’s pretty sure Kane still gets her opinions on every move he makes – whether he listens is a whole other question.

“There’s also a package from Abby that looked more personal,” Wells adds.

“More personal?”

“…Covered in bright wrapping paper. Addressed to ‘her amazing daughter-in-law’.”

“Oh,” Clarke flushes slightly. “I may have told her Ascension Day was sort of like Lexa’s birthday. I didn’t realise she’d take it so literally, though. What on earth do you think it is?” She tries to imagine what her mother could possible give Lexa.

Her mother has visited a couple of times. Abby still doesn’t much like Polis, finding it foreign and confronting, but she’s coming to like Lexa. They were getting along so well before Abby knew about the wedding, and they’ve returned to that. If they can’t agree on politics or morality, they can at least happily discuss Clarke. More than once she’s walked into a room to find one or both of them guiltily cutting off in the middle of a story about her, normally an embarrassingly adorable one.

Last visit, Lexa started training Abby to ride properly, in exchange for Abby teaching her some first aid techniques. Clarke could have trained Lexa in first aid and Abby in riding horses, of course, but she doesn’t know either as well as the two of them do. And for that matter, it’s nice to see them really get to know each other, so she has no desire to interfere and take over. She was happy just to tag along occasionally and enjoy a ride or refresh her memory of resuscitation techniques.

“Felt like a book,” Wells says, helpful as always. “Judging by the shape.”

“I shall open it later. Something to look forward to,” Lexa says diplomatically. “Perhaps it is information on Skaikru fisa techniques, she knows Dazi has been studying such things.”

Dazi has developed a sort of hero worship for Lincoln, but more than that, he seems to have a real knack for healing. Clarke’s worked with him a few times and found that as clumsy as he is the rest of the time, when someone’s injured, Dazi’s hands become quick and sure. He might miss Saskia, who is still with the Boat People and who has become something a protégée and probable eventual heir to Luna, but he’s happier than he’s ever been before.

Dazi’s gained a lot of confidence since he accompanied Luna from the Floukru to Polis as a guide, having persuaded her to enter into real discussion with the Commander. For the longest time, she had just communicated with Lexa through short messages – she’d never even seen Lexa since the alliance was made. Clarke thinks Luna had quite a different picture of Polis than the one she got when she finally returned, the bustle of people from every clan but the Floukru, the busy markets, the peaceful air, all speaking quite clearly of a happy and contented people. Visibly undercutting Luna’s belief that only her people had discovered how to exist without war.

Lexa and Luna had been very stilted at first, ghosts of other dead Natblida between them, the strain of the years of separation tugging away their words. But then, in the privacy of the meeting room, Luna had taken several steps forward and hugged Lexa fiercely, and it was like their anger melted away. Since then Clarke’s gotten to know Luna, and she likes her, but she has to admit that there’s some of the same flaws in Luna that she sees in her mother – inability to bend. Quickness to judge. Need to claim the moral high ground.
Luna and her people are here today, competing. Some of the markets in Polis are run by Floudonkru now. They sell fish, mostly. It’s delicious.

A few weeks ago when she stopped to try a new type of dried fish, recently delivered, she noticed a nearby stall run by the woodworker Murphy briefly worked for. The furniture and bows being sold weren’t just sturdy and well-made, a few were also covered in beautifully geometric patterns that seemed to have doubled their price. Beside the carpenter’s own mark was Finn’s signature – apparently the carpenter makes the items and sends some of them to Arkadia to have the designs carved into them, one person handling practicality, the other flair. It’s an apt description of Finn all over. There’s the possibility someday the carpenter will take him on as a full apprentice, but it’s by no means definite.

He and Raven still haven’t spoken, but they have sent each other a couple of letters, and some of the tension is gone from Raven’s face. That’s probably the only thing which saved Finn from meeting Anya’s knife sometime.

Clarke gives Wells a hug and moves into the elevator, followed by Lexa, who hesitates and then embraces Wells too. “See you soon, Wells.”

Gustus looks a little frustrated at this interplay, confused, but gives the signal for the elevator to operate anyway. They haven’t told him about the lightning – there would be no point, really. Gustus is completely loyal, whatever happens, and a story like this would just panic him. Lexa dying is nearly as much of a nightmare to him as it is to Clarke. He would never want to know he’d failed in his duty once before.

He and his partner’s shared obsession with duty is one reason why his relationship with Zion is so on and off, actually. They’ll manage fine for a month, then one of them will be two minutes late to a shift or a ceremony and the other will break it off to avoid being ‘a distraction’. They’ll avoid each other for a week until Clarke or Lexa points out they’re being ridiculous, then get back together until the same thing happens again. Clarke suspects if they ever retire, it will be together – but whether they’ll ever retire is the real question.

Once they’re at the roof, they sit and curl into each other. “Soon,” Clarke remarks uselessly.

“But,” Lexa echoes.

Both of them stare at the sky. Soon they’ll know – will they have to begin again?

“What do you -” Clarke starts to say, then stops. She knows the answer.

Lexa supplies it anyway. “I do not want anything to happen,” she says. “I do not want to see Nia’s smug face again. I do not want you to have to kill the Maunon again. I do not want any of it.”

“Maybe we can save more people,” Clarke says, although she doesn’t believe it. She’s just trying to look for a bright side. She doesn’t want to be trapped again, to feel the weight of terrible events bearing down on her, doesn’t want to examine every action in terms of how it might change what she knows happened. “The stations that crashed -”

“As likely to crash in any world,” Lexa replies. “Your mother’s station, though, perhaps, if Emerson does not remember this time -”

“Could also crash, with my mother in it,” Clarke says. “Or with Kane in it – who knows? And without a personal reason to hate the Mountain, my people might not agree with their execution. They might even side with them if Kane’s not in charge and we can’t contain the situation.”
thinks about it. “I suppose we could save Jaha… but honestly, as harsh as it sounds, the only reason I’d consider it would be for Wells.”

“Overall, his survival could be worse for everyone,” Lexa says, in an almost clinical way. Then she swallows hard and says, “But I, too, would wish to spare Wells his loss.”

“Murphy, we could save Murphy as well,” Clarke continues. She misses him, weirdly enough – his snarky bluntness. He was a terrible person in many ways, especially what he did to Charlotte and to Raven, but he became a better one. He could again. She wants him to have that chance, just like Bellamy, just like Finn.

Whether it’s worth repeating this time again, possibly destroying more things, possibly being trapped forever in this strange loop, possibly dying themselves just by an accident of timing or luck, definitely having to face the Mountain and Nia and her own people… well.

“I saw his friend the other day,” Lexa tells her. “John. The one who helped me at Prison Station.”

“Oh, right,” Clarke remembers him, but not clearly. “How is he?”

“It appears he returned to TonDC and is now a Seken. He was training with another young one. He has improved.”

Clarke checks her watch. “A few more minutes.” The clouds are gathering the sky. Clarke swallows nervously, looking up at them, then turns to stare at Lexa, drinking her in. Her beautiful solemn face with quietly smiling green eyes, the tan skin of arms scarred with evidence of battles fought and overlaid with dark winding tattoos, the warrior’s tension and grace in her every movement, every part of her warming Clarke. “I – I’ll see you soon?”

“Anya will be at the drop ship as fast as she can to take you to TonDC,” Lexa promises her. “And I will ride as fast as I may to meet you there. I promise.”

“I love you,” Clarke says. The clouds are getting darker, thicker, obviously unnatural in origins, and her ankle twinges as it always does in bad weather. Raven didn’t bother putting up anything scientific, in the end – partly because she’s not here to micromanage it, but partly because, as she said, if the lightning didn’t happen she would have spent weeks working on something unnecessary and if it did then her monitoring equipment would no longer exist. Clarke chokes it out again as the whole sky seems to become black. “I love you, Lexa, okay? I love you so much.”

“And I love you, ai hodnes, ai houmon. I will love you forever, whatever happens, whatever world we go to, the past or the future. Our souls are joined and nothing will ever change that, nothing. I love you, Clarke,” Lexa replies, own voice choked and rough, and leans in to kiss her.

They cling to each other so tightly that Clarke can’t imagine anything separating them, so tightly that lightning couldn’t hit Clarke without hitting Lexa as well. She kisses Lexa roughly, tears stinging her eyes and mixing with Lexa’s, Lexa’s fingers digging into her as hers dig into Lexa, desperate to hold her here. The kiss catches her the way it always does, the slant of Lexa’s lips against her own, the desperate press of tongue and near-bite of teeth, her hands clutching at Lexa’s body, feeling every part of her, until the world falls away and it’s just Lexa and her.

Then Lexa moans, pulls back for a moment, eyes wild. She blinks, becoming more focused, shedding a little of the haze, and says in a hushed voice, “Ai niron. Ai niron, the sky!”

“What?” Clarke says, then realises. The sky is perfect, clear. Not a cloud in sight. They dissipated even faster than they arrived. She laughs, unbelieving. “The storm’s gone. It’s gone, and we’re still
here.” She turns back to Lexa, still sobbing, now with happiness. “We’re here.”

She holds Lexa again, clinging just as close as before, happier than she ever thought she could be.

Chapter End Notes

I owe a lot of thanks for this story. Especially to Cassy, who gave me wonderful comments, corrections, and quite a few explanations of how snow works (I am Australian. Why did I think it was a good idea to set most of the story in the coldest places???). She has been ceaselessly amazing and never failed to make me laugh or blush with what she says about every chapter – actually, her feedback is probably funnier and more heartwarming than the actual story, I’m just lucky I’m the one who got to read it.

I would also like to thank everyone else who reviewed, especially the people who reviewed every chapter. You’re awesome. Some of your comments really made my day. I didn’t reply to all of you (whether I did often depended on my mood and energy at the time, sorry) but I promise I appreciated every single one. The thoughtful comments about the best bits, the analysis of where it was going, the ones all in capitals. Every single one made writing this story a real pleasure, and explains my obsessive need to update. I love you all.

Also my girlfriend, who I thank for everything, even though she’ll never actually read this – she missed the whole the 100 thing and has now been utterly spoiled by me. Nevertheless, she’s amazing and I try and say that as often as possible. Even as I write this, she’s holding back our hyperactive rescue puppy from trying to leap her full twelve kilos onto my laptop, so I don’t think I’m exaggerating to say it would’ve been hard to spend this amount of time writing if she wasn’t the most loving and patient person in existence.

Lastly, I would like to thank the government, for only threatening to put me on watchlists for the following google list, instead of actually going through with it:

Googled Things: A Partial List
Mount Weather air systems
Mount Weather vehicles
American government information about Mount Weather facility
Orbiting satellites same spot
Geosynchronous orbits meaning
Geosynchronous orbits picture
Homemade EMP
Nuclear EMP
Non-nuclear EMP
Explosively pumped flux compression generators
What are nuclear missiles made of
Nuclear missile blast radius
What does an EMP look like when it goes off
Bleeding diseases carriers
Antiviral medication for bleeding diseases
Does death by spacing hurt
How long does death by spacing take
Effects of decompression
Military trucks layout
Fuel use trucks vs jeeps
Devices to cover up car tracks in snow
Cover up car tracks in snow
How to drive a manual car
Can horses walk on ice
Horses snow shoes
Borium spikes shoes
Horses borium spikes shoes
Can you break locks by freezing them
Can you break locks by freezing them –bike –bikes
Picking locks with knives
Removing gunpowder from guns
Removing gunpowder from bullets
Removing gunpowder from cartridges
How fast does a plait burn
How fast does hair burn
Can you make a bomb fuse out of hair
DIY bomb fuse
How to make a bomb fuse
How to make a slow burn fuse
Accidentally eject gun clip
Confuse safety and clip release
Exploding flour
List of things that explode
Improvised munitions handbook
Knife versus sword fight tactics
Fancy swords
Quickest way to kill someone bloodlessly
How long can horses run for
Effects of carbon dioxide poisoning
Hypercapnia symptoms
Treatment for carbon dioxide poisoning
Treatment for stab wound to shoulder
Why do we wear wedding rings on the right hand
Why do we wear wedding rings on the left hand
Hi!

A group of really nice people approached me a while back and asked permission to do something kind of cool with this story. Of course, I said yes, go for it. If you want to see details (or even just some pretty awesome art), head over to the webpage https://clexacomic.tumblr.com/.

Fi

P.S. On an unrelated note, I can't believe this story ended nearly eight months ago and I still get incredible reviews regularly, sometimes even from people rereading! I loved working on this story and a large part of that is due to you all. You're the best. I still read every review and they always make my day. So thanks to all of you! <3

P.P.S For those with questions/suggestions about the above project... do not ask me in reviews, I will be completely useless. Sorry! Try asking at the Tumblr page!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!