'And she wants to see Costia. She needs to feel her, craves the reassurance of her body lying next to her at night. Hopes beyond reason that it can erase the memory of that moment in her tent, before Trikru and Skaikru marched together on the Mountain. That moment when Clarke was too close, the air too hot and their lips about to meet. That unforgivable – and Lexa fears unforgettable – moment of weakness that would have cost her so dearly.

She’s started to drift when a slow murmur among the riders brings her back to the present and her eyes settle on the majestic sight before them: Polis, enveloped in dawn’s embrace. And somewhere in this sprawling mass of dwellings: Costia, warm and soft.’

Costia lives and things get even more complicated.
This is an absolute first for me, meaning all comments and feedback - whether on the content or the format - are more than appreciated, just please be gentle with this little newbie :) I've got this story outlined (should be less than 10 chapters) but ideas are more than welcome at any time. Whatever it is and however crazy it sounds, just throw it at me and we'll see from there. Chapters will get longer, this was just a sort of intro. I'm not completely sure of the rating for now, I guess you'll have to stick around to see.

This will be a post season 2 fic that will incorporate elements of season 3 and 4 (with one major caveat: Lexa lives of course). It will span over the course of close to a decade after the fall of the Mountain.

I will see this through but comments, kudos, feedback in any form makes the process all the more rewarding.
The ride back to Polis seems longer than she remembers it to be. The growing distance does nothing to dull the heaviness that has found a home in her bones since she ordered the retreat. Since she turned her back on stormy blue eyes. Since she left Clarke at the bottom of the Maun-de.

With every rhythmic back and forth, with every brush of the horse’s legs against the tall grass, her limbs grow heavier and heavier, as if her body was protesting. Protesting without a doubt the pace of these past two days’ journey and the hard regimen she’s observed over the past weeks. Lexa though, can’t help but wonder if it’s protesting the decision she took, as well.

Jaw locked, back straight, she refuses to dwell on it. Refuses to question her choice. Because for the second time in her life, she’s not sure she wouldn’t regret it.

Instead, she tries to focus on what lies ahead. The words, the sentiment, the weariness are all too familiar: “I bring you the taken, your lost but never forgotten. I bring you the bodies of the fallen, warriors no more. I bring you… a temporary reprieve” her mind recites on its own.

The heaviness clings on.

Her advisors tell her she is a great commander. On some level, Lexa believes it to be true. She sees it in her warriors’ pride to fight for her (to die for her) and in her people’s eagerness to welcome her when she visits their villages. She recognises it – recognised it – in Gustus’ quiet unwavering support and Anya’s fierce protectiveness. Yet it’s also a foolish travesty, for it feels like only yesterday she claimed the title and was entrusted with the role. It’s too soon. Too soon for people to cast judgement – however positive. Too soon for her to rest.

She’s had to take decisions in the spur of the moment before, of course: decisions in the heat of battle that would decide the fate of entire armies; sparing an enemy when her heart is screaming at her to run them through with her sword; slipping away from a sleeping village and letting a missile bury an entire community.

But they’re a thorny and delicate affair and she’s always preferred the luxury of time to reflect and outline all possible outcomes and consequences. The time to debate a move with Gustus and Anya. The time to argue tirelessly with Titus for days on end. The time to wake Costia up before dawn and silently ask her for her opinion.
(Breaking in so doing every rule Titus spent so many years trying to hammer into her. But Costia is special, has always been – will always be. Lexa’s come to terms with it and so should he).

The coalition with the 12 clans is the result of such a process: weeks of heated discussions defending the idea to her generals (Anya unsurprisingly amongst the hardest to convince); days spent doubting herself and the path she was carving for her people; nights devoted to soaking up Costia’s unwavering support. And Lexa is immensely proud of the peace it has brought to her people – “relative peace” she mentally corrects herself, for there is so much left to do.

The decision to leave Skaikru to fend for themselves however, is not. And she knows it will be a source of endless “what ifs” in the months – years – to come. What if she had refused the deal offered by the Maunon. What if, Clarke by her side, they had stormed the Maun-de and brought an end, together, to the reaping, once and for all. What if Clarke had made it out alive.

From the moment Skaikru arrived, she’s been swept in this whirlwind of life and death situations and decisions at an ever-accelerating pace, hurtling towards one end and one end only: her people’s doom – she understands that now, but couldn’t then. With the growing distance comes the disorienting feeling of a veil lifting. She can see clearly today: despite the planning, despite the scheming, they were grossly underprepared. Their plan hinged on too many variables, half of which related to this “tech” neither she nor her people fully understand the potential and dangers of. The loss of so many lives could never have been justified.

She feels… ashamed for not realising it sooner and not insisting on more time to prepare and regroup. Skaikru – Clarke included – are but children on this Earth. They can’t be expected to master planning an attack of that magnitude and daring. But Lexa… she should have known, should have seen, should have anticipated.

She casts a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure the unit she’s travelling with is following closely. She left the bulk of her army behind, wishing to get to Polis faster, with Indra in charge of the protection and reconstruction of TonDC and Nyko supervising the team of healers looking after the broken souls released from the Maun-de’s lair. Her warriors will soon return to their villages, with tales of the battle and of their fierce Commander. So will the ones they saved from the Maun-de, once they are strong enough.

She suppresses a shiver at the memory of the emaciated figures that spilled out of their rocky prison, hollow-eyed shapes, leftovers of human beings. She never asked Clarke about the horrors the girl witnessed inside the Maun-de. Not because she doesn’t wish to hear how her people fared – she knows – but because there was something in the young leader’s eyes every time they broached the topic that silently warned her off.
She grinds her jaw. Dante will pay. They will all pay. If not today, then tomorrow. Soon, very soon.

The unofficial reason for her army to remain, for now, in the area – one she shared only with Indra – is to be ready, were Skaikru to try and retaliate in the aftermath of her betrayal. It’s an unpleasant eventuality she now has to prepare for: even though the Maun-de’s men should offer too big a distraction for them to turn their sights on Trikru, the Sky People proved unpredictable and surprisingly resourceful in the past.

She’d like to think Gustus would have approved of the precaution. She knows Anya would have volunteered to stay behind.

Gustus and Anya of course are no more and the thought brings with it the usual grimace, one she won’t try to fight tonight. Death has long been a constant companion and in times when Lexa feels too… weighed down, the names of the fallen – some (many, too many) by her own sword – come together to form a quiet chant in the back of her head.

It unnerves her that her eyes still linger on each face, searching among the men and women sitting tiredly on their horses.

Part of her wonders if she’ll ever grow accustomed to the absence of Gustus’ tall figure, riding slightly behind to her right. His eyes would never leave her and yet he’d always be aware of their surroundings: cataloguing every single suspicious movement in the bushes, every rustle in the trees.

Part of her already knows.

She’s been away from Polis for too long. Titus’ latest missives speak of the usual bickering between her ambassadors but also of an underlying nervousness among them concerning the Sky People. There will undoubtedly be heated discussions about her decision. The Maun-de is still standing after all. She had promised them its downfall and is coming back empty handed.

Some of the Mountain Men are now even able to roam her lands, free of their bulky protection attire and deadlier than ever. Like the sniper Clarke had killed. The ambassadors don’t need to know that yet, though – she’ll have to make sure word doesn’t spread.

Breaking a shaky alliance for the sake of her people – their people, for she’s been informed Lake People and People of the Valley are among the survivors – they will understand. But coming to an agreement with an enemy who has bled them for decades will undoubtedly leave many disquieted.
She will have to remind them of the numbers they saved; remind them that their Commander forced this formidable enemy to negotiate, something none before her could have ever dreamt of.

Only Lexa knows: what happened that night was anything but a dream.

More importantly, they will have to immediately commence planning their next moves against the *Maun-de*. Force them to fight in the open perhaps, in a forest her warriors know inside out? Or asphyxiate them with a blockade – a real enforceable one this time around, with the help of Skai Tech (if she can coerce Skaikru to still share, that is). They’ll need bigger numbers this time around, organized in small flexible units maybe, with protective armour like the mechanic from the Sky had talked about.

How many will they need (how many will she lose)?

These are worries for tomorrow. For now, just for tonight, with the shadow of the *Maun-de* looming far behind and the name of the dead running around in her mind, Lexa wants to focus on the warmth and comfort Polis never fails to provide.

She wants to stand on her balcony and let the sight and sounds of the bustling city at her feet wash over her. She wants to sit with her *Natblida* and see the progress they’ve made in her absence. She wants to drink in her people’s whishes and strength and plunge elbow-deep in Kostas’ patches.

And she wants to see Costia. She needs to feel her, craves the reassurance of her body lying next to her at night, longs to hear the heady whispers and playful nonsense of her lover against her skin. Hopes beyond reason that it can erase the memory of that moment in her tent, before Trikru and Skaikru marched together on the *Maun-de*. That one moment when Clarke was too close, the air too hot and their lips about to meet. That unforgivable – and Lexa fears unforgettable – moment of weakness that would have cost her so dearly.

Clarke. Maybe it’s because she sees something of herself in the fledgling leader. Maybe it was all just a trick the adrenaline of the coming battle played on her. Lexa can’t deny though, that she felt a connection to the cloudling. She refuses to examine – let alone acknowledge – its nature, however.

What would they say if they saw her like this?

Anya would no doubt give her familiar scathing wit free rein and reprimand her inability to get the
blonde out of her head. (She can’t help but wonder what transpired between the girl and her old mentor before the latter met her end. Does Clarke speak true? Did Anya really die by her side?)

Gustus… Gustus would… frown but refrain from any comment. When she was younger, and the demure warrior in one of his better moods, he used to give the top of her head a sharp little tap and remind her of her duty. All affectionate gestures, as small as they may have been, stopped with her ascension.

Whatever there is between them – whatever it was, she rectifies – nobody can know. Clarke is most likely dead by now. And even if she isn’t, even if her people retreated, Lexa accepted with her betrayal to extinguish any nascent affinity they shared.

She’s started to drift when a slow murmur among the riders brings her back to the present. Her eyes settle on the majestic sight before them: the outline and murmur of Polis, enveloped in dawn’s embrace.

And somewhere in this sprawling mass of dwellings: Costia, warm and soft.

---

She wants to rest or at least change but it would seem she won’t get to do either. As soon as she steps foot into the tower, Titus sweeps her up for what promises to be an endless briefing session to bring her up to speed.

Just as in his messages, there is no acknowledgment from him. No sign of recognition of their most recent loss. For – Costia aside – Titus is now the last one standing from the group that guided her throughout her training and into her role as Heda. It reminds her of the title of a book she had once snuck out of the previous Commander’s library: “And then there were none.”

They thankfully seem to have reached a lull in the conversation. She explained in detail to him what unfolded – mindful of presenting her decision as a success – and what they now need to prepare for. That is the priority. The rest, all matters belonging to his duty as interim administrator, will have to wait.

She’s about to take her leave when he carefully inquires: “Are we certain the Coalition would hold, were the Mountain to fall?”
Only Titus would know to ask this question and Lexa is reminded yet again of the formidable teacher he is. For as much as the fighting pits were Anya’s dominion and Gustus’ tests all about war tactics, Titus is and has always been a great strategist, never losing sight of the broader picture.

Though she’d like to change the wording to “when,” she must admit that very question has been on her mind more often than not as of late. Ever since she entered into an alliance with Skaikru to end the Maun-de and victory became, all of a sudden, a possibility within her grasp.

Titus already has an opinion of course. Lexa doesn’t think she’s ever seen him without one, whatever the topic: the Coalition, the nightbloods, tower protocol… And of course, the constant thorn in his side: Costia sharing her bed. Judging by his formulation, it would appear her former teacher believes the Coalition won’t survive.

Lexa would dismiss his worry if it didn’t echo so closely her own concerns. (On some level, she’s aware her apprehension may be part of the reason she found it so easy to betray Skaikru.)

She doesn’t need to hear his reasoning. She already knows the arguments. The Coalition between the 12 clans is young. The one characteristic that had brought all the clans together and cemented their alliance is the common enemy they had found in the Mountain. Even Ice Nation and the Sand People, as unconcerned as they like to appear, are deeply unsettled by the presence of such an alien and terrifying threat at their borders, especially one so consistently widening its reach.

Lexa may continue to stress the benefits their people will reap from long-lasting collaboration, from resource sharing to security, but she fears the clans haven’t had the time yet to recognise the Coalition as the primary reason for the decrease in famines, destruction and deaths.

“I’m aware of the potential fallout”, she replies, trying to placate him. It is important they revisit this, but she’s too tired to have this conversation now. She wants out of these clothes and into softer ones, wants to feel warm water on her skin, wants to close her eyes for a second.

Titus doesn’t seem to see it this way. “Heda, the coalition will be your legacy. It must be protected at all cost. I fear Ice Nation is already plotting their next move, were the Mountain to be defeated once and for all. It may be… advisable to give it more time” he forges on.

“I share your unease, Titus” she replies softly, the exhaustion weighing her down. “I refuse, however, to consider the Maun-de standing as the lesser of two evils. The time has come, I can feel it. We need to strike now as long as the Maun-de men remain distracted with Skaikru.” She takes a deep breath, remembering the countless candles she passed on her way to the tower. “We owe it to all those the Maun-de has preyed on. I owe it to my people.”
Her tone leaves no room for discussion. The older man has no other option but to let it go for now, bowing on his way out.

(We need to strike now, she adds in the quiet of her mind, while the captured Skaikru may still be alive and most Maun-de men remain confined to their sinister dwellings).

Finally alone, Lexa lets out a heavy sigh and places her hands on the table, hunching over. The weight is still there, a familiar pressure between her shoulder blades, a heaviness resting on her shoulders.

Her legacy. This has become a recurrent theme as of late and she knows it’s Titus’ way of showing pride in her achievements. Lexa also knows that worrying about one’s legacy is something one does at the end of one’s reign. She can’t help but wonder if her former teacher is sensing something he’s chosen not to share.

Yet the question remains: can one ever truly claim to know how they will be remembered?

Reaching the balcony, she takes the time to admire the view of the November sun setting on Polis. Traders are gathering their colourful wares on display and closing up shop for the day. Seconds, sweat glistening off their backs, can be seen walking back home from hard hours of training with their mentors. Farmers are fighting the kinks a day spent bent over, ploughing their lands, has left in their bones, while expertly balancing their tools on their shoulders. She can see children running back to their parents, after chasing the last rays of sunshine from alley to alley. It brings a small smile to her lips. Not wide enough to eclipse the frown that’s settled on her forehead, though.

If the commanders before her left their people nothing but years of bloodshed and suffering, is it foolish of her to pretend to leave them with something as fragile as peace?

---

She’s never known Costia for being very patient and tonight is no exception. She’s barely made it through the door of her chambers, after the harrowing day she just spent holed up with Titus, when a warm body pins her against the wall and soft lips seal hers with a searing kiss.

It’s passionate. It’s aggressive. It’s Costia.
“What took you so long?” the girl whispers against her lips after a couple of minutes of tongue and teeth, meeting her eyes for the first time. There’s happiness, excitement, mirth.

“Titus. ” She doesn’t even have the energy to huff.

“That grouch sent me on a spurious scouting mission yesterday just to keep me out of Polis for your return” Costia complains with evident frustration.

That would explain why she didn’t feel Costia’s eyes on her the moment they reached the capital.

“Am I to understand the two of you are still playing your ridiculous game of mutual sabotage?”

“How else am I to entertain myself in your absence? You’ve been gone for a month. One more week and I would have had to… replace you with somebody else.” Costia pretends to think it over: “Saskia perhaps” and punctuates the statement with a bite and a lick of Lexa’s lower lip, making her shudder.

“Remind me to have Saskia sent to the frontline next time we’re at war, then” Lexa retorts with a wide smile – the one that’s for Costia’s eyes, for Costia’s skin only – leaning in for more.

The kiss grows more heated, their hands roaming each other’s bodies with anxious familiarity. Lexa sways on her feet, lost in the feeling of Costia’s eager mouth, Costia’s pliant body, Costia’s heady presence.

Costia pulls away slightly, pushing her head to rest against Lexa’s shoulder and turning her face to breathe against her neck: “I was worried”. The hands digging even harder into her back are the sole indication there may be a bit more truth to the statement than either of them are ready to admit out loud.

“Have you no faith in your Heda, Kostia kom Trikru?” Lexa counters, with mock seriousness, trying to lighten the mood – for worrying is inevitable in their world but remains a weakness the Commander can not indulge in (nor admit to). She knows what she means to Costia and Costia knows what she means to her. Anything else is best kept buried beneath heavy kisses and heated sighs.
“How about I show you how much faith I have in my Heda!”

Costia’s hands leave her hips, make quick work of her sash and find a path inside her vest, past the many buttons that keep the various pieces of cloth together. The first touch of Costia’s palms on her skin sends little jolts down Lexa’s body and she can feel a familiar restless heat pool in her stomach. (That heat too, is for Costia’s touch only and no one else’s.)

And just like that first night, eons ago in that very same bedroom, Lexa surrenders to the beautiful girl with impatient hands and brown excited eyes, undressing her.

By the time her vest lies discarded on the floor and her shirt hangs half open, revealing her naked torso, Costia’s body is the only thing holding her up. They usually make it to the bed by now, but her lover seems to have something else in mind tonight. Her right hand is inside Lexa’s pants, pushing her legs wider apart, touching her over her thin shorts and Lexa knows she can feel the wetness there. She’s playing her like a master does his favourite instrument in the privacy of his house (how she missed this, her touch, her scent, her mouth).

Costia’s fingers ghost over her clit through the fabric, just there, just right, before teasingly dipping to the side and slipping under.

Her lover’s mouth is biting kisses into her neck and licking a path down her exposed chest without stopping the movement of her fingers: she’s parting her lips now on her way back up. Once, twice, Lexa loses count. They’ve just begun but she’s already close, so painfully close. Lexa’s hips have started moving of their own accord, meeting with increasing frenzy the pace of Costia’s hand.

It’s not how she imagined their reunion to go but it’s been too long and Costia is touching her there, right there, while her left hand is rubbing one of her nipples. There’ll be time for slow and teasing later, for now all Lexa can do is dig her hands into Costia’s shoulders – sure her nails will leave a mark – and let the moment consume her.

The girl is whispering sweet nothings in Trigedasleng in her ear – always the poet – coaxing breathy moans from Lexa’s throat (that she couldn’t keep in even if she tried – and she did try in the beginning, for a long time, before giving up on it entirely). She’s increasing her pace to an impossible rhythm.

Her head thrown back, eyes closed, her hips an uncoordinated mess, Lexa finally lets all thoughts of the Maun-de – of blue eyes – go. When she comes, she comes hard, burying a grunt into Costia’s shoulder and holding on to her tightly. Her lover brings her slowly back from the edge, her hands drawing shallow patterns into the scarred skin of her lower back.
She doesn’t know when let alone how they reach the bed, the softness of the covers and the warm breathing in her ear the last thing she registers that day.

She’s come home.

A sudden hush comes over the room when she makes her entrance, the happy glint in her eyes the only indication of how pleased she is to see them again.

“Heda” they chorus, dipping low, eyes downcast.

She sees Silas stumble forward a bit in his haste. Iro catches him by the hem of his shirt and helps keep him upright. After a small nod from her, Titus leaves them the room.

Ruben is the first (Ruben is always the first) to break the rigid atmosphere, taking one, then two tentative steps towards her. When she beckons to him, he crashes into her side, little hands bunching into the fabric of her tunic and head pressed against her. One by one they all come closer, reaching out. Lexa makes sure to pat each on the head – even Aden who’s grown considerably over the past months – before taking a step back and sitting down among them.

Titus would scowl at such displays – however small – but she’s long learnt to distance herself from some of his teachings. Not that Titus had been a bad teacher. Not at all: after all, he made her into the leader she is today. But she is no longer the quiet impressionable seven year old who didn’t really understand why she had to leave her family behind without a proper goodbye and come live in an unfamiliar and intimidating city instead. No longer the ten-year-old who would dare her friends to climb the tower, giving the old man scare after scare (to the point where Anya had to intervene to prevent a fatal heart attack). No longer the fifteen-year-old who stumbled through her first weeks as Heda and needed him by her side at all times.

In the course of the past years, Titus slowly transitioned into an advisors’ role, just like Gustus and Anya had gone from mentors to companions. The one who brought the Coalition of the 12 clans together has no need of a teacher anymore. She’s lost her companions along the way. No more teacher. No more companions. Life and Death are her only guides now.
The *Natblida* stare at her bashfully, in silence.

Silas shuffles to sit next to her on her left, so close their arms are touching. She knows he finds comfort in the proximity. When the stunted child had been brought to her palace and her healers had confirmed he would unfortunately never recover from the neglect and malnourishment of his early years at home, Titus had first suggested sending him back to his village. What use could a *Natblida* unable to be shaped into a fearsome warrior be?

But Lexa had been adamant that all *Natbilda* found amongst her people were to be treated equally and given the same opportunities. So they had taken Silas in and trained him as hard as all the others. Kostas had even helped elaborate a special dietary regime for the boy in his earlier days in the tower. They had made sure Silas would receive double rations two months in, trying to reverse as much as possible the damage to his body’s development. Five years later, Silas may still be the smallest and weakest in fights, but he’s the quickest in climbing up trees and the quietest on his feet.

Aden finally breaks the silence, serious face back on (but the eagerness of earlier still showing):
“Welcome back Heda.”

“Thank you Aden,” she chooses to reply in English to see how far along their lessons have come. “I am pleased to see you’re all in good health. What has Titus been teaching you in my absence?”

“Guerrilla wars, *Heda*” Aden replies with a concentrated frown, crimson creeping into his cheeks.

She nods. “A useful strategy, don’t you think, Iro?”

The lanky red-haired girl she addressed looks down with circumspect hesitation.

“I don’t know” she starts carefully, switching to English when Ruben – not so discreetly – nudges her with his elbow. “I do not like the idea of hiding from the enemy much, *Heda*”, she admits quietly.

“Explain.”

“How can there be honour in striking an opponent down from the shadows?”
Iro is clever and honest to a fault and Lexa can not wait to see if her skills with a bow have further improved in the time she’s been away.

“I see your point. I’m sure Titus explained how useful such a tactic can be, when facing a much bigger army on familiar terrain, though,” she replies.

“Have you ever led a guerilla, Heda?” Naqib interrupts, ever curious, ignoring the scowl Iro sends his way.

“I have” she admits with a slight inclination of her head, making a mental note to organize a tactical role play session with them soon. “A great leader is aware at all times of their army’s strengths and weaknesses. They design strategies accordingly. Waging a guerrilla war is not to be discounted.”

“But doesn’t Trikru have the biggest army of all the clans?” Naqib forges on, shaking his jet-black hair out of his eyes.

(It’s grown too long, Lexa notes. She’ll have to ask one of her aides to cut it.)

“We do indeed have one of the biggest armies among the coalition’s various clans, but there will be times when mobilizing all your men is not an option. And other times when the situation calls for using smaller units.”

“Why?” Ruben asks perplexed.

It’s hesitant and Lexa realise with a start it’s the first time she’s heard him speak English. It brings a slight satisfied smile to her lips. Titus must have intensified their English lessons.

“Tell me this, Ruben,” she starts gently, making sure he understands every word “would you ask the only able-bodied man in a household to come fight for you and leave his wife and newborn to face the cold on their own? Would you ask the woman who has fought for you for months and can barely stand on her own two feet anymore to stay on for more? Will you ask the 14 year old orphan to leave behind her little brother in order to join you in your fight?” she pauses, letting her words sink in. “As Heda, you must always be aware of what you are asking of your people and whenever possible, endeavour to lighten their burden.”

Ruben is frowning in concentration, struggling presumably with some of the terms she used, while
the rest seem to ponder her words. Silas and Flora, the youngest ones in the group, will most likely ask the oldest to explain her statement later tonight.

“Compassion” Iro whispers, understanding dawning in her eyes.

Lexa nods sideways, adding: “And wisdom.”

“Is a guerrilla war how we will defeat the Maunon?” Aden asks carefully. They must have discussed what happened at the Maun-de with Titus or been following her campaign’s progress these past weeks.

“What makes you think it could?” Lexa replies, curious to hear him explain his thoughts.

But Aden isn’t given the opportunity to share his views. The room suddenly erupts in a loud cacophony, each little one trying to have his own thoughts heard over his neighbour’s. She spots Silas who is in the middle of pushing a small table to the centre of the room, shouting that it’s supposed to represent the Maunon and positioning a reclining seat in lieu of Ton DC. They all converge around Silas’ improvised construction, gesturing wildly to the space surrounding it, engrossed in their own strategies.

Lexa’s eyes can’t help but smile at the scene: how passionate they all are and how much thought they’ve apparently put into devising ways to rid their people of this evil. It reminds her a bit of the ambassadors: all with their own ideas, eager to speak over each other, not once pausing to come up with solutions together. She bites her lip. She hadn’t realised how much she’d missed this, their group dynamic but also each single one of them. They still have a lot to learn, but there’s time yet.

Titus comes back to usher them to their next class, scowling deeply at the ruckus but Lexa refuses to feel guilty. It’s with a twinge of reluctance and the promise that she’ll hear their strategies on her next visit, that she watches on as they all take their leave and file out, Silas casting a lingering glance over his shoulder at the table and chair left stranded in the middle of the room. His attempt at spatially recreating the battlefield leaves her pondering whether she shouldn’t add a new skill to their curriculum.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

Titus did not exaggerate: her ambassadors are tense and obsessed with Skaikru.
“They walk like the Mountain. They talk like the Mountain. They fight with guns and fire, like the Mountain. You should have conferred with us before entering into an alliance with them, Heda.” Intan’s words seem to resonate with the other ambassadors, as they all nod in agreement.

She’s right of course. She should have. (And yet it’s also unchartered territory for the coalition. For not so long ago, any of them would have recoiled at the suggestion that they couldn’t sign an alliance without prior approval from the coalition’s other clans.) But how can she explain the fire in Clarke’s eyes or the overwhelming thrill in thinking for the first time that they – that she - can defeat the Mountain after all?

Titus is livid: “How dare you question your Heda!” he growls at the thin dark-skinned woman.

“It’s alright, Titus”, Lexa interrupts softly. “That is why we are all gathered here” she adds in a calm impassive tone, making sure to look all of them in the eyes before settling on Intan. “To discuss and agree, together, on a course of action considering recent developments. I have come to understand that Skaikru’s provocations…”

“So we’re calling burning more than 300 men alive a simple provocation now?” Djaïm interrupts with a deep rumbling voice, black kohl-rimmed eyes blazing with malevolence.

Djaïm has always been the only one of her ambassadors who would dare interrupt her. Even Lotrien, of the Ice Nation, knows better. But the people of the Horse clan are known for their incivility. She also suspects that the final battle leading to them accepting to enter the coalition has left wounds that will take many generations to heal.

“I have come to understand” she starts over, more forcefully “that our first interactions resulted from misunderstandings due to our different customs and tongues. I now believe Skaikru can adjust to our ways in time and bring incredible advancements to us all with their knowledge and technology.”

“And yet the Mountain still stands…” Lotrien comments, his big frame rigid, long white hair pulled back and Ice Nation scar burning bright on the side of his face.

“What help can they bring?” Tala joins in, bringing the conversation back on track. The Boat People have long been her closest allies and Lexa is once again reminded of how much she owes the tall woman with red painted tattoos on her face and arms, for her support.
“Weapons to rid ourselves once and for all of the monstrosities terrorizing our people; machines to drain lands and make them hospitable; advanced healing techniques and new medicine. I have seen their chief healer bring a reaper back to his old self. These are but examples of what we could learn from them and I am convinced there’ll be much more if we offer Skaikru peace.”

She knows she’s won Rafa of the Swamp people, Joao and maybe Laksha over.

But Lotrien is still sneering at her: “If Skaikru lives.”

Djaïm scoffs, adding: “And if Skaikru don’t retun the favour and join in an alliance with the Mountain, now that we’ve betrayed them.”

Lexa nods, ignoring the light queasiness in her stomach that their comments have brought up: “Yes, if Skaikru lives. As to a possible alliance with the Mountain,” she adds, turning to the horse clan representative, “I have left Indra in charge of enough men to take all necessary measures were it to happen. But I do not think it will.”

She rises from her seat. “As it is, none of us can afford to fight a second front with an enemy who is using weapons as deadly as the Maunon. The Mountain has been bleeding our people for years. Its fall should remain our first priority. And if Skaikru survives the coming month, I believe we should extend an olive branch to them and rediscuss an alliance, but this time, with the coalition, not just Trikru.”

“Would they consider it, Heda, after what happened?” Laksha of the River people enquires thoughtfully.

“Theyir leader has shown he can be reasoned with” she replies, thinking of Marcus Kane in a dark cell slitting his wrist and pushing all thoughts of Clarke - Clarke’s pleading eyes - out of her mind. “Now, I would like to ask each of you to clarify what their clan would contribute to this fight. Trikru can no longer bear the whole weight of an offensive against the Mountain alone” she adds, to remind all of them that the fact that they had sent only small units with inexperienced generals to support her campaign had not gone unnoticed. “We shall reconvene in a few days. Time is of the essence” she finishes, striding out of the room.

The real Battle of the Mountain has just begun and Lexa can feel the prickle of excitement mixed in with extreme wariness trickle down her spine at the prospect. For battle comes with using the skills she spent years to hone under Anya’s watchful eyes. But battle also means death and the blood on her hands has become an unwashable stain.
The library is bathed in the warmth of the afternoon sun when she slips into it. She seeks the peace and quiet the tall shelves of deep brown wood, stacked with books from bottom to ceiling, always provide. But instead, she finds Aden sitting at the bottom of a bookshelf, hunched over a voluminous book. He’s so engrossed in it that he doesn’t hear her approach and when she extends her hand to touch him on the shoulder, he jolts, the book falling from his lap.

“Heda”, he says immediately, scrambling up. “I was reading” he adds, hanging his head to hide his blush at having been caught off guard and by none other than the Commander herself. Lexa notes with quiet satisfaction though that he’s automatically switched to English in her presence.

“It’s alright Aden. What has you so captivated?” she peers at the book that is now lying open on the floor, but can’t make out the title.

“The Iliad” he replies, still contrite and hesitant to meet her gaze.

Lexa hums before sitting down on the ground, next to where she found him. She wanted some time alone, but this will have to do. She gestures to the spot next to her in invitation. “What is it about?”

Aden’s eyes have grown comically wide and it’s obvious he’s struggling, first with the fact that she just chose to sit down with him (uncharacteristically ignoring the table and chairs standing next to the large bay windows) and second, with the idea that she may not know the book.

She does of course, Titus considers it a classic any Natblida should know and even forced them to learn some parts of it by heart. She still remembers the arguments she would have with her fellow Natblida, long into the night, on the scandalous absence of women figures among the warriors.

But the truth is Lexa hasn’t been able to open a book of fiction in years. She used to devour them, stumbling over the long and complicated words yet soldiering on. They would occupy every free moment she could find in between sword practice and Titus’ lessons (until Costia came along, that is). And they would fill her dreams with golden haired gods and foolish heroes falling in love with impertinent nymphs.

But all she’s been able to read lately are treaties and history books… It’s not so much that the escape fiction promises has lost its appeal. And more that she can not find it in her to care for the characters
anymore. All empathy she has left she gives to her people. All sympathy she has left she keeps for her enemies. And all imagination she has left she needs for the politics of it all.

Aden seems to come back from his initial surprise and settles down next to her, with a shy smile. His first words are carefully chosen and tentative but soon enough he’s explaining the book’s plot, gesturing wildly with his hands, his eyes shining with excitement. The sight is so unlike his usual reserved and serious self that Lexa can’t help but return the smile. And so with Aden’s voice weaving a tale of impossible love and mighty battles, she pushes all thoughts of her heated discussion with the ambassadors away, if only for a moment.

Costia’s lying naked on her front, auburn hair a tangled mess spilling from the pillow all around her. Lexa would like to bury her hands in it, but for now she is otherwise occupied. She’s straddling her hips, trailing kisses down her spine and breathing in the slight tremors coursing through the toned body lying beneath her.

As much as she is loath to leave Costia in Polis time and again, she must admit that the catching up part is pure bliss. Costia’s been insatiable all week, backing her in any available dark corner at inopportune moments and Lexa is sure she doesn’t imagine her smug little smile whenever Titus has to clear his throat before entering the rooms they’re in, lest he walk in on them. It’s a silly game of nerves Costia has been playing with him ever since she started sharing her bed and Lexa doesn’t have the heart to ask her to stop torturing her former teacher. Only a year or two ago, she would have refused such displays that, if not quite public, still confirm to the people of the Tower (and by extension all of Polis and beyond) Costia as her lover. But times have changed and Lexa’s come to the conclusion that secrecy is no guarantee of safety for the people she cares for.

1, 2, 3. She’s now reverted to one of her favourite pastimes: counting the freckles on Costia’s upper back with her nose and pausing at each to taste the skin. 3, 4, 5. Costia hums contentedly below her, shoulders relaxed, taking deep and even breaths.

6, 7, 8

If only Titus had known that all it took for her to learn to play around with numbers was Costia, a beautiful girl full of life keeping her up at night. It would have spared them some of Lexa’s most gruelling sessions with him when she was younger. She had taken to reading and writing quite willingly but numbers had been a whole different ordeal. Lexa didn’t understand at the time why she had to learn to count men in such big numbers, why water could not be counted in kilos if food could, why distance units did not match her size. Titus’ patience had been truly tested and Lexa is immensely grateful for his perseverance.
“You haven’t spoken much about the Skylings” Costia asks softly out of the blue, turning her face away from the pillow and twisting her body slightly upwards to look at her.

“What do you wish to know?”

“What is their leader like?”

She stills. The memory of Clarke is decidedly not going to leave her be. She sidesteps, quashing the wave of guilt. It’s not technically deception… she just really does not want to go there today. Or ever, in the foreseeable future, really.

“Their power structure remains confounding. From what I have gathered, they used to be ruled by a council. But the system seems to have been discontinued, unable to adapt to our reality I would hypothesise. There are several figures among them who vied or have laid claim to the leadership since their arrival, including Marcus Kane, Thelonious Jaha and Abby Griffin. Marcus Kane seems an honest man of principle, by far the most capable and reliable out of them all.”

“Mhh. Yet your warriors speak of a young blonde leader. Were I to believe some of the stories flying around, the two of you disappeared for a whole day and their Commander returned from that little adventure her am in a sling – which is something we’ll have to talk about Lex: it’s hard enough to see you leave for war time and again, imagine hearing you’re off defying paunas on the side.”

She grunts noncommittally, her left shoulder throbbing in memory of that particular day. Curse her men for being such gossips.

“In fact, I’ve heard more than one compare her to a younger and more inexperienced you” Costia continues.
She wonders what compelled her warriors to draw such a parallel. Was it the steadiness in Clarke’s determined hand at Finn’s execution? The unhinged wonder in the blonde’s voice during the call to arms, when victory seemed within reach? Or simply because of all the hours the two had spent holed up strategizing?

“So?”

“So…?”

“So do I really owe a Skygirl for you coming back to me in one piece?”

She knows her cheeks have coloured guiltily and Costia gives an annoyed huff.

“Damn it Lexa, you know better than provoking a pauna!”

“The pauna was an accident. And we – I – made it out alive. I’m here, I came back to you, just as I promised I would.”

She tries to soothe the frustration she can sense in her lover by resuming her earlier activity. 17, 18, 19. Kisses never fail to distract Costia somewhat.

“What will you do about Gustus’ and Anya’s positions?”

Lexa quietens, grimacing, mood utterly ruined now.

She knows Costia means well. Yet it’s not common for them to discuss her dealings as Heda. Theirs is a careful equilibrium, crafted with care over the years: Costia’s extremely mindful never to initiate a conversation on state business and always lets Lexa come to her, except about specific issues she feels strongly about. It’s one of Costia’s many strengths: how she intuits Lexa’s needs and respects her secrets.

“I’ll have to appoint new people to replace them eventually” she sighs, reluctantly lying down on her
back next to her. Costia knows her. Knows Gustus’ betrayal has left a gaping wound inside of her that still burns. Knows Anya’s force of life was and will forever be unmatched. Knows the list of names has grown so long now it keeps Lexa awake until dawn on the nights she can’t keep the chanting at bay.

She sighs. “Indra has proven herself to be an honourable and trustworthy general, she could take over Anya’s units.”

Costia nods, her hand gently tracing butterflies on her stomach.

“I’ll have to talk to Titus about it” she adds, remembering how much she values the man’s counsel.

Her brown-eyed girl bends her head down to kiss a small spot right above her navel and Lexa lets her hands weave through her hair absentmindedly. Day light has started to filter through the windows, painting Costia’s hair on fire and the sight is magnificent.

There’s her duty as Heda and then there’s moments like these, in the privacy of her bedroom, where Lexa is just a girl, in love with another girl. Had she listened to Titus all these years ago, these moments of reprieve would not exist. But she had taken the risk, openly defied him and Lexa can not imagine her life without Costia by her side.

“Wulan has distinguished himself in the fighting pits over the past month, you may want to consider him for Gustus’ old position” Costia offers quietly.

Wulan is a fighter. A well-trained one, a member of her guard in Polis along with Costia. And if Costia trusts him with her life, then that is good enough for her. She nods. But they both know that Gustus wasn’t around just for her protection and that his is a mantle nobody can now assume.

“Can we talk about something else?” she whispers, pushing them until her naked body is resting on top of Costia’s, her thigh slipping in between her legs. Skin on skin. The grin that spreads on her partner’s face is contagious and Lexa bends down to taste her lips, dipping her tongue and sliding her right hand down over Costia’s thigh and further. The small eager gasp that leaves her lover’s mouth at the first touch is intoxicating and she’s come to understand she’s unlikely to ever tire of it.

She stills her hand’s movements and instead trails a wet path with her tongue down Costia’s chest, paying particular attention to her breasts, relishing the feel of her hardening nipples between her teeth. Costia’s breasts are glorious and Lexa’s sure that this very body, arching underneath her, is
what ancient poets were trying so desperately to capture with words.

Her mouth continues on its journey down, nipping at her inviting hip bone before Costia’s strong hands grip her hair and guide her head towards the patch of soft hair between her legs. As patient as she is in love, Costia’s always been notoriously impatient in bed. But Lexa feels like teasing this morning and well, the girl’ll just have to adjust.

Later, when Lexa’s catalogued every single visible freckle on Costia’s face, chest and arms (committing each to memory: it’s 189 today, less than yesterday but more than the day before) and when the time has come for them to rise, she softly breaks the comfortable silence.

“Have Wulan come to me this afternoon.”

Costia is already putting the final touches to her Guard uniform and smiles at the request, before nodding. She leans in for one last kiss, tasting herself on Lexa’s lips and slips quietly out of the room.

Where Gustus would force her enemies to cower with his towering presence and stern glare, Costia has always preferred to work from the shadows. And as in tune as Lexa is to her, there are still times when her lover is able to sneak up on her or slip from shadow to shadow unnoticed. But even when she can’t see her, Lexa knows: in Polis, wherever she goes, Costia goes. She’s always there, hidden away, reading the face and body of the people she’s conversing with and watching out for the glint of an assassin’s dagger.

She deserves the leadership of the Guard. They both know it. But the suggestion is one Titus still categorically refuses to discuss and Costia is too respectful to demand. Lexa will have to bring the issue up again with him once the trouble with the Mountain and Skaikru is over. She will fight to give Costia her due, if only because she can’t give her what she truly deserves in love. For despite Costia’s regular admonishments to the contrary, Lexa will always feel the girl deserves more than what she can give her. She’s always been undeserving when it comes to Costia – maybe now a little bit more so than before.

---

So she won’t be known as the Commander who fell the Mountain after all.

Lexa would expect to feel a twinge of disappointment, but the relief after hearing that Clarke is alive hits her with such force it leaves her struggling to keep her impassive mask on. She knows the blow
wouldn’t be so strong, had she not so purposefully avoided to think about the blonde over the past week. Thankfully, none of the ambassadors seem to have noticed. The news her scouts just shared meets with stunned silence and disbelieving frowns in the throne room. Out of the corner of her eye, Lexa sees the shift in Costia’s stance and Titus snapping his jaw shut, a frozen scowl on his features.

But Lexa knows. She knows that somehow, against all odds, Clarke – Wanheda, they called her – is alive. Wanheda, who was seen exiting the Mountain with a small group of injured Skaikru from the front entrance. Wanheda who marched in front, standing tall and gun in hand, all the way back to Camp Jaha. Wanheda who never returned to her people and instead walked away, disappearing into the woods.

Her scouts wanted to come straight to her after witnessing the group’s shaky exit but thankfully, Indra ordered them to stay on their assignment until they were sure of what had happened. Certainty came in the form of a group of Skaikru returning a few days later to dig more than 300 holes in the red earth and transporting covered human-shaped bundles from inside the Mountain, one by one, before lowering each into the ground. The scouts can’t make sense of what they saw, but Lexa remembers a conversation she had with Marcus a while ago about an old Earth custom his people hoped to reintroduce. It’s quite symbolic that a people born in the sky dreaming of returning to the ground would extend these last honours to a people born inside a mountain dreaming of the same.

‘Ridiculous lies’ Kieran scoffs. ‘How could the skylings possibly have accomplished such a feat?’ His outburst seems to end the silence that had come over the room and the ambassadors break into small whispered conversations all around her.

‘You heard their report, Kieran’, Lexa needs to raise her voice to make sure her voice carries over the murmur. ‘300 graves for 300 Mountain Men (men, women and children a broken voice whispers in her ear). I am as surprised about this news as you all are but I would never doubt my scouts. I would advise working from the assumption that they speak true and that the Mountain has indeed fallen, however unbelievable it may sound.’

‘If this is true, then Skaikru represents a bigger threat than you painted them to be, Heda’ Otis interrupts, his voice low. ‘Accomplishing such a feat, on their own…’ As neighbours to the lands Skaikru have been occupying, the Rock People, like Ice Nation, have been particularly tense ever since their arrival.

‘I agree with Otis, this changes everything’ Intan joins in, her body rigid.

Just a moment ago, they were discussing extending trade between the clans to new commodities and now, Lexa can already see the cracks forming in her hard-fought coalition. See the calculating eyes Lotrien rests on her. See the blood thirst in Djaim’s. Her gaze turns to her left, where Gustus would stand and she stares for a moment at the emptiness there. ‘Do you see?’ she wants to ask him, ‘My
legacy? Do you see it crumbling before me?’

She comes back to the moment, wishing to defuse the tension: ‘It does’ she says, her tone regal. ‘I propose to adjourn this meeting and take the remainder of the day to reflect on what the news means for each of us and for us as a coalition. It goes without saying that all plans for the military campaign are immediately to be put on hold. Tomorrow, we shall celebrate the downfall of the Mountain, for Skaikru has unexpectedly gifted us with the destruction of a mighty enemy and our people deserve to rejoice. Titus will let you know when we can meet again to settle on a new course of action.’

The change in programme seems to satisfy all and they start filing out of the room, still whispering amongst themselves. Titus lingers behind, clearly waiting for the room to empty out before he can share his thoughts with her in confidence. And Lexa already knows the topic of conversation will be her legacy, yet again. She breathes in slowly before letting out a long and deep sigh (there have been too many of those this week) and inclines her head, signalling for him to approach.

Night can’t come too soon.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

It’s been three months. Three months of convincing her ambassadors, over and over that Skaikru is not the enemy and should be left in peace, despite news of ever more frequent trips from their base to the Mountain. Convincing Titus that Wanheda roaming her lands is not a threat to her title. Convincing herself that she doesn’t need to examine her attraction – for that is what it was – to the young woman, even with Clarke alive. Three months of warm nights lying sated and content in Costia’s soft embrace. Three months of dreaming of a blonde haired goddess, bent on vengeance and screaming for her head. Lexa sighs a little in relief as she slips into the library, as has become a secret habit of hers lately.

Well, not so secret: Aden is sitting in his usual spot, squinting at the book in his lap, trying to block the sun out of his eyes. She settles down next to him, shifting once to make herself comfortable against the bookshelf, takes out the apple she grabbed from the kitchens on her way over and tucks her small knife out of the inside of her boot. He’s stopped reading now and sets about explaining the various scenes she’s missed since their last session, without needing any encouragement. Achilles is being Achilles, the Gods are as divided as ever and Troy hasn’t understood it’s about to fall yet. Lexa starts to cut the apple into small slices that she shares with Aden every so often.

She had been fascinated with the tale when younger, pitying a city which no matter how hard it tried, could apparently not escape its fate and finding beauty in the warriors’ defence of these elusive concepts of honour and valour. Now, she’s not so sure anymore. Though Lexa knows the scorching pain of losing something that belongs to her – family – and the temptation to shed blood to recover it,
the excuse of Helen’s kidnapping to pillage an entire city doesn’t really hold anymore.

She can tell by the way his hands become more agitated that Aden’s developed a particular fondness for Diomedes, the youngest leader of the Achaeans, and she suspects that Athena’s favour has something to do with it.

He stops after a particularly long description of yet another battle, brows drawn together and hesitantly asks: “Why did the Greeks have Gods, Heda?” It’s obvious the question has been on his mind for a while.

“All we know is that the concept of beings deciding over the life and death of mortals, offering advice and guidance, clearly occupied a central role in Ancient Greece, as well as in many other cultures since then.”

Aden’s troubled though: “But they are so…” he hesitates.

“Flawed?” she fills in for him, remembering her own struggles when reading about yet another lover’s quarrel between Hera and Zeus and Titus’ drawn out and judgemental lesson on it.

“Yes, flawed” he replies. “Why entrust one’s fate to a being whose actions and decisions seem so… unpredictable?”

Lexa doesn’t really have an answer to that and she looks out over to the windows: “They appear to have made their Gods in their image, subject to human passions, instead of envisioning other-worldly beings above it all like civilizations that came after them.” She turns back towards him: “The difference speaks volumes.”

“May I ask which one is your favourite, Heda?” he then asks timidly, gesturing to the book and not daring to look her in the eyes.

“Ancient God you mean?” Lexa pauses, remembering the young girl who could never tire of reading about Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, commander of the untamed. The girl who had found in Costia, so wild on a horse and skilled with a bow the Goddess personified. “Janus” she finally replies.
“I do not think I’m familiar with this one” Aden mutters with a frown.

“Janus is a Roman God, not a Greek one. He represents the passing of time, transitions and new beginnings. As such, he looks both to the past and to the future.”

Aden seems to mull it over and she knows he’ll be researching the God later in the quiet of the library. “The transition from war to peace, like with the coalition?”

She inclines her head: “That too. ‘What about you?” (Titus warning her of not developing close relationships with any of the Natblida be damned. She makes a mental note to start individual sessions with each of them in the weeks to come.)

Aden confirms her earlier suspicions by immediately blurt out “Athena”, the tip of his ears reddening to scarlet.

Maybe the question is less why the Ancient Greeks felt the need to invent their Gods and more why the world Lexa and Aden are living in doesn’t allow for it, she muses before returning to Aden’s tale of yet more battles and heroic feats.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
--------

She’s been distracted and can feel Titus’ watchful eyes on her.

The whole afternoon in fact, has been one compact blur, ever since Aden landed that kick earlier today. She had joined the Natblida’s sparring session, admired Iro’s impeccable aim with her bow, followed Naqib’s progress with his two Sai daggers and sparred with Aden. Surprised by his improved skills and quicker reflexes, Lexa had started to push him harder and what had started as a light exchange had quickly turned into an even-matched fight. The boy had blocked and parried every single one of her attacks, until that split second – a lapse in her concentration she still can’t quite explain – which he had used to land a blow to her face. The hit had completely thrown her off. It’s with a twinge of reluctance that she had had to admit that Aden is – where fighting is concerned – clearly ready. Either that or Lexa herself has lost the agility Anya was so adamant was her secret weapon, a thought she refuses to entertain.

The fury that slams into her when she hears of the bounty on Clarke’s head is all the more blinding and Lexa knows she hasn’t been as successful in keeping it from showing on her face this time.
Thankfully, she’s only in the presence of a few trusted generals, Wulan standing tall to her left.

The scout Indra sent is still kneeling in front of her and Lexa has to carefully suppress any sound of tremor in her voice, when she asks: “Are you sure?”

“Sha Heda, I verified the information in four different villages and trading posts.”

She’s only ever felt this crippling rage once in her life before. The force of it leaves her lightheaded. She gestures and turns her back on the room, dismissing him.

So Lotrien’s threats earlier on weren’t just posturing. (“If this is your weakness again, Azgeda will happily step in” he had sneered at her.) On second thought, she should have anticipated that one of the clans would try and appropriate the glory now associated to Clarke’s name (Clarke’s head), but they had made so much progress in discussing the possibility of a truce with Skaikru, that she had discarded the idea of the blonde leader becoming a target. She’ll have to confront Lotrien in private.

Not tonight though, tomorrow. For now, the image of Clarke’s head, wide unseeing eyes, held high by a jubilant Ice Queen for all her warriors to see, has etched itself in her mind and she knows she won’t be able to think clearly until she manages to shake it.

She can not afford to be distracted these days. Not when she has to prepare for the summit with Skaikru to discuss a treaty: Marcus Kane and Clarke’s nomon – Chancellor Griffin – are due to arrive in Polis soon. Not when her spy is sending troubling reports of scheming in Ice lands and the choices she has yet again to make weigh heavy on her mind. Not when her scouts haven’t been able to find any trace of the Sky girl they’ve been sent to protect in the 3 months she’s been missing.

And she can especially not afford to spare the young leader any thought when she suspects she hasn’t been as skilled as she hoped in hiding her preoccupation from Costia. She’s always kept secrets from her lover – it’s inevitable, comes with her position.

But never of this kind.

---

She knows exactly why she’s shied away from coming here since her return. Yet the news she just received makes the visit a necessity of sorts, if only to calm her ire. She could try the library but
remembers that Aden’s schedule would have him sitting in on one of Titus’ sessions and the solitude of books is not what she seeks right now.

“Monin hou, Heda” the small chubby man greets her with a wide smile when she enters the greenhouse.

“Kostas” she replies, nodding her head.

“You honour us with your presence. It brings us great joy to have you visit again” he smiles at her and Lexa doesn’t need to look to know that he speaks true.

The building is ablaze in the afternoon sun, despite the cracks in the glass panes here and there and the sections where the glass windows had to be replaced by transparent colourful bits and pieces, to counter the wear and tear of time. But the gigantic structure itself – even though it is a small wonder such a fragile edifice survived the apocalypse – is not what makes this place so dear to her. No, it’s the countless treasures it holds.

Three things hit the visitor simultaneously upon passing the threshold: the humidity, the colour green – green in all its different shades and vibrances, as far as the eye can see – and the noise, a constant comforting hum coming from the buzzing bees and the tinkling water.

This is where Lexa retreats to, whenever the stifling atmosphere within the tower’s walls becomes too much – or at least, she used to. The previous Commander had been the one to show it to her. At the time, the greenhouses displayed colourful and fragrant flowers from floor to ceiling and the ambiance never failed to seem to soothe the Commander’s nerves. Lexa changed all that when she ascended to the throne. For she comes from a family of farmers and her father’s words about the honour of providing the food for one’s people are etched deep into her mind.

The new Heda had the flowers and plants transported into neighbouring buildings or replanted in the garden outside (she made sure they would survive the move and continue to be taken care of). In their place, she sent tradesmen to all four corners of the Earth to bring her vegetable, fruit and root species (with detailed descriptions on how to grow them) to plant in the enormous glasshouse.

Kostas is a late – albeit no less essential – addition. The forever good-spirited man had shown up one morning, claiming to have come from far-away lands in search of the “Commander who grows life” as he had called her. How he had heard about her ambitious project remains a mystery. Kostas had come bearing gifts: a small round purple vegetable she had never seen before with an acquired bitter taste, together with its plant, and most important of all an unrivalled green thumb.
Lexa had been quick to add him to the permanent staff and has never regretted that decision since. Kostas is hard working, attentive to detail and creative too, taking the time not only to care for the plants but also to imagine new crossovers and mixes.

What was initially meant as a small private endeavour, both to collect – and protect – the diversity of this world, while preserving the small haven her predecessor had poured so much energy into creating, slowly grew in size and output. The glasshouses went from providing some of the food for the tower, to producing a surplus they now deliver every evening to the two orphanages and the many soup kitchens of Polis (Costia’s idea, when Lexa had shared the issue with her one night).

She heads straight to the far-left corner, where Kostas gestures with a pleased grin to a small patch of young looking plants.

“They’re growing well, Heda” he says, smiling. “Will you be staying for a while?” he adds gently.

Lexa just nods, her eyes trained on the seedlings.

“You know where the tools are” he replies and disappears, leaving her to trail delicate fingers along the plants’ fragile spines.

It’s a new variety of tomatoes – green ones. A gift from Joao of the People of the Valley last year. They’re the latest addition to the vegetable garden and Lexa’s very curious about the first harvest to come.

She putters around for a while, correcting the slope of the soil here, adding a stake there. All things Kostas could have easily done himself, but Lexa relishes the feeling of the earth (not blood, for once) flowing through and sticking to her palms, savors the soothing rhythm of digging, inspecting, correcting. There’s something in the physical sensations linked to this type of manual labour, a thrill that carries her back to a place she can not reach anymore without the sensory stimulation.

If she closes her eyes, she can almost hear her father whispering: “What are we doing Alexandria?” – “Providing for our family” a young Lexa would have replied after giving it some thought and hoping to impress him with the complicated words and sentiment – “We’re growing life, yongon: Life.”
“You care for her.” Costia’s tone is clipped, matter-of-fact.

Ice cold.

And Costia is never cold, not with her, not in the privacy of her – their – bedroom. But there she is, standing stock still with her back to Lexa, her frame shaking imperceptibly.

It’s a statement. Not a question.

Costia’s never shied away from facing her. She’s only ever seen her confront people and events head on. The realization that her lover’s shielding herself from her eyes… It breaks her a little.

She knows better – because this is Costia; Costia who’s been an unwavering rock all these stormy years now; Costia who knows her, better than anybody does nor ever did; Costia who was there for her that day when the Ice Queen revealed the true extent of her mania, shedding out of spite and folly innocent blood, the blood of Lexa’s kin – but she can’t help play coy, keeping her face and voice impassive:

“With Clarke alive, peace with skaikru will be much easier to achieve. She… It is important. For the coalition.”

“Don’t. Don’t you dare.”

Costia’s frame is shaking harder now, hot fury seeping like molten lava into her voice. The tone is not unfamiliar to Lexa per se. Yet, as ill-equipped as she has repeatedly found herself to be in matters of the heart, she has the sense, nonetheless, to understand that this has nothing to do with previous arguments or fights. This, in fact, is probably more dangerous than anything they’ve ever faced together before.

She owes Costia an honest answer, she knows. The problem is: she can’t have this conversation, not now. Not when the exhaustion of the campaign still stubbornly clings to her frame. Not when she hasn’t taken the time to sort herself out. She’s always been very good at compartmentalizing and with her return to Polis, Lexa had very carefully put the question of Clarke aside. Or rather, to be more accurate, the question of the lines Clarke had unknowingly blurred.
She needs something for her hands, misses the pommel of her sword around which they could wrap themselves, instead of falling so uselessly at her sides. Reaching out, is out of the question.

She settles for the truth, but not the one Costia seeks: “I care about you, niron” she replies with more force than strictly necessary, her voice stil calm but on the verge of giving way to the creeping panic.

Costia’s not impressed. To be honest, Lexa isn’t either.

“Answer me”, she orders in a voice that wants to be strong but shows signs of breaking.

Her lover finally turns to face her, pale cheeks highlighting the angry tears shining in her eyes, in sharp contrast with her blood red lips – she must be biting them again, Lexa notes with detachment. Even the freckles Lexa loves so much, seem to have lost some of their colour. But it’s her smile that cuts through Lexa’s façade. An ugly bitter rictus she’s never seen on those lips before.

“I am not blind, Lex. I know how anxious you’ve been for news. I saw how you reacted to the scout’s report earlier. Do I not deserve the truth? Answer me!”

The anger’s still there, mixed with frustration. And defeat.

Lexa can’t help but stare into Costia’s eyes, rooted to the spot, not quite comprehending how this conversation came about. For the first time since she can remember, she’s ready to acknowledge that she’s truly and completely terrified. There’s something there, something she’s never seen in these big brown eyes before: naked betrayal, stripped of all pretence, so raw it hurts to maintain eye contact. The anguish and despair, so clearly on display, lined with lingering disbelief, hit Lexa like the sword of an enemy, slashing deep into her.

She caused this.

She caused this.

The silence, marked by Costia’s ragged breathing, stretches on and the feeling that something rare, something treasured is breaking – worse: is irrevocably broken – settles deep into her bones.
“I can not” is all she is able to give her (“and you do not really wish me to” echoes in a secret part of her mind).

It’s too little of course, for the person who’s been by her side through the good and the bad. For the person who’s seen her shatter and helped her stand back up again. Much too little.

“I think. This may be the very first time I wish you were able to lie to me.”

The tone is so crushed, Lexa has to look away, ashamed and furious with herself. And how… How is this… How could she let this happen?

When they fight, Costia always makes sure to leave with a bang – that itself has been the topic of some heated arguments between them over the years, Lexa trying to avoid giving her attendants too much gossip fodder. This time though, the deafening silence around her is the only indication that Costia’s exited the room.

And she’s left with the question of how – in the course of only three months – she’s apparently managed to see the exact same look in the eyes of a dangerously attractive sky leader and those of the love of her life.

Chapter End Notes

I won’t subject you to me trying to make up some words and sentences in Trigedasleng, so anything in cursive has to be seen as spoken in Trigedasleng and all the rest spoken in English. I’ll add translations of Trigedasleng words to the endnotes in the next chapters. Small disclaimer: transientpermanence and her Commander story are in many ways my canon (because yes, it's that good), so similarities are not the product of chance (the flowers for instance, as well as the library are two such ideas with which I've played around a little).
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

She’s reached an open field when the rumbling of heavy footsteps gives her pause. She should have probably heard it sooner, but she’s been so focused on Finn she’s hardly registered anything else the past couple of hours. She barely has the time to make out lines and lines of heavily armed men crossing the wide expanse, when she’s roughly pushed to the ground. A heavy hand rests on the back of her head and a hot voice whispers to her: ‘Stay down or they’ll see you’.

Chapter Notes

This marks the end of the 'introductory chapters'. Next chapter will see Clarke meet Costia for the first time :) 

As usual, leave a comment, a question, a suggestion, a shout out, a disagreement, a tip, anything really that lets me know what you think :) 

Notes on the content: 
This chapter follows in the very beginning s3 canon but quickly deviates and we’re introduced to 2 main characters who will play a significant role in Clarke’s storyline in the future. 
I’m convinced Clarke would do just fine on her own out in the wilderness. What do you think of Clarke as a de facto vegetarian? 
We do not get here Bellamy crossing paths with Clarke, which was a shame to have to write out, as I really like their friendship. 
I couldn’t help but think that Finn’s ghost disappeared too quickly in season 2, so here he is again, a quiet presence by Clarke’s side.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been twenty days since she left Camp Jaha behind and Clarke has been doing just fine on her own.

She’s taken to sleeping in the trees, after waking to a dark wolf’s hungry growl on her third night. Just like every morning since, she shivers lightly, awareness seeping into her sleep addled mind.

Trina, Pascal…

She shifts, turns. And promptly falls off the branch. On a bed of soft leaves, mind you. You have to
give her at least that much: she does learn from her mistakes.

Still. Ouch.

She gets back on her feet with a painful groan and checks – like every morning – for possible fractures or sprains. Finding none, she rubs the last remnants of sleep out of her eyes, pats her cheeks with forced enthusiasm and stretches, partly to get rid of the kinks her night in a tree will no doubt leave, partly to warm up, as the temperature has been dropping steadily over the past four days.

She ignores the bruises she can already feel blooming on her chest and arms (this falling act is quickly getting old), climbs back up to grab the few belongings she had stashed away in a cavity, tucks her gun into the waistband of her jeans, and is on her way.

She’s not exactly in optimal form these days. Her nights are short, fitful, and leave her with the bleary sense of never truly being fully awake. Her days are long, spent stumbling through unfamiliar terrain, constantly on the lookout. Which means Clarke’s… exhausted.

She’s been walking west she thinks, following the sun’s position in the sky – and if the massive boulder she just passed looks familiar, she hasn’t noticed.

She should probably start marking it, just to be sure. But then that would leave a trail… And leaving a trail is not an option. In fact, the very first thing Clarke did once on her own, was try and erase all signs of her passing, while altering as much of her appearance as possible. (Although for whose benefit, remains… unclear).

She’d like to think she’s been quite creative in that respect. Upon finding a bush of wild roses, she had crushed the engorged rosehips into a thick paste to die her hair red. She also tried out different ways to braid it back and continues to apply broad dark smudges of soot from her fires to her cheeks and eyes.

(Not unlike…

No, she won’t go there.)

The finishing touch comes in the form of covering her boots and pants with a mix of dust and mud – not that she needs to add much grime to her current look, after crawling the Mountain’s tunnels.
(Long story short: yes, Clarke may currently best be described as a repulsive eyesore. Her general appearance, however, is by far the least of her problems right now, since said eyesore seems to be walking in circles in this damn forest.)

West or east, it doesn’t matter anyway. There’s no purpose to her footsteps, no destination to her journey. Yet instead of setting up camp somewhere quiet and far away, she keeps on going. Something keeps on urging her forward. Not towards, no, but forward nonetheless.

She’s been picking familiar berries and experimented with steaming roots (including a blindingly white one that left her seeing everything in a deep purple haze for a whole day). And so what, if hunger is the first thing she notices when she wakes and the last thing on her mind when she goes to sleep.

She’d take the hunger any day, over…

Trina, Pascal, Atom…

She tried her hand at fishing once. She’d just come across a small stream, where fish could be spotted swimming around. Using her jacket as an improvised fishing net – which on second thought hadn’t exactly been the brightest of ideas, considering that a week later it’s still uncomfortably damp – knees deep in the water and positively soaked from head to toe, Clarke managed, by the fifth try, to catch a translucent fish the size of her palm.

She grabbed the fretting creature by its tail fin, intent on killing it and proceeded to slap it against the rocks. But the fish just wouldn’t die and after the tenth slap, its small mouth desperately opening and closing around nothing but air, Clarke just lost her appetite and released the traumatized little thing back into the brook.

Thus ended her first and very much last foray into trying to catch fish.

Wilderness: 1. Clarke: 0.

Then had come the pathetic episode of DIY wooden traps for small game. With a few branches and pieces of scrap wood, channeling her best inner Raven, Clarke had cobbled together – and with every new escape perfected – modest ensnaring devices. A pheasant had flown away with her first prototype, probably seeing prime nest building material in it; two cheeky red squirrels had chosen her
second one as a mating stage (unperturbed by the irate blonde trying to shoo them away;) while a wild boar had barrelled into her third one, reducing it to dust.

Suffice it to say, if fishing had been an awkward experience, then finding herself cooing at her first catch: a young rabbit with mottled fur – before letting the terrified animal hop away – had been a downright embarrassment.

So, to recap: she can’t bring herself to kill an ugly fish, let alone a cute rabbit.

Which is absurd, because she loves meat. Just thinking of grilled deer has her salivating. She misses the smell of roasting game, misses the taste of fresh fat, cooked in its own juice.

Yet, here she is. Plants it is, then.

Wilderness: 2. Clarke: useless hunter and confused gatherer.

“Seeing their faces every day is just going to remind me of what I did to get them here.” Her parting words to Bellamy still hold true. In fact, Clarke doesn’t repeat them at night to remind herself, but because she wonders instead whether a time could come when she doesn’t feel their truth with so much certainty in her bones. For if there’s one thing she’s understood from these past weeks, it’s that the faces of those she killed in the Mountain won’t easily be laid to rest.

Finn wouldn’t disagree with her on that.

Oh yeah, because Finn’s here too. He’s been here, in fact, ever since her third day on her own (before her experiments with roots, she’s been careful to note).

If Clarke had to rate the days she’s spent on her own, she’d say the third one was her worst by far. First, she had woken to a wolf staring at her, all bared teeth gleaming in the moonlight. And instead of making a run for it, reaching for her gun or trying to climb a tree, she had remained paralyzed, sweaty and terrified, eyes fixed on the approaching beast.

Not one of her proudest moments (though the list is admittedly getting quite long).
She couldn’t say for sure how long they had stayed locked in this bizarre face-off, golden brown eyes boring into hers. Until the wolf, with one last growl, had turned around and disappeared back into the bushes.

Which had then led Clarke to discover an amused looking Finn sitting on a branch, mocking eyes watching her.


Is it still Finn though, if the person is dead? Shouldn’t she give him another name, despite the deceptive resemblance? (The same clothes, the same dimple, the same grin. The same eyes.)

She knows why he’s here of course. Also knows why this Finn is the one from the early days, before Mount Weather kidnapped his friends, before the steel of a machine gun came to replace intricate metal designs in his hands, before TonDC...

That doesn’t mean she has to like it.

She wants to be alone. Otherwise, she’d still be at Camp Jaha, surrounded by people she can probably not call friends anymore – if she ever could. She wants to be alone with her thoughts. Alone with her guilt. Alone with the sickening feeling of Bellamy’s hand resting above hers, while all around them bodies are falling and souls are burning.

She doesn’t want to see the man she killed in front of an entire army – in front of her mother, in front of his lover. She doesn’t want to be reminded of the taste of fear on his lips, as she slipped a knife between his ribs.

Although, as unnerving as he – it? – is, Finn’s ghost provides a welcome distraction whenever her thoughts start to wander to bright green eyes and timid full lips. Or as she likes to call her: “the backstabbing bitch who shall not be named.” TBBWSNBN for short (give or take a couple of Fs in-between). So she’s decided not to fight his presence too much (not that there’s anything she could actually do about it, even if she so desired).

Because given the choice between facing her ex – ex what: lover? flirt? fling? What do you call two scared teenagers finding in each other a fleeting moment of comfort, searching for the strength to face a wild new world? – and confronting her attraction to a stranger who left her people (left her) to die, Clarke would choose the former any day.
Remembering it, her words, her goddamn face, makes Clarke want to scream and tear something apart. (Preferably the person in question.)

Then again, livid though she may be when it comes to Lexa’s betrayal at Mount Weather (and that’s the understatement of the century), Clarke knows, deep down, that she must first come to terms with what she did, before she can sort out her feelings towards Commander Judas. Something she can’t do with Finn around. She needs solitude for that, damnit. Needs to look the guilt in the eye. Needs to seize the image of the dead with both hands and find a way to make this right.

Which means: she’s back to square one. Physically moving forward but nowhere near to getting anywhere.

Finn never talks. (Figures, that she would be denied the one thing that could actually be of help to her: a sounding board for her inner turmoil. He just follows her around wherever she goes.

She turns her head to the right and true to form, he’s there, walking next to her.

Like so many times before, his words: “You and Bellamy are leading us down a dangerous road” echo in the back of her mind. She shakes her head. How wrong he was, to believe Bellamy was a negative influence on her, when it’s been the opposite all along.

After all, she’s the one with death in her wake. She’s the one who went with no plan whatsoever into the Mountain. She’s the one who killed Dante Wallace in cold blood and then proceeded to end the lives of an entire people.

Trina, Pascal, Atom, Wells…

So maybe she hasn’t exactly been doing “just fine” on her own. But she’s trying, ok. She wasn’t raised for this world. Sure, the forest can look luscious and welcoming – gorgeous and enchanting when the sun hits the trees just right – but take away some of the light, some of the green, and all you’re left with is a dark and daunting environment, where every rustle, every sound is an unfamiliar threat.

(That’s one thing she’s just now realised: there is no silence on Earth. It just doesn’t exist. Nature, life, the elements, they all conspire to create this constant thrum. And it would be pleasant, if only it
weren’t potential signals of imminent doom. Although, on second thought, wasn’t it similar on the Ark? The hum of airvents, the buzzing of electric lights, the echo of human activity all around. It’s not the same though. Everything on the Ark, absolutely everything, had a metallic quality to it. She much prefers this noise to the Ark’s, if she thinks about it.)

Plus, she’s pretty sure even Grounders aren’t born with the skills to navigate these woods: they develop and hone them over time.

It’s a work in progress, whatever this is. And if Clarke can deal with the hunger, get over the dirt and – dare she say it – handle the loneliness, then she should be fine.

(Lexa and Finn be damned.)

---

She’s reached an open field, when the rumbling of heavy footsteps gives her pause.

She should have detected it sooner, but she’s been so focused on Finn’s annoying presence, she’s hardly registered anything else the past couple of hours. She barely has the time to make out lines and lines of heavily armed men crossing the wide expanse, menacing dark figures with white warpaint against the backdrop of a vivid landscape all around, when she’s pushed to the ground. There’s a rough hand pressing on the back of her head, a hot breath in her ear.

“Stay down or they’ll see you.”

It’s a man’s voice and once the panic has subsided, cheek smushed against the red earth, Clarke takes the time to weigh her options. She can either follow the stranger’s instructions or fight him and risk catching the attention of an army of unknown allegiance. Judging by the newcomer’s strength, she can tell the fight won’t be an easy one. Plus, he’s at a clear advantage, standing in her back.

She opts for staying put – for now – acutely aware of the gun hidden under her jacket.

His grip slackens, enough for her to raise her head a bit. She catches a better glimpse of the soldiers walking through the tall strands of wild barley. Her first conclusion is that whoever they are, they’re not Trikru. From their appearance alone, she’d say Ice Nation, but it’s difficult to tell from so far away.
She’s either walked in a completely different direction than she thought – which is not entirely impossible, if she’s honest – or something is really wrong with this picture.

Once the bulk has passed them, she decides to test the waters a bit and turns her head to take a long look at the man who so rudely forced her into hiding. Even in his crouched position, Clarke can tell he’s tall, shoulders well defined, with thick athletic arms. His brown hair is tied back in a neat bun. His nose is flat and his eyes resemble small slits, carefully studying her. He looks intelligent. Very intelligent. And dangerous.

Something clicks when she sees the circular mark burnt into his skin on the side of his face: “You’re Ice Nation” she whispers.

He doesn’t give any sign he heard her.

She goes through the list of everything she’s eaten in the past 24 hours. Nope, no strange looking roots or toxic leaves. This must really be happening.

She doesn’t know whether she should thank him or rage at him, so she settles for silence, schooling her features into an impassive mask. Like she would see her do very often… (And of course her mind would sneak her back in at the most inopportune of moments.)

He seems to think the danger’s passed and straightens up, patting at the dust on his pants. She ignores his outstretched hand, rubs her face to get some of the caked dirt off and follows him up.

“Which way are you going?” he wants to know, once they’re both standing, looking down at her from his height.

Clarke is no fool, so she gestures as vaguely as possible to her left in order not to give anything away. He hums in response, studying her for a breath.

“I’m heading that way” he finally says, pointing towards the opposite side of the fields – her initial destination. “You’re welcome to join me if you wish.”

Now Clarke’s in quite a pickle. She came here to be alone. Solitude, remember? But since Finn’s
already not leaving her side, derailing all her plans for introspection, what’s one more travel companion? (It must say a lot about the past couple of days, if she’s so fast to break away from her self-imposed isolation and agree to travel with a complete stranger.)

“Why not, for a couple of hours maybe” she shrugs.

She studies his reaction for any sign of duplicity but can’t pierce through his impassive mask. He grunts and turns, confidently expecting her to follow. She starts after him with a slight shake of her head at his presumptuous attitude and a sense of foreboding settling in the pit of her stomach.

---

Roan (for it’s his name) crouches down to start a fire with the small pieces of wood they gathered. They walked all afternoon in companionable silence and are now setting up camp for the night, to Clarke’s silent relief. For some reason, her limbs and movements feel slower today. Maybe it’s the aftermath of the adrenaline-rush after her near run-in with that anonymous army. Or maybe it’s just the result of these past weeks’ heavy toll on her body and soul.

“Why are you hiding from your own people?” Clarke finally dares ask the question that’s been on her mind all along, breaking the quiet of the night.

It’s a bit of a shot in the dark, but, again, she’s no fool: Ice Nation army or not earlier, Roan is clearly avoiding wider travelled-on paths.

She introduced herself as “Raven” (from Skaikru goes without saying) – the first name that came to mind – but the knowing smirk on his face let her know as soon as she said it he wasn’t duped.

He doesn’t seem to be a trader, nor a messenger. He doesn’t look like a representative on official business either. Plus, he’s heavily armed and let’s face it: this man was built for war. They’ve remained suspended so far in this delicate bubble of convenient mystery that seems to suit both equally.

“Why did you run away from yours, Reyven?” he counters.

And well… that’s the end of that discussion.
They settle for watching the fire take, the wood cracking under the heat. Clarke shuffles closer to the flames to keep the night’s chill at bay.

When Roan extends his water pouch to her, she declines. She may be open to travelling with him but Clarke is on high alert, at all times aware of the fastest number of moves required for her to grab her gun. For as much as Clarke’s discovered in his presence a welcome distraction, there’s something unsettling about him. She hasn’t been able to shake the sense of danger that won’t let the tense knot in her stomach unwind.

Just like the forest all around them, Roan is both handsome and treacherous. In fact, he reminds her of a story her father used to read to her (the title comes to her immediately, for it left quite the mark on her young mind: Little Red Riding Hood). When she had recounted it to Wells one night, it had so frightened the boy he’d had nightmares for weeks afterwards.

Whether in disguise or not, Roan’s undeniably a wolf.

He’s laid his sword, bow and dagger down beside him, but Clarke knows there must be a world of small weapons still carefully concealed in the folds of his clothes. He apparently sleeps on the ground and judging by his unimpressed shrug earlier, didn’t seem to think much of her strategy to take to the trees. Then again, Ice Nation aren’t of the Trees…

Though for a complete stranger to these lands, he seems quite adept at navigating the thick forests they’ve been wandering through.

(Too good at it, in fact.)

Roan seems to have decided to put an end to their charade, for he continues: “Or should I say the great Wanheda, Mountain slayer? Which does one go by these days?” he adds with mocking eyes, watching her like a hawk.

And well, there it is: confirmation that he knows exactly who she is. Which puts her at a glaring disadvantage.

“I’m no one” Clarke replies with force, keeping her eyes trained on the fire.
The way he just said that name – *Wanheda*– makes her blood churn.

“A lot of people out there, right now, looking for No One” he replies looking at her, the flames reflected in his sharp eyes.

This is news.

She suspected Skaikru would come looking for her, even though she hoped they would respect – if not understand – her self-imposed retreat. But is that it, or is there someone else out there, tracking her every move? She experiences a short moment of panic: surely the warriors they just saw have nothing to do with her disappearance… before chiding herself and shaking the silly thoughts out of her head. Now she’s truly lost her mind, if the thinks a whole army would be summoned to hunt her down.

Since there’s no use in denying it anymore, she asks: “And who would those people be?”

“That depends on who’s asking… Reyven the lonesome or… ?”

Fair enough. For a reason she can’t explain, she can’t bring herself to use “*Wanheda*”, so she goes with: “Clarke, Clarke kom Skaikru” and extends her arm for the second time that day.

He holds it for a moment too long, his eyes never letting go. She needs two movements to get to her gun, can have it pointed at him in three.

“Very well then, Clarke kom Skaikru. You wanted to know who’s after you: men and women of all sorts. Some looking for vengeance, some for riches.”

She’s aware Roan didn’t reciprocate by revealing his own clan, but that’s a fight for another day. Right now, she has too many questions.

“Riches? What do you mean?”

“There’s a price on your head, *Wanheda*. A sizable one.”
“What?”

Surely Lexa wouldn’t…

Except she would, wouldn’t she? If she found it to be in her interest, if it played in her favour. She would.

“By who?”

Whatever seems to surprise Roan in her reaction, he doesn’t voice it. He leans back and takes a breath. “That is information I do not possess.”

She’s pretty sure that’s only half true at best. As to the other side of the coin: the motive, Clarke doesn’t need to ask. The unwelcome image of the charred bodies scattered around the dropship flashes in her mind. She remains silent and lets the conversation die, suddenly eager for sleep.

They settle down for the night after devouring his loaf of dark bread and sharing her mix of nuts and seeds. She gives in and takes a sip from his pouch as well.

She will sleep with her gun tonight.

Perched on her branch, Clarke’s eyes feel heavy, yet they remain glued to his form. There is a specific scene, there are specific words, nagging at her subconscious. (What big eyes, What big hands).

Trina, Pascal, Atom, Wells, Charlotte…

She dreams of her name, added to that list. She dreams of a cloaked figure, receiving gold in exchange for… She dreams of a little girl in a red cape travelling with her executioner.
The atmosphere relaxes somewhat the following day. It’s as if an invisible weight evaporated, when Roan acknowledged her as Skaikru, and she admitted to being the one who brought about the Mountain’s downfall. She can detect grudging respect in his eyes (which makes her cringe internally, but she’s careful not to let it show).

He proves once more to be an affable presence, considerate of her need for quiet and space. Or maybe he craves both just as much as she does.

They might not be so different from one another, Clarke muses: two wandering travellers with what would appear no true destination. Both more at ease when shrouded in silence. And both apparently aware of what it means to take a life.

(She had not so discreetly observed him while hunting a small fox earlier on and caught the quiet “Yu gonzpele ste odon” he had reverently whispered in Trigedasleng to the slain animal. She’s pretty sure it’s not part of a ritual – be it Trikru or Ice Nation – so it must be his own.)

… Two wolves in sheep’s clothing?

Clarke finds herself politely declining the offered meat that night. There’s… something unsettling about the perspective of tearing flesh out with her teeth, that just kills her appetite.

The story must really be on her mind, for Clarke inexplicably finds herself sharing the tale of the unsuspecting young girl traipsing through the forest and of her cunning predator with Roan. He listens. Judging by his grunt of disapproval at the girl’s gullibility, it would appear he’s even becoming invested.

What she doesn’t expect, is for Roan to reciprocate with a tale of his own. Trading stories, even if meant for children, sounds… oddly personal.

“There’s this tale in Ice lore I heard when I was but a child” he starts.

The crackling of the fire is the only sound apart from his voice. He’s lying on the ground, lower body wrapped in his furs and arms folded behind his head, looking up at the night sky. And the sky tonight is a true sight to behold: not a single cloud in sight, every star seems to have decided to come out and try to outshine its neighbours. It’s mesmerizing.
She doesn’t say anything, curious to see where this is going.

“Would you like to hear it?” he asks.

She nods, trying to mask how eager she is.

“One day, the Sun went to visit the Moon. And the Sun sighed: “My good friend, we both have too many children. Looking after them is causing us much unnecessary trouble.” The Moon cautiously replied: “How right you are, my friend”, waiting to see the true meaning behind the Sun’s words.

“I propose we eat them to save ourselves the constant pestering” the Sun finished very seriously. The Moon was taken aback by the suggestion, but hid their discomfort well. After much thinking, they replied: “I can see the sense in your argument, friend. Yet I couldn’t possibly eat my own children. Why don’t you send me one of yours to feast on, every day, and I shall do the same with mine.”

The Sun readily accepted and so the macabre exchange between the Sun and the Moon commenced.”

Uh, ok… this is not how Clarke pictured her evening going. She’ll admit her own tale wasn’t exactly cheerfulness incarnate, but she’s not particularly looking for new gory bedtime stories these days (she’s got enough of those to last her a lifetime).

Yet… there’s a side of her that wants to hear more. She leans in closer.

“The following day, as agreed, the Sun sent one of their children over to their friend, the Moon. The Moon, however, didn’t have the child for lunch. Instead, it covered the youngling in a thick and tasty condiment, to the point where he truly became unrecognizable and so disguised, sent him back to the Sun. The latter, believing the child to be of the Moon, as per their bargain, promptly devoured him.

And so it went, day after day, child after child. Slowly, the Sun lost one offspring after the other, until there were none left. The Moon on the other hand, through this cunning ruse, managed to save all of their own progeny.”

Roan turns his head slightly in her direction. Their eyes meet. Clarke squirms a little under his fixed
stare.

He continues: “And this is why during the day, the Sun can be found reigning all alone in the firmament. And why the Moon always comes out in the company of its many children, lighting up the sky, offering travellers solace and direction.”

Oh. That’s actually quite…. Very dark, for sure, but also oddly… poetic.

He pauses and his eyes break away from hers.

“Upon discovering their friend’s treachery, the Sun, bent on vengeance, went after the Moon. To this day, it can be seen pursuing it across the skies, yet never quite catching up to it. On the rare occasion the Sun seems to be gaining ground and about to swallow his old friend whole, my people call up to the skies and their clamour never fails to scare the Sun into retreating.”

He turns his head back to the open night sky.

“Gaining ground… do you mean when there’s an eclipse?” she asks, when it appears he’s finished, “we were told about them in Earth Skills.”

Roan gives a small nod.

“Why would you want to keep them from devouring each other?” Clarke hesitantly wants to know.

“Because we need both. The sun during the day to melt the ice and let the earth breathe and the moon at night to light our way, Wanheda.”

What do you say to such a tale? It’s not particularly cute or nice, more gruesome than anything else. She’s unsure why he shared it with her in the first place: is she supposed to catch a deeper meaning or discern a metaphor in its midst? The moral of the Little Red Riding Hood one was clear-cut. Here however…?

She feels she should say something, acknowledge this moment somehow, so she goes with: “Thank you for sharing this story with me.”
Roan inclines his head once more and they both fall silent.

Trina, Pascal, Atom, Wells, Charlotte, John...

She dreams of hungry monsters burning bright that night, slowly catching up to her until they consume her whole.

In a way, she’s been waiting for it to happen ever since they met, her instincts telling her not to let her guard down.

And they were right.

They’ve been traveling side by side for a couple of days now and Roan’s been looking at her with calculating eyes all morning. The queasiness in the pit of her stomach is back full force.

When he finally attacks, Clarke’s ready, almost relieved even. She can grab her gun in 2 moves. And yet, he’s faster than she anticipated, and within a matter of seconds, he has her pinned down on her front, holding her hands tight in her back and using his weight to keep her against the ground.

She tries to kick him off her, but he twists away and she promptly finds herself on her back with a knife to her throat, unable to reach for her gun.


“So eager to trust strangers” he tsks down at her, pressing the blade to her throat, enough for her to feel the prickle of its tip and for the panic to well up inside of her. “Maybe you’re not the Commander of Death after all.”

“If you were going to kill me, you would have done so already” she reasons, falsely confident,
glaring defiantly up at him.

“There’s still time” he replies coolly with a thin smirk before confiscating her gun and yanking her up with more force than strictly necessary.

“Why are you doing this?”

None of this makes any sense. Why would he wait this long, if the plan had been to take her prisoner all along? Why share these stories and let her believe they were starting to get to know each other?

Roan (is that even his real name?) doesn’t answer. He ties her hands up in her front and pushes her forward.

“If you’re going to make me walk on a leash, the least you could do is tell me why” she huffs petulantly.

The Azgeda man remains stoically silent.

Between a mum Ice Nation warrior with undisclosed intentions and a dead ex-whatever, Clarke doesn’t really know what she would pick if given the choice. But between Roan dragging her further into the forest and Finn looking at her with sadness in his eyes while keeping his distance, there’s no question she would pick Finn’s unsettling ghost any day.

Speaking of which, the Arker boy has of course conveniently disappeared – she makes a mental note to get him back for that later. But for now, she has more pressing matters to attend to – for instance: the man trying to kidnap her. And she needs more information.

“Are you doing this for money, is that it? Look, whatever they’re giving you, my people will offer you more” she bluffs.

“Not for someone who abandoned them” he counters, still unsettlingly calm.

Clarke can feel the anger building inside of her now, replacing the fear: “You don’t know anything about me” she retorts heatedly.
“I know you took the coward’s way out” he says, looking her straight in the eye.

“Like you’re so different” she spits. “You’re in disguise, same as me. You’re on the run, same as me. In the wilderness, same as me.”

“I was banished. Nothing like you. You had a choice” he replies.

(This keeps on getting better and better, she thinks. Now she has to worry about what unforgivable things he could possibly have done to be exiled by his own people.)

He then adds: “And no, I can’t and won’t take you home to your people. Because you’re the way back home to mine.”

They start walking in silence, Roan pushing her whenever she slows down and Clarke grunting in protest just to try and rile him up. This is good: it gives her time to think. I’d be easier if he had revealed what he intended to do with her, but clearly he’s bringing her somewhere (“to someone” a voice in her head warns). And whatever it is, it can’t be good. Which leaves Clarke with one single thought running through her mind: she doesn’t want to die. She doesn’t know how to live with herself, true, but she’s not ready to let go either.

(If she’s completely honest, this comes as a bit of a surprise. Not that she contemplated suicide these past two weeks, but to feel her survival instinct kick in once again and with such force leaves her disorientated.)

She survived an assault of more than 300 trained warriors. She saved her friends from the clutches of experienced and deadly Mountain Men. She can survive this.

The plan comes to her naturally when they happen across a small meandering stream, as if she were born for this – born for deceit, born for murder. She’s now several feet behind him. He tuggs impatiently on the rope. Clarke simply let’s herself go, falling to her knees and then head first into the sand. She can feel him stop in his tracks, can hear his footsteps coming closer. He nudges her shoulder with his foot once, twice. Clarke gives no signs of a reaction and continues to feign unconsciousness.

“Looks like the great Wanheda is human after all” he mutters, before walking away.
She can hear the sounds of feet parting water, gives it a couple more seconds, and then attacks. She’s on him in a flash, with the rope around his neck, plunging his head into the water and using all her weight on his back to keep him there.

He struggles. A lot. But she has the momentum and he can’t shake her off. Just a couple of seconds more, she thinks and then it’ll all be over. She lifts her head away from the body jerking desperately underneath her and there he stands: Finn.

Floating bloody Finn.

Finn and his unwavering belief in peace, haunted eyes not looking at her this time, but at her captor instead, before they circle back to her. He doesn’t do anything, no movement of his head or hands, but something passes between them and Clarke slowly finds herself relinquishing her hold on the suffocating man, without fully comprehending why. Damn it. All she knows is that this is something she needs to do. Roan’s movements have lost of their force, his grip on her hands slackening. With a jerk of her arms, she lets him go and pushes his body on the shallower side of the river.

So she can’t kill him. That doesn’t change anything to the fact that he still very much is trying to kill her. Now what brilliant solution does Finn have for that predicament? None, of course.

She looks back at Roan’s duffel bag, where she knows he stashed her gun away. She could… Her eyes turn to the forest. If she runs now, she should be able to get a good enough head start. Time’s up: she needs to decide.

She closes her fist, gives the side of his head a forceful blow and takes off, hoping with all her heart that this bought her enough time. She runs at full speed towards the cover of the trees, her heart drumming up a storm in her chest.

She’s about to reach them, when the searing pain of an arrow hitting her left leg makes her stumble. She doesn’t spare it a thought, let alone a glance. There’s no time for that. She can’t stop now. She recovers her balance, forcing herself to stay upright and keeps going, trying to put as little pressure on her injury as possible.

She’s protected by the trees now, but she knows it’s not enough. She needs to put as much distance as possible between herself and her Ice Nation pursuer. She jumps a fallen tree, slides a bit in the mud when her feet hit the ground and ignores the jolts in her leg at each one of her movements.
The adrenaline pushes her forward.

Her lungs are aching, her leg is warm (probably from the blood gushing from the wound) and Clarke is running for her life.

The pain and the blood loss finally catch up to her a little while later and Clarke passes out mid-run without even noticing.

Wilderness: 5. Clarke: …?

She’s dreaming. She knows she’s dreaming. But the rage cuts so deep, igniting every single one of her nerve endings.

Clarke is a ball of fire bursting at the seams. A supernova on a mission to self-destruction. She’s the sun hell-bent on vengeance. But that cannot be, for that would make her the moon, the cunning saviour of her people. Which she is not and never was.

She’s... She’s betrayal. She’s…

The faint sound of cutlery against glass is the first thing she registers when she comes to.

There’s this unpleasant and yet oh so familiar feeling at the base of her neck: the panic of waking up in a strange place after losing consciousness.

She remains stock still, trying to make sense of her situation without giving away that she’s now awake. She’s lying on something hard. She can feel a rough texture, covering her up to her chin. She’s… naked underneath, she realizes in rising panic, but for her underwear and… are these bandages around her thigh? She feels sweaty and feverish, yet oddly clean at the same time. It’s all very… confusing.
There’s the shuffling of footsteps to her right, followed by the same clink of earlier.

The faint smell of some type of warm broth drifts under her nose. Boiled vegetables. Her stomach gurgles loudly and well, there’s no use pretending she’s asleep now. Her left hand tenses around the sheet as she braces herself.

She opens her eyes to grey ones peering right at her. She doesn’t really know what to do, so she remains silent and so does the other person. After some more time staring at each other, she chances a quick look around: she’s lying on a wooden cot in a small room with bare walls of red earth. There’s a small light brown table against the wall opposite the bed, right under a square window. The grey curtains are pulled back and there’s a little bit of sunlight filtering in, enough for her to know that it must be the end of the day.

The only other person in the room is a tan boy she would place between 10 to 12 years old. His hair is shaggy, a shiny black mess that reaches his shoulders and falls into his eyes. The combination of pale luminous eyes with jet black hair is… startling.

Pushing with her elbows and arms, she tries to sit up, but the pain in her leg promptly forces her to lie back down. She feels sluggish and shaky. She tries again, more slowly this time, and relaxes against the wall with an exhale.

The brown skinned boy continues to observe her with curious clear eyes, until he reaches out, presenting a bowl to her.

“Dina” he offers in a hesitant voice. “Choj op.”

The words are transparent enough and trigger memories: Trigedasleng. Her nostrils flutter at the inviting smell. She should refuse (she knows better than to trust complete strangers by now), but she hasn’t eaten anything warm in days and the smell of spices alone has her mouth watering.

He carefully places the bowl in her hands, still slightly trembling from the effort of sitting up. Clarke forgets all about protocol: in the blink of an eye, she’s tipped the bowl back and is slurping down its nourishing contents.

“Mochof” she murmurs a bit self-consciously once she’s drunk the last drop and licked her lips, remembering that she’s not alone in the room.
The boy just nods with a pleased smirk, motions amusingly for her to clean her chin, takes the empty bowl and leaves a seriously embarrassed Clarke the room.

He’s left the door slightly ajar. She can hear movement and quiet whispering in the neighbouring room, which has the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She searches for her clothes but doesn’t spot any of her personal belongings. Except for her father’s watch, she realises with relief: a conscientious hand must have taken it off her wrist and placed it on the table.

She carefully lifts the blanket to examine her leg. The bandages could be cleaner – dirty enough for Clarke to worry about infection: there is some reddening of the skin around that she’ll have to take a closer look at very soon – and the way they’re loosely wrapped around her thigh lets her know they won’t hold for long. They’ve taken the arrow out, at least. When she carefully palpates around the wound, Clarke decides things might just turn out fine. She wouldn’t be surprised if this was the work of the silent boy.

Speaking of which, he’s back.

She pulls the blanket back up hastily. He’s carrying the same bowl with apparently a second helping and brown bread. Clarke accepts the bowl with the same enthusiasm as the first. She’s a bit more dignified this time around when emptying its contents and adds a genuine smile when she thanks him again.

Friend or foe? she muses, looking into his curious eyes.

She can’t see any tattoos or scars on his face but he could still be Trikru. He’s wearing several long shirts that all come together to cover his chest and a pair of loose white pants. A thin brown worn-away belt, hanging low on his hips, holds the whole ensemble together. His expression is contemplative, yet not unkind.

Remembering the little tidbits of Trigedasleng she had caught here and there, she decides to break the ice: “Ai laik Clarke.”

She doesn’t know why she reveals her real name, this time around, instead of using Raven’s. Maybe it’s because she feels exposed and vulnerable. Maybe it’s because of the boy’s eyes.

“Clarke kom Skaikru” he replies, nodding.
The fact that he knows who she is doesn’t sit well with her.

“Ai laik Damian” he adds, puffing out his chest and looking her straight in the eyes.

Oh, he’s Trikru alright, she thinks with a smirk to herself. A proud little warrior, no doubt. The conversation seems to die after that: Clarke doesn’t know much else in Trikru language and he resumes his no doubt riveting occupation of observing her silently.

“The boy is the one who found you” a deep voice explains from the door.

Clarke automatically reaches for the back of her waist, before remembering she doesn’t have her gun and wincing at the movement. The gesture doesn’t go unnoticed by the room’s new occupant.

“My name is Shabir” the man introduces himself, placing a hand over his heart.

He’s tall – colossal really – and burly, with a wide chest and thick shoulders that look caged in, in the door’s narrow frame. His left eye is only half-way open, from an old injury perhaps, that did not leave a visible scar. He’s wearing heavy robes, his long beard highlighting his thick eyebrows and thin nose.

“I’m Clarke”, she replies after a beat, mirroring his gesture, once the shock at seeing this giant of a man subsides. “From Skaikru” she adds.

His unsurprised nod lets her know that he too, inexplicably, seems to already know who she is.

“Welcome to Sinchuk, Clarke kom Skaikru. Your injury calls for rest. It would be a great honour for my people to have you stay among us for as long as it takes to heal.”

If only her leg was the only thing needing healing, a voice mutters in the back of her mind.

When his last words register, she can’t help but blurt out: “Why?”

His brow furrows, as if perplexed and not comprehending the meaning behind her question. “Your
“No, I mean, why would you take me in, why would you care for my injury?” she clarifies.

“You ended the Maunon” he replies then, confusion still evident. “Our people lived in the Maun-de’s shadow for decades.”

A grimace takes over Clarke’s features at the reminder, but she remains quiet. Shabir, as it turns out, is the village chief and Clarke intuits that it’s a great sign of respect for a person to be accommodated in his private quarters. She learns that Damian brought her to Sinchuk two days ago, after the boy had found her, lying inert on the forest floor. Clarke can’t help but wonder how he managed to carry her all on his own.

They tell her she’s been in and out of consciousness since and tried their best to stop the bleeding when they removed the arrow. She can’t remember any of it.

She’s quick to accept Shabir’s offer: her leg won’t let her go anywhere for at least two weeks and something tells her that even though she can’t quite call them friends yet, at least these two don’t seem like foes either.

Shabir is a man of few words – she will start to call it “Grounder silence” she decides – and after a short exchange in Trigedasleng with the boy, he leaves them the room. Clarke’s questions will have to wait for tomorrow it seems and she relaxes back into the bed, too tired for anything else today. The boy – Damian – remains behind, puttering around the room.

Clarke falls asleep to the faint noise of his movements around her, wondering what happened to Roan.

It’s the first night in months the names don’t come to haunt her.

The tables are lined with rows upon rows of dead people.
She did this.

Jasper is on his knees, Maya’s body in his arms, looking up at her with so much sorrow and reproach.

She did that.

On one monitor, Clarke can make out tiny hands and tiny feet sticking out from under small tables, amid games and toys littering the floor.

She did that too.

Stacks and stacks of cages reaching up to the sky, with shells of human beings locked inside.

The revulsing feeling of lying on a pile of naked bodies drained of all life.

Can nightmares still be called nightmares when all they consist of is an endless loop of vivid memories?

And while we’re at it, why do people call it “making memories”? “Make” implies agency, implies consent, implies willing participation. She did not “make” these memories. They were thrust, hammered, carved into her retinas. She doesn’t want them, doesn’t need to see over and over again, doesn’t…

Clarke jolts awake, heaving, drenched in cold sweat, her hair sticking to her face. Bringing her arms around her chest is a reflex, even though for the first night since she left Camp Jaha she’s not physically cold. In fact, she’s rather warm. She lifts a hand to her forehead and sighs: she's burning up. Infection it is, then.

Float.

She rearranges the pelts on top of her and sinks back down into the warmth of the cot with no hope of going back to sleep now.
The Mountain, the Mountain, the Mountain. She can’t think of anything else. She can’t dream of anything else. Jaha’s words the day the 100 were sent to Earth echo in her head: “Mount Weather is life.” Well, Mount Weather is now death, Clarke’s made sure of that. But then again, so did the Mountain Men themselves.

She decides to be productive and tries to sit up with a frustrated huff. It takes her one, two, three trembling attempts, before she manages, with a grunt, to raise herself up slightly, enough to see the room.

She’s alone.

On the table, she spots a large basin filled with water and equipped with a small cloth, a green salve and fresh bandages, items Damian must have left for her. She feels weak and sick, as if about to throw up or faint at any moment. (Or both.)

But nothing’s ever come from wallowing.

She slides her feet over the side of the bed and tentatively applies some weight onto her good leg. She’s not sure she can do this, but she owes it to herself to try. She cautiously lifts herself up and hops over, biting down the moan that threatens to escape her lips every time she has to put a little bit of her weight on her injured leg.

She starts washing herself with shaking hands before she gets to the bandages, carefully unties them and sets about cleaning the wound. The redness seems to have expanded in an intricate pattern of streaks and there’s considerable swelling. She’s relieved to see there’s no pus, though. She can handle this, it’ll be ok. It’ll leave a scar, she’s sure (her mother will be furious with her).

Once she’s done, she takes one final look around the room and inelegantly falls back into bed, realizing that for the first time in days, she can’t smell herself.

A stack of clean clothes is waiting for her in a neat pile on the table the second time she wakes and Clarke sighs contently at the feeling of slipping into a soft and clean shirt. She struggles a bit to put on the pants but they’re loose enough to be comfortable once she’s slid her left leg in.

The house is completely silent and she doesn’t know if she should find that soothing or worrisome. She decides to take her first peek outside, but only gets as far as the door, before she wobbles in pain.
She braces herself against the wall and closes her eyes.

F*** this hurts.

The sound of young voices shouting at each other drifts in from the window and jolts her out of her self-pity. Slightly disappointed in herself, Clarke gives up on the door and approaches. A large group of children is fighting – playing? – with wooden swords and shields in the space between this house and the next.

She watches on as they all stop and gather around a brown-haired girl with intricate braids facing away from Clarke. It would appear she’s explaining something. When they all nod in agreement, she points to another girl whose eyes grow twice their size, before she seems to steel herself, gives an excited salute and runs off. The rest divide themselves up into two groups, with the second one looking decidedly unhappier, before taking position in a tight formation against the wall.

The second girl comes back, strands of barley or wheat tied into her hair and a fierce expression on her face. The brown-haired girl finally turns and Clarke would recognize the precise outline of the warpaint on her cheeks anywhere…

Clarke takes an involuntary step back.

Figures, that even here – where is here anyway? – Lexa would come to haunt her…

The girl must have met Lexa, or at least seen her pass: her stance is rigid and her eyes are determined. The second girl takes up position at her side and something like understanding tickles at the back of Clarke’s mind: if this one is playing the Commander then… No …

The brown-haired girl sounds the attack: “Jomp emo op! Frag emo op!”

The first group, led by the two girls, surges forward. The blows leave nothing to the imagination: they’re hard, vicious, meant to hurt. The second group defends itself as best it can against this onslaught and manages somehow to keep its ranks tight.

After some time, the little Heda finally calls for a retreat. The first group hangs back, each side counting their injured: bruises and scrapes here and there, a split lip, a bloody nose. She gathers her men for some quiet conferring.
With a strong pat to the other girl’s shoulder and what sounds like firm orders in Trigedasleng: “*Gon em down. Gon ai*”, the brunette leaves the scene.

Clarke can’t pretend anymore she hasn’t recognized the battle these children are re-enacting. It fills her chest with an inexplicable sadness. Whether for herself and what she’s been through or for the oblivious little warriors dreaming of glory and gore, she doesn’t know. Both, probably.

Is this the tale the Commander is spinning these days: of a Skaikru lackey doing her dirty work for her? That Lexa ordered her to fight in her stead, instead of fleeing the scene like the betraying *bitch* she revealed herself to be?

The second girl is left standing all alone. With a grim look of determination, she charges the second group – “the Mountain” Clarke groans internally – on her own, sword raised high and a vicious war cry in her throat. She gives as good as she can and by an unspoken rule, the second group’s fighters start to slowly fall away, until she stands victorious, chest heaving with the exertion.

The brown-haired girl comes back. She’s carrying some sort of crown made out of leaves in her outstretched hands. “*Wanheda*” she announces clearly – there’s that word again – and the undefeated girl approaches, before sinking down on one knee, head bowed. A speech follows that Clarke doesn’t quite understand, with all the boys and girls – including the vanquished – who have now come to surround the two, nodding their heads from time to time. The child Commander lowers the crown onto the girl’s head and the group erupts into genuine cheers of “*Heda, Heda, Heda!*”

This marks the end of the game (but this is no game, Clarke’s mind screams) and they promptly resume fighting in pairs.

Clarke slinks back, taking a seat on the bed, sighing heavily. Word travels fast it seems, if after only a couple of days or weeks – how long has it been? – children are already re-imagining the battle. She can’t help but wonder if she’s really up for a world where murderers with the blood of hundreds on their hands – whatever the circumstances – are found deserving of crowns.

She notices with a startled grunt that she’s not alone anymore. She doesn’t want to know how long Damian’s been standing there, observing her. The surprise is enough of a shock that she loses her balance, teeters and falls, her leg folding in on itself at an awkward angle. A crushing feeling of helplessness descends on her then and if she didn’t have an audience, she’s pretty sure she’d be crying by now.
“I’m ok, I can do this on my own” she snaps at the boy, when he steps forward with a helping hand and instantly regrets the harshness of her tone.

A hurt look crosses his features. He takes a hesitant step back. He lets her struggle after that – and struggle she does! – to get back up. She pulls and pushes, grits her teeth and finally manages to prop herself up against the table.

That’s enough agitation for a day, she decides. Turning her back to him, she slouches back over to the bed and sits, trying to hide her grimace. She petulantly refuses to look at the boy when sliding back under the covers. Why is he here, inside, with her, anyway? Shouldn’t he be outside, playing with the other children his age? Playing at war?

She spends two whole days cooped up, fighting the infection as best as her tired body and soul can. Damian, who continues to bring her hot meals twice a day, seems to have decided to give her the silent treatment. She could apologise of course, but well, two can play this game and Clarke’s not famous for backing down, is she.

On the third day however, the boy returns after a third helping. She’s standing in front of the same window, eyes closed, enjoying the feeling of the sun on her face. When she turns to him, Damian gestures towards the door, as if offering she come out of the room.

Clarke points to her leg with a frustrated grunt, adding: “It hurts too much.”

She feels like a whiny child. (She’d rather not imagine what Raven would say, were she to see how Clarke is coping with her injury. Pitiful.) Undeterred, the boy comes slowly closer until he’s standing by her side. He takes her hand in his and places it carefully on his shoulder.

She realizes with a shock that this is the first friendly human contact she’s had in three weeks – ever since her parting hug with Bellamy – and she almost flinches, as if burned by the touch. She manages to stop herself though.

Damian is considerate in his movements and slowly, the blonde hopping and huffing under the strain, they exit the room.
“Mochof”, she grits out, once they’re outside of the house.

Damian just nods and she’s struck with this sudden question: who exactly is taming who in this dynamic?

They do not venture far, Clarke’s muscles quick to protest. Nevertheless: being outside is **glorious**. The sun is high and generous, inundating the tree and square in front of Shabir’s home. The sun: one marvel she won’t ever get bored of.

Shabir’s house seems more spacious in comparison to the other ones in the small alley, but not by much: there’s the room she’s staying in, an additional door Clarke guesses must lead to the man’s own quarters and a big hearth with neatly stacked cooking utensils opposite the front door.

She’s not sure where Damian sleeps and when she asks, all she gets in response is a shrug and vague gesture towards the outside. In fact, Clarke has quite a few unanswered questions when it comes to the boy: his ties to the village chief for one (Clarke’s come to understand they’re not of the same kin) and more importantly why he’s staying around, so determined to help a stranger from the Sky – and a rather rude one so far, at that.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

It’s been a week and Clarke is feeling a familiar itch in the back of her neck. She’s frustrated with her leg not healing fast enough; feels heavyhearted every time a child stops dead in its tracks to watch her pass with big cautious eyes; and bitter at the respect she sees in the adults’ small nods to her while they keep a careful distance, when she’s out on a walk with Damian. She’s sick of staying in bed most of the day with nothing but her thoughts of guilt and of impossible choices – because as much as she would like to deny it, Clarke has now come to accept that the Mountain was a **choice**.

She’s exhausted after way too many unfinished nights spent wrangling down graphic dreams and she’s had enough solitude to last her a lifetime. (It’s strange that, because she’s no stranger to solitude: her own people locked her up in solitary confinement for a whole year, after all. But something’s changed, somehow). Shabir is a busy man and rarely around and Damian, well, Damian is silent. Helpful, she has to admit, gentle and patient, but silent nonetheless.

She wants – no, she **needs**– to do something.
Help comes in the form of Shabir that night. She hasn’t seen him all day, which is not unusual, but when he comes back home, he’s frowning, deep in thought and Clarke can’t help but ask what’s on his mind, hoping it’s not too impolite.

Shabir looks up: “I’m afraid I have an unusual request, Clarke kom Skaikru” he rumbles.

He used to call her “Wanheda” but after explaining the meaning of the word (Commander of death) and seeing Clarke’s visible flinch, he had thankfully switched to “Clarke kom Skaikru” without her prompting.

That is one thing she has learnt to appreciate about her two hosts: they seem to intuit her needs and never prod. She hasn’t had to explain why she was traveling alone several days away from her people’s camp or why she was injured when they found her. Nor what happened at the Mountain or why she spends most of her nights awake. (The dark circles under her eyes have become permanent fixtures she can’t wash away in the morning and Clarke knows they must have heard her on the few occasions she woke up screaming her lungs out.)

He doesn’t wait for her before he continues: “Our teacher has to travel to his home village. He leaves tomorrow and will be gone for several days, maybe even weeks. The town council would like to respectfully ask if you would be so inclined as to spend some time with the young ones.”

To say that Clarke is completely flabbergasted at the request is an understatement.

“It would be an excellent opportunity for them to learn some words in your tongue” he explains further.

She needs some time before she can do anything else but gape at him.

Shabir, as perceptive as always, must have sensed her growing frustration – or maybe Damian told him of her incessant twitching – and is offering a way to fill her days without any risk of further injuring her leg. But teaching English? That is something she definitely had not thought about.

She accepts though, the perspective of a change too tempting to be ignored.
Which is how the following day finds her standing in front of a group of twenty or so little faces, sitting at attention on the ground and looking up at her with something between fear and admiration. She recognizes some of the playing fighters she had spied on, on her third day here.

And Clarke is not proud to admit that she has quite possibly never been so terrified in her life before. Shabir explained to her this would be their first interaction with her language: English is usually only taught much later to a few particularly promising seconds, if at all.

Sinchuk being a rather small village, they are teaching all ages together. She spent the whole night fretting over possible approaches to start, managing only to rule every single one out and wake up tense and nervous.

The class is a disaster.

Clarke can’t shake the feeling that the children are looking at her with justified apprehension, makes the mistake of starting with written letters to teach them the alphabet and pronunciation, rambles, stutters and overall is just completely out of her depth. Despite her many attempts to have them call her by her name, they stubbornly stick to “Wanheda”, further throwing her off her game. She can see the confusion on their faces throughout, replaced by relief as the time to wrap up draws nearer and Clarke sighs in defeat.

What a monumental failure!

---

She’s nothing if not persevering, so she’s the first one in the room the following day, waiting for them to file in.

She bullied Damian – who apparently is not attending any of the lessons for some obscure reason – into coming along, and can see the surprise in the other children’s faces when they spot him. He sits down to her left, the others giving him a wide berth.

She’s decided to forego anything written this time around and jumps right into teaching them basic words of introduction. In addition to their names and where they’re from, they learn how to calculate their age, which means Clarke has to get into numbers and small maths as well. As their number is uneven now, she pairs up with Damian when the time for practice comes around.
Clarke is swelling with pride when at the end of the session – they finish much much later than initially planned – all are able to introduce themselves in English. They leave with small smiles and shy “leidas” directed at her and Clarke can’t wait for the next class.

It’s been on her mind a lot lately and let’s be honest, she’s never really been able to keep things bottled up.

They’re on one of their daily walking tour around the small village, to build strength back into her leg. She feels dizzy, wincing at the spasms of protest in what’s left of her injured muscle, but Damian doesn’t need to know that. She can’t quite hide the look of relief though, when they reach what’s become “their spot”: a large tree with sturdy branches hanging low and offering the perfect shade.

The day’s one of the coldest Clarke’s spent on the ground. Shabir’s been kind enough to lend her one of his warmest pelts. It rests heavily on her shoulders, the only protection between the freezing sweat running down her spine turning into a full-fledged cold.

For a second she wonders how Skaikru is faring in these temperatures, but is quick to push the thought away, just as fast as it came.

“Damian, what are you doing here? With me, I mean?” she finally gathers the courage to voice.

The boy looks up at her, a slight crease forming on his tan forehead. Clarke’s deduced from their latest interactions that he understands much more English than he lets on.

“I mean, I’m grateful, really, I am, for saving me and for all your help since, but why stay, why stick around, Damian?” she rambles on, gesturing between them.

It’s true: he cooks and fetches the water for her, goes on long walks with her and Clarke’s now also discovered that he’s the one who’s been washing her clothes all along.

She knows she’s made her point when he instantly breaks eye contact, a slight blush coming up his
cheeks. It only lasts a short moment though and when he turns back to face her, his eyes are almost
daring her, his face one of deep concentration.

He draws himself further up: “Ai gaf badan up Wanheda” he replies.

Now, Clarke likes to think her Trigedasleng has improved, but she hasn’t understood a single word
except that damning one she wishes people would stop using.

It must show, because Damian continues: “seken” he says, imitating her previous gesture, pointing
first to himself and then to her with an open palm.

“Seken.” She’s heard the word before, she’s sure of it. It sounds an awful lot like “second.” Like
Octavia proudly informing her that Indra’s asked her to become her second in fact. Like Tris whom
she couldn’t save. Like Anya talking about Lexa… Clarke casts a quick glance to Damian’s rigid
stance, so similar to a soldier’s, and realizes with a sinking sensation that she may be on to
something.

“You mean… second?”

At the boy’s pleased nod, Clarke doesn’t know whether to panic or laugh.

She goes with indulgent amusement: “Damian, you can’t be serious…”

Oh but he is, his determined eyes say as much. “Ai gaf badan up Wanheda” he repeats.

Time for panic then. “No way”, she shakes her head. Putting some distance between them, she starts
to pace nervously. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I’m not a warrior. I’m not a lieutenant or general or
anything for that matter. I have absolutely nothing to teach you, and especially not concerning
fighting or war. Absolutely not.”

Damian doesn’t blink, he just lets her rant freely, following with slightly concerned eyes her nervous
strides.

“No” she finishes, coming to a stop, looking him dead in the eye and trying to convey how serious
she is.

Damian just shrugs, failing to hide a small smirk and Clarke has the unpleasant impression that she’s somehow managed to lose that argument.

“No Damian, I don’t need a second, I don’t want a second, I wouldn’t know what to do with a second.”

He draws closer, offering his shoulder for her to lean on and Clarke can do nothing but accept the silent offer, if only to relieve some of the pain that is now shooting up her leg after her furious pacing. He’s apparently decided that the discussion is over. Together, they start to walk back in the direction they came from, Clarke hobbling along and throwing him nervous glances from time to time.

“That doesn’t make you my second” she mutters defiantly and Damian just nods, as if to say “sure.”

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

It’s late in the evening. The birds are singing up a storm in the large tree in front of the house and Clarke is sitting in a chair outside, wrapped in one of Shabir’s warm pelts, with Damian by her side. They watch as the last rays of sunshine retreat from the sky and twilight slowly takes over, emerging from the shadows.

From time to time, she points at items surrounding them, Damian telling her first the Trigedasleng word for it, which she’ll try her best to memorize and vice versa. Her favourite word so far is probably “tripi”, which Shabir equated with “strange.” A useful word to know. Whenever he gets a word in English right on the first try, Clarke reaches over to mess up the boy’s shaggy hair a bit and he always responds with feigned annoyance, trying – but not too hard, she’s noticed – to evade her hand. She’s also started to teach him the alphabet (phonetically), so that soon, he’ll be able to write the words he’s learning and practice them on his own.

They will soon retreat inside to cook dinner, Clarke following Damian’s silent instructions as best she can. Supper – by far the simplest meal of the day – usually consists of a watery broth (the water they used to wash the day’s vegetables in, complete with some vegetable peels), served with fresh bread they need to finish (for it’ll be too hard the following day) and a slice of cheese. Now talk about a life changing experience: cheese! A big uneven ball of fresh cheese made out of cow’s milk and mixed in with herbs, which Shabir keeps in a small and cold cellar beneath his home. Her eagerness in reaching for it never fails to make Shabir’s eyes twinkle in delight. She’s already
salivating just thinking about it.

They’ve had a couple of misses, especially over lunch. On more than one occasion, Clarke ended up in tears, unable to swallow anything more – the people in this village like their meals spicy, she’s discovered. And then there’s the other day, when she found Damian grilling a small rabbit he had proudly presented to her after going hunting in the forest (“Still doesn’t make you my second” Clarke had muttered in response) and had promptly run out of the house to vomit.

There’s something about the smell of cooked meat, she’s discovered, that makes her skin crawl and just revulses her. Whatever the animal, to Damian’s noted chagrin. She can’t quite make sense of it, but it’s there. So it’s been strictly meat-less since. Clarke is embarrassed that her new eating habits should be observed by the whole household, but it’s either that or ask for a special meal every time, like a princess.

And Finn was right: Clarke never liked being called a princess. Ironic really, that these would be his last words to her… She’s relieved to realize that it’s the first time the boy sneaks his way into her thoughts since she’s arrived here and wonders what it is about this village that is keeping him at bay. Whatever it is, she’s uncertain whether to consider his absence a blessing or a curse.

Shabir is back earlier than usual tonight and grabs a low hanging chair from inside to sit with them. Clarke has come to look forward to their late night talks. She’s found in him a companionable presence and a resourceful storyteller.

His favourite topic of conversation is Sinchuk and he’s regaled her with countless legends about its founding and the great men and women who led it in the past. Damian usually listens in, trying to pick out familiar words. Shabir’s second favourite topic of conversation is the Commander, something Clarke is much less enthusiastic to hear about, but smart enough to know she can’t voice her objections. So she sits through story after story about Lexa’s achievements: the birth of the coalition, the old laws she had to change to make way for peace, Hedathis, Hedathat. And she hates every single second of it – except she doesn’t: she’s looking forward to these stories too. And hates herself even more for it.

“How can I ever repay you for your hospitality?” Clarke wants to know. She’s grown more and more uncomfortable with the village providing for her. And the few words she’s managed to teach the young ones can’t really be considered enough of a contribution in exchange.

But Shabir just gives her a slight frown: “We will forever be in your debt, Clarke kom Skaikru. Many of the families here have one if not more of their members who disappeared. Amongst them my own son” he adds, a soft whisper in the night air.
“I’m sorry” she mumbles and would offer some type of physical comfort if they had known each other for more than two weeks. “By disappeared you mean that they were killed or that they were taken by the Mountain?” she wants to clarify.

Shabir has a faraway look in his eyes. “It used to be one of the curses of this land” he replies after a pause, not looking at her. “The absence of certainty, the not knowing. The lingering hope. You ended the Mountain, you ended the reaping. And with it the suffering of all these families. You gave them, us, me, truth and peace of mind.”

Shabir’s never spoken of his son before. He must not have made it home. With a cold shudder, Clarke remembers the feeling of naked bodies beneath her. A pile of stiff cadavers, nameless faces, forever lost to this world and yet tormented even in death. Dozens drained for their blood, so that a few could survive. They fall into an awkward silence, three figures soon to be swallowed up by the cold winter night.

She already knows the answer but still asks: “Did… your son… did he…?”

Shabir shakes his head silently.

“Why stay here, within the deadly range of the Mountain, when you could go somewhere else to lead a peaceful life?” she enquires and hopes he’s not offended by the question.

Her host casts a long look around them. Minuscule fires have started to materialize inside the alley’s homes and the noise of people sharing stories about their day trickles up into the night.

“This is my home” he replies simply and Clarke sees the truth in his open eyes. “We weren’t always a target of the Maun-de. They used to be confined to a smaller territory. But over the past two decades, they slowly extended their reach with the reapers. We failed to realize the danger Sinchuk was in on time. My son was taken not so far from here, together with two of his friends. The Commander gave orders to accommodate families wishing to relocate to safer villages. Many did: they left for TonDC or Polis. But some decided to stay behind, for their fields, for their trade. I had failed my son. I promised myself I wouldn’t fail them too.”

Damian heads inside to start cooking and when Clarke is about to follow him, Shabir lays a gentle hand on her arm: “Let the boy prepare dinner.”

She hesitates. Because it’s not just about helping Damian. She likes their playful collaboration when
cooking together, has grown… attached to him. But something’s been on her mind, so she sits back down.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you actually, do you know where his family is?” she enquires.

Shabir sits a little bit straighter in his chair at that, a conflicted look crossing his eyes.

“The boy was cast away, Clarke kom Skaikru. He is one of the Stained Ones” he explains. At Clarke’s blank look, he continues: “He was born with a deformity due to radiation. Our customs require the family to abandon the child as soon as it appears, to remove the stain from the bloodline. Hence their name: the Stained Ones.”

Clarke recoils a bit at that, wondering why she hasn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary in Damian’s physique: “You mean he’s on his own? No family? No home? But you took him in, didn’t you?”

“I allowed his presence in the village when he brought you here but he does not live among us” Shabir replies.

Clarke is silent, mulling over his words: “Where has he been living all this time, then?”

Shabir gives a small sigh: “I can only speculate. In the forest, most likely. Many of his kind travel to the Dead Zone, never to be seen again. But it would appear the boy chose to stay behind.”

Clarke feels for the clear-eyed boy whose silent presence has become a source of comfort for her. She vows to pay more attention to him in the future.

Something clicks.

“Is this why you won’t call him by his name?” she asks, realizing she’s only ever heard Shabir refer to Damian as “the boy”.

He acquiesces without offering any explanation. There are so many things that she has yet to learn and understand about Trikru culture.
It’s fitting though, somehow: that a boy shunned by his people would be the one to save the girl running away from hers. That a boy promised to death would be the one to save the Commander of death.

“I’m not sure” she starts, needing his advice, “but I think he asked me to take him as a second.”

Shabir lets out an uncharacteristic howl at that. Clarke is pretty sure she should be offended, but bites it down.

“The boy has spirit” he rejoins.

“What should I do?” Clarke asks.

“Custom is for a warrior to choose his second, not the other way around” Shabir starts. “Then there’s the matter of him being a cast away. But you are Skaikru, not Trikru, so one could argue none of this really applies to you.”

“So, you’re saying I can do what I want? I have no idea what having a second means though, I have no use for one and wouldn’t know what to teach him” she continues.

Shabir gives her a slight smile: “The boy came to you. Only he knows why. But I can tell you this, Clarke kom Skaikru: my son was a second. As a father, I had hopes of him becoming a great Trikru warrior, of course. But what I wished for the most, was for him to learn to survive. It seems to me that the slayer of the Mountain would not be the worst place to go looking for that.”

Survival…

She dreams of the disappeared that night and wakes up screaming with the image of Human monsters sinking their teeth into Human flesh etched into her mind.
There’s a slight commotion at the entrance, a sharp contrast to the usual quietness with which the children come filing in in the morning. Clarke looks up and sees that one of the girls – the little Commander – is limping and leaning heavily on one of her friends. She remembers their names from her second class: Salva and Zoltan.

Her medical training immediately kicks in and she rushes forward to kneel in front of the injured girl, while her friend holds her up. Salva shrinks away from her touch when she brings her hands forward. Clarke tries to think of something reassuring to say: “Fisa” she says, the first word that comes to her mind, “ai laik fisa” she repeats, pointing to herself. The girl finally gives her a small nod and after a rapid check, Clarke realizes her ankle is broken.

Salva is in obvious pain but trying to put up a brave face. Clarke can feel the dislodged bone and against her better judgement decides to try and put it back in place immediately. She sends Damian to bring them cold water and bandages with the few words she’s learnt with him, motions for Salva to lie down and tries to explain to her that this will without a doubt hurt very much. The girl nods once again, she’s understood and accepted it and the boy she came in with – Zoltan – inches closer, offering his arm for her to hold on to.

With a few manipulations of her hands and a broken gasp from the girl, Clarke’s reset the bone. Damian comes rushing back in and Clarke washes her patient’s foot and ankle. Damian doesn’t come to her side to help her and Clarke doesn’t want to push, sensing after her conversation with Shabir that there’s maybe something else, something bigger, at play here.

She looks around the room for anything that could be used as a splint, settles on a piece of wood the children came in with and gestures for Damian to cut a small part of it off. Zoltan is faster though and cuts it exactly the size she needs before handing it to her, pointedly ignoring the glare Damian sends his way.

Once the ankle is stabilized and carefully bandaged up, Clarke sits back on her knees, surveying her work with a twinge of pride. Salva’s remained silent all throughout the procedure and Clarke would congratulate her for her bravery if she knew how to. She settles with: “yu(pointing to the girl) yuj.” And it earns her a pleased little smile.

She doesn’t have the heart to impose a class after what they just went through but the injured little Commander stays put and the other children slowly follow her lead and sit down in their usual spots, all traces of fear gone from their eyes when they look up at her expectantly. So she decides to just roll with it and teach them some words and expressions related to anatomy. They seem to find the word “doctor” particularly puzzling and when the time has come for them to leave, Clarke can hear some clumsy tongues practicing: “Skai doctor.”

She insists on accompanying Salva back to her home and tries to explain that she will need to rest her
ankle as much as possible. The girl’s eyes are defiant at the prospect of staying holed up in her home but Clarke refuses to leave until she feels she’s received some sort of unspoken promise that she will be careful. She then makes her way back to Shabir’s house, looking for Damian. She needs to know where the village healer lives, so she can alert him to the girl’s condition.

But Damian just shakes his head and explains hesitantly: “not here.”

Clarke makes a mental note to ask Shabir about it later. “You did good today” she says with a soft smile, ruffling his mane.

He smiles in return, squaring his shoulders, preening under the compliment.

“Still doesn’t mean you’re my second though” she adds, not missing the mocking grin he sends her way, like he knows something she doesn’t. She’s seen that look more often than not these days and it’s... unsettling.

Clarke launches her “project: getting to know Damian better (while making sure he does not misunderstand it as me acknowledging him as my second)” that very afternoon. On second thought, this title may be a little bit too long, she’ll have to shorten it.

She’s seen Damian carve some pieces of wood into small figurines before, so she draws with mud on a white cloth a rough sketch of a game board (she thinks its name in the old world was backgammon), explains to him what she has in mind and lets him go in search of an appropriate chunk of wood.

She spends the afternoon watching him carefully fashion the board out of the dark wood he brought back, giving him directions from time to time. Then comes the carving of the small round pieces and the board itself. Once it’s finished – they leave the sanding to tomorrow – she starts explaining to him the rules (or at least what she can remember of them). Damian listens with rapt attention, frowning from time to time but not interrupting her. Funnily enough, it’s the point of playing such a game in the first place that has him knit his eyebrows dubitatively and that Clarke finds the trickiest to explain. She ends up leaving him no choice and feels strangely as if she’s pulling rank in doing so.

Damian is a thinker, sometimes pondering a move for several minutes and frowning at her fidgeting
in the meantime, which reminds her strangely of another quiet boy Clarke used to play with. Wells was the one who introduced her to the games of the old world, using whatever he could find on the Ark to recreate boards and asking her to draw on them.

After a couple of games, she can sense Damian’s growing frustrated with her (fair enough, she keeps on changing the rules, making adjustments here and there whenever she remembers new details or exceptions). They decide to call it a day for now. But the experience leaves her with a warm feeling in her chest.

When he leaves with the board tucked under his arm, she forgets to call “Still not my second” after him.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

A soft rumour wakes her up the following morning. Noise is not unusual as the village slowly wakes and men and women greet each other when they leave for the fields, but the rumour is different this time around, whispered words close by. Clarke shakes the sleep out of her bleary face, passes some water on her neck and chest and chances a small peek from her window. She can’t see anything. She grabs her clothes, is careful not to make too ample a movement with her leg and once dressed, goes to investigate the origin of the noise. Shabir seems to have had the same idea and together they step out of the house.

They’re met with a line of roughly 20 people, queuing in front of the entrance. Clarke recognises most of them as villagers. Shabir immediately goes to talk to them and after some quiet exchanges walks back towards her shaking his head, a playful twinkle she has never seen before in his eyes.

“They wish to see the Sky doctor” he replies extending his arm to the whole queue.

Clarke’s jaw falls to the floor. She remains standing there, unable to process the scene, and Shabir leaves her with a soft pat on the back, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like: “Good luck.”

This marks her busiest day in Sinchuk by far. The town’s healer disappeared a year ago – Shabir suspects he was taken by the Mountain – so these people have had to get by on their own ever since.

She starts with triaging the ones who were waiting, in order to get to the most urgent cases first and
sends Damian to gather essential supplies in the forest for basic drinking concoctions and salves. She then sends all non-urgent cases home, asking them to return in the afternoon – whether on Earth or up in the Ark, this never fails to earn her some displeased rants. And proceeds to turn her small quarters into a makeshift consultation room (she hopes Shabir won’t mind). The only break she takes is to get to her English class, where they continue to cover words related to anatomy (Damian quickly becoming one of her most promising students, to the great displeasure of some of the others, she’s noted). Things go swimmingly well on that front, Clarke is smug to note.

The consultations go off without a hitch and offer her a precious insight into the private lives of the village’s inhabitants. She recommends some herbs to a mother whose baby is running a fever after reassuring her, checks an older man’s rashes on his back, cleans several wounds and puts a dislocated shoulder back into place. Overall, there’s a lot of sore throats, fevers and blocked noses, all due to the winter season.

It’s not easy, because Clarke is not yet completely familiar with this world: neither as regards all remedies that are available thanks to the wide variety of plants on hand, nor with the illnesses Grounders are subject to. But she manages, relying heavily on her mother’s training, her experiences these first months on Earth caring for the 100 and her rudimentary Trigedasleng. Damian helps as best he can with translation and a girl in Clarke’s class – Soko, one of the oldest – even volunteers to help with the mixing of ingredients in the afternoon.

There’s something wrong about touching bodies and claiming to be able to soothe their ailments after the Mountain. And yet there’s something so right about it as well. She’s exhausted that evening but when Damian surprises her by presenting the backgammon board and asking for a game, she accepts with a genuine smile. Her first in months.

It’s the first time she’s travelled outside the village in the 2 months she’s been staying in Sinchuk and Clarke’s excited at the prospect. Her left leg still hurts, but it doesn’t throb anymore at the slightest of movements. She’s grateful Shabir suggested she accompany Nathan, who usually runs these types of errands, to the nearest trading post.

Instead of gallivanting around the forest, Clarke should of course be planning her next move, now that her injury’s almost healed. She’s been quite successful in avoiding that very question: “what now?” She feels almost paralyzed whenever it sneaks into her thoughts and the perspective of leaving the comfort of Sinchuk is one she can’t quite face yet. She knows however that every single additional day she spends away from her people means more questions and accusations once (if) she returns.
Damian simply tagged along with Clarke’s resigned unofficial approval. Theirs is an unusual trio, with Nathan playing the proud team leader, riding in front of the worn down cart full of clanking items the village wishes to trade for; a young brown-skinned boy with jet black hair and an injured blonde trailing slightly behind. Clarke is using this opportunity to further expand her Trigedasleng vocabulary (grumbling at the number of existing Trikru words to describe what, to her eyes, are more or less identical trees) and Damian seems more at ease around her anyway. Something tells her his unease may have to do with the dirty looks she’s caught Nathan sending the boy’s way, when he thought she wasn’t looking. (Whether this has to do with Damian’s status as a Stained One specifically or with Nathan’s insufferable superior attitude in general, she doesn’t know.)

The forest around them is filled with the creaking of the cart and the jangle of its contents, a far cry from usual Trikru stealth. What a strange party indeed. “One might even be inclined to call the scene Tripi”, she thinks and smiles to herself. Here and there, she’ll catch the sound of trilling birds in the distance.

“Skaiflaya” Damian explains, when he spots a fat little bird running comically into the bushes.

“Skyflyer” she repeats with a smile, finding the word amusing, yet oddly appropriate. “Strik skaiflyer biga trimani” she tests, too proud of being able to put such a simple sentence together – but come on, give her a break, it’s probably her first full Trigedasleng sentence. “Strik” she knows because of how Shabir always calls the little ones playing in the yard: “strikon.” And “trimani” she learnt when Damian revealed he considers the forest his home.

“Strik skaiflaya raun biga trimani” he corrects with a surprised smile.

Ok, so not a full correct sentence, but it still counts.

When Damian points at tiny rabbit tracks, she immediately shoots out: “Thompa.” But can’t remember the word for the other set of tracks he spots a little while later.

Damian helps her out and fills in: “Trilipa.”

“Trilipa” she repeats. Some kind of deer. She can’t help but think the word is too shrill, too silly, to accurately fit the first animal she saw on this planet. She shakes her head, frowning. “Nah, doesn’t sound right.”

Damian, who’s quite used to her antics by now, just huffs good-naturedly. “That is word” he
carefully pronounces. “You not choose word.”

Her smile grows even wider. “No, but see, “thompa” echoes the noise a rabbit makes when hopping around. It fits. The word in English for “trilipa” is “deer”. It’s majestic, dark, sturdy. It fits as well. And Trigedasleng is only an offshoot of English, a dialect. So I can say “trilipa” it’s not the right word. And I can say I don’t like it” she replies, teasingly, not sure he understood her ridiculous argument.

They’ve been riding all morning and are about to reach their destination, when Nathan identifies a trail that could belong to a panther and has the brilliant idea of enlisting Clarke’s and Damian’s help to hunt the animal down: “more to trade for” he argues. Against her better judgement (hello, she’s injured!), Clarke gives in, which is how some time later a large and irritated black panther is lunging at her, foaming at the mouth.

Everything had gone according to plan: Damian had lured the animal to their spot and Nathan had jumped down on it from the branch he was balancing on. Until it hadn’t: the panther – more irritated than afraid, really – had shaken the foolish daredevil off with one powerful roll of its shoulder, before turning her sights on… her.

Seriously, why did she let this idiot rope them into such a pointless suicide mission! Clarke tightens her grip on the small knife Shabir gifted her, trying to keep the panic at bay and braces for impact. It’s all over in a flash: a white-blue blur comes barrelling into her, the panther hot on its heels. Clarke hits the ground hard, with the burning feeling of claws burying themselves into her shoulder.

Damian it turns out – in blatant disregard of her earlier instructions, but what else is new – had come to her help and slid beneath the beast’s belly, impaling it with his own handcrafted dagger. Clarke herself got the panther in the throat with her knife, staring straight into its glowing yellow eyes.

The light in them dims, until it’s completely gone.

“Damian, I told you to stay put” she groans out from under the panther’s weight, while quickly scanning the boy for injuries. He just gives her a shrug with a pointed stare, which Clarke interprets to mean: “make up your mind already.” (And he’s right in a way: either he is her second and has to observe her orders to the letter or he’s not, can do whatever the hell he wants and Clarke can just float herself). Or is he trying to show her she quite obviously was in need of his help? Bottom line: they’re both alive, the panther’s dead and Damian’s growing cocky.

She gives up with a shake of her head. Before getting up, she whispers “Yu gonplei ste odon” to the fallen mammal still lying in her lap, running her hand over its spine. It’s a magnificent animal. At the
sight of its blood now spilling onto the frozen ground, Clarke regrets not fighting Nathan harder to let it be. Damian seems surprised by the gesture but she can see him reverently whisper the same words to the beast a second later. He wipes his dagger on his sleeve, the dark stain in stark contrast with his light tunic.

Her back doesn’t hurt but she’ll have to take a look at it soon. They resume their journey, all three a little bit worse for wear, both adults slightly discomfited, while Clarke doesn’t think she’s imagining the satisfied tilt to Damian’s posture.

A young woman with long braids and soft eyes – Niylah, Nathan called her – welcomes them with a congratulatory drink when they arrive at the trading post. (Clarke forbids Damian from having one, which earns her an exasperated huff from the boy. She couldn’t care less: he’s too young, end of the discussion. The girl looks on, amused.)

Clarke could swear there’s a flash of surprise and recognition when Niylah sets eyes on her for the first time but it disappears just as quickly. It’s strange though, because she doesn’t think she’s ever seen her before.

“My father just left” she says, her eyes on Clarke. “Good timing” she adds, with a coy curve of her lips in her direction.

Now, it’s been a while and her Trigedasleng leaves much to be desired, but Clarke could swear she was…

Her thoughts are interrupted by Nathan, who grunts out: “We’re in a hurry” before rattling off the long list of items the village wishes to acquire. Niylah dips her head in acknowledgement and drags their goods away, one by one.

“I would wait” she tells them over her shoulder once they’ve completely emptied the cart. “It’s getting dark outside.”

Dusk is indeed slowly engulfing the forest and the trio decides to stay the night. This doesn’t seem to faze Nathan much. He already knows where the makeshift washroom is and shows them to the stables, where they’ll be able to sleep. The horses should keep them warm even though they’ve now entered the coldest months of winter. He drops his satchel in the furthermost corner of the stables, far away from where Clarke and Damian laid theirs and leaves without a word. The blonde could do without the attitude, but opts to remain silent. Damian hunkers down on the makeshift cot fashioned out of straw and closes his eyes, visibly tired.
Clarke decides to use the time to try and clean the wound on her back in the small washroom they passed inside the house. She is soon joined by Niylah, who offers her assistance and well… gorgeous cheekbones and kind eyes aside, the wound on her back is hard to reach. Clarke would be silly not to accept.

It’s a bit… strange though. She’s been in vulnerable situations before, of course. Both Damian and Shabir assisted her in cleaning and bandaging her leg wound on multiple occasions. Yet there’s something different about this. About sitting on what appears to be a bed – Niylah’s bed – her back bared to this complete stranger, who is now standing behind her and gently running a wet cloth over the panther’s imprint.

She winces involuntarily and tries to mask it with smalltalk: “You and your family live here?”

“My father and I, yes.”

“Don’t you… Isn’t it a little bit isolated?”

She gets a chuckle out of the girl. “Sometimes isolation is a good thing.”

Ain’t that the truth. Though how or why it would apply to this pair remains obscure.

“It doesn’t really get lonely out here, if that’s what you’re thinking. Traffic is booming: the neighbouring villages now all come to trade, many travellers stop by, all since the Mountain’s fall.”

She stops her ministrations, and goes to rinse the cloth out. Clarke catches a glimpse of streaks of red in the bowl’s water. (So not just a light scratch then. Floating Nathan and his floating ideas.) She comes back carrying a small bottle, in addition to a new set of clean fabrics. The bottle, Clarke discovers, holds a liquid antiseptic of some sort. It stings, but she bites the hiss down.

Niylah continues in her quiet voice: “My grandfather handed this trading post down to my father. Once he’s too old to run it, it’ll be my turn to take over. I like it here, it’s where I was born and raised, where I feel at home.”

Clarke hums, racking her brain for something to say that wouldn’t sound too forced or intrusive.
Niylah beats her to it though, and volunteers: “My mother was taken by the mountain.”

This time, the blonde doesn’t fight the sigh. It comes from deep within and shakes her whole chest before leaving her body tired and weary. She can’t help but wonder how many more heart-breaking stories of personal loss she’ll hear in this region from people who have shown her nothing but generosity and kindness since she’s been on her own.

“You ended the reaping” Niylah goes on to say.

Oh. So she too knows who Clarke is. That explains the look earlier.

Her improvised healer dips the cloth in the bowl for one last time and finishes cleaning Clarke’s shoulderblade. The water’s warm and the touch soothing. The blonde closes her eyes, letting her head dip down, without really noticing it.

Niylah doesn’t let the heaviness settle on them. “No kill marks” she says, after a beat, as much a question as it’s a statement.

“My back's not big enough” Clarke replies honestly, her voice hoarse. She remembers the first time she came across this Trikru tradition. Remembers Tris and Anya. Remembers the fate of the warrior who had explained the scar’s meaning to her. More names. Too many names. She imagines for a second her back resembling Roan’s: covered in tiny little dots, spilling onto the top of his thighs. One dot for one kill.

She wishes Niylah would remain silent and let her lose herself in the softness of the fingers currently running on her back. But the girl doesn’t seem to be on the same page.

“Tell me about the mountain.”

“There's nothing to tell” Clarke answers with drained finality. “I did what I had to do. That's all.”

Niylah forges on, still seemingly oblivious to the blonde’s discomfort: “That's all? You killed our greatest enemy. You wiped them out by yourself, Wanheda.”
“Clarke” she corrects immediately. That’s it, the blonde is just about done with this line of questioning and the images it brings forth – images she usually manages to keep at bay (if only during the day).

“Niylah, would you mind... not talking?” she asks, pained. She doesn’t miss the flinch in the other girl’s stance and immediately regrets her bluntness. “No, I mean…” she gestures, but nothing comes. She doesn’t really know what she’s trying to say or what her own hands are asking for.

Niylah has now come around to face her, her fingertips resting lightly on Clarke’s hand, guarded eyes looking into hers, searching. There’s an imperceptible shift in the atmosphere right then and there, away from the heavy topic of conversation. A shift in the room’s soft lighting, in the warm air they breathe, in Niylah’s lingering touch. A shift Clarke can’t quite describe but doesn’t mind either. She’s hesitant – shy and scared – to return the girl’s gaze. It’s too intense, full of something Clarke doesn’t think she deserves right now (will she ever?). And there’s unmistakable desire there as well. Their eyes lock. Niylah lifts her hand to her cheek, palm warm and open.

When she slowly leans in, ever closer, Clarke can see it all unfold in slow motion. She has a choice: she could stop her right now, no questions asked. Or she can let it happen and see where it leads them. Niylah’s so close Clarke can feel her breath against the bridge of her nose, can count the stars in her eyes. The girl takes one more step forward.

So close.

A beat and then the press of soft lips against hers. Clarke keeps her eyes open. Her brain catalogues in the distance Niylah’s delicate eyelashes, the gentle feel of her kiss, the warm mouth encasing her bottom lip. The feeling is… wet. Sweet. Nice. She lets out a small sigh without really registering it and Niylah’s tongue slips into her mouth. Very nice in fact. The girl’s hand tangles in her hair and Clarke’s hands find their way to her hips.

It’s been so long. She tilts her head up to grant better access and is rewarded by a gentle tug forward. They resume their dance of parted lips, adventurous tongues and light touches.

The last time she was so close to somebody was… that almost kiss in Lexa’s tent before the march on the Mountain (because there’s no denying what was about to happen) – that moment that Clarke will not, under any circumstances, think about.

And before that of course… Finn. A terrified boy about to die. A kiss goodbye. The kiss of death.
The thought is like being pushed beneath a waterfall, the water pelting down on your head and shoulders to the point of drowning out anything else. And Clarke involuntarily jerks away from Niylah.

The girl has reopened her eyes and is now looking at her with open confusion. And desire.

“I’m sorry” she stutters, trying to come up with an explanation or at least an apology. “I’m… I’m not ready. To be with anyone” she whispers trying to convey the truthfulness of her words with her eyes and giving a small squeeze to the girl’s hips, without withdrawing her hands.

Niylah seems to understand and nods. The moment is tainted now, the other’s presence a source of awkward tension suddenly. Niylah leaves her with a shy smile after giving her a salve for her shoulder. Clarke trudges back to the stables, a little bit upset with herself for breaking this lovely moment, this connection.

---

They start on the journey back in the early morning hours the following day, after a short night Clarke spent tossing and turning, listening to the quiet huffs of the animals around them, the memory of lips quickly evaporating into the cold air.

Their cart is full of salted dried meat, sacks of long brown rice, various farming tools and pelts. Nathan seems very pleased with their bounty. Niylah though, is nowhere to be found. Clarke can’t help but feel a twinge of guilt.

---

When they return to Sinchuk, Clarke and Damian are no longer the only foreigners there anymore. A group of tents has sprouted up at the entrance of the village and she would recognise the rigid posture of the woman standing in front of Shabir’s house anywhere: Indra. The general is currently engaged in a discussion with Clarke’s host, but seems to sense the fixed gaze on her for she slowly turns. Clarke is close enough by now to see the deep scowl carving itself into her face when she recognises the blonde.

Indra is quite obviously anything but pleased to see her and unwilling to attempt to hide it – so basically, nothing out of the ordinary for the proud warrior who never shied away from expressing her displeasure at the blonde – and Clarke wonders why she expected any different. She’s
embarrassed to realize that she on the other hand feels downright giddy to see a familiar face. She does have the sense not to throw herself into the woman’s arms when she reaches them, though.

“What is the meaning of this?” Indra asks, turning to Shabir.

“Wanheda has been living among us for the past months” he replies very calmly.

“And you thought it wise to hide this from your Heda, Shabir of Sinchuk?” she snaps back.

Clarke can tell Shabir is becoming slightly self-conscious but he hides it well: “I thought it best not to spread the news, considering the amount of people with questionable intentions currently roaming these lands and looking for her” he reveals and Clarke feels ashamed she didn’t pause once to think whether her presence was putting the village and its inhabitants in danger.

Indra doesn’t seem to have a reply to that except for a low grumble and turns her back on Clarke, resuming her previous discussion in Trigedasleng with Shabir. The blonde knows a dismissal when she sees one, but questions have started flooding her mind. Questions she thought she’d successfully kept at bay these past months. So she remains standing next to them, fidgeting self-consciously. She can see Indra is slowly losing her focus and starting instead to follow the movement of her nervous hands, the scowl etching itself deeper and deeper into her features.

Until she finally breaks, turning back towards her: “Yes?” she bristles.

“I was wondering if we could talk once you’re done” Clarke asks, making it a point not to break eye contact.

Indra grimaces in blatant distaste but inclines her head after a beat: “Wait for me in my tent.”

Clarke lets her young companion know she’ll be busy and heads for the general’s tent: it’s easily recognizable as the largest one in the group. There are no chairs inside, so she remains standing, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The wait stretches on and she knows Indra is probably doing it on purpose but tries not to let it faze her.

“You wanted to speak” the stern woman growls upon finally entering the structure.
Now that she’s there though, Clarke doesn’t really know where to start anymore, the jumble of questions in her head an unsorted mess. She goes with: “I saw an army, two months ago, marching West. Hundreds, maybe thousands of men.”

Indra’s face closes itself off even more if possible. So maybe this wasn’t the smartest way to break the ice...

“We are aware” she replies icily.

“It didn’t seem to be Trikru” Clarke forges on. But Indra remains impassive, not giving anything away. “I thought maybe Ice Nation” Clarke tries one last time and the general gives her an impatient nod.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Skygirl.”

Like hell it isn’t. Indra’s silence is all the confirmation she needed. Clarke has been among Grounders long enough to know that the Trikru – Lexa – would never tolerate an incursion of so many Ice Nation warriors on their territory. But there’s nothing Clarke can do if the warrior’s decided not to give anything away. Should she mention her run-in with the man who claimed his name was Roan?

She decides against it and changes course: “Any news of Skaikru?” she asks hesitantly.

Indra’s features instantly change into an undecided blend of disapproving pity and Clarke decides then and there that she prefers a scowling Indra to the one looking at her now. She shouldn’t be here, asking a Trikru warrior how her own people are faring.

“Skaikru are fine, enjoying the truce the Commander has offered them” she says in a superior tone, lifting her chin. “If that is all” she continues, turning her back to Clarke, “you may want to see Nyko” she adds mysteriously before striding out of her tent.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------

They’re sitting in their usual spot, all three of them, Shabir’s stature casting a towering shadow against the house’s walls. Clarke is in the process of explaining the rules of backgammon to him.
while Damian – who has become proficient in the game to the point where he keeps beating her at it (which may or may not be the reason why Clarke is looking for a new partner) – watches on, cutting in from time to time whenever he feels she is not being clear enough, when the ground under their feet starts to rumble. She can feel the tremor of the earth travel up from her toes into her legs and leave her upper body trembling.

The board pieces on the small table in front of them are jostled out of their positions and a small layer of dust rises slowly from the ground. It’s followed by a stifled murmur that seems to come from far away, carried to their ears by the freezing winter air. Clarke jumps to her feet, standing on shaky legs.

Her first reflex is to turn immediately to Shabir for an explanation, but he looks as caught off guard as she is. The flash of alarm in his eyes doesn’t help quell her rising panic. With a frown, he turns his face towards the village’s east entrance, sharp and alert.

A beat. Shabir rises from his seat and once the earth seems to have settled back into silence, says: “It came from the Mountain.” His voice leaves no place for doubt and carries a fearful apprehension Clarke has never heard from him before.

The Mountain.

The Mountain Nyko told her Skaikru is visiting on a regular basis. The Mountain where according to him, some of her people have even started to live. The Mountain where Jackson and her mother are now treating patients.

Clarke doesn’t know how but she doesn’t panic. Her thoughts are ordered, her mind is clear: she has to go there. It could be nothing, could be a small earthquake, could be Skaikru deciding to close the Mountain once and for all. But a sinking feeling has taken up residence in her chest and she hopes beyond reason her gut is wrong this time around.

She has to know, she has to be certain.

Shabir seems to understand the conclusion she’s come to, because when she turns back towards him, he just nods.

“The forest is too dangerous to navigate in the dead of night, Clarke. We can plan for a trip together tomorrow.”
“I… I’m sorry but… My mom… My friends… I can’t wait.”

“You can take my horse. I will see if some of the village scouts can accompany you” and with that he brusquely turns and leaves in the direction of the main cluster of houses.

Everything suddenly accelerates into a frenzied blur. Clarke runs into the house and hastily throws her few belongings into a satchel. On a whim, she also takes some of the medical supplies she’s gathered over the past few weeks and apologizes in her head to the village for pillaging their reserves.

When she emerges from the house, Damian’s still sitting in his spot but with a small bundle at his feet, as if ready for travel.

“No, absolutely not”, she says gruffly, shaking her head.

She’s wondered what will happen to him once she’s ready to leave Sinchuk of course, especially since Shabir made it clear that staying here is not an option for him. But who knows what they’ll find, it could be dangerous. Too dangerous for a ten year old, that’s for sure. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, she could be back very soon.

But Damian doesn’t acknowledge her and when Shabir returns with 7 of the village’s warriors and horses, the boy silently climbs on top of the one meant for Clarke and looks back down at her, as if daring her: to climb up or to refuse to do so, Clarke isn’t sure. And there’s no time really for arguing, so she climbs up behind him, swearing under her breath that this argument is not over. If Damian hears her, he gives no indication of it.

Shabir checks the saddle’s girth, throws the boy a sad look and a whispered “Ste yuj, strikon.” It’s not emotional per se but… there’s something swirling in his one good eye. Clarke decides to read is as fondness. They depart after she exchanges a short and lingering “May we meet again” with her host these past months. Shabir deserves more than a few words hastily thrown together in the dead of night and Clarke silently vows right then and there that come what may, she will find a way to repay him for his kindness.

Their group rides hard under the moonlight, making sure to slow down whenever the forest swallows its light. The hoarfrost-covered ground allows for a fast canter, without having to worry about the horses slipping. Clarke lets Damian take control of the reins, barely registering their surroundings. Her mind is on what she’ll find, worst case scenarii forming one after the other and
leaving her more anxious by the minute.

When they finally reach their destination, the scene that greets them in the first rays of dawn, is one of pure destruction. Her eyes settle on the gigantic heap of debris where the Mountain once stood, the gaping hole in its centre a clear sign that it didn’t collapse in on itself of its own accord. Heavy black dust is in the air, clinging to their clothes and making her eyes prickle. She doesn’t know how she gets down from her horse or how she’s suddenly running towards the mass of caved-in rocks.

She skids to a stop when she sees the two silhouettes lying on the ground in front of where the entrance used to be. A thin body, blood matted long brown hair, the glimpse of something metallic around the shin: it’s Raven, clutching a radio in her hand. Raven and Sinclair. And it’s inevitable for her to wonder: if they’re here, if they were caught by surprise by the blast, then who else is here – who else was here?

It takes Damian shaking her arm to jostle her out of her stupor and the medic in her takes over once again. After making sure they’re both breathing – knocked unconscious by the blast most probably – she rises back up. Sinclair shows obvious signs of heavy beating and unless Raven’s become a boxing champion in the months she’s been away… She doesn’t finish the thought but the silent implication makes her shiver.

The group she came with – she knows a few of them from her consultations – has started inching closer to the rubble, not sure what to do and coughing at the dust. She doesn’t know what compels her to turn her head to the right, but she does, like a reflex of sorts. She finds Finn, standing there, his presence somehow a comfort this morning. And for the second time since his ghost started to visit her, back when she was wandering the forest, he’s not looking at her. No. He’s surveying the same scene, the desolation reflected in his eyes. He slowly turns his face to her and she doesn’t need him to say the words. She already knows.

“It’s time to do better” she whispers into the air.

Chapter End Notes

Choj op - Eat
Ai laik - I am
Maunon - Mountain Man
Maun-de - Mount Weather
Mochof - Thank you
Leida - Bye
Ai gaf badan up wanheda - I wish to serve the Commander of Death
Seken - Second
Fisa - Healer
Yu - You
Yuj - Strong
Yu gonplei steodon - Your fight is over
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

She knows Costia well enough to accept defeat. She sighs, unable – or is it unwilling? - to keep the words from bursting out of their cage: ‘I can not lose you too’, she confesses shyly, her hand reaching out but not daring to touch the woman asking her to let her go.

Chapter Notes

It's not easy to write in a fandom where there's such a wealth of incredibly good stories you can't help but compare your meagre effort to. But here we go ;) I also realize it calls for quite some effort for some who expect a Clarke/Lexa story, to get into a Clarke/Lexa/Costia one. Thanks to all the readers who are sticking around and I'm always interested in feedback!

Really really great stories I've been reading lately: The White Queen Running and You're not a slave to the things you've done. Man, both are so so good.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s been tense and irritable. She can see it in the wider berth Wulan’s been giving her these past couple of days. It’s not just him: every single person she’s interacted with this week seemed cautious around her – out of the ordinary cautious, that is. The ambassadors were all excessively reverential this morning and at lunch, the Natblidaloooked guarded in her presence. Even Titus – whom she would have expected to not pay her any mind (or quietly rejoice) – has been looking at her with veiled concern.

She’s been tense and irritable for seven days now. Hasn’t had a full night’s sleep in just as long. Craves a soft body that is not there at night and thinks of a brown-eyed girl that is not there during the day. For it’s been seven days since Costia marched out of her room and the warrior has yet to return to her side. They’ve been apart before, of course, so many times. But never when in the same town. And never with this uncertainty hanging over them – an uncertainty Lexa has yet to fully acknowledge. For the simple reason that she’s not quite sure how to handle the possibility of Costia not coming back to her.

She’s aware of her mood, but has found it near impossible to keep it from showing, which only serves to further increase her frustration. She’s allowed herself one single outlet so far: the fighting pits (and has the bruises to prove it). Yet, she’s found the daily sparring with overeager warriors… lacklustre.
The knot in the muscles of her upper back – the one Costia was so skilled at relieving after a hard day of sparring with Anya – is now wound so tight, she wonders if it’ll ever come loose again. Maybe there’s some comfort in feeling it, a constant physical reminder of her failure to stay true to the girl who insinuated herself into her life and into her heart. The girl who belongs to her and only her.

She slowly tunes back in to the conversation with Titus and a few of her Trikru generals. The heavy discussions with the other clans to convince them that it remains in every one’s interest to agree to a temporary treaty with the Sky People – even after the most unwelcome eruption of a small group of armed Skaikru in her tower – are thankfully behind her. And the negotiations in parallel with Marcus Kane and Abby went more smoothly than anticipated. In the aftermath of the Ice Nation’s surprise attack on their people, the two leaders had in fact been only too eager to agree to a formal truce (although Lexa suspects Indra bringing her and Abby news of a certain blonde Skygirl, safe and cared for in Sinchuk, had something to do with the wary woman’s change of heart).

In a way, everything went as well as one could have hoped for: the treaty they have now signed guarantees the Sky People safety on Trikru lands, as well as logistical support to consolidate their current settlement. In exchange, Skaikru are to give the coalition access to their technology. The finer details of this exchange in knowledge will have to be hammered out at a later stage. Similarly, safe passage to the lands of the other clans remains to be agreed upon, but Lexa is infinitely pleased. Or rather, she would be, were she not… so tense and irritable.

The two Sky leaders rushed back to their people two days ago, but not before Lexa could note the wide-eyed wonder in Marcus Kane’s eyes when taking in her capital. Marcus Kane will be a reliable ally, she thinks. Abby kom Skaikru on the other hand… will be trickier. But nothing she can’t handle.

Would Anya approve of this alliance, she wonders? Would Gustus? The answer’s not as easy as it could seem.

Now all that is left is for her to appoint a liaison, a trusted person to follow all matters concerning Skaikru. And deliver on her promise for safety, which, despite Lotrien’s gruff assurances that the attack on the Mountain wasn’t meant to kill anybody, won’t be an easy feat, considering the Ice Nation’s continued scheming. Even though Kane and Abby seemed more focused on the challenges lying ahead, Lexa knows it’s just a question of time before their people call for vengeance. *Jus drein, jus daun* after all, a principle the Ice Queen is intimately aware of.

“We can raise an army from the villages near Arkadia.”

Lexa notes with interest that her general, who is usually very vocal about her dislike for the Sky People, is volunteering to lead this army herself. She wonders if this change was brought about by
the defeat of the Mountain or if the woman came to some sort of a mutual understanding with the
two Skaikru leaders over the past weeks.

“**I trust you to do what needs to be done**” Lexa gives her the go ahead. “**Make sure the strain is not felt too heavily by the surrounding communities. They’ve been through enough as it is and their supplies are dwindling. They’ll need as many people as possible to work in the fields.**”

The general accepts her new mission with discreet pride and falls silent.

“**I would like to volunteer as liaison to the Skylings**” the voice that interrupts them is at the same time soft music to Lexa’s ears and a hard slap in the face.

Costia breezes into the throne room as if it hasn’t been a week since they last saw each other. She’s wearing her guard uniform, hair tied back in the usual braids of Trikru warriors of her rank, warm leather boots lined with grey fur on her feet. She’s beautiful (oh so painfully beautiful). Lexa notes the thick dirt still attached to the boots’ sides, the only indication that the girl’s been away, guarding the city’s outer walls most probably. Her lover (Lexa refuses to use the past tense) is carefully avoiding to meet her eyes. And in this moment she feels she would give anything just to have the girl currently standing in the middle of the throne room look at her as she used to, not so long ago: with love, understanding, desire.

The silence in the room is awkward. Her generals are pointedly looking at anything but the two women. She can tell by the nervous twitch of his upper lip that Titus would rather be anywhere than here (she cannot blame him) and Wulan has turned a deep shade of fuchsia. Which essentially means that all of Polis seems to be aware they’re going through a rough patch. Brilliant.

Costia forges on, unperturbed. “**I am proficient in their tongue and know the area by heart.**”

All reasonable and true arguments and facts Lexa is already familiar with. She is, indeed, one of Lexa’s best English speakers and served as a scout at the border when she was a second.

But she also knows what Costia coming to her in such a formal setting and formulating this request in the presence of third parties means: she’s trying to force her hand. For the Commander is now in a delicate position. If she refuses, she opens herself to criticism and accusations of partiality. If she accepts… She cannot be seen as anything but fair and Costia is indeed a perfect candidate for the position. She can already see Indra nodding her approval. The decision in a way was taken out of her hands the moment Costia passed the room’s threshold, even if it means Lexa now has to send her lover away. Away from the safety of Polis’ walls. Away from her.
“Leave us” she orders the room’s occupants quietly, standing up. Her gaze is trained on Costia and Costia alone.

When the last of her generals has left and a reluctant Wulan closes the door behind them with a final glance to her, Costia eventually looks up. Their eyes meet for the first time in a week. But it feels longer. Lexa takes in her features greedily, noting the dark shadows under her brown eyes – an exact replica of her own. But she cannot see, cannot count the freckles she holds so dear from this distance, so she comes down to stand in front of her.

“Niron, beja, don’t do this” she starts, not ashamed to be seen pleading. “Stay in Polis, by my side. We can talk about it. My feelings for you have not changed.” She injects as much honest force as she can in the last sentence.

Costia remains silent.

“I can convince Titus to give you the leadership of the Guard” she tries again. She’s grasping at straws now and it’s pathetic really. But this is Costia. The one she doesn’t know how to carry on without. The one she doesn’t want to carry on without. And Lexa selfishly decided a long time ago – back when she fought Costia tooth and nail to have her become a Guardsman in Polis – that this girl will be her weakness. That this beautiful woman standing in front of her will be the exception to every rule.

“My mind’s made up, Lex. You cannot deny me this.”

The words are final and Costia’s always been fiercely stubborn, unafraid to defy her Heda whenever she felt strongly about something. She knows Costia well enough to accept defeat. But there’s a softness in her voice as well – usually reserved to lover’s whispers – that Lexa thinks could just maybe set them on the path to repairing that something rare and treasured that’s been broken.

She sighs, unable – or is it unwilling? – to keep the words from bursting out of their cage: “I can not lose you too”, she confesses shyly, her hand reaching out, but not daring to touch the woman asking her to let her go.

“I have to do this” Costia whispers back.
Her words don’t offer any of the reassurances Lexa’s heart is yearning for, but desperate as she is, she’s decided to consider the light squeeze to her outstretched hand a promise. Costia is, after all, the only one she has left.

They must look a fright, covered in dust from head to toe, their red eyes standing out in blackened faces. But she couldn’t care less.

To her utter bafflement, Clarke finds herself yet again leading people – her people. Although “lead” may be a bit of an exaggeration. Let’s say “coordinating efforts”, rather. The role comes with a familiar rush of adrenaline and dread she has no time to examine.

The first groups from Camp Jaha – elements from the Guard mostly – had turned up just after her, stunned into defeated silence at the scene. With more arrivals, the desperate shouts of people wondering if their loved-ones had been inside the Mountain had followed. Then had come the suspicion: what was she doing here and who were all these Trikru men?

It had taken Clarke and Jackson more than an hour to isolate family members. With the help of a couple of volunteers, they had set them up a little over to the left, on the forest’s edge. They had then sent a team of engineers, together with the Ark’s only architect, to make sure the dam stands strong. She had tasked Damian with helping to build a tent for the wounded: Raven and Sinclair in the beginning, now joined by a couple of Arkadians who injured themselves in today’s activities.

Most of Arkadia has come out to help by now, inexplicably looking to Clarke for directions. She’s noted the absence of several familiar faces, however: her mother, Bellamy, Octavia, Kane. She ignores the panic that threatens to bubble up everytime she delves on this fact too long. There’ll be time to ask about it later. For now, she’s busy clearing some of the rubble with the teams. Their morning unfolds to the rhythm of uncovering ashen faces she recognizes from happier times and tearing them away from their sombre sepulchre. They move slowly, in order not to cause more rocks to rain down. The hope of finding Farm Station people still alive, trapped somewhere below, is the only thing that keeps them going.

She’s had to disappear into the woods twice already, to lose whatever contents her stomach can still heave up, away from her people’s eyes.

What if…
The list is already so long. She doesn’t think she would survive adding new – familiar – names to it. She’s never been so close to falling to her knees and praying to whatever entity the old world believed in.

They posted some guards around the makeshift morgue to protect the dead from wild animals. Placing the bodies out of sight is a necessity, to keep the excavation teams motivated. A separate crew, Lincoln among them, is currently digging new graves (next to the neat rows she’s discovered to the left, where once there was nothing but a dirt path and now she suspects hundreds of bodies lie beneath the grass).

She can’t help but notice that buried flesh does not smell.

Not like…

The warriors from Sinchuk insisted on helping, so she asked them to scout their surroundings, just in case. A necessary strategic move when she started noticing the heavy distrustful glares Arkadians were sending the small group. It saddens her to see, but Clarke understands her people’s wariness: as long as Raven and Sinclair remain unconscious, they won’t know for sure what happened here. Her skills may not match her mother’s, still it doesn’t take a doctor to know that the young woman whose body they just extracted did not die from the collapse but rather from a very neatly slit throat, her front caked with dry grey tainted blood.

Damian can currently be found in the space they’ve cordoned off to store all the items the teams manage to salvage: piles and piles of books in different states of conservation, pieces of furniture still miraculously intact, some small medical material, electronic equipment that may or may not still be of use and, surprisingly, a couple of beaten down bicycles... The boy eyes every new item with unbridled curiosity. She has to suppress a small smile when she spies one of the Ark’s former store keepers show Damian how to use stock cards, the boy immediately taking to the idea of keeping a clean inventory in his rudimentary English.

She’s worried to note how much equipment was still inside the Mountain. She thought the Ark would have taken everything potentially useful out by now… Unless her people were considering moving in?

Night has started to fall when somebody suddenly shouts for her. The urgency in the tone prompts her to break into a run, towards a particularly large pile of rocks around which several men and women are now gathered. When she approaches, they motion for her to make as little sound as possible and after a beat she hears it: a faint clink coming from deep inside. Monroe identifies it as Morse code: there’s apparently a group of five trapped under the rubble, with a severely injured
person and another one unconscious, their air supply dangerously thinning with each passing moment. This is the sliver of hope they all needed and it fills the clearing teams with renewed frenetic energy.

She falls back, lets them work on carefully carving a path down to the survivors, and heads toward the medical tent instead. Jackson will need help to prepare for the potential arrival of new patients. She pointedly avoids looking at the morgue and family members of the dead on her way, for if there’s one thing she cannot deal with right now, it’s further grief. The day’s been physically and emotionally draining as it is.

She’s lost in thought when a gangly and wide-eyed man storms into the tent.

He doesn’t see her at first, his eyes whizzing from bed to bed, but she recognises him immediately.

Her reaction is instantaneous, the exclamation out before she even registers it: “Bellamy!”

It’s a strange feeling to experience happiness and sadness at once, overwhelming relief tinged with an afterthought of guilt.

He turns to her, stunned. He hasn’t changed much, bulked up a bit maybe. His hair sticks out in different directions, face red from the cold and covered in grit. They move towards each other, stopping just short from touching. The hug both seem to instinctively reach out for remains unspoken between them.

Seeing him again – seeing him safe – is overwhelming. She could stand there for hours, registering the minute changes in the lines on his face, in the skin of his arms, in the palms of his hands.

“What are you doing here, Clarke?”

The moment only lasts a few heartbeats though, for he shakes his head, takes a step back and returns to his previous frenzied state. Once he’s done checking the remaining beds, he clenches his jaw and closes his fists. It seems he didn’t find what he was looking for. Was Octavia inside the Mountain?

He turns back to her: “What are you doing here, Clarke?”
It’s a fair question, though she didn’t expect him to go there right away. Especially not in such an aggressive tone.

She helplessly gestures around her: “Helping. Or rather trying to” she replies, not knowing quite well how to place his pained look.

She wants to reach out, touch him somehow, for confirmation that he truly is here. For a modicum of reassurance. For a connection. She doesn’t.

He takes her in, silently, before something seems to break.

“Three months, Clarke! You were gone for three months! I… We went looking for you everywhere! They say there’s a price on your head! Where the hell have you been?”

Her stomach gives a guilty churn and she has to look away.

“I was staying at a Trikru village less than a day’s ride away from here” she reveals.

There’s nothing shady about Sinchuk, yet she feels almost… guilty, admitting she was so close, safe and taken care of.

They’re interrupted by the woman she had put in charge of that last clearing team: they’ve dug a small tunnel towards the trapped group, enough to speak and provide them with water and food. Not enough yet to extract the occupants though or take care of the injured.

Bellamy remains silent during the exchange while dramatically rolling his eyes, his hand running through his hair in a nervous tick.

He doesn’t wait for the woman to leave the tent before resuming his earlier rant, only louder this time: “So that’s it, uh? You think you can just come back like that and start ordering people around again?” he exclaims, gesturing to the working crews outside.

Before she can answer (with what would have probably been a not so kind retort), they’re interrupted again, this time by Octavia. The Blake girl spares her only a short glance in which she
manages to convey both surprise and contempt, before taking her brother away by the elbow.

Fair enough, Octavia had after all warned her she wanted nothing to do with her after the Mountain. Besides, for the moment, nothing could taint Clarke’s happiness and relief upon discovering the girl alive and well. Bellamy though, is the one she took the time to say goodbye to. The one she’d tried to explain her reasons for leaving to. She is warmed by the fact that they searched for her but can’t he understand she needed space and time away from them?

This is miles away from how she had pictured returning to her people. She knew her welcome would be a highly volatile affair, but had thought that she’d have days to formulate apologies in her head, play out different scenarii. She had expected to be able to prepare herself to seeing her friends again.

From the open flap of the tent she can see the pair walking over towards the morgue, Octavia quietly leading her brother’s larger frame. She wants to catch up to them. Wants to voice that one fear that’s been nagging at the back of her mind, in a loop she’s stubbornly ignored so far: were Kane and her mother in the Mountain? But she doesn’t, pushing it as far back as possible.

She turns away.

The group from Sinchuk comes back shortly afterwards with hunted game that should be enough for all and no sightings of hostile warriors (the third good news of the day). While they prepare the meat, she recruits Damian to help her build a big enough tent for all of them for the night. The clearing teams don’t want to stop but Clarke can see the heaviness in their movements and the shivers starting to crawl up their bodies with the evening cold setting in, so she negotiates to have them return to Arkadia to rest and be replaced by new men and women in a shift type of rotation. Since excavation work is likely to continue on throughout the night, she’ll stay here with them and help in any way she can.

She’s not ready to see Arkadia yet, anyway.

With a weary sigh, Clarke resigns herself to a hungry and sleepless night, cursing herself for not asking anybody about her mother. The new crew attacks the caved in Mountain with eagerness, in the warm light of the big fires the Trikru built all around and Clarke joins in the effort, far from able to muster an ounce of the same enthusiasm, yet too restless to remain a bystander.

“You should eat something. Here, have some of this.”
Jackson finds her during the second break of the night shift, looking as exhausted as Clarke feels and there’s comfort in the friendly hand he’s laid on her shoulder. With a gentle squeeze, he offers a piece of bread and cooked meat to her. The smell alone has Clarke’s empty stomach rolling and she turns her nose away, trying to calm her breathing.

She shakes her head.

“Thanks, but… Cooked meat is… I just can’t these days” she tries to explain, motioning to the piece he’s still holding out for her.

He nods with a small frown.

“Then have the bread at least. The bakery is still a work in progress, but they’re getting there. This one’s not even half as bad as what they churned out a couple of months ago” he tries for levity.

And he’s right. It can’t rival with Sinchuk’s dark bread, but it’s perfect for a starving stomach. She can’t shake the feeling that she’s forgetting something though.

Oh. Jackson! Jackson would know.

“My mother, was she…” she can’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

He understands immediately. “No, Abby wasn’t inside. She and Kane went to Polis a couple of days ago.”

Polis.

Her mother went to the capital.

She feels all of a sudden full, feverish, sick and can’t even finish her meagre piece of bread.

Her mother is safe.
Her mother saw Lexa.

It’s with astonished delight that she comes face to face with her former teacher, Pike, two days later, when Kane invites her to attend a meeting at Camp Jaha.

Pike’s anger towards the Grounders and calls for Arkadia to take up arms, is a disappointing revelation, however. For this man, standing rigidly in his military clothes, is the teacher who helped sketch in their minds images of a peaceful life on the Ground. The teacher who used to speak animatedly of ancient farming and weaving techniques and who would go on and on about man’s intricate relationship with his environment. She’s reminded once again of how much experiences – how much experiencing the Ground – has changed all of them, in more ways than they will probably ever know. He is not the teacher she once knew, just as she is not the student he once taught anymore.

Although, looking back, there had been warning signs. His glorification of the so-called “discovery of the Americas” and complete disregard for the people and cultures living on the continent prior to the arrival of the white man for instance.

The reunion with her mother is the only one that went relatively well, except for the endless barrage of questions ever since. She frowns, remembering Abby’s first interactions with Damian. The older woman had initially been confused about the young silent boy constantly following her daughter around, and switched to judgemental disapproval, once the blonde had explained their “arrangement” to her. Thankfully, the older Griffin now seems to be hesitantly warming up to him, even though Clarke suspects it has more to do with trying to reconnect with her than genuine fondness towards him.

No, actually, the reunion with Kane was the smoothest by far. The older man had welcome her back with an unexpected tight hug and smiling eyes.

She hasn’t seen Jasper at all, Monty has been awfully fidgety around her, she’s only caught glimpses of Bellamy here and there and Raven and Octavia have both avoided her like the pest. Lincoln gave her forearm a strong squeeze but has since then kept to himself, probably so as not to anger Octavia. The other survivors of the initial 100: Harper, Miller, Monroe & co, probably influenced by her friends’ lukewarm welcome, don’t really know how to behave around her.
And the rest of the Arkadians, well, it’s hard to tell. What is for sure though, is that all now seem to know who she is. Whether it’s a nod, the careful shuffling of feet or wary avoidance, she doesn’t pass a single Arkadian without some type of acknowledgement. It’s a strange feeling, quite frankly, one that she’ll need time to grow accustomed to.

Clarke doesn’t speak and feels oddly out of place in the stuffy metallic room. Something vicious in Pike’s tone and Abby and Kane’s uncomfortable dismissal of his interruptions compels her to listen, listen very carefully.

She has mixed feelings over the news the two adults bring back from their trip to Polis. The treaty is a surprise and a good thing of course, the only way to ensure that what they did in Mount Weather – what she did – was not all for nought. At the same time, something ugly in her is envious, envious they got to see the Trikru capital, envious they got to see the Commander in her home, envious the two adults do not have the weight of wiping out an entire people resting on their shoulders.

And something raw in her is furious that it would be so easy for Lexa to move past her betrayal and present herself now as a magnanimous protector. Judging from the looks the others send her way when Kane explains the general clauses of the informal alliance they just agreed to with the Commander, Clarke may not be as skilled at hiding her anger as she’d like. She unclenches her fists and pushes the rage back down.

The news – that throws Pike into yet another heated rant – that they’ll soon be joined by a Trikru liaison, who’s apparently none other than the Commander’s lover… Well. Clarke doesn’t even know where to begin to sort out her feelings over that piece of information. One thing’s for certain: the universe definitely has it out for her.

It’s not like…

It’s no surprise that Lexa would have someone.

It’s just that…

Bellamy, who’s remained silent throughout the meeting but hasn’t stopped frowning, resigns from the Guard. Clarke understands his reasons, understands the guilt. She heard he lost somebody in the attack, which would explain his earlier outburst of two days ago and the haunted look that hasn’t left him since. Considering that he seems to be leaning towards Pike’s more distrustful and muscular approach towards the Grounders these days, his resignation may not be such a bad idea either. Maybe he needs a break, like her. Maybe she could show him Sinchuk, introduce him to Shabir. Maybe her relationship with him is not what needs healing, but the boy himself.
When the meeting is over and Bellamy realises she’s not following them towards the hall where they are to hold the Memorial for those who died in what is now confirmed as an Ice Nation attack, he lingers and turns to her. Their eyes meet and she quietly shakes her head. It’s not that she doesn’t want to explain to him her reasons for not attending and more that she’s not sure she would find the words. All she knows is that it wouldn’t feel right for her to be there.

He scoffs before stepping away, but Clarke grabs his arm before he’s completely out of reach.

“Bellamy, wait. I’m… I’m sorry, for Gina. I didn’t know her well… But she must have been a really great person” she offers, hesitantly.

He seems to falter in on himself at that, the fight leaving him at once. “Thanks” he starts, staring at the ground but Clarke can see that his eyes have glazed over. “She was” he whispers. “I’m sorry too” he continues, “you know, for the other day. I didn’t, I mean, I’m glad you’re back Clarke. I really am.”

The moment is broken by the overhead speakers crackling to life and after an uncertain beat, Bellamy turns away.

She leaves the Ark and Camp Jaha behind. Her steps carry her through the forest and she comes to when she’s standing at the graveyard, Damian – who’s somehow joined her – silent by her side. It’s not the fresh graves dug throughout the past days she’s standing over. No. It’s the ones her people dug to cover up her sins of a couple of months ago that her feet have somehow decided to seek out, tonight: one for each person she killed in Mount Weather. The places are easily recognizable despite the absence of tomb stones or inscriptions: nothing has grown over where the bodies were laid to rest.

She knows some of the rites of the people of the old Earth. How some cultures would gather when the body was lowered into a grave and then revisit it from time to time, bringing flowers, a prayer, a thought. She has no flowers – not 300 in any case – and knows no prayers (knows no God to address them to either), so she settles for a thought. A thought for each one of her anonymous victims. The innocent ones (for there were innocent ones); the not so innocent ones; and the guilty ones. Although contrary to when she would kneel next to Wells’ resting place and relate to her best friend her day or their friends’ antics, Clarke is not so sure she has any right to speak to the dead this time around.

There will be no backgammon or vocabulary exchange for them tonight. She feels bad Damian seems compelled to remain by her side as if offering his shoulders to bear some of her pain, instead of playing with some of the Arkadian kids or doing something else more appropriate for his age. But
she reminds herself that she didn’t ask him to come, that he’s there of his own accord. Clarke goes from grave to grave, the heaviness in her heart growing with each step. Damian remains a little bit behind, probably sensing that she needs the space. He’s taken to pick up some of the small white stones covering the ground ever since the Mountain was blown apart, lying one on each grave they pass, muttering something under his breath, before moving on to the next.

The names are back.

Trina, Pascal, Atom, Wells, Charlotte, John, Diggs…

And she has a feeling they’re here to stay.

She wakes to sounds of shouting (rotting faces still imprinted into her eyelids).

She’s still sleeping at the bottom of the Mountain – to the great displeasure of her mother who would rather her daughter rejoin her in the safety of the Ark’s carcass – together with the group from Sinchuk, Damian and, strangely enough, Octavia and Lincoln who put up a tent next to theirs two days ago. Clarke didn’t dare ask why the two are not sleeping in the Ark anymore and they didn’t volunteer any explanation.

She slips into her jeans without much difficulty, exits the tent and meets a couple of unfamiliar faces some ways away. They’re all heavily armed. She soon identifies Pike amongst them.

Damian is already there, watching the scene unfold, his arms crossed, a small blade clutched in his fist. In fact, the whole group from Sinchuk is watching and Clarke feels embarrassed when she realises she must have slept through most of it.

It would appear that Octavia is shouting at… her brother, gesturing widely. Because yes, Bellamy is there as well, the second face she recognises amid the group carrying rifles. Behind Octavia, who is growing redder by the minute, between the armed group and the scouts from Sinchuk, Lincoln is holding a knife to someone’s throat.

It’s a scene she cannot quite make sense of, so she focuses on reaching out for Damian’s hands,
trying at the same time to offer a reassuring touch and get him to relinquish his tight hold on the weapon. Their eyes meet and he lets the blade go with a displeased frown. She leaves her hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

She’s about to walk up to Octavia and Bellamy and ask the bickering siblings what is going on, when Kane and her mother arrive running and out of breath, with a couple of guards in tow. They all seem to understand the situation much faster than she does. She doesn’t miss the look of frustration in Pike’s eyes before he orders the first group, which seems to be exclusively composed of people from Farm Station, to drop their weapons, lowering his own at the same time. She sees Lincoln release his captive out of the corner of her eye but her attention is on her mother, who is now berating Pike heatedly.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Charles? These men came here to help us” the older Griffin is shouting at the top of her lungs and Clarke feels like a little girl again, her first instinct to run for her bed and hide under the thin covers. Damian it seems has the same reaction, for he’s leaning as far back as possible away from the irate woman.

When Pike replies with a cold: “What you don’t have the guts to do” before being led away and the small crowd cheers him on – including members of Arkadia’s Guard, she notes – Clarke feels the familiar dread in her gut return, similar to when they heard the Mountain’s roar in Sinchuk.

This cannot be good.

Her grip on Damian’s shoulder grows imperceptibly tighter.

---

Her mother confirms her suspicions later that day, when she fills her in on the public confrontation that took place during the Memorial between Pike, herself and Kane, centered on the arrival of the Trikru protection force Indra had told them about. Lincoln further describes the clash she witnessed that very morning, corroborating what Damian had tried to explain to her: that the warriors from Sinchuk were indeed the target and that had Lincoln not intervened, a couple of them would likely have been killed.

This is not good. Not good at all.

After talking to the Trikru scouts, Damian helping with the translation, Clarke reluctantly agrees with
her mother that to diffuse the tension with some Arkadians and ensure the group’s safety, it’s best to send them back to Sinchuk.

She puts great care into crafting a thankful message for Shabir that she entrusts their leader to relay to him. After a rather contentious discussion with Kane and her mother, they also give him one of the radios Raven – who is now back on her feet and as active as ever (but still not talking to her) – and Wick just repaired, showing the group how to operate it. The idea, Clarke had argued with the two hesitant adults, is to extend their network and what better way than by establishing daily communication with a village a day’s ride away. The fact that she would vouch for Shabir’s character and stressed the support the village chief had immediately sent when the Mountain had been attacked, is what ultimately sways them.

Damian, Clarke notes, looks on, fascinated, though whether it’s directed at the artefact itself or the strong-headed mechanic who is firing rapid explanations on its use, her hands flying from one button to the next, she’s not sure.

She doesn’t even ask him if he wishes to return to Sinchuk with the group: Shabir was very clear the boy had no place among them (and a very selfish part of Clarke is not sure she’s quite ready for them to part ways so soon).

Kane surprises her when he asks for a private meeting that evening, his concerned look matching her own. Damian tags along and it seems Kane’s accepted his silent presence by her side, because he doesn’t object.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Clarke, it’s good to see you! Come in, come in.” Kane starts, motioning for her to sit down as well.

Damian takes a seat and withdraws the little notebook they’ve studiously put together, containing the alphabet and first transcriptions of English words into Trikru phonetics (there’s the weather, a couple of plants, numbers, basic words of introduction, and a whole list of names for the pieces of junk salvaged from the Mountain).

Clarke remains silent, curious to see why Kane wanted to see her on her own.

“We haven’t had the chance to catch up, you and I. I wanted to know how you’re settling in. I’d be interested in hearing about your stay in… Sinkuch, is it?”
Yeah right. Although the sentiment is probably genuine, that sounds like not even half the truth.

“Sinchuk” she corrects.

“Right, Sinchuk. A few of us went to look for you, I’m very glad to hear you found a safe place to stay.”

“Why did you?”

“Pardon?”

“Go looking for me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m touched you did. It’s just… When Jaha left, we didn’t send out a search party. And I told Bellamy why I had to, so it’s not like I disappeared…”

Kane seems completely thrown off by her question.

“Mhh. Well. You can imagine that your mother was quite worried. I tried as best I could to calm Abby and we asked around, but no one had any information as to your whereabouts, not even the Commander.”

Float. They asked Lexa about her.

“And then Indra informed us there were men looking for you, that a price had been placed on your head. By then it seemed… the most reasonable thing to do, if only to try and protect you.”

It… makes sense. She’s still uncomfortable, this feeling of being caged in, unable to escape her people is still there. But Shabir had confirmed that the threats on her life were to be taken seriously. And frankly, she’d probably be the first to launch a search party, were one of her friends in a similar situation.

“I…” She doesn’t want to apologise. Doesn’t think the should. “I’m grateful. For everything you did.”
Kane gives a small gentle smile.

“As I am grateful to you for coming back and helping with the excavation.” “Anyway” he starts over with a sweeping gesture, “this was then. I say we focus on the present. As you know, we will hold a vote tomorrow.”

Clarke nods, feeling a little bit like a student.

“Pike has… surprised us all. His return, his rhetoric and the support he seems to have garnered among some of us” he continues cautiously. “Your mother… Abby and I, have decided that I should run for the both of us, present a united front.”

It’s telling that Kane’s the one to share this piece of information with her and not her own mother. She feels a twinge of sadness at the thought.

“Without overstepping, I wanted to know where you stand, Clarke.”

The question is too vague. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve led our people in the past, remarkably so. I am curious to know if my candidacy has your support” he replies.

Clarke knows how to read between the lines.

So Kane wants to know if she’s running. The thought is so preposterous to Clarke, who wishes she were still in peaceful Sinchuk sometimes and almost entertained the thought of traveling back with the village scouts earlier, that she can’t suppress an incredulous laugh. If she’s completely honest, she hasn’t spared the upcoming vote for Arkadia’s new Chancellor much thought at all. But when she explains to her mother’s friend she’s not even sure she’ll attend, he doesn’t hide his shock.

“Clarke, this will be our people’s first real opportunity, on Earth, to choose a leader. It’s a historic moment that will set the course for the years if not decades to come.”
He’s right: she’s been so busy with dealing with day to day crises, so busy losing herself in the wrongs of the past that she’s lost sight of the future.

“Clarke” he reaches out, taking hold of her hand and the touch, though comforting, is… surprising. “Our people look up to you, you should participate.” He seems to debate his next words before he continues: “In any capacity you wish to.”

“What will you do about Pike?” she asks, instead of responding.

He leans back in his chair and rubs his forehead with a sigh. “What would you do?” he sends back her way, studying her.

“If the vote is to be the milestone and defining moment you’ve envisioned, then no more shady politics like back up in the Ark.” She ignores his slight grimace: “You want to start over? Then do it right: let him run, let him speak.”

It’s the right thing to do. She’d like to think it’s what her father would have wanted.

Kane interrupts her: “The man is dangerous Clarke, he could lead us all to ruin.”

“All the more reason for you to fight him out there, for all to see, for all to hear. People want a platform to voice their doubts, want you to take their concerns seriously. You need to win fair and square, Kane. You and my mom can’t keep on ignoring his arguments and followers” she counters.

“Yes, but how do you counter fear?” he wonders aloud, slightly at a loss.

“I don’t know” Clarke replies, “but I do know that it’s not by brushing it off” she placates him.

“Am I to understand you will attend and give me your support?” he asks, coming back to his initial concern.

Clarke shrugs noncommittally.
He may be nice, but she won’t give him what he wants: “I need to think about it first” she lies.

The truth is, she’d rather be anywhere. She wants to run as far as possible from the Ark, more wreck than home these days. She wants to leave the tombs – old and fresh – far far behind. But she knows Kane is right: if these are still her people, then Clarke’s place is amongst them tomorrow.

“Oh, and Clarke?” he calls back to her before she exits the room. “If you’re ever wiling to share, about your time in….”

“Sinchuk”

“Yes, Sinchuk. Well, I’d be a very interested listener. The few glimpses I caught of Grounder culture in Polis were downright... fascinating.”

Right, she could have done without a reminder of Kane’s trip to Polis.

“Trikru” she corrects.

“Pardon?”

“Trikru culture. Polis is the Trikru capital”

“Oh, right, of course, that’s what I meant.”

She leaves with a smirking Damian in tow.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

She’s gorgeous.
Of course she is. Just her floating luck.

Clarke groans internally.

Why that matters to her is something she’s not ready to dwell on.

Correction: it doesn’t matter. It’s a purely offhand observation. Just as one’d comment on the weather.

Still, though: hadn’t there been… Hadn’t they shared… Had she made it all up?

Her memories of that day – of that one moment – are jumbled, overshadowed by flashes of a blood-streaked Lexa blindsiding her and leaving her to die.

And it’s not like she had seen this… this connection, this… thing coming. But she could swear…

That Lexa would be spoken for comes as no surprise, but then why hadn’t she said anything? Why go on and on about trust being a luxury she couldn’t afford, on her love and weakness tirades, when back at home a gorgeous girl is waiting for her? It doesn’t make any sense. And as much as she may hate her guts right now, Lexa doesn’t look the type to play mindgames.

The debate ahead of the vote has been going on for more than three hours now, opposing Kane to Pike, who was allowed to run. No other candidates came forth. The arrested group from Farm Station was granted a temporary reprieve and can be found standing huddled together to the right. Kane and Pike have slowly descended from the niceties of their opening statements into furiously interrupting and speaking over each other. It’s the ugly mess of testosterone and baseless accusations that comes with Ark politics.

Clarke’d probably be exasperated by now, if her attention wasn’t on something else. Or rather, someone else: the new liaison Lexa sent to smooth out any hurdles the fledgling understanding between Skaikru and Trikru could encounter.

Costia.
A dark-skinned warrior with never ending legs, an extremely toned upper body and deep brown eyes.

The woman greeted her with a frosty “Wanheda” earlier, before moving on to Kane, but Clarke hasn’t missed the curious glances she’s sent her way since.

Her presence to the event (Kane’s idea, a “sign of respect and unity”). Clarke suspects he secretly hoped Pike would not dare go too far in his cries for war in her presence – a gross miscalculation on his part) has so far served only to fuel Pike’s rant.

Speaking of which, the man is currently haranguing the crowd, pointing a threatening finger at the Trikru woman and stepping dangerously close.

“Remind us again why you let Grounder spies participate in our elections?” he calls Kane out.

She scans the crowd, sees the nods, sees the suspicion. This could get out of hand very quickly.

Kane looks completely caught off guard by the accusation. “Costia is an official envoy, sent by the Commander to help us in the process of settling down. She’s here today strictly as an observer.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why does she have to be here at all?”

“Charles, our relationship with the Grounders, with Trikru, is essential if we want to survive.”

“Why? What have they offered us so far? Tell us Kane: what have they actually given us? Security?” Pike makes a show of scoffing loudly.

More nods in the crowd.
Her former teacher pointedly ignores the Trikru woman and continues, addressing Kane: “How were our children welcomed when they crashed? Where were these so-called protectors when Farm Station was slaughtered on the ice, one by one? Where were they when you were all kidnapped by those you call the Mountain Men? Where were they when the rest of my people were brutally murdered? Is that what you call security?”

Kane’s not hiding his growing agitation very well. “The Commander promised us justice for that last attack.” He can see it’s not a strong enough rebuke, though. “They brought us food and tools since. Cattle will follow. We’re on their land, Charles. How can you possibly call for a confrontation?”

“Are we on their land? What claim do they have to it?”

She has to admit, she’s not quite following Pike’s logic there.

“… They’re living on it. We’re in the middle of Trikru territory… The countryside is dotted with villages and outposts. We’re from the Ark…”

Pike makes a show of slowly turning around on the spot. “I don’t see any Grounders living where the Ark fell, do you? No villages on this side of the lake, no dwellings around the dropship either.”

“These are all the Commander’s lands” the Trikru liaison interrupts, loud enough for the front of the crowd to hear. She takes a step closer.

Pike doesn’t back down: “Is it? What makes it hers? We are just as much of this Earth as you are. What higher claim do you have to this land? Our ancestors temporarily left, due to the circumstances, so what? The fact that yours stayed behind doesn’t give you more of a claim to these forests, these fields.”

He turns away from her to face the audience, thrusting his finger high in the air: “What is the one certainty we all grew up and lived for? What is the one mantra we raised our children with? That no matter what, one day, we would all return. Return to Earth. Return to our home. This, this land, is our home land. All of it.” He pauses. “Who are they to pretend to tell us how and where to live in our home?”

She can see the Trikru is seething. “You came from the sky” she hisses. “Our people have been
farming and hunting this Earth for more than a century. We were born **here**. We became men and women **here**. We watched our parents grow old **here**. We **fought** for this land.”

“Exactly. War, fighting, that’s the only thing you do” he throws an ironic smile to the crowd, back resolutely to the liaison. “We’ve all seen it: it’s the only language they understand. And now **we’ll** fight for it. Hell, we already did! Last time I checked, **you** were **losing** against the Mountain. **We’re** the ones who destroyed them. Seems only fair we’d get the land.” Pike replies with a wild fire to his tone.

Clarke exhales.

This… This is even worse than she thought.

Pike’s on a roll: “You all know me. I’m a man of peace. But we’ve tried it your way Kane. How many have we lost since we landed, ugh? How many? You don’t even know. And you insult their memory, you insult our intelligence, by asking us to try it one more time, give you one more chance. I’m done seeing my people picked off, one by one. I’m done being told I should be thankful for scraps. **We are not weak. It’s about time we showed them** and reclaimed what is rightfully ours!”

His last words are met with clapping and cheers. Loud and gleeful cheers.

Kane is visibly at a loss for words, too floored to come up with a retort. She understands, yet it’s the absolute worst possible scenario, for it lets Pike bask in the applause, lets the roar soar. Someone needs to shut Pike down and quick.

Until a voice rises from the back of the room: “What does the Griffin girl think about all this?”

**Hold on, what?**

That’s when her evening takes a turn for the worst (not that she was having a jolly good time before, mind you). She jolts out of her haze, a frown all she can muster as a reaction. But several people are now acquiescing with the anonymous shouter. A hand pushes her forward towards the elevated space, where Pike and Kane have fallen silent. And before she realizes it, she’s standing next to both candidates in front of a curious and silent crowd.
Her eyes cross the liaison’s calculating ones. Clarke swallows and finds it hard to breathe.

“Uhhh” she starts eloquently, trying to calm her racing heart and staring to the side.

She brings her hands up to stop them from fidgeting, tucks her hair behind her ears and lifts her head. She has to think, has to concentrate. This is too important to mess up.

She sees Finn. Before the pyre. Before the village. Finn and his yearning for dialogue. Finn, the first advocate for peace.

She sees Trina. Pascal. Atom.

She sees Wells.

With a deep breath, she manages to rally every ounce of courage in her, ignores Kane’s encouraging smile and starts: “I don’t… I’m not… I don’t understand why we’re talking about fighting each other, actually. I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

She turns to the Trikru girl: “Is peace truly on the table? Will L…” she catches herself on time. “Will the Commander let us settle here?”

Lexa’s lover replies clearly: “Yes.”

The word resonates in the hall.

“Like we can believe anything they say!” comes hollered from her right.

“Full me once, shame on you. Full me twice…” says a woman in front of her, shaking her head.

And well, they do have a point, don’t they? It transports her back to that day, back to Lexa disappearing into the night, her people in tow, back to the deafening ringing of betrayal in her head. And oh how unfair, for her to be put in this position of having to vouch for floating Lexa, when her heart is screaming at her to bruise and strangle and… HURT the brunette.
She doesn’t know the liaison, yet that doesn’t matter. It all comes down to Lexa’s word and the question: does Clarke trust it?

She’d like to scoff. She’d like to be able to answer with a resolute no. But it’s more complicated than that, isn’t it? Does she unconditionally trust it? Float no. And yet she remembers her time with Lexa. Remembers “what you would have done” and “the duty to protect my people comes first.” Remembers begging. She sees the pieces all slotting into place, forming an imperfect portrait of a hardened leader. Oh, how she wants to fight it, this understanding. Wants to deny it, wants to refuse it, wants to carve it out of her chest if need be.

She raises her voice, channeling all her anger into a stare-off with the liaison: “Can we trust Trikru, can we trust the Commander blindly? No. But can we make a deal with them while remaining on our guard? Yes.”

She shakes her head and turns to Pike: “You say we gave peace a chance. You say the time has come to fight.” She tries to find Octavia’s eyes, cross Raven’s or spot Monty in the crowd, but the former 100 evade her. Nevermind, she’s used to feeling alone. “I’ve been here since the very beginning. I came down with the 100. I don’t know where you’ve been all this time, because all we’ve been doing is fight.”

There’s nothing staged in the exhaustion in her tone, in the grimace that takes over. She’s so tired, the product of these past days, but it’s more than that. Her recovery in Sinchuk, the adrenaline of their first months on the ground: it’s all there, in her voice, in her bones, weighing her down.

“You speak of those we lost. And yes, their names matter. I know them by heart. I know how each one of them died and I know in which order. Many died fighting. And though I can’t claim to speak for all of them, many died to get us the deal that is on the table right now, ready for us to sign. You’ve all heard her: the Commander will let us settle here. No more fighting, no more deaths. Whoever this land used to belong to, whatever rightful claims we may or may not have, we’re given a chance at a home, right here. It’s enough for all of us. It’s enough for you, for your children and your grandchildren. It’s enough for a fresh start.”

With a sigh, she finishes: “So again: why are we talking about fighting each other? Why are we calling for more blood, for more tears, for more death? There is a life for us here, of that I’m convinced. And I don’t know about you, but I want to start building and living it.”

Kane sends a small smile her way and if she had to guess, she’d say it’s pride she can see shinging in her mother’s eyes.
The liaison’s gaze however remains hard to read.

“Who cares what the girl thinks” somebody intervenes, “she led us to the fiasco at the Mountain!”

A couple of people in the crowd express their assent.

Clarke doesn’t have to respond, somebody else does it for her: “Are you completely daft? She’s the one who saved our kids from there!”

“Please, that was pure luck. She insisted on an alliance with the Grounders and it ended in betrayal. What more proof do we need to finally get it in our heads that there’s no peace to be found with them?”

“Plus we all heard the rumours on her… “special” alliance with the Grounder Leader!”

Floating hell. She can now add mortification to the range of emotions she’s been through today. Her eyes cross the liaison’s assessing ones. Yes, inviting her to attend was definitely a bad idea.

The crowd dissolves into bickering. What follows is essentially a gruelling assessment of her past mistakes and achievements (“She killed that boy” – “He was going to die anyway, Ronald” – “She’s been missing for months, who knows who she was shacking up with” – “What counts is that she came back when they blew up the Mountain, I don’t remember seeing you help at the site. She did” – “Look, I’m not saying I wouldn’t be doing a whole lot of respecting in the bedroom, but I’ve said it times and times before, women and politics? It just doesn’t mesh well. They’re just too gullible.” – “Oh God, not this again”).

Clarke slinks back down, coming to stand next to her mother who gives her hand a squeeze, her eyes soft. The blonde has to restrain her a couple of times from charging into the crowd at some particularly disparaging remarks about her daughter (and her daughter’s… cleavage, because yes, apparently, that’s a thing and no, this debate could not sink any lower).

There it is again, the desire to run.

Pike goes on to argue that living like the Mountain Men isn’t such a bad idea. That fear and
deterrence ensure peace and prosperity. That all Skaikru need are powerful weapons. She tunes it all out, pointedly avoiding to look at the liaison.

Time for the vote.

“Congratulations” is all the brown-haired warrior offers when they file into the meeting room the following morning.

Kane nods gratefully before looking at each of them. He had asked for this meeting as soon as the voting had started (whatever the end results, Clarke notes) and as the confirmed new chancellor of Skaikru a little while later, had had to join in in the celebrations that lasted deep into the night.

Clarke finds herself yet again surprised at being included but feels slightly resentful at not having been allowed to sneak Damian in this time, especially after the night the two of them just spent exchanging in broken English about what this vote means for her people. The boy had been visibly taken by the celebratory atmosphere, the hopeful feeling in the air and made Clarke recite everything she could remember from her old history lessons on the concept of democracy.

She’s seated at the big round table facing David Miller, the head of the Guard. Her mother is sitting to his left, Kane to his right, and Sinclair in the far right corner. The Trikru liaison apparently prefers to stand, as she has yet to take a seat (something Clarke is extremely thankful for, considering the last empty chair is right next to her).

“We’re all here today because we have a lot of work ahead of us and I’d like to get on top of things immediately. I asked Costia, the new liaison to attend” he starts gesturing to the woman in question, who just inclines her head, “as I would like an outsider’s perspective on what we’re about to discuss. I meant it yesterday when I said that this is to be a founding moment for us: we have to reinvent ourselves.”

He licks his lips: “I’ve been thinking about it for a while and I’d like to create different committees to brainstorm and present us with proposals on how to organize our life on the Ground. A committee on how we want to construct our leadership for example.”

He turns to their visitor to explain: “Back on the Ark, we used to have one chancellor, a 6-member
council, and representatives for each of the 9 stations – sub-groups if you will.”

He then reverts to looking at each of them in turn: “I would like us to question that and see if we can’t come up with a different set-up. The same goes for our rule of law and our separation into different stations.”

They all nod in quiet and slightly stunned assent.

“If we want to survive, we’ll also need to change our whole social structure, Marcus” Miller’s father adds in. “We can’t keep on idolizing our scientists and the guard: we’ll need as many people to help with farming and hunting as possible.”

Kane signals his agreement before continuing: “Now, if we all agree, how would you propose we create these committees?”

“We could open them to everybody: explain their purpose, post a sign for each in the mess hall and ask people to write their names if they’re interested in participating in one” her mother offers.

“They will have to meet in the evenings, so as not to disturb our daily activities” Miller senior chimes in.

“Very well,” Kane nods in thought. “But we need to limit the number of participants, otherwise they won’t be functional. And I’d like to have each headed by one of you, to make sure they stay on track.”

At Clarke’s dubious look, he gives her a small reassuring smile. “I think one committee should be on mapping what we’d like our future settlement to look like, maybe you could be on that one, Clarke? You’ll have to make sure to follow what the other groups are discussing and to have at least one or two engineers in your team.”

She gives a confused shrug, not sure what she’s getting herself into but at the same time unable to ignore the slight tingle of excitement that’s found a home at the base of her neck.

“Good, how about we start with clarifying the committees we need and then we can identify their leaders?” he finishes.
The discussion that follows is actually an interesting one. It takes them two hours to settle on the creation of 12 committees, with her mother & Sinclair (leadership), Kane & Lincoln (Rule of Law), Monty & Raven (science and technology), Sgt Miller & potentially Indra (protection and security), Jackson & Nyko (medical affairs), herself & Lexa’s partner (mapping) among the designated heads and a couple of other people Clarke is pretty sure she should remember from the Ark but can’t place.

It was her idea to try and have as many groups headed jointly by a Sky person and a Trikru, considering they are to settle on the clan’s lands (they agreed that in order for it not to appear like a hijacking of the whole process, the Trikru member will remain discreet). But when her mother comes up with the brilliant suggestion of pairing her up with the liaison, Clarke is adamant she would give her first born for the chance to take it all back. And judging by her deep scowl, she’s pretty sure the other woman is as enchanted as she is by the idea of having to work together. The blonde has the presence of mind not to voice her reservations, but can’t hide the greenish tint to her cheeks.

Before they can call it a day, her mother turns to Kane: “The election was very close, Marcus. What will you do about Pike?”

It’s the one question on all their lips since they entered the room. She sees Kane pass a heavy hand over his brow for the second time that morning and a deep frown settle on his forehead.

“For now, Pike and the group from Farm Station have all been led back to their cells. But this is something I actually wanted to discuss with all of you as well. I must admit, I’m… at a loss. Do any of you have suggestions?”

The liaison is the first to share her opinion: “The man is a threat to peace, he needs to be dealt with”, she states with finality, brown eyes hard.

Clarke bristles in irritation. How typical.

“We should organize a trial, he did go against Abby’s leadership and was about to kill Grounders” Miller’s father tries more diplomatically.

“And risk an acquittal or him escaping? The longer you drag this out, the more the man’s arguments for hate fester. And by giving him a trial you only offer him another stage with a guaranteed audience. He needs to disappear” the woman cuts in again.
Kane is now furiously rubbing his forehead. “What exactly are you suggesting?” he asks her.

“An assassination or banishment for life. It’s simple, effective and easy to organize.”

Oh, she’s Lexa’s lover alright. (There’s a memory there, heated words exchanged between two figures in a tent: “What the hell is wrong with you, you can’t just kill everyone you don’t trust” – “Yes, I can” echoes in her head.)

This is pretty much when Clarke loses it. She stands up and rounds on the Trikru liaison: “We can’t just kill people like that. This is not how we do things, not what we’re about.”

The only reaction she receives from the warrior though is a long unreadable look, before she simply turns away to face Kane, regally dismissing Clarke.

The Chancellor sighs. “We all know Pike’s unit has gone through hell these past months and I feel for them” he says, looking at Clarke. “We also can’t ignore that we are unfortunately operating in a legal vacuum right now” he continues, eyeing Miller’s father.

“It pains me to say, but I’m afraid that given the chance, Pike may try something similar again. We just simply can not afford another stunt as the one he pulled the other day. They were about to kill these villagers you brought with you in cold blood, Clarke. We can not let that slide.”

Clarke is livid. How dare he use her protectiveness over the scouts from Sinchuk against her to justify murdering one of their own!

“He deserves a second chance” she intervenes, her tone firm. “Bellamy deserves a second chance. They all do” she continues forcefully.

And isn’t that ironic, finding herself arguing to give would-be murderers a second chance while she had been so deeply torn over the free pass they had given Finn after he had killed all these people in TonDC…

Her mother is the one to try and find a compromise: “How about we give them this second chance while pre-emptively making sure they can’t do any further damage and all remain on our guard in the meantime?” she proposes, reaching out with her hand for Clarke’s arm and rubbing it soothingly. The touch is cold, offers no comfort. “You can pardon them all, Marcus, this would appease the
many who voted for Pike, maybe even rally some of them to you.”

Her mother, always the politician.

“We can not allow them access to the weapons though. None of them can be reinstated to the Guard’s ranks” David Miller cuts in warningly.

“Tighter security and restrictions on access to the armoury are long overdue anyway” Kane admits. “The damage our guns can do is as much essential to our security right now, as its biggest threat I’m afraid” he continues with a murmur.

“Or… let them think they managed to get a hold of some weapons instead and show their true colours” Costia offers, breaking the silence. “See where that leads you... In the eventuality they would try something of course” she adds curtly, noticing Clarke’s furious scowl.

“You’re suggesting we set a trap for them” Kane looks at the woman warily.

“It is not really a trap if their commitment to respecting your rule is genuine” she replies.

As revolted as Clarke is about the idea, she finds it hard to formulate a convincing argument against the proposal and plops down into her seat in a daze. Such plotting should be reserved for enemies, if at all. She settles for listening to the scheming adults, the queasiness rumbling through her. It seems that even after all this talk of new beginnings, mere hours after the election, old habits are hard to break. That her mother is among them shouldn’t come as a surprise, but Clarke can’t help but feel profoundly betrayed and disgusted by the older Griffin.

When they’ve finalized their plan and Kane swears them all to secrecy, her mother turns to her: “Do you think we could trust Raven with this, Clarke?”

It’s been brewing inside of her ever since Costia’s intervention. But instead of exploding, as she is extremely close to do, it’s time to resort to old tactics.

Clarke just rises and gives them a short: “If you kill them, I’ll let everyone know you planned it from the start”, before she leaves the room with a resounding slam of the door.
Outside, she finds herself alone in the empty metal corridor and realizes with a jolt that she really doesn’t feel at home here nowadays.

She’s not invited to any more meetings after that.

She doesn’t care.

---

She slips into his cell a little while later, after she’s taken the time to cool off (Damian has a calming effect on her, Clarke’s noticed, something in the grey of his eyes, in his patience…).

She’s put off this conversation for too long. She can see he’s conflicted when his eyes settle on her: at once reluctant to be in her presence and so angry he looks about to burst.

She opens with a neutral: “We need to talk”, which immediately earns her a scoff from the brown-haired boy.

“You’ve decided that. The mighty Wanheda. Who went missing for months without sending news, without a single word. Now you want to talk?”

It’s the bitterness in his tone she finds the most cutting and Clarke is sad to realize that this man is not her friend anymore.

“Bellamy, what is going on with you?” she asks, her voice laced with concern.

“With me? What is wrong with you all?” he counters, opening his arms wide, before continuing: “We’re at war, Clarke! 49 of our people died in the attack on Mount Weather. How can you just stand there and accept it? Our people deserve justice!”

She tries to reason with him, if only to get him to lower his voice: “You heard my mom and Kane, Bellamy, the attack was the work of the Ice Nation, not Trikru. We can’t put all Grounders in the same basket. The Commander’s apparently assured Kane the deaths would be avenged in time. If it’s justice you want, we will get it. You can’t go looking for it on your own, by planning to kill
innocents!

Bellamy’s quick to interject: “She left us to die on that mountain, Clarke. She will always put her people first. How can you possibly trust her now?”

And it’s a fair point: if there’s one thing Clarke’s come to understand over the past months from trying to reconcile the image of Lexa, patient and fair, always ready to offer advice and transparent in her hatred for the Mountain Men, with the blood-soaked warrior who turned her back on them and made a deal with that same enemy, it’s that they are one and the same and that Lexa’s duty to her people always has and always will come first.

“Things have changed. Kane and my mother entered into an alliance with her. It’s over. It’s all over.”

She tries to reach out to him but he shrinks away from her touch. “There it is again, why do you get to decide it’s over?”

“Bellamy, we did our part.”

He throws her an incredulous look: “We?”

“Yes, we. You and me… what we did in Mount Weather…” she can’t really find the proper words. For how can you possibly shine a positive light on mass murder? “You can’t let Pike ruin everything we’ve fought for for so long” she tries again. “Please tell me that going to war is not what you want!”

The boy seems impervious to her pleading though: “We’ve been at war since we landed, Clarke! Don’t you get it? It was always us versus them. There is no “Ice Nation” and “Trikru” and whatever else clan they lied to you about. They’re all one and the same: “Grounders.” And all they’ve been doing since we landed is harass and attack us, picking us off, one by one. At least Pike understands that. Pike sees the bigger picture!”

She shakes her head, taking a step back: “I have to believe that peace is possible, Bellamy. I know it is.”
The boy replies with force: “You’re wrong. And I let you, and Octavia and Kane convince me that we could trust these people when they’ve shown over and over who they truly are. And I won’t let anyone else die for that mistake.”

It would appear they’ve reached an impasse. They could argue about their people’s options for the future the whole day, it all boils down to a question of trust or rather capacity to trust the Grounders again. Bellamy’s was shattered beyond repair in Ice Nation’s latest attack. Clarke’s is slowly on the mend.

She decides to try a different tactic: “Kane is going to pardon you all” she reveals. “We’re creating committees to come up with ideas on how to build Arkadia. You should come and participate. You could be on the same one as me, Bellamy, we could do this together.”

She adds, with a pleading tone, reaching out, but the boy cringes away from her: “We need you. I need you.”

At her last admission, Bellamy shrinks back, as if hit. “You need me?”

“Yes, I need the guy who wouldn’t let me pull that lever in Mount Weather by myself.” She feels open and vulnerable, dredging all of this – all the memories of that day – back up. But also revealing how much the boy has come to mean to her. It’s a strange realization, that even in times of peace, without the futures of so many of their fellow Arkadians resting precariously on their shoulders, being here, settling here without him wouldn’t sound quite right.

Her statement is met with a broken silence and a hurt look crosses his features. “You left me, Clarke. You left everyone.”

His voice is raw with emotion and Clarke finds it hard to choke back a sob. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for leaving. I’m so so sorry, Bellamy. I knew I could. Because they had you.”

He just shakes his head: “I’m sorry too” and turns away.

She tries once more: “Bell...”

He interrupts her, angry. “Enough, Clarke. You are not in charge here. And that’s a good thing because people die when you’re in charge. You were willing to let a bomb drop on my sister. Then
you made a deal with Lexa who left us in Mount Weather to die. And forced us to kill everyone who helped us. People who trusted me.”

Here’s the thing: this is nothing she hasn’t already thought, nothing she hasn’t already agonized over these past months. She has been carrying this guilt for the fallen – either because she didn’t protect them as they needed to be or by her own hand – ever since the first deaths on the Ground. Clarke can recite their names by heart: first there was Glen, then Trina and Pascal, followed by Atom. Wells. Pure and unsuspecting Wells. Then Charlotte. And from there an endless litany: John, Diggs, Roma, Dax, that goes on and on. The guilt’s been spreading inside her like a virus, infecting happy memories and thoughts with such a crippling dose of self-loathing she is sometimes surprised to find herself waking and getting up in the morning. But to hear it from somebody else – to hear it from a friend (not just a friend: Bellamy) – with so much conviction and reproach is the equivalent of a knockout blow to the heart.

“Did you bury the dead? No, you didn’t. You didn’t because there’s either nothing left of them to bury or because you left us to do the dirty work. We had to carry every single one we killed in the Mountain out of there. The little children. The women. The old. The sick. Those who helped us and those who fought us. Every single one” he continues with red rimmed eyes.

Bellamy shuts down completely after that and refuses to even acknowledge her presence.

But Clarke can’t leave, not without sharing her truth: “You think I don’t carry the weight of what we did? What I did? You think I haven’t spent every single night since Mount Weather seeing their faces, seeing that floating lever, to the point where I just don’t want to go to sleep anymore? You think I don’t contemplate shooting myself every single time I tuck that damn pistol in? I’m sorry I left. I’m sorry you had to bury the dead without me. But I won’t apologize for needing time alone.”

She takes a shaky breath, before continuing. “You say we’ve been at war since the beginning. I say you’ve had nothing but war on your mind ever since we landed. You see strength, weapons and shows of force as the only way to protect us. Well, I think Finn was right all along: there is another way. But it’s not on you. The mistakes, the suffering, the deaths. It’s on all of us: the 100 for lacking the courage to reach out to the Grounders, the adults who thought it wise to send their sons and daughters down with no backup or any preparation whatsoever, the Grounders who didn’t see the difference between clumsy children and determined invaders. It’s on all of us.”

After a couple more half-hearted attempts to get Bellamy to open up again, Clarke gives up. The boy’s apparently decided their conversation is over. She pauses before crossing the threshold, her back to him and a hand on the door.

“I miss you” she whispers to the wall. “I miss my friend. And… there’s so much for us to do out
there. We could shape Arkadia’s future, together.”

The warning is there, right there on the tip of her tongue, ready to leave her lips. They’ve been through so much. Doesn’t decimating a people together deserve at least one spilt secret? She wants to tell him, she really does. But then she remembers Damian’s hand clutching a knife. The young boy preparing to fight for his life. A fight he doesn’t know would be over in the blink of an eye, with a bullet to the head. She thinks better of it and nods to the guard.

She doesn’t turn back.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

It’s quite simple, really: they just disagree on absolutely everything.

Every. Single. Thing.

From the importance of permanent housing to the location of the school, from use of the lake to the layout of irrigation systems, every single one of their group discussions ends up with Clarke and her fellow committee leader at each other’s throats. I’d be funny, if it weren’t so floating exasperating. The woman continues to insist on calling her “Wanheda” even though Clarke knows she’s seen her flinch at the name every time.

And when they don’t argue, she’s treated to a frosty “Grounder silence” (expertly pulled off) that leaves Clarke with the unsettling impression that she’s being sized up. Antagonizing her has become second skin in a way and if she’s completely honest, she’s found herself disagreeing with the beautiful woman just out of spite more often than not lately. She knows it’s gotten pretty bad when her mother comes to her one evening to suggest she switch to another committee. This is how good her relationship with her mother has become: not only do they not see each other outside of official business anymore, but the great Abby Griffin is now even siding with a Trikru over her own daughter. Great. Clarke refuses of course. Her mother leaves her alone after that.

She knows her hostility towards the liaison has less to do with her attitude and actions since she arrived (although there’s plenty of material there) and more with the green-eyed girl Clarke can’t help picture every single time she sees her. She knows that. But she’s also been so careful so far in avoiding to examine her feelings towards the Commander – “that lying backstabbing bitch” a voice that sounds suspiciously just like her fills in – that she’s not ready to stop.
There are glimpses of course, the respect shown to Kane, a light tickling laugh caught in an
exchange with Indra, friendly touches exchanged with Lincoln. All signs of a unique girl, different
from the one Clarke can’t get out of her head. Different from the one Clarke dreams of strangling and
… something else all in the short span of a night – before the dead take over, that is. (And take over
they always do.)

As so often these days, dawn finds them sitting outside of their tent. Clarke’s nights are short, wasted
landscapes reeking of death. Damian, she suspects, has taken to waking with the day’s first light to
enjoy the spectacle before them: Octavia and Lincoln make it a point to wake up very early every
single day in order to train. This comes in addition to their evening sessions, mind you. Octavia,
Clarke is impressed to note, has become so skilled in the months she was absent, that she now offers
a credible match for Lincoln. After warming up, the two get into rehearsed sets of movements and
then into sparring for real, their blows and jabs precise and powerful.

Octavia is currently trying to throw Lincoln over her shoulder, but the tattooed man is resisting.
Clarke can see out of the corner of her eye Damian mimicking with involuntary twitches Lincoln’s
movements and makes a mental note to ask the warrior whether Damian could join them in their
morning activities. He may be young, but he looks interested and she wants him to find something
that’s “his.”

She watches on without really seeing, her mind on the day before her, with its inevitable screaming
match with the liaison. She’s come to cherish this quiet time-out routine of theirs every day,
surrounded by the sounds of a forest that is slowly waking up. She takes a deep breath, followed by
another.

There’s no putting it off any longer. She has to go see the girl.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

There’s something in the air. The freezing cold of the previous weeks is slowly giving way to the
humid promise of rain. She’s been tossing and turning on her cot all night and knows she must have
woken Damian up by now. When the sound of gunshots in the distance fills the gloomy March air,
Clarke immediately tenses: it has begun.

Kane pardoned as planned the belligerent group from Farm Station, which earned him much respect
among the Arkers. But you would have had to be blind to miss the whispers, sneaky looks and
overall suspicious behaviour the group immediately adopted upon its release. Pike was never one for
subtlety, after all.
The thing is, Clarke’s tired. Which is absolutely no excuse of course. That’s one thing she’s learnt in her time on the Ground: there are never valid excuses. Only context and choices. But she’s too tired to think, too tired to know how she feels, too tired to act. Tired and conflicted. It’s as if low but constant noise takes over every single time she finds herself with the peace and quiet to try and sort herself out.

So, she let it happen. Anything from her and it could have been stopped, could have been prevented. But she didn’t. Gone is the girl who helped a murderer escape, ready to fight by his side against an entire army until the very end. This new Clarke simply watched on as her former teacher marched them all to their end. She watched on as her beautiful partner in crime signed his death warrant. She observed from afar their not-so-secret meetings and the knowing looks Kane and her mother exchanged, unbeknownst to them. She’s not sure she likes this new Clarke very much. (Not many people seem to these days.)

The boy who taught her to shoot… probably dead by now. Is his blood on her hands too? Whose blood isn’t?

It’s instinctive, the urge to run. Because she can not stay lying in bed while the night comes to life with the ratatat of falling bodies. Because she can not be here when they come back, refuses to be: will the Guard carry their bodies back to camp, for all to see, or will they leave them there to cover it all up? It’s telling that she doesn’t have to pack her bag: she never really unpacked in the first place. As if she knew, all along, that this was only temporary. That her return was a passing fluke she would quickly snap out of. That home is no longer home.

She moves over to Damian and once again, he seems to have anticipated her actions without her needing to explain. He too, doesn’t need long before he’s ready to go, backgammon board tucked tightly under his arm. They quietly slip out of their tent into the black night. Octavia and Lincoln are nowhere to be seen and silence has now fallen all around them. She decides against folding the tent down to bring with them, it would take too long.

They’ve reached the first trees when Clarke notices the unmoving shadow to her right. She stills.

“It had to be done” the shadow says, a sharp jab in the night.

Clarke could cry at the unfairness of being caught sneaking out by her of all people. But to hell with it, she is nobody to her and certainly not somebody who could force her to remain here against her will.

Clarke turns to face the outline of the woman, leaning against a tree. “Then why do I feel so…
“Dirty?” she whispers.

The liaison pushes away from the tree trunk: “The things we do for our people are not there to make us feel good and we do them regardless.”

“You sound just like her” she cuts in with bitterness.

She doesn’t need to specify who she’s referring to, they both know. Yet she feels she’s broken one of those unspoken rules between them: Lexa, always there in the air when they interact, but never named, never acknowledged.

The woman just chuckles: “I suppose years of sharing each other’s bed will do that to you.”

Clarke blushes in the hazy light of the moon and turns her head down, clearing her throat awkwardly. Now those are images she could absolutely live without. Lexa’s lover seems amused at her embarrassment. Great.

“This is wrong. Scheming against our own. It’s not right” she starts again, shaking her head. “You may have lost sight of right and wrong, but I haven’t” she continues, more fiercely.

The woman seems to ponder her words, before she retorts: “Leaders do not navigate in the realm of black and white. One would think you’d have learnt that by now, Wanheda.”

Flinch. Because, well, she does know about the grey, every single floating shade of it.

“But shouldn’t a leader always be fair to his own people? How is this fair to any of them?” Clarke argues, gesturing towards the sounds of fighting.

Lexa’s partner inclines her head: “This is fair. The group was given multiple chances to change course and refused, over and over again, to lay down their arms and tone down their aggressive rhetoric.”

Clarke shakes her head: “As fair as having a kill order placed on Lincoln’s head, you mean? – Lincoln who would give his life to serve the Commander!”
The silhouette draws up at that: “Lincoln made his choice” she hears, but she can sense that her interlocutor is uneasy about this new line of questioning. She’s seen the bond between the two Trikru warriors after all.

“Maybe it would reassure you to know that they did not kill them tonight” the shadow reveals.

This is a surprise for Clarke: “How do you know?”

“There was much discussion after you left. More meetings. Your mother, the Chancellor and Sergeant Miller all agreed that were Trikru to be their target, we shouldn’t kill them in the heat of the moment, for fear of increasing even further the Sky people’s distrust of us in general and of the purpose of our army in TonDC specifically. In the end, they settled on capturing them and having them tried.”

The news is an immense relief to the blonde: Bellamy’s alive. “You disagreed” she intuits.

“My opinion on this topic is no secret” the woman admits with a shrug.

They fall silent after that, Clarke taking a moment to calm her beating heart. Bellamy is not dead. His blood is not on her hands.

“If you travel north-east, you will find the shoreline. Follow it and you should manage to make your way to Luna’s people. Many just like him (she gestures towards Damian) have sought shelter there. You would like Luna, I think. It may just be the place for the two of you, Wanheda” the liaison continues after some time, cocking her head to the side and looking at her with inscrutable eyes.

Clarke is surprised at the offer and jolts out of her thoughts. She realises she’s still carrying her bag, Damian waiting patiently for the two women to finish their exchange.

“She would fight me” she rejoins. “She would argue that I need to stay, that my people need me here.”

The woman shrugs again looking out into the clearing: “Yes well, I am not her, am I?” she replies simply with a frown before turning away and disappearing into the obscurity.
Clarke remains rooted to the spot for some time, deep in thought. After a while, Damian reaches out and she thinks at first that he wants to nudge her along but no: he wraps his hand around the bag she’s carrying and gives a small tug, asking her to let it go.

And well, it seems he’s decided for the both of them.

They stay.

---

It turns out blood was shed after all and the blonde can’t help but wonder whether the Trikru liaison knowingly lied to her. (Who is she kidding, she knows.)

Clarke is at Camp Jaha the following morning, when Kane informs them all in the mess hall about the events of the previous night. Whispers and rumours are flying high, each person with their own theory on what the shots heard could be. He tells them that a small group from their people marched on the Trikru army under the cover of night, armed to their teeth, intending on slaughtering them – that very army the Commander, who is their new ally (“newish” Clarke grumbles), sent for their protection – in their sleep. He tells them the Guard, having caught wind of their plans, successfully thwarted the attack.

He leaves out that the group was unknowingly carrying guns and rifles only loaded with blanks. This would raise too many questions.

In the process, their leader, Pike, was unfortunately killed. She doesn’t miss the wary looks and whispers people exchange at that. The other attackers are now all back in their previous cells and will, once it’s possible, be tried for their crimes or rather attempted crime. Clarke doesn’t go to visit any of them this time around, not even Bellamy. She’s not sure there’s anything left to say.

Octavia rounds on her as soon as Kane’s announcement is over and it’s TonDC all over again. “Did you know?” she demands, her jaw clenched. “Did you floating know, Clarke?” Octavia has always been fire, ever since they arrived on the ground. This all-consuming and glorious rage for life that Clarke wouldn’t trade for anything, even when it’s directed against her.

For whatever reason, she feels she owes the girl the truth and replies with a pained. “I did.”
Octavia lunges for her, fists first.

Thankfully, Lincoln is quick enough to grab his girlfriend before she can land a punch and holds her back. Clarke has to push Damian, who protectively slid in front of her, back behind her, out of harm’s way.

“You and your little pet better not be around tonight” the angry Blake throws at her.

Clarke is so offended by the comment she could slap her. “You mean Damian? Damian’s not my pet, Damian’s my second!” Clarke replies harshly, matching Octavia’s tone.

The young girl explodes into mirthless laughter at that. “And what are you teaching him: how to betray his friends and scheme against his own? This has got to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard” she shouts with venom.

“You mean as ridiculous as a seasoned Grounder taking a gangly little girl who lived her whole life locked away, under her wing?” Clarke counters.

It’s a low blow, she knows, especially since she’s aware Octavia was forced to discontinue her apprenticeship with the Trikru general and is taking the separation hard. But she insulted Damian and Clarke is livid.

“Fuck you Clarke,” the Blake sibling spits, furiously fighting Lincoln’s hold, “Indra saw something in me!”

“Yes, well I see something in him too,” she replies placatingly.

Clarke isn’t sure she understands the other girl’s ire, but Octavia’s a fairly complex one, underneath the black and white. Yes, she’s always thought of the siblings as an inseparable unit, come what may (though there was a time she used to think that of her and Wells as well, and look how that ended…). But Octavia was the one who looked ready to murder her brother that one morning not so long ago, so why would she glaze over his actions and their implications now, especially considering Bellamy’s plans when he was caught?
“You think taking in somebody who’s just as fucked up as you is going to offer you redemption? After everything you’ve done… All the dead you have on your conscience… And now betraying Bellamy, who’s been by your side ever since the beginning! You don’t deserve peace, Clarke!”

Lincoln finally manages to drag Octavia away, shooting her an apologetic look and Clarke is left with a very pleased-looking Damian, who’s not even trying to hide his wide grin. (If he understood Octavia’s last words, he’s obviously chosen to ignore them.) And well, yes, that’s now official then: she’s acknowledged him publically as her second so… second it is!

“Don’t look so smug” she tells the brown-skinned boy, ruffling his hair. “Tonight, you’ll be training with them” she adds, motioning to the two departing silhouettes, an uncertain tilt to her voice. She hopes Lincoln will keep his word and manage, somehow, to get his lover to calm down, enough for Damian to join in. Considering the scene they all just witnessed, she’s not sure this was such a good idea.

Despite her surprising misguided defence of her brother, Octavia does make a good point. Or rather a couple of good points. What is it that draws Clarke to the clear-eyed boy? Is she indeed just using him for something she herself doesn’t quite understand? And… what does she deserve?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

Today is going to be a good day, Clarke can feel it. She’s had her first restful sleep in months, only waking once to the faces of the dead and managing to fall back asleep immediately afterwards. The overcast sky and constant torrential rain of the past three days has now given way to clear bright skies. She washed her hair back into its original sandy colours and scrubbed the grime of the previous days (weeks) out of her skin at the lake. She even indulged in the luxury of slipping into her first clean underwear since Sinchuk. She made it on time to still find something for breakfast at the central mess hall, with Damian by her side, and has a full day planned for the both of them.

Yes, today is going to be a very good day.

She’s walking in long strides, not really looking at the ground, intent on reaching Kane’s tent to discuss some ideas her group had last night as fast as possible, when the ground beneath her gives way and in the blink of an eye Clarke’s lost her balance and is lying on her back in a thick puddle of mud, legs kicking the empty air above her like a helpless bug. The fall knocked the wind out of her and it takes her a while before she realizes what just happened. Her instinct is to immediately try and get back on her feet but her first and second attempt just end up with her body burying even deeper into the cold slippery sludge. She can feel it seeping into her hair and down her spine. It makes her shiver with disgust.
After much cursing – attracting the attention of several curious onlookers who have now stopped to watch her flailing (assholes) – and several more unsuccessful attempts to get back up, Clarke finally manages to rise onto her knees and balance herself up on very shaky legs, arms outstretched on each side. She tries to muster a dignified face but thick mud is trickling down from the top of her head over her left eye and when it hits the corner of her mouth, the blonde suddenly feels as if she could cry. In fact, she can sense the tell-tale prickle of tears in the back of her eyes.

Her clothes are ruined, her mood is ruined, everything’s ruined.

“Oh no you didn’t” she suddenly hears somebody shout to her left and Clarke could swear she recognizes the voice but doesn’t dare turn lest the sudden movement cause her to lose her balance all over again.

“Clarke Griffin” the voice continues, “tell me you didn’t just decide to inaugurate a mud bath without me!”

Raven – because it’s Raven – has now come into her field of vision and Clarke can only stare at the woman who is… taking her top and shoes off? Unbuckling her jeans? And who is now conspicuously wading in before she’s lunging at her with unexpected enthusiasm?

She’s knocked back down for the fifth time this morning when Raven’s hands grab her waist and the mechanic proceeds to sweep her quite literally off her feet, bringing her down with a furious splash.

And Clarke lets her.

Because this is Raven being playful, being friendly. Raven with whom she hasn’t spoken since before the attack on Mount Weather. Raven who could have been a close friend had an idealistic boy with wavy brown hair not gotten in the way. It’s hard to explain. She had first felt their connection back when the mechanic collided with Earth, had initially chalked it up to similar tastes in men but has now come to recognise this wonderfully strong woman as a kindred spirit of sorts.

In a matter of seconds, Raven’s covered in the thick brown-red liquid too, wrestling Clarke down and pushing her deeper and deeper into the makeshift pool. But there’s no aggression or hostility in her actions and Clarke notes with detachment that the slime is a little bit warmer this time around, the experience somehow not as humiliating as before.
She can see it, as if it’s happening in front of her: a blonde and a brown-haired girl, both 3 or 4 years old, jumping feet-first, with all the might of their bright yellow boots and young age, in a puddle, giggling and splashing each other a little bit in the process. Two little girls without a care in the world. It’s not a memory per se, more “what ifs” blending with scenes Clarke remembers from the movies of the old world she used to watch with Wells.

She can feel it building slowly inside of her without recognizing it at first (it’s been so long). It starts as a twitching in her throat, an itch in her nose. It blooms in her chest, slowly, and finally bursts free: she laughs. It’s a full-body laugh that makes her abs tense and her limbs feel like jelly. A deep uncontrollable laugh, in which Raven soon joins her, before she grabs her head and dunks the side of her face into the sediment once again, for good measure. The action only makes Clarke laugh harder, half-heartedly trying to swat Raven’s hands away from her.

They have gathered quite an audience by now, but neither of them cares. Clarke wonders what the others must see in these two young women, unrecognizable now under a thick layer of caked red earth clinging to their skin and dripping from every extremity, laughing hysterically in the morning sun. Her abs hurt so much she lets go of any pretence at resistance and lies down, clutching her stomach and smiling up towards the sky. A real true smile. Raven soon follows suit next to her, their heads close, temples touching.

“Clarke?” the voice puts an immediate halt to her giggles and makes her sit up with some effort. “What… what is this? What are you doing?” It’s the befuddled admonishment of a mother, with very clear undertones of disapproval.

Clarke groans. Of course her mother would choose this moment to walk by. Of course.

It takes her and Raven quite a bit of effort to get their laughter under control and rise back up. She’s grateful her mother doesn’t seem to have recovered from the initial shock of finding her daughter wrestling a half-naked woman, knee-deep in mud, yet. Abby just stares flabbergasted at the two of them, her mouth opening and closing of its own accord while they trudge away (down to the lake), squishy noises accompanying their every step. Damian, who’s apparently given up on trying to hide his grin stretching from ear to ear, picks up Raven’s clothes before sending a shrug her mother’s way and hurrying after them.

And if Clarke weren’t so focused on making sure she knows exactly where she’s stepping this time around (not that it matters anymore), she would have caught a glimpse of a brown-haired warrior with curly hair, looking on with smiling eyes.

“I’m sorry you know, for ignoring you these past weeks.” Raven’s the first to break the comfortable silence that’s settled over them once they arrive to the lake and proceed to scrub each other vigorously.
She snorts. “I get it” Clarke replies. “I’m not going to lie, it hurt a bit.” At Raven’s arched eyebrow she corrects herself: “Ok, a hell of a lot. But I do understand” she rambles on.

“It’s just, I’ve been trying to deal with it all you know, and, well, it’s not easy. Dealing I mean. There’s Mount Weather. Everything that happened before that. Finn. And then, then there’s you leaving. I may have been a little bit… furious with you. With myself. With this whole fucked up situation” the mechanic finishes sheepishly, rubbing with her hand the back of her neck.

It’s a rare sight: Raven, looking so genuinely open and vulnerable. Clarke reaches out and engulfs her into a fierce hug, one the girl immediately returns. It’s a bit strange, standing almost naked in a lake, water up to their thighs, holding each other close. Neither lets go.

“I’m sorry for leaving” she whispers into her hair. She doesn’t mention Finn. Wouldn’t know where to start.

They leave it at that. Frankly, there’s no need to say more for now.

When they get back to the shore, finally recognisable once more, Clarke gently nudges Raven’s shoulder and motions to her hip.

The brown-haired girl replies with a grimace: “Yeah, it hurts sometimes.”

“I’ve seen you walk around, Raven. It looks like it does more than just hurt from time to time” Clarke needles.

“Ok, it hurts sometimes and the rest of the time, it hurts like a bitch” the mechanic admits, looking down.

“Did you let my mom take a look at it?”

Raven shakes her head no: “I can manage on my own.” “I know, I know, it’s stupid” she adds dejectedly, when she sees Clarke’s incredulous scowl.
“Promise me you’ll make an appointment as soon as we’re back?” she asks softly.

Raven looks reluctant but seems to think better of arguing: “Ok, yeah, sure.”

When the mechanic spots Damian holding out clean clothes to her, she breaks into a wide grin: “Aha, a man after my own heart! I approve, Griffin” she exclaims, making the young boy blush as far as his ears.

“Hi there Tiger, I’m Raven” she introduces herself.

“No Tiger. Panther” Damian replies very seriously.

“Uh… yeah…sure. Panther, what was I thinking?” Raven looks unsure of how to respond, before she continues: “Well, this was fun, but I got to run. Tell you what, how about I and… little Mr Gentleman over there drop by my place so I can give him some clean clothes of mine that he can bring back to you? I don’t know how you’ll squeeze those weapons of yours into my tops though… Mhh… Unless you plan on wearing these?” she asks, motioning to Clarke’s soaked through clothes she’d tried unsuccessfully to rub the grime out of.

It’s not like Clarke really has a choice here. She lets the two go, Raven already chatting Damian’s ears off, settles down on a big rock and lets her eyes take in the immensity of the lake.

Today is going to be a good day.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“Welcome welcome to Raven’s Magical World of Wondrous Inventions!” the mechanic hollers at them when Clarke and Damian step into her new workspace. The brunette is grinning from ear to ear, arms wide open in greeting.

“Hey,” comes from somewhere around the back, “it’s supposed to be Raven and Monty’s World of Wondrous Inventions!” Monty exclaims, wheeling into Clarke’s line of vision.
Raven looks at him, thoughtful: “No, I’m pretty sure it was always supposed to be Magic and not your name, Monty. Are you claiming you’re more important than Magic?”

Clarke suppresses a chuckle at her friends’ antics. The usual reserved boy and very loud mechanic make for an odd couple, yet the formula obviously works.

“Ah Damian, you’re here, good. I need help with something, if you don’t mind” the young man continues, choosing to ignore his co-worker and motioning for the boy to follow him.

Clarke lets her eyes linger on Damian, who throws her an uneasy glance, before the two disappear into the partitioned area. She turns back to a grinning Raven sporting a knowing look.

“He’ll be fine, mom” she says, pushing Clarke’s shoulder lightly. “Besides, what could possibly happen in here? It’s not like we’re in the business of manufacturing explosives” she adds, with a wink.

Clarke ignores the jab. Damian had expressed the desire to spend more time understanding the mechanic’s work and she had finally relented after the 10th argument. She’d rather he spend time bonding with the other children his age in Arkadia, but there’s only so much she can do against his practiced pout – an unusual sight in the boy who tries at all times to maintain a composed and serious demeanour – and he had finally worn her down.

Noting that her friend seems to be moving much more fluidly after the small operation her mother performed, she lets her eyes roam over the two geniuses’ new work space. Having them bunk together hadn’t been the initial plan, but they had both insisted on it (“synergies” the two had argued). Their huge workshop is the second building Skaikru built this month – after the school – and it’s a testament to the renewed burst of hopeful energy that’s been coursing through the camp ever since the election (and Clarke suspects more particularly ever since the onset of sunnier and warmer days).

With input from some villagers from TonDC, Skaikru had fine-tuned a process to manufacture solid bricks out of clay (gathered in the nearby riverbed), straw and specific additives created by Raven. They had recruited Arkadia’s children to knead the mixture, before separate crews pressed it into molds and let the bricks dry in the May sun. Then came the fire and small injections of lime mortar. The actual construction and final layer of mud plaster had taken quite some time, Raven disagreeing with the architect on the building’s design and most Skaikru working these days on preparing the fields to the West.

But here they are now, in a large open space with high red walls, the room bathed in the bright light
coming from the massive open doors. She can glimpse the lake from where she is: Raven had insisted on having her workspace away from the rest of their settlement and given the choice between the cemetery and the lakeshore, had gladly settled for the second location.

Incidentally, bricks have since then also become Skaikru’s first export commodity, highly sought after, judging by the demand they’ve received from the neighbouring villages. It makes sense: TonDC has to be rebuilt from scratch (if Clarke had more time to dwell on it, she’d probably have ethical qualms about selling building materials to a village that was razed to the ground because of her). Meanwhile, the neighbouring villages, such as Sinchuk, always in the Mountain’s shadow, had never taken the time to invest in building permanent structures. This has completely changed now. So Skaikru put in place permanent crews for fabricating bricks and are exchanging those against seeds, food and wooden furniture items with their neighbours (Lexa’s partner playing a key role in helping the negotiations along).

Her eyes settle on the various items Raven seems to be working on these days: there’s a pile of bicycles in one corner (“My current pet project” Raven explains, “I’m not revealing anything until I’m 100% sure it can be done”), a miniature turbine Clarke guesses must represent the ones from the dam (“All I’m saying is, we should have thought about this before you sent me in to sabotage them”), several pieces of solar panels salvaged from the rubble at the foot of the Mountain are lying on the large table (“Totally fixable once I work my magic” Raven offers, wiggling her fingers, “we need them to recharge the computers”) and piles and piles of junk near the entrance that Clarke can’t quite identify. She spots two snails making their way towards the computer on the right side of the table.

“And what are those? Cheap labour?” she asks.

The mechanic looks up at her, furrowing her brow: “They’re snails, Clarke.”

“I can see that, but what can they do, or what do they do?” the blonde clarifies, irritated.

“Well, they’re snails…, so they’re being snails and doing what snails do, I guess” Raven speaks slowly, as if the blonde wasn’t quite awake.

“You know what I mean” she scolds her friend, who finally breaks into a grin.

“This one’s Humpty” she motions for the one on the left, “and this one’s Dumpty” she points at the one on the right. “And Humpty, it would appear, little champion that he is, is about to win the race” she singsongs, raising her voice.
“No way, Dumpty is all about endurance, you just wait and see” comes from the back of the shop.

“We found these two buggers lounging in the rain outside the other day and they’ve been kind enough to agree to race for us ever since. In exchange, they get a cosy little home Wick built just for them and a regular supply of… leaves” Raven explains. “Anyway, did you hear?” she adds, switching to a different topic.

Clarke looks at her quizzically.

“About Lincoln.”

The blonde shakes her head no, frowning.

“Lexa’s pardoned him” her friend continues.

“Wait, what? Seriously? This is amazing!”

“Yes, well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, there’s terms and conditions…” Raven starts and Clarke’s not sure she likes where this conversation is going.

When Raven doesn’t say anything more, she impatiently motions for her to continue.

“He needs to bring her the pau, pa, fuck I can’t remember how you called it. You know, that big gorilla you said had attacked you and Lexa?”

Clarke can feel her blood turning cold. “The pauna?”

“Yeah, that. Something about Lincoln having to redeem himself for the dishonour he’s brought on his community or…” the mechanic trails off.

Clarke is already sprinting out the door in the direction of Camp Jaha.
“Griffin?” she calls after her. “Clarke!”

The blood is pumping so furiously in Clarke’s temples and ears, she barely registers Raven’s parting shout: “Hey, remember to drop by later for the inauguration!”

As soon as she spots her, Clarke is screaming at the top of her lungs: “What the hell are you thinking? What the actual floating fuck!”

“So you heard” is all the liaison replies, a guarded look in her eyes.


“The Commander is not in the habit of playing games” she replies impassively, her lips a thin irritated line.

“Of course it was her!” Clarke exclaims, lifting her hands to the sky. “So first she abandons us to die at the Mountain and now she sends the one person who worked tirelessly to build peace between Skaikru and Trikru from the start, and continues to do so, to die?!?”

“You fool” the woman retorts, advancing on her. “The only reason why Skaikru is alive today is because she defended you when all her generals and the other clans wanted to slaughter your people” she starts.

Clarke has to take another step back. The woman continues her advance.

“The only reason why Lincoln is alive today is because she rejected her generals’ advice to have him executed.”

 Clarke has to take another step back. The woman continues her advance.

“And you, Wanheda, are alive today because she made sure, that all clans understood what going
after you would have for consequences.” The liaison finishes with: “Today, she’s once more sheltering you from the war that is brewing with Ice Nation. Asking men and women to leave their families in order to protect you and your oblivious people from a potential attack. Have you even stopped an instant to think what it means for her, to have to go to war with a coalition member over nothing but you?”

She can’t deny being slightly intimidated by the fierce warrior that is now towering over her, so close she can feel her breath on her cheek. This is all news to her: war? What war?

But Clarke’s not one to back down: “If she cares so much about our wellbeing, then why send Lincoln to fight a monster that’s claimed the lives of so many before him? I’ve seen its lair, it’s littered with corpses. He won’t go, I won’t allow it!”

Their noses are about to touch.

The liaison shakes her head, unimpressed: “You forget yourself Wanheda. The decision is Lincoln’s and Lincoln’s alone” and turns her face to the side, as if dismissing her.

“Then she won’t mind if a whole team of us goes with him” Clarke grits out.

“You don’t understand. It has to be Lincoln’s fight” the woman in front of her warns.

“Like hell it does” Clarke throws over her shoulder before rapidly making her way back down to where she just came from.

There is much planning to be done.

---

It’s late afternoon and Raven and Monty’s inauguration party is in full swing.

“You two do know that the initials would spell “Raven and Monty’s World War One”, right?” Kane furrows his eyebrows in confusion, looking at Raven’s designs for the sign they want to hang over the entrance.
Monty scrunches up his eyebrows at that, but the mechanic just waves Kane off and Clarke can’t help but smile at the scene, her fury of this morning set aside for the interlude of the event.

She can tell people are enjoying themselves, soaking in the last rays of sunshine of the day and preparing tonight’s feast on the shore. She can spot Damian arguing with another boy over how to start a fire properly and is tremendously proud of the progress he’s made in English the past months. Her second’s slowly come out of his shell lately and she knows the daily sparring sessions with Octavia and Lincoln, which Monroe, Miller, Bryan and a couple of other members from the Guard have now joined, have helped.

A little bit over to her right she can hear a large group of people arguing over how Arkadia’s social life should be organized. This is something she’s noticed as of late: the committees have awoken an interest and need in people to participate in the shaping of their community. At all times of the day, groups can be found engaged in heated discussions about Skaikru’s future. Sure, a few passionate debates had descended into fights, but overall, the atmosphere’s remained relatively peaceful.

She can also tell some of her friends are already well into their fifth if not sixth drink of moonshine, specially prepared by Monty for the occasion.

The 100 – she should start calling them “the 46” she muses (or is it 45, since they haven’t heard from Murphy in quite some time?) – have all let go of their initial awkwardness towards her by now (with the noted exception of Octavia and Jasper) and it warms something inside Clarke she foolishly thought she could get by without. Lincoln’s stopped pretending to ignore her in his girlfriend’s presence. And although things with her mother are still frosty, she’s at least on polite – if not friendly – terms with Kane and Miller’s father again. Jackson even clumsily tried to play the middleman, a rather disastrous – but appreciated – attempt at patching her relationship with the Griffin patriarch up.

“He was brilliant” Monty exclaims, clapping her on the shoulder and looking at Damian. “Truly brilliant, he’d be of tremendous help to us here, you know, Clarke.”

The blonde narrows her eyes. “Why do I get the impression this one time visit is going to become a regular thing?” she asks him, half-serious, half-playful.

“I’m just saying,” her tipsy friend replies, “he’s smart, he’s got a knack for it and he liked being here.”
“No offense, Monty, but I’m not sure he’s here for your pretty eyes” Clarke explains with a smile, which earns her a confused frown.

If Clarke were a good friend, she’d force him to hand over his glass to her and take a break from drinking. But Monty’s mom is part of the Farm Station group now locked up with Bellamy and Clarke can’t begin to imagine how he’s coping with the uncertainty of what will happen to them. So, she’ll be an even greater friend and let him have his fun tonight. Maybe keep an eye on him though, just in case.

Harper slides up to them, whispering something in his ear, at which he immediately turns beet-red.

“Ha, uh… Harper’s got this thing. Yeah, so… I’m going to go” he stutters before following the blonde who’s tugging him by the hand.

Clarke didn’t see that one coming. So maybe there’s no need for her to watch after him. She silently toasts the departing couple.

---

“Should we talk about Bellamy? I feel like we should talk about Bellamy” Raven blurts out, falling down in a heap next to her.

It’s much later now and Clarke has been sitting by the fire on her own, staring at the lake’s sparkly outline under the moonlight, lost in thought. She’s reluctant to let the festive atmosphere of the evening go, but it looks like Raven’s gone from happy-drunk to sad- or reflective-drunk and she decides to indulge her friend.

She takes a deep breath, her shoulders sagging, eyes fixed on the shimmering surface. It’s confession time for one of her darkest secrets. In a way, she’s almost relieved to be able to talk about it with someone.

“I knew of the plan. I was in the room when Kane, Miller’s dad and my mother first came up with it” she admits, leaving out on purpose the role the damned Trikru liaison played in planting the idea in the first place. “They wanted to kill them all, in the beginning,” she adds. Because it’s all about finding satisfaction in small victories, isn’t it?
Raven remains silent and then confesses in turn. “I figured as much. I mean. I didn’t know about the murdering part but… Your mother came to me, I’m the one who prepared the blanks.”

They fall silent, shoulders brushing against each other, finding comfort in the small physical contact.

“Do you also feel so… shitty?” she asks the thoughtful blonde.

Clarke nods silently before continuing, her eyes refocusing on the fire in front of them, its dance casting warm shadows on her face: “I went to see him, before they got pardoned. The first time around. We talked. Well, more argued than talked, really. But I didn’t tell him. I could have, I already knew. But I didn’t.”

She can feel Raven’s eyes on her and wonders how the mechanic could possibly understand Clarke’s actions when she herself can’t.

“There was this evening, after his release. We were all having dinner together. And it was just like old times, you know? Before Mount Weather, even before we burnt all these people at the dropship. Before the fear and destruction and death. I decided that night I’d tell him about the blanks. I swear I was about to do it. But then he started spewing this nonsense about the army in TonDC, how they were a threat to “neutralize”. That we had to make our move before they did. And I, well… I wasn’t so sure anymore I should” the girl whispers, looking away from Clarke’s profile.

Oh. So Raven understands quite a bit more than she thought she would. (She should really know better by now, than to underestimate the brunette.) They both betrayed their friend. However noble the intention, righteous the justification, their hands are dirty. What more is there left to say?

“How’s Octavia holding up?” Clarke asks, seeing the young girl currently sitting in Lincoln’s lap by the lake, his frame shielding her from prying eyes. The two seem completely immersed in their own world and Clarke can’t help but feel a twinge of envy. She wonders how Octavia is coping now, her brother locked up and her lover about to go fight a monstrosity.

Raven shrugs: “She’s angry. At everybody, not just you, you know. We haven’t really spoken lately but, she’s not stupid, she suspects foul play. I think she knows… about my involvement…”

Clarke sighs: “She definitely knows about mine.”
They fall into an uncomfortable silence after that, both lost in the embers. It seems they’ll need much more time before they can sort out their feelings over Bellamy’s incarceration. But right now, the moonshine is starting to make Clarke feel lighter than she’s felt in months and she closes her eyes, turning her face up towards the night sky.

“Does it ever…” her friend starts. She can feel her shift before she continues in a cracked voice: “Why is it so hard? Why is everything so fucking hard down here?”

Shit. Raven’s crying now. It’s pure instinct that compels her to turn and take the sobbing brunette fully into her arms, gently rocking her back and forth.

“I don’t know, Ray. I don’t know. But it’ll get better. It’ll get easier. I have to believe it. We all have to believe it.”

“I can’t… I don’t think I can take much more of it…” comes muffled against her shoulder.

And fuck. Clarke doesn’t think she can either.

She continues her swaying motion, dropping a single kiss to Raven’s head. “You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met Ray. We’ll get through this. And whatever else they throw at us.”

They stay like this for hours, to the point where she doesn’t feel her friend’s fingernails digging into her skin anymore. When Raven’s eyes remain closed, her breathing falling into a regular rhythm and her frame leaning a little bit more heavily on Clarke’s, she decides to drag her back to the workshop and see if she can’t find two extra cots for herself and Damian.

She’s about to try and haul the mechanic up when she spots the lonely figure by a rock. It must be the moonshine, Clarke thinks, that carries her forward to seek the person out.

“I just have one question: was it you or was it Lexa who ordered Pike killed?” she asks Lexa’s lover.

Because Clarke heard the unease in Kane’s tone when he shared the news and hasn’t missed the tension between the new Chancellor and the Trikru woman since. All subtle indications that the plan had indeed been not to have any of the rebels killed, but to capture them instead.
The girl doesn’t look surprised or unnerved in the least. “Like I said, it had to be done” she replies simply. Which does not answer Clarke’s question. At. All.

“You had a deal with Kane and still went behind his back?” Clarke forges on. “What is it with you and betraying your allies! How are we supposed to trust each other, if you keep breaking your word?”

“Jus drein, jus daun, Wanheda” the liaison retorts, turning her calculating eyes on her.

“Bullshit! No Trikru blood was spilled that night, or before” she counters. “That doesn’t apply."

“Not that night, no, but Pike and your brown-haired friend killed two members of the Guard back in Polis. They were my friends. They had lovers and children. They were innocent.”

“So this was vengeance? These idiots thought they were preventing an attack in Polis, they were tricked into it by this Ice Nation spy, you know that. What would you have done?” Clarke argues back.

“You’re not listening, Wanheda. There is a difference between subduing a man and killing them. Blood was shed. This was justice. Pike sealed his fate when he killed the guardsmen and repeatedly advocated for aggression. Our rules are our rules. They are how we survive.”

Survival. It always comes down to survival with them. What a match made in heaven these two, probably discussing how better to betray allies over breakfast and how to spin the story come dinner. Speaking of which…

“I saw kids play in Sinchuk, a couple of months back. They re-enacted the battle with Mount Weather. They seemed to think the Commander had withdrawn on purpose and sent Skaikru – me – to fight in her name.”

Costia’s eyes are boring into hers. The Trikru remains silent.

Clarke soldiers on. “Is that what she told her people? What, she’s too chicken to admit she retreated, too ashamed to confess she broke an alliance?”
“Go to sleep, Wanheda” is all she gets in response. Costia turns her face away, the dismissal clear and insulting on purpose.

Clarke storms back to Raven, who’s swaying dangerously close to the flames and decides to call it a night, her blood still boiling and mind reeling from the conversation she just had.

It takes her a while to fall asleep.

She’s walking back to camp when it happens and if Clarke had given this a bit more thought, hadn’t been so focused on this new start, she would have known it was just a question of time.

One minute she’s alone, hurrying along to reach Damian before the storm she can feel coming in the menacing air, the other a long lost friend has her pinned to a tree and is plunging a knife deep into her.

Jasper’s of a smaller build than her, lighter and in any other situation she could – should – be able to take him. But he caught her completely by surprise and it’s done now. His hand is shaking, large brown eyes looking straight into Clarke’s stunned blue ones.

The momentum of the blow leaves her completely disoriented, a groan the only sound to escape her lips when her back slams against the rough bark of the tree. She notes, as if from far away, that the knife cutting her open does so silently. There’s no squelching. No gurgling or slurping. Nothing to indicate her body’s just been dealt a deathblow.

There’s a memory there, tickling the back of her mind. Another time. Another place. But death cloaked in the same eerie silence of morbid anticipation.

She can see the desperate glint in Jasper’s eyes, the determination mixed with pain. So much pain. He does something then, a twist of his wrist or a push of his hand, she’s not sure, but can’t keep from whimpering, her eyes going wide.

She can pinpoint the exact moment when panic sets in. White hot panic radiating off him in waves. Panic and realization. Clarke can’t do anything but stare as he goes through the motions. She can feel
the blood start seeping through the wound, can feel the pain shooting up her nerves, like an afterthought. She knows she’s wasting precious minutes but her body refuses to move and her mind can’t quite catch up with what is happening.

The forest is quiet but for their short breaths, mingling in the suffocating space that’s left between them. They’re so close now their noses could touch.

There’s a sudden rumbling from the clouds. That too, seems to come from far away.

“I…” he tries but it comes out garbled. “She…” again, abandoned as soon as it’s uttered. “You…”

It’s quite apparent he won’t be able to form a single sentence. And Clarke doesn’t need an explanation anyway. She already knows.

Maya. Jasper’s love. A pale brown-eyed girl, trying in her own way to right the sins of her people. Maya who had helped them. Maya, whose death sentence she had knowingly signed the moment she had pulled that lever down. Maya, whose body now lies anonymously in one of the graves at the foot of the Mountain.

The blood of enemies she could maybe live with, explain and justify. But the blood of friends? The blood of her friends’ lovers? Not once but twice? If recovering from that is out of the question, how is one to live with such ghosts?

His breaths are coming out faster now. His hand hasn’t moved, nor has the knife lodged in her abdomen.

“It’s ok” she finally whispers, after some time. She’s surprised to note how steady her voice is. Steadier than his. She slowly lifts her left hand – it’s not painful – and covers Jasper’s with it. Whether she wants to pull the knife out or help him bury it deeper, she doesn’t know.

“It’s ok” she repeats and if there’s a bit of blood at the back of her throat, she doesn’t notice. “I understand” she wants to say.

The rumbling up above grows louder. The air around them becomes heavier, carrying with it the promise of imminent rain.
Whether it’s her touch, her words or the cloud’s protests, Clarke will never know. Jasper just suddenly jolts away, in full panic mode now, arms and hands outstretched. His right hand is covered in blood. Her blood, Clarke notes with detachment. A dark and rich burgundy. A stain on his hands that is swallowed up as soon as it touches the ground.

Her hand falls onto the blade’s grip.

They stare at each other in silence, their roles reversed somehow. And then he turns and runs out of her field of vision.

Her mind chooses this moment to slam back to reality and tries to do everything at once: analyse her current situation, understand the extent of the injury and severity of the damage, survey her surroundings for anything that could help and map out a course of action. It’s too much of course and it leaves her reeling. She feels dizzy. Her knees start to give out and she struggles to stay upright. She takes in a shaky breath.

It is ok. She’s not really needed. She’s been busy, sure, but nothing someone else wouldn’t be able to do. She was going somewhere, earlier, wasn’t she? Yes, she was on her way to Raven’s atelier. Her friend will be pissed. Her mom… They may not be on speaking terms but her mom will be devastated. And then there’s Damian. The boy doesn’t need her per se. But…

What had Charlotte said? Something about slaying her demons. And it’s fitting somehow. Had Wells experienced a similar moment of clarity? Probably not. But if he had, had he spared a thought for his stubborn friend?

The wind picks up, filling her nose with the scent of the forest before a downpour. The birds overhead are growing agitated, parents calling for their little ones to come home. Clarke looks up, trying to catch a glimpse of the sky. The first drops of rain start to fall, crashing first into the canopy but soon managing to find a path all the way down. Down to earth. Down to Clarke. Her shirt is slowly getting soaked, the fresh water mixing with warm blood. The clash in temperatures is jarring.

She opens her mouth. It feels silly, so inappropriate considering the circumstances. Something the little blonde girl of 3 or 4 would do, had she grown up on Earth, in between splashing around in puddles in her bright yellow rubber boots. A couple of drops run down from her hairline, mixing with the sweat on her forehead before getting stuck in her eyelashes. The first taste of rain on her tongue soothes away the tang.
This is how Lexa’s lover finds her: chest heaving, sliding slowly towards the ground, her hand clutching the knife still lodged inside her.

It takes her only a split second to understand the scene.

“I’ll go get help, Clarke” she whispers, crouching down to her level.

“No”, Clarke doesn’t know where the strength in her tone is coming from. “Lincoln” she whispers. “Get Lincoln.” The liaison looks like she wants to argue, so she continues: “Costia, please.”

With a sombre expression, the girl finally nods and stands.

“Don’t tell anyone else” Clarke croaks out through the blood filling her mouth, before the Trikru is off, running in the direction of Lincoln’s and Octavia’s house.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter keeps some of the canon of s3’s earlier episodes concerning Arkadia, with one major change though: Pike doesn’t win the election and the massacre of the Trikru army does not take place. I recognise the plot as a very human and plausible storyline, I also understand it as an important event to move the storyline forward. I would have liked to be able to work Pike’s victory in, maybe something similar will happen in the future. But the massacre represents such a transgression in my eyes that I can’t have it occur. It’s simply not something I think the perpetrators – and all Sky People in a way - could ever come back from.
So, Clarke finally meets Costia. There are plenty of different ways this could have gone. They could have met with Costia perfectly aware of who Clarke is but Clarke not knowing who she is. This could have been the cause of much miscomprehension and would make for an undoubtedly funny scene to write. I decided to go another route. The scene between Bellamy and Clarke in his cell needs some more work. This is such a pivotal and heartbreaking moment for them.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Her mind is a complete blank, focused on one thing and one thing only: this mother floating inhumane pain. Her body doesn’t seem to have understood her stomach is the only location affected. Instead, it feels like every single one of her nerves is on fire. Whose brilliant idea had it been again to refuse anaesthesia? She clamps down on Costia’s arm and digs her nails into her skin.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is now completely canon deviant. Clarke survives the attack (no surprises there, our girl is strong ;) ) and we get a better glimpse into Arkadia and this new Sky colony her people are building.

This story is taking its sweet sweet time, trust me, I know :) The next chapter is going to take us back to... Polis.

Thanks a ton for the comments and kudos. As you know, comments are the sweetest of all nectars!

She must have passed out at some point. When she comes to, she’s lying on her back on a small cot, Lincoln hovering over her to her right.

“This would be less painful with your mother’s medicine” he says, noticing she’s awake.

Her shirt is torn in half and he’s applying pressure to the wound. She feels feverish and it’s difficult to breathe.

When he offers her a green beverage Clarke recognises as a Trikru anaesthetic, she just shakes her head no and he nods in resignation with a knowing look, returning to the task at hand. The prospect of losing sensation – or worse consciousness again – even if only in a small portion of her body, is one she doesn’t want to chance right now. And there’s this part of her that wants to feel every second of the pain, craves it even. She can’t really explain it, not to him, not even to herself. But it’s there.

She looks down, trying to gauge the extent of the damage but the blood and Lincoln’s hands are in the way. Blood, in fact – her blood – is everywhere. Her stomach gives a lurch.
She hadn’t noticed it before, hadn’t realized, but Jasper slid his knife just below where…

No. She can’t go there right now. She won’t.

She’s lucky to be alive, considering the angle. Had he researched the perfect jab beforehand or was it just pure chance? What did the people of the old world use to say? Something about consequences and boomerangs. What flies around… No, what goes around comes around? Her father had explained the saying to her but she had been too young to fully grasp it. Now though…

Boomerangs… She had found the idea of an object magically returning to its owner, no matter how far it were to be thrown, fascinating. She’d like to see one, one day. Maybe fabricating one could be a project for her and Damian…

“How are you feeling, Clarke?” Lincoln asks in a soothing tone.

She’s seen her mother play this game often enough, to know Lincoln is trying to distract her.

She wants to answer, say she’s ok, convey her relief, yet the words stay stuck in her throat. She tries to force a smile, to make a joke but she chokes on her next breath.

Her thoughts jump to Trikru warriors and their tradition of inscribing each one of their kills on their body, into their skin. She wonders if maybe it’s less for intimidation purposes, as she had initially speculated, and more to re-establish a balance in the world: marked living flesh in exchange for the souls taken.

What has she – Wanheda – given back to the world so far? What will she have to give?

How did she get here again? Oh right: Costia. The girl suddenly appears by the door, as if summoned, carrying a jug of water and with a furious looking Octavia in tow. The Blake girl almost seems… worried.

“It was the skinny one, wasn’t it?” the liaison starts, more statement than question, while she pours her a glass and fills Lincoln’s basin up with the rest. Her eyes never stray from her task, yet there’s something simmering underneath her collected exterior. And if Lincoln looked bad, Costia is… literally covered in blood.
Octavia remains silent by her side, her anxious eyes flying from Lincoln’s hands fidgeting around her gaping wound to the wall and then back again. The blonde can see the tension coiling around the girl’s muscles.

Clarke should deny it, keep what happened in the forest to herself. But she’s feeling lightheaded – probably from all the blood loss – and something tells her she doesn’t need to lie.

She wonders when she started understanding who Costia could possibly refer to with “the skinny one.” Or when the beautiful warrior went from a stranger in whose presence she shouldn’t let her guard down to a trusted… acquaintance.

Wait, beautiful? No! Well, technically, yes of course, nothing new under the sun there, but not like that. Anyway, she’s lost a lot of blood. It’s the fever talking.

Clarke just nods in confirmation, looking into the dark brown eyes now trained on her and grits her teeth when Lincoln presses a little bit harder on her abdomen.

Octavia seems confused for a moment, looking back and forth between the two women, before she blanches, all blood leaving her face. It’s only a split second though before the fury slams back in her eyes and she storms out of the room without a word, fists clenched tight and knuckles white.

Costia smirks in Lincoln’s direction at his girlfriend’s antics. “You of all people would choose a restless soul” she says, shaking her head and earning a mock glare from the man.

The momentary reprieve doesn’t last for long.

Lincoln returns to his earlier ministrations: “The wound is deep but doesn’t seem to have damaged any important blood vessel or organ. You’re still losing a lot of blood, though. Your mother…”

Clarke gives a sharp shake of her head, interrupting him.

“Jackson then…”
“No. You. Just you. Too many people know about this already.”

“The best way for such a wound to heal would be wrapping it tight. But the bleeding is out of control, Clarke. I’m going to have to burn it shut instead” he explains in a resigned voice.

Only then does the blonde notice with apprehensive eyes the crackling fire in the corner of the room and the blade resting in its midst. She grimaces. This is going to hurt.

“Are you sure you don’t want to be out for this?” he wants to confirm, always gentle. She nods, which earns her a wary sigh. “Fine. You should hold on to something though.”

There’s an awkward pause, during which all three of them search the room to find something solid for her to hold or bite down on. When their rapid investigation comes up empty, Costia steps forward with a shake of her head and a small huff, kneeling by her side. She offers Clarke her left forearm. The blonde grabs onto it, without a second thought, bunching the cot’s sheets in her right fist.

When Lincoln retrieves the glowing red blade from the flames and brings it so close to her skin she can feel its heat, she squirms, but holds her stance. He doesn’t give her the time to register the sting of the alcohol he pours with no warning over the wound, before he lowers the knife to her abdomen.

Son of a $#%^!

The hiss of blade against skin, the smell of charred flesh, the scorching pain, it’s all too much and she lets out a chocked scream – is this truly her voice? Her mind is a complete blank, focused on one thing and one thing only: this motherf*cking pain. Her body doesn’t seem to have understood the burn should be confined to her stomach. Instead, it feels like every single one of her nerves is on fire, pulsing with agony.

Whose brilliant idea had it been again to refuse anaesthesia? She clamps down on Costia’s arm and digs her nails deep into her skin. The warrior doesn’t say anything, her grip on Clarke’s left arm tightening.

---

When she wakes a little while later (did she pass out?), she’s still in the same position as before. Lincoln isn’t there anymore and Costia’s slouched in a chair facing her, her chest rising slightly with
each breath she takes in her slumber.

Clarke can’t help but notice that the girl’s left hand is resting palm-up on the bed sheet, close to her own, their fingertips almost brushing. The proximity has her furrowing her brow, trying to remember what happened after Lincoln sealed the wound shut. Everything is a little bit fuzzy. But if the angry red indentations in Costia’s skin are any indication, it seems the blonde had a hard time letting go.

She takes a minute to observe the sleeping warrior, unaware of the familiar itch in her fingertips.

She can feel the drowsiness taking over and curses herself again for refusing any help to relieve the searing pain. You wanted to experience this torment? Well there you have it.

In the quiet of the room, her focus already waning, Clarke realizes this marks the first attempt on her life in times of peace, since they arrived on Earth. Or is it the second? By one of her own, no less. And she’s left to wonder what it is about this world that just won’t leave her be: will she ever have the chance to put the demons of her past behind her? Or will peace prove as treacherous as war?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------

She’s been sitting in the same position for two whole days. Her back is sore. Her legs are itchy. And Clarke’s slowly losing her mind. It reminds her of Sinchuk and the days she spent holed up in Shabir’s home (only this time around, she does think about her situation, instead of trying to distract herself at every turn).

The fact that Lexa’s lover – Costia – has been the only constant by her side, hasn’t exactly helped. Lincoln’s in and out, Octavia’s been missing ever since she stormed out, Damian ran away right after his first visit, and Raven – who had gone from queasy green to furious red in a matter of seconds – defiantly agreed to go about her daily routine in order not to raise too much suspicion among the Arkers.

Because yes: she’s decided to try and cover the attack up as best she can, against Lincoln’s repeated objections and Costia’s disapproving silence.

It sounds crazy but this is what she wants to do. And well, as the victim, she should have a say in how this whole situation plays out, no? It won’t be easy to have her absence go unnoticed. But her current rift with her mother should make it at least possible.
That both Costia and she would go under at the same time makes sense, since they have yet to put the final touches to Arkadia’s future map (an easy cover that Kane and her mother had apparently not questioned at all). Thankfully, these discussions with the Trikru liaison are now much more civilized and peaceful than they used to be. If Clarke were to think about it, she’d even go as far as to admit they make somewhat of a good team – when they put their mind to it, that is.

The time out has also given her the opportunity to convince Lincoln to reluctantly accept their help for the pauna and Clarke is unashamed to admit she may or may not have used her injury to guilt him into it.

Speaking of which, she’s currently discussing the equipment Raven still has to put together with the girl in question, who’s gathering her designs scattered all over the floor. Unsurprisingly, this is the moment Costia chooses to return to the room.

“You always disappear when Raven shows up and reappear whenever we’re wrapping up. Is it because you still disagree with us helping Lincoln?” Clarke enquires.

Both the liaison and her friend look at her, frowning in surprise.

“You already know I do, as does Lincoln” Costia replies honestly. “But that is not why… I leave. I simply wish to give you and Raven the… appropriate privacy.” she continues, looking at the blonde and her visitor.

Clarke looks back down at one of Raven’s drawings of a hand grenade, designed to latch on to whatever it’s launched at and only explode when triggered through the remote control.

“You don’t have to, the plans are no secret. Even Kane knows about them.”

She completely misses Costia’s furrowed expression and Raven’s widening grin.

“I wasn’t referring to the plans, Clarke.”

The blonde looks back up at that, not comprehending. It’s her turn to frown: “What then?”
Raven intervenes: “If I may interject, I believe our honourable guest is under the impression that you and I…are…you know” she explains slowly.

Clarke turns to her, lost: “Are what?”

“Not exactly talking or planning when we spend time together” Raven fills in for her.

Is Clarke awake right now? Is this conversation really happening? Are they just messing with her or did she hit her head in the forest? Not understanding a thing to what the two of them are saying is starting to give her a serious headache.

“What do you mean? What else would we be doing in here?”

“You know”, Raven replies, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

And…

Oh… Wait, what? No!

Clarke is quite literally… speechless. A brief glance in Costia’s direction confirms what Raven’s hinting at. She can feel the heat pouring into her cheeks. Her face feels like it’s on fire. Scratch that, it’s like a furnace, burning with the power of a thousand suns.

“I… No… Pff… What?” she stutters.

Raven isn’t exactly helping: her friend bursts into laughter at her spluttering. “Man, your face, Griffin, what I wouldn’t give for a camera right now!”

Once she’s gotten her laughter somewhat under control, the mechanic seems to finally pity her and turns back to Costia: “We’re not. Clarke and I are friends, that’s all.”
“My apologies. I shouldn’t have assumed” is all Costia replies, her voice oddly formal.

Clarke can’t see her reaction, she’s too mortified to look up, so she busies herself with focusing on the intricate stitching pattern of the bed sheet.

Raven fills in unhelpfully: “Oh, don’t worry, I understand. I mean, who’d be crazy enough to pass up on all this, right?” she quips, gesturing at her body and throwing a wink in Costia’s direction for good measure.

Her irreverent friend leaves them to it after an exaggerated and very loud kiss to her cheek (“See you later, love” she whispers huskily in her ear). Clarke doesn’t mind. She’s got plenty of time on her hands to plot her revenge. And how glorious it will be!

She’s reluctant to admit it takes her quite a bit of time to recover from her embarrassment. Costia, strangely enough, seems as interested in the wall as Clarke was just a moment ago in the bed sheet. She could address what just transpired, have a frank conversation about it with the Trikru, but the perspective of talking about her love life (or lack thereof) with… her… when she’s the one who shares her bed, is just one mindfuck too far (and she knows quite a lot about those).

So, she goes for a safer topic of conversation: “The other day, you said that war is looming on the horizon. What is going on?”

“You were just stabbed by one of your people and that’s what you want to talk about? I’d be more interested in knowing why you’re protecting the boy” Costia retorts with heat.

“Please” Clarke insists and if her lips are currently forming a little pout – something she’s unconsciously learnt from Damian and has been perfecting these past few days – she’s not ashamed.

Costia sighs, throwing her a disgusted look. The girl unceremoniously plops down in the chair next to Clarke’s bed, before launching into her explanation: “Ice Nation has made it a habit to stage minor attacks here and there along the border, all while denying any direct involvement. The Mountain used to keep them in check. But ever since its fall and the end of the rains, it seems activity at the borders between Trikru and Ice Nation lands has increased. Trouble is brewing.”

“Why would they do that?”
“To defy Heda. Show the world she is weak” Costia replies, her lips a thin worried line Clarke has never seen her sport so far.

The blonde has to suppress a snort: Lexa, weak? No way. She keeps those thoughts to herself though, because there’s something rather unsettling about seeing Lexa’s lover take the threat seriously.

“When I was… away, after Mount Weather, I came across an army that could have been from Ice Nation. At least, I think they were. I told Indra a little while later, but she dismissed it, said you – the Commander – were aware of what was going on” Clarke starts.

Costia nods in acknowledgement: “Yes, yet another provocation from the Queen.”

“But how can they claim no responsibility when you know exactly they’re behind it?”

“It’s a perverse game the Queen’s been playing ever since she rose to power. To do her bidding, she’s armed bands of bandits who live from looting Trikru villages. Seasoned fighters, but also young boys and girls who grow up knowing nothing else but violence. When they attack, they take everything: the cattle, the food, people’s belongings. Most of the time, they burn the houses, kill those who refuse to join them (whatever their age) and rape the women. But over the years, the Queen’s control over these groups has become more tenuous. They’ve taken to raid Ice Nation villages as well and have even gone as far as to target Ice Nation military and food supply convoys.”

“This led the Queen to change her strategy. She uses their attacks on Ice Nation villagers to drum up hatred for Trikru among her people, spreading the word that Heda lets these groups operate freely on our territory. She claims they’re proof Heda is unable or unwilling to protect a fellow coalition partner. She exploits the situation as a justification to reinforce Ice Nation military presence at the border and to send patrols deep into Trikru territory. She claims incursions of her units, like the one you came to witness, are to pursue the gangs and to better protect her people.”

Costia continues, looking at the room’s small window. “Her ambassador in Polis is even calling for a revision of our borders, arguing that the forests between Ice lands and TonDC should belong to Ice Nation. I believe he calls it a matter of “clan security”.” She sighs: “I’m convinced the Queen’s retained a direct line to these groups, but we have no proof.” Her gaze falls back on Clarke: “Now you see how she could claim not to be responsible or how she could try and justify such violations of our frontiers and of the Coalition.”

Clarke is surprised, to say the least. Shabir hadn’t mentioned Ice Nation represented such a threat.
“Can’t you put an end to the looting yourself?”

“It’s easier said than done” the liaison huffs. “We didn’t have the numbers when the Mountain was still a threat.”

“But Mount Weather doesn’t exist anymore” Clarke counters.

“We can not send men into Ice Nation territory until the ice begins to thaw, they would either freeze or starve to death otherwise. Ice Nation’s frozen landscape is treacherous to navigate for us people of the trees, Clarke” she explains, turning her eyes back on her.

“Can’t you just post your soldiers now along the border, if it’s only bandits? No need to send them into foreign lands, no?”

“Sha” Costia continues: “But the clement weather now allows us to prepare the fields for future yield. Our stocks are dwindling and we now have additional mouths to feed with the ones rescued from the Mountain. These harvests will be crucial to replenish our granaries and ensure our survival. We already mobilized an army to rebuild TonDC and protect Skaikru from a potential Ice Nation attack after what happened at the Mountain. Heda doesn’t want to call more of her warriors away from their families at such an important time.’

The blonde wonders if she shouldn’t start a drinking game: one shot of moonshine every time she hears a Grounder mention survival in a conversation (boy would that be fun with somebody like Indra, may even get the woman – if supplied with enough alcohol – to send the ghost of a smile her way, who knows). Who is she kidding there’s not enough moonshine in this world to play this game for more than a day.

She nods in understanding. She’s relieved she doesn’t have to take such decisions (anymore) and is reminded once again of the weight that rests on the Trikru Commander’s shoulders.

“And once the harvest period is over, will she go on the offensive then?”

Costia gives her a shrug: “That will depend on the weather.”

“Well, it should be end of Summer, beginning of Autumn, no? So, should be feasible, right?”
Costia regards her then, contemplating: “Autumn?” she asks.

Clarke needs some time to understand what she means. “Yes, Summer. Then comes Autumn…” she replies.

After a stretched silence, Costia finally leans back in the chair, recognition dawning in her brown eyes: “She mentioned you count time in changing seasons. I had forgotten.”

It’s Clarke’s turn to furrow her brow: “Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn, yes. Is that not… Is that not how you divide up a year? Wait, do you have a rainy and a dry season instead?” she hesitantly asks.

“A season always matches a certain set of characteristics, doesn’t it?” Costia wants to know.

What an odd conversation. “Yes, well, usually. Summer for example is hot temperatures, Winter cold ones. Why, what am I missing here?” Clarke returns at a loss.

“That is how the old world worked, maybe, but not anymore, Clarke” Costia replies with something akin to a smile in her eyes.

“What do you mean “not anymore”? January and February were colder, the ground froze. Or at least, that’s what it looked like. You had rain in March and hotter days ever since May. I don’t understand, that’s exactly what seasons are about.”

Costia now sports a wide smile: “You are right, but the sequence itself is not an assured one. You can have frequent cloudbursts and hot temperatures in January, freezing cold right after scorching heat in May. You saw it yourself: July was colder and black ice even covered parts of the forest. There is no order to it.” She amends: “Or at least, if there is one, then we haven’t found it yet.”

Oh. She’s surprised none of this came up ever before, in her conversations with Shabir, for instance, or with… her. How could she – how could they – have missed this? They had been monitoring the Earth for decades now, shouldn’t they have seen such a major change?

“Then how, if seasons do not exist per se, if there’s no known rhythm to the weather and you can go
from one extreme to the other, how do you survive?” (damn it, now she too is starting to use that word).

“By preparing for all eventualities” Costia replies simply and the revelation gives Clarke a whole new understanding and respect for Grounders.

“You mean to say you never know when harvest time will come, you never know when temperatures will drop?”

Costia nods her head, still smiling amusedly at her.

“This makes… no sense!” Clarke huffs.

Her interlocutor leans back, letting out a small laugh at the blonde’s petulant tone.

Costia starts over: “There is a man who dwells among the Boat Clan people. A friend told me about him. He believes the constant change in weather is because the Earth hasn’t settled yet, that it’s still shaken about what happened all these years ago.”

Clarke mulls her words over. She understands why the idea could sound appealing, but it contradicts her lessons from the Ark about the Earth’s tilt, distance from the sun and moon and the role these factors played in the sequence of seasons.

It’s strange, how this small piece of information: the absence of seasonal change, puts her whole perspective on the planet on its head. Because at the end of the day, it’s not like Clarke’s been here – on the Ground – long. The concept of seasons didn’t hold any real meaning up in space. But it had been drilled into her with the help of movies from the old world: Winter was ice skating and snow ball fights, Spring was puddles of rain and preparing the fields, Summer was shedding clothes and going for a swim, Autumn was her favourite: trees on fire and moody temperatures. They had been so sure...

Then again, they had also been sure the Ground was uninhabited. So much for superior technology and science…

She returns to their conversation: “So no months, no years either?”
“No, we do have years and months. We calculate them following the position of the moon and the stars, to measure the passing of time. And days, of course.”

“But no hours” Clarke adds, remembering something she had discussed at length with Damian, the boy teaching her the various words in Trigedasleng meant to describe specific moments in the day (there was first light, dawn, right after dawn, the dampness of morning giving way to full daylight, the moment birds start chirping, the time later on when larger animals wake and so on and so forth).

Costia nods.

“Wow!” Clarke leans back into the pillow and takes a moment to absorb it all. “Is that why you insisted on the irrigation system?” she asks, remembering one of their biggest arguments.

Costia inclines her head: “Sha, that and the greenhouses.”

Two things she’s embarrassed to remember she had fought her tooth and nail on.

Costia starts over: “It is easier for Trikru: the weather has been fair to us. But the Horse Clan to the East for example sees only little rain all year round. The Rock People have their lands swept by howling winds for days on end. And Ice Nation is plunged in continuous cold temperatures, the ice slowly covering more and more of their lands. This has made it incredibly hard for their people to survive.”

Clarke ponders her words, before starting: “You speak like you’ve been there. Ice Nation, I mean.”

Costia nods with a far-away look in her eyes, a crease forming on her forehead. “I used to be a scout along that portion of our Northern border, together with…, before the Coalition, when we considered the neighbouring clans our enemies. The missions Heda sent me on often brought me inside icy terrain.”

Clarke chooses not to push to know what Costia had been about to say concerning her time as a scout. Instead, she asks: “Lexa was sending you there?”

She can sense she’s crossed some invisible line between them, for the indifferent reserve she hadn’t
seen in a while is back in Costia’s guarded eyes. The liaison nods before getting up, picking up the empty jug on her way out of the room without a word.

That was abrupt…

Clarke takes the time to look around her. She’s in Octavia and Lincoln’s house, she knows. The Arkers had launched in June and July, once the census had been completed and the model architectural plans finalized, the construction of a first batch of 50 houses around the fallen Ark.

Clarke had initially suggested to have different crews work on it methodically (just like they had done with the school, the brick factory and Raven’s workshop), but the people had become restless, each wanting their own place to be completed first and desiring a different layout than their neighbours’. She had immediately dismissed it as petty greed but Kane had shown understanding: theirs were people who had been confined, their whole life long, to small and narrow steel rooms. Wishing for space and – more importantly – demanding to have a say in the design of their future shelters, was only natural.

The Chancellor had also argued that Clarke’s role as head of the mapping working group didn’t just entail coming up with detailed maps for their future settlement, but also ensuring their proper implementation (“I did not sign up for this”, she had grumbled stubbornly, to which Kane had only smiled). The only silver lining had been when she had then contended, unabashed, that this “honour” should also extend to her co-head, Costia (might as well take someone else down with me, she had thought, pleased with herself, not realizing that this meant they would have to spend yet even more time together).

When they had noticed that bricks were disappearing from the warehouse and that anarchic foundations were starting to appear here and there, with Arkers carving entire clearings into the forest surrounding them overnight, they had been forced to intervene. It had taken Costia, Kane and herself quite a bit of negotiating with the protesters to agree, in the end, on granting each household a set number of bricks and a set quantity of building material, while recommending – but not imposing – specific designs. This had again triggered anger: some had argued that brick allocations should be calculated per person, so that families could build a bigger house than single people; others had insisted these allocations take into account a person’s standing, based on their position back up in the Ark; others still had maintained it should correspond to a person’s contribution now on Earth (which had sparked yet another debate on whether work in the fields was more valuable than in the brick factory or the Guard).

Before tuning them all out (turns out she’s not such a people person after all), Clarke had had to admit that the first argument would also make sense in terms of land occupation (at least for now and if the number of bricks was to be sizably revised downward). So they had agreed to a brick quota for each person instead of per household, but flat out denied to have it linked to a claimed or perceived social standing or contribution to the group.
After a couple of days, the most eager Arkers had had to admit though, that if piling bricks up with layers of lime mortar was an activity relatively accessible to all, building inclined thatched roofs was an entirely different matter altogether. So Clarke had giddily radioed Sinchuk, asking whether the carpenter she had met there (Elias had come to her with a dislocated shoulder) would consider coming to Arkadia to help them out. Shabir had graciously accepted. She had then recalled the initial crews meant for the construction, in order to assist the impatient Arkers. And if she had only done so after a couple of days, relishing in secret the power to let them stew in their stupidity, neither Costia nor Kane had commented on it.

Lincoln and Octavia – or rather, Octavia all on her own – had been an entirely different matter. Clarke had been happy (and not really surprised to be honest) to hear the couple wanted to build a home together, secretly wondering how Bellamy would take the news. But the Blake sibling had refused point blank to have it in the designed encampment area and instead fought tooth and nail to be allowed to settle outside, in the same spot, close to the Mountain, where the two of them had already set up their tent.

The location though posed a certain number of problems, not least for security, so after much debate, the girl had ungraciously accepted the counterproposal that they could build on the lake shore. Clarke had only later discovered they had put up their house inside the second line of trees, a far distance from Raven and Monty’s workshop (and from the Ark), instead of the agreed upon spot, but had decided against mentioning it.

In order to prevent any other Arkers from asking for the same privileges, Kane had named both Lincoln and (a very circumspect) Octavia sentries in the Guard and argued their place could be considered as much a house as an outpost for security purposes. As reluctant as she is to admit it, the man can show impressive people skills sometimes.

Clarke herself hasn’t decided on anything yet. She had had to fight Arkadia’s new “Population Committee” for Damian to be authorized to stay with her in Arkadia, but had seen her request for bricks to be allotted to him denied, on the justification that ‘otherwise anybody would be able to come to their settlement and request a share.’

Needless to say, Clarke had been livid. The ensuing – very loud and very public – argument will be recorded in the colony’s future Annals, she’s sure. She had been ready, right then and there, to pick up her bag again and leave it all behind (while wishing them all very sincerely to hell).

But then Raven, Monty and every single one of the hundred still alive had spontaneously come and donated some of their own building materials and well, her anger had deflated somewhat. So they have the materials. All they need now is for her to make up her mind. In the meantime, because their tent – which used to be comfortable – had been feeling slightly less so, ever since Octavia and Lincoln moved into their house, leaving them completely on their own at the foot of the Mountain, Damian and her had taken more often than not to crashing at Raven’s atelier for the night. It’s not a
particularly bright idea considering the boy’s growing crush on the mechanic, but Clarke had found herself enjoying the girl’s company more and more.

She’s brought back to the moment by sounds of arguing outside.

She hears Costia’s forceful: “Skaigirl, no!” before the door opens with a loud bang and Octavia is barging in, dragging behind her a beaten down Jasper, who is sporting a mean black eye that looks like it could knock a person flat out. Octavia is holding his collar in a tight grip and yanks him to a stop at the foot of her bed, at the same time as Costia makes her re-entrance, water jug or whatever it is she was doing in their back-kitchen all but forgotten. Jasper doesn’t say a word, he just stares at her with wide fearful eyes.

“I found him hiding in the dropship” Octavia starts, straining to keep her voice under control. “What do you want to do with him?” she continues, looking straight at her.

She looks so wild for a second Clarke is certain that were she to ask her to execute him, she would do it on the spot.

“I’d like to talk” Clarke says after releasing a breath she’s not aware she was holding, looking not at the Blake girl but her prisoner. She’s had time to think about this, the eventuality of seeing Jasper again, and she’s ready. “Would that be ok?”

When the brown-haired boy nods rapidly in surprise, she turns to look at Octavia. “Can you leave us? I’d like to be alone with Jasper.”

Octavia is too surprised to do anything, let alone respond.

Costia’s the one who speaks up: “Are you sure this is wise, Clarke?”

The blonde inclines her head, her eyes trained on him. The liaison reluctantly leaves the room, tugging a dumbstruck Octavia away.

“O” Clarke calls back when the brunette’s reached the threshold. The nickname rolls naturally off her tongue with pleasing familiarity. Octavia stops. “We’re going to need this” she points to the girl’s side.
The Blake sibling looks down, confused, before sharply looking back up. “Clarke…”

“Please.”

There’s a real storm raging in Octavia’s eyes while the moment stretches on. Finally, with a defeated air of resignation, she reaches for her belt and unsheathes one of her long knives. She walks over brusquely – Jasper visibly shrinks away – and deposits it at Clarke’s side.

“Thank you.” She reaches out with mild discomfort to squeeze Octavia’s wrist, before the girl turns away for good.

Clarke fights against the pain to rearrange herself in a more comfortable position in the pillows (this is going to take a while), before she gestures to the chair, intimating to him to take a seat.

And then she starts.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“Watch it” is the first thing she hears when she enters her friends’ workplace.

Her eyes drop down, to where the voice is coming from and settle on Raven, who is currently crouched on all fours, scowling murder at Clarke’s heavy boots.

“Oook…” she starts hesitantly.

“Humpty and Dumpty laid eggs a while ago, and 4 hatched. Monty and I are parents – or wait, aunt and uncle of some sort. Can you believe it, Griff? Our first workshop babies! I’m proud to present to you: Eeny, Meeny, Miny” she explains excitedly, pointing at microscopic shapes Clarke can’t really discern through Raven’s arms “and the one next to your left foot is Moe.”

Clarke gazes down and would you look at that: there is indeed the tiniest of brown snails making its
“They’ve been trying to hightail it out of here ever since they developed their husks. Ungracious little f…” she casts a cautious look around her and corrects: “things, I tell you.”

Raven finally gathers all 4 of them on a small sheet of paper and gets back up, carrying them to the long working table Wick and Damian are currently sitting at, in the centre of the room.

“Again. Repeat after me: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie.”

Clarke’s second interrupts Wick with an exaggerated eye roll and continues in his stead in a bored tone: “Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Julie, Kilo…”

Clarke notes Damian’s obvious dislike for the engineer before she tunes them out. Now finally back up on her own two feet, she’s discovered that Raven and Wick have taken it upon themselves to train Damian as a radio operator, in the hope of having him take over.

“Makes sense, Clarke, he speaks both Trikru and English. He’s the perfect candidate!” her friend had enthusiastically explained.

But Clarke knows that managing the fast expanding radio network Arkadia’s now established with most neighbouring villages has proven more and more time consuming – Trikru taking to the new means of communication rather quickly (they’ll have to come up with a set of rules soon, Raven had warned them, if they don’t want the only existing channel to be hogged by lovers’ messages and endless shopping lists). To sum it up: the mechanic is all too eager to hand it over to someone else. Why (or whether) Damian had volunteered at all, isn’t really clear to Clarke, since she thought he liked tinkering with junk together with Raven best, but she didn’t press the issue. She has a feeling the mechanic could talk the boy into anything if she so desired (she’ll have to have a chat with her on the subject).

Sudden shrill shouts from outside interrupt her musings and she carefully walks over to where her friends have wheeled the large doors aside, leaving the entrance wide open to let as much light in as possible.

The screaming voice draws nearer: “Help! HELP!”
A young girl, barely older than Damian and dressed only in her underwear, is running towards her. She points towards the lake in front of them: “My brother, we were playing, he can’t swim! You have to come help me!”

There’s a blur to her right, she’s slightly pushed to the side in the commotion. The next thing Clarke registers is Damian rushing down to the lake and jumping in.

“What…?” Raven starts to say but Clarke grabs her arm, not giving her the time to formulate her thoughts and drags her down, following the panicked girl who is now running back to the shore.

They follow Damian’s forceful breaststroke, bringing him ever closer to the lone figure not so far away from the bank, that is quite apparently struggling to stay above the surface. The figure – the girl’s brother – keeps on disappearing below the waves, before reappearing again, arms flailing all around him.

Clarke has never felt more powerless in her life: she wades into the lake herself, not caring that she’s still fully dressed (or that her boots may not survive this rough treatment), but has to stop before the drop, when she feels the ground giving way under her feet. She can’t go further: she still doesn’t know how to swim.

It’s with a collective sigh of relief that they see Damian reach the drowning boy and grab his torso. It’s an apparent hassle for her second to find his balance with the added weight, but after a short struggle, he seems to get a hang of it and starts to tow the boy behind him, careful to keep his head above water level.

As soon as they reach her, Clarke is there to grab both of them, giving Damian an extra push to the shore and carrying the girl’s brother in her arms, back to the anxious group of people who have now gathered around Raven and the sister.

He’s breathing and hasn’t lost consciousness. He’ll be ok. Scare of a lifetime though, without a doubt. Damian walks by her side, visibly shaken as well by the whole experience and once she’s lain the rescued boy down on the rocky beach, checked him and instructed his sister to start a small fire to keep him warm, she walks back to the grey-eyed boy.

Without really thinking of it, she goes through the motions: she stops him, checks him over (he’s freezing, trembling uncontrollably from head to toe), before she yanks Raven’s dry shirt off of her and instructs him to strip down. But Damian doesn’t react, doesn’t even seem to hear her. So she grabs the many layers that are now clinging to his skin and one by one peels them off.
It’s only when she’s in the middle of vigorously towelling him off with Raven’s top, trying to bring back some warmth into his limbs, that it registers: Damian’s torso is…black. Which is strange, a contrast to his clear eyes and brown skin. In fact, it’s not black as in black skin per se, but more as if his skin is covered in a thick layer of scarred and dead looking flesh.

Her arms stop, hovering in the air, Clarke’s eyes drawn to the sight before her. The stalling of her movements must also snap the boy out of his stupor because he suddenly jerks back from her, eyes wide and horrified, wrapping his arms hastily around his mid-section in a desperate attempt to try and hide his torso.

He takes one step back, away from her. She’s never seen him look so terrified.

“Damian, it’s ok” she starts, but he doesn’t seem to hear her.

He takes a second step back, looks over her shoulder at the group of people who have gone from fussing around the rescued boy to staring at the two of them. And in the blink of an eye, he turns and runs away, quickly disappearing between the trees, leaving Clarke standing there, now clutching Raven’s damp and rumpled shirt.

What just happened?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“I want to play a game, we need a game board, or a deck of cards, Griff. Something to take my mind off my useless workshop partners” Raven sighs.

“Hey, that was mean!” Monty drowsily protests from the other side of the small fire, but he’s too comfortable, lounging in his girlfriend’s arms, to do anything more than half-heartedly scold her. “I’m every bit as brilliant as you are!”

They’re all sitting by the lake enjoying the first real breeze of the day. And by “all”, she actually means all the people she’s slowly starting to think of as family. There’s Raven, Monty, Octavia, Harper, Damian (who is strictly forbidden from drinking but Clarke strongly suspects Raven from sneaking him moonshine whenever she’s not looking: the boy looks cheerier and cheerier by the minute), Wick, Miller and Bryan (the last two are currently involved in a heavy make out session that
Clarke thinks should be forbidden in the presence of single friends), Jasper and Monroe. There’s even Lincoln and Costia, off to the side, talking to each other in low Trigedasleng.

It’s the first time since he attacked her that Jasper is joining them in one of their many evening breaks and his presence feels… unsettling, yet right somehow. Although it highlights more starkly the absence of another brown-haired boy.

She’s glad Damian accepted to join them as well. Ever since the incident at the lake, he’s shunned being around Arkadians and Clarke understands why. She’s seen the looks, heard the whispers. It drives her up the wall but there’s little she can do about it: shouting at them will only call more attention on to him and she knows that’s the last thing the boy wants right now.

She’s never seen him cry but the glistening in his eyes and defeated slump to his shoulders these past days are impossible to ignore. When Raven had come to her, revealing some children have started calling him “Grounder monster” – not just behind his back but also to his face – Clarke had nearly lost it. She’s tried to talk about it with him but he’s categorically refused to broach the topic. In fact, Clarke suspects he’s actively been avoiding her and she wonders if it’s because he blames her for inadvertently revealing his “secret”. He’s gone when she wakes, spends his days holed up with Monty and Raven and is asleep when she returns in the evenings. After he missed a training session with Lincoln and Octavia for the first time though, she personally dragged him out to the open clearing and made him promise to Lincoln he wouldn’t miss any additional ones.

“What are you telling me for,” Clarke counters, “I thought you were the genius?”

“I am, I am, but you’re the artist here. Plus you and Panther over there did a fairly good job on that board-game, what’s it called? Backgammon! So…” (Clarke’s noticed Raven calling the boy “Panther” a couple of times now and wonders if it’s the mechanic’s way of trying to make him feel better.)

The blonde interrupts her before she can continue: “How do you know?”

“Damian showed me of course. A bit repetitive if you ask me, but hey, not like I’m in a position to complain” Raven explains, taking a swig of the bottle they’ve been passing around. “Anyway, we need a group game, not a two people one, keep up Griff.”

The revelation stirs inside of Clarke a mix of happiness over Damian playing with others and sadness, because this was kind of “their thing”. It’s a strange combination and she quickly pushes it aside, pointedly avoiding to look in the direction of her second.
“Deck of cards is actually not a bad idea, I’ve been toying with this one project, but it’s a bit of a strange idea…” she trails off.

“Out with it, Clarke” Octavia interrupts impatiently, leaning forward, her arms on her knees.

“Ok, so, back in the Ark, Wells taught me this card game, Happy Families, do any of you know it?”

Only two nod their heads, which is not surprising: games were a rare treat on the Ark.

“It’s this super simple game from the old world, where you have plenty of different families, consisting every time of the father, the mother, a son and a daughter and the objective for each player is to complete the most families by asking the other players for cards. For example, if I want to assemble the Baker family, I could ask Raven for the daughter or ask Monroe for the father. If they’re in possession of the card, they’re forced to hand it over to me. If they’re not, I lose my turn.’

Monroe gestures as if she were handing something over to her, feigning annoyance. Her friends all nod and Clarke can see Damian now listening intently. It makes her smile, how the boy who had at first found it so hard to warm up to the concept of games, is now avidly seeking partners and opportunities to play the few she’s taught him.

“A deck is easy to fashion out of salvaged cardboard. There’re piles and piles of it lying around” she continues, “and I could do the illustrations.”

“A perfect set of two parents and two children, how very gendered and might I just add: fucked up. No wonder they didn’t want us playing that game in the Ark!” Raven chimes in.

“Yes, exactly, so, I was thinking that instead of the 4 usual figures representing family members, we could make a customized set, you know.”

“How?” Raven frowns in thought, interest peaked. “Most of our parents are dead and Ark families were only allowed one child anyway… Well, except for the freak over there” she adds, gesturing with a playful smirk in Octavia’s direction.

Clarke quickly replies before the discussion can descend into yet another verbal sparring session
between the two girls: “Well, for example, instead of the baker’s family, there could be the 100 family. And instead of it consisting of the baker, his wife and his two children, it could be places or events that are important to us, like the dropship for one, I don’t know” she tells them.

“A 100 family would need a tech genius” Raven cuts in, now fully on board, sitting up and puffing out her chest.

“Technically, you’re not even part of the 100” Monty quips, earning a playful glare from the girl.

“Shut it, Monty, or I file for full custody of our four kids!”

“So, the dropship, an engineer and what else?” Miller brings them back on track.

“The Ground?” Octavia offers, to a collective groan. “Ok, ok, how about Prison Station then!”

“And a princess” Raven says, looking at Clarke.

The blonde fumbles at the suggestion, but is saved from responding by Wick: “Man, 4 is too few, we’d need families of 6 or 8 cards at the very least…”

“We can, there’s no reason we need to stick to four. But wait, I need to write all of this down” Clarke interjects, taking out the small notebook and attached pen Damian had found in the piles of rubbish in Raven and Monty’s workspace and offered her.

“How about a set for Trikru then?” Octavia perks up and Clarke can see they’ve now garnered the attention of the two Trikru warriors as well. “We could have one card with TonDC, if you want to keep a location every time.”

“Mmhh, isn’t it kind of completely destroyed though?” Harper interjects and Clarke doesn’t miss the fleeting look Octavia sends her way.

The Blake sibling forges on: “Yeah, ok, but it’s being rebuilt, right? Anyway, how about a hunky warrior for Lincoln, a healer for Nyko.”
Clarke adds: “A second?” winking in Damian’s direction.

And Costia finishes with: “Polis and the Commander of course”, leaving Clarke to wonder how she will possibly draw Lexa. But that is a problem for another day.

“Should we do one for Mount Weather?” Bryan suggests uncertainly.

Octavia picks it up: “Easy, a bunch of sick inbred murder assholes, acid fog…” After some hesitation, she adds: “A reaper” with clear distaste in her voice. A shudder passes through the usually stoic Lincoln. She finishes with: “and a missile”, throwing Clarke yet another uncomfortable look.

“A turbine or the dam” Raven adds. Noticing the strange looks she’s receiving, she protests: “What? It’s a work of art you guys!”

“And… Cage or Dante Wallace?” Monty finishes, uneasiness lacing his voice.

It’s visceral, the immediate reaction the name evokes. “No, not… no, just no” Clarke stutters. “I… let’s make this a positive game. We can have people, obviously but not…” She doesn’t finish.

The hesitant whisper comes from Jasper then: “We could have a card for Maya?”

Monty nods solemnly at his friend’s suggestion, while Harper deposits a small kiss to the side of his forehead. The silence that settles over the group is heavy and in the day’s retreating light Clarke can see the awkward frowns most of them are now sporting.

She decides to break the tension: “Ok, we need way more families though.”

Octavia turns to Lincoln: “How about more clans, or, Luna and her people?”

“We don’t know them though” Miller argues.
“Ice Nation then” Octavia forges on. “We ran into them a couple of months ago, and well, then they attacked us. If we’ve got a family for Mount Weather, then we can definitely have one for these guys.”

They all turn to Lincoln and Costia for input. “There’s ice?” Lincoln tries, trying to help. Upon hearing their small laughs, he quickly adds: “And the Ice Queen.”

“Then there’s the bitch who led us to Polis last time” Octavia cuts in with venom. “What was her name? Lio?”

“Echo” Raven supplies in a sour tone.

Clarke notes the words “spy bitch = Lio or Echo” down with a question mark in her notebook before reaching for the bottle.

“If you have the Queen, you could also have Roan, her son and heir to the throne” Costia adds.

Clarke stops mid-swig. Moonshine dribbles down her chin, she chokes, spits, coughs and can’t breathe, all more or less at the same time. She doesn’t need a mirror to know that it’s not a pretty sight. Why does this keep on happening to her in front of witnesses, especially in… her presence?

“Watch it, Griffin” Raven exclaims, wiping away the liquid that sloshed on her and leaning dramatically away from the blonde.

Bryan is more considerate and starts gently tapping her in the back. “Are you ok there, Clarke?”

“No reason” she croaks out.

“Yes, Roan, Prince of Azgeda” Costia confirms looking at her intently. “Why?”

“No reason, no reason” Clarke is quick to say, shaking her head a little bit too vehemently and ignoring the suspicious look the liaison sends her way.
Floating Roan of Azgeda. There’s no way… but it would be such a coincidence… Nah, “Roan” is probably one of those very popular names amongst Grounders. Ice Nation families must try to imitate their Queen.

“How come… I mean, I’ve never heard of him before, I didn’t know the Queen had a son” she tries.

“Prince Roan was banished some time ago” Costia replies with a dismissive movement of her hand.

Clarke dissolves into a second coughing fit, Bryan still diligently trying to help her through it.

Well, so much for coincidences…

Fuck (she’s been spending too much time around Raven and it shows. Her mother would disapprove of the swearing).

Wick interrupts her train of thought: “How about one family for the Ark? We could feature the Chancellor, a medic, the Guard, different stations or Unity Day? I don’t know.”

Clarke pushes all thoughts of Roan away and makes sure she takes careful notes of all their suggestions, ideas on illustrations already swimming around in her mind. So far, they’ve got families for the 100; Trikru; The Ark; Skaikru or Arkadia (they haven’t settled on a name for that one yet); Ice Nation and Mount Weather. It’s not enough for a complete deck of course, but it’s a good start. And so what if they’ll be the only ones able to play if this game ever sees the light of day.

She sends Damian a small smile, making sure he’s not struggling with the language, something which is happening less and less lately (her Trigedasleng on the other hand is simply… not happening at all) and tunes back in to the conversation. Octavia is in the middle of explaining they should have a family consisting exclusively of animals they found on the ground, be it the water monster that attacked her, the pauna Clarke’s told them about or the glowing butterflies.

The blonde doesn’t miss Damian’s flinch at the word “monster” and feels a pang in her chest.

Double fuck.
She starts counting.

She doesn’t really know where the impulse is coming from.

Correction: she knows. She’s always been aware that counting was one of her coping mechanisms, along with drawing. Funny that: one used to be a means to escape her fears. She could cover surface over surface with lush representations of a wild and vibrant dreamt up Earth. The other meanwhile used to be a means to keep track of time. Remind her of every single day of hell she still had to serve.

But she’s free now. She even has the drawing materials to evade whatever unpleasantness her current life provides. (Although she’s discovered alcohol has quite the similar tempting attributes.) Speaking of which, she’ll have to give these new pencils Damian snuck away for her a go.

So why is the counting back, all of a sudden?

Why can’t he leave her in peace?

“No way!”

“Trust me, I’d love to find a way to unsee it or pretend it didn’t happen but unfortunately, it did” the blonde replies with a grimace before taking a drag.

Raven turns her head towards her and sits up slightly on her elbows, not without difficulty: “You’re telling me you interrupted your mom. In the heat of the moment. In her consultation room?” At Clarke’s pained nod, she drops back down, continuing: “I mean, that her and Kane are an item isn’t really a surprise, right? And so them getting it on shouldn’t be either. But damn, what I wouldn’t give to have been there!”
“What I would give not to have been there” Clarke echoes with a whiny groan before passing the pipe on.

They’ve apparently lost Octavia, who is currently sprawled out next to Clarke’s right side and has been unable to rain her giggles in ever since Clarke described the scene she had walked in on.

Raven props her head up against Clarke’s left side, before asking: “Was it hot?”

“She’s my mom Raven!” the blonde protests, disgusted.

Octavia dissolves into even louder laughter at her comment.

“Right, right. But was it? I mean, Kane is kind of rocking that beard to be honest, can’t say I haven’t thought of hopping onto that ride myself, if you know what I mean… And well, Abby’s Abby, right, always been quite the goddess. So together… Fireworks, man, Fireworks…” she trails off.

Clarke regrets ever telling them about it (then again she kind of knew she would and did it anyway, so she can only blame herself). Raven has her right arm outstretched towards the sky and is making exploding gestures with her hand, while her left is forming a tunnel around her right eye. She’s muttering things to herself the blonde can barely decipher from where she is: “yeah, that could work, man, this is the best idea in the history of best ideas. The Grounders are going to freak out.”

“Really didn’t need the mental image of you and Kane, thank you very much” Octavia chimes in with a scowl.

This seems to bring her friend back. “Oh, come on O! I don’t know what is sadder, that you now only have eyes for that tall and brooding warrior of yours – I’m not saying he’s not a hunk, because hot damn!” She snickers, before rapidly adding: “Wait, not that I’m looking of course. Anyway. What was I saying? Right, what is sadder: that or that Clarke’s mom is having more fun than she is. Actually, scratch that. I do know: the latter. Definitely the latter.”

Clarke wants to sputter, wants to refute. But she can’t, because well, technically, as she’s just been very unfortunate to witness first hand, it would appear her mother is seeing more action than she is these days.

What a sad sad observation.
“Like you’re one to talk” she pushes Raven’s shoulder and her friend slumps even further down, laughing.

“What?” the mechanic replies in mock affront. ‘I’ll have you know I’ve been quite busy in that department, thank you very much!”

And ok, this is news. Clarke’s been crashing at her atelier often enough recently to be surprised, especially since Raven’s not particularly known for her subtlety or discretion.

“I have you to thank actually. That Elias you invited to come help out with the construction of the houses? Let’s just say the man knows his way around more than just wooden poles” she informs them with a wink to the blonde “Oh, wait, wait, this one is better: he knows his way with wooden poles! No, wait: he’s quite the expert with wooden poles? Ugh, this sounded sexier in my head”.

And ew. Ew. Ew. Ew. Not as ew as barging in on her mother, propped up on her medical table and a shirtless Kane standing between her legs, but ew nonetheless.

“Elias was one of my patients, Ray. This feels… incestuous.”

The mechanic snorts loudly at that: “You’re kidding right? You banged my boyfriend and I can’t touch one of your former patients?”

She’s got a point. It’s the first time they’ve mentioned… him since she’s been back. Clarke is happy to note the exchange doesn’t carry the old bitterness or anger.

Thinking of Finn is still heavy of course. The usual startling queasiness that would go hand in hand with each one of his visits, back when she was on her own, is there. But she feels lighter somehow, knowing that she can talk about him with somebody else, hearing the playfulness in Raven’s tone, the memory of the boy’s eyes slowly eluding her.

“My love life is none of your business anyway” the blonde huffs, going back to their initial discussion (in hindsight, not a smart move).

“What love life?” Octavia asks, in mock-confusion.
“Ha. Ha. Thanks, O, very funny. I... There was something, when I was away. I just didn’t tell you guys about it.”

Her two friends immediately turn to fix her.

“How the f*ck, they were right: you were totally on a sex holiday! That’s great Clarke! Who was it with? What happened? Did you sleep with them?” Octavia wants to know.

Clarke’s pretty sure she’s bright red by now (yes, definitely not a smart move): “Uh… No… Actually… I broke it off… (she barely stops herself from saying “after a kiss”). We just... I… Uh… It didn’t feel right.” Even in the day’s waning light, she’s careful to avoid Raven’s eyes.

There’s an uncomfortable silence then. She can sense her friends don’t know whether to continue mocking her or let the implications of her last words sink in. She decides to let them stew and tries to remember the hot girl’s face. What was her name again? Nadya? Nyala? (And so what if she can’t recall it, the memory of the kiss is very much intact and one she likes to revisit on occasion.)

“I feel you, I feel you. Sometimes it’s just not meant to be, you know? Finn and I, we could go for hours. When we were 14, I think, we used to hide beneath one of the large tables in the mess hall, our lips glued to each other. But if you ever feel lonely Griff, you know where to find me!” Raven offers, wiggling her eyebrows at her and exaggeratedly puckering her lips.

Clarke can suddenly understand, with her hand playing in Raven’s hair and the brunette lying half against her, how Costia could have mistaken them for a couple.

“Seriously though, don’t you… miss it?” Octavia wants to know, bringing them back to this extremely annoying topic of conversation. And Clarke’s pretty sure the Blake sibling isn’t referring to “kissing”. They sound like twelve year olds discussing crushes and sex in veiled terms so a sour-tempered and nosy chaperone can’t follow. The whole conversation is quite surreal.

Of course she misses it. It used to not be on her mind at all, what with Roan, her injury, then Sinchuk and her return to Arkadia. But recently... Clarke has to admit that her thoughts may or may not have strayed. In fact, there might be moments when she regrets turning Nalya (or something) down, all those months ago. She may even have toyed with the idea of going to visit her, but it seemed a bit extreme to go this distance for what would essentially be a booty call. Besides, if she were to leave Arkadia, it’d have to be to go and visit Sinchuk first (Shabir’s invited her a couple of times already, even sending her two large cheeses from his cellar).
She’s tried to make herself come, in the few opportunities for privacy she’s found here and there (one of the major downsides to sharing a room with Raven or Damian – or both). But every time her phantasies inevitably morph into an all too familiar silhouette with soulful eyes and Clarke can’t have that. So, every single time, she stops in the very middle of it and ends up even crankier than before, which is completely counterproductive.

“I mean, I can’t even remember my life before sex. It makes me feel so good, so connected to Lincoln, you know and…”

“I get it, Octavia, thank you, I really don’t want any details” Clarke cuts her short and Raven gives her left arm a light squeeze.

Her friend has the presence of mind to change the topic of conversation. Unfortunately, this brings her back to the images now forever burned into her scarred mind.

“Hold up, aren’t you and your mom kind of on the outs? What were you doing in the medical bay in the first place?”

“Serious, Ray, that’s what you want to know? I need to vent! I need to get this bloody moment out of my head, not rehash it!” Clarke argues, grumbling, but her friend only chuckles. “My mom wants to see Damian. I was going to tell her to back off” the blonde reveals.

“Why would you want to do that? What’s the problem with her seeing him? Wait, why does Damian need to see your mom?” Octavia wants to know.

“He doesn’t, that’s the very reason why she needs to back off!” the blonde replies. “I know her. She doesn’t want to see him for a chat, she wants to check him. She wants to see for herself what everybody’s been talking about. You know, Damian’s, well… It’s not really a condition, right, but let’s say the skin on his torso.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Makes sense” Raven replies from far away. But after a beat, she adds: “And that’s a bad thing because…” She lets the sentence hang and passes the pipe over to Octavia, who lights it up again.

Clarke sighs, exasperated. “She wants and I quote to “see if she can do something about it”. Can you believe her? Damian’s floating fine as he is.”
Raven doesn’t seem to agree with her: “And yet I remember you urging me to let your mother examine my hip and leg … Kind of contradictory, Griff.”

But Clarke’s given this a lot of thought: “You were in pain, Ray! You were shot and then injured! Damian, it’s not an injury, it’s not a skin condition, it’s just how he is.”

Her friend doesn’t seem very swayed: “If you put it this way, I guess I can sort of see your point?” she relents, more question than statement.

“And while we’re on the subject, if I remember correctly, after Mount Weather, you were the first one to give us a hard time about seeing a doctor” Clarke adds as an afterthought, with no real bite to it.

“That was different” is all Raven replies, coldness seeping into her tone and the blonde immediately regrets her jab.

It’s Octavia who chimes in: “Did you ask Damian what he thinks and what he wants, before going off on your mom? He’s clearly struggling with it himself…”

And if Clarke could reply in the affirmative, she would. Only the boy first avoided her like the pest, making it impossible to have such a conversation. And now, well now he’s gone, so that discussion will have to wait.

She shakes her head no: “I wanted to, but he refused to talk about it with me and I also don’t want to give him false hopes, you know?” When a sudden memory crosses her mind, she nudges Octavia with her right foot: “By the way, can I ask what you told him?”

“Uh?”

She clarifies: “The other day, he came back from your evening training looking almost happy, or at least happier. I hadn’t seen him like this since before the drowning incident. I figured you or Lincoln must have spoken with him…?”

“Oh that. Yeah. Man, what happened at the lake really did a number on him! He was down for a
whole week, not really into the sparring, not paying attention... Even Harper managed to land some blows and Damian’s usually way too fast for that to happen. He’s not very strong, but he’s damn good at dodging. Lincoln tried to get him to snap out of it. I thought he may be more comfortable in discussing the issue in Trigedasleng, you know? Not that he couldn’t do that with me, but maybe with another guy... I don’t know. Anyway, it didn’t really work, he didn’t open up. So I took him aside after a session and we talked. It was a good chat actually. He’s... he’s smart. You’re lucky to have him. Or I guess he’s lucky to have you” she finishes sheepishly.

Clarke’s pretty sure the former’s closer to the truth, but won’t correct her: the moment feels too much like officially burying the hatchet between them and Clarke wouldn’t taint it for anything.

“But what exactly did you two talk about?” she prods further, feeling like prying (but she really wants to know).

“It wasn’t long or anything, I just found this book in Bell’s room: “The Iliad” and remembered he used to read it to me, back in the Ark. There’s this one warrior, Achilles, who as a child is plunged into the river Styx by his mother, to make him immortal, untouchable. It’s as if his skin is impervious to harm. As a kid I would always wonder how that would look. I just told Damian the story and that I think Achilles would look like he does, you know. That it’s nothing to feel ashamed of, that it just makes him special. A good kind of special.”

Clarke and Raven mull their friend’s comparison over.

“Oh, and I also gave him the book. He asked for it, I hope you don’t mind…”

Clarke’s not sure whether she should be furious or thankful (except she is: she’s furious). She bites her tongue and tries to remain calm: “So you basically hinted at Damian potentially being invincible before seeing him off with Lincoln and failed to mention that Achilles ends up dead? Really O?”

Octavia doesn’t appear sheepish at all. She simply shrugs: “Achilles doesn’t die in the book, Clarke, I checked. And what Damian doesn’t know won’t kill him. Look, it did the trick, didn’t it?”

Her two friends stay silent after that before Octavia switches to a completely different topic, addressing Raven: “So that thing with Wick is over and done with then? He’s a cool guy, shame it didn’t work out between the two of you.”

And isn’t this night full of revelations! “Wait, what? You had a thing with Wick?” Clarke asks,
surprised, previous concern over the crap Octavia may have put into Damian’s head almost forgotten (almost).

Raven ignores her and sighs wistfully: “That thing was never really meant to last, O. Wick and I, we’re better off as friends. Plus now that he’s joined Monty and me in the atelier, well, it’d be awkward to date a colleague I see day in day out, you know? It’s like Griff said: I wasn’t feeling it”

“Have I really been the only one with nothing happening in the… in that department?” Clarke wonders, before clapping her mouth shut upon realizing she’s voiced her question out loud.

“Sorry kiddo” Raven pats her stomach in a weird angle “Better luck next time. Though O’s right, Wick’s a really cool guy, if you’re ever interested, I could put in a good word for you, see if he’d be keen.”

Clarke grimaces. No, thanks! “So, Wick, Elias, how many more people I know have you actually been with?” she huffs.

“Not sure you’d like the answer to that question” the mechanic quips back mysteriously.

A grave strategic error: now both Clarke and Octavia absolutely want to know. When Raven remains tight-lipped, the two girls launch themselves on top of her, a half wrestling-, half tickling-assault that has her breathless within seconds.

Raven finally holds her hands up in surrender in-between fits. “Ok, ok, I give. I'll tell you, but you can’t claim I didn’t warn you. Here we go: I may have shared a little moment with Bellamy.”

This has the expected effect of immediately and completely shutting her two attackers up.

Clarke is… Clarke doesn’t really know how she feels about that little piece of information. She’s happy her friend’s found people to share those moments with. That one of them was Bellamy though… Not that there is or ever was anything between her and the brown haired boy. No. (Ok, so she may have wondered on a few occasions. But more because she was surprised no romantic entanglements had ever developed from her friendship with the boy – who, let’s be honest, is not exactly hard on the eyes – and less because she wanted it to.) In fact, there was never any ambiguity with Bellamy, never sudden tension at an accidental brush of skin, never lingering hands or eyes. So, no, she’s not upset per se.
It’s just… she doesn’t really see these two together. And maybe the news is only bittersweet because of the boy’s absence? It certainly helps to contextualize Raven’s strong feeling of guilt…

“No way, not my **brother** Raven!” Octavia whines, sitting up and furiously rubbing her hands off on her thighs. “Take it back!”

“Sorry” Raven replies unapologetically, holding her two hands up before taking a long drag.

“Urgh, how am I supposed to look at you now?” the Blake sibling continues, frowning at her hands and earning a snort from the mechanic.

Now that they’ve mentioned his name, Clarke can’t really think of anything else. She’s hesitant though, because she’s never broached the topic with Octavia’s around.

“Have… How is your brother doing, O?” she finally asks.

Octavia throws her arms up in the air and grumbles: “How the hell am I supposed to know? I haven’t seen him since their botched attack on the Trikru army in TonDC.”

“Wait, they don’t let you in to see him?” Clarke gets up on her elbows, incredulous and ready to launch into a rant about their new leaders. But Octavia’s next words sober her up just as fast.

“I wish. No, I can. I mean, I could. I think. I just… I just haven’t been in to see him” she reveals quietly.

Oh. Shit. Clarke knows none of their other friends have visited the detainee, so if Octavia hasn’t either, then… Shit. Shit. Shit. (She really needs to stop with the swearing.)

“Why not?” Raven presses.

Octavia replies immediately, a little on the defensive: “Probably for the same reason you haven’t.”
And well, fair enough. Octavia doesn’t seem too keen on continuing on this particular subject, but now all Clarke can see is her friend, Bellamy, all alone, hunched over in a dark cell.

“Do you think we should?” she asks the young warrior, uncertainty lacing her voice.

Octavia simply shrugs: “You guys do what you want. I’m not going. As long as he thinks we need him to protect us from Trikru and that protection goes through preventively killing people. Wait, scratch that, as long as he’s ready to pull a gun on Lincoln, that guy’s not my brother” she states resolutely, crossing her arms over her chest.

Clarke and Raven exchange a silent look. They’ll have to discuss this just the two of them later.

“How’s the trial going?” is Clarke’s next question.

The brunette seems to perk up slightly. “It’s almost over. The Commission’s reviewed each of their cases, held private audiences and decided to give them all the choice between banishment for life from Arkadia or staying with Skaikru – the condition being that they then have to serve ten years of community service in a Trikru village, before they can return.”

“Oh” Clarke’s surprised she missed this.

“It all happened when you were out, after Jasper… Now all that’s left is for each of them to choose” Octavia explains.

Raven snickers: “Quite genius to force them to offer their time and energy to a Trikru community. But wait, shouldn’t the commission be afraid they’ll attack people there? Monty says that all his mom ever talks about these days is how inferior and dangerous Trikru are. How they all need to be wiped out for our own protection…”

Octavia grins: “It was Costia’s idea. She figures those who are really sorry and reconsidering their previous beliefs will choose the community service option, which hopefully should show them how alike we all are and further prove Trikru are not a threat. And those who would still kill Trikru would surely rather be banished than willingly spend time surrounded by them or worse, working for them…”

“You’ve been talking with Costia?” Clarke suddenly interrupts her.
Her friend shrugs: “Yeah, she’s been helping me with learning archery. I’m trying to stay in shape for when Indra takes me back” she responds with a fierce grin, flexing her biceps, before asking “Why?”

Clarke shrugs: “No reason, just curious.”

Octavia’s eyes light up and she adds: “She’s one hell of a fighter, I can tell you that. I kind of hated her guts in the beginning, what with her and Lincoln being so close and even more so after she delivered the Commander’s order for him to fight the pauna, but as a warrior? Wow! She can even take Lincoln, you know? Beats him every single time! She was Indra’s second, actually.”

“To come back to Clarke’s love life” Raven starts over, earning her a collective groan, ‘I wouldn’t mind helping you out you know’ and then, upon realizing how that sounded, she hastily adds ‘I mean as your wing woman! I could scope people out for you. Doesn’t have to be Wick. I could vet them and then pass them on.’ She seems sincerely convinced this is a good idea. Clarke isn’t though, so she mulls it over. It’s not like she’s got much to lose, right? And she has been feeling quite lonely lately. Or even just to release some tension… She doesn’t think Raven would go for the same type of people she would, but then again Finn and Bellamy are quite the glaring counterexamples… So why not accept?

She hesitantly agrees: “What exactly would the vetting process entail?” thinking she’d rather not share even more bed partners with the brunette. Raven excitedly sits up, rubbing her hands together and ignores her question.

“Awesome, it’s decided! So, just to clarify: what are we talking about these days? Something serious? Some fun with no strings attached? Some wham bam thank you, but I’ll be sleeping in my own cot tonight? What would you like? Guy? … Girl?”

She adds the last part as if it were common knowledge, as if Clarke’s made it a habit to discuss her sexual orientation with her or shouted her preference over the rooftops. Two things the blonde is pretty sure she hasn’t done. As a matter of fact: she’s 100% sure she’s never discussed any of that, not with Raven and not with anybody from the Ark. Except for Wells, but that conversation had happened a very long time ago. She had made him swear on his chess board to never tell anybody else and they had only talked about it in the first place because he had walked in on her with her hands up Jessie’s skirt. (Jessie whom Wells had had the tiniest crush on for the longest time. The boy hadn’t talked to her for a whole month after that).

She’s also 200% mortified now. Great.
So this time, Clarke is definitely spluttering. (They really need to find some different topics of conversation.) It takes her quite a while to regain her breath. Octavia’s remained suspiciously quiet: no exclamation of surprise, no snickering, nothing.

“How…” she starts, her voice quite raw from the lack of air.

Raven scoffs: “Please. With the amount of time you spent in Commander bitchface’s tent? There’s **no** way all you two did in there was discuss strategy.”

She can’t breathe.


That’s it: she’s going to die while discussing her sex and love life with her two closest friends. How bloody pathetic.

Clarke’s coughing so hard she has to sit up, which makes both girls groan when the movement dislodges them from their comfortable positions reclining against her sides.

“What? No. We didn’t. What are you talking about?” she croaks out.

“You want me to believe you two never acted on all that sexual tension between you?”

“What…? Lexa’s not… I wasn’t… There’s no… She’s taken Ray, she’s with Costia, you know that.”

“So… you’re admitting you would have gone for it, if she had been available?” Raven asks with a glint in her eye the blonde is not sure she likes. Actually, she’s sure she doesn’t.

“No, I’m saying you can’t throw things like that out there, especially not here. If Costia hears you talk like this, she’s going to misunderstand and think…”
“That you were thirsting for her girlfriend?” Raven fills in for her.

She just absolutely can not catch a break today!

“Let her breathe, Raven, the poor thing is going to suffocate to death if you continue” Octavia chimes in, rubbing soothing abstract figures over Clarke’s back.

But the blonde doesn’t miss the small teasing tone in her voice. Great, if they both gang up on her, she’s never going to survive the evening. Once she’s got her breathing back under control, Octavia lies back down again.

And well, she might as well rip the band aid off: “Ok, for the record, I do like girls, yes, but no, not Lexa, I wouldn’t… I can’t… I don’t know what you think you saw but there’s absolutely nothing going on there. Nothing. Nada."

“Mhhh”, Raven mutters unconvinced before a smile takes over again.

“What?” Clarke wants to know, suspicious.

“Nothing, I just remembered Jasper and Monty owe me now.”

Her friends will never seize to surprise her: “You bet on me?”

“We did” Raven admits unashamed.

“What are the stakes?” Octavia asks from Clarke’s right side. “And why wasn’t I invited to participate?”

“We wagered a year-long supply of moonshine” Raven shares proudly, conveniently forgetting Octavia’s second question.
“Nice!” the Blake sibling exclaims, bringing her hand up for a blind high five over Clarke’s body. The blonde shakes her head. At least they now seem to have moved on from discussing her, so that could be seen as progress, no?

“How are you holding up, O?” Raven throws back, lifting her head to look at Octavia. Lincoln had left the previous day on his “mission impossible” (as they had started to call it after Octavia had completely lost it, when she had overheard the two of them refer to it as “the suicide mission”), a heavy bag with Raven’s freshly made hand grenades, dynamite sticks and remote detonators slung over his shoulder… With Damian in tow.

Clarke had refused, argued, raged, even pleaded. Then she had very maturely ignored and frozen him out. But Damian had in not so many words told her it was his decision, not hers. She had tried to pull rank: wasn’t a second supposed to obey orders from his mentor? But the boy had deflected, arguing that he had to do this to prove himself worthy of her mentorship in the first place. Which made no sense. Until Lincoln had confirmed that young Trikru are known to engage in risky operations, in order to catch the eye of their desired mentor and be chosen as a second. A young Lincoln for instance had tried to catch a panther alive and still has the claw marks to show for it. (Clarke can’t help but fleetingly wonder what unique feat Costia accomplished, to have Indra choose her.)

Octavia wraps herself a little bit tighter in Lincoln’s jacket and sighs. “I… I don’t know. I’m pissed he refused I accompany him. Scared because it’s the floating pauna we’re talking about and damn Clarke, sometimes I really wish I hadn’t asked you to describe it to me. But he’s strong, you know. He’s got all your stuff with him and he’s got Helios… He’s been training for weeks. I don’t know how much help your second is going to be – no offense. But I know he’s going to be ok. He has to be.”

“He will be” Clarke lifts her right hand to clasp the brunette’s. “They both will.”

“Lincoln’s smart, he’ll set the perfect trap for it. That gorilla or whatever is no match for this many explosives, trust me!” Raven adds.

“I’m surprised you’re not more pissed about this, to be honest” Clarke voices, remembering her own confrontation with Costia a couple of months ago and how incensed she had been.

“You’re kidding right? I’m so floating pissed. I swear, if that floating Heda of theirs had been there when Lincoln told me...” she leaves it hanging between the three of them, without needing to be more explicit. “She’s sending him to battle a floating monster whose lair is littered with corpses. As if that’s not enough, they’ll be right next to Ice Nation and we’ve all heard about their frequent incursions into Trikru territory! And to top of it all off, there’s Lincoln. Floating Lincoln, who’s all
“You need to understand, *niron*. These are our ways, *niron*. You can not come with us, my love.”

I’m so angry at him for going along with it! And I’m here, like an idiot, waiting for his return like a floating housewife, pretending to understand why Damian going is ok but me coming isn’t!”

Done wit her rant, she adds with a wry smile: “I made him sleep in the forest for 10 whole days I was so pissed.”

That’s a lot of floats, but her friend’s rant is somehow reassuring, more in character with the fiery girl Clarke has gotten to know. Until what her friend just mentioned about Ice Nation hits home and shit, Clarke hadn’t thought of that additional threat. She had secretly made Lincoln promise on everything he held dear (basically: Octavia) that he would keep Damian out of harm’s way. Because if anything happens to the boy, Clarke doesn’t know how she’ll live with herself.

Despite the quite heavy topics of conversation, Clarke is, by now, quite high. Completely, utterly, head over heels, irredeemably flying. In her defence, Octavia had been down, moping all alone in her empty little house and it had been Raven’s idea to try one of Monty and Jasper’s latest experiments with Trikru plants to cheer her up. And fuck does the boys’ new discovery pack a punch. Admittedly, Clarke hadn’t exactly put up much of a fight at her friend’s suggestion, feeling quite mopy herself, but… that’s just footnotes. Besides, if Octavia has the right to let loose because Lincoln’s gone, then so does she. And after what she just saw in sick bay? Anything goes!

The trio is lounging on the lake banks just down from Octavia’s house (where they’ll all likely crash later, as the girl’s indicated she doesn’t want to spend the night alone) and the breeze from the lake carries with it the soft promise of a good night’s sleep. The more the night stretches on, the less sense her friends seem to make. Clarke herself is pretty sure she still has all her faculties (if you leave aside the flying part) until she realises she’s standing (or rather swaying) half naked and challenging her two compatriots to a skinny dip under the moonlight in approximate *Trigedasleng*. Why or how she switched to the Trikru language is unclear. But the water looks glorious and no amount of reasoning – strangely enough from Octavia – will deter her from jumping in. She stumbles and falls as soon as she enters the water. Which could be considered a blessing in disguise, as Clarke decides to stay down and gets comfortable, sitting in the shallow refreshing water. She’s soon joined by Raven and a grumbling Octavia and the three girls proceed to splash the rest of the night away.

She dreams of Jessie that night. Of a pretty girl sending shy smiles her way. Of her left-cheek dimple and crooked tooth. Of how exhilarating it had felt to feel a girl unravel around her fingers for the first time.
It’s one of those days where no amount of shade will help: as soon as one steps outside, one will inevitably feel as if their body is liquefying on the spot. They’ve suspended all construction (the very last batch of houses is almost finished), brick fabrication and farming because of the blistering heat. Most Arkadians have sought refuge inside their small and cool newly-constructed houses instead.

Most. Two people can currently be found lounging in the small shade in front of Raven and Monty’s atelier. (Technically, they should stop calling it so, since several people have now joined them – Raven is already talking about expanding – but the mechanic continues to argue that it still very much is her and Monty’s, they’ve just “generously accepted to host a couple of extra geeks – on a strict probationary basis of course”.)

She’s dragged away from her thoughts when Raven breaks the silence: “Say what you will about the Commander (and God knows I’ve said a lot), but the bitch’s got taste.”

It takes Clarke a moment to understand what – or rather who – Raven is referring to. Costia is currently in the process of… undressing, a few yards away from them. Raven makes a sound that resembles a broken low whistle but Clarke doesn’t really register it. The blonde remains silent. In all honesty, it’d be pretty difficult for her to say anything, considering her brain seems to have conveniently short circuited. Plain and simple.

If there’s something Clarke really doesn’t need, it’s visual confirmation of how beautiful the girl is, and yet here she is: with her hair in long tresses falling over her shoulders, slender but strong and well-defined upper arms, full round breasts covered only in tight Grounder bindings, a flat stomach and these bloody legs that go on for days. It’s unfair really that she would have to compete with… well, that. Profoundly unfair.

Why this is a competition in the first place – or what they would be competing for – Clarke’s not sure. And she’s not 100% sure it’d be a “what” instead of a “who”.

Her shameless ogling comes to an untimely end when Costia joins Octavia in the water. She dives under, enjoining an apprehensive-looking Blake girl to do the same. Costia moves like a fish in the water – a beautiful and elegant fish. Octavia’s style on the other hand could best be described as enthusiastic thrashing.

Raven sends the blonde a knowing look: “As reluctant as I am to bring that subject of conversation back on the table, you need to get laid, Griffin. You’re drooling.”

It’s probably not true but Clarke is so concentrated on trying to hide her angry blush from her friend that she unconsciously wipes at her mouth.
To distract her friend, she asks: “What are they up to?” nodding towards the two women on the lake’s edge.

“Octavia wants to learn to swim. Costia accepted to teach her” Raven explains. At a gesture from Costia, who’s resurfaced, the mechanic continues: “And that’s my cue.”

She jumps down from the large rock she was sitting on with a slight wince and proceeds to strip as well, starting with her new upgraded brace (she’s disturbingly started calling it “Little Ray”). Once she’s in nothing but her underwear, she leaves Clarke with a small wave and catches up to the other two.

The blonde doesn’t mind being left alone. From her perch on a low branch of the tree that was offering them shade, she has a perfect view of the scintillating lake. She takes out her small notebook and starts drawing – more sketching really – small pieces, thinking she’ll gift them to Damian when he and Lincoln come back. She suppresses the worry, that inevitably comes up whenever her thoughts drift to the two of them.

In the beginning, they had been able to follow their progress through Arkadia’s radio network with the neighbouring villages, but then had come the time for them to go under and start tracking the rampaging beast inside the thick forest. Clarke and her friends haven’t heard from them since (which hasn’t exactly helped improve Octavia’s mood).

She misses Damian. Very much so, in fact. It’s no surprise, considering the boy’s been a constant presence at her side over the past 9 months. And yet, surrounded by her friends, she hadn’t expected to feel so…unbalanced in his absence. Only a handful of people make Arkadia home and Damian is one of them. She misses the way he would pester her in the mornings to get her out of bed (“accidentally” splashing a glass of ice cold water on her face on more than one occasion). She misses his animated descriptions of Raven’s or Monty’s work and his hilarious recounting of radio exchanges with the Trikru villages in the vicinity (static and in general poor reception quality had led to more than just a few priceless misunderstandings). She misses the look of pure joy that would cross his features every single time he asks another player for the card of the Seken when their group is playing Happy Families.

She draws the detail of the tree’s bark and the moss covering it in some places, the different shades of green and brown, the intricate design on the skin of the lizard that’s lounging in the spot Raven was sitting in not so long ago, the rocks covered in algae and the small crab chancing from time to time a peek out from a crack but retracting its claws just as fast. And if the last shape she draws resembles a bathing Trikru warrior, dark skin glistening in the water, she doesn’t want to know.

After a while, the three girls swim back to shore, Costia in the lead, and get out of the water. Raven walks with ease, her limp almost completely forgotten.
“Did you see? Clarke, did you see that?” Octavia asks her, excited, breaking the blonde out of her reverie.

She nods, not paying attention. She did not. Because she was still focusing on putting the final touches to her sketches of course and not because she was too distracted by the sight of Costia rising out of the water.

“Totally nailed that crawling thing! Right Costia? It’s kids’ stuff, really” Octavia states proudly, puffing out her chest and grabbing a piece of cloth to dry her hair.

It takes their teacher a while to respond: “Your performance was… acceptable for a first day. There is however considerable room for improvement” she finally agrees, with a slight frown in Clarke’s direction and the blonde can only hope she didn’t catch her staring earlier.

Raven adds: “I could totally get used to swimming all the time. It’s… freeing, somehow, not to feel my leg as this… weight I need to lug around…” She then pats her knee and mutters “Sorry pal” before she continues, louder and fully turning to Clarke: “We should make it compulsory for all to learn actually, considering what happened the other day. If Damian hadn’t been there, that boy would have drowned. None of us could have helped.”

Clarke realizes with a start that the three girls around her have become silent and are now all looking at her expectantly (how or why she zoned out is unclear and has definitely nothing to do with the path several drops of water have decided to take, trickling from Costia’s neck down to the swell of her breasts). Octavia’s standing right in front of her, her hand on the blonde’s arm, while Raven’s reaching for her shirt.

“Uh, sorry, did you ask something?” she mumbles.

“Yes, you kind of spaced out on us there. Is everything ok? Is it the heat? Did you stay in the sun for too long?”

When Clarke gives a small shake of her head, the Blake sibling continues: “I was saying: are you sure you don’t want to learn to swim, Clarke? Raven’s right, it’d be really useful. You never know when you may end up needing it…”

Clarke shakes her head quickly: “No it’s ok, thanks.”
She’s good right where she is. Besides, she can’t really afford any Arkadian seeing the long white scar Jasper’s attack left (not sure she herself is used to seeing it either).

Were she not so lost in her own thoughts, she would have seen the look her two closest friends exchange and the dangerous glint in Raven’s eyes. Next thing she knows, she’s being pulled back by Octavia who’s manoeuvred an arm around her neck and Raven’s trying to take a hold of her legs.

“What...? Raven...? Let go of me... What are you doing?” she says, in alarm. As soon as she realises where this is going, she starts fighting Octavia’s hold in earnest, kicking her legs in the air to prevent the mechanic from grabbing onto them. “Guys no, this is not funny, I’m fully clothed. Guys, I’m serious. Raven, no! Costia, do something” she shouts a little desperately at the girl, who’s observing them with a curious grin, arms crossed over her chest.

It takes much more pleading and struggling before the Trikru finally steps up to the trio. She sends Clarke a look full of mirth, swats with no effort whatsoever Raven’s arms away and in the blink of an eye, has managed to push Octavia off of her.

But before the blonde can thank her or even take a relieved breath, Costia steps closer, right into her space and with one swoop movement, she has Clarke hoisted up, bent over her right shoulder, her arm reaching back to hold her legs firmly in place. She can hear her friend’s surprised laughter but is too shocked to do anything.

At the exact moment she finally starts kicking the woman in the back with her legs, she’s suddenly unceremoniously thrown over, head first, into the water.

Cold. Cold. Cold. COLD. The water’s freezing. And to think she was having such a nice and relaxing day...

As soon as she breaks the surface again, sputtering, she’s launching herself in pursuit of the traitor. She kicks, balances her weight out with her arms outstretched to her sides and is about to catch up with the brown-haired girl when she becomes aware that she is definitely not able to touch the bottom with her feet anymore.

The realization brings her movements to a screeching halt, her spine rigid with cold dread. Her clothes are clinging to her uncomfortably, the added weight messing with her equilibrium. Far from looking alarmed at the precarious situation Clarke finds herself in, Costia is sporting an infuriatingly wide smirk. That’s when the blonde realizes she literally swam into her trap, when she followed her
out into deeper waters. She’s now utterly at her mercy.

The water, the clothes, the adrenaline, it all brings back the flash of a sensory memory to her: jumping down from the Mountain ledge into a cascading thunder; feeling the rush of the rapids all around, this immense pressure on her body that’s pushing her further down, away from the surface, away from the light; the most horrible feeling of all: running out of air; the instinct to breathe and yet the certainty that it’s not possible; the suffocating burn; and finally the darkness.

She goes under, her arms thrashing around, trying desperately to keep her head above water. But all it achieves is to push more water into her mouth, into her eyes, into her nose. The salty water triggers her gag reflex. Her ears are ringing. She’s in complete panic mode, can’t think, can’t see, can’t hear.

There’s a sudden force. One that instead of dragging her down lifts her up, back to the light, back to the surface. In her confused mind, she wonders if the strong arms circling her waist belong to Anya.

But it’s not Anya. Anya’s dead. It’s Costia.

The girl must have sensed her distress, because her previous grin is replaced by sincere worry. “Clarke, can you hear me? I am here, you’re safe” she whispers reassuringly, slipping her left arm under the blonde’s legs, her right hand holding Clarke’s head out of the water.

Clarke grabs on to her neck, holding on for dear life. She takes one big breath, chokes. Her chest feels too tight. She coughs water out before she takes a second breath, followed by a third.

“You’re safe”, Costia repeats, firm hand keeping Clarke’s head against her collar bone. The blonde can hear the concern in her voice but her focus is on regaining her breath.

“I’m sorry”, she gulps out, panting.

Costia interrupts her: “Clarke… You have nothing to apologize for. If anything, I am the one who is sorry. I shouldn’t have dragged you out here. I am so very very sorry”.

Clarke doesn’t think she’s seen the girl look so… openly honest before.
“Shall I swim us back to shore?” she continues, but Clarke’s grip on her grows instinctively more desperate.

“Can we just… can we just wait for a moment?” the blonde asks, her breathing still ragged.

“Of course” the Trikru replies, stilling her movements. Clarke can feel her legs moving below to keep the two of them above surface.

Costia’s arms slowly manoeuver to rearrange their position and Clarke finds herself with her legs around the liaison’s waist and her forehead resting on her shoulder. She can feel the panic slowly receding. She doesn’t know how long they stay like this, two floating silhouettes, intertwined. Costia remains silent throughout. She doesn’t pry, doesn’t ask. Patiently waits for Clarke to recover.

As traumatic as the whole experience has been, it does quite convincingly illustrate her friends’ point: learning to swim could indeed prove useful.

She lifts her head off the Trikru’s shoulder: “Am I too heavy?”

Costia gives a small laugh, accompanied by a shake of her head.

Clarke wants to explain, wants to tell her about the Mountain, about her escape, about Anya. But she doesn’t.

“Could you… You… I think I’m feeling better now” she starts, not knowing how to ask the Trikru. She hates how weak her voice sounds, hates how helpless she feels.

“Would you like me to bring us back to the banks?”

Clarke squeezes her thighs, relieved. “Yes. Please.”
“I’m ready” she exclaims, slightly breathless, once she reaches the Trikru’s tent.

“For…”

“For you to take me” she elaborates, trying to strengthen her resolve.

…

The dark-skinned girl remains speechless and if Clarke weren’t so concentrated on what lies ahead, she’d find the various stages Costia’s face goes through quite entertaining.

…

“I… Clarke… Are you feeling well?”

“Yes, yes, I mean, not going to lie, I’m maybe a little bit… scared, you know. Well, you saw. Not that I doubt your skills in any way, though. I mean, look at you, you’re so strong! But I think I’m ready. You know what, I may even be a little bit excited at the prospect!” Although she’s saying in essence the truth, she’s aware she’s laying it a bit thick with the enthusiasm. What Costia doesn’t know though, is that it’s less for her benefit than for Clarke’s own.

…

Costia continues to stare at her with guarded bewilderment. She takes one step forward, peering at Clarke intently. “Are you currently inebriated?”

The blonde frowns. “What? No, why would you ask me that? Why, do you think it would help with the nerves?”

Costia takes a hasty step back, scowling. Yes, Clarke’s definitely never seen her so out of sorts.

“I am… flattered, Clarke. I really am” she starts, with a nervous bounce of her leg.
Why does she feel like a “but” is coming? This makes no sense, Costia herself had been the one to offer… Why would she take the time with Raven and Octavia and not with her?

“And you are… a very… uh…” the liaison continues.

“Have you asked her yet?” Octavia interrupts, poking her head into the tent.

“I have, I am!” Clarke replies, irritated at the disruption.

“So…” Octavia replies, impatience lacing her voice. “Come on, we don’t have all day! The sun will set soon. If we don’t go now, then we won’t even get to swim for a full hour!”

It’s Costia’s turn to interrupt: “Swimming?”

“Yes. I was wondering if you’d take me to the lake. Remember, you volunteered to teach me the other day?” Clarke presses on.

“This… All you wanted… You’d like me to teach you how to swim?”

That’s an awful lot of different ways to repeat what is essentially the same idea, but maybe Costia’s a little bit tired and slow today.

“Yes! Please. I mean, if the offer still stands of course…”

Costia erupts into loud guffaws, doubling over. The scene is so… out of the ordinary, for the girl who is usually always so put-together and proper that it leaves both Clarke and Octavia gawking at her, open-mouthed, uncomprehending.

Costia reigns it in for long enough to ask: “And you would like me to take you now?”

What is going on? Clarke shakes her head, trying to find possible reasons for the girl’s sudden
hilarity. “If you have the time, yes” she clarifies.

It takes Costia another 20min to tone her amusement down, which leads Octavia to proclaim she’ll just take a headstart and that they can join her whenever they’re ready. Once they finally reach the lake shore – Raven and Octavia already racing each other – Clarke has to fight with her own shyness when taking her top off. It’s less about nudity – although Clarke would like to think anybody in their right mind would feel slightly timid when undressing in front of somebody as gorgeous as Costia – and more due to the long and angry scar now adorning her stomach, courtesy of one aggrieved Jasper.

“Are you sure, Clarke?” Costia wants to know, when the blonde sinks the tip of her toes in, testing the waters.

Fuck it’s cold. Was it really that cold last week?

“T’m sure” she replies with exaggerated resolve.

Costia throws an uncertain glance her way before looking out over the lake. She finally gives a small jerk of her head. “Fine. Your friends learnt in shallower waters. But the process may be faster out there. What would you prefer? I promise I won’t let you drown either way” she adds the last part as an afterthought.

She’s come this far after all, she might as well make the most of it! “Let’s… Let’s do deeper waters then.”

The lesson starts out surprisingly pleasant. Costia is gentle in her movements, careful never to let her out of arm’s length throughout. Clarke first learns to float on her back. She relaxes her iron grip on the woman’s shoulder to try to lean back into the water.

Clarke will not think about the fact that she is quite literally in Costia’s arms right now (bridal style!), let alone mention the fact that the woman’s practically naked. Nope. Will not think about it and most important of all, will not acknowledge it.

She’s startled to realize on her 5th attempt that Costia is not holding her up anymore at all. She is floating! She breaks into a wide smile, looking up with excitement into the Trikru’s eyes. But the movement throws her balance off and in her effort to remain in position, she suddenly inhales a lot of water. A most unpleasant sensation she is not particularly fond of. Costia is there once again to catch
her though and Clarke bursts into nervous laughter.

“God, I’m so pathetic” she manages to choke out in-between fits.

Costia only smiles warmly at her: “You are doing well, but you need to let go. The water will carry you, so just let it.” When the blonde’s calmed down, the liaison softly taps the point right between her two eyebrows and follows it up with a tap to her sternum: “Your strength and control come from here. Concentrate. Focus on you, your breathing, your body, your power. Forget the water, forget me, forget everything around you.”

Easier said than done!

To her credit, Clarke does try her best to empty her mind and focus on these two points, as instructed. Costia swims slightly away but leaves her hand in the blonde’s left. With her words on repeat, Clarke tunes everything out, lets the feeling of calm wash over her and loses herself in the sensation of a cool surface effortlessly supporting her weight and a brilliant sky above her.

It works.

She lets go of Costia’s hand without even noticing it.

The feeling is quite indescribable and Clarke swears she could spend entire days lying back like this. It’s not the bubbling happiness of her first dip with Finn. Nor the rush of jumping after a desperate Anya into the unknown either. It’s peace. Pure and simple. Maybe the very first time she experiences it on Earth, as a matter of fact. The thought is... jarring. The whole world around her is reduced to a few certainties right now: her body; the water; the sky. A troubled but resilient soul confined to a tired shape, in the sole company of immensity. The immensity of nature, the immensity of this Earth.

Maybe the most surprising is the level of noise – static almost – in her ears. Sure, the water does drown out the sounds of the outside world. She can not hear Costia’s quiet encouragements or Raven’s and Octavia’s lazy banter on the shore anymore. But the silence is full. There’s this chirping or crackling coming from deep below. It’s not unpleasant, a reminder of the flutter of activity beneath her.

It reminds her of the constant thrumming of the Ark. Sometimes irritating. Always reassuring.
Learning to swim – and not just float – is a whole other ordeal and Clarke can feel her frustration mounting proportionally with each mouthful of water she swallows every time she fails to reproduce a somewhat satisfactory breaststroke. But damn it, if Raven and Octavia can learn in one afternoon, so can she!

Costia remains playful throughout, laughs a lot at Clarke’s antics, a loud and open laugh Clarke had not yet heard coming from her. The impatience Clarke had noticed in their early committee discussions and mistaken for annoyance invariably rears its ugly head after a while, but Costia seems to be aware of this penchant of hers and tries hard not to let her restlessness show, which Clarke is very grateful for.

It’s petty, she knows. But it also feels oh so good when, at the end of the lesson (Costia, the pest, makes her swim back all on her own, following her progress closely), she spits a mouthful of lake water in the woman’s face. Just because. She’ll get her sweet revenge on her two co-conspirators in due time. Clarke doesn’t notice the two girls are not alone anymore until the stature of a man blocks the setting sun from blinding her.

She takes a couple more steps forward, finally able to take a good look at him. He’s standing in the shade with her friends, a good head taller than Octavia, holding the reins of a black horse currently busy nibbling at the tree’s low leaves, to the displeasure of a small green bird whose nest rattles on its fragile perch every time the horse goes in for a bite. The bird is chirruping up a storm but the rider’s mount continues, unperturbed.

Clarke doesn’t think she’s ever seen the man before but her friends don’t seem uncomfortable in his presence either.

“I see nothing much has changed” the dark-brown man starts, smirking openly at Costia. “Still spending your days splashing around with pretty girls in deep deep waters”.

Costia stops dead in her tracks, the surprise clear on her face. There’s an excited gleam in her eyes, so alight, that tells Clarke the girl could launch herself in the stranger’s arms at any moment. But something is apparently holding her back.

The newcomer decides things for her: with practised hands, he ties the reins to a branch and steps forward, grasping at her forearm. He doesn’t stop there: he also tucks Costia closer and for a brief moment pulls her into some sort of hug, their fronts pressed against each other’s.

Clarke can see the girl’s grip tightening on his arm, her knuckles turning white.

The man smiles wider at that: “My, it is very good to see you too, cousin. It has after all been more than a year since we last saw each other.” He chuckles. “And do not worry, your houmon is safe. A little bit broody these days, from what I’ve heard. But safe.”

Turning his kind brown eyes to Clarke, he adds: “And you must be Wanheda”, extending his forearm to her in greeting. “I hope this one has been behaving somewhat acceptably” he cocks his head back in Costia’s direction. “She has a knack for getting girls into trouble and tends to forget that she not only represents Trikru and Heda but also her own family.”

The liaison pushes his shoulder back: “If all you’ve come here for is to disparage me, then you might as well leave now.”

He scoffs and the two descend into entertaining bickering in Trigedasleng. It’s…cute. And even if they understand only half of the private jabs and jokes, the three Skaikru shamelessly listen in with rapt attention.

Something seems to have lifted in Costia’s eyes and posture with the arrival of this unexpected visitor. Clarke’s never seen her so carefree. She looks… younger. A more vibrant kind of beautiful.

Once the sun has completely disappeared behind the horizon and Clarke and Costia are back into relatively dry clothes, Octavia takes off in the direction of her house.

“Don’t forget, tonight, biggest and wildest party Arkadia’s ever seen! You better show up, mopy!” Raven calls after her.

The Blake girl gives her the finger without even turning back. (These types of playful exchanges have become the norm between the two. Even Abby’s stopped shaking her head in reprimand every time.)

“Hey, you should come too” Raven starts again, turning to Jonah and placing a light hand on the man’s bicep. (Uhu, touchy feely Raven. Interesting.) “Who knows, maybe with the help of our little friend Moonshine you’ll consider sharing embarrassing stories about that one” she finishes, pointing at Costia mischievously.
Raven’s been instrumental in the preparations for the get together tonight to celebrate the 100 crashing on Earth. There had been intense discussions amongst Arkadians on which event should be considered a founding moment to be commemorated by future generations. In the end, the date of the signing of the alliance with the Commander of the 12 clans had won (over the Ark sending its youth down to the unknown and even over Unity Day). Clarke would suspect the Council of having rigged the votes if she herself hadn’t secretly cast hers for the alliance as well.

It’s less that she thinks the dropship’s landing shouldn’t be celebrated and more that she believes it shouldn’t be considered their founding moment. Because of what it represents, first of all: a nonsensical decision (why send unprepared children when you could have sent adult volunteers?); but also because of everything that happened after that: the destruction, betrayal and death. The truce with Trikru earlier on this year represents a new beginning. A new way. And hopefully: lasting peace.

“Jonah knows better than to share anything” Costia replies, cutting her cousin (who seemed eager to acquiesce) off with a threatening glare.

The Trikru girl makes her way to Jonah’s mount, her hand warmly caressing its black forehead and sweaty muzzle. She leans in closer, seemingly whispering things into its twitching ears.

“Oh, Raven”, she starts as an afterthought, “the Commander would like to invite you to come visit Polis, our capital. There are many things she wishes to discuss with you. I’ve already informed your Chancellor and he approves of the idea.”

Raven’s eyes have grown comically wide, her earlier ribbing of Clarke about her “questionable breaststroke technique” (“talk about a fish out of water, Griff”) completely forgotten. Clarke would find her friend’s features almost comical, were there not such naked furor mixed in, painfully obvious for all to see. Clarke looks from her friend to Costia and back, prepared to intervene if needed, while the Trikru waits patiently for the mechanic to settle on an emotion.

After a short, stunned silence, her friend explodes. Clarke’s never seen Raven like this before. Her friend looks downright… murderous.

“She… I… What? Who the fuck… What the… ARGH.” The brunette gives one last embittered huff before turning on her heels and stomping away, hands balled up into fists.

Which leaves Clarke with two very surprised and concerned Trikru. She should reassure them or...
downplay her friend’s reaction at the very least.

Except Clarke is in the middle of her own personal meltdown.

Is this really happening? Is floating Lexa really inviting Raven to Polis when…? Had all those words meant absolutely nothing at all to her? Of course they hadn’t and she should know better than to think any differently. But damn! The searing anger and jealousy are clawing their way up from her heart to her throat. She has to fight to keep them from spilling. And here she had thought today was turning into a relatively nice day. Her mind fixated on the invitation Costia extended to Raven, she pushes the rage down.

---

She dreams of seeing Lexa again that night. She dreams of finally voicing the pent-up rage that’s been boiling up inside of her ever since the betrayal at the Mountain. She dreams of taking the impassive Commander by surprise and pointing a gun at her.

She doesn’t pull the trigger.

She never does.

“So, what did he say?” she asks, both eager and apprehensive to hear what the brunette has to say.

“She’ll think about it” her friend replies before crashing down next to her. “He’s still not ready to talk to you, though” she adds, with a small drained voice.

It hurts to hear but if she’s completely honest, Clarke herself is not ready to sit down and reconnect with Bellamy anytime soon either. Some things simply need months or years to be mended. And as much as she misses him (and miss him she does), she still doesn’t know how to move their friendship forward, considering how they left things.
Raven takes the obscene number of bottles of moonshine she’s been carrying in her bag out, one by one (there go the spoils of the wager she won), and lays each delicately down next to where they’re sitting. Clarke remembers with a grimace her massive hangover from the stuff after the dropship-themed party and considers herself lucky that Monty’s concoction continues to taste relatively vile, otherwise she’d be on a sure path to becoming a proud (conservative) alcoholic. Although… maybe she already is, considering she’s in the company of more bottles than people right now.

There won’t be any partying tonight though.

Because exactly a year ago, Clarke killed Finn.

She’s reached her countdown.

So yeah, no partying.

There won’t be any home-made fireworks. Jasper won’t pathetically try to arm wrestle with Octavia. Bryan won’t coax her into singing while he strums away on the yukulele Miller DIYed for him (Clarke’s lyrics growing more indecipherable the more the night drags on). Monty and Harper won’t be tucked in a corner, attached to each other’s lips. Monroe won’t try a magic trick on Raven, who’ll derisively deconstruct it within the minute (also, Monroe, it seems, turns quite touchy feely after a couple of drinks and is definitely into girls, if the way she was drooling when Octavia took her shirt off before challenging every single person in the vicinity to an arm wrestling match is any indication – to Octavia’s vocal disgruntlement, Jonah had managed to defeat her. Not that Clarke can really judge her for it: the Blake girl does have a nice set of abs. And those shoulders? Damn!). And Clarke won’t end the night squished between a restless Octavia and a snoring Raven (who had been visibly reluctant to leave the company of Costia’s cousin).

No. Tonight, it’s just the two of them.

How had Raven put it? “Booze, the idiot’s ashes – or rather what’s left of them – and a lot of feelings.”

Her friend had been the one to approach her and Clarke had reluctantly accepted. She had been ticking down the days leading up to today with growing dread, the menacing cloud on the horizon looming ever larger as the date came nearer: the dropship crashing, her birthday, burning the Trikru army alive, escaping the Mountain, Anya’s death… Bloodshed after bloodshed. All leading up to this day: October 23rd.
Why Raven would turn to her for company on a day like today is… unclear. Maybe a little bit disturbing even. But the perspective of spending tonight alone or under the hovering eyes of her worried mother? **No way.**

Although now that Raven’s here, she’s not so sure anymore she wants the company.

What if…?

Finn hasn’t come to visit – “haunt”, she corrects herself – in ages. But a small part of her – a stupid and irrational part – had thought – not hoped, just thought – that… on this day… he might. And… well… maybe she’d like to be there for it.

Maybe, just maybe, she misses him.

The two friends had long debated whether they should hold this mini-ceremony of theirs here or somewhere else. In a nicer spot perhaps: on the lake banks. Or a more significant one: at the dropship, where Finn had surrendered himself. They had even considered making the trek to where it had all happened, that somber day. In the end, the cemetery in the Mountain’s shadow had won out for its symbolism. Clarke had let Raven debate it all out with herself. She didn’t feel she should have a say in this.

They’re well into their second bottle, drinking in complete silence – one she’s not sure to feel comfortable in or not – and it’s official: Clarke will definitely not be feeling well tomorrow. In fact, she’s already not feeling well right now. She’s never felt so light, so close to exploding. So restless. So close to being sick as well.

Do Trikru have an equivalent for this? Pike liked to proclaim that religion and psychotropic substances were two features one inevitably encountered in any culture. So, probably? But then again, she hasn’t really noticed any trace of religious beliefs or practices in Trikru culture. So, maybe not? Although, to be fair, their worshipping of the Commander does resemble from time to time a religion or cult. She doesn’t remember ever seeing or hearing of alcoholic beverages in Sinchuk. But it’d be safe to assume Trikru know the effects of jobi nuts, right? She’ll have to ask Costia.

Her companion interrupts her slurred train of thought.

“You know this whole “Spacewalker” nickname, it wasn’t even him. The illegal spacewalk for which we lost three months of oxygen? It was actually me. All me. Finn just took the fall, ever the
gentleman. I was older, I would have been floated. He was in Prison Station with you guys because of me. **All** because of **me**. Did he ever tell you that?"

Clarke shakes her head no.

She’s surprised. Not surprised Finn didn’t tell her – they barely knew each other, to be honest. But surprised because the spacewalk anecdote had come to summarize his character in her mind (in the early days at least) and fit right in with his reckless actions inside the dropship before it had crashed, which had led two of their group to a gruesome death. And yet it all makes so much more sense at the same time.

“Oh, so, **you** were the one who wanted to do an illegal spacewalk and got busted?”

“Yeah, kind of. Well, it was Finn’s birthday present for me. He thought it’d go undetected” Raven tries to explain. “And it did work. Until I tried to come back inside and something got jammed. I told Finn to use the manual override and that caused the floating breach.”

“So, does that mean we’re supposed to call you something like “Spacewalkergirl” or “Spacegirl”?’ Clarke asks, trying to lighten the mood.

“Mhh, “Spacegirl”, I like the sound of that! But why not just “Spacewalker”, no need to reinvent the wheel, no?”

Clarke shrugs: “I don’t know, it sounds… masculine… But if that’s what you’d like, “Spacewalker” is fine too.” She leaves out the fact that the reason she wanted to switch to a new nickname is to avoid being reminded of the boy every single time she’d address Raven.

Who is she kidding: just hearing Raven nearby inevitably brings back memories of him. And she suspects her own presence acts as a similar trigger to the brunette.

“Nah, “Spacewalker” was his in the end. And… he kind of took it with him, in a way. To the grave, I mean. Well, so to speak, since we didn’t burry him, did we?” she asks, patting the small urn in her lap awkwardly. “I’ll stick to being called Raven” she adds, after a pregnant pause.

Clarke doesn’t miss how her other hand is nervously fiddling with her necklace.
“Spacewalker” she whispers. With tonight’s revelation, the nickname has lost all meaning now. She always preferred his name anyway, liked how easily the short sound would pass her lips and wrap around a smile.

“Do you ever miss it?” Raven breaks into her musings.

“I swear, Ray, if you’re asking me about my sex life again…”

“No, you idiot, I mean the Ark. Do you ever miss it?”

Clarke shifts: “I… It's a good question. I don’t know. Don’t you?”

“No” the mechanic replies with force. “I mean, sure, there are mornings I’d kill for a hot shower and fuck I could seriously live without these squat toilets, but apart from that? Not a single floating bit. And I know how ungrateful or uncaring it might sound. I know that had the Ground not happened, Finn would probably still be alive and we’d be together.” She pauses. “Probably.” She shakes her head and starts over. “Maybe. Who knows. But there is not a single floating bit of my life up there I miss.”

Raven doesn’t stop there, she’s on a roll: “Fuck. I can’t believe I just said that. I miss him, I do. I miss him so fucking much, Griff!” Her voice breaks away, grip tightening around the urn. “Sometimes it feels like I can’t breathe. And then I want to think of him and I realize I can’t floating remember his eyes anymore. They were my favourite thing about him. His eyes and his stupid smile. And I can’t remember them. I know the colour and shape they used to be, I know he constantly had to push his hair out of the way, but I can’t see them anymore. I’m lying in my bed, and I’m super concentrated, but I just can’t, you know?”

Clarke shuffles closer and slips her arm around her shoulders, holding her tight, Raven pushing her head in the space above her shoulder.

She does know: she can’t see his eyes anymore either.

“But then sometimes I can still feel… What I’m about to say is going to sound completely mad. But, I’ll wake up and I swear I can still feel his breath against my cheek. The tingles it would leave when he would smile in the crook of my neck” Raven continues, unconsciously reaching back.
And fuck, Clarke didn’t need this sensory memory. Because no, it doesn’t sound mad. She too, knows that feeling, can almost feel Finn’s breath on her cheek right now. A whispered “I wanted it to be you too” against her skin.

It feels strange to discuss all this with her. Not just strange: downright uncomfortable. But it’s obvious her friend needs to get some things off her chest and Clarke can be a good listener. She’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t trigger too many memories of her own, because losing it is definitely not on her list for tonight.

Raven lifts her head away and murmurs: “He was the only really good thing you know? The only thing that made sense back in the Ark, him and the Zero-G Mechanics programme of course. The rest was all fucked up. My mom, Mecha station, the whole bloody principle of spending our lives cooped up in a box floating in space. Down here, it’s a mess, no doubt. It’s scary as fuck but it feels real you know? I didn’t realize it before, how stifling the Ark was. How much I felt trapped and just wanted to… breathe.”

“I guess I don’t either. Miss it, I mean” Clarke starts to reply, deep in thought. “But I wonder if, say all the… stuff with my father never happened… I was happy you know, before. At least I think so. I had my parents, Wells. Even the Ark itself. It’s what happened to my dad and being locked up that kind of ruined it for me. I only started dreaming of the Earth when I was in quarantine, not before. It’s only then that I began wishing for something else, for somewhere else, anywhere else.”

“Nah, you’d have blown a fuse, Griff. You wouldn’t have lasted long as an adult up there, I guarantee you. That place was a floating prison, it would have become a cage for you too, soon enough” Raven chimes in.

“You said its scary here. Do you still find it so?” Clarke wonders.

“Hell yeah! But it’s a different scary, you know? It used to be about surviving and now it’s more about finding your place, shaping yourself into the person you want to be. Up in the Ark it was about which box they would manage to squeeze you in. Here, there’s just this sea of possibilities… Plus scary is good, keeps me on my toes. And I have a feeling the Ground won’t ever let us relax for too long. I’m surprised how smooth the past months have been, actually. Well, ok, bar Jasper’s fucking murder attempt on you, of course. Would I like to be able to walk normally? Of course! Will I ever forgive Murphy for what happened? Probably not. But this injury, having to come to terms with it and learn to do things differently… It’s been tough, sure, but so eye-opening at the same time. And I know I’ll curse myself for saying that tomorrow morning, when I’ll feel like shit and will have to put my brace on. But still.”
“I…” Her voice stays for some reason caught in her throat. She has to swallow and start again. “I don’t tell you enough but I’m really proud of you, Raven. What you’ve gone through… I can’t possibly imagine handling it as well as you did. As you do. It’s…” She wants to say “inspiring” but she doesn’t want her friend to get all shy on her. She reaches for her friend’s hand instead and finishes: “You’re so floating strong.”

Raven gives an embarrassed shrug. Yet instead of withdrawing her hand, as Clarke expected her to, she interlaces their fingers and turns towards her: “What do you think Finn would say, if he saw Arkadia today?”

“He’d be amazed” Clarke replies with conviction. “At the truce we’ve found with Trikru, which he always hoped for. At the way Arkadia’s thriving. At everything you’ve built and created, Ray…”

Clarke takes a minute to let her thoughts wander, thinking of the boy. Killed by rules he was fascinated about. Sentenced to death by those he wanted to make peace with. The boy whose execution had become a pre-condition for that very peace.

“I wonder sometimes if we’d still be together, after everything. If he had lived…” Raven leaves her sentence hanging.

“And what do you think?”

“I don’t know. I honestly do not know. I can’t help but think that, if I hadn’t pushed him away when you were taken by Mount Weather, if I had not told him to go look for you all, then maybe TonDC would not have happened. Then maybe he’d still be alive…”

Clarke tightens her hold on her: “Ray, what happened in TonDC is on Finn and Finn alone. And admittedly, maybe the idiots who let us roam around freely with guns. But it’s not on you. You know that, right?”

The brunette gives a small nod, too weak for Clarke’s liking, but that is not a battle she’ll fight tonight.

The evening stretches on well into the night, Raven comfortably shifting away from Clarke.

At one point, the mechanic inevitably broaches Clarke’s least favourite topic as of late: “What do you
reckon it’s like, Polis? It must be full of people. From all over, not just Trikru. And I see this gigantic statue of the commander on her horse, sword drawn, in full battle gear and with her face paint on – you remember, the one that makes her look like a ridiculous racoon? – at the entrance of the city, intimidating every new visitor. Or maybe a row of statues of her in different poses, welcoming you?” She sits up, clears her throat and entones in her best imitation of a guidebot: “To your left, the Commander with a spear. To your right, the Commander looking mean. Right behind, the Commander with a sword and after that, the Commander with two swords!” She reverts to her normal voice: “Marble everywhere, that’s a given, glistening in the sunset. With a grid of water canals sneaking their way through and every person going about their business on long and narrow boats… Do you think she lives in a palace? She probably does. A huge imposing building where I’ll have a whole wing just to myself. Maybe I could even ask for an atelier!” She finishes with a huff: “Man, I’m torn, Griff.”

“Are we still talking about what Polis looks like?”

“No, keep up. I’m talking about going at all. I mean, the bitch is the fucking reason why Finn’s dead! Yes, sure, he shouldn’t have killed all these people, we can all agree on that. But fuck, she could have shown some leniency! She could have banished him or I don’t know, even had him tortured for all I care. Anything but demand his head, you know? Plus am I just supposed to brush aside the fact that she fucking strung me up and let her men cut into me for hours with no evidence, no proof of anything? What ever happened to innocent till proven guilty?”

“For somebody who’s not sure whether she’ll go, you sure as hell talk a lot about Polis” Clarke interjects, somewhat sour.

“Don’t sulk, Griff. It’s unbecoming of a lady and doesn’t suit you at all” Raven dismisses her. “So, what do you think? Help me out here!”

“The only question you should ask yourself is: what do you want to do?” Clarke throws back.

“I… I want to go” Raven confesses in a small voice.

The blonde gestures: “There you go. If that’s what you want, then go. Nothing’s holding you back.”

“But why invite me though?” Raven asks with concern. “Costia’s being super shady about it, claims she doesn’t know. But they’re lovers, right, she’s got to know something!”
That’s not exactly a question she can help her friend with, but she can try: “You’re an amazing mechanic, Ray. Word gets around. Who knows, maybe she wants to see with you if the radio network could be extended to all Trikru territory or at least up to the capital?”

“Yeah, I wondered about that. But what if it’s something else? What if she wants me to teach them how to build grenades and stuff?”

“Mhhh… You need to talk about that with the Council and Marcus before you leave, clarify what tech they’re willing to share and what not.”

“Who’s going to take care of Humpty and Dumpty when I’m gone? What if Lincoln needs more support from us and I’m not here and the pauna’s on their tail and…?”

“Ray” Clarke cuts in. “I know we don’t always look like we’re smart and capable enough, but I can assure you Arkadia will survive your absence.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Jonah says the capital is amazing. And that there are all these shops and open-air markets. Some even specializing in electronic and electrical equipment. Can you imagine? That would be absolutely insane!”

Urgh, Clarke’s not sure what she hates most: discussing Polis or the endless esoteric ramblings on tech her friend is quite prone to.

Clarke retaliates by teasing her: “You sure spent a lot of time talking to Costia’s cousin…”

“It’s not like that, Griff.”

“I didn’t say anything!” the blonde protests.
“No, but you definitely implied. It’s not my fault he’s a nice guy.”

“Uhu. Easy on the eyes too” Clarke replies with a smile.

“Fuck, can you believe the genes in this family? First Costia, now him… I mean it though, it’s really not like that. We had a good chat the other day actually, before he left for the border. He’s smart, but in this humble way, you know. He lost somebody close to him too. He’s not exactly up for anything new” Raven reveals.

“Are you?” Clarke wants to know. It’s part simple curiosity about her friend and part something she’s wondered about herself.

Raven shrugs noncommittally and Clarke chooses not to push her.

It turns out she doesn’t need to, because the mechanic continues of her own accord after a while: “I want to be. And then I wake up next to a guy and it doesn’t feel right, somehow. You know? I think I’ll stick to harmless fun for now. Give it a bit more time.”

They’re interrupted by a huff: “There you are.” Costia emerges from the shadows. “Abby kom skaikru has been looking for the two of you all day” she adds, looking at the mechanic who’s currently sprawled out on her back on the mossy ground, her legs and arms forming the shape of a fallen star. “I’m not particularly interested in playing your page, you know” she continues, scowling in Clarke’s direction.

Raven doesn’t really acknowledge the newcomer, her eyes fixed on something she seems to have spotted in the black sky. Clarke tries to imagine Costia as a prepubescent page and… giggles.

Oh GOD, did she just giggle? How floating embarrassing! How much have they had to drink?

It takes Lexa’s lover a full minute of looking from them to the pile of empty bottles, before she rolls her eyes, sighing exaggeratedly: “I see…”

But instead of leaving or insisting they get back to camp, the Trikru flops down next to Clarke, reclining on her forearms and looking up at the starry night. “So, what are we doing exactly?” she asks.
The whole thing is so out of character it leaves Clarke speechless. That and the fact that there’s something oddly… pleasant about her closeness.

Raven still seems absorbed in her gazing, so the blonde gestures vaguely to the urn in the brunette’s arms. “I killed Finn. You know that right? Finn was Raven’s boyfriend. It all happened a year ago. I mean, exactly a year ago. It’s a sort of… anniversary if you will. We’re… reminiscing.”

“Oh… Alright” the Trikru doesn’t say anything more for a while, letting the silence settle between them.

“Do you know our ritual to commemorate the dead?” she finally asks the two women.

Great! Trust a Trikru to lighten the mood.

“Yeah yeah, funeral pyre, Yu gponiblei ste odon, and all that jazz” Clarke replies.

“I do not know what jazz is, but I meant for anniversaries” Costía replies seriously before she launches into her explanation. “A year after the person died, we will burn a mark into our skin. That is, only if you were the one responsible, of course.”

“Why only a year after?” Clarke wonders out loud. She thought the mark happened immediately after a kill.

“Multiple reasons. It forces you to remember for one, forces you to revisit what happened instead of putting it aside or blocking it out and moving on. But also because we believe that, for a year, the soul will roam this Earth, searching for its new vessel. Once he’s chosen a new body to reincarnate itself into, only then can we inscribe his passing on our own.”

Clarke’s curious: “Is that all you do after a year?”

“No, the family will organize a banquet and invite all those who used to know their loved-one. The banquet is to help along the process for a successful reincarnation and celebrate it.”
Raven speaks up: “I like that, the idea of getting together to honour someone’s memory. Maybe we can do this next year, Griff.”

Clarke has no idea how anyone is able to stomach any food when reminiscing about a dead lover, parent or child, but she doesn’t voice her reservations.

“You can not” Costia reveals. “It should only take place on the first year mark.”

“Oh. That’s shitty. Wait. Does that mean… Are we fucking up Finn’s reincarnation by not holding one? Would we – as Skaikru I mean – even reincarnate here?” Raven asks, worry lacing her tone.

“Well,” the Trikru starts with a frown, thoughtful, “you are living amongst us now. Here, on this planet. So one could argue that reincarnation would apply to the people from the sky too. And as to tonight, it appears you are amply supplied with beverages. I have some nuts here we can share. And we are three, which is enough to make this a banquet, I would say.”

Raven sighs in relief and relaxes, before reaching for some of the nibbles Costia’s offering.

Clarke asks: “I always wondered: what do you do with the braid of hair you cut off?”

“That is up to you” Costia offers. “Some keep it as it is and place it somewhere private or somewhere significant. Others lace it into their clothes or into their own hair.”

“Oh, I saw that” Raven interrupts. “Jonah has one of those, right? He’s braided it into his hair, behind his ear, but it’s a different colour, it stands out.”

Costia acquiesces but doesn’t volunteer any explanation.

Clarke secretly wonders what Lexa did with Anya’s braid, but knows better than to bring that up tonight. “And after that one year, after the banquet, you don’t do anything anymore?”

“There is no need, Clarke. The soul lives on, the living move on.”
Raven seems agitated again: “Is reincarnation possible for all?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow?”

“I mean, is it an option for everybody, whatever… whatever the kind of life you led, whatever the suffering you may have caused?”

Costia shares a long look with the troubled mechanic and Clarke finally understands what Raven’s too scared to ask.

“No soul deserves to err for eternity, Rayven.”

“So… that’s a yes?”

“Sha.”

Clarke lets out a breath she wasn’t aware she was holding. She’s not sure whether it’s for Finn or...

Raven meanwhile grows serious, struggling to get onto her knees, facing them. “In that case” she starts, taking a hold of the bottle. She lifts it up, with misty eyes, an offering to the night. “May you find the most amazing form to host your beautiful spirit, Finn!” She takes a long swing, before passing it on to Clarke.

The blonde feels a little put on the spot. It’s not that she doesn’t have anything to say to him. And more that she has too many things to say. Too many things to share. It doesn’t fit in a parting wish. And this wasn’t supposed to be goodbye anyway, she’s not ready to let go, there are still so many...

“Clarke” Raven whispers, pressing the bottle into her hand and squeezing it. The blonde closes her fist around it by sheer instinct, too focused on the lone tear that is now making its way down Raven’s cheek. “I know. Just… say whatever comes to your mind. Whatever you’d hope for for his reincarnation.”

“I…” she starts, but falters. Tonight’s not about her and her guilt. “You were made for this world, Finn. From the moment you set foot on this ground, you shone with this contagious lust for life and
wonderment. I hope. No, I know, that however you live on as, you’ll gift your new environments the same generosity and smile.”

She takes one, two, three moutfuls of moonshine before slouching back into the cold dirt. Raven shuffles closer without saying anything, until their sides are pressed against each other. Clarke doesn’t move, needing the contact.

She feels drained.

“May your soul find the peace it longs for, Finn kom Skaikru” Costia finishes their impromptu eulogy, before taking her first swig and grimacing at the taste.

The trio falls silent after that.

There’s this nagging thought in the back of Clarke’s mind. One she’s terrified to delve on. One she’s not sure she can deal with right now. Because if the first anniversary is one’s last chance to say goodbye, then… what does that mean for Wells?

Costia’s the one to speak after what feels like ages: “There’s a story my mother used to tell me when I was a child.”

And wow, is she actually going to share something personal for the very first time? Because aside from the few anecdotes they had managed to pry out from a tipsy Jonah, the liaison remains a complete mystery to her. Why the fuck is Clarke drunk when she needs to be sober for this, damn!

“The story goes that, at the beginning of the world, children, always looking for new ways to entertain themselves, used to unhook the stars from the sky and play with them for hours. But every time it happened, their parents had to chase after them, for the stars were essential for men to find their way at night on land and at sea. So they would chase their children, recover the stars and hang them back up in the sky. After a while, the parents grew tired of the endless back and forth. When putting the stars back, they would sometimes mistakenly place them in a different position, which would lead to wanderers getting lost. So, they decided to push the sky further away, out of the children's reach.” She pauses.

“Ever since then, we can't play with the stars anymore” she finishes, with a touch of sadness in her voice.
There’s something about stars that seems to turn intimidating Trikru and Ice Nation warriors alike into chatty people, Clarke muses, remembering Roan’s rather more morbid story. But this one has an innocent quality to it she would find hard to describe with words. Plus, she much prefers Costia’s voice. By far.

She falls asleep with one last thought: what a sad fucking banquet.

The following day, when she wakes, head pounding and tongue thick (why, oh why, did she let Raven talk her into bringing moonshine), Clarke can’t really remember how the two of them managed to reach the safety of the workshop and tuck themselves in.

“Clarke. Clarke! CLARKE! CLARKE!”

There’s a running Octavia hurtling towards her. Hurtling is the wrong word. Flying’s more like it. She would find it quite graceful, the way the brunette jumps over logs and slides over rocks, hours spent training with Costia definitely paying off, if she weren’t instantly on the alert as to what could have prompted Octavia to seek her out like this.

The girl doesn’t spare any moment to catch her breath when she gets to her level. Instead, she grabs her arm and starts pulling her towards the path they recently cleared, leading to TonDC.

Upon sensing some resistance from the blonde, she adds between puffs of air and without breaking her stride: “They’re back! Come on, they’re back!”

A wide smile splits her face from ear to ear and Clarke instantly knows who she’s talking about.

She’s not particularly in good shape (not in bad shape either, mind you, just not in “Trikru warrior“ shape, that’s all), but she suddenly finds herself running just as fast as her friend.

When they spot the two moving figures, slumped over the familiar silhouette of a galloping Helios, Clarke’s legs push her even faster forwards. And when the smallest figure slides down from the horse, too impatient to wait for it to come to a complete halt, she envelopes the grey-eyed boy – who’s grown quite a bit it seems – in a bone-crushing hug, too overwhelmed to really say anything.
Damn it feels good to have Damian back in one piece! And for once, it seems the contact-shy boy is as reluctant as she is to let go. She jokingly tries to lift him up but fails miserably and they both burst into laughter.

She’s apparently not the only inarticulate one. To her left she can see Lincoln holding Octavia close against his chest in an intimate embrace and when the girl lifts her head to smash their lips together, Clarke could swear her eyes are glistening with unshed tears. The two lovers just stand there in the middle of the path and don’t disentangle, even when it starts to rain lightly.

Shivering in her soon soggy clothes, Clarke finally takes a step back to examine Damian, without completely stepping out of the hug.

He’s definitely taller than when he left, now reaching up to her shoulders. His jet-black hair has grown longer and he’s wearing it held together in a tight bun at the back of his hair. The look ages him somehow. It suits him, she decides. His cheeks have hollowed but he doesn’t seem malnourished or starving and under her hands she can feel the ripple of the muscles in his arms. He’s sporting a similar smile to Octavia’s earlier: a wide, earnest one, full of light. But she can also see the pride in his eyes and posture, the slight tilt of self-confidence that wasn’t there before.

She’s the first one of the four to talk (she has after all been practicing with Costia and Octavia). “Monin hou” she says in carefully enunciated Trigedasleng.

She can see the happy surprise in his eyes and can’t quite stop herself from ruffling his hair affectionately. He leans into it, going in for a second hug and Clarke closes her eyes, savouring the moment.

Octavia’s horse shuffles closer to the couple and starts nudging Lincoln in the back, huffing loudly. Whether it’s because Helios feels left out or is starting to grow restless under what has now become a downpour is unclear, but it effectively leads to Lincoln and Octavia hesitantly breaking apart.

Clarke shares a tight hug with Lincoln, whispering a reverent “Thank you” in his ear and the four of them head back to Arkadia’s settlement.

There’s quite the welcome party that awaits them when they reach the first houses: Raven, Miller, Monty, Jasper, Harper, Bryan, Monroe, Wick and a couple of others from the Guard and Raven’s workshop are all waiting. Even Marcus and Costia have come out and greet them warmly in the Trikru way. They all know Lincoln better but Damian gets his fair share of hollers and fist bumps.
(with a fond “Everything oscar kilo?” from Wick and a misty “Man you’ve grown, Little Gentleman” from Raven).

There are no obvious signs that the two succeeded in their quest, but the sole fact that they’re back alive, combined with the fierce gleam in the boy’s eyes and Lincoln’s relieved smile, are indication enough.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

It’s a bloodbath.

The space around the Ark within the protective barrier has become so crowded it’s harder and harder to weave her way through it. The once firm ground is now a squishy mixture of blood, soot and dirt. Who is she kidding: judging by the swarm of flies and the state of her boots, it’s blood, mostly blood.

Their Trikru friends had warned them: something was brewing in the border territories between Ice Nation and Trikru. But Arkadia had somehow managed to remain quite sheltered from the mounting tension. Up to now, that is.

Because today, four months after Costia had explained the Ice Queen’s scheming to her, they have to deal with the aftermath of the latest – and by far deadliest – clash.

From what she’s understood, a Trikru unit had chased a group of bandits away into Ice Nation territory. Mindful of respecting the coalition’s clauses, the unit had initially stopped at the border and borne witness to the slaughter of an unsuspecting Ice Nation village by the very same group they had been in pursuit of. Unable to just look on, the Trikru had apparently tried to intervene. This had led to the prompt intervention of heavily armed Ice Nation units based in the area, who had not taken the time to understand the situation before sounding the charge at the invading Trikru unit; immediately followed by Indra sending in reinforcements for the Trikru side. To sum it up: every one fighting every one, with civilians trapped in the middle and always the first casualties to fall.

Fleeing civilians and the wounded had started pouring into TonDC the following day. With the new town’s medical unit (consisting of two lone junior healers) quickly overrun and unable to cope with the influx, Indra had radioed in, asking whether patients could at least be redirected to Arkadia, where Abby and Jackson had worked tirelessly over the past months to realize their dream of turning half of the fallen Ark into a functioning medical facility (with the help of the engineering unit and the salvaged equipment and consumables from the Mountain).
Marcus had immediately accepted. Which is all fine and dandy, except Arkadia had definitely not been ready: no mass casualty plan had ever been discussed or rehearsed and apart from her mother, Jackson, herself and two trainees, no Skaikru had received any prior medical training. Marcus had come to her in a state of panic, Abby requesting her presence to organize the triage area, since both she and Jackson were practically locked up in the operating theatre, performing complicated surgeries on the most urgent cases (sometimes two at a time).

Costia, Octavia and Lincoln had gone to help the Guard secure the transfers from TonDC, equipped with newly fixed radios in order to warn the Ark ahead of the arrival of new patients. Raven and her team of DIY-geniuses had furiously worked on building makeshift stretchers and IV-line holders. In the end, two thirds of Arkadians had been called in to help create an emergency resting area for green cases, support Clarke’s small team in the monitoring of yellow cases and build an extension to the existing morgue.

It had been somewhat manageable in the beginning, the wounded trickling in from TonDC one or two at a time, and Clarke able to examine them quickly before redirecting them to their respective zones and leaving Damian to explain to the people accompanying the patients what was happening. But it’s as if in the blink of an eye everything had descended into complete and utter chaos. From 1 new patient arriving every 15 minutes, it had turned into 15 arriving at once on makeshift carts and gurneys carried by exhausted warriors and haggard looking villagers.

It’s been a couple of hours now and the continuous stream still doesn’t seem any closer to stopping. Clarke is running from cot to cot – or to be more accurate: bed sheet, blanket or any random dirty piece of cloth haphazardly strewn on the floor – trying as best she can to assess each person and not miss something in her haste. It’s possibly the absolutely worst hygiene conditions she’s ever seen in which to provide emergency care, but hey, it’s not like they have any way of improving that right now.

She’s asked Damian to radio the other villages for them to send any healer and supplies they can spare and though they all accepted, that help has yet to arrive.

To make matters worse, they’ve been unable to block access inside the Ark’s protective barrier to the families and friends, which only further contributes to the overall chaos. They had tried, tried really hard, but without people speaking Trigedas leng (apart from her second), it had been near impossible to convince family members that they needed to stay outside, so Clarke and those helping her could have the space and privacy they needed, without causing a small riot. Especially since said family members are all carrying weapons.

Thankfully, the Ark had played in their favour there: it turns out Trikru families are extremely suspicious of the giant metallic structure currently housing the red zone in its halls – managed by
Abby’s two trainees – and the operational theatre.

It’s a good thing for Abby and Jackson, but not so for Clarke, who’s working right outside. Between the moans of the wounded, the rattles of the dying and the desperate pleas of their loved ones, the noise is a constant roar in her ears, further chipping away at her frayed nerves.

They’ve had a couple of mishaps already, although no major ones for now (touch wood). Clarke had asked for example for the body of a patient who had died before she had even been able to get to him to be moved to the morgue, but the two stretcher-bearers helping her had taken the wrong person: a yellow case, who was very much still alive and hadn’t much appreciated waking up in a room full of corpses. It had taken Damian a while to get the misplaced patient and his brother to calm down.

Clarke had then lost her composure for a split second when she had recognized a frazzled Costia rushing in, carrying a body over her shoulder. And if she had felt relief upon recognizing the liaison’s cargo as an unconscious Jonah, she would never admit it. The girl had looked at her with so much fear and terror, Clarke had tried her best to reassure her, before she had had to move on to another patient. She left Raven in charge of keeping an eye on the injured warrior in the yellow zone. Jonah has a nasty spear wound on his left shoulder and has lost a lot of blood, but with constant supervision, she’s confident the dark-skinned warrior will pull through.

Costia and Jonah are also not the only familiar faces she’s spotted among the crowd. Ryder, whom she hadn’t seen since the Battle of the Mountain, was carried in completely unconscious a while back. Considering the severity of his wounds, the warrior she had come to begrudgingly like will be lucky to survive the night.

But overall, despite the chaos and the mess, despite the blood, despite the pleas and cries of family members, things have been going as well as they could go: meaning they’ve lost way too many people, but have also saved many more.

The dead today look very different from the ashen faces they had hauled out from the Mountain back in February. They don’t look peacefully asleep, as if instantly mummified. No. Their faces are yellow and blue instead, contorted into painful and grotesque grimaces Clarke knows she will never forget.

Things had turned ugly when Indra had arrived unannounced, storming through the gate. Her unit had promptly started rounding up the few Ice Nation warriors and villagers who had also sought care in Arkadia amidst the overall confusion, yanking them out of beds and hoisting those who couldn’t walk on their own up on their shoulders. They were needed for “questioning” she had argued and the vengeful gleam in her men’s eyes had left no doubt in Clarke’s mind that she would never see her patients again. With Markus absent, along with any other member of his council, Clarke had ordered the few members of the Guard present, to block the Trikru general from leaving with their prisoners.
There had been a brief moment when, with swords pointed at assault rifles and vice versa, the situation could have completely gotten out of control. But Costia had thankfully intervened, immediately trying to defuse the tension. She had initially tried to get Clarke to relent and let them go, but when the blonde hadn’t budged from the principle that the medical area (so basically everything within the Ark’s fence) was to be respected as a neutral zone and that any patient brought was to receive medical care, whatever the side they were fighting on, she had surprisingly switched gears and managed to convince a furious Indra to leave the premises and the Ice Nation patients behind.

Clarke isn’t a fool though: she had immediately radioed Kane, who was busy striding along the roads leading to Arkadia in order to facilitate a proper arrival of new patients, warning him Indra may organize a checkpoint to catch Ice Nation on their way to Arkadia (they had switched to the second radio channel Raven had just put in place a couple of weeks back, in order to make sure no Trikru on their network would overhear them). And predictably, the general had tried to do exactly just that, leading to heated negotiations between Kane and her, with Costia playing the part of facilitator.

---

The blonde is washing the blood out of her hands. And if she needs one image to sum up how fucked up her world is (how fucked up this world is), it’d be the fact that blood is easier to wash away than dirt, soot, vomit, mud or any other type of stain. Even when your hands are coated in it. It’s stickier sometimes. It’s sneakier, always. It buries itself deep under her nails, sure. It simply won’t leave her alone, to be honest. But come hot water, and the flow just drains it all away. Even her drenched clothes may one day recover, leaving absolutely no trace of what she’s been through.

Of what she’s had to do.

In a flash, she’s there again: kneeling down in the tent, rubbing compulsively at her hands, unseeing, furious tears streaming down her cheeks. Her arms, her front, covered in his blood, still warm. It’s funny she should still remember that moment so clearly when she’s had the blood of so many more on her hands since.

And today? Well, they stopped recording arrivals halfway through, but she’d say they received around 200 wounded, if not more. (They stopped counting the dead, too.) She feels the number alone is not enough to represent the sheer magnitude of the day’s events though. It doesn’t quite render the draining pandemonium still raging right outside the door.

It’s not the same of course: taking somebody’s life versus not being able to save another’s. But every line is blurred down here and she’s been wading through the grey ever since the dropship crash. Or
had the blending of contours and colours already started back up in the Ark?

She breathes in slowly. Once. Twice.

“Clarke” a gentle voice whispers.

She doesn’t register it, not really.

Eyes transfixed by the red water disappearing down the drain, she tries to focus on her sternum – the spot Costia had pointed out as home to her inner strength – to centre herself.

She’s been on her feet for 18 hours by now without a single break. It gives a whole new meaning to the expression of being “dead on one’s feet”. Things haven’t really calmed down out there: patients are still coming in, albeit at a slower pace than before and they’ve got an army of yellow and red cases to look after. But the healers from the neighbouring villages have finally arrived, along with additional helpers and they’ve been of tremendous help (she even recognized little Soko from Sinchuk amongst them). So she’s indulging in a short break.

Plus she needs to get this floating blood off. She needs to get it off right now.

“Clarke” the murmur again.

The thing with triage is that there’s the theory and then there’s applying that theory in a context. Suddenly, it’s not about how serious your injuries are and how soon you’ll need medical attention anymore; not about an objective physical medical assessment; but more about how many healers are available, how many supplies they have left and how realistic it is that they’ll manage to save you in time.

And there it is again: the grey. Playing God. Sending everyone to her mother is impossible, so Clarke has to prioritize. And today, “prioritize” means Clarke has to say: you will live; and you will die. Not because your injuries are too severe, objectively speaking. But because we won’t be able to help you soon enough. Because there’s just too many of you and too few of us. Way too many of you. Because in the time it’d take me to close your wound and clean you up, ten others I could have saved will die.

It’s math, not medicine. Calculating odds and probabilities. Calculating resources and effort. She
hates it.

Why won’t this **fucking** blood come off?

Long fingers come into her field of vision and pry her hands apart, holding them delicately. A soft pressure turns her body away from the water.

“Clarke.”

She blinks and the figure now standing in front of her, gently holding both of her hands to her sides, comes into focus: Jackson. An exhausted looking Jackson still in his OR scrubs. Blood-shot eyes, hollowed cheeks and gaunt features. A familiar face, that resembles pretty much how she feels and not so different from her patients’. She’s clearly not the only one who’s just barely standing after the two days they just had.

There’s no reason why she should suddenly surge forward. None at all. And yet she does, smashing her lips against his and forcing them to part. There’s nothing instinctual or natural about it. Nothing reasoned or rational either. Jackson’s been a constant in her world through her mother, even if she hasn’t interacted with him much as of late. But she’s definitely never felt **any** type of attraction to the doctor. Not before and certainly not now. But he’s single – or at least she thinks so – she hasn’t been with anyone in **ages** and today’s been kind of hellish.

So, fuck it, Jackson’ll do.

She grabs his neck to keep his face in place, desperate for more contact, but Jackson resists and wrenches his lips away.

“Clarke, what are you doing?”

Of course the usually quiet Jackson would choose this moment to become a talker.

“Clarke” his hands come up to cup her face and bring her eyes up to meet his. “Clarke” he repeats.

They’re both breathing heavily, staring at each other, the running faucet all but forgotten. She knows
exactly what he sees in her eyes, for she can see the same turmoil in his.

She brings her hands back to his neck, gentler this time. “Just... I just need…” she whispers, trying to explain.

But words can’t describe today, can’t do the current storm of emotions crashing against her ribcage justice. Words, weak and traitorous, have fallen short so many times in the past and today’s no different.

She lifts up onto the tip of her toes and leans in slowly. Jackson doesn’t step back, he remains stock still. Their lips meet for the second time. And now that he seems to have recovered from his initial shock, it looks like this may be what Jackson needs too, for he kisses her back, brings her face that much closer. She hops up on the edge of the sink to deepen the angle, their tongues battling with each other in something akin to despair.

When her hand sneaks into his pants to grab him, he leans back with a jolt: “Clarke, are you…”

She doesn’t let him finish and his question is left unanswered, hanging in the small space between their two tense bodies, replaced by a loud moan when she starts stroking him. It’s not gentle. There’s nothing tender about it, but it does the trick and he slumps against her, his head resting on her shoulder, hands falling to grip at her sides.

Is she sure? Absolutely not. But she’s also not exactly in a thinking mood right now. In anything but a “thinking things through” mood, as a matter of fact.

They’re pulling at each other’s tops, Clarke’s now in her bra and Jackson in his undershirt, her legs bracketing him. He’s not quite hard yet, but she can feel his cock pressing against the inside of her thighs. She doesn’t think she’s particularly wet, but her whole body is buzzing with this nervous energy and she needs release.

She’s about to slide back down to take her pants off when the door to the room slams open and a panicked Costia, followed by a breathless Raven, appear. Clarke and Jackson remain frozen at the interruption, neither daring to blink or take in a breath, reality and time crashing in on them.

The neon lights are too bright, the sink’s edge is painfully digging into her ass, her pants are still covered in blood and his hands, currently resting on her thighs, are just wrong. Too big, too hot, just wrong.
Raven’s the first one to speak: “Clarke, it’s Jonah, he’s crashing, we need you in the yellow zone. Now.”

This brings her back to the moment. She blinks, unceremoniously pushes the doctor slightly away from her, plops down, retrieves her top and follows Raven out, leaving a stunned Costia and a confused Jackson behind.

She tries to make herself come that night when she finally makes it to her bed, but falls asleep midway with her hand between her thighs. She dreams of stars instead and of a little girl rearranging the sky.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

Clarke’s pacing nervously in the medical bay, waiting anxiously for Jackson to come back from his lunch break. She’s come to apologize or rather make sure they’re both on the same page concerning… what happened the previous week, before she goes to see Marcus. It was a mistake, a passing spark of folly Clarke can’t explain except by delving into a long explanation on hormones, loneliness and watching too many people take their last breath in the course of one day. A conversation she honestly would rather not have with him: she’s embarrassed and mortified enough as it is.

So she’ll stick to the essential part: they should simply forget about it and preferably never mention it ever again. Jackson’s not a friend, not really, but he’s her mom’s closest colleague. And friend or not, she’d rather things be clear and there not be a risk for future misunderstandings.

But Jackson doesn’t show. She resumes her pacing, trying to distract herself from replaying the images of their impromptu tryst in her head. She soon finds that the back and forth movement is not enough. So she steps closer to her mother’s desk and lets her eyes linger, half out of need to focus on something and half out of real curiosity.

Her mother’s become a stranger somehow. No. Clarke’s become a stranger to her – or is it a stranger altogether? Funny that: she’s starting to feel more at home here yet at the same time the two of them are growing more and more estranged. Go figure. But the blonde’s found herself wishing they’d reconnect lately.

One more reason why she needs to clarify this thing with Jackson straight away.
Her eyes settle on the framed picture of herself in her mother’s arms, with a smiling Jake propped up on her mother’s desk. The glass is half shattered, most likely from the crash-landing. She must have been 5 or 6 at the time it was taken. Her father had wanted to surprise her mother by visiting her in the medical bay with a wide-eyed Clarke nestled on his back and holding on to his neck.

Thinking of her father still brings this familiar tightness in her chest, one she suspects will never go away. It’s not the queasiness that comes with memories of Finn. Rather a crushing sense of loss, unfairness and emptiness.

Still wandering, her eyes catch on a pair of documents lying on top of the medical filing cabinet her mother extracted from Mount Weather before its collapse. She recognises the logo in the top left corner of the document. She draws nearer, curious. It’s a long list and Clarke immediately recognises the names, immediately understands: Vie, Lorelei. Vie, Maya. Vie, Vincent. Wallace, Cage. Wallace, Dante. Whitman, John. Whitman, Joan. The list goes on and on. Clarke can’t help it, she has to turn the pages, has to be sure, has to know.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 pages. 382 names. 382 people. 382 souls.

She recoils.

There’s movement in the corner of her left eye: probably Jackson back from the mess hall, and out of sheer panic, in a gesture she will never truly understand, Clarke grabs the set of documents and shoves it down her pants, below her shirt.

When Jackson rounds the corner, she’s anxiously smoothing her top over the crinkles to hide the papers beneath. The exchange that follows is awkward. Not really a conversation per se, more a stuttered:

“So, last week, I was… and you were… so yeah, that happened. I mean, it didn’t… happen. And that’s a good thing. Really, so… I don’t ever want to talk about it. If that’s ok of course. Not that you really have a say, though. I mean, of course you have a say, but… It never happened, ok?” she rambles, a real gold-medallist in avoiding looking him in the eye, before she hightails it out of there, heading in the direction of the Chancellor’s office.
“Clarke, thank you for coming! Please, come in, take a seat, put yourself at ease.”

Marcus looks exhausted. He had sent for her, requesting her presence for an urgent private meeting, so it’s with no small measure of caution and distrust that Clarke sits down – in the same room she had stormed out of more than half a year ago and was never invited back to.

“You wanted to see me?”

“I did, I do, we have much to discuss. You look good! Really good. Any new addition to your regimen that I should know about? Tips on how to stay in shape? I’ve been trying to work out myself, joined the guard’s daily sparring sessions. You know, the ones Octavia and Lincoln are teaching? But, I guess you heard, I broke my arm sparring with Monroe. I’m trying running these days, not my preferred choice to be honest, but one has to stay fit!”

If Marcus is babbling (a stark contrast to his usual smooth political ways) and throwing away compliments when Clarke knows for a fact that she looks tired and stressed, then this can only mean really bad news. Or personal news? But surely her mother would be the one informing her if the two had anything big to share, no?

“Marcus, can we please skip the small talk? I know for a fact that I look like shit. And if I may, so do you” she cuts in, trying not to put any bite in it.

If he’s taken aback, he doesn’t show it. He rubs with a dirty hand at is forehead. “You’re right. This week has been quite… evenful. I feel I’ve aged a year, if not more, these past few days.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes. Well, Costia’s been kind enough to deal with Indra’s rather… vociferous recriminations. Things are slowly reverting back to normal in the medical bay, as you know, and some healers from the neighbouring villages have started going back. We still have a couple of unclaimed bodies in the black zone, unfortunately, which is quite tricky but all in all I’d say the worst is behind us.”

“Let’s hope.”

“I wanted to thank you personally for your help. I’m trying to debrief people to understand how we could better handle such incidents in the future and your name came up on several occasions. People
were very impressed with how you handled yourself considering the circumstances and managed the triage zone.”

Ok.

Of all the different routes she thought this conversation may go down, she definitely did not expect… praise or whatever this is. And Clarke… let’s just say she’s not the best at receiving compliments.

“Just trying to help” she shrugs, embarrassed.

“Yes, well, yours was incredibly useful.” Kane looks sheepish for a moment, hand still rubbing his face. “Which is why I don’t want you take what I’m about to ask of you the wrong way.”

Uhu. There it is.

“I’m afraid I’d like to pick your brain again, if that’s alright with you, Clarke.”

She doesn’t reply, choosing to look at him pointedly instead.

Slightly unsettled, Marcus clears his throat, before starting in earnest: “Last week was an eye opener for many of us, as to the current tensions wracking the coalition. I’ve discussed things at length with our liaison and the council: we were all quite shaken by how close to Arkadia the armed clashes are unfolding. The talks we had were meant to clarify what attitude Arkadia wants to adopt in the event of an all-out war between Trikru and Ice Nation – something, which has unfortunately become quite a likely scenario.”

He pauses, then continues. “At the same time, the Commander has honoured our alliance in every aspect we had agreed upon, in terms of land and support, and more importantly in terms of ensuring our protection. In light of this positive collaboration, we discussed our options: Arkadia could argue for a special status as a neutral territory, with the known risk of course of this neutrality not being respected by one of the parties; or we could side with one of the warring parties, be it Ice Nation or Trikru. Our history with both clans is, to put it mildly, quite turbulent, but many of us have expressed the desire to explore ways of deepening our alliance with the Commander.”

It all sounds quite…sensible for once. Clarke’s quite proud she doesn’t even flinch at the mention of
Lexa.

“You are, by far, the one who’s spent the most time with her.”

Who? Wait… her her? Lexa her? Why is she getting this sinking feeling…

“So I was wondering if you’d be open to share your thoughts on this, especially considering the Commander’s betrayal during the attack on Mount Weather.”

Clarke squirms in her seat. Sure, she’s had hours and days to analyse over and over again what happened at the Mountain and sure, she did spend a lot of time with Lexa. But that doesn’t make her in any way an expert on how the girl ticks. Especially considering they have the girl’s lover as liaison…

“What exactly do you mean by deepening our ties with Trikru?” she wants to clarify first.

Marcus holds her stare when he replies: “It could mean a formal fleshed-out alliance with Trikru. Bilateral treaties with other clans. Joining the Coalition as the 13th clan is also on the table.”

Wow.

That is indeed very big news for Skaikru.

“Is that truly an option?”

“Costia tells me it is” he replies succinctly.

My my, hasn’t the Trikru liaison been busy in the past week…

“So Clarke, what do you think? Do you trust the Commander?” he asks again.
Ugh. She decides to be honest.

“It depends what you mean by trust. Do I trust her right now to protect Arkadia at all cost? No. Hell no. But do I trust her to have the best interest of her people at heart at all times? Yes. Is she a good ruler? I don’t really know to be honest” she pauses, her thoughts a jumbled mess. “What Lexa did at Mount Weather was in hindsight unpredictable of course, because Mount Weather offering a deal to Trikru, whom they considered to be savages, seemed inconceivable; and yet at the same time predictable, in the sense that Lexa, when given the choice, will always put her people first.” The words taste bitter.

She takes the time to think her next sentence over: “The problem with the deal we had at the time nis that it never made any of us her people or put us under her protection and responsibility.”

She pauses again. “I’m unfamiliar with the complexities of what it means to be a coalition partner vs the alliance you’ve agreed on with her now, especially since it seems even the coalition doesn’t prevent them from fighting each other in an unofficial way. But anything that puts us officially under her protection, whether it’s as a new clan of the coalition or in any other way, can only offer us more security.”

“I’m glad you see it that way Clarke. Really glad” Marcus starts with a little bit too much…relief. He looks nervously down at his now clasped hands.

And there it is; the real reason Kane’s invited her, the one thing he’s been skirting around all meeting long. Clarke bites her tongue, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“The Commander’s invited us to visit Polis and agrees to host talks and negotiations there, with all the other clans present. My understanding is that it’s less about hammering out the details of an agreement and more about convincing us that a more formal long-term partnership would be in our interest, while at the same time persuading the other clans Skaikru deserve a seat at the table.”

He pauses… Ok… why is he so nervous? Her mother and Kane have already visited Polis once, why should this invitation be cause for concern?

“The Commander’s expressed the desire the person representing Skaikru be you, Clarke.”

What?
It shoots out of her on autopilot, the idea so... revolting she wants to physically recoil. “No.”

Kane has gone from a hesitant green to a stressed yellow by now, all colours that don’t suit him very well.

“No way. You can’t make me go there, Kane. After everything she’s done. No!”

“I’m…” he clears his throat, tries again. “I’m afraid it appears to be non-negotiable, Clarke.”

“What do you mean “non-negotiable”? What the fuck does that mean?”

“It was request, Clarke, not an invitation. You’re expected in Polis in two days’ time.”

Lexa “requested” her presence? Requested as in ordered? REQUESTED it, like she’s a floating subject at her beck and call? What the &%$!
The imposing chest sitting in the middle of the room looks familiar. In fact, she could swear it’s an exact replica of the one she received all those years ago… Realization hits her at the exact same time her guards lift the heavy lid. And it’s too late for her to halt their movement. There, right in the center of it, lies a human head. To her credit, she doesn’t wince. Doesn’t move a muscle. Even though everything inside her is bursting at the seams.

And canon rears its little head again in this chapter, I hope it’s not too confusing (canon compliant vs deviant) and also not too annoying to read about scenes we’ve all already seen in the TV episodes. Clarke comes to Polis and discovers Lexa’s world, complete with some intrigue.

Favourite scene to write so far was the drawing lesson. Picture request: no request this time, but a big disclaimer instead! The cartoon lexacoons already exist out there and are AWESOME. If you don’t know about them already, go check out Mochiball’s art: http://immochiball.tumblr.com/.

I’m posting this now because I’m an impatient little shit, even though I’m not a 100% happy with the Clarke/Lexa confrontation scene. I’m sorry for how long it's taking me to update. Thanks for all the comments and kudos so far. I’m really really curious to hear your thoughts on this half of the chapter, so please leave comments! I live for them (or at the very least: I write for them)!

Are you planning on scowling the whole way to Polis?” Costia asks her with no small amount of mirth.

Clarke pointedly ignores the jibe, focusing on the lulling heat emanating from the horse Indra was gracious enough to lend them, so she could make the trip. She’s on her fifth loud huff since they departed and yes, she plans to scowl the whole way to the Trikru capital (not that the girl needs to know that).

Besides, Costia hasn’t exactly been trying to engage in pleasant conversation either: the warrior’s been attentively scrutinizing the trees and their surroundings for any sign of threats ever since their departure. Not an easy task considering the forest’s plunged in a thick grey fog that swallows...
anything in their vicinity beyond two meters. The liaison even insisted they reduce their gait to a very slow trot, to make sure they don’t fall victim to a surprise attack. Suffice to say: tensions with the Ice Nation are at an all-time high and many Trikru seem to believe Clarke has a target on her back.

She knows Costia was squeamish about leaving Jonah’s bedside to accompany her on the journey and only relented when Indra maintained she couldn’t spare any of her own warriors, considering the volatile situation at the border. (Clarke secretly suspects the Trikru general of still holding a grudge towards her, after the incident with the patients from Ice Nation.) Costia’s cousin is thankfully making a slow recovery, but Abby had cautiously informed them that the warrior may never regain the same full range of motion with his left shoulder as before. Despite the liaison’s initial reluctance (and though she would never admit it out loud), Clarke is glad for the company today.

The blonde herself had agonized over making the journey now and leave Arkadia in turmoil or bow out, but Kane had been adamant (rightfully so) the talks to join the coalition were more important than her help back home. The Chancellor had also dismissed Clarke’s (completely founded) doubts on whether it was a good idea in the first place to have her Skaikru’s ambassador (so to speak), considering the blonde’s lingering anger towards Lexa. “I trust you to represent us to the best of your ability, Clarke and know when to bring up the fiasco at Mount Weather up, if ever at all. Water under the bridge, you understand? Your previous history with the Commander is as much a potential liability, as it may be an opportunity for us” is all he had said, concluding with an embarassed: “And well, she did request you.” Great pep talk.

The latest stumbling block, right before her departure, had been their fledgling blood bank running out of available blood packs. Sadly, the ensuing campaign to get Arkadians to donate their blood had met with intransient defiance (‘Why should we give our own blood for these people?’). In parallel, explaining the unfamiliar process of blood transfusions to the Trikru patients’ families had required endless demonstrations from Costia, Lincoln and Nyko to reassure them. In the end, they had been able to put in place an unofficial policy of 1 donor for 1 patient (from their family or friends), making sure to draw 2 or 3 times from each donor to replenish the blood bank’s stock once and for all (until the next mass casualty that is, a small voice reminds her).

Their common dismay over the attitude of their fellow Arkadians had brought Clarke and Abby somewhat closer for the first time in months. And it’s…nice, to have her mother back, so to speak. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed the older woman’s reassuring presence. Clarke’s changed, of course: she doesn’t look for the same validation, doesn’t need the same type of attention and respect she once craved. But so has her mother. Focusing on developing their nursing activities has brought out a calmer, less calculating side in the older Griffin, Clarke had almost forgotten existed. She seems almost relieved to be able now to concentrate on one simple goal, away from politics: saving lives.

They’re like two old friends who used to know everything about one another but lost touch and now need to rediscover each other, building on - at the same time as doing away with - previous truths and preconceptions. With the slight complication though, that her mother still instinctively tends to slip into the role of protective parent from time to time, which never fails to make Clarke cringe. But
the blonde’s able to call her out on it now, at least. And so far, the doctor has shown great mindfulness not to encroach too much on her new life with Damian and her friends. So far, so good. One thing she could do without though? The fact that her mended relationship with her mother means she gets to see a lot more of… Jackson. Flash interactions that give a whole new meaning to the concept of awkwardness.

She hasn’t broached the topic of Kane with her, although it’s been on her mind. It’s not as if she needs confirmation that the two are an item. She got that and so much more than what she had bargained for, a couple of months ago. She’d just like to know exactly what they are. All she needs is a word, a concept, a box. But she’s well aware that were their roles reversed, she’d be the first to tell her mother it’s none of her business. So she’s kept quiet for now, observing Kane from the side-lines and catching glimpses here and there of brief moments of comforting familiarity and burgeoning intimacy between the two. Now that she thinks about it, Kane may well be part of the reason for the changes in her mother. It’s strange though, this feeling of needing official clarity.

She’s able to recognize the selfish self-absorption in the fact that she had never wondered if her mother would find somebody new. To replace her father. No, not replace. But still… occupying a space that shouldn’t be theirs. That should be Jake’s and Jake’s alone, even if only in memory… So yeah, to say that Clarke is conflicted over the whole thing is an understatement.

There are moments she’s completely fine with it, interacting normally with Kane (and she likes the man, she really does). And moments where… she wants to lash out at him. Or rather at her. Open up that dreaded subject of her mother’s responsibility in her father’s death all over again, even though she’s able to recognize she’s moved past it, both emotionally and intellectually. Actually scratch that, intellectually maybe; emotionally no, but that may never happen either. There are some things you will simply always carry with you, it’s just a question of how deep you bury them…

When she had finally packed and left (carefully stashing away Skaikru’s present for the Commander and exchanging a heartfelt “May we meet again” with her mother), Arkadia’s hot topic du jour - source of much strife - had been over how to accommodate the refugees. Most villagers fleeing from the conflict between Trikru and Ice Nation had sought refuge in TonDC. The new town, which had lost many of its own inhabitants the previous year (wince), had had no issues in integrating them. Indra had ordered her people to help with the construction of shelters and had included the newcomers immediately in farming work. A small wave has now left to return to their destroyed villages, but the vast majority will likely stay in TonDC for a while, if not for good. There’s only so much starting over a person can do in their life, after all.

The tricky part had come with those TonDC – Indra – had refused to receive. Mainly: the Ice Nation villagers who had chosen to flee into Trikru territory, instead of burying deeper into Ice lands. Although, when most roads into the Ice hinterland are rumoured to be cut off by rogue entities and the journey is sure to lead to famine, the line between that choice being the product of an informed and voluntary decision and it being the product of a forced one, is admittedly quite blurred. Most had smartly opted for bypassing TonDC altogether and had landed in Arkadia, usually accompanying wounded family members.
Considering Skaikru’s last brush with their clan, some Arkadians had been quick to call for them to be chased away, if not worse (and Clarke had definitely heard much worse). Even Raven had initially called for retribution, which had led to heated discussions among their group. With Octavia on the fence and refusing to officially disavow Indra’s stance, Bryan, Monty and Clarke had found themselves in the strange position of being Ice Nation’s strongest advocates. To everyone’s surprise, Damian had been the only one to manage to get through to the mechanic and mellow her out.

Kane’s intervention had been prompt: making it very clear that attacks or any type of harassment would not be tolerated. He had then proceeded to sit with each newly arrived family to discuss their options and had been saddened to hear testimony after testimony of perpetual insecurity and starving in their home villages. Thankfully, the Guard had stood by the Chancellor’s side and prevented any incidents from happening. But the question remains as to what to do with these 50 or so families, who seem to have nowhere else to go. She would have liked to participate in the decision-making process, especially since her second could be considered in a similar situation (even though she knows the boy would object to being branded a victim) and she hasn’t forgotten her fellow Arkadians’ reluctance to support him settling down amongst them.

Clarke had first thought she could combine her visit to the capital with Raven’s (desperate not to face Lexa on her own), but the mechanic, who had initially been so enthusiastic about making the trip, had strangely decided to postpone hers. Clarke suspects Costia’s cousin of being part of the reason why she chose to stay behind (to Damian’s dismay, who had been uncharacteristically rude to the wounded warrior). The discussion with the boy had been a very long one, Clarke leaving the decision entirely up to him: he could remain in Arkadia, continue his training with Lincoln and Octavia and pursue his work with Raven, Monty and Wick; or come with her. And the fact that he had chosen to stay behind… stings a little, to be honest.

To be fair, he had decided he would stay, but then make the trip at a later date with Raven. So it’s not exactly a rejection per se. But still… Besides, she knows it has very little to do with her and everything to do with the boy’s contentious relationship towards Trikru, be it the people or the culture. After all, as the capital of the People of the Trees, Polis could be considered the epitome of all things Trikru and Clarke understands his dread at the idea of traveling to a place where he would most definitely not be welcomed, were his “condition” made public.

Anyway, when Clarke was thinking of company, she definitely did not expect to be treated to silence (though admittedly, she kind of should have known better). Oh, but wait, Costia had actually addressed her! The blonde scrambles for an answer, after her long silence. She can hardly explain to the Trikru that every single step forward fills her with one more drop of cold apprehension inside. (Drops that coalesce to form stones. Heavy stones.) That she feels paralysed at the idea of seeing her soon.

She settles for a half-truth: “I’m sorry, I thought I’d be travelling with Raven, you know…” she starts before she catches herself. “Not that there’s anything wrong with traveling with you. I love it! I
mean, love is maybe a little bit too strong a word. I like it and I really appreciate you tagging along, I do. It’s just, Raven’s a friend, you know?” God, somebody shut her up!

“Not that I don’t consider you a friend, of course. I mean, we know each other… and well… you’ve been living with us for what, 6 months now? And we collaborated for the mapping exercise… We do things together, you taught me how to swim… You’re almost… a sort of… friend, right?” she says, more question than statement.

Costia’s lips twitch upwards and she cocks her head to the right as if mulling over her words. “I suppose” she replies, not giving anything away.

From where she is, Clarke can’t properly see her face, but she could swear there’s a touch of whimsical wonder in her tone.

“Speaking of your… friend” she lets the word playfully roll off her tongue, “what exactly are her intentions with my cousin?” Costia wants to know, throwing Clarke for a loop.

The blonde has to think it over, wondering how far she can confide in the brunette. “I don’t think I know much more than you do on the subject. Raven’s not the type to disclose much about her love life.”

Costia nods, a small worried pout on her lips.

“But she’s good, you know. I mean, she’s a great person. If there is something going on…” Clarke doesn’t know how to express what she wants to say, that Raven’s this incredible and bloody smart woman who never seizes to amaze her. That she couldn’t possibly imagine life without the girl’s snarky and generous friendship. “Then Jonah’s a lucky guy” she finishes lamely.

Costia throws a small chuckle her way and raises her eyebrow suggestively.

It takes Clarke a while to catch on: “No, God no, not this again! I’m not… you know that we’re not… I’m just saying that, as a friend” she mock glares. Speaking of bed partners… “That thing you saw, the other day, me and Jackson, it wasn’t… We’re not… There’s absolutely nothing going on between him and me. Zero. Zilch. Or is it him and I? Anyway, the point is: I… Jackson’s a friend, nothing more.” she stammers out, not sure why it’s suddenly so important for her to set the record straight and cursing her inability to stay quiet. When had she become so inarticulate?
She doesn’t miss the imperceptible frown on Costia’s brow, but other than that, the girl remains stoic, riding slightly ahead of her.

“You do not have to explain, Clarke.”

The blonde eggs her mount on to come to her level. “I know, I just wanted it to be clear” she starts, realizing her mistake immediately, because, honestly: why?

Costia doesn’t ask but now that the question is running around in her head, Clarke can’t stop herself from rambling on, again: “Because… uh… Well, as we just established, we’re friends. And friends tell each other things… like these types of things…”

Moving on: how do you start a conversation with somebody you barely know anything about or rather, how do you not so subtly change the topic away from the hole you seem dead set on digging yourself into?

She’s saved from her predicament by Costia, who volunteers: “Jackson kom Skaikru is an excellent healer and a kind man. A good choice in a partner, Clarke. Maybe one day you’ll explain to me what exactly you understand by “friend” though, as our definitions seem to differ in some ways.”

Clarke almost falls off her horse. If she hadn’t caught the cheeky smile the damn girl throws her way, she would have missed that Costia – who is now dissolving into loud laughter at her reaction – is only teasing her. The knowledge doesn’t prevent her face from going up in flames. Maybe silence isn’t such a bad idea after all.

“I’ve been… It’s been a while… I don’t, not with friends. Well Jackson’s a friend but…” she starts, with absolutely no idea where she’s going with this.

“It is fine, Clarke” Costia interrupts her, “would you like to change the subject?”

Thank FUCK.

At Clarke’s vigorous nod and relieved “Please”, the liaison continues: “Have you reflected on how you’ll convince the ambassadors to let Skaikru into the coalition?”
Oh, back to business then, ok. Frankly, no, she hasn’t. What she has put a lot of thought into lately though, is what she’ll be screaming at Lexa when she finally sees her again and gets her alone. But she can’t share that with the girl, so she goes with a vague: “A little.”

Costia dips her head once, biting her bottom lip in thought, before she seemingly takes this as an invitation to explain the clan system to her. Clarke leans in to make sure she doesn’t miss anything. “Say you divide the clans into three categories. First come those already on your side. As much as Heda may deny it, you can count Trikru as firmly convinced of Skaikru’s trustworthiness.”

Clarke gives a small smile at that, ignoring the voice in her head wondering out loud how many people had to die for Skaikru to earn Tirkru’s respect – how many people she had to kill for her to extend her people peace. (Who is she kidding, she knows exactly how many.) It’s… nice, albeit still new, this atmosphere of commiseration between the two of them, and more importantly, to have Costia mention her.

“Ok, who else?” she asks.

Costia furrows her brows at her question. “That is all, Trikru is the only one.”

Well, that is bound to sober one right up.

“Then come the clans you will need to convince. That would be the River people (their ambassador’s name is Laksha); the Boat People (represented by a woman called Tala); the People of the Valley (with Joao as their delegate); the Swamp People (their ambassador is Rafa) and maybe Delfikru (with Ange). And the Rock People of course (you can not miss Otis, he is quite the character). You will have to pay particular attention to him: the Rock Line Clan’s lands border yours to the West and Otis is very invested into anything to do with Skaikru.”

Clarke is a little bit lost. “That is a lot of clans to convince…”

“Yes, but remember: discussions have been ongoing for months now, ever since they all agreed to a truce after the fall of the Mountain. Heda has already prepared the terrain and the collaboration between Trikru and Skaikru this year is proof that strengthening our ties can only prove mutually beneficial. All they need is a little push in the right direction. Show a strong front and stress the many benefits their individual clans could reap from Skaikru becoming a permanent partner.”

“As Wanheda” Clarke says with distaste. Because she’s no fool: she knows why Lexa insisted she
be the one to come.

Costia is honest enough not to deny it: “Sha, as Wanheda.”

“And to finish, come the clans who have already expressed their opposition to the idea. The key people there are Lotrien, the ambassador of the Ice Nation; Kieran, of the Hill People (we also call them the Blue Cliff Clan, but I don’t expect you to have heard of them, they're a private people, mostly keeping to their caves); Intan, who represents the Desert Clan; Uzac, the delegate for Broadleaf; and Djaím, of the Horse Clan.”

That’s… a lot of clans. Too many in fact. What’s the point of her going there if almost half of the coalition has actually already made up their minds and is against Skaikru joining?

Her concern must show, for Costia continues: “Do not let appearances fool you, Clarke: some of these clans may show outright - and very vocal - defiance, but are actually open to discussing the matter in private. You will have to play to their alliances. For example, Kieran’s people (Blue Cliff) live in perpetual fear of Ice Nation to the North, the Horse Clan to the West and the Sand People to the South. Now, were you to win the Sand People over (Intan, remember?), then they would be amendable to discussion. Do you follow?”

She does, but she’ll have to draw a geographic map of all these clans tonight and write down the names of their representatives, with Costia’s help, otherwise she’ll be completely lost. Something tells her first impressions will play a major role in the upcoming negotiations. In a way, it’s a sign of how far they’ve come: a year ago, the Sky People were discovering men they were indiscriminately calling “Grounders” (if not other more unsavoury names). She remembers Lexa’s patient explanations about the Tree People in the quiet of her tent, whenever Clarke’s brain would stop processing strategy-talk. Now, although there are still so many intricacies of Trikru culture for them to grasp, they’re also learning about a whole new world of clans.

Costia’s not done: “Unsurprisingly, the hardest of all will be Ice Nation, but this may soon change. The one you should be most careful about is actually Djaím. He has a tendency to oppose anything Hedaproposes out of spite. But were he to find himself isolated and under pressure from all the other clans, he would be forced to adjust his stance.”

The thought of facing all these men and women is daunting.

But wait a second: “Hold up, why should Ice Nation not be an issue anymore? Considering how we left things with them, I’d say they’re pretty much going to remain a major thorn in our side. We may be ready to shake with them for the coalition’s sake but my people still want justice for what
happened, Costia.”

The girl deflects her question: “This is for Heda to tell you, not me.”

Secrets. She hates secrets. (And yet she has so many of them herself.)

Costia forges on: “Now, what will your arguments be?”

“Mmhh, the fall of Mount Weather. How we achieved it, the technology and weapons we used” the blonde thinks out loud.

“Sha, but do not delve too much into it. The clans still feel uneasy about how the Sky People defeated so quickly an enemy we cowered under for decades. The same goes for your earlier victory at your skyship over Tristan’s men. The reminder is bound to stir up some nervous disquiet amongst them. Use subtle hints to both events to exude power and danger, but in general, stress more Skaikru’s achievements in times of peace.”

“Ok, like the radio network with Trikru villages? The hospital and the fact that we’re open to treating anybody?” Clarke muses.

“Make sure to mention the pauna. That will be most impressive for many. In fact, I suspect most clan leaders must have already heard about it. Lincoln’s adventure has turned into quite the tale amongst our people. It not only shows the power of your weapons, but that you put them to good use and are willing to share.”

“Lincoln and Damian’s adventure” Clarke corrects her before continuing cheekily: “Are you finally admitting it was a good thing we helped him?”

Costia sends a begrudging smile her way, choosing to ignore her comment. “The Desert Clan is struggling with many giant sand snakes. Access to Raven’s exploding devices could go a long way to swaying Intan.”

“Wait, real, giant snakes? You mean mutated, like the pauna?” the blonde interrupts her. And then, at Costia’s acquiescence: “Float! How big are we talking about? Man, these must look scary!”
“I can confirm they do. And they’re not particularly friendly towards mankind either” Costia replies with a frown as if remembering an upsetting memory.

Clarke gets back on track: “So that would win us the Sand People… And you said they were essential, right? To put pressure on that other clan… Are we sure we want to go down that road, though? Sharing our weapons with the other clans? Kane was worried it could result in more problems in the long run. Especially since the coalition apparently is no guarantee for peace…”

“That is a matter for you and Hedato discuss. I imagine an agreement could be reached for limited manufactured amounts to be allotted without divulging any of the designs and fabrication instructions…”

“How come you know so much about all of this? I mean, I guess you and Lexa must be talking about… of course you do… sorry, I just… It’s none of my business, really. Forget I asked.”

Damn her and her bloody big mouth. Way to go, Clarke!

But instead of clamping up, as she usually does whenever the blonde brings Lexa up, Costia surprisingly replies. “I am Trikru but my family was living from herding horses deep in the South, close to the border our clan shares with the River people and Shallow Valley.”

Clarke wants to ask if Lexa’s from the same region, but knows better than to push her luck.

“Our herds would often graze these other clans’ lands and once a year we would travel farther to the most remote clans to sell the horses we had trained or acquire new foals.”

“Oh. Wow. That sounds exciting and adventurous?”

It doesn’t quite explain why the liaison would know so much about all the clans. But today marks the first time the girl opens up with real tangible personal information, so she’ll take it! Plus the image of a younger Costia, whispering reassuring words to a huffing mare to calm her down, is now swimming in her mind. (It fits, somehow… Yes, it fits.)

Costia nods in earnest, a wistful tone to her voice: “It was.”
“What are they like? The River People and what did you call them: Shadow Valley?”

“Shallow valley” the Trikru corrects her. “They go by different names: Shallow Valley or the People of the Valley, it’s the same. As to what they are like,” she picks up her speed a little bit, “I guess you will have to wait and see, ambassador. Who knows, if you make an impression, they might even invite you to visit their homelands! Now, let’s make things interesting: last one to arrive to our base for the night has to stand guard for the first shift” she throws over her shoulder, with a mischievous smile, urging her horse to break into a canter and leaving the blonde in the dust.

“HEY!” Clarke shouts after her, “not fair! We don’t even have a base!” before going in pursuit.

---

Despite waking at dawn, they have to split their journey over two days, primarily because of the excruciating slow pace Costia had initially imposed. When they make camp in a small clearing for the night (their first break of the day, Costia first on the scene of course), Clarke slides down from her mount and stays slumped on the ground for several minutes. Everything hurts. In fact not just everything but parts of her body she hadn’t even known existed. Everything. Hurts. The physical pain is a welcome distraction from the anxious knot that’s ever growing inside of her, but still. Everything. Floating. Hurts. Costia takes pity on her and organizes their dinner on her own, but not without shaking her head and laughing at her (Clarke takes her previous comments on being glad for the company back).

Before she heads off into the forest in search of sustenance, the warrior wants to know: “You do not eat meat, correct?”

The blonde grunts in response, surprised she’s noticed.

“Why is that?” the girl continues, tilting her head to the side and forcing Clarke to utter more than just animalistic sounds (not an easy task when she can hardly focus on anything else than her aching joints and muscles).

She powers through and gives a small shrug: “I don’t know, it just started in Sinchuk, I think. I simply can’t stomach the smell or the taste anymore. Maybe it’s because I went without for a month?” Clarke wonders out loud, because frankly, she hasn’t really spent too long trying to analyse the development.
Costia doesn’t prod further and simply disappears into the smog.

When they’re settled for the night, both gazing up into the smoke through which the outline of stars can be imagined here and there, Clarke’s the one to speak up.

“So what would you recommend as musts in Polis, must-dos, must-sees?” she asks tentatively. She’s not ready to call it a day, too drunk on how chatty Costia is revealing herself to be.

“Polis” the girl starts, before pausing, contemplative. “Polis can be deceitful to new eyes. It has everything you need and so much more, yet you won’t know it. I would say, the night market is without a doubt a place you should experience once, but with somebody by your side, otherwise it may well turn out to be a nasty affair. Oh, and the bathhouse of course, but that goes without saying.”

It turns out, Polis is apparently famous for its baths and the liaison goes on to sing their praises for quite some time. Interesting.

Clarke’s feeling daring. “Which spot is your favourite?” she asks, hoping the answer won’t be something like “the view from Lexa’s bed.”

Costia takes her time before answering. “It is not a place per se, but I like Polis best in the early morning hours. The transition from the last remnants of the night to the first rays of light. The flutter of activity that slowly takes over the quiet” she reveals, a wistful tone in her voice again.

Clarke finds it hard to imagine the city, with nothing to go on, yet she feels she’ll like it – all nightmares about the floating Commander temporarily forgotten. But more than that, she thinks she’d like Costia to show her Polis.

“The story you shared, the other day. When I was with Raven. The one about the stars. You said your mother used to tell it to you?”

Costia remains silent for some time before she replies: “Yes.” Clarke thinks she’ll leave it at that simple answer but the girl surprises her once again. “The stars were essential for us, growing up. They would light our way at night. Knowing how to read them properly ensured we wouldn’t get lost.”
“Surely you must have drifted off course once or twice when you were younger…” Clarke needles.

The Trikru puffs her chest up in defiance: “We know our lands by heart. Trikru take pride in never losing their way.”

She’s got her exactly where she wanted: “Really? What about that one time you went missing for a whole month?”

It’s probably the first time she sees Costia flustered. Is that a… blush bathed in the light of the warm flickering fire?

The liaison goes from furrowing her brow to a narrowed glare: “I see Jonah’s been talkative” she grits out between her teeth, her chest deflating.

Clarke sends an “I got you” wink her way. “Don’t take it out on him, Raven kept him abundantly supplied with moonshine the night we celebrated the dropship landing. He may have shared an anecdote or two, but nothing really embarrassing. The stories are kind of cute, actually.”

Costia grumbles in response and shifts restlessly. She falls silent before she sits up, looking at Clarke. “In the story I told you, children could catch the stars, once upon a time. In the South, when I would sleep out with our horses for weeks on end, so they could graze new lands, there was one star in particular that always shone very bright” she explains, before turning her face back up towards the inscrutable welkin.

“And I knew, deep down, that the story wasn’t real, that it wasn’t possible. But I was curious. I wanted to try at least, see it for myself. I don’t know how much Jonah told you, but yes, I did get lost. Once. I was chasing that one star, trying to get closer to it, close enough to touch. I wasn’t gone a month though, a week or two, maybe, but not longer. My cousin likes to exaggerate.”

“And what happened?” Clarke queries, enraptured.

“I never quite seemed to catch up with it. So after a while, I just gave up and realized I had completely lost my way. When I got back, I told my parents a horse had gotten lose. Jonah’s the only one I told the truth at the time.”

Clarke can hear the smile in her voice. “Which one is it?” she wants to know, scrutinizing the open
skies where the smog is slowly retreating.

“That star isn’t there anymore” Costia clips back.

It takes her way too long to catch on: “How can…?” But when she does, she scrambles up, mirroring Costia’s relaxed sitting position. “Wait, there’s no way… you don’t mean the Ark, right?”

The warrior nods. There’s something in her eyes. An intensity to them as they stare into Clarke’s.

“No… seriously? Wow! What a strange coincidence, don’t you think?” the blonde continues, stunned.

“And here you are: instead of us taking you from the sky, you came down on your own” Costia finishes.

They don’t say anything for a while, Clarke trying to wrap her head around the fact that Trikru – or at least this girl and her people – used to look up to the Ark every single night, in search of guidance. It’s the type of peaceful, soothing silence she can share with only a few of her friends. And Damian of course.

“It’s funny. You living on the ground and dreaming of the stars, while we were living in the skies and dreaming of the ground? We were so focused on the Earth up there, that we never really looked at everything around us. We didn’t see any beauty in space. It was more a terrifying black immensity. We lived in fear of disappearing in it. Come to think of it, we never considered any alternative to coming back down to Earth. But here… To see the skies lit up like that… it’s so stunningly breathtaking…” The blonde loses herself in the contemplation of the glittering firmament.

“Did you really not suspect the Earth was populated? That we exist?”

Clarke shakes her head, surprised at the question. “No. We genuinely believed it to be uninhabitable to any human life form. It sounds silly, doesn’t it? To pour all our hopes onto a place we knew so little about… We tried to monitor it from afar, but with each passing year, we’d have to scrap one of the few programmes that was still connecting us to Earth in order to save on energy. The satellites were the first to go. The last decades, we had no capacity to observe and follow anything on this planet anymore.”
“What does the Earth look like, from up there?”

It’s the first time someone asks her that and she’s hit with the memory of this monumental wonder of a planet she would get lost into the contemplation of.

“It’s… blue.”

“Blue, really?”

“Yes, well, it depends from which angle you look at it of course, but usually yes, it’s blue. This deep clear blue, interspersed here and there with oceans of white clouds. Apparently it was always the case: water used to cover close to two thirds of land. But the nuclear apocalypse led to tectonic shifts that increased that amount to about 90% – at least from what we could tell. It’s ironic really, that such a destructive event for the Human race increased the coverage of the one element from which life stems…”

Costia hums, intrigued: “Blue.”

“And huge. There’s this one story my mom used to tell me, about when I was a kid. She says that one day, I woke up from a nightmare, crying and went to my parents’ bedroom. I slipped into their bed, which woke my mother up. I was a scared mess. She says I was babbling about a giant blue orb that was going to swallow us whole. It took my parents weeks before they realized I was talking about this planet.”

Her companion chuckles. “What enabled you to lay this fear to rest?”

She pauses, trying to remember. “My mom offered to switch bedrooms with me. Mine had these two windows above the bed, from which I would see the planet all the time. But my dad. He… made up this story instead. He painted Earth as this insecure giant longing for us to return to it. He said that it had gifted us the colour of our eyes, so we’d never forget where we come from. And that Earth wasn’t colossal to intimidate me or squash us but rather to make sure we’d always have it in our sights and never forget that it is home. I could never look at it the same way after that.”

“It would appear we both had quite the storytellers in the family.”

“Yeah…”
She’s started to drift, her eyes closed – not really there anymore but not completely gone either – when she whispers: “I never thanked you...”

She’s still conscious enough to hear and understand Costia’s sleepy words in response: “What for, being such good company today?”

She wants to smile (she likes Costia’s playful side), wants to shake her head but nothing moves. So she goes for words instead: “No. That day, in the forest...” She’s too tired to continue, so she just ends it with “thank you” and struggles to stay awake. She is after all supposed to stand guard.

She could swear she hears the girl mumble sadly: “I should be the one to thank you. You did save her after all” but she’s not sure.

She thinks she would have liked to show Costia the view from her bedroom, up in the Ark. Yes. She would have liked seeing the Earth reflected in the girl’s fascinated brown eyes.

They’ve reached their destination. Clarke sucks in a breath. The city sprawled at her feet is like nothing she’s ever seen before. Sure, the movies of old had helped them picture the urban landscape their ancestors had built. Yet there’s watching it on a screen, with the occasional skip and lag, and seeing it live. Polis is enormous, nestled in a large green valley, mountains and hills framing it on all sides. Life and liveliness as far as the eye can see. The blonde remains rooted to the spot.

Costia breaks her out of her stupor: “This is where I leave you, Clarke.”

“Yeah, ok...” she replies distractedly, drinking Polis in.

Wait.

What?
She whips her head to the side, frowning at the girl and reaching out: “What are you talking about?

Costia smiles and doesn’t move away. “I was only ever accompanying you for your protection.”

At this, Clarke turns resolutely away from the spectacle, confused. “No. Why aren’t you coming with me?”

“I am needed back in TonDC and Arkadia.”

Clarke’s hand, the one resting on the Trikru’s arm, falls away. “Oh…” she whispers, “but this doesn’t make any sense… Don’t you want to at least rest, even if only for a couple of hours? Stop by to see Lexa?” she asks, uncomprehending.

Costia looks back almost wistfully at the city… with something akin to longing. The blonde files it away for later.

“I can not. Maybe some other time” she clips back.

Clarke can’t make sense of the pain in the girl’s voice. The warrior’s started leading her horse away, when she calls her back: “Wait, Costia… I… I haven’t even thanked you, for everything you’ve done.”

There’re so many things she’s grateful for, so many things she’d like to acknowledge. Where to start? The swimming lessons, this trip, her support during her convalescence and last but by far not least saving her in the forest.

She fumbles: “Thanks. For coming with me. It’s… I very much enjoyed your company these past two days. Actually, I’ve been meaning to tell you that I… I’m really glad I got to know you, you know. Despite our shaky start.”

She can’t find the words to express the respect she’s come to feel towards her, to describe how much space the liaison has come to take in her life.

The Trikru only nods with understanding eyes. Clarke’d like to think it’s also a silent confirmation of
reciprocity.

She tries to think of questions to stall the liaison’s departure. Because she doesn’t want to face this foreign city alone. Because she didn’t think once she’d have to face floating Lexa on her own. She doesn’t think she can do it. It’s too soon.

But there’s also something else there, another reason….

“In all honesty, do you think we can do it? Do you think I can convince them to see Skaikru like any other clan instead of a threat, one that would have a place in the coalition?” she asks the departing girl.

Costia’s smile falls away, her gaze coming to rest once again on the bustling town. “It is Heda’s plan, is it not?” she starts.

Clarke shrugs hesitantly. What does she know what Lexa’s scheming these days, really?

The girl’s eyes find hers again. “I have never seen her fail, Clarke. Lexa always gets what she wants. And I have a feeling you are not so different” she finishes, after a pregnant pause.

There’s something heavy there, something the blonde can’t quite put her finger on.

But before she can examine it further, Costia quips: “I would recommend however you start with a bath before any of the official introductions and meetings. Our journey has left… quite the mark on you.”

The mirth is back in her voice and Clarke can’t help but shake her head at the jab.

She waits for her traveling companion to disappear behind the tree line, before she lets out a shaky sigh and turns her sights back on the Capital. She clenches her fists, once, twice. There’s no delaying it further now: Polis awaits.
She’s stopped from entering the designated room by a bald man with a strange tattoo on the back of his head. He’s wearing brown robes and sporting a deep scowl on his face. She’s pretty sure she’s never seen him before, yet the hostility is palpable.

“You are not to look at Heda the wrong way. You are not to address Heda the wrong way.”

She interrupts his practiced speech: “Yeah, Yeah, I know the drill” with more attitude than she’s really feeling.

Because first of all, let’s face it, the ship has long sailed on not looking at Lexa inappropriately and as to speaking to her “the wrong way”, she’s been dreaming of doing just that for weeks – correction: for months now. Second, there’s something about him and the intrusive hand he’s placed on her shoulder that just rubs her… the wrong way.

She knows better than to give her anger free reign in such a public setting, however. This is too important. It’s not about her and whatever closure she may need. It’s about giving her people a fighting chance.

Freshly scrubbed clean of the journey’s grime thanks to a quick stop at a public fountain before stepping into the tower, she’s eventually pushed inside a large oval room, light cascading in from large openings, with Lexa seated regally on a throne.

And fuck. How could she have ever possibly thought she was ready for this?

The sight of the young Commander leaves her reeling. It’s as if the past twelve months didn’t happen (has it really been a year?). As if it’s only yesterday she killed every single person inside the Mountain after Lexa’s betrayal.

The brunette is flanked by a colossus of a man, his black hair tied back and Clarke experiences a flash: the memory of the Commander’s former personal bodyguard, Gustus. This one is clean shaven though, with red brown skin and thin eyes. The bald man from earlier comes to stand to Lexa’s right.

They’re not the only ones in the room: several aides and people who look to be on official business are standing around Clarke, all facing the Commander.
There’s nothing in Lexa’s eyes or demeanour. No recognition. No acknowledgement, let alone shame. She wasn’t foolish enough to expect any different, but it still stings.

The bald man – she’ll call him “Baldy” she decides – announces her arrival to the assembly in Trigedasleng: “The Skaikru envoy: Wanheda.”

Clarke flinches inside. She had suspected this would be an official affair. Costia had confirmed as much. That doesn’t mean she’s going to like a single second of it. The blonde carefully schools her features into an impassive mask (she doesn’t think she’s very successful), trying to mirror the woman who’s still sitting, back straight, looking down at her with nothing but mild interest.

“Heda” she says, as practiced with Costia, her eyes meeting Lexa’s for the first time and letting go just as quickly. She inclines her head in a small respectful gesture. “Skaikru is grateful for the opportunity to come before you and make their case for friendship” she speaks, her face still turned towards the ground but loud enough for all present to hear.

She’s either done a great job with the Trigedaslengor said something completely insane judging by the sudden hush that falls on the room’s occupants. She straightens her back and looks up. The Commander dips her head imperceptibly, indicating for her to step closer to the elevated rostrum. She’ll go with “good job” then. Thank God for Costia (she’ll have to find a way to properly thank the girl for her advice on Polis’ protocols).

She makes a show of lifting the present with her arms outstretched, palms up, for all to see and deposits it on the first step leading to the Commander’s throne. Just as the liaison instructed her to and careful not to make eye contact with Lexa while she does it.

“A present from Skaikru for the Commander. A small gesture of gratitude for the trust Heda’s shown us this past year. And several maps of the new Arkadia, to thank Heda for the support we have and continue to receive from her people.”

When practicing with Costia, she had laid it on a little bit too thick with sugary flattery. The girl had thankfully stripped it all away from her planned speech, explaining that Lexa had very little patience for it – something Clarke could have guessed – and that it would be considered a sign of weakness and falsehood by the other clans.

She still loathes every single second of this exchange.
“Welcome to Polis, Ambassador. I trust you will find our capital to your taste and I am looking forward to engaging conversation” Lexa replies in the same formal tone. “There is much to discuss. But first, we shall let you settle into your new quarters to recover from the journey. I wish for your stay among us to be pleasant and informative” she continues, descending the stairs, sidestepping the wrapped parcel without sparing it a single glance.

Clarke is immensely glad for some quiet time alone to regroup, before her eventual private confrontation – because confrontation it will undoubtedly be – with the Commander. She silently follows the guard who guides her to her designated chambers. The floors, corridors and wings pass them by in a disorienting blur. She doesn’t register much of anything at all in this labyrinth, the mental stress of seeing Lexa again finally catching up with her.

She slides with a pained groan in-between the crisp bed sheets, longing for a body to wrap her own around, and tries not to think of the following day. She’s out before she realises she’s still in her traveling clothes.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

By “glad for some quiet time” though, Clarke hadn’t meant three whole floating days completely on her own in the sole company of the one mute guard religiously posted at her door and the occasional visit of help, bringing her food and hot water (but apparently immune to any attempt at small talk). She can’t believe she ever found “Grounder silence” a source of amusement, because this is torture.

“Pleasant and informative” my ass. Delicious food aside (because boy does the Tower’s cook know a thing or two about soups! No disrespect to Damian’s cooking skills, but Clarke’s pretty sure she’s never eaten anything that tasty and rich), she’s ready to go full Wanheda on Lexa and her bloody demands.

She could of course venture outside her chambers to go explore the city but... there’s something about Polis – the sheer size of it, first of all, but not only – that’s just this side of overwhelming, right now.

To add insult to injury, her nightmares have made a disturbing comeback. It’s not that the dead had ceased their nightly persecution in Arkadia, mind you. Far from it! They were still there, lurking in the shadows, biding their time and coming forth whenever she was at her most vulnerable. Their visits had, however, become less frequent as of late and Clarke can’t remember the last time she woke up drenched in cold terror.
That was then.

Now, they’re back and with a vengeance.

She doesn’t know what’s triggered it: whether it’s how unfamiliar everything is here (the town, the tower, the bed); Lexa’s distressing proximity, which Clarke is hyperaware of at all times; or simply because she hasn’t slept alone in quite a while. The absence of Damian’s even breaths, Octavia’s snores or the feeling of Raven’s body sprawled next to hers is… physically and emotionally painful.

This is how the anniversary of the Mountain’s fall creeps up on her.

The realization, on the morning of November 2nd, hits her with the force of a nuclear explosion – the ones they used to learn about back on the Ark. First, there’s the release of devastating energy. Then come the cascading chain explosions, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake. She spends the day curled up in a foetal position in a corner of the room, speaking to the ghosts of people she didn’t even know. The cacophony of voices in her head swells to a deafening point.


When it’s not them, it’s a more familiar list of names she finds herself reciting out loud: Trina, Pascal, Atom, Wells, Charlotte, John, Diggs, Roma…

The smell of rotting bodies (had they already started rotting or were they still cooking, though?). The sight of peeling skin. The hiss of bodies wracked with tremors, spasms and seizures. It’s all back. She wants to run. Wants to roam the forests on her own again, filthy and lost. Wants to be in Arkadia, floating the day away. Wants to pretend for an instant that all of this – all of it: coming down to Earth, the Mountain, her friends’ graves, Lexa – didn’t happen.

Wants to jump from the balcony down into blissful oblivion, 50 floors be damned.

She stays put instead and spends the night vomiting everything her body has to offer, stomach still heaving long after she’s emptied herself.

And at the darkest of hours, when even the owl outside her windows is out for the count and Clarke’s terrors are at their most vicious, it’s another name entirely that finds its way to the tip of her tongue. Or rather a word.
“Dad.”

She realizes she hasn’t thought of him in months; discovers she can not recollect the feeling of warmth and contentment she would experience in her father’s embrace. That last thought finishes to break her. She curls up in a ball, wrecking sobs racking her body.

Lexa lets her stew for three days.

She’s going to kill the woman, there’s no going around it. So she doesn’t have a gun, so what? That’ll only make every single second of it that much more enjoyable.

On the third day, she’s this close to throwing one of the lounging chairs into the glass windows and smashing the rest of the furniture to pieces, when Baldy comes to get her, indicating Lexa is now ready to receive her in private.

Finally!

She didn’t sleep a wink the previous two nights, still feels adrift, more shuffling zombie than functioning representative really, but there’s no way in hell she’ll miss this meeting. (She’s pretty much hit rock bottom by now, so any distraction’ll do. And boy does this promise to be a worthy distraction!)

She’s led into a different room. This one’s smaller, with a high desk in the corner, covered in miniature models and large rolls of maps. Two comfortable-looking chairs frame a small wooden coffee table in front of the open balcony, from where a pleasant breeze is wafting in.

Lexa is standing over some maps, her back to her. She turns when Clarke comes in. She claps her two hands in her front and seems to hesitate.

“Hello, Clarke.” Her tone betrays none of the rigidity the blonde can discern in her stance, it’s much softer than during their formal introduction three days ago. “Thank you for coming.”

It does something to the blonde, something she’d rather not examine too much, to hear her name pass these lips again. The unique clink of the “cl” and the hard resonating “k” at the end. It’s said with so
much familiarity… Almost cautious fondness. And Lexa looks so open (she’d even go as far as to say hopeful…).

Forget blasting the windows: what she wouldn’t give to be able to throw something at that pretty face right now.

But first things first: “Fuck you” she replies hotly, advancing on the brunette. It’s said with the relief and venom of an earnest confession. She can feel the anger burning inside her, slowly bubble to the surface and she’s done keeping a lid on it. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you” she continues for good measure, her angry strides bringing her ever closer to the object of her ire.

Lexa frowns, clearly taken aback. But there’s a flash of acceptance in her eyes that tells Clarke she may have expected such an outburst. “I’m…” She stops, takes a nervous swallow, leaning backwards. Her hands come out, as if searching for something to hold on to at her side or in her front. “I understand, Clarke. I…”

“Oh no, you don’t get to look at me or talk to me like that! In fact, you don’t get to talk to me at all. First you order me here, as if there’s absolutely no history between us. As if you couldn’t simply ask like any decent human being would. Then your Majesty ignores me for three whole floating days, leaving me all alone in my room, with nothing to do. And now her Majesty finally grants me an audience, brushing everything that’s happened aside! NO WAY!”

Lexa’s come out of her initial surprise. “Are you saying you would have come, had I simply asked you directly, Clarke?”

“No, but I would have considered it” she admits. “Not leaving me much of a choice? That was fucking low! And that’s saying something, coming from you” she continues, seething.

Granted, considering the hours she spent thinking of this moment, meticulously planning her words, tone, behaviour and actions, one could have expected a little bit more eloquence and wit… She blames the previous days for throwing her off her game. (It certainly has nothing to do with the brunette in front of her and this unsettling proximity.)

But all her anger does, is make the infuriating girl look at her with empathy. Floating fucking empathy, like Clarke is some poor little rescued puppy.

“I understand your… displeasure, Clarke and I apologize for the form. I’m afraid it couldn’t be
helped though. These negotiations have been postponed for too long. We do not have the luxury of
tergiversating anymore.”

“Apparently, we do, since I’ve been doing nothing but tergiversating on my whole fucking own for
three floating days!” Clarke scoffs heatedly. (Raven would be proud – then again, Raven would
have probably decked the brunette by now, so maybe not.)

Lexa looks at her impatiently then, as if in the presence of an unreasonable child. “There are more
pressing matters to discuss, Clarke. As you’ve seen, the coalition of the 12 clans is… fragile, to say
the least. Tensions with Ice Nation have reached a tipping point. We are on the brink of an all-out-
war. Were that to happen, the fighting would unfortunately spill over too close to Arkadia for your
people to remain completely safe. The current agreement between us covers security, of course” she
looks Clarke in the eyes, clasping her hands behind her back and lifting her chin, “and I trust
Skaikru’s found our protection satisfactory these past months. But Trikru can no longer bear the sole
weight of ensuring your people’s safety.”

“You brought me here to blackmail us?” she shouts, incredulously.

Lexa forges on in her lecturing tone, her patience clearly tested: “No, I brought you here so we can
ensure Skaikru remains safe. Together” she grits out.

Not the thing to say. Really not the thing to say. “Oh really? You know when my people could have
used saving? When you abandoned me at Mount Weather.” The “me” – instead of “us” – slips
naturally from her lips. Thankfully, Lexa chooses not to pick up on it. And there it is: the one subject
she had promised herself she wouldn’t bring up, not this early on at least.

Lexa though has the gall to dismiss it entirely. “Clearly, you didn’t need my help” she retorts
placatingly, raising her eyebrows.

“Clearly” Clarke repeats, dripping with sarcasm.

She turns her back to the brunette, walking over to the table. She needs purchase. She needs to put
some distance between the two of them, lest she launch herself at the Commander. Needs to find
something to fiddle with to stop herself from fidgeting. (But something small, otherwise the
temptation to fling it at Lexa’s head will be too overpowering. Who is she kidding, the temptation’s
there, whatever the size.)
Lexa seems to finally relent. “You're angry, Clarke. But nothing’s changed. My decision at the time was for the good of my people. And I know you understand that. I know you. What you've done haunts you, and it's easier to resent me than to face yourself.”

She makes it almost too easy for Clarke. “Oh, I can do both!” she spits out.

Lexa changes tactics with an oh so familiar daring tilt of her chin. “What would you have done then, if their leader had offered you the same deal? To save your people at the price of mine. Would you really have me believe you would have chosen differently?”

Clarke’s asked herself that very question many times and she always comes up with the same answer. But Lexa doesn’t need to know that. “I don't betray my friends.” Because fuck, that’s what they were, no? Or could have been! Hadn’t Lexa felt it too?

“But you did. You had friends in Mount Weather” comes volleyed back at her.

She’s surprised Lexa would go there. That’s by far the lowest of blows. This is starting to get dirty and something primal in Clarke is rejoicing at the thought. The uglier – the bloodier – the better. “Those deaths are on you, too. The only difference is: you have no honour, and I had no choice.”

It’s a lot of half-truths. Scratch that, it’s a lot of complete untruths and exaggerations. But she needed this conversation to happen months ago and ever since, all that pent up frustration has had no outlet, only brewing ever closer to the surface and harder to restrain.

Lexa lets her distaste show. “It helps no one to dwell on the past and that is not why you are here” she grits out with an impatient gesture of her hand. She slowly advances on the blonde. “There is no other way to ensure Skaikru’s safety but have your people become my people. I'm offering Skaikru the chance to join my coalition, become the 13th Clan. I trust your people understand how rare such an opportunity is. No one would dare move against all the clans, not just Trikru. Join me, Clarke, and your people will be safe.”

“You don't give a damn about my people. I know why you asked me here. I made you look weak at Mount Weather! And now the Ice Nation is exploiting that. You need us to enter the coalition, otherwise it’ll crumble. And you can’t have that. So have the goddamn honesty of admitting that instead of playing games! And don’t you dare pretend the offer is a magnanimous gesture to my people!”
She’s completely unprepared for Lexa’s next move. “Very well. You are right, Clarke. I do need Skaikru in the coalition. I do need you.” The flash of bare honesty in Lexa’s eyes, her words and almost vulnerable tone: it completely breaks the blonde. And just like that, her anger deflates to a simmering memory.

Fuck.

She needs to regroup. She’s too agitated, too thrown off. Too surprised, too emotional. Too tired, too drained. Things weren’t supposed to unfold like this.

She plays for time: “How did Ice Nation know there was a self-destruct mechanism inside Mount Weather?”

Lexa, apparently, is unable to give her a satisfactory answer: “We’ll have your answers soon, Clarke. Am I to understand that Skaikru is willing to do what it takes to join the coalition?”

The blonde looks scrutinisingly at her, trying to uncover any hidden meaning behind her words but Lexa’s mask remains impenetrable. She gives a sharp nod, grinding her teeth.

“If you betray me again” she threatens, her voice just above a whisper, heavy with fury, pain and vulnerability, all wrapped up into one jumbled emotional mess. (And Lexa’s the last person on Earth she wants to be vulnerable in front of.)

The brunette’s eyes are open. So green. So sad. She swallows and whispers back: “I won’t.”

At the blonde’s silence, Lexa continues: “Now, we need to discuss strategy.” (When have they ever not discussed strategy?). “Out of all 11 clans, you will need to focus your efforts on two: the Desert Clan, represented by”

Clarke cuts her off: “Intan, I know.”

She doesn’t think she’s ever seen Lexa so… surprised. It takes the Commander a beat to start over. “Very well. Yes, Intan, from the Desert Clan. And Kieran of the”
But Clarke interrupts her yet again, huffing impatiently: “Of Blue Cliff, I know, Costia already explained all of this to me.”

Lexa looks even more stunned than before, if possible. She opens her mouth, a slight frown creasing her brow. Closes it again without saying a word, the frown deepening. “I see” she grits out, visibly displeased.

Which… doesn’t make any sense to Clarke. She has the unpleasant sensation she’s missing something. Something that’s right there, staring her in the face, but she can’t detect.

Clarke volunteers more information, trying to break the uncomfortable silence: “The support of the Desert Clan would go a long way to lifting the Rock People’s, the Hill People’s, the Swamp People’s and Broadleaf’s fears and reservations. Were I to manage to win both the Sand and the Hill People over, Ice Nation and the Horse Clan would both find themselves too isolated to stand their ground.”

Lexa nods. If anything, the frown’s now evolved into a full-on scowl. “Costia…” she starts, swallows, and tries again: “Costia’s explanations are correct. I have it on good authority none of the Southern clans will give you any trouble and the Boat People have assured me of their backing as well.”

“Why would Ice Nation not give us more trouble? Considering how bad things are these days, it seems a little bit too easy…” Clarke wants to know, thinking back to what Costia had let slip.

Lexa looks at her, uncomprehending: “I’m sorry?”

“Costia said something on the way to Polis, she said Ice Nation may soon not be a threat anymore or something like that” she elaborates.

But it seems that is not the part Lexa’s interested in: “Costia came with you?” she asks with a small gulp and a flicker of something heavy and conflicted in her eyes, something too complex for Clarke to identify properly.

It’s the blonde’s turn to be lost: “Well yes. I… She said the roads aren’t safe enough for me to make the trip on my own… Kane and Indra agreed… I thought you knew…”
Lexa turns away slightly from her, her face turned down towards the bustling town, seemingly losing herself in its contemplation. Her silence is quite out of character – neither a calculating nor simply thoughtful one.

Now that she thinks about it, from this angle, Clarke can see deep purple rings under the girl’s eyes. It would appear she’s not the only one who’s found sleep lacking lately. There’s something about her cheeks, too. She can’t claim to remember the girl from months ago, but it’s as if her cheeks are a little bit more hollow. Her bones a little bit more visible.

The Commander finally seems to come to: “I can not reveal much at this stage, I’m afraid. Suffice to say, I am indeed trying to resolve the current violence in a rather expedited manner and give your people justice before Skaikru joins the coalition. If that is still one of Skaikru’s demands.”

She looks back at the blonde. Clarke gives a curt nod: it is, her people need justice.

---

When Baldy comes to get her, she can’t help but petulantly call him out on his attitude: “You do not like me very much, do you?” she asks him, loud enough for Lexa to hear.

He doesn’t reply at first, looks at her and then at his Commander, before he offers with a sneer: “You are a threat to Heda and her power. Your mere existence has caused much unnecessary bloodshed and led Heda’s leadership to be questioned by many. So to answer your question, Wanheda: no, I do not like you very much.”

“We are nota threat to Lexa. Skaikru is nota threat to Trikru or the coalition. We want peace” she replies with force, stepping into his personal space.

He remains stoic, correcting her with a superior sneer: “I was not speaking of Skaikru, Wanheda.”

 Fuck this shit! She didn’t come here to be insulted by a monk-wannabe with a weird head-tattoo. “I am nota threat” she retorts with a frustrated huff.

The man dismisses their argument, turning instead to Lexa: “I hope you know what you’re doing, Heda.”
To hell with decorum. Clarke storms out of the room.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

Bumping into an all too familiar figure on one of her explorations of the tower’s life – and yet another tragically unsuccessful attempt at ditching her silent guard – is decidedly right there in the surreal department, just as jarring an experience as seeing Lexa again.

The smirk and the dark penetrating eyes haven’t changed one bit. And she’s hit with the same feeling that took hold in the few days they spent together: unspoken mutual understanding, coupled with the absolute certainty that she can not, under any circumstances, trust this man. He seems to have traded in his travelling garb for more comfortable clothes and looks right at home, surveilling Polis from one of the lower balconies.

She comes to an abrupt halt. Her shadow stops a little ways behind. She’s too stunned to take the lead. Roan is much too eager to take it.

“Wanheda. What a pleasant surprise to see you in this… distinguished environment. And in such good health!”

Nothing in his tone or demeanour betrays shock or even disappointment. He must have heard of her arrival. Prepared for this encounter. Even orchestrated it, maybe?

It’s uncanny, the tremble that goes through the wounded muscle in her leg at hearing his voice again. Bloody fucking Roan. Polis is decidedly turning into her worst nightmare.

“I must say, I didn’t expect you to lay your grudge to rest so soon” he continues.

What the hell is he talking about, with that aggravating sneer? “My grudge?”

He tuts in that patronizing way she detests. “This burning desire to give the Commander what she deserves…”
She has no patience for this type of useless exchange. “What would you know about what I want?”

“I myself have carried enmity for long enough, to recognise the look of one who wishes to kill another in a very slow and painful manner.”

So he’s not as clueless as she’d have liked. Big deal. The thought of killing Lexa is nothing novel, of course. There was a time, not so long ago, she gleefully entertained it. But as a fantasy, a wishful scenario she’d cling onto at night, to calm herself down. If she’s completely honest, it never crossed over into reality, into an option she’d actually pursue. (Now, hurting though…) She always remained aware of Lexa’s position, of the repercussions such a move would have on her people.

Maybe that’s why she’s having such a hard time in Polis. Being here forces her to face this deeply entrenched schizophrenia: the knowledge – worse: acceptance – that attempted murder is not within the realm of possibilities. Or maybe because it made her realize that she never truly wanted to, to begin with? Easier to wish harm upon someone than to examine…

“And what is the Prince of Azgeda doing here exactly?” she wants to know, turning the tables on him.

If he’s surprised she’s come to learn of his true identity, he doesn’t show it. He makes a sweeping gesture with his arm, a challenging glint in his eye. “Why, enjoying the many pleasures and sights Polis has to offer, of course.”

Yeah right. Polis must bring out the bullshit in him, for she doesn’t remember him being so full of it back in the forest.

“And you are here to negotiate with the Commander. What was it again? A… truce?” he needles.

Oh, so the Prince doesn’t know everything. And yet he’s here, clearly at ease. Then again… Her eyes fall to two towering shadows behind the curtain. Maybe he’s less of a willing guest as she initially thought…

“Lexa and I have many things to discuss” she evades.
“Of that I have no doubt” he replies with that damn glint. “How are your people fairing?”

“As well as can be expected after the attack from yours” she snipes back, refusing to reel the viciousness in.

The hit seems to land, for Roan’s mouth makes an annoyed twitch. “I can imagine they must be… yearning for revenge.”

She doesn’t answer, eyes squinting at his profile: he’s fishing and there’s no way she’ll give him more, when he continuously refuses to give anything up on his end.

The silence hangs heavily in the corridor.

She positively hates feeling so… uncomfortable. Yet she’s also been very much alone these past couple of days. The parallelism with a similar internal debate months ago doesn’t escape her. Only she has to be even more careful this time around: a Skaikru representative shouldn’t be seen too often in the presence of Azgeda officials, whatever their current status.

Ugh, is she really considering cozying up to Roan?

She goes against all her instincts, against the protesting tremor in her thigh, takes one step forward, a second, and comes to stand next to him, arms crossed and eyes falling on the city. She’s careful to leave a space between them.

“So, what are these many attractions you speak of?”

The abrupt change in attitude and topic throws him off for a beat, but he swiftly recovers and seems to decide against pursuing his earlier line of questioning. “Mhh, how well do you know the Tower? Have you been to the kitchens?”

She shakes her head no.

“Then I shall start by introducing you to two of Polis’ finest cooking aides!”
It would appear Roan is just as happy as she is for some company. She follows his lead, well aware of the three stalking guards, never too far behind.

The representatives slowly file in. She crosses the questioning eyes of Tala and can see she’s not the only one in the dark as to why Lexa’s called for an emergency meeting with all the clans.

Lexa starts without waiting for them to find their seats: “Ambassadors of the Coalition.” Her commanding voice resonates in the room. “Today we honour our covenant. A clan that stands against one of us, stands against us all.” The ambassadors look askance at her, but Lexa soldiers on, unperturbed: “Lid fingadon in” she orders and her guards drag in a woman Clarke’s never seen before.

The blonde can count on the fingers of a single hand the things she’s learnt about Lexa over the past 2 weeks. They’ve kept all their meetings to strict negotiations over Skaikru entering the coalition: Clarke wants to make sure she understands every single clause it entails and Lexa is probably weary of the anger still boiling inside her. Their strategizing sessions are different this time around. Sure, they can still go on for hours and deep into the night; Lexa’s tendency to slip into teacher mode is never too far away; and the stakes are just as high as for the assault on the Mountain. But there’s something off, something missing. It’s not surprising per se, considering the baggage they’ve accumulated since then, but it leaves her… wanting.

She must admit that Lexa’s coaching on how to approach the other clans has so far paid off: one by one, every single reluctant or opposed ambassador changed their stance, falling like expertly manipulated dominos.

All that remains now is Ice Nation. Surprisingly enough, Clarke’s found Lotrien, their representative, approachable and easy to talk to. In fact, the two have had some very interesting discussions. Add to that her strange run-ins with Roan, who’s some sort of official guest under unofficial house arrest from what she’s understood – or is it the other way around? – and the blonde’s more and more curious to learn about this complex clan’s history and ways.

The problem lies elsewhere: with the person Lotrien is taking his orders from.

But back to the few morsels of information she’s learnt about the brunette.
One: Lexa likes apples. In fact, she brought one or two to every single one of their meetings. It’s utterly trivial, but not as much as one would think, because it’s the only thing Clarke’s seen her eat and she is, as it turns out, extremely protective of them. Clarke had made the mistake of reaching for one once, but met only air, as the Commander had precipitously retrieved it, keeping it firmly in her hand for the whole remainder of their discussion. If the blonde’s completely honest, it’s become sort of a game on her part and the Trikru never fails to react swiftly, almost unconsciously. She doesn’t think her host has realized what she’s up to. Yet.

Two: Lexa’s not ok. It’s nothing obvious to the naked eye and admittedly, Clarke doesn’t know how the Commander usually behaves when in her home capital, but there’s a greenish halo to her complexion, something sad to her aura that wasn’t there before. Something’s off. The usual imperceptible glint in her eyes when discussing strategic moves is gone and Clarke’s at a loss as to what could possibly have provoked such a change. But she’s ready to bet that is the reason why they haven’t found a way back to their previous… bond, or whatever that was.

Three: Lexa’s avoiding her like the pest. Whatever Clarke does, wherever she goes and as unpredictable as her movements may be, she can not seem to bump into the Commander anywhere. Sure, she must be busy, what with the continuing clashes with Ice Nation at the border. But something tells the blonde there’s more to it than just pure chance (or bad luck, depending on what mood she’s in).

All three new items on her list of facts about Lexa do not mean the blonde’s forgotten one of the first characteristics she had committed to memory concerning the brunette: she always has something up her sleeve. And this impromptu meeting today is definitely going somewhere.

The woman the two guards just brought in walks slowly, a contemptuous shuffle in her step, despite her hands being chained to her legs, before they push her down on her knees. By the look some of the ambassadors exchange, Clarke thinks she may be the only one in the room who doesn’t know who the prisoner is.

Titus (for it’s Baldy’s name) takes over: “Queen Nia of Azgeda has confessed to the destruction of Mount Weather that resulted in the death of 49 members of Skaikru.”

Wow. What? Is this… the Queen? How the hell did Lexa manage to capture her?

He turns to her: “Wanheda: what say you?”
Wait. Uh… Shit, Lexa had warned her about this. She had admittedly left considerable parts of her plan out, but she had told her to be ready. So, in theory, she is – or should be.

She clears her throat to give herself a couple extra minutes before she speaks up: “Skaikru demands justice.” By some miracle her voice doesn’t betray her inner turmoil.

“Azgeda only did what had to be done. Need I remind you of the Ice Nation blood Skaikru spilt? Skaikru are not a clan. Skaikru are not one of us. They are invaders, outsiders, enemies!” As aggressive as her words may sound, Clarke doesn’t sense any real animosity towards herself or her people. No, there’s something much bigger at play here.

Titus interrupts her: “Silence!”

But Lexa gestures for him to step back and replies to the Queen calmly in English: “It appears your memory needs refreshing, Nia. Not to worry, that’s bound to happen with age. Allow me, then: at the time of your attack, Skaikru had entered into an alliance with the coalition. An alliance, which puts them under the direct protection of Trikru, very much a coalition member. I’m sure Lotrien wouldn’t have failed to mention that to you.” She continues: “By attacking them nonetheless, you are in direct contravention of our rules.”

She turns to Titus, who takes over once again, the eagerness only thinly veiled in his voice: “The punishment for your crimes is death. Do you have anything to say in your defence?”

“I need no defence” the Queen roars back before nodding at Lexa with venom in her eyes: “She does.”

The room’s grown dead silent.

“Today is judgment day” the Ice Queen exclaims, climbing up to her feet. “I call for a vote of no-confidence.”

Titus is the quickest to react: “Take this Queen to meet her fate” he orders the Trikru guards.

But before they can grab the woman by the shoulders, Kieran of the Hill people suddenly shoots up: “Not so fast” he starts, looking with undisguised unease in Lexa’s direction before clearing his throat and squaring his shoulders. “Commander no longer” he enunciates and is immediately followed by
It’s like dominos falling all over again, only this time it’s all wrong. The wrong timing, the wrong direction. One by one, every ambassador rises to their feet to repeat the same words. This all seems… a little bit too rehearsed.

“Take them away too!” Titus rages, pointing a shaky hand at all of them.

But Lexa interjects: “Hod op.”

“Lexa, please, execute these traitors…” he implores her.

But she remains unmoved, her eyes never leaving the Queen. “Let her make her move” she states forcefully.

“Commander what is this?” Clarke interrupts (she has to bite down on the impulse to use Lexa’s name), not completely lost but definitely not liking where this official meeting is going, when Skaikru is so close to becoming a full-fledged member of the coalition.

Lexa doesn’t turn to her when she sharply replies: “This is a coup.” Her words resonate in the room and leave the blonde frozen in her spot. Lexa had told her to be ready for Ice Nation to be brought to justice. She hadn’t said anything about a challenge to her rule…

The Queen cuts her off: “This is the law. Herlaw. A unanimous vote of the ambassadors or death, are all that can remove a commander from power.”

Unanimous… Clarke’s nervous eyes sweep around the room: is she the only ambassador who’s remained silent? She can feel all eyes on her. Shit. Float. Fuck. Seriously? So what, she’s expected to vote right now for or against a Commander who stabbed them - her- in the back but who has also proven to be true to her word ever since then? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. But wait, she’s not even a real ambassador! Skaikru hasn’t yet entered the coalition… No, she must be mistaken. She tries to fight the panic welling up.

“It’s not unanimous” comes from the opposite side of the room and Clarke’s hopeful eyes find the silhouette of Tala, who’s standing tall, almost regal. “Floukru stands by Heda” the woman continues
and Clarke can see out of the corner of her eyes the furious surprise etched on the Queen’s face.

Titus promptly steps in, still agitated but clearly relieved: “This vote of no confidence fails” he bellows, in a trembling voice. “All these coup plotters will suffer the exact same fate as the Ice Queen” he adds, pointing at each one of the ambassadors who sided with Ice Nation.

“She won’t take our heads because she knows our armies will retaliate” the Queen speaks up yet again, her eyes taunting the Commander. “None of us here wants war” she continues, slowly turning on the spot with a small belittling smile.

“We both know what you want, Nia” Lexa replies icily, rising to her feet before she takes the steps down to be at eye-level with her. “If you think me unfit to command: issue the challenge and let’s get on with it.”

“Very well. You are challenged” comes immediately back. Again: this is too rehearsed. Clarke feels like a spectator at one of these old matches (what was it: tennis?), trying not to miss anything in the unfolding surprise confrontation.

“And I accept your challenge” Lexa answers calmly, ignoring the horrified look Titus sends her way.

It’s with an incredulous sigh that Titus eventually raises his voice: “So be it: single combat. Warrior against warrior. To the death.”

Wait.

Wait.

WHAT?

Did she get that right? Something about a fight to the death?

Lexa’s advisor continues: “Queen Nia of Azgeda, who do you choose to be your champion?”
This is going way too fast for her. They need to take a break, she needs **Lexa** to explain what’s going on. Lexa’s a schemer. Clarke’s seen how she thinks and plans. Surely, she must have anticipated this move, prepared for it.

Nia doesn’t pause to think: “My son: Roan, Prince of Azgeda.”

There’s this fleeting moment – a flash of surprise maybe – when Clarke could swear Roan is trying hard to school his features back into his usual impassive mask. So maybe not so rehearsed after all?

Titus turns to Lexa: “**Heda**, who will fight for you?”

The girl in question takes her time. She turns away from the Queen, her back to all of them and Clarke wonders if it’s less a show of indifference and more to buy herself some time. The blonde can see the eagerness in Lexa’s bodyguard, as he leans forward, ready to accept with pride, were she to choose him. The Commander climbs the steps up again, one by one, before she slowly sits back down on her throne, her back ramrod straight.

“I am the Commander. **No one fights for me.**”

Ok, now, her Trigedasleng isn’t that bad: this she definitely understood. Titus looks like the ground just opened up under his feet. It’s plain for all to see he wants to protest and Clarke unexpectedly experiences some sympathy for the man. But he buries it down and remains silent. Lexa’s words were spoken with finality, leaving no room for discussion.

There’s no going back now and they all know it, judging by the small victorious smile playing on the Queen’s lips.

---

Lexa is on her throne when Clarke enters the room. Yet despite the setting, the brunette looks much more relaxed than she’s ever seen her before in Polis.

She notices the same tall warrior standing at attention to Lexa’s left and baldie a few steps ahead of her. What really gives Clarke pause however, are the young children, sitting on the steps at the
Commander’s feet. Not only that but the latter appears to be engaging with them.

The whole scene is rather… odd.

Maybe it’s the soft breeze coming in through the open balcony behind the throne. Maybe it’s the sound of children’s voices. Whatever it is, the room is transformed: there’s no trace of the gloomy atmosphere reigning mere hours ago, when the Ice Queen turned the tables on the Commander of the 12 clans.

“What are the three pillars of being a Commander?” Lexa’s tone is that of an invested teacher’s, firm but with this… underlying warmth.

The sight, the tone, the situation are all very much unexpected and contribute to throw Clarke off the tirade she had been ready to launch into.

The children volunteer their answers, each one waiting for the other to finish before speaking up.

“Wisdom”
“Compassion”
“And strength.”

Lexa offers every one of them her undivided attention, with small signs of encouragement.

To say Clarke’s intrigued is an underatement, but she’s got more pressing matters on her mind. Like… this fight to the death for instance.

She stops next to Titus and can feel the undisguised dislike rolling off of him in waves. Well, he’s going to have to get over himself, if they want the proud idiot who calls herself their leader to stay alive.

She leans towards him and whispers out of the corner of her mouth: “Have you talked her out of it yet?”
She knows he’s battling between simply ignoring her altogether – his assuredly preferred choice – and voicing his distaste out loud.

“No” is all he says, tone clipped.

He’s not going to make this easy. She wonders whether Indra and Titus get along, whether having the two of them in the same room somehow cancels them out. She’s not sure she’d like to stick around to know.

“I don’t understand: the Queen’s not fighting, why should she?” Clarke pushes.

“The Queen’s strength is not in doubt” he starts, in a lecturing tone, tiredness and frustration lacing his voice. He turns his body half towards her: “Thanks to you, Heda’s is.”

This again. Yeah, they’re definitely off to a very rocky start. But Clarke is nothing if not persistent and her self-imposed restraint with the man is a testament to how much she needs Lexa alive.

The Commander is finishing her lecture and the blonde is surprised to discover she understands more Trigedaslang than she’d have thought.

“Train hard and remember: you are each worthy of your nightblood.”

“Nightblood”… what a strange word. She wonders what it could possibly refer to…

The children all rise. Titus claps his hands and they immediately fall in line, the result of years of conditioning, no doubt.

“Natblida, follow me” he instructs them.

It’s probably the only time Clarke will ever feel a twinge of reluctance at seeing Titus depart. They may not be friends – far from it – yet she intuits she will need as many allies as possible to persuade Lexa to go back on her announcement.
Before they all file out, Lexa speaks up: “Hod op.”

The brunette walks to the assembled group and addresses her: “Clarke, these are my novitiates. Should I die tomorrow, one of them would succeed me.” She must see the disbelief in the blonde’s eyes, for she turns back to the children with a small smile playing on her lips. “Clarke kom Skaikru worries about her people. Tell her what will happen to them when you become Heda.”

A gangly boy with dirty blonde hair is the first one to speak up: “If I become Heda” he starts.

Lexa interrupts him: “Introduce yourself, Aden.”

The young boy flushes, the tips of his ears turning a light shade of red. He starts again, pushing his shoulders back: “If I, Aden kom Trikru, become Heda, I pledge my loyalty to skaikru, ally to Trikru and the Coalition. We all will. Hedamade each of us vow it.”

And indeed, one by one, the other five repeat his words, including a girl Clarke finds eerily familiar. The smallest one in the group, who introduces himself as Silas kom Trishanakru, is visibly struggling with English and intimidated. Clarke suppresses a small smile at the scene’s sheer amount of adorableness, momentarily forgetting all about her initial mission.

Lexa looks on, pleased. “Thank you, now go join your teacher” she says, releasing the group, before she turns to the blonde.

“See? Nothing to worry about, Clarke. It is as I told you: my spirit will choose wisely.”

Her last words tickle the back of her mind, but Clarke’s got more important things to tackle right now. If she didn’t recognize first-hand the confidant – almost cocky – certainty in the brunette’s eyes, she’d dismiss the whole display as a joke. Does Lexa really think that witnessing a bunch of ten year olds commit to protecting her people will lay Clarke’s concerns to rest?

“I’m sorry if I’m worried that the fate of my people lies in the hands of children” she grits out, incredulous.

“Then you worry for nothing. Indra’s army will remain in TonDC, ready to come to Arkadia’s aid at a moment’s notice. Your people are protected, as I vowed they would be and the future of our alliance is, as you just saw, secure.”
Clarke bristles at Lexa’s lecturing tone (although now she knows at least where the girl got it from).

“This is not just about my people! You don’t stand a chance against Roan!” she exclaims, exasperated.

She’ll admit that, in hindsight, this wasn’t necessarily the smartest thing to say. The two of them may have argued in the past, plenty of times in fact, but she doesn’t think she’s ever seen the Commander look so… affronted.

“You’ve never seen me fight” Lexa enunciates, defiant outrage shining bright in her eyes.

Clarke is surprised to realize that… this is actually accurate: despite all their talk of fighting, she’s never seen the brunette in action.

She tries to regain her footing: “Maybe not, but I saw him with a bow and a dagger and it’s no goddamn joke!”

(Shit, if Lexa asks her where she’s coming from with this, she’s screwed.)

The girl doesn’t pick up on what she inadvertently let slip. She’s apparently had enough of their disagreement and replies in a placating tone: “If you’re right, then today is the day my spirit chooses its successor. And you, Clarke, need to accept that.”

There it is again, the same question as during Arkadia’s election: is peace and her people’s prosperity dependent on Lexa or not? And more importantly: why can’t she dissociate one from the other?

Clarke throws a heated: “Like Hell I do” in her face (where is floating Baldie, when you need an ally?) before she storms out of the room.

She needs a floating plan and knows just the person to approach.
“Is that Death I hear stalking me? Or just the Commander of Death?” the practicing Ice Prince challenges when she approaches him.

She tries her best to remain unnoticed by the other warriors sparring in the pit, including an attractive red-head and a dark-skinned man facing-off a few feet away and draws the hood a little bit further down over her face. How Roan would know who she is, when he’s had his back to her the whole time is… not reassuring. At all. Further proof that Roan is clearly a skilled fighter (not that you need to tell her left leg that).

“We need to talk” she starts.

He dismisses her without a single glance in her direction. “We have nothing to talk about. I need to prepare.”

Now that’s the haughty Roan she remembers from their traipsing through Trikru lands, a complete different man from the serene guest who showed her around the Tower mere weeks ago. This is not going to be easy. Then again, she didn’t expect it to be and if she can get judgemental Titus to mellow, then she sure as hell can get mommy’s boy to listen for a moment.

She tries to get his attention a different way: “I know you had nothing to do with Mount Weather.”

It’s a shot in the dark, really. She’s fishing. But it does the trick, as Roan promptly halts his movements, listening intently.

“That’s why I didn’t tell Lexa you tried to kill me, back in the forest” she continues and frankly, it’s close enough to the truth.

She may have admittedly been too busy antagonizing Lexa up to now, to find any time to discuss other matters with the brunette. But even if the opportunity had presented itself, Clarke would probably not have brought it up. Probably.

“This fight to the death is what your mother wanted all along.”

She can sense he’s veered off from mild curiosity into irritation now.
“What do you want? Spit it out!” he sneers, levelling her with a bored yet piercing glare – a combination he excels at.

Now comes the moment of truth. She should strike the iron while it’s still hot, or so they say. But the blonde hesitates: she’s still uneasy about this whole affair – or rather: uneasy about her motivations – and has no clue how he’ll react to what she’s about to propose.

“I want you to become King” she states, with more confidence than she feels. “I know you’ve thought about it” (again with the wild guesses, this could end very very badly for her). “Your mother was willing to let you die. Willing to let you be banished. I know you just want to go home.”

He shrugs her off, resuming the precise swinging of his sword in the air: “When I win today I will.”

“But for how long? How long until your mother finds another reason to cast you out? To sacrifice you?” She’s not getting through, she can tell, so she brings it home: “No one can cast a King out of his kingdom.”

There’s a pause in his movements, a sign he’s contemplating her words. That’s progress, at least. Her heart is beating fast, suspended to the momentous decision that is about to fall. Because it is not just her own fate he now holds in his hands: by revealing herself, Clarke could have condemned all of Arkadia. He turns his back on her once again, shaking his head, sinking in one simple movement all her hopes.

“I can’t do it. My people would never take me back.”

Fuck. She really thought she had him with that last image. Fuck because he turned her down. And fuck because he does make a very good point.

“Your people don’t need to know.”

He scoffs at that. “Don’t insult my people’s intellect, Wanheda. Treason of that magnitude… I wouldn’t be able to keep it secret. My people would know.”

She’s about to give up and make her retreat when he adds, throwing her a calculating look over his
shoulder: “But… I can help you do it.”

She stops dead in her tracks.

“Ok… Yeah… That can work too.” Not the plan, definitely not the plan, but at this point, she’s desperate enough to go with anything. Anything that guarantees Lexa won’t have to fight him. Any scenario in which Lexa lives. So let’s see what he has to offer. “What were you thinking of?”

“First, I want you to promise me something, Wanheda” he replies slyly.

“Why would I?” she counters uneasily.

“Well, you do need my help. It doesn’t come cheap” he taunts darkly.

This is floating unfair. “I need your help, yes, but whatever happens will also help you. Asking me for something in exchange is absurd!” she whispers hotly, trying to keep the volume low.

He just shrugs with a small smile, in this infuriating noncommittal way: “Take it or leave it. It’s your call.”

Clarke bristles. “Last time I checked, you owe me! I could have drowned you in that river! I let you live that day!”

“So did I” he volleys back. “If I had really wanted to kill you, Wanheda, then you can trust me, you’d be dead.”

Aha. The answer to the million dollar question that’s kept her up on more than one night. She suspected as much. Clarke gives in: “Fine, what is it?”

There’s a pregnant indecisive pause on his side. They’re now standing face to face, but Roan cocks his head to the right, with a far-away look in his eyes. “My people…” he commences, choosing his words carefully “do not want the sun to swallow the moon.”
It takes her a minute to catch on: is he really bringing that one tale he had shared in the forest back up again? What the float is he playing at? They don’t have time for this shit. She waits for him to elaborate some more and elucidate what he means… He doesn’t.

“I don’t…” she starts.

All of a sudden, his free hand shoots out and grabs at her upper arm, squeezing beyond comfort. He interrupts her, his eyes boring into hers, unblinking: “Promise me that if this fails, that if it does come down to a fight and I fall, you will do everything in your power to protect them.”

She tries to move her arm away but his grip tightens. Protect who? He can’t be talking about the moon or the sun, so what? Wait… his people? Is he asking her to look out for Ice Nation? Clarke is a little bit lost but his look is too solemn for her to dismiss his request. Can she really promise him something like that? Then again, they are talking about a plan B or C. If Lexa does survive, then there will inevitably be retaliations against Ice Nation for daring to defy her rule. It may be a stretch, but maybe Clarke could play her part in trying to curtail the repercussions?

She looks back up, trying to conceal her lack of confidence. She needs to project strength and resolve right now. She gives the Prince a firm nod.

“Swega em klin” he says, releasing her arm and extending his forearm to her.

She’s a little bit out of her depth as regards the protocol here, but grabs onto it anyway and replies: “Ai swega em klin” with force. She’s not sure what she just committed to exactly, but it seems to satisfy him.

He steps closer to her, chest to chest, and leans forward, bringing his mouth to her ear. The last time they were this close he was attacking her and she was legitimately fearing for her life. Yet now they’re plotting a murder together.

He takes a deep breath – the only indication he may not be as unaffected by this whole ordeal as he’d like her to think – before starting. Here we go…

---

The Queen is having lunch when she’s let in, sitting at the head of a long black table in a dank room.
The young girl serving her sends Clarke a suspicious look before taking up position further away, retreating into the shadows (but there nevertheless). She’d have preferred to do this without eye witnesses, but it’ll have to do: it’s now or never, after all.

The Queen licks her fingers slowly, deliberately so, one by one, her gaze never leaving Clarke’s form: “To what do I owe the pleasure?” she asks with faux pleasantness. Clarke goes straight to business, in part because she doesn’t think the Ice Queen would tolerate much small talk, but mostly because being in the dangerous woman’s presence creeps her out. “What if Skaikru were to help you secure the vote of no confidence?”

Nia certainly looks intrigued. She sits back in her wide chair, her piercing eyes trained on Clarke. “Now you’re thinking like a leader to your people! But Skaikru is not part of the coalition yet. You’re not the problem here. Floukru is.” “I can influence Tala to change her vote” Clarke claims. The Queen gives her a sceptical tight-lipped smile, gesturing to the blonde with her right hand: “And what makes you think that, Wanheda? You’re new to Polis and its intrigue. You have no sway over Tala.” “I do. I could threaten the Boat Clan with Skaikru retribution, were they to refuse to switch to supporting you. Luna remains first and foremost an isolationist, does she not? She will see that changing Floukru’s stance is the only way to keep her people safe.”

Nia scoffs: “You think I didn’t come up with a similar plan myself? I already approached Tala, warning her of Ice Nation’s wrath were she to side with the wrong faction. She seemed amenable and then, as you can see, turned around and backed Lexa. The annoying girl must have gotten to her somehow. You won’t achieve anything by trying to strongarm Tala.” “I will if I reveal the Boat People are within range of the missiles we salvaged from the Mountain before you attacked it. You said it yourself: Skaikru is not part of the coalition. We have no binding non-aggression clause towards any of the clans except Trikru” Clarke counters. It’s bold. Risky. Also complete and utter bullshit. But the Ice Queen doesn’t need to know that. “I would need some assurances first.”

She knows she certainly has the woman’s full attention now. Nia leans forward: “Skaikru will be safe. Now tell me more about those missiles.” But Clarke won’t let her take control of the conversation. “And me?” she wants to clarify. “My quarrel is with Lexa. And Lexa alone. Not you. When she’s gone I won’t need the power of Wanheda” the Queen dismisses her concern, planting her knife aggressively into the table in a gesture so eerily familiar, though it doesn’t hold the same grace somehow as when Lexa does it to intimidate a visitor. “Ok.” “Okay?” the Queen returns with suspicion. “What does Skaikru get out of this?” “The Commander gone” Clarke replies and she knows Nia can hear the hot anger and white fury that still linger deep inside of her. “After everything we went through, all the fighting, the death and the efforts to try and build some common ground, she left my people to die.”

Nia jumps on the statement as if she were waiting for it: “So you want vengeance for her betrayal. Yet you’re ready to give up on revenge for the dead my people may have caused?” Clarke has been rehearsing this argument often enough that the lie leaves her lips with no effort whatsoever: “My priority is with the living. Not the dead. This is not about vengeance or justice. It’s about trust. As it is, I can not trust the Commander with my people’s safety.” Nia pauses, sizing her up and Clarke
tries her hardest to keep up her neutral facade. If the Queen calls her bluff, demands proof of either the missiles or her sway over the Boat Clan, before they shake on it, she’s screwed. But she doesn’t.

“Why try to enter the coalition then, if you claim not to be able to trust her?” the Queen needles. “A tactical move. But my people know when to seize an opportunity when one arises…” Clarke leaves the sentence hanging. The silence stretches on. Finally, the Queen nods for her to come closer. The blonde takes this as a sign that they’re in agreement. Now comes the moment of truth…

She tears the knife out from where it was lodged into the table: “We bind ourselves in blood” she recites in Trigedasleng, cutting a firm line across her right palm and hopes the Queen doesn’t see the small tremble of her hand. “I see you’ve learnt our oath” Nia says, pleased. But Clarke remains focused: she wipes the blade on her sleeve - on that one specific spot – before sticking it back into the hard wood, her eyes almost taunting the Queen: “Do you accept?” The Queen stands up, her movements measured, precise. She grabs the blade, lifts her hand in the air and recites the vow. They’re almost there. In a couple of seconds it’ll all be over.

A young female voice suddenly shouts “Hod op” from behind her and Clarke instantly knows that something just went terribly terribly wrong. She turns and is thrown unceremoniously on the table, back throbbing with the force of the impact. It’s that girl again, the one who was serving the Queen when she came in. She sniffs at Clarke’s sleeve and well: FUCK. She’s made. “Poison” the girl seethes.

The Queen remains calm but the sharpness in her movements betrays her surprise. She cleans the blade with a cloth, sneering down at the dizzy blonde, who’s not so sure she’ll make it out of here alive. “We could have been allies, Clarke. Instead, I declare you and your people enemies of Azgeda. Ontari, hold out your hand” she orders and the girl – Ontari apparently – executes herself. “I’m letting you live.” The Queen continues, grabbing the offered arm and slicing through the girl’s palm. “For now. To send a message to Lexa. I have my own Natblida. And she will be the next Commander.”

Black blood starts dripping thickly onto her face, so much so that it completely obscures the vision out of her right eye. She’s never seen blood that colour before. So maybe this wasn’t exactly the best idea ever and she may or may not have created a new mortal enemy to Skaikru. Something they could definitely do without. But at least she’s still alive, right? So there’s that…

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------

She’s sitting cross-legged on the warm rug in her room, its raspy texture comforting against her bare thighs. Her back is to the large bed, where her battle armour lies untouched. She’s trying to empty
her head, to put aside the confrontation she just walked away from, first with Titus, then with Clarke (the blonde’s presence in Polis has been… draining, to say the least). Trying to push aside the unsettling knowledge that her legacy is now, in a surprise turn of events and despite all the care she’s put into securing it (– despite all the lives that were lost in the process a voice reminds her –), completely up in the air. Her legacy…

She takes deep even breaths. 1, 2, 3. And soon finds herself retreating into her mind.

On the day of her ascension – the blood of her fellow Natblidasticky and warm on her hands – Lexa decided three things.

First, she was going to be the best Commander for her people their lands had ever seen. Titus and the previous Commander had made it a point she learn about her predecessors. Their triumphs and strengths. Their mistakes and weaknesses. Their ultimate downfall (for the death of a Commander is never a peaceful one). Whether the result of greed, malice or folly, they had all met their violent demise at the hands of foes – and more often than not: friends. Fifteen year-old Lexa vowed that day she would do better for her people. She would be better. It may sound pretentious, especially coming from someone so young, but the previous commander wouldn’t have had it any other way. Ambition comes with the territory and Lexa’s been striving for more her whole life.

She takes another deep breath in. Exhales slowly.

Two, when the time would come she would look death in the eye and accept her fate. “As dignified in death as in life, strikon. Every page needs to be turned one day, every sword laid to rest” the previous Commander would always say. (She would never call her – or any of them actually – by their name.) She vowed she would not beg. She would not supplicate. She would not cry. Most important of all: she would not be afraid and she would leave all regrets behind.

Fear had been the hardest to tackle at the time. Lexa knew she should have entered the conclave her mind free of any angst or dread. She was a good fighter, Gustus had made sure of that. She was the quickest and the most inventive, courtesy of Anya’s training. But every warrior knows anything can happen on the battlefield, no matter how prepared you are. So every warrior says his goodbyes before entering the fray.

And Lexa, well, she’s ashamed to admit she was terrified when that tolling bell announced the beginning of the conclave. Her conclave. Hers and her fellow Natblida’s. She knows Luna had seen it in her eyes. But uncharacteristically, the young girl – who was usually so quick to taunt and tease her – had chosen not to call attention to it. She hadn’t even used it against her when later on the two of them had crossed paths in the forest and duelled. These days are all behind her now, of course. Her heart is free of fear and free of regret.
But there’s this nagging thought she can’t ignore: she would have liked to say goodbye to Costia. She pushes the hot longing the image of the beautiful warrior inevitably brings back to the surface away, far far into the deep recesses of her mind.

Another inhale. Another exhale.

She’s ready to face Roan and if that is to be her fate, ready for the flame to pass on to a new Commander. But she’ll fight death tooth and nail, because she can feel it, deep down: her time has not come. There is so much more to accomplish. (She can’t help but wonder if very conviction isn’t what every Commander fools themselves into believing before meeting their end.)

Three, she would lead with Costia by her side. It’s ironic, really, that on the very day all her training and all his teachings paid off, she would reject one of Titus’s golden rules about life as Heda. “A Commander’s life is one of solitude. Remember that!” he had tirelessly reiterated over the years, frowning upon collaboration, discouraging friendships and condemning crushes. Romantic entanglements were a distraction a Commander could not afford and an assured death sentence.

But Costia was pretty. Costia was cheeky, with a very stubborn streak. And Costia had inexplicably set her sights on her. So who was Lexa to refuse the brown-eyed girl? She had fallen, fallen hard for the dark skinned girl’s teasing smile, playful tongue and altogether overwhelmingly irresistible presence.

And Costia had accepted her with all her faults and hang-ups. Accepted to come in second to and in every thing (because Lexa belongs to her people and no one else). Accepted to give so much and receive so little. The girl had unwaveringly stood by her side through it all.

So to end up today, facing her possible death and feeling so… alone, is a bitter adjustment. The odds are in her favour: Roan may be a good fighter, but she’s better (she’s sure of it, as arrogant as it may yet again sound. Just like she knew she wasn’t better than Luna all those years ago when she viciously charged the girl). She suspects even Roan knows. But that doesn’t change anything to the fact that the sound of the winding horn finds her sadly alone in this room with so many shared memories.

Inhale. Exhale.

The signal for the two fighters to present themselves resonates a second time. She’s ready, her mind devoid of any fear and focused on one thing and one thing only: survival.
But yes, she would have liked to say goodbye.

---

“Klark kom Skaikru” comes the small voice. “Are you on your way to watch the fight?” a boy she remembers from Lexa’s informal class asks her.

Just her luck!

Truth be told, she was about to do the exact opposite: try and find a small corner, somewhere in this floating Tower (anywhere), where she could hide away from the world and worry at her nails until there’s nothing left of them. But as luck would have it, she’s run into the Nightbloodsinstead (or Natblida as Lexa seems to be calling them), apparently on their way out of the Tower, the oldest leading the youngest ones.

“Uh, actually, I was…”

“Forgive Ruben. He can be a little bit brash sometimes” Aden cuts in, in polished English.

He’s good, the tremble barely noticeable in his voice. Ruben on the other hand, looks downright terrified.

She takes a moment to take them in, all standing in a neat line. She’s not entirely sure who Lexa is to them (a mother figure, a mentor, a teacher…?), but they’re clearly affected by what is about to happen. There’s guarded eyes and carefully schooled blank faces, sure. But underneath it all, she can feel the terror rolling off of them in waves, can spot the slight uncontrolled tremors shaking the frames of the smallest ones. The oldest three: Aden, Naqib and Iro, are trying hard to reign it in and project strength the others can latch onto.

She sighs, coming to a split decision. “It’s ok, Aden. I… You know what, let me walk you down.”

They fall into step behind her and she has the strange feeling they must look like a mother duck leading her ducklings to the water for the first time. Very tense little ducklings about to brave the wild wild world.
She’s never seen such a flurry of activity in Polis’ streets: people are running and shouting in all directions, the rumour ever growing, the closer they get to their destination. When they reach the fighting pits, the crowd parts for them. Whether it’s because of Wanheda or the Natblida in tow, she’s not sure. It makes her cringe nonetheless.

She’s not entirely convinced it’s a good idea for these little Heda-to-be, to have a first-row view of the arena. Correction: she’s 100% sure it is not. But it’s not her call to make.

Aden takes charge: he pairs them up, making sure to place a taller one behind a smaller one and orders them to huddle close. She suspects it has to do with feeling the comfort of each other’s presence. The youngest one, Silas, has now completely given up on putting up a brave front and is staring at the two lone warriors dressed in black with frightened eyes.

She’d like to whisper reassuring words to him, yet nothing comes: she has none to give. Her mind is stuck on a loop: if Lexa dies. Lexa can’t die. She can not, period. But if she does…

The girl in question is wearing a leather outfit that looks at once supple and solid, battle makeup on, red sash strapped to her left shoulder. She looks regal and dangerous.

Titus, who’s sitting up on the raised canopy with the ambassadors, rises and starts in powerful Trigedasleng.

A hush settles over the crowd. Clarke’s never felt so… as one with the people surrounding her. She can’t say where her fear ends and where her neighbour’s starts. The nervous energy all around is paralysing.

“In single combat, there is but one rule: someone must die today” Titus’ voice soars and the crowd roars in response.

She still can’t haggle over vegetables in Trigedasleng but this, this she understood clear as day. What the hell is she doing here? This is the last place she wanted to find herself at. Sure, the two of them have… unfinished business. Yet there’s no… spark of excitement, no hint of vengeful glee coursing through her.

She doesn’t want Lexa to die.
(It’s all for the sake of her people of course. Nothing else. Nothing more.)

The excited clamour almost drowns Titus’ final words: “You may begin.”

The two warriors walk off in opposite directions, each going for his chosen weapon. This brings Lexa close to where Clarke and the Nightbloods are standing. And the blonde is not ready for that.

Lexa unclasps her sash, hands it over to Wulan. The gesture feels ominous somehow.

That’s when the Commander sees her. She recognizes the fleeting surprise in her eyes, the minute stiffness in her shoulders. They hold each other’s stare in silence, eyes locked in an intense exchange, immersed in their makeshift little bubble.

Clarke can sense a presence, somebody pushing their way through behind her and finally coming to a stop to her left, but she has only eyes for Lexa.

Lexa’s on the other hand have lost of their focus. The spell is suddenly broken.

“I’m glad you came” is all the fighter says in a soft voice and she knows it’s sincere. Almost reverential.

“Me too” she wants to reply, but the words are taken out of her mouth by the newcomer, standing very close to her side.

She knows that voice…

Clarke whips her head to the side: Costia. The sudden arrival of the liaison throws her off, long enough that when she looks back, Lexa’s drawn her sword and is now skillfully evading Roan’s first attack.

It’s not that she wasn’t aware of how real, how serious this is… but the first draw of blood – when Lexa slices Roan in the back - brings it home. Clarke feels like she’s going to be sick.
Everything from then on out happens too fast. There’s no time for her to exchange any words with Costia, welcome her or ask how things are. There’s no need to enquire what brought her so suddenly back to Polis: her lover is fighting for her life and Clarke can’t imagine how the girl is able to stomach it all. (Then again, she must have had plenty of practice.)

Both women are entirely focused on the fight unravelling before their eyes.

Lexa’s magnificent. Fierce. Beautiful.

She’s never seen her fight, not really. (And whose fault is that!)

She’s seen Lexa rule. She’s seen Lexa command. She’s seen Lexa march into battle. But she used to be part of the room, part of the crowd, part of the fight. Watching it – watching her – suddenly from an outsider’s perspective is... unsettling.

It’s not just that: she’s been so focused on her resentment these past weeks, on the betrayal, that she hasn’t truly taken the time to stop and watch. She’s suddenly reminded of what Trikru must see in Lexa: this unyielding aura able to command an entire arena with a simple jut of her chin, a defying straightening of her spine. And she understands now, probably for the first time, the unquestioning loyalty these blazing eyes demand.

*Hedain* all her glory.

Clarke blanches when Roan lands his first hit, forcing Lexa down onto her knees, but Costia is there, a solid comforting presence by her side. And Lexa’s not just holding her own, no. She’s actually gaining the upper hand. Her strikes are precise, her stride assured, her gait powerful.

It takes Clarke’s breath away.

Roan’s lost his sword and scrambles for the spear of a guard. The two warriors circle each other.

The scene suddenly stills, as if happening in slow motion: Roan disarms the Commander from one of her swords. Clarke flinches. (No… God, please no…) Her second sword is smashed out of her hand and falls several feet away from her. (No no no no!) Clarke shudders involuntarily. She wants to
look away and hates herself for it.

Isn’t this what she yearned for, not so long ago? For Lexa to pay?

Roan sends her flying to the ground with a powerful kick to the abdomen. Clarke registers out of the corner of her eye Titus, falling down onto his seat. Her own legs are about to give way as well. She can’t bear witness to this. She just…can’t. She needs to go, she needs to leave. Right now. She needs to…

(She doesn’t notice the hand grasping her wrist.)

Roan’s approaching the fallen figure now, like a feline stalking its prey. He’s making a show of it, too, and Clarke thinks she can taste blood in her mouth. He brings his spear to Lexa’s throat. She has nowhere to run to, no weapon within arm’s reach.

(The vice grip on her wrist tightens. There’s nothing gentle about the touch but fuck does she need it right now.)

The Prince lifts his spear back up for the final blow – the killing one.

(She can feel the prickle of nails digging into her skin.)

In the blink of an eye, Lexa’s evaded his jab and is back on her feet. Clarke gasps, together it seems with the entire audience. The fighter manages to grab onto Roan’s spear and just as suddenly, it’s the prince who is lying flat on his back, looking up at her, entirely at her mercy.

The weight of the moment is broken by the Ice Queen who stands up from her chair and screams with viciousness at her son: “Get up! If you die, you do not die a prince. You die a coward.”

Something passes between the two fighters. It looks as if they may be talking to each other. Lexa lifts the spear in the same fluid motion Roan did, not so long ago. And sends it flying. Straight into…the Ice Nation Queen seated up on the canopy.

Despite the cries of anguish and surprise coming from the crowd, she can hear the small laugh Costia
lets out and she turns, stunned, to the Trikru.

“What…” she starts, but is cut off by Lexa’s strong voice that rises above the noise.

“The Queen is dead!” the victorious fighter shouts, “Long live the King!”

The two fighters clasp hands and the Commander helps Roan up to his feet, to the deafening chanting of the crowd: “Heda Heda Heda Heda.”

Lexa’s eyes sweep the mass of people and for a brief moment Clarke could swear they find hers. Wulan hurries back to the Commander’s side. The girl snaps her red sash back into place with a thankful nod, as if she hadn’t broken a sweat. Titus has reached her now and it’s clear he’s finding it hard not to express his relief.

It comes naturally to the blonde, to find herself facing Costia, incredulous smile on her lips. To slip her arms around her neck and draw her into a relieved bone-crushing hug. She feels elated, needs the physical reassurance of another body, just to make sure this really did happen, just to ground her. The brown-eyed woman returns the embrace just as tightly, slightly sinking into her.

They laugh, pressed against each other.

It’s over.

Lexa killed Nia. Faced with a choice, she opted for changing the rules of the game instead. It’s a genius move.

She clings on to the dark-skinned girl as if her life depends on it and only lets go when Costia steps away to bury an anguished little Nightblood into her arms.

---

“Surely, anything you want to discuss can wait until we’re both changed and our injuries are tended to” the former Prince argues with some bite in his voice, when she insists on seeing him immediately.
She orders her guards to clear the room (including Titus, to the latter’s astonishment) before turning fully to face him.

“I’m afraid it can not.”

“I haven’t even had the chance to receive my people’s congratulations, Commander” he insists. “Nor secure the allegiance of my mother’s generals. I am not their recognized King yet. Who’s to say they’ll support me?”

She gestures impatiently with her right hand, cutting his protests off. “I am confident in your diplomatic skills. The matter I wish to discuss with you now will, I believe, decide over the future of your people, Roan kom Azgeda” she starts, her voice strong and firm, her eyes sharply trained on him.

He quiets at that, looking at her guardedly.

“I did not end your mother’s fight today because I considered her a threat to the coalition’s survival. Nor because of her… actions all those years ago. I killed her because I saw a man who would do right by his people, in her stead. A man who knows the sacrifices one has to make for peace and is not afraid of making them. A man who will lead the coalition with me towards a future our people could never have dreamt of. You, Roan King of Azgeda, in addition to having proven yourself a fearless warrior on the battlefield and a mighty opponent in the fighting arena, are all that.”

“And I will forever be indebted to you for what you did today” he grits out between his teeth, the suspicion growing in his eyes. “So spit it out: what do you want from me, Heda?”

---

She knocks, careful not to further jostle her injured hand. She took the afternoon to bathe, letting the warm water and her aides work the day’s exhaustion out of her muscles and bones. To say that Roan hadn’t taken kindly to their… conversation earlier is quite the understatement. The new King had left in a storm without committing to anything. But Lexa hadn’t expected him to either. Her aim all along had been to only make her position abundantly clear (with or without the recourse to thinly veiled threats – Anya would have been proud). She doesn’t need him to give her an answer. She doesn’t need promises. At least not yet (but soon).
She feels tired, very much so. But also clean and relieved the day is finally coming to an end. The door opens. Clarke is, like her, in a night gown. A blue one, she notes distractedly. Like her eyes. ‘Is this I told you so?’ the blonde wants to know in her gravelly voice, with less bite and more cheek than would have been conceivable a couple of months or even weeks ago. But Lexa didn’t come here to fight. On the contrary, she wants to bury the hatchet, so to speak, once and for all. ‘No. This is thank you’ she replies and can see the girl visibly soften. ‘Come in’ is all Clarke says, backing away from the door to allow her to enter her candle-lit room.

It’s… not a good idea. Clarke’s eyes have never been so blue, the fabric she’s wearing is hugging her curves as if it was tailor-made and Lexa doesn’t have the energy, tonight, to fight her blatant attraction to the blonde. Slipping is not something she can afford right now. Not ever of course and especially not after discovering that Costia made the trip all the way from the Ice border to Polis, to see her fight. It’s not like there’s any real risk of this happening. Lexa spent her whole life learning to school her mind and discipline her body. A little… crush won’t even put a dent in her training. But still, it’s not a good idea for her to pursue this… whatever this is.

But before she can decline, the blonde suddenly grabs her left wrist. Her sleepy reflexes don’t even have the time to kick in. Clarke speaks up: ‘Sit down, let me change that for you’ and as usual with her, it’s not a question. So Lexa does as instructed. The girl’s all business when she sits down next to her, a warm towel in hand, gently unwrapping her bandages. Her touch is… electrifying. It leaves little tingles wherever her fingers press. She knows these reactions of her body. Knows them all too well. This was definitely one of her worst ideas. ‘That girl, who was with Nia. Ontari. What will happen to her?’ Clarke wants to know. And although she’s glad for the reprieve to keep her mind on work, that one specific issue is the last thing she wants to be thinking and talking about. She tries to deflect as best as possible: ‘She won’t be back until the Conclave after my Death, I suppose.’

‘Do you ever talk about anything other than your death?’ She can’t suppress a small smile from forming at the playfulness in the blonde’s tone and is gratified with one in return. It reminds her of some of their exchanges right before the offensive on Mount Weather. When Clarke was comfortable enough to stay in her tent well into the night and send little jibes her way, with that bold glint in her eyes, Lexa’s come to… appreciate.

‘Your ambassadors betrayed you. How do you move forward?’ Clarke wants to know, serious again, but her eyes searching for something. ‘They were doing what they believed was right for their people, Clarke’ she whispers in response, lost in the blonde’s gaze. The atmosphere is charged, just like that last moment a year ago, in the privacy of her tent, before Bellamy’s signal. They’re so close that she could… Lexa fights the impulse: ‘How would you have voted in their stead?’ she asks. The blonde gulps, but Lexa already knows the answer. It’s the reason why she had tirelessly worked over the past months at securing Tala’s vote in the first place and not pushed for a hasty inclusion of Skaikru into the coalition: in order not to put the blonde – and by extension Skaikru (which would have been disastrous) – in this position.

It has the desired effect of jolting Clarke out of the moment and she breaks eye contact, busying herself with smoothing over the new dressing in the palm of Lexa’s hand. ‘I would have done what
is right for my people, too’ she sidetracks noncommittally. The girl swallows and rises: ‘Anyway, I’m sure Costia must be waiting impatiently for you to get back to your room and celebrate, after the fright you gave us, I mean her, today.’ Lexa searches her face for a trace of bite or anger but is surprised not to find any. As much as she wishes it were true, it’s not but she won’t correct her. The girl continues: ‘Reshop, Heda,’ the Trigedasleng rolling nicely off her foreign tongue. Lexa takes the hint, rises and walks back to the door. ‘Good night, Ambassador’ she whispers.

---

Titus is waiting for her when she slips out of the blonde’s room, a deep frown on his face. And for once, the blonde or Lexa’s interactions with her don’t seem to be the cause. It’s the equivalent of having a bucket of cold cold water thrown at her – something Anya had been very fond of subjecting her to whenever she’d be dissatisfied with her second. Right now, the sensation is most unpleasant and very much unwelcome.

“What is it, Titus?” she snaps, instantly regretting taking her exhaustion out on him.

“You are needed in the throne room, Heda.”

She’s reluctant to be dragged back into clan business when she was ready to settle down for the evening. She’s had a very long day, can’t this wait?

“What happened?” she asks, schooling her tone back into impassiveness, lips pressed into a thin worried line.

“A surprise gift from King Roan of Azgeda just arrived. The accompanying message recommends for you to receive it immediately upon delivery. None of the guards dared open it in your absence.”

She grimaces but indicates for him to lead the way. Why would the young King be sending her something now? Could it have anything to do with their conversation this morning? Already? And if so, what could it be?

The imposing chest sitting in the middle of the room looks familiar. It takes her tired mind a split-second to place it. She could swear it’s an exact replica of the one she received all those years ago… But that’s impossible… Her mind must be playing a trick on her…
Realization hits her at the exact same time her guards lift the heavy lid. And it’s too late by then to halt their movement.

There, right in the center of the box, lies a human head.

To her credit, she doesn’t wince. Doesn’t move a muscle. Even though everything inside her is bursting at the seams. She puts all the energy she has left from this draining day into fighting the memories that want to coax her back to that day. That horrible horrible day, when she had discovered Leïla’s head throning inside a trunk sent to her by the Ice Queen.

She swallows. Once. Twice.

Titus’s arms that were reaching into the chest stay suspended in the air, frozen, hands unwilling to touch. It’s the first time she’s able to read her former teacher’s face so easily: he’s floored; dismayed; horrified. She swallows a third time. One of the guards finally decides to help and grabs the offending item out, holding it with his two hands, arms outstretched. He presents it to her as if it’s a present from one of the clans, meant to be admired and examined. Meant to be put on display.

She made sure before the fight to get a good look at Ontari and there’s no doubt about it: it’s her. Roan came through. Ungracefully, disgustingly and with clear ill-will – because there’s no way the resemblance between the two trunks is pure chance – but still. The threat looming over her succession when she’ll die, is no more. At least for the time being.

And she now has the blood of yet another Natblidaon her hands. An innocent child raised to become a pawn in a much bigger game she would have never fully understood.

What a waste.

She’s tired, wants this day to end.

Titus is now looking at her with… something akin to revulsion. They don’t need to speak. He knows. Titus who’d tried relentlessly to impart to them how special their black blood made them. Titus who would give his life to protect a Natblida, of that she’s always been certain. Titus who had come to count the dead at the end of her conclave, the flash of agony in his eyes the only indication of his inner turmoil. And it’s that look she’s never seen before that finally makes her flinch. It doesn’t break through the numb haze that’s settled over her though. He’ll understand, he just needs time. He’ll see she was only doing what she must, as Commander of the Blood. Yes, in time he’ll
recognize it as being for the good of her people. But for now, there’s nothing she can do about it.

So with one last look at Ontari’s wide unseeing eyes (the numbness has now reached her heart), she strides out.

In the grand scheme of what’s become her life, what is one more transgression? One more name added to the quiet chanting in her soul? One more sacrifice?

---

A strong and lithe frame – an oh so familiar one – wraps herself around her from behind. She doesn’t know how long she’s been in this position, prostrate in front of the heart, but the night is dark and the fire died a while ago. It takes a while for her to emerge from her haze. She doesn’t remember reaching her room nor sliding down to the ground.

“Costia?”

“Shhhhh” comes from the voice she’s missed so much.

“What…? How…” she stumbles around words. She’s too lost in the gut-wrenching grief to be fully there, in the now, formulating thoughts.

“Titus came to get me. Don’t speak, niron. I’m here.”

“Are you really here?” she wants to confirm, in a voice that’s much smaller than she’d like. It’s been so long…

“I’m here, Lex. I’m here.”

She doesn’t really control her movements when she shifts and her arms reach up to wrap themselves around the girl in a desperate embrace. She’s usually not this clingy. Usually not this inarticulate.

But this is Costia.
And Costia’s here, really here.

She finally has her back.

It starts like this: Clarke is on her way out to meet up with the only familiar face in Polis, Ryder. She had almost squealed when she had suddenly recognized the tall warrior among a crowd of busy patrons at one of the food stalls in Polis’ busiest street. She had immediately thrown a barrage of questions at him, from his health and recovery, to the situation in Arkadia and latest developments at the border. Ryder in turn had reluctantly but with good-humour agreed to sit with her at a later stage and respond to all her queries in a calmer setting. So she’s on her way out of the tower. But when she passes by the open study Lexa and her had had their first fight in (the first of many), she screeches to a halt.

No. It starts with Kane wondering what Skaikru could possibly bring as a gift to the Commander and Costia recommending they come up with something original, not the usual herds of choice cattle or chests brimming with intricate embroidery and fine weaponry. Considering Skaikru has none of these luxury items, Kane had been quite eager to follow her advice. So he had recruited the help of the delinquents to come up with something appropriate, befitting of a Commander. In the end, it had come down to Raven’s attempt at fashioning a bullet-proof coat, resistant to any type of attack or weapon and Clarke’s idea.

Wrong. It starts with a lonely boy who, back in the Ark, would pester the blue-eyed blonde endlessly for her to play with him this game of the old world he’d put together from scraps: chess. Wells had tried to play on his own, against himself, but with apparently limited success. It starts with Clarke relenting, every time, just to see that victorious smile split his face from ear to ear (and because she secretly enjoys the shy boy’s company more than she’d admit). It starts with endless games of cat and mouse on a board. It starts with Clarke losing. Every time. It’s not that Wells hadn’t tried to let her win. But his clumsy attempts had been so obvious that the young blonde had stubbornly refused to play into it.

So in the end, after Raven’s tinkering had produced a vest, which was indeed bullet-proof but so heavy it required 6 delinquents to just lift it (peeved by Jasper and Monty’s snickering, the mechanic had sworn she’d find the right balance in materials soon enough), Skaikru had tasked Damian with fashioning a chess board out of a beautiful oak tree from the dropship site (Costia hadn’t commented on the irony of it all: a stained one carving out a present for the Commander…). Surprisingly enough, Jasper had been the one to suggest the symbolism of choosing a tree that had grown and thrived on Trikru lands, defying the Mountain’s shadow; that had survived the crash of the so-called invaders.
from the sky and their first clashes with Trikru units; and that now offered shade to Arkadia’s fledgling new settlement.

Clarke had expected Lexa to be inquisitive about the rules and show eagerness to start playing. But after days and days of surreptitious snooping around and yet not seeing any trace of the board, she had come to the disappointed conclusion that the Commander had completely discarded their present. So imagine her surprise when, three weeks into her stay, right there, on the small table, she finds the board laid out to perfection, its big pieces bathed in the warm morning light.

She’s too curious for her own good. Always had a little irreverent streak in her as well. So she darts into the empty room and draws closer. The board lies untouched, as if set up for decoration purposes. She wants to mess it up, which would never cease to rile Wells up (her intent all along, “Clarke” he would always whine and she would live for their ensuing mock-fights and Wells’ irresistible pout).

So she does just that: she grabs one of the 8 black pawns and pushes it 2 squares forward on the board. Her opening move made, she leaves.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“Hold your pencil slightly more horizontally, Ruben. Yes, perfect. Now bring it slowly down, just like that. You can relax your hand a little bit. You’re doing great!”

“But the line’s not straight” the frowning boy replies, his face remaining concentrated.

Clarke smiles: “That’s not a problem. Let me see, what exactly are you drawing?”

“A tree” he replies with a small pout, slightly discomfited by the fact she didn’t recognize it.

“Well, a tree is never really a perfectly straight line, now is it? If you look around you, they have small creases, hollows and bumps, uneven textures growing on it and so on, right?’

He nods in thought: “So I’ll never be able to draw a straight line?” he asks, the idea clearly upsetting to him.
“Well, you don’t need to, do you? Tell you what, I’ll show you a neat trick. Can you all come around Ruben for a second?” she calls for the other scattered children to gather close.

“Without the help of a ruler or anything else to guide our hand, we’ll never really be able to draw a perfectly straight line, ok? But the closest you’ll ever get to it, is if you first draw its outline. One way to do this is by breaking it down with smaller lines or dots. Here, let me show you. Do you all have a good view of what I’m doing?”

She takes out one of the apples in her bag, positions it in front of them and starts drawing it.

“See, instead of attempting to draw a perfect circle from the start, I’m drawing little dots. And now, I’m going to fill in the blanks by linking up all these points. Voilà! We have our circle now!”

They shuffle closer to see the final product.

She continues: “The thing is, I actually don’t care about having an even line or not. What’s interesting to me is to have the general shape of the object. It’s a circle, right? You can either do what I just did with the dots, or you can sketch many different lines, like this. I know, it looks messy at first, but can you see the shape slowly emerge from all these overlapping lines? Now I’m going to darken the outline of the circle I really want, see? So, Ruben, to come back to the tree you were drawing, I would recommend the second approach. Why don’t you all practice this a little bit, keeping your original model? And once you’re done, come to me and we’ll start in on three-dimensional drawing, ok?”

Six little heads nod eagerly, before each returns to his former spot.

She slowly goes from one to the other, trying to give useful advice here and correct a gesture there. Lexa had surprisingly enough been the one to suggest she teach the Nighthawks the basics of drawing. Clarke can tell Titus had been dead-set against it, but Lexa had argued that a future Commander should be able to draw maps of their Kingdom and read their enemies’ mapping of available forces and terrain. Clarke – though not an expert at drawing maps per se, but her work with Costia back in Arkadia still fresh in her mind – had immediately agreed, curious to spend more time with the young ones. This is how today finds them in a small clearing on the outskirts of Polis, the Guard standing watch a little to the side.

Silas shuffles over to her, looking quite put out.
“What is it?” she asks, squatting down towards the sulking little figure.

Instead of explaining, the youngest boy simply pouts and shows her his sheet of paper (she knows he’s very shy about his English, so she lets it go). His sketch of… an unidentifiable shape is admittedly not today’s best work.

“What were you trying to draw?” she asks and he gestures in the direction of the horses grazing nearby. Yeah, definitely not remotely close to a horse and Clarke’s afraid she won’t be able to salvage it. But the boy looks so defeated all of a sudden, that she’s going to try her best to cheer him up.

“Didn’t I say you should concentrate on inanimate things first?” she asks with a chuckle, gently poking him in the ribs. “You know, it’s very ambitious and brave of you to start out with one of the hardest animals to draw. Tell you what, how about we sketch something easier, something smaller? We can do it together, if you’d like? You want to continue with the animal theme?"

He bops his head several times. Clarke grabs the apple she had used earlier on and bites into it, wondering what animal would be easiest to start with.

“Mhhh, ok, tough, but we can try. What…”

She’s interrupted by a rustling in the bushes behind.

They both turn at once and she can sense how the boy at her side immediately tenses up, crouching into a defensive position. They wait in rapt attention. More rustling. Silas slides in front of her, as if to shield her and she’d find the thought quite hilarious – a throwback to another young boy awfully protective of her – if she weren’t so focused on the suspicious silence now coming from the grove.

Suddenly, a small black and grey creature with pointy ears darts out, apparently oblivious to the fact that it’s heading straight for them. They’re on a collision course and sure enough, it would have barreled into Silas had the boy not expertly rolled to the side at the very last moment. The move however, leaves Clarke wide open… The animal, which looks like a small raccoon, comes flying at her, snatches Clarke’s apple right out of her hands and retreats, just as fast, back into its hiding place.

It takes her a second to catch her bearings, staring dumbfounded at her now empty hand, before she bursts into laughter, leaning back with her two hands coming to rest on her stomach.
What an odd little thing.

It’s not her first run-in with a raccoon, not by a long shot. Raven had started a while back to notice things were disappearing from her atelier in Arkadia. They could have chalked it up to Damian tinkering with things at home, had the boy not been away with Lincoln at the time. Once her friend had determined the thieves were operating at night (after intense unsubtle spying on her part for days), the mechanic had recruited their group into organizing nightly patrols of 2. Actually, “stake-out” would be a more fitting word than “patrol”. These nightly sessions had been an unexpected opportunity for Clarke to grow closer to Octavia, who had slowly opened up to her.

In any case, Monroe had been the one to discover the culprits: a family of raccoons, occasionally slipping inside the workspace through one of the open ventilation holes and dragging some hard-earned treasures back to their nest. (Clarke suspects Bryan and Miller of having discovered the truth way before the girl, as the couple had very suspiciously started leaving bits of food all over the atelier during their ever more frequent visits.) Long story short, after Raven had retrieved her precious items, Wick had built the raccoon family a doll-sized cabin close to the entrance, where the delinquents had started leaving food and other things for them to sift through during their nightly visits.

She turns back to Silas, who’s relaxed his stance but is furrowing his brow at the laughing girl.

“I know just what we’re going to draw, you and I” she starts mischievously, reaching for the kneaded eraser.

The idea of starting with abstract shapes is not an intuitive one and it takes her quite a while to break it down into easy steps for him. She makes him work on the body first, they then move on to the tail (which he seems to find quite entertaining to draw and colour in) and keep the head for last: the ears, the nose, the eyes. They first draw the animal in a sitting position, so Silas can picture it better. Their final product though, is a cute raccoon bounding out of the thicket, determined eyes set on an apple lying on the ground.

It may be the apple-thing, or something else, but… there’s an image in her head now. And well... now that it’s there, she finds it hard to fight it. So she changes the shape around the eyes a little bit, adds a cloth draped over the raccoon’s left shoulder, throws a touch of red in, and holy float: yep, she did just transform the animal into a cartoon version of… Lexa.

Lexa who may or may not have her head for such a picture. Now that she thinks about it, this was really not one of her brightest ideas: in general – period – but also more particularly considering she’s in the presence of the Nighbloods… She’s either completely lost her mind or… No, she’s definitely lost her mind.
Silas has grown very still, eyes fixated on the modified drawing. He scrunches his nose and looks up at her, as if needing confirmation that yes, the blonde did indeed just go there. He looks back down to the sketch. His hand comes out tentatively and he traces the raccoon’s new darkened shape around the eyes – a perfect match for Lexa’s war paint – with one shy finger. He lets out a hum, snatches the paper up and runs over to Aden.

Clarke remains in her spot, anxiously biting her lip and waiting to see how this is going to play out. The two boys engage in a whispered conversation, Silas gesticulating. Then Aden motions for Iro and Naqib to join them. More whispers. Refusing to be left out, Ruben and Flora catch up with them as well. The soft mumblings grow in volume with an occasional glance in her direction, but Clarke can’t make out the words they’re exchanging. Oh boy…

Then the little troupe slowly makes its way towards her.

Aden speaks up, as some sort of appointed spokesperson, but she can see the uncertainty in his eyes: “Silas likes your drawing very much, Clarke kom Skaikru” he starts, formally. “But maybe, it is best… if… unpractised eyes do not see it,” he continues with a furtive look around him, his voice tilting up in uncertainty.

She’s going to have to tread these waters very carefully. “I think that would indeed be very wise, Aden. We can also destroy it, if you want, or I can stash it away in a safe place? Why don’t we just forget about this whole thing, uh?” she offers with what she hopes is a reassuring smile, reaching for the item in question.

But Silas vehemently shakes his head in protest, protectively drawing the picture to his chest.

Ruben cuts in: “We will not speak of it, Clarke of the Sky People. You have our word. But… I would like to learn how to draw it. The… He… The raccoon. Could you show me?”

“Me too!” comes from Iro.

“Can you do one of Heda with us, Clarke? Please?” Flora pipes in.

And wow, she really hadn’t expected this type of reaction, nor for this day to turn into an impromptu cartoon caricature class. But this is exactly what she ends up doing and she loves every single second of it.
“Flora, what did you… oh…”

She’s taught them all how to draw the raccoon’s basic outline and even drew a small image of that same raccoon sitting on a much too big wooden throne – unmistakably Lexa’s – with 6 smaller mini-raccoons sitting at its feet (Flora grabbed that one as soon as she was done and reverently slipped it into her satchel for safe-keeping). She didn’t miss Aden’s surprised blush when spotting the mop of blonde hair on the tallest mini-raccoon.

In front of her lies the girl’s latest piece. And she didn’t expect that level of cheekiness from her usually quiet student. Her lines are sharp, the shading expertly rendered. Clarke has to hide her smile with her hand and bite down hard on her bottom lip to suppress the laughter that wants to bubble out.

Oh. My. God.

Flora just drew a picture of the commander-raccoon lying on the floor in a complicated and messy tangle of her red sash. It’s without a doubt one of the funniest things Clarke’s ever seen and it leaves her utterly speechless.

Lexa can absolutely never see this.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

As always, Joanne is doing a precious job as a Beta, trying to make sense of my mess! Thanks so much to all those sharing their thoughts, feelings, ideas and suggestions and leaving kudos. Any feedback totally makes my day!

She needs to think. Needs some peace and quiet. The glasshouses are too busy these days and Kostas’ new assistant is not as discrete as she should be, when throwing surreptitious glances her way. The chaos in the library is still being cleaned up. So she settles for her study, even though she’s found Clarke’s erratic energy lingering in the room’s air for days after every single one of their arguments.

What had their latest disagreement been about? Let’s see… There had been the explosive quarrel over Skaikru’s expected contribution in case of armed conflict. Then the never-ending debate over taxes. After that the unresolved discussion on the sharing of seeds. More recently, Lexa’s insistence the energy produced from the soon to be rehabilitated dam be distributed evenly to all villages within a certain radius of the fallen Mountain (including TonDC), had led to quite an epic shouting match.

If she’s perfectly honest, she finds the tough negotiator Clarke is… titillating, even though she hadn’t expected any different from the stubborn leader. But the blonde could definitely learn a thing or two in subtlety. She’s all fired up intensity, quick in her fury and relentless in her zeal, but Lexa knows: no fire can last.

She would be more than willing to teach the girl the ways of diplomacy, if only the Sky-girl seemed receptive in any way to return to more… peaceful interactions.

She stills as soon as she passes the threshold. Something’s wrong. She can sense it, even if her brain hasn’t properly caught on yet. Yes, something’s… out of place. She just doesn’t know what.

Her eyes fall on the low table on which the infuriating present is laid out. It’s so typical, for the People from the Sky to gift something without providing any information as to what it is or represents, its use or purpose. The idea that Lexa – or anybody else on Earth for that matter – wouldn’t know of habits and customs of the old world, apparently didn’t even cross their mind. Thoughtless ignorant fools.

Lexa had almost ordered her guards to use the mysterious wooden board as fodder for the next fire in
her chambers. And if Skaikru later on discovered their present had gone missing, she would have been able to dismiss it as an honest mistake. After all, how is she, the rudimentary “Grounder” as she knows many of them believe her and her people to be, supposed to know what else to do with a piece of carved wood too crude to be out on display.

She can already picture the rage such a nonchalant excuse would without a doubt elicit in the fiery blonde currently enjoying her hospitality.

(The image is not entirely without appeal.)

Clarke is beautiful of course. Lexa’s always known that and is able to acknowledge it, without feeling guilty. But when she’s furious… When she’s furious she’s breath-taking. And the girl hasn’t noticed yet that the Commander of the 12 clans has become quite fond of egging her on, in the sole hope of seeing her eyes burn a tad brighter, her jaw clinch a tad tighter, lips parted in an aborted growl, upper body thrust forward and her gestures picking up a frenzied staccato.

It’s a dangerous game, she knows. But it’s only fair, considering Clarke herself has been playing an equally dirty one with her fondness for apples, oblivious to the fact that Lexa’s caught on.

Back to Skaikru’s present: something had stopped her from going that far. She needs Skaikru on her side after all and can’t afford petty antagonizing. Not for the time being, at least. So, she had opted for temporarily leaving it in a corner, untouched.

There were two ways to go about this.

She could either take the board at face value and consider it an unrefined representation of… two warring armies, maybe? With at least one but potentially as many as five towers and what seem to be rough-looking… horses, on each side…? (Which makes no sense at all, since it’s well known the Polis tower – her tower – is the most majestic of all the clans, by far. The only one deserving a mention. How dare they include another just as tall on the opposite side?) The rest of the figurines remain a complete mystery to her.

Could this be Skaikru’s attempt at portraying the Battle of the Mountain?

Or she could consider it a tool, but was then left with the baffling question of what it could possibly be useful for…
Quite the puzzle indeed.

Asking Clarke directly – Costia’s rather reasonable suggestion – was of course out of the question. So she had ignored her lover’s exasperated sigh and ordered her entire library be combed through, in search of clues: books containing illustrations matching the strange item, descriptions of past traditions related to the spoils of war. After all, didn’t the previous Commander boast of having one of the most well-furnished book collections of their time? There had to be something there.

And indeed, her aides had initially found many references to similar or even identical boards, but not a single one featuring it with those strangely cut chips. They had then unearthed one that fit the bill, for there on the cover was an exact replica of the present, but it had proven a useless find: the book was in a language long lost to her people. (She had never understood why the previous Commander kept works in extinct languages or trinkets with no use. Misplaced sentimentality from an otherwise stone-cold leader.)

Finally, Aden, who had kindly volunteered to help and probably knows the library better than any of the staff by now, had, thanks to his smaller stature, extracted a thick volume that had fallen behind one of the tall shelves. But far from answering her many questions, the book (“My system”) had proven quite… an odd read, to say the least.

First of all, were she to believe its quite dull author (a certain Aron Nimzowitsch), it appeared Skaikru had thought it appropriate and wise to gift her – their future Commander and current protector – a game.

Yes, that is right: a game. A board game, to be more precise (because apparently that is – or at least used to be – a thing). But board or not, a game nonetheless. What we tolerate in children before they leave those dreaded first 5 years of their lives behind. A game. The thought is so baffling in its uncouthness, it had taken her a full night’s rant to a very patient Costia, to recover from her bewilderment.

And yet, at the same time, there seem to be quite an impressive set of rules to observe, completely negating the playful aspect of the whole thing. None of it makes any sense and short on patience (as well as time) these days, Lexa just set the board up and left it at that, putting the author’s philosophy of the game and many theories aside, for now. Collaboration with the new Ice Nation King needs to be strengthened; the talks with Skaikru are hopefully reaching a conclusion; she’s started privately tutoring the oldest Natblida (Aden, Iro and Naqib); and then there’s… Costia.

She would be hard-pressed to find the correct words to express what having Costia back means and feels like.
Lexa prides herself in being quite self-aware, so she’s noted of course the return of her appetite and sense of taste – to Kostas’ great pleasure. She’s thankful for the deeper sleep she’s now able to enjoy and can hold endless audiences with renewed vigour. She also knows the changes haven’t escaped Titus’ attention. It’s like being offered water after going without for weeks, when one’s past the point of even noticing how thirsty they are. The storm of intense sensations those first drops on one’s tongue unleash… Costia is all that and so much more.

Costia’s meant to be in her life. She’s been convinced of it, ever since the girl barrelled through her defences – even if it took her some time to accept it.

Her eyes continue their practised search of the room. Yes: right there, on the wooden panel in question, one of the black pawns ventured outside of its assigned row. (It’s black against white, she’s learnt from this Aron Nimzowitsch. The naïve dichotomy is in itself unnerving. No wonder Skaikru find the game appealing.) Something or somebody must have knocked it forward.

The breeze perhaps?

Or is Titus messing with her? Her relationship with her former teacher has been off-kilter ever since the… Ontari incident. The disapproving perplexity is still there whenever he spies Clarke in her presence, but her advisor’s grown quieter. In fact, he seems to have withdrawn into himself. And Lexa doesn’t know whether she should be worried or thankful for the reprieve.

She’s about to reach out and put the offending item back in its place, when a strange thought stills her hand.

Surely…

Probably not, but best to be certain before she does anything…

She turns back and walks in the direction of the library instead.
To say Clarke’s been hovering around for the past couple of days, trying to catch a glimpse of the chess board – although technically completely true – would be an unwelcome and gross exaggeration, if you ask her.

She’s just a little bit curious. A little bit nervous. A little bit excited. Plus, there’s only so many strolls about town Ryder will tolerate in her company. In fact, the warrior’s made her understand, in no uncertain terms, that spending his convalescence as an improvised Polis tour guide isn’t exactly his cup of tea. (She hasn’t told him yet she’s started to think of the stoic man as her new Polis BFF – she’s not sure he’d react as enthusiastically to the news as she’d like him to.)

Damian and Raven can’t get here soon enough.

It looks like today her waiting has come to an end. There, right there: on the board, one of the white pawns is now mirroring her opening. She looks to the right. Looks to the left. The corridor is completely empty. There is no way of confirming for sure who displaced the figurine.

But Clarke knows.

She steps inside, throwing a last furtive look over her shoulder (running into that bloody Titus man and being subjected to yet another one of his hour-long rants of objections to her teaching methods with the nightbloods, would assuredly ruin her day – if not her entire week), pushes the door shut behind her and sits down, contemplating her next move.

The room she’s in would best be described as… cosy and she realises with a start that it’s the first time – not just on Earth, but in her whole life – that she comes to spontaneously associate a space with the word. Small, with furniture in golden tones and light filtering in through pale pink curtains.

This is where things would usually start to go downhill for her, whenever she would play against Wells. She needs to think her next couple of moves through, very carefully. The advantage of having played chess for so many hours back in the Ark, especially with somebody as meticulous and patient as the young Jaha, is that she had learnt quite a few tricks along the way. In fact, there’s one trap Wells was particularly fond of. She racks her brain, trying to remember how the quiet boy would set it up, unbeknownst to his opponent.

She can almost feel his watchful gaze, attentively following her hands.
Was it this…? No.

She sneaks a glance to where she imagines Wells would sit, close but always mindful to give her her space. She can see him trying hard to remain silent, always so eager to dispense advice, even when worked against his own interest.

Maybe this pawn here? And then… No.

She plays several scenario out. Once she thinks she’s got it, she drives the pawn forward.

May the best player win!

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------
------

One of her pieces – a pawn, she corrects herself – is the first to fall. It doesn’t faze her. It is after all not the first time Lexa has to sacrifice some of her units in the grand scheme of things. It was a good pawn, that served its purpose well. But such is a pawn’s life, the lowest level of protection for her two most important pieces, the ones she had initially mistaken for towers – rooks she corrects herself again, what is it with this game and its strange names? – the Queen and the King.

She had been quite miffed to discover the game considered the King to be the most valuable piece of all, to be protected at all cost, when its role is, to be honest, more symbolic than anything else. Especially considering the Queen’s impressive range of motion and versatility. How strange to relegate her to second place… Until she had realized (in the middle of Costia going down on her – the girl hadn’t taken too kindly to the ill-timed epiphany, but Lexa had more than made it up to her that night), that it could be considered a strategic deception, for the benefit of one’s enemy: leave the ruler in the public’s eye secretly weak and have the most powerful person orchestrating everything from the shadows, supporting the troops on the battlefront, taking out key opponents.

Today though, it’s Clarke’s turn.

She throws the board one last careful gaze, before closing the trap she had started to set up three moves back with Aron’s (or “Nimzo” as she’s started to affectionately refer to him) precious help. And no, it can not be considered cheating to defer to the book (which has quickly become her favourite bedside reading), since she’s a complete beginner in this game and by all indications, Clarke isn’t.
Besides, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with cheating. Intentions do justify the means after all. (Anything goes in times of war.)

Today, Clarke’s Fleimkepa – “bishop” she corrects herself – will fall. The Commander of the 12 clans rejoices privately. She reaches for one of the apples Aden brought to their earlier reading session and bites into it with more gusto than ever.

“Should I expect you in bed any time soon or do you and this… strange board, plan to spend what promises to be quite a wild night together?” comes from the room’s entrance.

Lexa doesn’t look up, too concentrated, hunched over the chess game, the book full of Nimzo’s precious advice lying open next to her.

This can’t be right. There has to be something she can do…

“Mhh” she hums distractedly in response.

“Lex” comes again, as if from far away. She barely registers it.

“I see. Shame, I asked Saskia to join us tonight. To provide some… entertainment, you know. But since you’re otherwise occupied, I guess I’ll have her all to myself. Not to worry, I’ll let her know you couldn’t make it.”

She goes with a similar response as earlier: “Mhh” and throws in a small nod (you can never go wrong with a nod, it works with Titus, every time).

But a smack to the shoulder violently jolts her out of her thoughts. She blinks, looking up at her attacker. Oh.
“Costia” she breathes out, surprised and pleased to see her.

“Yes, Costia. Remember the girl you share a bed with?” her lover replies with her usual sass, arms bent and fists planted into her sides.

She can’t help but smile. Of course she remembers. How could she not? She makes to stand but the girl places a firm hand on her shoulder, keeping her in her seat.

Her lover cocks her head in the board’s direction and asks: “What has you so enthralled?”

What? She looks back to the board. Oh, right. That.

How to put this…

“This was Skaikru’s present to me. It comes from the old world, where it was known as chess” she starts to explain.

But Costia interrupts her: “I know, Lex, I was there when they had it carved and there when you mobilized the whole tower to try and understand its usefulness. Besides, I couldn’t possibly miss how you’ve started religiously reading that enormous book at night.”

Right.

“I have been trying to learn how to play…” she offers.

But is interrupted yet again. “With Clarke?” Costia asks and Lexa suddenly wonders – too late – if they’ve wandered into dangerous territory.

Costia’s back, sure: back in her life, back by her side. (Back in her bed.) And the feeling, the relief, the warmth, know no equivalent. But the subject of Clarke has remained completely… unspoken between them. It’s not that they don’t talk, they do. A lot. More than ever, probably. Costia spent weeks describing in detail her extended stay among the Skylings and Lexa herself dissected Polis intrigues for her. This new-found openness is… strange but not unpleasant.
The blonde, however, has been largely left out of these late-night conversations.

She knows they need to talk about their confrontation of a year ago, the one that had resulted in Costia leaving. And the sooner the better. But she can’t figure out how to start that dreaded discussion. And well, she’s not as brave as one could think when it comes to breaking the peace with the girl she loves. She’s quite honestly terrified of saying the wrong thing and Costia deserting her again. So, for the second time that year, the Commander finds herself completely at a loss as to how to proceed.

Costia’s face is a practised blank, not giving anything away.

“Yes” she admits, scrutinizing her lover’s reaction for clues. She doesn’t get any (Costia learnt from the best, after all).

She could clarify: that she’s been so careful to keep her distance, when it comes to the blonde; that she restricted their interactions to the bare minimum. Explain that it’s more them playing against each other than together. She doesn’t.

Costia simply nods, her eyes roaming over the board.

“Yes, winning?” she then asks, with a glint in her eyes.

And well… now there is no hiding it anymore.

“It appears I may have… fallen into a… masterful trap” she reveals reluctantly, throwing a serious scowl in Nimzo’s direction, the book having failed so far to offer any useful tip for the bind she finds herself in.

Costia seems impervious to her dejection, for she breathes out a sincere “Oh boy”, before she dissolves into loud laughter.

It takes her lover too long to reign in her completely unwelcome amusement. Lexa’s now bordering on annoyed.
“I see” the impudent girl finally says, wiping at her eyes before moving to stand behind her, her two hands resting on Lexa’s shoulders.

She starts rubbing soothing circles into her skin through her shirt’s fabric. It feels good. So good Lexa closes her eyes for a brief moment and leans in.

“So that’s why you’ve spent the past 2 days holed up in here… Titus is getting quite worried, you know. And there are only so many audiences we can cancel or push to next week, Lex… The Ambassadors will start talking…”

“Let them talk” is all Lexa replies softly, too focused on Costia’s magic hands.

“Does Clarke know how much of a sore loser you are?” Costia asks her then, tone full of mirth.

“I am not a sore loser” Lexa bristles.

“Of course not, niron. You just don’t take kindly to defeat and turn positively feral when pondering capitulation, that’s all. Far from me to hint at tantrums or anything of the sort” Costia coos with the same infuriating smile in her voice.

“I do not know what you are trying to insinuate, nor do I think I would I agree with it, were I to understand” Lexa replies, straightening her back but not moving away from her lover’s ministrations.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and assume you’ll stay huddled here until you find a way out of your current predicament?” Costia whispers close to her ear.

(The proximity, the familiar loaded timber of voice, it all awakens this familiar stirring inside of her.)

She’d like to deny it, but her partner knows her decidedly too well. She needs to do this now, won’t be able to sleep otherwise.

Costia’s lips graze her exposed neck. The incorrigible tease gives her a small peck there, before
drawing away, her hands giving her shoulders one last forceful squeeze.

“Just don’t start a war over this, Lex, and don’t stay up too late, ok?” she whispers, retreating to their shared chambers.

It’s only much later, when Nimzo’s – useless – sentences have started to blur and Lexa’s been replaying the same move for the fourth time without realizing it, that Costia’s first words finally register: the little titbit about a new bed partner. That damn Saskia again.

It’s a joke of course. It must be. Costia likes to make stories up sometimes, just to rile her up. They’ve always been exclusive. Not as a result of a conversation, more because that’s who they are, the balance they’ve found.

Lexa lets out a growl and is out of the room in the blink of an eye. She can find a way out of this ambush tomorrow.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“You summoned me, your Majesty?” are Clarke’s biting words when she enters the room. It’s irreverent but she had planned on sleeping in this morning and was right on the brink of falling back into a light slumber when one of Lexa’s guards unceremoniously yanked her out of her chambers and insisted she follow him to the Commander’s study.

Lexa, who’s standing in front of the windows, turns calculatedly towards her. She sizes her up, from head to toe, slowly and with narrowed eyes.

“Are you the one behind this treachery?” she grits out and is every bit the imposing Heda Clarke remembers from the battlefield.

To say Clarke’s completely lost is an understatement. Thoughts flash in her sleep addled mind, trying to understand what Lexa could possibly be referring to: intrigue among the Ambassadors maybe; something to do with Roan?; hopefully not trouble with Pike’s ex-followers again, back in Arkadia or tensions with the refugees; or worst of the worst: the truth about Anya’s death finally revealed?

“Behind what? What are you talking about?” she asks, confused and cautious at the same time.
“This” Lexa replies with force, pointing agitatedly at the small table.

Clarke lets her eyes fall on it and immediately understands what’s missing. She discovers the once neat chess board lying overturned on the ground, at the table’s feet, the figurines scattered all over the floor.

“What…?”

“I will only repeat my question once, Clarke” Lexa clips. “Did you or did you not have anything to do with the game being destroyed?”

What the hell is Lexa on? “Why… That’s absurd, of course not!” she exclaims, offended by the suggestion.

She’s reached the small table in two hurried steps and kneels down to assess the damage. The board survived the fall just fine and Clarke starts gathering the chess pieces, one by one, placing them delicately back onto the table.

Lexa must find her reaction genuine, for her demeanour relaxes imperceptibly. Her eyes remain suspicious though.

“Do you think you would be able to reconstruct it? To where we stood in the game?” she asks softly.

Clarke takes a second to try and remember how she had left the board yesterday morning. She knows she had Lexa’s queen backed in a corner and her King completely exposed. But the rest? She shakes her head in frustration. It’s with a twinge of sadness that she accepts the fact that their game is most likely over now.

“No. I mean, I could try, but if I’m honest, I don’t think I’d be able to find the exact previous set-up…” she sighs, standing back up and setting the recovered board back onto the table, next to the stacked pieces. “Damn, I was so looking forward to seeing your face when I’d checkmate you!” she adds, passing a hand in her hair.

Lexa’s back stiffens and Clarke already knows what’s coming before she utters the words.
“No offense, Clarke, but you were far from winning” the brunette interjects with arrogance.

Maybe it’s her slight superior tone. Maybe it’s because the blonde’s still rankled from her rough awakening. Whatever the reason, Clarke rises to the bait, almost giddy at the prospect of some quality verbal sparring.

“You’re kidding right? I had you cornered on all sides, Lexa. There was nowhere for your King to go! You had totally *lost* that game. I should know, Wells pulled this trick often enough on me. Don’t even dare deny it!”

“Oh, so you admit to resorting to the advice of an external person, this… Wells, from Skaikru, I presume?” Lexa counters, rapid as fire.

Clarke growls, stomping closer to her.

“What? Wells is dead. He was my best friend. We used to play a lot together.” Lexa’s features immediately turn apologetic but Clarke doesn’t give her the opportunity to interject. She continues, pointing at the volume lying open on the table. “But hey, while we’re on the subject, is this a chess book I see?”

Lexa’s eyes flash dangerously. “Exactly how, *Clarke kom Skaikru*, was I supposed to understand what this present from your people is, let alone learn to play?”

And oh.

The wounded pride in Lexa’s eyes looks… genuine.

Shit.

Everything had happened so fast, the decision to send her to Polis, the scramble for a present, that they hadn’t even thought a single second Lexa or the Trikru in general wouldn’t know about chess. Clarke’s anger deflates and she slumps down into one of the chairs. But if Lexa didn’t know what it was, then why didn’t she ask?
“I… I’m sorry. We should have… I didn’t think…”

Lexa makes a small dismissive gesture, sitting down in the opposite chair, albeit in a more elegant fashion than the blonde.

“I apologize as well. For the comment, about your… friend” she offers.

This is… new. Silence per se isn’t, not really. But for the first time since she’s arrived in Polis, it’s not charged. There’s no crackling anger or annoyed edge to it.

Clarke’s eyes come to rest on the empty chess board, the bittersweet twinge lingering. She nudges it with the tip of her finger and just goes with her gut: “What do you say, Heda? Fancy a rematch?”

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-----

“Mhhh, not bad Silas, not bad at all” Clarke murmurs, squeezing the boy’s shoulder affectionately. She doesn’t miss the proud grin the youngest boy tries to hide in his chin. “I like what you did there, with the tower. Careful to keep your scale though. When you’re done drawing your outline, you can go ahead and ink it. Come get me before you start with the shading though, ok?”

The smallest of the nightbloods nods vigorously.

Today’s been a great day so far and it only promises to get even better: Damian, Raven and a whole bunch of other people are set to reach Polis tonight. In the meantime, Clarke is going ahead with her programme of drawing sessions with the nightbloods. After teaching the group the very basics on how to draw inanimate and animate objects, they have now moved on to the real purpose of these lessons: maps. In fact, today’s the first practical exercise and they’ve found the best spot for it: a small secluded glade, protected from the wind and with an unrivalled view over the capital.

After a little bit of theory on scales, angles and landmarks, Clarke’s now left them to their own devices. They have the afternoon to come up with a satisfactory drawing while she goes from one to the other, dispensing advice. What Clarke hasn’t told them is that Lexa asked to see their creations that very evening and the blonde’s anxious to have the fruits of their labour examined by the Commander.
“A little bird told me you broke your hand in training yesterday” Clarke starts when she approaches Aden.

The boy is indeed struggling (to say the least) to draw straight lines with his left hand, his right resting securely and heavily bandaged against his chest.

“Birds can not speak, Clarke kom Skaikru,” he replies politely, clearly confused, his eyebrows drawn and mouth twisting to the left.

It’s quite possibly the cutest thing she’s ever seen. (Except of course when Damian puffs up his chest like he has something to prove. Now that is cuteness personified. She can’t wait for Damian to get here.)

“I meant Silas, Aden. The bird thing, it’s… an expression. Anyway, it’s not important. See, what I don’t understand is that you didn’t have a training session planned yesterday…”

She knows that because it had been one of the few days Lexa had been completely free. (And instead of hammering out the final details concerning Skaikru joining the coalition, the two had found themselves engrossed in a hard-fought game of chess – yet again.)

Aden ducks his head down, the tip of his ears turning a light shade of red. “I was practicing on my own” he mutters.

And damn Clarke wants to take this young knight in her arms and squeeze all the serious out of him until there’s nothing left but an innocent boy who has all the time in the world to grow up. She settles with placing a gentle hand on the serious boy’s shoulder instead. (The first time she had initiated contact, he had instantly flinched away, so she’s been careful ever since and is glad to see he’s visibly warmed to her touch.)

“You’re pushing yourself too hard, Aden” she offers softly with a light squeeze.

It’s not her place, she knows. But he broke his wrist for Christ’s sake! And Titus will definitely not be the one to say something.
“You already have a crazy intense schedule, between sword practice, hand to hand combat, horse riding and your lessons with Titus… Is there really need for you to cram extra fighting practice in?”

The gravity in the boy’s eyes is back full force, eyebrows further drawing together. “Of course, Clarke kom Skaikru. Ontari could try to claim Heda’s power for her own at any moment. We are the last line of defence. As the oldest Natblida, it is my duty to make sure the flame never falls into the traitor’s hands. That means I need to be better.” He stops there, furrows his brow and clenches his left wrist around the pencil. “I need to be better than all the others, better than the best.” His eyes are determined, staring straight into her own.

She lets her hand fall away. Like so many times before when exchanging with the nightbloods, she finds herself at a loss for words. There’s so much admirable strength in these little warriors and yet her heart can’t help but break a bit every time she’s in their presence.

“Aden, what good a fighter are you, if your hand is broken? A broken wrist takes at least a month to set itself back into place. That’s a whole month of missed practices…” She leaves her sentence hanging. She doesn’t want to push but also doesn’t want the boy to hurt himself further.

Aden whispers something unintelligible, averting his eyes. Clarke stills, hoping to God she misheard him.

“What?” she exclaims, in a slightly panicked tone. “What did you just say?”

Aden is pointedly avoiding her eyes. He clears his throat and repeats himself, louder but still sheepish.

“This was necessary, Clarke. With my right hand unusable, it will force me to build the strength and dexterity of my left. In due time, I will be able to strike down my enemies with both arms. Few warriors are as agile with one as with the other. It should help me surprise Ontari, were it to come down to a fight.”

She’s too flabbergasted to utter anything for a while. Did she understand him correctly that he may have intentionally broken his wrist? On freaking PURPOSE?!

“Please oh please tell me I misunderstood you and you didn’t do it on purpose. Aden…”
His head ducks further into his shoulders.

Purpose it is, then.

Wonderful. Just fucking wonderful.

As much as she dislikes their teacher, Clarke’s pretty sure Titus wouldn’t explicitly instruct the Natblida to hurt themselves like this. His is a mix of creepy over-protectiveness and brutal teaching methods she still doesn’t understand fully. So Aden must have come up with this hare-brained plan all on his own. And now Clarke is left with a pupil who can barely hold his pencil upright.

Great. Just… great.

With a sigh, she lets the subject drop: there’s no use in making the boy feel even worse by launching into a lecture (more rant than lecture she suspects).

She makes sure to circle back to Aden as often as possible although the two have resigned themselves to the fact that nothing’s going to come out of his splotchy and shaky lines today. The rest of the group are now well into colouring their maps. Ruben needs a little bit of assistance to fully grasp the concept of sharp, clean shadows and she sits by Silas for a while, following his process when determining which colours to use and in which order.

The time’s now come to wrap-up. She steps in front of their little half-circle. “Alright, now who remembers the very last steps we talked about when finishing up work on a map? Things you shall not, under any circumstances, forget?”

“A signature” Naqib throws in.

“The legend comes first though, doesn’t it, Clarke kom Skaikru?” intervenes Flora, ever the know-it-all.

“That’s right, labelling and legend first. The legend is key, it deserves the same attention and care you put into your drawing. And then the signature. Just as we talked about: sign with the initials of your name and clan. But there’s one very last step we’re missing. Can anybody tell me what it is?”
After a silence, Aden volunteers: “The date.”

Clarke couldn’t be happier when later on, each one steps up to her to carefully hand over their finished product.

“Great you guys, really, I’m super impressed! Next time, I’ll ask one of my friends, Lincoln, to come show you one of the maps he drew and explain how useful it was in taking down the Mountain, how does that sound?”

There’s a tiny gasp and Iro enthusiastically asks: “Lincoln, the pauna slayer?”

And well, that’s a new one for her. The blonde wonders if Octavia knows about her boyfriend’s newfound fame.

They all file away. Flora whispers a conspiratorial: “Can we draw the raccoon again, soon, please, Clarke? I have a few ideas of additional animals I would like to show you…” before she shyly hurries back to the group.

And Clarke knows exactly which raccoon she’s speaking of. Yep, this one’s not going away, is it?

---------------------------------------------------------------

She tries to slip as quietly as possible out of the bed without waking Costia.

She’s been awake for quite some time now but instead of walking down to the fighting pits for her morning sparring routine with Wulan, she’s exceptionally opted for staying put, watching the beautiful girl next to her sleep and occasionally, reaching out for a brief and light caress (because it’s hard to just look, when a naked Costia is involved).

But she can’t put the day off any longer. Roan is leaving for his Kingdom today and it’ll probably (hopefully) be a while before the two leaders see each other again. So as loathe as she is to see the young King after his distasteful form with Ontari’s assassination, she needs to make sure they’ve covered all urgent matters before they part ways.
Costia doesn’t stir. Lexa suppresses a secret smug smile. Last night had indeed involved quite… strenuous activities. Or rather one activity. Multiple times. Multiple incredibly times. With Costia on the receiving end of most. She can still taste the beautiful girl on her lips and that alone guarantees a good day ahead, come what may.

Once dressed, she sits down on her black leather couch to tie her boots. She adjusts her hair one last time, contemplates kissing the sleepy woman awake but decides against it and exits the room quietly.

---

Titus, Indra and Roan are waiting for her when she enters the throne room. She’s asked Indra to join them in Polis to report the latest on the situation at the border with Ice Nation. She nods to all three before taking her seat, Wulan silently taking his position to her left.

“King Roan, thank you for joining us. I trust your prolonged stay in Polis was pleasant?”

She doesn’t care for pleasantries, never has – that’s at least one thing Titus and her have in common. But the previous Commander had admonished her repeatedly, arguing that sometimes a well-placed nicety here and there could go a long way towards facilitating friendly relationships (“friendly but not necessarily trustworthy” a younger Lexa had stubbornly grumbled at the time). The Commander had made her promise, so this is her now: trying to respect that promise.

“It’s always with great pleasure that I come to the capital and I will forever be thankful for your hospitality.”

Roan is a pro, the words flowing with ease, not a single trace of falsehood or insincerity in his voice. This makes her want to knock him down a notch and what better way than through feigning disinterest? She unsheathes one of her knives, passes a practiced finger over its blade, holds her hand out to Wulan, who promptly presents her with an apple, and starts cutting it into precise slices. (She did miss breakfast after all.)

“I trust you received my… present?”

She suppresses a small hiss when the blade slips from her grip and slices her palm. Serves her well. She wanted to take him down a peg? Well, clearly Roan won’t be so easily unsettled.
Back to business it is then.

“I did” she barely manages to growl out, closing her fist tight to hide the trickle of blood from the room’s occupants. “Your… promptness was duly noted.” The style too, but that goes without saying. A change of subject is in order. “Indra, what news do you bring of the border?”

“It appears all Ice Nation troops have retreated deep into Ice Nation lands. There have not been any clashes or skirmishes since the King’s ascension” the stoic woman replies. Lexa knows what she wants to say: since Nia’s death.

“All is as I pledged to do” Roan interjects, looking directly at Lexa. “I am a man of my word.”

She nods and motions for a disgruntled Indra to continue: “What of the bandits, General?”

“We’ve been hunting them down, with the help of the unit Ice Nation provided. We’ve been successful in dismantling the biggest group; our collaboration took them by surprise.” She adds with clear distaste: “Ice Nation troops were instrumental in cutting off their escape route. But we’re still after the smallest ones, to make sure no elements that could do any damage to the villages in the area are left behind.”

These are all excellent news, further comforting her in her choice to put Roan at the head of Ice Nation. She knows she’ll be able to work with the man. (While keeping an eye on his ambitious ego, of course.)

“The ones you caught…?”

“All executed, Commander. Jus drein, jus draun!”

“Except the children?”

“Sha, Heda, as per your orders.”

“Thank you Indra.” She turns to regard Roan: “Who will you have represent Ice Nation in Polis, King Roan?”
“Lotrien has proven a satisfactory ambassador so far, I believe. I do not plan on replacing him.”

That is… interesting. She had expected Roan to launch a purge from the shadows in order to start with a clean slate: appoint new people and orchestrate his mother’s staunchest advisors’ disappearance. But then again Lotrien occupied a special position: both an essential part of Nia’s system yet at the same time far removed from her influence. (She’s either misjudged the man’s allegiance to Nia all along or his tact when playing political games. Either way, Lotrien is someone to watch out for.)

She’s about to put an end to their meeting when Roan speaks up again, his eyes falling for a brief moment on the half-eaten apple still in her hand.

“If I may, Heda. It has come to my attention that there could have been a few… – I believe the phrase is “bad apples” – among my mother’s aides…”

About to bite into a new slice, Lexa immediately halts her movements, straightens her spine and listens intently. Where is he going with this?

“Tradition would have me… put these problematic members to sleep.”

His eyes are boring into hers, two calculating slits. He’s waiting, she knows, for a sign, something – anything – betraying her thoughts. She doesn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Indeed” she replies, her tongue hitting her teeth sharply. “Tradition would however then have me put a certain number of… similar elements operating in Trikru territory to rest, in response” she directs cautiously.

A tense silence follows. She can see from the corner of her eye Titus, silently looking from one to the other. Roan doesn’t seem ready to stick his neck out, so she takes it upon herself.

“Maybe some bad apples from both sides deserve to be salvaged and… exchanged. In the spirit of renewed friendship between Trikru and Ice Nation” she offers.

It’s a dangerous gamble. He now knows where she stands. In fact, he could decide to send a couple
more heads her way instead. And as unreadable as she endeavours to be, so is he.

“Indeed” he finally acquiesces. “In the spirit of renewed friendship.”

---

“And so…. this is what exactly, a dried up fountain? A really ugly piece of art?” Raven throws drily but intrigued to the group.

They’re at the Eastern entrance of Polis’ main square, in the middle of which Lexa’s tower reaches up to the sky. She’s taken her friends out to… “sightsee” in the Trikru capital and Raven’s been insufferable, wanting to know the names of each place and item. Clarke even had to drag the enthusiastic mechanic out of someone’s house, where she had invited herself out of curiosity (turns out Trikru don’t take kindly to people barging in without being invited to).

The blonde is surprised to realize she never paid attention to the translucent shape off to the side. The closer they draw, the stranger it looks. A deformed pile of opaque looking glass twice her height and so thick it’s become one with the wall behind it (considering how shaky the house looks, it’s difficult to know whether it supports the sculpture or whether it’s the other way around).

Damian dares a step forward and extends his hand, touching the surface. It’s not water but it does look indeed like a former fountain, its bumps and curves smoothed down by time. She slowly makes her way around it. Here and there, tall candles are balancing precariously, flames valiantly crackling in the air or extinguished wicks glowing an angry red.

“This used to be a meeting point for the families who lost a loved one to the Mountain.” Roan’s gravelly voice comes from behind, drawing closer. He stops next to her, his eyes traveling up the curious construction. “They would come here and light a candle. One candle for each disappeared. People believed that as long as the wick would stay lit, their captured family member would stay alive. They’d come back as often as needed, to keep the flame burning and when the time had come, replace the candle with a new one. With time, more and more people started gathering and the melted wax became the basis for this… shrine if you will. Last time I visited Polis there were thousands of candles and a silent crowd watching them burn away the night. Quite a sight for the young traveller I was, back then.”

Clarke sneaks a glance towards the warrior – King now; she corrects herself – who continues to surprise her. Conversations can sometimes be so stilted with him that she’ll agonise over his every word and posture for days afterwards, frustrated. And then they’ll suddenly find themselves sharing a moment of genuine honesty, like right now. That’s it: Roan gives her whiplash and she doesn’t like
it. Especially because she’s no closer to figuring him out than she was when they first met. (She still
doesn’t know what led to his banishment in the first place, for Christ’s sake!)

She wants to retort: “Was that before or after you tried to kidnap me?” but they have company and
she never told anybody of her early encounter with the Prince. So she remains quiet.

“Mhhmm, what about the wind and drafts out here? Seems to me this is a giant disaster waiting to
happen, leaving lit candles unattended like that” Raven asks, ever the scientist. Her friend must not
have seen her room in the Tower at night yet, for if it’s anything like Clarke’s, then it must be
**littered** with candles of all shapes and scents. Talk about a fire hazard.

“The candles are said to be of the best quality: they all come from the Commander’s private
collection. The tower’s aides keep watch and maintain the shrine at all times. As you can see, the
spot is well protected from bad weather and the piles of wax now constitute an effective rampart
protecting the new candles. There has, to my knowledge, never been any fire.”

The group remains silent for a beat, before Raven asks: “So what is it now? I mean, there’re still a
couple of lit candles here and there…”

Clarke thinks she knows the answer to that and can’t help remember Shabir. Her stomach clenches.
Did her generous host join the crowds of mourners in Polis? If so, does he still make the trip out here
from time to time, to keep the flame alive for his missing son?

“Some disappeared ones reunited with their families when the Mountain fell. He’s now fully turned
to Clarke, eyes trained on her. “But many did not. Their kin can still be seen lightning candles to this
day. The things we’ll believe to keep hope alive…” Roan trails off.

Raven shuffles towards Damian: “Hey pantherboy, you want to know how candles work?” she
murmurs to him.

Damian frowns but acquiesces in perfect English and Raven launches into a long explanation on the
chemical reaction called combustion. Clarke is surprised to notice Damian isn’t lost when the
mechanic mentions carbon dioxide. She tunes them out and turns back towards Roan, who is… still
watching her intently.

She looks back at him, wearily. The strange man smirks at her, his eyes as narrow as ever.
He breaks their staring contest: “I’m starting the journey back to my lands today, Wanheda. I left as an undesirable and return as a King. It was a pleasure seeing you again, in such good health.”

Ugh, veiled threat or genuine sentiment? Cryptic Roan is definitely her least favourite one of his moods. She wants to ask, about the sun and the moon. Wants to know if their chase has now come to an end or if it’ll have to start anew for the world to keep its balance. But she has more pressing matters on her list of topics to discuss with the Ice Nation.

“We didn’t talk about the Ice Nation refugees in Arkadia” she reminds him.

The King shrugs. “Lotrien remains in Polis and will continue to ensure Ice Nation concerns are given proper attention. I trust the two of you can settle these matters amongst yourselves.”

A struggling Aden cradling his broken wrist flashes before her eyes. “What will you and Lexa do about Ontari, Roan?” she asks the departing King, her voice dropping to a whisper, purposefully using his name and not his title.

He doesn’t reply, not immediately. Instead, the bastard turns way, throwing her a small aggravating wave. He stops before fully disappearing around the corner though, and whispers back, only for her to hear: “You would do well to remember your place Wanheda. Do not forget I know the name you whimper on cold nights.”

Damn it, now she’ll have to ask Lexa.

Strange though. He said “name”, singular, not plural. What could he possibly be referring to?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

―

“Just let me get this straight, you want me to set up the exact same trap I laid out last time?”

“Correct.”

“You’re sure you’d rather not just wing it and see where things take us? Wouldn’t it be more exciting
if we went for a completely new game? What’s the fun in rehashing an old one?”

As she’s come to notice as of late, Lexa understands around a third of the words and expressions Clarke uses. “Winging it” for example has probably very little to do with a bird and “see where things take us” doesn’t seem to hold the same double-entendre as when husked by Costia. As to “rehashing”,… she’s drawing a blank.

“No, I would rather try and find a way to evade the scheme you resorted to.” She thinks she’s already found it: by simply not taking the bait in the first place, but she needs to verify how it all plays out. She wants to be sure.

They’ve been civil with each other. Were she in a particularly good mood, she’d probably even go as far as to say that things have been palmost... pleasant with the Sky Leader as of late, something she can’t claim about any of her meetings with the ambassadors from the other clans. Maybe she should introduce all of them to chess? She can already guess Kieran’s defensive and Djaïm’s destructively aggressive styles.

“You do know it’s an unbeatable trap, Lexa.”

“No trap is unbeatable, Clarke.”

“Well, this one is.”

She purses her lips and motions to the board. “We shall see.”

Clarke shakes her head but seems to have given up on fighting her and is now contemplating her next move, pushing her hair back to see the board better. She realises she’s never seen the blonde’s hair so long. And the girl is quite visibly struggling with keeping it from falling into her face. She tries to imagine what Clarke would look like with braids. The notion is… appealing. Maybe she could ask one of the younger aides still in training to give Clarke’s hairdo a go?

“What will you do about Ontari?”

She frowns, averting her gaze from the blonde’s rebellious curls. “What do you mean?”
“I saw Aden. He’s pushing himself way too hard in order to be ready for – and I quote – “whenever Ontari comes to challenge Heda’s rule.” Did you discuss the matter with Roan at least? Where is the girl hiding?”

Oh. That.

She knows about Aden, made sure to send him her best healer for his broken wrist. Even considered for a split second telling the Natblida the truth. Unfortunately, she had had to dismiss the idea immediately: reassuring them in any way would mean revealing she had Ontari killed and they can’t have that. Not because she’s afraid of strife within her own ranks (the very few Trikru aware of the girl’s existence would without a doubt rejoice). But because it would put Roan in too delicate a situation with his own clan. Questions would inevitably arise over his potential involvement: his people wouldn’t forgive him killing one of their own, however much of a threat to peace Nia’s pawn represented.

It’s a secret for her to carry (one of so many). Well, with Costia’s unwavering and Titus’ silent support. Definitely not a secret for Skaikru’s ears.

“Roan and I will have to see what to do about the girl” she replies as vaguely as possible.

“You can’t keep such a threat looming in the shadows, Lexa.”

The brunette bristles. If she wanted a second Titus in her life – someone constantly telling her what to do – she’d have replaced Gustus with Indra, instead of taking the almost mute Wulan as her personal bodyguard. She knows it’s unfair to the blonde, considering she’s operating with only part of the information. But still.

“I am aware of the danger she represents, Clarke. I will handle it” she replies placatingly.

“How?”

Pleasant no more.

“You will have to trust me to do what must be done and we shall leave it at that.”
She knows the blonde’s unhappy with her response, but is smart enough not to push. Clarke will have to learn to stick to her own business anyway, might as well learn to do so now.

“And this is a special experience because…” Clarke leaves the sentence hanging, trying to see through the thick humid fog obscuring the room. They appear to have entered a large and bright chamber, light filtering down copiously from the ceiling and reflecting off the tiles adorning the walls and floor.

“Hey, hands off…! Clarke, that woman just tried to yank my shorts down! I said hands OFF” Raven shrieks, battling with a relatively large woman who looks in her fifties and is energetically trying… indeed… to get the poor girl’s underwear off.

Costia chuckles. “She is only doing her job, Rayven. Thalia has been working here for as long as I can remember and the baths are best enjoyed without any undergarments.” She turns to the woman in question and says something to her in Trigedasleng that Clarke can’t quite catch. The older woman shakes her head in disapproval but seems to give up on undressing Raven for the time being.

“Sorry, WHAT?! You didn’t say anything about THAT. There’s no way… I’m not… no… No way, Costia” Clarke exclaims, her hands instinctively moving to cover her body.

The Trikru woman laughs. Laughs. And laughs some more. Head thrown back, smile up to her ears, hair shaking with the movement, it’s this full laugh Clarke’s only heard a very few select times. A laugh she wouldn’t mind hearing more often, if she’s completely honest.

“I said you’re not “supposed to”, Clarke, but we will of course not force you to undress…” she throws easily with a hint of cheek. And on that note, Costia turns away and proceeds to… take her top bindings off while crossing the room.

Well, if all her blood hadn’t already rushed to her head in the room’s moist heat, it sure is now. Clarke has a hard time to process that Costia – her friend she needs to remind herself – is now walking, topless, away from them, quickly swallowed up by the opaque mist. Her eyes are absolutely and helplessly glued to the warrior’s retreating form.

Fuck she needs to get laid.
Now that she thinks about it, it’s true most of the women around them are indeed in an advanced state of undress. It’s… mind-boggling to discover Polis’ women, of all ages and shapes – women she’s politely interacted with in town, women she’s seen hurrying about in the Tower and women she doesn’t know from Adam – lounging about, only half covered by wet pieces of cloth (leaving nothing to the imagination). So far removed from the usual adjectives she would use to describe them. Skins of all colours, hair of all types and bodies of all shapes contrasting with the room’s brightness. It’s quite a sight to behold.

She’s abruptly shaken out of her stupor when the same woman – Thalia – who seems to have given up on Raven for now, shoves her face first against the wet tiles of the closest wall, forces her to spread her legs wider and proceeds to energetically scrub her from head to toe with a very raw piece of cloth and soapy scented water.

What the FUCK is happening. And where the fuck is COSTIA.

Clarke is so mortified she doesn’t even protest when the woman lowers her underwear to rub her ass. She’s just thankful her shorts are snapped back into place when she’s finished (with a rather hard slap of the old elastic still holding her underwear together: her wardrobe in that department is in dire need of a thorough overhaul).

The woman takes a step back, but before Clarke can attempt to escape, she’s splashed with ice cold water.

“Twis op” comes from behind her.

By the time she registers the words and takes an educated guess as to their meaning, she’s forcefully turned around, back to the wall. Thalia, who is now facing her, starts all over again, this time subjecting her front to her earlier rough treatment, same scratchy cloth in hand. Clarke’s brain is still trying to process the icy water of earlier, so nowhere near ready to catch up.

She’s never felt so… “Humiliated” is not the word. “Violated?” No, not really. “Man handled” would probably be more accurate. Yes: she’s never felt so man-handled in her life. Well, actually, she probably has, considering the way the guards would treat her up in the Ark or Roan’s kidnapping attempt the previous year… Yeah, she’s maybe being a little bit dramatic right now. But this Thalia woman is definitely no gentle caretaker, that’s for sure. Another bucket of freezing cold water later, leaving her drenched and shivering from head to toe (“cold, cold, COLD” plays on a loop in her head) and Clarke is finally let go. Whether her wounded and very wet pride is ever going to recover from this episode is doubtful.
Thalia now seems to be looking for something – someone – and as soon as she spots Raven, who’s trying to make herself as small and invisible as possible, hiding behind a large green plant in the room’s left corner, she charges in her direction.

“Oh hell no!” the mechanic exclaims before darting away, chased around by a very determined Thalia, pushing surprised women in the latter’s path and hopping onto any elevated item she can find to make her escape. (It’s a testament to how good of a support Raven’s new brace is, for Clarke doesn’t see her wince once at the exertion of such acrobatics.) But as agile as Raven may be, Thalia remains undeterred and Clarke has no doubt as to how this chase will end. She lets out a chuckle. (It would appear all her ego needed to set aside the unpleasantness of earlier was to see her friend in a similar predicament.) Her skin feels raw, as if an entire layer has been peeled off. And looks just as it feels: her arms and legs are one big angry red mark. Very appealing. Now she’s definitely never getting laid.

Good friend that she is, she leaves Raven to fend for herself and goes in search of the one responsible for this full-on assault in the first place (the one whose brilliant idea it had been to take them to the “renowned and popular Polis Baths”), careful not to slip along the way.

She steps into a secluded room where the air is so thick, Clarke at first has the impression she cannot breathe. She can’t tell whether she’s alone or not: an opaque fog clinging to her every pore hangs like heavy drapes all around her. She tries to take a couple of breaths but has this very disturbing sensation of too little air entering her lungs.

“Lie down, Clarke. You should not overextend yourself here. It takes time for your body to adjust to the change in temperature and humidity.”

Well, at least she’s found Costia. So, there’s that… She would of course have preferred for it to be in a place where one can breathe or see but hey, she’ll take it.

The blonde steps forward, rather blindly, arms outstretched. A hand gently closes around her wrist and tugs her forward. Her eyes are slowly adjusting to the steam and following what she guesses to be Costia’s lead, her knees finally hit a smooth and hot surface. She feels her way around it, it must be a similar make as he tiles under her feet. She slowly turns and tentatively sits down, only to jump back up again, yelping.

“Fuck that burns!” (She’s on her twentieth “fuck” of the day, a sure sign that Raven is back in her
life).

The Trikru woman chuckles and she can suddenly feel a humid cloth pushed into her hands. “You can sit or lie down on this” Costia explains.

Clarke does as she’s told, arranging the folded cloth and adjusting her back against the damp wall. She takes her right knee in her hand, trying to ease the tension in her neck and shoulders.

“What is this place?” Her lungs are still feeling the burn and worse, she has this scary feeling that no matter how many breaths she tries to take, she can’t quite catch up.

“The baths can be whatever you want them to be. For some it’s a space for socializing, as you saw in the hall. For others, it’s a site meant for rest and meditation. This room’s elevated temperature and humidity should help your skin remain firm and your muscles relax.”

Her words are accompanied by a new wave of steam hitting Clarke in the face and chest. She takes a couple of deep breaths. She can still not see anything in the room, apart from her own two feet and hands (and then only barely). But Costia’s not far, somewhere to her left. Yet, despite her presence, Clarke can’t exactly claim she’s completely relaxed.

“Why is it so hot in here, I can’t breathe properly” she complains, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. And it’s true, every gulp of scalding air leaves her lungs wanting more oxygen. Why anybody would subject themselves to this willingly is beyond her.

She hears a rustling behind her, the metallic sound of something being placed on the bench’s tiles and can suddenly feel Costia’s body close by. The girl leans over. Clarke sucks in her breath and squeezes her eyes shut. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. It’s too hot. There’s not enough air. And Costia’s way too close.

The first touch of an icy cloth dripping down her left shoulder is heaven.

“The heat is meant to soothe the body and mind. Focus on your breathing, remember?” the girl reminds her in a whisper.

Clarke nods, even though her companion can’t see her. The cloth continues it’s soothing journey downwards before reaching her wrist. The water’s freshness in this heat feels wonderful.
“Deep deep breaths that come from here instead of your chest.” A hand comes to rest over Clarke’s bellybutton.

Wow. That’s not too close anymore. That’s…

“And contract this upper part” Costia continues her instructions, while plunging the sponge in what must be a bowl and moving on to Clarke’s right shoulder.

And well, the blonde’s officially gone into sensory overdrive now, tingles running up and down her spine and arms.

Damn room. Damn oxygen. Damn celibacy.

Her eyes burn to try and discern the girl’s form: is she now completely naked or still just topless? Something coils inside her at the thought. Something heavy, in the pit of her belly.

Actually, you know what, she doesn’t want to know.

“You could have warned us” she starts.

“About?”

“All of this! The steam, the scrubbing, the… lack of privacy. This isn’t exactly what I pictured when you mentioned baths.”

“There is little pleasure to be found in the expected, Clarke. I promise you won’t want to leave once I’ve introduced you and Rayven to everything the place has to offer. Are you not enjoying yourself?” the girl retorts with no sign of sheepishness in her voice.

And well, Clarke can’t exactly claim she isn’t. She’s not quite enjoying herself per se (not by a long shot) but she’s also not “not enjoying herself” either, if that makes any sense. At least not anymore. The blonde grumbles.
“That’s it. Breathe in through your nose, using the back of your throat. And exhale with your mouth. Yes. Again. Slowly. Now, once you’ve inhaled, hold your breath for a short instant before you let go. Exactly, like that. Just continue for a while.”

Clarke focuses on taking slow and even breaths and following the cloth’s calming path. Costia’s other hand is still on her stomach. The heat, the touch, the skin… She’s going to pass out, there’s no way around it.

“I would recommend you lie down, Clarke.”

Sure. Except the simple thought of lying down while a semi-naked Costia continues with whatever this is, is a little bit too much for her right now.

She unwraps her cloth and does as she’s told. The firm and warm tiles against her back are surprisingly comfortable. She senses (more than sees) the Trikru retreating back to her former position, their physical proximity gone. And with it the cold water’s refreshing caress.

It leaves her feeling strangely… wanting.

“Do you come here often?” Clarke wants to know.

“We used to come here all the time when we were seconds. Now, not so much, but it remains a very special experience to me.”

She can see how this place could indeed appeal to young warriors in training, wishing to relax after a particularly gruelling sparring session.

“Octavia mentioned you were Indra’s second?” Clarke asks, curiosity piqued.

“Mhmh” the brown-eyed girl replies.

“Must have been quite the experience… Indra’s not particularly a piece of cake” she offers, trying
“Why would you compare Indra to cooked food?” comes back.

She shouldn’t. Really, really she shouldn’t, but she can’t help it. Clarke bursts into a happy laugh. And if it takes her a little bit too long to recover, well, it’s only well-deserved payback after the Trikru’s mockery earlier.

“It’s an expression. When something is a piece of cake, it means it’s super easy.”

“Ah. Your people have strange metaphors, Clarke.” After a beat, Costia continues: “Indra was the best mentor I could have possibly asked for.”

Clarke needles, too curious to let Costia evade her meaning. “She’s tough though. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure she’s a great fighter, but I’ve always seen her so… cold, or ruthless.”

She hears a small sigh behind her.

“Indra wasn’t always so… hard. She was strict, yes, but very human as well. She still is of course, deep down, it just takes her more time to warm up to new people these days.”

“What hardened her then?” Clarke pushes, aware Costia’s close to shutting this subject down.

“Indra’s son was killed at the battle for the desert. And after the fallout with her daughter… Well, the loss had an irreversible impact on her, as I imagine it would on anybody who goes through such a terrible ordeal.”

This sobers the blonde up immediately. She seriously needs to stop sticking her nose in other people’s business.

“Oh. I… I didn’t know.”

“Few people do. Indra is a very private person.”
“I don’t remember who but somebody told me a second, well, no, a pupil, needs to accomplish a feat of bravery to be chosen by the mentor of his choice. Did you do something for Indra to pick you?”

Costia chuckles at the question. “I haven’t thought back to that day in ages” she starts with obvious fondness in her voice. “Indra choosing me was… an accident, if you will. Not like Lexa and Anya for instance.”

Clarke wants to ask. She really really does. But she lets Costia continue, too afraid to ruin the moment.

“Indra’s battalion at the time came to the town where my father and I were attending a horse market. I think I may have told you about the yearly market the Horse Clan hosts?

“The Horse Clan are the Plain Riders, right? Djaïm’s people?”

“Sha. A particularly wild horse my father had set his eyes on, a beautiful young bay stallion, got loose and went on a rampage. He wreaked havoc in the whole market, destroying stalls left and right. The other animals started becoming nervous. Many of the sellers tried to get it back under control, but failed. I snuck up, threw a rope around it, jumped on its back and after a while managed to calm it down. My father was livid. I don’t think I had ever seen him so furious. Indra apparently witnessed it all and approached me afterwards.”

Clarke can picture the scene. A crowded market, the sudden chaos, a small fearless silhouette, all dark sun-kissed skin and wild curls, braving the wild animal.

“I don’t know much about horses. But isn’t Lexa’s a bay stallion too?”

Costia chuckles once again. “That’s correct, except it’s the same horse. I gifted it to her on her Ascension Day” she reveals.

Oh…

They fall into a long comfortable silence. After a while however, Costia nudges her elbow. “You should go, Clarke. In the adjacent room you’ll find a comfortable resting area with refreshments. It’s
very pleasant. After you’ve relaxed there a bit you can of course come back in here.”

“But you’re staying?”

“You’re new to this experience. It’s important you keep your stay in this heat short with long intervals in less aggressive atmospheres. I will come find you in a bit to show you the rest of the baths, don’t worry.”

The blonde wants to protest. She wants to stay and something tells her it’s not for the smoke or suffocating heat.

But the choice is taken from her when Raven appears on the threshold, hands waving in front of her, trying to dissipate the fog and a scowl on her face: “Griff, you in there?! I swear to god, you pathetic excuse for a friend, if you’re in there…”

---

She dreams of damp rooms and secret touches that night, her limbs deliciously heavy.

“Clarke, would you be free to talk?” the carefully worded question comes from a slightly sheepish-looking Lincoln. A strange sight, to say the least.

“Sure” she replies, intrigued and follows him away, to the left.

He slowly leads them to what she’s now come to know as a more quiet part of town. They make a right turn, then a left, followed by a right again, and Clarke is now officially lost. She doesn’t think she’s delved that deep into Polis before: not with Ryder and certainly not on her own.

They suddenly find themselves in front of a tiny open shop - a tavern, in fact and Lincoln turns back to her. ‘I thought we could speak over refreshments’ he offers, hopeful.
She nods and he gestures for a large woman to bring them two tankards of something she doesn’t quite get in Trigedasleng. She sits down at a tall bar table placed outside and breathes in the day’s crisp night air.

Lincoln’s request to split from the others is admittedly a surprise, but a nice one. With Octavia stuck back in Ton DC in intensive training as Indra’s second – and from what she’s heard doing very well – she’s never spent so much time with the man on his own.

Opportunities to bond with the kind warrior, who’s become such an essential fixture in one of her closest friends’ life, had been few and far between in Arkadia before the blonde’s departure. Kane and Miller Senior had heavily solicited both him and Costia to help develop Arkadia’s defensive plans. And the rest of the time, Lincoln had taken over training a focused Octavia, more determined than ever to get back into Indra’s good graces. In pure Trikru tradition, Octavia had decided to go for desperate measures and defeated in the course of a single night 50 of Indra’s men to surprise the stunned General in her quarters that night (and the legend goes: in her nightgown). It seems the young Skaikru’s move had paid off in the end, since Indra had immediately taken her back under her wing. Clarke could not be any prouder.

She wonders when Lincoln got to discover little gems like this tiny joint in the capital. Then again, there are many things she doesn’t know about him – too much in fact, considering everything they’ve been through together. She needs to make more of an effort in the future, which reminds her of a similar resolution concerning Damian. One thing’s for certain though: Lincoln appears… nervous. Ill at ease.

She tentatively reaches out and puts a calming hand on his arm: “Lincoln, what is it?”

“I…” he starts, but stops.

She starts again: “Hey, it’s me, you can talk freely. I hope you know that.” She gives his arm another squeeze and that seems to break his hesitation.

“As you know” he starts, “Octavia and I have been… an item for more than a year and a half now. We train together. We live together. The connection we share has grown ever stronger.”

Clarke nods slowly. Where the hell could he possibly be going with this?
“I… In Trikru customs our union is accepted as such. Octavia is acknowledged as my partner in life. There is no need for additional… gestures. But earlier this month, your friends, Jasper and Monty seemed to hint at… a ritual in Skaikru culture. One that is… compulsory, otherwise life partners may be… frowned upon. I believe the term they used was to make “an honest woman” out of Octavia. I didn’t know who else to ask… I’m not sure I understand… Octavia is honest to a fault. It’s one of her many qualities I find myself drawn to…”

Clarke bursts into laughter, while Lincoln looks slowly more and more discomfited.

“Did the two Skaikru boys lie to me?” he asks, a touch of defensiveness lacing his voice.

“No, well, yes, I mean, kind of” Clarke explains. “They didn’t lie in the sense that the expression definitely does exist. It refers to marriage, a… an act, let’s say, or an institution. I’m not explaining this properly. Consider marriage a contract, ok? One that formalizes a couple’s union and is most often sealed through a ceremony. But… first of all, you need to know that it’s absolutely not compulsory. Not all couples get married. And second of all, well, to be honest Lincoln, I don’t think that that’s Octavia’s style.”

He frowns, so Clarke elaborates further: “See, historically and I really mean way back when, marriage was most of the time not consensual: for most women and many of the men involved it was a decision taken by others, their parents for instance.”

His frown deepens.

“As a contract signed between two parties, it could be used as a strategic move: for families to forge new alliances for example or to pool their resources together. All that slowly changed. In the modern world destroyed all those years ago, from what I understand, you had marriages contracted for strategic reasons (be they political, legal or economic), religious marriages, etc etc.”

Lincoln looks to be deep in thought: “And for Skaikru, in the sky?”

“Marriage survived in the Ark but only in its symbolic and administrative form. Couples were free to choose their partner.”

“What exactly does the ceremony you spoke of entail?” he wants to know.
“There again, things really changed over time and you have to keep in mind that customs varied widely from one culture to the other. In the part of the world I know of, men were expected to ask for the woman’s hand in marriage – that’s an expression by the way, not to be taken literally – by bending down on one knee, offering her a ring and asking her to marry them. The ring was used as a symbol of unity and longevity. If the woman agreed, then there could be a ceremony or party, whatever you’d like to do. But you can see how heteronormative the whole thing is.”

“Hetero...?”

“Oh, right sorry. Well: hetero refers to couples formed by a man and a woman. The history of marriage was in many cultures very much linked to that... model.”

She can see Lincoln wants more details on the rites still observed by her people, so she volunteers: “In the Ark, we kept the whole spiel about the proposal with one major change: the ring. Every single piece of metal and belonging on board was extremely precious and rationed, so many had to do away with the tradition of exchanging rings altogether, while a lucky few recycled the rings of their grandparents. And as I said, there’s no religious ceremony, a simple civil one where we exchange vows, or promises if you prefer.”

Lincoln stands back, still looking slightly confused: “Why do anything at all?”

“Well, in many cultures it celebrated this alliance between two families, right? But also the moment the daughter was leaving the family home to move in with her husband and symbolically, the continuation of the bloodline. Because let’s face it, marriage was also about the couple having children. Up in the Ark, life was so ruled by guidelines and regulations, we had to formalize two adults coming together, simply because they would be entitled to have one child and receive common living quarters.”

“Did all adult couples on the Ark marry?” he prods.

“Well, yes, but again, it’s linked to how confined our living situation was up in space. There was no way for a young couple to simply decide to go build a home somewhere, you know? Every single speck of space, every single element of our lives was under scrutiny. As an adult, you had two options: remain single or marry. Marriage became an obligation for... let’s call it... logistical reasons.”

She remembers the working group Kane had established to discuss customs earlier on in the year: “Did you follow at all the discussions in Arkadia about couples, families and living together?”
Lincoln shakes his head no.

She tries to recall the decisions that had been shared with them: “I don’t remember who was in charge of it, but I know Bryan sat in on it and if I’m not mistaken, they decided to make marriage – a private ceremony between two adults – optional for couples wishing to do so, but with no official implications from a legal perspective or for their day to day and access to resources.”

“And you believe Octavia does not wish to follow this custom?” he looks at her, the frown still there.

“Well, can I be completely honest, Lincoln?” she starts and continues when he nods: “The symbol of the ceremony, of the rings, of professing your love and intention to seal your fates to one another in front of friends and family, is definitely still strong among my people. But in addition to marriage being an option - so not compulsory - the whole thing is very old-fashioned and basically the vestige of patriarchal societies where a woman’s fate was decided upon by men. There are so many aspects about it that just do not fit our world anymore. For instance, most would expect you to go talk with Octavia’s father – since she doesn’t have one, I guess it would be Bellamy – stating your intentions and asking for his approval or authorization. Some still follow these, arguing that it’s about upholding tradition. Considering how headstrong Octavia is, I don’t really see her being into any of this at all.”

She doesn’t miss the grimace on Lincoln’s face at the mention of the girl’s brother and shares a friendly look with him before continuing: “Then there’s the fact that, well, she has a rather… tumultuous relationship with Skaikru customs, period. And concerning marriage more specifically, since it’s because of those very Skaikru rules on marriage and what one couple is allowed and is not allowed to do that Octavia had to grow up hidden from the world. I can see her being much more enthusiastic about Trikru customs…”

Lincoln looks down at that: ‘There is no… equivalent though.”

“Nothing at all about courtship or starting a life together?” Clarke wants to clarify, surprised. She’s learnt about so many Trikru rituals about their lives as warriors and death, surely they would have some to celebrate the forming of new families…

He shakes his head again. “We have some around childbirth, but no, nothing that could apply to Octavia and I. We… As you know, we do not have religions.”

She can sense the concept is still a hard one to grasp for him by the way the word rolls uneasily off
his tongue.

“And we do not deal with private matters collectively. My partnership with Octavia is mine and mine alone. Or rather ours. There is no need to formalize as you said, or officialise it.”

There’s a lull in the conversation. The small square is slowly filling up with men and women of all ages standing and sitting all around while drinking the same brew Lincoln had ordered for the two of them. The sting of fermentation and hops with the heady and overpowering perfume of honey. It’s strong. (Not as strong as Jasper and Monty’s concoctions, but strong enough she’ll stop at 2 and will still need her drinking partner’s help to get back to the tower.) The atmosphere is relaxed and she’s discovered that more often than not, the curious or awed glances their fellow patrons send their way are as much addressed to Lincoln as her.

“Octavia knows how I feel about her” Lincoln breaks the silence. It’s not a question, more a statement. His tone is firm and Clarke experiences the smallest twinge of envy, at having somebody so entirely transparent and sure of their feelings.

“Is marriage something you will do?” he wants to know after a little while.

And fuck if that’s not an unwanted reminder that she doesn’t have what Lincoln and Octavia have. She’s totally fine with being single. Not just fine: she relishes the independence. But she could do with a little bit more action in the bedroom, if she’s completely honest. She gives a small laugh: “Ugh, I’d have to find the person first, you know?”

Lincoln reaches out to grip her shoulder and looks her in the eye: “You will, Clarke kom Skaikru. I’m certain of it.”

Her eyes avoid his and land on the table. This conversation has now officially veered into very weird territory.

“Or not, you know. It’s ok as well to be alone. Maybe it’s what I need, what I was made for…” she trails off. And beyond the fact that she still needs to get comfortable in her own skin, still needs to find a way to bury all the names and faces, she does believe it to some extent.

The look he gives her at that is one of such open empathy and sorrow she instantly regrets bringing her eyes back up to meet his.
“We may not have ceremonies to celebrate the joining of two souls, Clarke, but we strongly believe that there is a soul out there meant for each and every one of us” he explains. He looks so sure, so confident.

She wishes she could feel the same…

“So”, she starts, “how did you find the maps the little ones drew of Polis?”

Clarke had diligently brought them to the Commander at the end of her session, only to be told by a smug Titus with dripping disdain, that “Heda was too busy to receive the Skaikru envoy.” (She had forced herself to stop calling him Baldy, too afraid of slipping and using it in public.) So she had left them for Lexa to peruse and not heard from them since.

Lexa is currently sitting opposite her, a small line forming between her brows. She’s leaning so far out over the chess board she’s on the edge of her seat (it’s only a question of time before she slides down, really), lips thin and eyes flitting from piece to piece.

“Mhhh”

It’s a rare sight. It feels almost… intimate, seeing Lexa like this, her guard down, so concentrated she’s become oblivious to the world around her. Clarke referring to the Natblida as “the little ones” never fails to get Titus going in a flash (“you’re talking about Heda’s heirs, the future of the coalition – of humanity, Wanheda; show some respect”) and usually earns her a little disapproving (she thinks secretly amused) shake of the head from the Commander. But they’re alone today and Lexa is clearly so focused on trying to get out of Wells’ trap that she’s lost to the living.

(It’s the 5th time this week they’re replaying their first game – at Lexa’s request – and the Commander is no closer to finding a way out, despite earlier assurances to the contrary. Clarke doesn’t mind though, it’s provided her with ample time to catalogue the girl’s wide array of cute minute expressions – not that Clarke finds her cute per se, now that would be quite a tangled mess. Just... You know. Not displeasing to the eye.)

It’s a contradiction and surprise: how someone with such sharp instincts can also lose themselves so completely. How someone usually so serious can find what is essentially a game so captivating.
Clarke lets out a small chuckle.

The sound jostles Lexa out of her trance. She furrows her brow, looking up. “Chit?” she starts before she squares her shoulder back and corrects herself: “I apologize Clarke, did you say something?”

The blonde shakes her head with a small smile, unable to hold the Commander’s gaze. “The maps, did you find the time to take a look at them? We didn’t talk about it during the last couple of games” she repeats.

“Oh. You are correct. The work is satisfactory; you have my heartfelt gratitude for agreeing to teach them this rare skill. I am convinced they will find it very useful.”

“But…” she fishes, because she can feel one coming from a mile away.

Lexa frowns in thought, relaxing back into her seat and crossing her fingers in her lap. “I found them… missing key information at times.”

Forget her earlier thoughts; the Commander’s no longer cute. Clarke’s immediately on the defensive (after all, you do not criticize the work of her little ducklings – and essentially her own – like that).

“Such as?”

Lexa’s clearly sensed the change in her mood and turns cautious. “Well, were I a general, a map would need to show me functioning and safe water points my men can stop at, or particularly tall trees standing out, on which to position sentries. Do not mistake me, their maps are good in rendering detail – well, except for Aden’s for obvious reasons – but they could feature more vital information for armies or scouts on the move.”

She has a point and Clarke had planned on delving more into that aspect once they had successfully covered the basics of map drawing anyway. So they’re essentially on the same page. (Though it’s a little bit unfair to ask such a level of knowledge from the little ones, when they’re kept cooped up inside Polis most of the time.)

She remembers the children in Sinchuk re-enacting the battle of the Mountain.
“Maybe we could organize a practical exercise?”

She knows she’s piqued Lexa’s interest by the way her body is now completely facing her, away from the board. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well, we could send them on a sort of treasure hunt. You know, first I could take them out to draw a map of an area not too far away from here, without telling them its purpose and then a day or two later, we could return to the same area, split them into say two teams, each in control of a portion of the territory and with the same mission: taking over the other’s. The idea being that after such a role play, they would be better able to differentiate between an essential piece of information and a superfluous one. What do you think?”

“When would one side be declared the victor?”

“I don’t know, we can think of something. Like an item that they need to steal or a specific stronghold deep in the other’s territory that they would need to seize? Depends whether you want them to focus more on offense or defence…”

Lexa cocks her head to the side in thought. “I will discuss the idea with Titus. It is, as you well know, not customary to let the Natblida venture outside of the capital’s bounds. Especially for the younger ones. We would have to take great pains to ensure their safety.”

“Well, we could scout out the area beforehand. Make sure it’s completely safe. And each team could have an adult supervisor, who wouldn’t help them, just observe. Or even more, if you think one’s not enough.”

“I have been contemplating myself a similar type of outing with them. Maybe I could accompany one of the groups…”

By the little spark in the brunette’s eyes, Clarke can tell she’s excited by the prospect but won’t admit as much.

“While we’re on the topic, Iro seems to be under the impression that Lincoln kom Trikru will be joining your next drawing lesson…”
Oops. Maybe she should have asked Lexa for permission or something?

“Oh. Right, yes. It was just an idea. I thought Lincoln could show them the maps he drew of the reaper tunnels leading into the Mountain. You know, to show how instrumental a detailed map can be in winning a war. But, look, I haven’t approached him yet, it was just a thought…”

Lexa nods. “It is… an interesting initiative. I will allow it, but come to me first, next time, Clarke.”

Properly chastised, the blonde choses to concentrate on the board. Lexa thinks she’s so clever, leaving her knight open to attack, but Clarke’s not an idiot and spotted the trap ready.

“May I suggest Lincoln’s intervention take place during a general discussion of the Mountain’s fall instead of at one of your more practical outings? I am certain hearing your account on what happened after…”

“After your betrayal” Clarke fills in for her. She’s surprised to notice it has less bite to it than she would have thought.

“After the Trikru retreat, would without a doubt be informative for the Natblida” Lexa continues unperturbed.

“Will you speak and explain why you left us there?” the blonde asks, more tired sadness than raging resentment.

“I could.”

Clarke isn’t sure she’s ready for that though: listening politely to Lexa’s rationale for leaving and worst of all explaining to a group of ten your olds how she came to kill almost 400 people in one night. It’s… too… They’re too pure. She’s too tainted. Dirty.

It’s too soon.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------
“Lincoln, have you seen Damian?” she asks, with a slight edge to her voice.

The Trikru had promised them a unique adventure. And true to his word, the evening has indeed turned out full of surprises, for he has taken them to the famous Polis nightmarket Costia had mentioned in passing.

Organized once a month and occupying the entire square at the foot of Lexa’s tower, the market presents like an intricate maze of stalls, stages and tiny eateries. Unlike the daily fruits and vegetables or meat and fish markets each taking place on different days of the week and in different parts of town, the nightmarket appears to be an improbable mix of vendors, hawkers and performers, with a pinch of crazies added into the mix. Case in point: the man Lincoln just steered them away from mid-rant (something about a City of Light? she’s not sure), muttering about “Kerua being at it again”. That “Kerua” sure looks like quite the character.

After hopping about Polis like a young fox on mushrooms these past couple of days (dragging every night an ever-growing pile of freshly bartered junk back to her room, which is slowly turning into Ali Baba’s cave), Raven can now be seen engaging quite heatedly with the owner of a… rusty and large circular box. The man cracks the lid open, Raven takes a peek and Clarke can feel the excitement bubbling inside the mechanic when she lifts her head back up. The two shake on it and Raven returns to their side, wide grin flickering in the torch lights.

The only limit to her friend’s enthusiasm so far has been her very limited purchasing power. Because as it turns out, Skaikru’s pockets are not deep. Or at least not for what tends to catch Raven’s eye. (“They’re not visionaries, Clarke. Completely unable to project themselves into the future, I tell you” her friend had ranted to the blonde, frustration lacing her voice.) Lincoln on the other hand had received quite the generous budget from Kane to gather second hand clothes, fabric (linen and wool) and animal skins in exchange of brick orders.

“Are you not bringing that box home? It looked like you were bargaining with its owner” Clarke wants to know.

“We did. But he’ll only deliver the box once he gets my side of the trade. Oh, actually, this concerns you too, Griff. I promised him a portrait. Like the one you have in your room, you know. That charcoal thing of Lexa.”

Clarke chokes. On nothing. All air leaving her lungs and her face turning an ever-growing shade of red. “You what?” she wheezes out, flabbergasted.
"You know, that drawing you did of Commander sleepyface!"

Clarke throws a furtive look around them, carefully avoiding Lincoln’s gaze. She had indeed taken the liberty to draw the Commander, when during one of their chess sessions the brunette had dozed off. First rigid as ever, sleep had slowly forced the girl’s muscles to relax, until she had folded in on herself, progressively leaning ever more dangerously towards the ground. Clarke had been extra careful, making sure the Commander wouldn’t know she was drawing her and hiding the drawing once back in her room, so no snoopy aide would stumble across it.

When – and how – the fuck had Raven seen it?

Her eyes finally meet Lincoln’s but if anything, the Trikru looks merely… intrigued.

“How… What... Why would you commit to something like that?"

“You said yourself you wanted to get more practice in. This way, you get the desired practice with interesting subjects and I don’t have to sit still for hours posing for you, when my hands could be doing proper magic instead!”

Clarke narrows her eyes. “Subjects? As in plural?”

“… Uh… What?”

Clarke has been around Raven for long enough to know when the mechanic feigns nonchalance. And as things go, that is one very bad poker face.

“Raven” she starts, her tone a growled threat, “you said subjects. Subjects, with an s. I’m only going to ask you this once: what did you do?”

To her credit, Raven doesn’t really look chastised at all when she admits with a hesitant finger rubbing the back of her neck: “Look, I may have promised your skills as a personal portraitist a couple of times, but only in exchange for very very valuable items. Plus, I made sure every time it’d be people you’d find interesting to draw, you know, with little quirks or scars here and there. Not that that was hard to find, mind you, Grounders kind of perfected the “weathered” look, if you know what I mean. Anyway, no big deal, clear-cut win-win situation for all involved.”
What. The. Fuck.

And yet there’s something strange in Raven’s look. Something shifty. Clarke knows that look oh too well.

“What are you not telling me?” Her growl this time around is positively feral.

“Uh, well, there may or may not be one nude involved? I’m not 100% sure, we didn’t understand each other very well. But you guys can sort it out amongst yourselves, right? Great!” she claps her hand in exaggerated enthusiasm, “now that that’s sorted, how about we resume our little tour?”

Her friend motions to move away but Clarke grabs on to the lapel of her jacket in an iron grip.

She is livid.

“How many?”

Raven looks anything but at her.

Clarke grits her teeth, repeating her question: “Raven fucking Reyes: how many drawings did you agree to?”

“Around 5? Not more than 10 Clarke, I swear!”

Ugh. She’s run out of swearwords.

The blonde stomps away (it’s either that or things are guaranteed to turn an ugly shade of physical). She barely registers Raven’s shouted: “Oh, come on, Griff! How does the saying go again? It’s a small step for you but a big step for humanity? Not that I would know with my leg. Don’t go!”

Marching away though, as she quickly realises, is a very bad idea.
Why, you ask?

Because she quickly finds herself face to face with Damian, crouched down in a corner, a young girl with short spiky hair kneeling behind him and… is that a knife?

“Damian?”

The boy looks up at her quick approach. The girl however remains concentrated on whatever it is she’s doing. Clarke is relieved to realize she’s not holding a blade, as she had initially thought, but something else: an elongated stick of wood, she’s thrusting back and forth with precise rapid movements, rhythmically poking at… Damian’s naked back.

Clarke frowns. What is going on here?

She’s so focused on the strange object itself she doesn’t notice the white shape slowly blooming on the boy’s skin. But when she finally does, she takes a step back, alarmed.

“What… Damian, what is she doing to you?”

She reaches out to halt the girl’s movements but is stopped in her tracks by Damian, who grabs her wrist in a vice-like hold.

“I am getting…” He pauses, looking for the word. “Tattoo” he finishes, with a shy little smile that immediately morphs into a pained grimace (one that he tries to hide).

And well… Clarke was always ill equipped to deal with a second. But with a teenager? Now that’s a whole different ordeal! And it would appear that the young boy, whose forehead now reaches her chin, is hitting puberty swinging. What is one supposed to do in such a situation? (Oh God, must she have a “trouble down there” type of conversation with him too? The thought alone makes her cringe.)

She peruses his face quickly, trying to gauge whether he’s in his right mind or high on something, but his eyes are clear and focused.
She winces when she sneaks a peak at the boy’s exposed back and spots what she now recognizes as a needle fastened to the stalk the girl’s holding puncture his dark skin.

It’s surprising – positively so – to see Damian disposed to bare his chest so… publically (surrounded by Trikru). Something she’s sure would have been unfathomable before the hunt for the pauna. It fills her with pride and fear at the same time, for she’s unsure of the codes here in Polis. She sneaks a glance around them and is relieved to see that the market is so busy and the night so thick, people don’t take any notice of the two squatting figures.

The girl’s movements don’t waver, her incisions precise and delicate: up and down, back up again, right to left and back to the right again. She flips the needle and continues to work on the lines on the boy’s shoulder. Clarke leans over her a little bit more to look at the outline she’s started to inscribe into the boy’s skin.

Looking at the needle makes her queasy. And the medic in her shudders to think of all the hygiene and sterilization rules the girl is currently breaking.

She could interrupt them, insist Damian think it over more (then again who knows how long he’s been contemplating getting a bloody tattoo) or at least discuss it with her first. But she’s not a parent, not really: she’s a mentor. The boy’s always reminded her not to cross that line: he is his own self, can make his own decisions. Besides, the damage’s already done, the overall outline soon finished.

She throws one last look at Damian, whose face contorts in pain more often than not, and turns on her heel, slightly defeated, but mind made up.

She returns a couple of minutes later, with two steaming tankards of the honeyed concoction Lincoln introduced her to earlier in the week. She offers one to a surprised Damian, whose knuckles have turned an angry white and keeps the other for herself. If she’s going to spend her evening sitting there, following the girl’s progress and offering her second some measure of silent comfort, then she’s going to need it!

Clarke takes a large swig and swallows the delectable burn.

The outline is now almost complete and in the candlelight’s gleam, she recognizes the blooming shape from one of her Earth lessons back up in the Ark. Or… wait a minute. This actually looks like… one of her drawings.
Because **of course**.

She has to suppress the urge to roll her eyes and drain her mug right there when she notices the piece of paper in the girl’s lap.

“A panther, Damian? Really?”

“Not a panther. The panther!” he corrects, smug.

“Mind telling me why?” She knows. She does. But wants to hear the boy’s reasoning.

Damian struggles to keep his spine in place, so as not to disrupt the girl’s work, before responding. “For their strength and stealth. Lincoln says they can take on animals twice their size, Clarke.”

She supresses a secret smile. “They’re good swimmers as well, if I recall” she adds, sharing a small wink with him.

She knows it’s only half the story – if at all. She can vividly remember the first time the animal had been used to address the boy and feels ambivalent about him choosing it as some sort of “spirit” animal.

She wonders also what it says about him – about them – that he chose such a solitary creature.

Her artistic side can acknowledge the girl’s work is good. It’s clearly not her first time. Then again, she does seem to have a full booth set up, with several abstract designs to choose from on display; needles and stalks of different sizes and shapes stacked in a box; and a whole array of available inks in another. (She’ll have to take a closer look at those.)

The panther’s face is now finished, all gleaming canines and piercing gaze. Before going into shading – Clarke is amused to notice the parallels between the girl’s process and the one she’s taught the nightbloods in their drawing lessons – the tattoo artist looks up at her.
And fuck. Her almond-shaped eyes are this warm honey brown Clarke would recognize anywhere. The blonde takes the girl in: the pointy jut of her chin, her full cheeks and slim yet over-confident stature. These eyes.

We’re basically talking about a mini-Raven.

Of fucking course.

Oh Damian…

She lets out a loud sigh.

This is going to be a long night.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“\[\text{I hear your new second is proving quite… resourceful.}\]”

For half a second, Lexa can glimpse the fleeting shadow of a smile that could be described as nothing less than beaming on the general’s face. It disappears just as quickly. The pride shining in her eyes, however, remains.

“\[\text{Oktavia kom Skaikru has distinguished herself, both on and outside the battlefield. Her fierceness – and the cunning of an Ice Nation scout she forged a friendship with – were instrumental in the defeat of the bandits at the border.}\]”

“The name of that scout?”

“Athol.”

It doesn’t ring a bell. Then again, Lexa’s heard of so many young and promising scouts amongst the other clans, the names rarely stick. This one needs to though, because for Indra to praise somebody
from Ice Nation, then that person is not just a random somebody.

“What are your plans concerning the Skyling in training?”

“Her sword-wielding and horse-riding are satisfactory but the girl will need to work more on her skills with a bow and spear.”

“Her rise is remarkable, considering her people are still learning to walk this Earth…”

Lexa leaves the sentence hanging, pensive. She doesn’t add the second part, for she knows Indra holds Skaikru’s physical endurance in very low regard.

“She received guidance from Lincoln kom Trikru before joining my unit. It shows.”

“Do you trust her?”

She can see the woman is surprised by the direction this conversation is heading into. “I do, Heda. Octavia is loyal to a fault.”

She nods, still deep in thought. “Maybe so, but to whom?”

She can see Indra’s not particularly happy she’s chosen to push.

“The arrest of her brother has further alienated her from her people and consolidated her bond with Lincoln. In time, with Skaikru joining the coalition, I am confident she would come to pledge herself to its preservation.”

“Loyal to the coalition then, not to me.”

Indra swallows imperceptibly. “Oktavia still has much to learn about leadership, Heda. And as Trikru as her spirit may be, I fear part of her heart will always belong to her people.”
“Mhhh.” They share a silence, before Lexa announces: “I wish for her to learn the art of assassins. Teach her what you can and then, have her report to Polis to complete her apprenticeship.”

“A Skaikru, Heda?” Titus interrupts in disbelief. And Lexa knows that as revolting as the idea may be to him, he’s more upset about the fact that she didn’t consult him prior to taking this decision.

“Yes. If Indra is confident she’ll learn to dissociate her people’s interest from the coalition’s survival, then who better to protect it, should the need ever arise? As non-Trikru, she would never be suspected of any behind the scenes… “arrangements”.”

Titus doesn’t dare argue further, but she knows he’s disgruntled and will bring it up in private, sooner than later.

Indra’s remained quiet throughout and Lexa isn’t sure what the older woman is thinking. “As you wish, Heda.” The older woman inclines her head. “There is another matter I wanted to bring to your attention.”

“Speak.”

“Scouts from the Ice Nation unit that aided us in our fight against the bandits, speak of a… “shadow” roaming the wastelands between Trikru, Ice Nation and the Hill People.”

“You mean beyond Lake Audo?”

“Sha, Heda. Although, respectfully, Skaikru have taken to referring to it as Lake Arkadia these days.”

She grits her teeth. So rather ungratefully occupying her lands isn’t enough, they’ve now taken to rename them. Clarke will definitely be hearing her thoughts on this.

“What of it?”

“There is a strong possibility it is the one we have been hunting, Heda.”
“How sure are you?”

“The description matches.”

She nods. She needs to be careful about how to approach this.

“I shall discuss this with the Skaikru envoy.”

“With all due respect, Heda. We should eliminate this threat now, while it’s still within our reach.”

“I take note of your concerns, Indra. I shall let you know of our decision.” To make sure she hasn’t hurt the woman’s feelings, she adds: “I am very pleased with the developments that have taken place in TonDC under your leadership. Should you have a personal wish, I would be more than happy to grant it.”

She knows she’s succeeded when the woman puffs her chest out, chin high. “Serving you is my one and only pride, Heda.”

“The offer stands. Will you return for the pardon ceremony?”

The general nods, before striding out of the room, leaving her in the sole company of an unhappy Titus and a quiet Wulan.

Her counsel approaches her as soon as the large door swings shut: “You did not inform her of Gaia’s return by my side.”

She shrugs it off. The omission is intentional: her General had after all disowned her daughter when the young Trikru had fled Polis a couple of years prior.

“The subject is a delicate one, as you well know and I would rather Gaia be the one to approach her mother. I’ll broach it in private if she doesn’t. Do we know where the girl spent her time away?”
“She claims she travelled the world and was able to describe to me in accurate detail the lands of several of the other clans. Her loyalty to the flame remains pure, Heda, I am sure of it. About the Skygirl…”

“You disapprove, I’m aware.”

“I fear we’re giving a future enemy the very tools with which to hurt us. The tools with which to kill you, Heda.”

It would appear Titus hasn’t seen the shift yet, or if he has, then he hasn’t grasped its meaning. For Lexa’s less and less concerned with her own safety and is meticulously building a loyal base for the coalition instead. The coalition’s survival, that’s what matters. Clarke was wrong: it was never about what they deserve, rather always about what they can achieve. And now, without the Mountain, Lexa knows: longlasting peace is possible.

“Have faith, Titus. Training her ourselves will allow us to try and exert some measure of control over her and failing that, to know at least exactly what she is capable of, as well as her limits and weaknesses. Reintegrating Lincoln into Trikru should also provide some assurance as to Oktavia’s future allegiances, if their bond is as strong as Indra would have us believe.”

“Ok, Ok, I get it, you made your point. But you also have to see it from my people’s perspective, Lexa. The word “Audo” means nothing to them. You can’t fault us for wanting to associate our everyday landscapes with words that hold meaning in our eyes, especially after everything we’ve been through.”

Judging by the look of profound affront etched into Lexa’s features, this was clearly not the thing to say. (She’s almost cute when she’s frowning like that and Clarke’s hands unconsciously yearn for a pen to etch it into paper. There it is again: that bloody word. She doesn’t – can not – find the Commander “cute”. It’s just not… an option. Really not an option.)

“What your people have been through? I will not even honour this with a reply. Allow me though, to stress that however traumatic and intense Skaikru’s experience has been, it does not, in any way, erase or replace what previous inhabitants – my people – have experienced on these very same lands; and remind you in passing, that your settlement is and remains on Trikru territory. I can not and will not tolerate your people renaming Trikru landmarks, Clarke.”
“You can’t keep on reminding us left and right that we’re on leased land. We just escaped from borrowed time, Lexa, my people won’t accept to be kept on a leash!”

The Commander takes in a long breath before releasing the air through her nose.

“For peace, for our people to live together, we need to speak the same language, Clarke. Figuratively and literally. You need to know about the history of your settlement’s lands. There is a reason why the Lake is called “Audo” and the name itself ensures this very history is passed on to our offspring and future generations.”

Clarke’s growing increasingly agitated and kills one of Lexa’s bishops just out of spite. Probably a stupid move, but who cares. (Well, actually, she does or she should, since Lexa’s been getting closer and closer to winning as of late. And although Clarke never entertained any illusions as to her skills in the art of chess – courtesy of Wells beating her over and over again – she will be sad to see the days where she could gloat a little, in front of a decidedly disgruntled Commander, go.)

Instead of retaliating immediately though, Lexa sits back and crosses her hands in her lap, studying her, frown dissipating.

“I do not want to fight, Clarke. You know I am committed to guaranteeing Skaikru’s settlement is secure.”

Argh. This is decidedly a new development, one Clarke still has to adjust to. She’s used to them having rather heated confrontational exchanges, used to friendly smalltalk over chess and used to long silences. But this: Lexa looking so…open. Almost pained. Clarke deflates in an instant.

“So I’ll speak to Kane. We’ll explain it to our people. It’s… It’ll be ok. I think. We just have to present it the right way. Like I said, I get it, I do.”

“Thank you.”

There’s that line again. This is… charged. Intimate. But unlike previous times, when she would steal glimpses of the young Trikru leader on private occasions, this is Lexa taking her mask off in front of her.

And Clarke’s painfully aware she’s completely ill-equipped to deal with such moments and yet
slowly getting addicted to them.

She doesn’t know what possesses her to continue: “Costia taught me to swim in the lake.” The memory brings a small smile to her lips. “I guess she told you. She taught all three of us: Octavia, Raven and I. It was… Well, I was a disaster.” She chuckles, remembering her first couple of panicked attempts at floating.

She can see the brunette going through a whole range of emotions: there’s definitely surprise (so she didn’t know. Probably not something Costia had deemed worthy to share, the blonde muses, a little disappointed), barely concealed interest and something else. Something that prompts the Commander to look everywhere but at Clarke. And is that… a blush? No, the lighting must be playing tricks on her. Strange.

Lexa swallows before finally looking up. “And can you? Swim, now?”

“I’d say so, even if Octavia would probably disagree and Raven object to my style.” Her smile grows, reminiscing about the various practice sessions the Blake sibling had tricked her into, making it a point to dunk her at least once every time and with Raven continuously mocking Clarke’s rather “survivalist” swimming technique.

Lexa looks at her then with this glint, the corner of her eyes almost crinkling.

“I would be curious to see you in action.”

Now it’s definitely Clarke’s turn to blush, before clearing her throat, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Not sure my skills are quite worthy of the Commander’s attention yet.”

Lexa doesn’t reply. But the glint doesn’t leave her eyes.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“Stop fidgeting.”
“You stop fidgeting.”

“Wow, real mature, Griff, real mature. I have to move, how the fuck else am I supposed to cut your hair?”

“Raven, I swear, if you mess it up and I end up having to shave most of it off…”

“Well, if you continue shifting constantly like this, you probably will have to!” Raven gives a loud growl and pushes the blonde’s shoulders back in place.

Clarke finally settles into the chair, yet not without nervously twitching every time the scissors appear in her line of vision.

Her friend can’t help but throw in a little dig: “Awwww, scared the Commander won’t find you pretty anymore?”

“One: I have no idea what you’re talking about. Two: I don’t recall ever making my love life any of your business. And three: fuck you.”

“Wow, defensive much? Anyway, don’t think you have me fooled. You guys spend more time in that study room of hers, around the lamest excuse I’ve ever seen: a chess board – aka the most boring game in the world – than you did in her tent last year with a war to plan! How Costia’s not getting a little bit jealous is beyond me…”

That is Raven for you: too blunt for her own good.

Funnily enough, Clarke’s problem isn’t with the Commander these days. The two of them seem to have reached some level of understanding. One could even go as far as to describe the atmosphere during their latest chess sessions as downright friendly.

No. Her problem, is with the Commander’s lover. Because as terrified as the blonde is to admit it, after her fifth sex dream involving an all too familiar dark-skinned brunette, Clarke has had to come to the jarring conclusion that she may be attracted to the Trikru liaison. And by “maybe”, she means she’s 100% positive she is and 200% positive she has no idea how to deal with it.
It’s easy to understand: Costia is, as previously established, gorgeous. Add to that the fact that Clarke’s been spending an awful lot of time with the girl in various states of undress lately and that she hasn’t had sex in God knows how long (oh, she knows exactly how long, it’s just too depressing to mention): it all leads up quite naturally to her current predicament. But being able to explain it, doesn’t mean it’s still not a major fucking inconvenience. So that’s what she has to grapple with these days: a rational mindfuck. And she’s going to have to sort this all out sooner rather than later, if she wants to get any sleep in the coming days.

“Really, this again, Ray?” she deflects, before changing the subject entirely: “So, I had my first customer today…”

“Ugh, you’re still upset about that…”

“About you pimping me out as an artist without telling me?! Now, why on Earth would I be?”

Raven can’t help release a small chuckle. “You know, I always liked that expression “why on Earth”, it felt so absurdly funny to use it back in the Ark, and even though it’s now accurate, never fails to crack me up.”

Clarke’s rather unimpressed by her friend’s attempt at changing the subject. She cocks her head, arching her right eyebrow.

Raven clearly gets the message. With a small huff, she finally gives up her act: “How did it go?”

Now how to describe one of Clarke’s strangest experiences? The man in question, blacksmith during the day and trader at night, had sat still a total of 2 minutes, before starting to fidget under Clarke’s trained gaze. She had tried, in her rudimentary Trigedasleng, to put him at ease and make him talk. Not as straightforward as you’d think, considering she was yet again in the presence of a fine “Grounder silence” specimen. It’s uncanny, how such a massive person would flounder over being under scrutiny. Although she knows it had as much to do with being forced to pose, as with who she is – or rather what she represents: Wanheda.

The man’s reaction is no surprise, come to think of it. She’s had a couple of similar encounters with people in Polis: this awkward mix of genuine gratitude and reverent fear that reminds her of her first weeks in Sinchuk and never fails to leave her stomach roiling.
The first sketch had been a disaster and sensing her first “customer” about to bail, they had reached the following compromise: he would go about his day as any other in his atelier and Clarke would settle in a corner and draw him as best she could.

“It was super strange actually. You didn’t tell them it would be… me, did you? He was clearly startled when I showed up… I think this could be a problem with others too. It’s… I’m not… People recognise me. Not always, but often enough. And it’s not always…positive, you know. I think a lot are… scared, intimidated.”

She leaves out that the man had argued that if the brazen Skaikru brunette were a friend of Wanheda’s, then she could come and shop for free at his stall, anytime she’d like.

The various sketches now lie rolled up inside her bag. She’ll take a look at them tonight before offering the best one to him tomorrow. Or maybe Raven could bring it herself? But then again, she’d like to be present when he receives it…

“Shit, do you think he’ll want the wheel back?”

“What wheel?”

“The wheel we bartered over.”

“Oh… A wheel? What do you need a bloody wheel for? OUCH, what the fuck Ray!”

“I told you to stop moving, or I’ll end up cutting a piece of your ear off! And look at those little cute things, it’d be such a shame” her friend mocks, tugging playfully at one of her earlobes.

“Sorry, sorry! I don’t know about the wheel, I hope not. I guess we’ll know soon enough, once he sees the endresult.”

“Mhhh… I want you to know that your support to the cause is greatly appreciated and who knows, maybe it’ll even be generously compensated, Griff. Hopefully. One day. In the distant future. Preferably to be negotiated with the Commander or Kane directly though. I mean, I’m only my own little self, right, I can’t go around making promises…”
“Yeah, yeah, like I believe your lies” she replies good-naturedly, rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

Truth be told, Clarke enjoyed her day out and about, applying her skills to something a little bit more challenging than miniature nightbloods and cartoon representations of raccoons. (Raven however, doesn’t need to know that.)

Her father had been the one who had introduced her to drawing. He used to joke that it had been the only way they had found to get her to stay seated and concentrated for more than 5 minutes. And there’s something… incredibly intimate about drawing portraits. Strangely enough, sometimes more intimate than sewing someone’s guts closed.

“What do you think they’ll do with the pieces?” The question’s been on her mind, because as unfamiliar as Trikru culture may still be, its people don’t strike her as the type to hang portraits of themselves, up in their homes.

Raven shrugs. “How the hell should I know.”

“Think about it, have you ever seen a picture of someone? It just doesn’t seem like something they’d be into…”

“Beats me, Griff. Maybe it’s for promotional use?”

“But if that’s the case, then we’re talking about a completely different type of image…”

“Look who’s getting all excited!” Raven replies with a smile. “Maybe you should actually thank me for building up your clientele!”

“Like hell I do. You still owe me for this, Ray. **BIG**!”

“Speaking of which, you didn’t ask about Bellamy…”

The transition is rather abrupt and the atmosphere shifts instantly. It’s true. She hasn’t asked. She wants to know. But is apprehensive. Of what exactly, she’s not sure.
“I know. I…” She’s unsure how to explain. Probably doesn’t even need to: this is Raven after all, the only other person who could possibly understand how she feels. “What did he choose?” she whispers guardedly.

“He went with your suggestion. He’ll be serving his 10 years of community service in this village I can’t for the life of me recall the name of. I did as you instructed and warned this Shabir friend of yours that he’s coming? Bell and his escort left Arkadia shortly before we did. We didn’t really get any chance to… talk. But at least we know he’ll be safe and useful, plus not so far away… It’s better than nothing, right?”

Clarke lets out a sigh she wasn’t aware of holding and remains silent. It’s been ages since she last saw Bellamy and their conversation hadn’t exactly been a pleasant one. But she’s… happy’s not the right word. Relieved. Yes: she’s relieved at hearing the news.

“And Voilà!” her friend exclaims with flourish after a little while. “All done. I must say, that was a really great idea!”

“It was yours, Ray…”

“Exactly, a stroke of genius! Shake it out a little bit… Yeah, looking good, Griff! Downright fuckable, I’d say. Good to know I’ve got a career in hairdressing if this mechanic thing doesn’t work out.”

“You mean if there’s no future in wheel recycling and snail racing?” Clarke replies sarcastically.

Raven shoves her shoulder playfully. “No vision, Griff. People like you are what’s holding people like me back from realizing our full potential.”

“Do tell me more about that potential of yours, oh wise and strong zero-g mechanic! What magic have you cast on the radios’ range?”

“Sure, go ahead, make fun of me all you want. Bottom line is: I’ve got mad skills, and you know it. Those bloody radios are going to bend to my will sooner or later.”
“The question’s not whether I know about it Ray, but whether the Commander does… The radio network for Polis was one of the pre-requisites for our accession negotiations to start…”

“Yes, well blame your girlfriend’s tough negotiating skills, not me!” her friend replies with a frustrated huff, driving a hand through her hair. “I’m trying, ok. I really am. And I’m close, I can tell. Plus, I wouldn’t be too worried about the scary commander getting impatient: she hasn’t dropped by my workspace to ask about the radios once. I think we’re good. And if she does, maybe you can find something to distract her with…” she throws with a suggestive wiggling of her eyebrows.

The blonde’s come to cherish these moments of playful banter with Raven in Polis. Almost as much as her long arguments with Damian over him getting that tattoo (the panther is… big, as in really big); disappearing a little bit too often (Clarke suspects to spend time with the tattoo artist – good for him, at least he’s moving on from his unhealthy obsession for Raven); or pigheadedly refusing to go to the tailor and let Clarke have new clothes fitted for him.

All these rather simple and yet so special moments contribute to make this foreign town almost feel like… a second home.

Almost.

(Then there’s the moments she spends chuckling internally at the little frowns and excited grimaces popping out from under the Commander’s mask, in the privacy of Lexa’s study. Those moments… she doesn’t quite know how to describe them yet. But they matter somehow.)

(…And then there’re her dreams. But that’s another subject entirely. One she’d rather not think about too much.)

She shakes her head a little, from left to right. Passes a hand in her shortened locks and loops a curl around one of her fingers on the way down. It feels good.

She feels… lighter, maybe.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

She’s given a little shake. “Griff.”
No. No. No. No. No. She was having too nice a dream, the bed is warm and soft to perfection and there’s no way the night’s already over. She burrows her head further into the cushion.

Another shake. “Griff, come on.”

“Mhh…” Maybe some form of acknowledgement will make them go away?

Third shake. “Get up, you lazy blonde.”

It’s Raven, she’s pretty sure it’s Raven. Raven is a friend. A good friend. Raven can also go to hell. “Go away” she croaks out, muffled into the pillow.

“Trust me, I’d love to, but there’s somebody knocking on your door right now and since it’s your bloody room, something tells me you should be the one to go open it… Unless you want all of Polis to think you’re banging the irresistible mechanic who’s going to revolutionize their lives?”

What was she dreaming of? Oh, right. The lake. Strong arms helping her float, slowly letting go. This flat, soothing immensity all around, carrying her. Silence. Feeling weightless. Every fibre in her body intricately connected to the world and yet at the same time enjoying a unique introspective moment. The memory’s right there, within her grasp. All she needs is to plunge under again. Just for a little bit more. Just…

“For fuck’s sake” she hears grumbled, before the bed shifts and she registers the sound of somebody stomping away.

“Clarke, I… Oh. You’re not Clarke.”

The voice is familiar, there’s this unique clink of the “cl” she’s sure she’s heard before. Somewhere. Sometime. But recalling it would mean letting go of her dream and she’d much rather stay in the water for now. Just for a few more moments…

“Shit… Uh… I mean… Uh… Commander…”
“Rayvon kom Skaikru. My apologies for the late hour. I… was under the impression these were… Clarke’s quarters.”

“Oh, yeah, right. They are, they are. I’m just… She’s just… uh… well… Fuck, I’m way underdressed for this. I’m guessing this can’t wait, right? Ok. Stay here. Let me go get her. Just… don’t move.”

There’s shuffling, coming closer. A whispered “Clarke, get your ass out of bed, **now!**” The bed slightly dips down again on one side. And there’s definitely nothing gentle about the shake anymore.

“Ray…sleep” she mumbles.

“Clarke, you useless bedhead, the Commander is here.”

Wait…

What?

She jolts up in panic, eyes wide and lower half of her body still half-tangled in the bed sheets.

“What?”

“The freaking **Commander** is at your door” Raven repeats in a loud stage whisper, gesturing widely towards the half open door.

“Fuck. Shit. Did I oversleep? What time is it?”

“Nah, it’s the middle of the night.”

“**Fuck**” she mutters, in a mad dash to get to the door. Her brain may not necessarily be working at full capacity right now, but Lexa coming to her in the dead of night can only mean one thing: bad news.
It’s only natural that she would trip: her legs are after all an uncoordinated mess battling it out with the sheets (and the sheets are winning). Thankfully, Raven is there to catch her before her face gets painfully acquainted with the hard floor.

“Ugh, you’ve gotten heavy, Griff” her saviour grunts out, holing her up.

Clarke’s too focused on reaching the room’s entrance to feel offended and soldiers on, ignoring her friend’s worried “Griff, you might want to…”

“Lexa” she breathes out once she’s facing her visitor. “I mean, Heda” she corrects herself, when she notices the familiar silent tall figure flanking the girl.

This seems as good a time as any for Clarke to realize she’s in her sleeping clothes, which, ever since Raven started crashing in her bed at night, involves very short shorts and a low-cut skin-tight tank top (Raven’s a cuddler you see and well, it does get quite hot under the furs).

Great. Just… Great.

She’s probably never blushed this much in her life before. Ever. And the rush of blood to the head? Not a pleasant sensation when you’ve just stumbled out of bed.

“Clarke. I… Oh.”

Lexa stops. There’re a million thoughts running in Clarke’s head as to why on Earth the Commander of the 12 clans would be visiting her at such an hour. But Lexa just freaking stops.

The girl in question tilts her head to the side, her gaze fixed on a point slightly to Clarke’s right, level with her eyes. The blonde turns her head, following her line of sight, trying to understand, but there’s nothing there. What the hell is going on? In fact, on second thought, Lexa’s gaze seems fixed on her… ear? Or… her hair? Fuck. She’d rather not think about the state it’s in right now.

“Yes?” she asks pointedly, reluctant to bring the attention back on her. Sure, her curls may look like she just survived a hurricane (the parallel is rather fitting, considering how much Raven likes to toss and turn in her sleep) and she’s vastly underdressed, but there’s got to be more to this visit…
“You… Your hair. It’s different.”

What?

Silence.

**Awkward** silence.

**Really** awkward silence.

Is this really happening?

“It is…”

Lexa slowly nods, eyes still on what Clarke now understands is her new haircut. “Mhmh” is all that comes out of the Commander. More frantic nodding. “It’s shorter.”

“Yes…” Just-woken-up-Clarke? Not the most diplomatic of fellows. So she’s going to have to be **extra** careful about how she voices this: “You wanted to inform me of something…? Or discuss an urgent matter…? Did we receive news from Arkadia?”

Lexa looks almost fearfully at Clarke’s mane before swallowing once.

She doesn’t remember Raven doing such a bad job…In fact, it had looked quite alright when she had glanced into her mirror last night… “Lexa…”

The Commander finally seems to shake herself out of her strange trance. “Yes. Of course. I…” (one last hasty peek at her short locks) “I believe I have found a way to counter Wells’ trap” she finally reveals.

Wells’ what?
If Clarke hadn’t just been woken up in the middle of the night and roughly dragged out of bed, then she might have taken a moment to appreciate Lexa’s familiar use of Wells’ name, as if she herself had known the boy; or how far the two of them have come, for the girl to be paying her a visit in the middle of the night. But as it is, she was having a lovely dream (or she thinks she was, she can’t really remember), catching up on much-needed peaceful sleep and now she’s positively cranky. Really. Damn. Cranky.

To hell with Protocol. “Lex, why did you really come here?” she asks tiredly, passing a hand in her hair (discretely trying to pat it into some sort of shape). Because there’s no way chess could be the reason.

The Commander almost looks chastised and takes a visible gulp.

Surely… No… Clarke remains silent, her eyes narrowing.

“I. Well. It seemed – at the time – a development worthy of… an immediate visit. Looking back now, I can understand how it could seem rather… rash and uncouth of me to wake you in order to share this news. I apologize for the disturbance. And will let you… and Rayvon kom Skaikru… return to… sleep.”

God. So all of this… for that. Bloody chess. The tension that had started to gather in her shoulder blades seeps out of her at once, her anger evaporating at the sight of a contrite and blushing Lexa. She doesn’t even realize her left hand’s darted out and caught the departing girl’s wrist.

“Help me out here, because I can’t remember: exactly how many times did you announce you had found a way to block it this past week alone, only to be defeated time and again? Was it 9 or 10? I’m not sure” she throws in a teasing tone, unconsciously running her thumb slowly back and forth on the inside of Lexa’s palm.

Her visitor looks positively affronted by the comment but there’s relieved playfulness in her eyes when she retorts: “I’m afraid I fail to recall those instances you speak of. Besides, it does us no good to dwell on the past, Clarke. I assure you this time I have found a way to evade your friend’s clever trap.” She doesn’t withdraw her arm either.

“Uhu” she smiles. She turns her head, takes one last longing look at her bed (she can still feel its lingering warmth surrounding her tired limbs), where Raven’s snoring form can be seen sprawled across the mattress, before resigning herself to the fact that her night is well and truly over. And since
her day’s apparently decided to get a head start on her, she might as well try and catch up.

“Let me grab something to wear and I’ll be right with you. You can show me this exploit of yours.”

There’s surprise but something else as well in Lexa’s eyes – something that looks an awful lot like warmth – and Clarke gives a small shake of her head, refusing to acknowledge it.

Ah, it’s you” the brown-haired Skaikru mutters, when Lexa enters the small room she’s using as an atelier.

She had initially put the girl up in the tower’s biggest available chambers, thinking the artisan may need extra space to work, but after finding her tinkering with strange metal parts inside the kitchens for the third consecutive time (the brash Skaikru claiming her chambers were much too far removed from places with a steady food supply – “I have needs you know” being her exact words in an overly-familiar tone), Lexa had asked her aides to clean one of the smaller rooms adjacent to the kitchens and the Skaikru had immediately taken over the space.

The girl isn’t the most… diplomatic person, she’s come to discover. And despite Lexa’s recent efforts to establish some sort of rapport between them, she still has a long way to go, judging by the girl’s less than enthusiastic welcome every time she comes to visit.

She makes to leave, not particularly in the mood for passive aggressive displays of immaturity, when the girl interrupts her.

“Well, now that you’re here, you might as well stay. I’ve got a good feeling about this one. All I need now is to push this in place, here, press that thing there and… Here we go!”

The room falls into silence, both women leaning over the small metal box, where a small red button is now blinking, and straining to hear something.

Nothing.
She straightens back, slightly disappointed. She shouldn’t really be surprised: it is after all the fourth such false alarm by the Skaikru in just one week and Lexa is starting to wonder if Costia didn’t slightly oversell the girl’s potential. If she’s unable to deliver on Clarke’s promises, it could have a sizeable impact on the ambassadors’ willingness to collaborate with Skaikru.

She purses her lips conspicuously. “Mhh, it would appear you may still need some additional time for the messaging network. Not to worry, we are still within the agreed upon timeline. Have the guards find me when you’re successful.”

She’s about to take her leave and return to more pressing matters when suddenly, a crackling fills the room. And the strange unnatural sound seems to be coming from the black box.

Rayvon leans eagerly closer, her ear to it. More crackling. Nothing to be hysterical about: it’s actually a rather irritating sound, if you ask her.

A vice-like grip on her arm prevents her from attempting a second exit.

“Static” Rayvon explains, looking up at her. “It’s a good sign. It means it’s working.”

Now, she may not be an expert in old world “tech” as the artisan likes to refer to it, but even Lexa knows a working radio’s supposed to make more sound than this. Strange people, the whole lot. And the mechanic, she’s discovered, is probably one of the oddest of the bunch. Lexa had initially kept her distance, partly to give the girl the required space for her creative process, but considering… recent developments, she had made it a point to force interactions with her more often. (After all, if she is Clarke’s… companion, then it’s important Lexa get a read on her.) These moments however never fail to leave her with mixed feelings she can not quite put a finger on. She’s glad, of course. Clarke deserves somebody in her life and though a little bit strange, she has no doubt the girl possesses a brilliant mind. But. Well. Anyway.

Rayvon fiddles with a button and a steady voice suddenly resonates inside the room. She doesn’t recognize its owner but the person is speaking in clear Trigedasleng. Probably one of the chiefs from the villages already part of Skaikru’s network.

The craftswoman next to her can barely contain her excitement. “Holy shit, it worked! I can’t believe it, I’m a genius!” She jumps up, makes a movement forward, arms wide, as if about to attack her, stops midway, seems to think better of it and holds her hand up, looking at her expectantly.
Lexa looks right back with alarm. Clarke really chose an odd one.

Rayvon lets her hand fall from its strange salute and resumes her earlier position, ear close to the metal box. “What are they saying?”

She listens to the disembodied voice intently. “It appears to be a long list of... items” she replies, frowning.

In fact, from what she’s heard so far, it’s a rather long list of utterly frivolous items. The person is currently requesting tight fabric to prevent his stomach from wobbling too much when walking and a new pair of short see-through women’s undergarments for what he refers to as “a special occasion”.

This needs to stop. Now.

“Hand me the speaking device” she orders the Skygirl, who is thankfully smart enough to immediately do so, muttering something unintelligibly about a “handset”.

Once she’s got a good hold on it, she starts speaking in her usual authoritative voice: “This is your Commander speaking. I order whoever is talking to cease immediately. This is an official channel of communication at the service of the coalition of the 12 Clans. Be quiet, now! Or suffer the consequences!”

To her dismay, not only does the litany not stop, but it goes from bad to worse: each new item mentioned more inappropriate and personal than the previous one.

She looks up, furious: “Your machine is not functioning properly, Rayvon kom Skaikru.”

“Actually, that’s unfortunately how radios work: you can’t interrupt somebody when they’re talking. For as long as they’re pressing the speaking button on their handset, this one here, they can’t be cut off…”

It sounds unbelievable but the girl seems sincere.

“Who is speaking?”
“Oh, man, don’t ask me, I have no idea. I told Kane a while back the system was increasingly being used for private discussions.” The brunette chuckles, lifting her hands up. “You wouldn’t believe the things people broadcast on it.”

Actually, Lexa would probably believe it, considering the things the person’s currently sharing with his silent interlocutor.

“So, it is working, then?”

“Yep, looks like it’s all Oscar Kilo!”

Lexa would like to think she’s grown accustomed by now to obscure Skaikru expressions, but she’s never heard Clarke use that one before. What does Oskar have to do with any of this? And more importantly: who is this Oskar the girl’s referring to? Could Oskar be the one speaking?

“Is Oskar a colleague of yours?” she asks politely, folding her hands in her front. Small talk was never her forte, but she did commit to getting to know Clarke’s lover better, so…

There’s a beat where Lexa knows, just knows the Skaikru is trying her best not to laugh at her (it is not the first time and she doesn’t care much for such moments).

The girl seems to get herself under control, which is rather smart of her, and explains: “Uh, so, you know how sometimes, through radio, we use codes? Well, a long time ago, people developed an alphabet specifically for radios. For instance, Oscar, means O. And Kilo, means K. So, Oscar Kilo would be how you would say “ok” on the radio. Anyway, I’ll have to do a couple of checks later today, make sure broadcasting works as well as reception, but seems like Polis is now connected and sharing the same frequency we’re all on!”

Lexa nods, ultimately satisfied, if a little (not a little: completely) lost. “That is good craftsmanship, Rayvon kom Skaikru. I will have Titus send you the men identified to become… radio…”

“Operators” Rayvon fills in for her.

“Yes, the tower’s new radio operators.”
“Well, actually, I was hoping I could move on to some of my other projects, you know? There’s so much stuff I found on the markets, the possibilities are endless!”

“And who do you propose will train my men then on how to use your machine?”

The artisan shrugs. “I don’t know. Damian could do it…”

“Damien is…”

“Clarke’s second, you know, Damian.”

So Polis can now send instant messages to the Trikru outer villages at the border with Azgeda; radios apparently require their own alphabet; and Clarke has a second.

Isn’t this world just full of surprises…

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

She doesn’t know what it is, but Lexa’s been weird all evening and the awkwardness is driving Clarke slowly insane.

She finally breaks, temporarily giving up on trying to get her tower out of its current predicament (whose brilliant idea had it been to teach Lexa how to play chess? Of course the girl was going to master it in the span of a couple of sessions!).

“That’s it, I give, what’s going on?” she exclaims, frowning.

Lexa looks perplexed but Clarke’s having none of it.

“Oh come on, you quite obviously have something on your mind, so let’s hear it, I’m listening.” It’s
taken the two of them too long to get to the comfort zone they’re now able to savour, she won’t let it go without a fight.

Quite uncharacteristically though, Lexa looks away guiltily, eyes falling into her lap. (Clarke may have bought her tower some time.)

For Christ’s sake, since when is Lexa shy or embarrassed? Is this about her hair again? (Because if it is, Clarke’s not sure she’ll be able to keep it PG-13 this time around.)

“I would like to invite Rayvon kom Skaikru to visit one of our warehouses next week” the brunette finally reveals, looking back up, straight at Clarke.

Clarke has to suppress a small smile at Lexa’s unique pronunciation of Raven’s name. Ok… and why exactly is this any of her business in the first place?

She had initially been quite apprehensive about the two girls spending time together, as Raven’s not exactly the Commander’s biggest fan these days and clearly not ready to bury the hatchet. In order to reduce the risk of a clash, she had slyly arranged with the kitchens to keep Raven amply supplied with food at all times, as the blonde had discovered back in Arkadia that a hungry mechanic is a highly volatile one. And it would appear her scheming has proven fruitful, as Raven has so far refrained from biting Lexa’s head off.

“Cool. Is this to test the radios’ range? I heard the network is up and running.” (And by heard she means Raven had barged into her chambers – thankfully fully clothed – brandishing one of the handsets and screaming “Eureka” at the top of her lungs.)

Lexa gives a small shake of her head, still looking at her carefully, as if expecting another reaction. “The radios work fine. I started some time ago an attempt at gathering and cataloguing items left over from the old world, for which my people have no use for, in the hope of repurposing them. The warehouse I wish to take her to holds one such collection of mine. I believe Rayvon kom Skaikru may find its contents more… valuable than my people could imagine.”

“Oh, why didn’t you say so! Any place with junk to sift through and Raven’ll be a goner, for sure, trust me. And if on top of it all you give her unlimited access to it for free, the girl’ll probably want to marry you!”

Mhhh, now that may have been a tad too familiar from an unofficial ambassador when addressing
the commander of the 12 clans, even if the two of them have taken to meeting for rather informal conversations every day…

“I mean, you know, figure of speech. I’m not implying anything about you and Costia, obviously, you know, just… Anyway…so… you’ve got your sights on my tower, uh?”

That’s deflection 101 for you. She doesn’t know if she’s imagining the atmosphere’s lingering awkwardness. It’s a different awkward now compared with earlier though. So that’s something at least?

Now, how to get her tower out of this quagmire…

“What would Wells do?” Lexa looks at her with an undisguised smug smile.

“Sorry?”

“It is usually around this time that you start wondering out loud what scheme your old friend would have devised in your place” the brunette explains, gesturing to the board.

What?

She realizes with a start that it’s true: whenever Lexa backs one of her pieces into a corner (which is happening more often than not lately – too often, if you ask her), she’s taken to imagine a concentrated Wells, usually sitting next to her. A quiet presence to which she can turn to for advice on her next move. She just had no idea she was doing any of it out loud.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Clarke counters, ruffled, “Miss let’s see what Aron what’s his name would do.”

Lexa throws her the same vexed look Clarke gets, every time she disparages the manual which seems to have become some sort of bible for the commander.

“Well, at least my counsel is leading me to victory after victory, or have you conveniently glossed over the fact that you haven’t won a single game this week?”
Clarke snorts, secretly pleased by the light-hearted banter. “Oh, you mean the games I let you win? Because let’s face it, considering how murderous you looked when I was winning that one game, you’ll understand I’m not particularly looking forward to repeating the experiment…”

Lexa looks up sharply. She appears so affronted by the insinuation that Clarke can’t help but laugh out loud.

The blonde quickly backtracks: “I’m only kidding Lexa, no need to work yourself up into a frenzy. Now, stop distracting me and let me see how to turn the tables on you…”

Lexa looks guardedly down at the table at that, before throwing furtive looks at the only other table in the room. Clarke’s not sure what the commander is seemingly expecting. Doesn’t matter, now she just really needs to win this game.

So… what would Wells do?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

She’s pretty sure she must be one of their regulars by now.

In fact, she’s willing to bet the only other person coming more often is Raven, who’s discovered the heat works wonders to relieve the dull pain in her hip and leg and has become best pals with Thalia. (There’s a theme buried there somewhere: foes turning into… something else). Understandably so: Clarke is willing to swear on anything she holds dear that Thalia has the most blessed pair of hands in Polis. Scratch that: on this Earth.

She groans into the small towel her head is resting on, as said woman continues to knead her shoulders and turn them into melting butter. The sounds coming from the elevated cot next to hers – where Raven is currently in a similar position, lying face down and back fully exposed – are just as obscene. Did she already mention that Thalia’s hands are magic? There’s simply no other word for it.

The two girls are, believe it or not, back at the Polis Baths. Only this time, they know exactly what they’re in for and even voluntarily (eagerly) undressed for it. They revisited the suffocating dry heat room, making sure to intersperse their stay with lazy breaks outside and are now giving the massages Costia was adamant they should try a shot.
“This is bliss Griff, pure fucking undiluted heavenly bliss” Raven breathes out in a dreamy sigh while her masseur, a hunk of a man named Tijan, diligently continues working on her muscles.

Clarke herself is too far gone to reply with words, but she couldn’t agree more. She exhales her ascent with one of Thalia’s forceful pushes on her back: “Mhmm.”

“I’m never leaving this place.”

The blonde chuckles. Raven, always so dramatic. “What happened to Arkadia not being able to survive a single week without you?”

“Fuck Arkadia.” Raven releases her filthiest moan so far. “I’m staying here, with Thalia and her crew. Forever. Who requires daylight when you’ve got those hands? What do you think, Tijan? I’m sure there’s stuff here and there that needs fixing.”

The third guest in the room releases an amused chortle and Clarke is instantly reminded of why she had made it a point to face Raven and not… Costia, who’s currently lounging on the cot on her other side and very very VERY much naked.

And by naked, she means: completely. And utterly. Nude.

But it would appear the universe has other plans for her, as Thalia gently nudges her neck up with her chubby fingers, turns her head and lies it back down.

Clarke is now facing the Trikru. Great. Absofuckinglutely GREAT.

Their eyes meet.

Clarke does not want to know how Costia’s back glistens when covered in oil, glinting kill marks somehow only adding to the allure. She does not want to know what Costia looks like joyously spaced-out, with this far-away gleam in hooded eyes. And she most certainly does not want to catch a glimpse of the side of her breasts, pressed against the hard surface, nor the swell of her ass, barely concealed by the small towel lying on top of it.
Fuck.

The alternative though, is to gaze firmly into the girl’s eyes, while two skilled pairs of hands work them over.

And it's weird, to say the least.

Is it just her or is it getting hot in here?

“Your new hairstyle suits you” Costia offers.

And if there’s one thing Clarke doesn’t need, it’s to add compliments into the mix. A knot forms in the pit of her stomach. One she hasn’t felt in a long time.

“I know, right?” Raven pipes up. “I’m the one who cut it. I told you you look hot, Griff!”

Costia smiles, her eyes never leaving Clarke.

The knot tightens. And oh, it’s been a while, but Clarke remembers it all too well.

It’s positively sweltering now.

She needs a distraction, something to get the girl’s attention away from how flustered she feels (she must be positively scarlet by now). She focuses on Raven’s masseur, who gathers his utensils and quietly exits the room after a hushed exchange with Thalia.

“You think so? Lexa looked downright perturbed by it the other day” she offers in lieu of a response.

They’ve certainly come a long way if she can now mention her without Costia shutting down. There’s something… forbidden yet exciting in not needing to tiptoe around wording and tone with the Trikru girl anymore.
Costia’s eyes crinkle with mirth and she barks out a laugh, the movement shaking her whole body. The girl attempts to wink at the blonde despite her current position: “I can imagine. Lexa doesn’t do well with change.”

The movement causes the towel covering the brunette’s lower back to slide further down towards the top of her thighs.

And no, Clarke will most certainly not break eye contact.

She unconsciously gives her legs a small wiggle before fully catching on as to why. When she does, the shock of the realization almost makes her break eye contact. There’s no denying it though: she’s a little bit turned on. There’s no way she’ll delve too much into the reasons behind her body’s treacherous reaction though. **No way.**

Fuck.

She regroups: “Lexa? You’re telling me Lexa what, can’t handle change?”

“She hides it well but yes, it takes time for her to adjust to new situations.”

In hindsight, making Costia talk wasn’t exactly the brightest of ideas. For with the movement of her chest, the towel slides further down.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“M… Your Commander? The one who leads thousands of men into battle and is supposed to adjust to any new situation in the blink of an eye?”

“I does not affect her when she leads.”

If not, then when?
“It only manifests with everything that is personal, Clarke”

Oh.

And damn, their eyes are still on one another.

“I’m getting horny with all this pampering” comes from the other side of the room.

Clarke doesn’t know if she wants to bless Raven for breaking the moment or curse her for voicing, ever so to the point, Clarke’s own inner turmoil.

“You’re the one who asked Thalia for her most handsome masseur. What exactly did you expect?” Clarke huffs good-naturedly, remembering the long list of superficial attributes Raven had rattled off when asked about her masseur’s desired qualifications and the almost hungry gleam in her friend’s eyes when Tijan had first been introduced to her a couple of weeks back. She rolls her eyes for Costia’s enjoyment.

“Not a blonde hunk of a God, with smooth hands carved out of angels’ tears, that’s for sure. Urgh. Have you seen his abs? How is that guy even for real?”

Yes, Clarke has seen his abs. And they are admittedly otherworldly. Which begs the question: why is she finding it so hard to think of anything else than the dark skinned Trikru next to her?

“I’ve always said Octavia’s a lucky bitch, but Tijan could totally give Lincoln a run for his money. And that’s saying something! Wait, why did he leave? Please say it’s not over, I was just starting to really get into it…” Raven exclaims agitatedly. “Shit, did I offend him or something?”

Thalia titters something in Trigedasleng, which Clarke doesn’t fully understand. Something about a room and sports, she thinks. Costia hums in response, a small frown appearing on her forehead. Her eyes still on Clarke.

“Thalia suggests you follow Tijan into the adjacent corridors, Raven. If that is to your liking.”
“I don’t remember you showing us any additional rooms... How big is this place? And why do I need to move? Can’t he just come back?’’

“I… did not… think it necessary to introduce you to this wing, during your first visits. But Tijan apparently offered to... serve as your guide.”

Clarke can tell Costia is choosing her words very carefully, but why?

“… I still don’t understand what’s over there…”

There’s a mysterious and thoughtful quality to Costia’s eyes, still boring into Clarke’s. But there’s uncertainty there as well.

“As you know, the baths offer a certain number of facilities for… relaxing and socializing. The room we’re currently in is one of many. The corridors Tijan disappeared into offer a space for people who would like to get to know each other… better and those wishing to partake in a different… type of activity, a slightly more… strenuous one, to do so away from prying eyes.”

Is it just her or has Costia never looked at her with such intensity? Clarke couldn’t look away even if she wanted. It takes the two friends a moment before Costia’s words sink in. Is she referring to… No. Right?

“Wait a minute. You mean… You’re… No… Sex?” Raven blurts out. “Holy fuck, you do, don’t you! This is GENIUS! And Tijan…? Really? So what, I can just follow him through this door…? Clarke, do you believe this? He’s gorgeous sure, but, I mean, we don’t really know each other…”

“There are no expectations of any kind, Rayven. You can choose to stay here, Thalia can call him back or have someone else replace him. Or you can choose to chase after him and… explore this wing and what it has to offer together. Either way, you are most certainly not nor ever forced to do anything you do not wish to.”

An uncharacteristic silence follows. Even Thalia’s hands on her have stilled. Then there’s the sound of rushed rustling.

“Well, you know me. “Leave no stone unturned and so on”, so, yeah, I…. uh, thanks, and well, see you later. Oh, and uh… don’t wait up, Griff!”
Clarke hears more than sees her friend hurriedly exit the room. She doesn’t know what to think about this whole affair. On the one hand, she feels queasy about leaving her friend in an unknown place with – let’s be honest – a complete stranger. On the other, how could she possibly begrudge Raven some well-deserved fun? But then there’s the fact that the mechanic also just effectively left her to an uncomfortable staring match with a naked Costia, so...

“Do you… Is it safe? For her to be on her own?” she still wants to confirm even though she realizes she trusts Costia wouldn’t have let the brunette go if she herself didn’t know it to be free of danger.

Costia’s eyes are burning. “It is. I have known Tijan for years and have not once heard of any incidents in the baths.”

Thalia makes an assenting noise.

“But…” Costia seems almost hesitant. Playful yet flustered at the same time. “if you’re really worried, you can go see for yourself. The corridors’ most enthusiastic guests are not known for refusing new companions. You never know, even Rayven may appreciate the company…”

Let’s rewind and backtrack a little bit. Her day had started fairly normally she thinks. She had woken up to a grumpy Raven (as on any other day), left her grumbling friend to sleep her bad morning mood off a little longer and visited the kitchens to sneakily grab some leftover fruit (again, as on any other day). She had then descended all the way down, passed the still glowing candle memorial outside and reached the small shack where Lincoln and Damian are staying. Upon finding it empty, she had made her way to the edge of town where, unsurprisingly, she had discovered the two engaged in their morning sparring routine.

Clarke had initially not understood why Lincoln and Damian chose not to practice in the fighting pits with the other Trikru warriors.

Costia for instance, she’s come to know, spends at least two hours there every morning. (Curious, Clarke had gone once to check it out. It had been quite the sight: the arena – the same one where Lexa had fought Roan – swarming with shirtless warriors, bodies already sweating in the morning sun’s shy embrace, younger warriors trying to show off new skills, kicking up clouds of white sand in the process, and young clumsy seconds being lectured by their supervisors. The dark skinned girl had been quite… striking, effortlessly holding her own facing off with men twice her size. Costia’s abilities shouldn’t have come as a surprise to the blonde who had already seen her spar in Arkadia, but the setting, her opponents, her outfit, all had conspired to make it an unforgettable sight.) She’s heard Lexa too can sometimes be spotted sparring with her warriors. And the thought of seeing the two women battling it out… does some strange things to the blonde.
That is until Lincoln had quietly confided that Damian would be putting himself in harm’s way were he to try and socialize with Trikru warriors and his “condition” discovered. She had felt so stupid then and ashamed for not thinking more about Damian’s situation. How could she have forgotten about this whole floating “Stained” business?

Anyway, back to her day. She had scolded Lincoln for forgetting about their appointment and dragged a whiny Damian (yes: whiny) to the one place he had so far refused she take him, namely the tailor’s. The suggestion for them to acquire new clothes had been Raven’s who had stumbled upon this linen couturier on one of her junk hunts. And let’s face it, Damian’s former light blue and white tunics are looking a sad dishevelled dirty brown-grey these days. Turns out the rude old man in charge had heard of Clarke’s artistic talents and been keen to show off a portrait of his to his competition in the street. He hadn’t asked any nosy questions and simply taken their measurements. (Her skin is itching for the new set of clothes that should be ready in a couple of weeks.)

Damian had then run off to God knows where – in fact, there’s something almost cagey about his absences as of late (if he really is spending all this time with the girl, then she needs to have a chat with the two of them) – and Clarke had returned to the tower to put the final touches to one of the last drawings she still has to deliver from Raven’s deal. She had enjoyed a relaxed lunch with Lotrien – after rumours of Raven’s feat extending the radio network had spread, Clarke had received in the course of a day invitations from every single ambassadors for private meetings, during which each had made a case for her and Raven to immediately visit their people and build additional networks there. And sat down with Lexa to hash out the finer details about their planned outing with the Nightbloods.

Finally, she had met up with Raven and Costia for their latest visit to the baths. Really, all in all, a pretty normal day.

So how in hell is she now lying half naked next to a girl whose mere presence is apparently reducing her to a flustered puddle of sensory overload and being… propositioned by said girl to turn her friend’s latest dalliance into a threesome…?

The image of her joining a very naked Raven making out with Tijan the man-God is… one she really doesn’t need right now.

She wants to ask. God she wants to. And she tries, really. “Did you ever… I mean, have you ever…” But the words don’t come together, the implication, the images too forbidden and charged for her to fledge them out. There goes nothing. She leaves the sentence hanging without finishing it. Some questions are better left unanswered.
She unconsciously squirms on the cot and is hit with this overwhelming urge to start touching herself. She wonders for a split second what Costia would do, were she to slowly slide her hand down, lifting her hips just an inch and never breaking eye contact. Would the girl look away? Would she trace her hand’s path down with her eyes? Would she… Would she mirror her own actions?

Reality blasts through her like a bullet when she realizes where her thoughts have strayed. Fucking hell. She can’t, absolutely can’t ever think those things. What the fuck is wrong with her?

Small talk. She needs to focus on small talk. And most certainly not on the fact that she’s now – Thalia having exited the room as well, Clarke suddenly realizes – completely alone with Costia. Fuck her and her apparently one track mind. Fuck her and her thoughts. She feels like a floating horny teenager. This has got to stop.

She breaks eye contact. “I think I’m good here… But uhm… You were right. The Polis Baths are quite an experience. I don’t think I thanked you for taking us. And well, as you heard earlier, Raven and I are really glad you showed us this place.”

She looks straight, then to the side. Down. And yet inexplicably, her eyes come back to rest on her companion. Damn it. Why are Costia’s own brown ones not letting go?

“They’re probably Polis’ most famous landmark. Don’t tell Lexa though. She’d be positively offended I’d dare imply it’s not her tower.” Another cute attempted wink.

Yeah, this day has just completely gone off the shits.

“I…Sure. So, Trikru love coming here? It’s not just a warrior thing, after practice or battle?”

“Everyone comes here, not just people from Polis but from the whole region. I have found no other place like it. The story goes that the end of the world split open the earth right in this one spot and water came shooting out of its depths. The first survivors of praismaya came upon the hot springs here and discovered the water’s soothing qualities for their ailments and pains. Word slowly spread: the first visitors settled down, giving birth to Polis and with more and more guests, the baths expanded into the current complex you now know.”

“You mean they’re the reason Polis became such a centre? Became a city”
Clarke can understand the appeal. There’s something indescribably wholesome and reassuring about water, she’s discovered, ever since Costia’s impromptu swimming lesson. The anecdote also offers a new, more welcoming glimpse into Polis, suddenly less a city of power and more a healing centre for the lucky few to have survived the nuclear apocalypse.

She sinks back into the soft cot. Something’s not quite right though. She frowns in confusion.

“Wait. A couple of months ago, when you accompanied me on the journey here you wanted to know what Raven’s intentions were with your cousin, and now you’re sending her off to have fun with another guy?”

Costia sighs. It’s her turn to break their connection and she turns on her cot until she’s facing the ceiling.

“Who am I to assume the balance the two of them have found? Relationships come in many shapes…”

And fuck. If Clarke didn’t want to know whether Costia had ever lurked around the corridors, then she really doesn’t want to know what type of relationship her and Lexa are in.

“Besides, Jonah is in a difficult place right now. He’s not ready.”

“And that’s for you to decide?”

“I do not decide anything. I discussed it with him in Arkadia before my return to Polis and am most assuredly not forcing Rayven to do anything she doesn’t wish to do. I am merely giving them options. They’re both adults and responsible for the choices they make.”

“So what, this was a test to see how much Raven is into Jonah?”

She experiences this flashback to a complete different time and place. A forest plunged into the night, with Costia playing another type of game, another type of test, on her this time.
“No.” She shifts, turning onto her side to face the blonde. Her towel slips off leaving her naked breasts fully exposed and she makes no motion to readjust it.

No, no, no, no, no! Can not look. Will not look. Must not look. (Should also not get flustered or wet in any way but let’s be real here, that ship sailed a long time ago.)

Clarke is so quick in turning herself she almost falls off. It takes her a couple of tries before she’s lying on her back, eyes firmly fixed on the ceiling and towel covering to the best of its abilities the top of her thighs and her own breasts.

The blonde is not sure she’s imagining the teasingly playful tone in the girl’s voice when she continues. “I mean it: Jonah is not ready and it is my understanding Rayven is aware of it. His last union left him quite… scarred to say the least. He’s not been able to put it fully behind him for now and I do not fancy seeing him suffer like that anytime soon.”

“Oh.” Clarke gulps. She doesn’t know much about relationships but let’s just say she knows a thing or two about emotional scars. Hell, she knows the whole encyclopaedia on them by heart, front to back. “What happened?”

“She died. With you.”

Clarke’s head turns on autopilot. Costia’s eyes have turned incredibly sad, boring into hers, searching.

“Who was it?” she chokes out, her mouth dry.

Costia squints at her before revealing: “Anya.”

Oh shit…
It happens on her way back to the Tower, clothes back on but Raven still unaccounted for. She’s walking by the candle memorial when a hand suddenly halts her movements, wrapping itself around her wrist.

“Wanheda.”

She recognizes the girl instantly, even if it’s been a year (has it really been a year?). Clarke’s always been good with faces. Names however? Not so much. It starts with a D or an N, she thinks.

“You failed to inform me Clarke took on a second” she whispers while unstrapping her shoulder pauldron. She folds the red sash up and places it neatly on the small table.

It’s not a reproach, she doesn’t want to turn this into a dispute. But this could well turn out to be a useful piece of information and Costia could have easily mentioned it in one of her (admittedly few and rather brief) missives while on assignment in Arkadia.

“Strange, I distinctly remember that the purpose of my mission was to act as liaison between our two people and not spy on the blonde Skaikru… That being said, I did inform you” her lover replies easily, drawing nearer.

Oh. Lexa flushes at Costia’s tongue in cheek retort.

She grimaces. How had she missed it? Her hands meanwhile continue going through the motions, on autopilot. She unbuckles her thick belt before shedding her heavy black vest with a tired shrug. Both come to rest delicately on the back of the chair.

“Let me” Costia whispers, placing her hands on hers from behind. She lets the girl take over docilely. Power and control have never been an issue between them.

The brown-skinned girl slowly lifts her loose under shirt, her grazing fingertips leaving a trail of tiny goose bumps on her sides. Lexa’s now in her bindings, blue bruises from her latest sparring session with the Natblida blossoming on her sides.
“I see Aden’s still breaking through his Heda’s defences.”

Lexa gives a small groan. “Not just Aden this time. Iro and Naqib too.”

She can feel Costia’s pleased smile at the news. “Naqib’s always been my favourite.”

“Only because he reminds you of a younger version of you, ready to go chasing after wild horses at a moment’s notice.”

“Mhnh. Maybe the Commander of the 12 clans should stick to sparring with someone her own size and calibre… say Silas for example?”

Lexa chuckles in response, amused. She’d been so proud of Ira and Naqib during practice that she had giddily – as giddy as Heda can be that is – announced the plans for their outing to the whole group, unable to keep it a secret any longer.

Costia’s fingertips ghost over the bruises and Lexa has to fight an instinctive flinch.

“No that I don’t enjoy the trio’s artwork, but I’d much rather the woman I love not wince when I touch her” Costia pouts.

“I fail to see why your troubles with Saskia in the bedroom are of any concern to me” she humours the girl and earns a small jab to one of the biggest bruises.

Costia’s hands start leaving feather-light touches on her skin, the girl now pressing enticingly against her back.

“I’m sorry. About my earlier question. I don’t remember you mentioning it, that is all…” Lexa confesses, apologetic.

“Mnhh.” Costia presses a small kiss to her shoulder, her hands continuing their titillating dance. Her fingers loosen her bindings and slip beneath, first to caress the sensitive skin under her breasts and
then cupping them slightly more aggressively. “I spoke of the boy, the wastelander she took under her wing.”

**Of course** Clarke would take a Stained one as second, in blatant contempt for her people’s ways. This couldn’t possibly get any worse. The whole thing would undoubtedly rile her up, were she not currently the object of Costia’s skilful attention. Speaking of which… The girl’s hands have now reached her skin tight black trousers, nimble fingers making quick work of her buttons. She feels the wet slide of a tongue against the back of her neck, circling towards her ear. Her body gives an involuntary shudder.

“Now you’re going to tell me she brought the boy here…” she huffs.

She can hear the small sigh Costia releases, feels the hands halt their movement before retreating. She catches them before they’ve left her skin and slides them back under the waistband.

“Don’t… Please…” she begs in an eager whisper.

There’s a beat of hesitation before Costia’s tongue resumes its advance, now licking behind her ear, teeth peeping out to nip at her earlobe.

“You’re lucky you’re cute, farm girl” the girl breathes between two sharp bites.

Her lover quietly nudges her legs a bit more apart with her thigh and Lexa obliges her, widening her stance. Her pants are tugged downwards, past the curve of her ass and left hanging above her knees (Costia’s never been very patient after all and Lexa’s not one to object tonight – or ever).

“She did bring the boy. But before you throw a tantrum, I do not think she’s fully aware of the affront this represents.”

Costia’s hands have now returned to her front, her teeth scratching a delicious path down the slope of her shoulder. Lexa’s rapidly losing her focus on what they’re discussing.

“She should know better. Lincoln should have apprised her…” she murmurs in a last ditch effort at preserving her concentration.
But it’s a lost cause: Costia’s playing a teasing hustle around the top of her thighs, occasionally letting her fingers dip to the inside, ever closer to where Lexa needs her. Her mouth is now sucking lightly against her pulse, a move which never fails to make her knees go weak.

When Costia’s finger brushes against her for the first time, through the wet fabric of her underwear, Lexa has to lean forward, grabbing desperately hold of the back of the chair. She suppresses the small whimper that wants to escape her now parted lips. It’s hypocritical of her, she knows: to revel in every little sigh Costia offers and yet deny her the same satisfaction. (Who is she kidding: soon she won’t be able to keep anything in any way.)

Costia’s apparently not done seducing her. “I thought of you all day, niron. Of taking you just like this against the table. Of feeling you so warm and oh so ready for me.”

“Really” she hisses, when Costia’s tongue comes out to taste her pulse point and her fingers find her clit already hard and frantic for attention. She forgets to breathe for a second there, while Costia toys with it through the material. “And where exactly were you when fantasizing about me?” she rasps. She’s not going to be able to put entire sentences together for much longer.

“The bathhouse.” Costia’s right hand leaves her hip to return to her breasts, leaving a trail of tantalizing caresses in her wake. The other though continues to tease her over her shorts.

The image of Costia, naked, body glistening in a damp room, shoots straight to Lexa’s core. She groans, pushing her backside more firmly against the girl’s front.

“I even briefly entertained the thought of indulging my… urges right there, in fact.”

This time she can’t censor a whimper.

“Why didn’t you?” Lexa’s not usually one to participate in Costia’s flirty games. She craves them, sure, but often feels rather gauche when trying to actively engage. Repartee outside of clan business generally fails her. Apparently not tonight though.

Costia’s tongue is gliding against her skin, one hand toying with her nipples. There’s something quite precious in surrendering to familiar hands that know her body, its reactions and pleasures, inside out. And something inestimable in falling into somebody she trusts so completely.
“I was in the company of your Skaikru ambassador. Something tells me that’s not what Titus has in mind whenever he speaks of protocol.”

The revelation brings an entirely new image to Lexa’s eyes and she’s too far gone to fight it. She makes to turn but Costia’s body behind and the arms bracketing her stay strong, preventing her from doing so.

Costia must sense her distress, for she quickly reaches for the hem of her shorts and hastily pushes them down, yet not cupping her straight away. She lets her fingers slide over her once, twice. Lexa sags against her in pleasure, the thrill of deft fingers exploring her, parting her, dipping inside, leaving her body thrumming with sexual energy.

She’ll have to repay the girl in kind once she’s done tormenting her.

---

“How would you…describe Rayvon kom Skaikru?”

They somehow made it to the bed (though Lexa’s not too sure on the particulars) and are both lounging on their sides, facing each other. It’s one of those peaceful moments she holds dear yet can’t help feeling she doesn’t deserve. The room’s plunged into darkness, the night’s glow the only light, their hands almost invisible to them, but tireless in their lazy exploration of each other.

“How would I describe Rayven? Why?”

“Can’t I be curious about one of my guests? You were the one to suggest I invite her to Polis…”

“I thought you were quite happy with her work, the radios are working now, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you want to know what I think of her?”
“As I said, just out of curiosity…”

“Lex…”

Fine, fine.

“I… Is she…” She stops her stammering, before starting over: “I have come to suspect that the nature of the Skaikru craftswoman’s bond with Clarke is… more than friendship…”

She wants to say “partner” but the word tastes… strange on her tongue. She leaves the sentence hanging, waiting to see if Costia’s going to disprove or acquiesce. The girl does neither. She has no choice then but to continue.

“Clarke is admittedly, together with Kane, the only Skaikru I have engaged with at length. With Rayvon not only a useful resource for technology but also Clarke’s… lover, it could arguably seem advisable for me to put in more of an effort to familiarize myself with the girl.”

If “partner” tasted bitter, then “lover” tastes even worse.

Costia sighs in mock exasperation. “And I’m the one Jonah calls useless with pretty girls, how unfair this world can be… You think the two are an item and so you’d like to learn more about the person who is sharing the blonde’s nights. I see.”

Lexa wouldn’t quite put it this way, but is too startled to argue, because despite the words, there’s surprisingly no bite to Costia’s tone. In fact, it sounds almost mischievous. She’ll have to mull it over tomorrow, when her mind is sharper.

“Let’s see. I do not know much about Rayven, but have so far enjoyed most of our interactions. She seems a spirited and rather intelligent young woman. Not an ounce of diplomacy and discretion in her but Clarke and Skaikru as a whole seem to place quite a lot of trust in her skills and ingenuity.”

“I am pondering inviting Rayvon to accompany me to one of the warehouses. Perhaps the one with all the collected wires. She seems quite fond of those…”
Costia chuckles loudly. “Now that’s a trip I’ll stay out of, but I’m sure the two of you will find something you can bond over. If not wires, then maybe your mutual interest in Clarke? Who knows!”

At her last words, Costia’s hands suddenly go from soft brushes to ticklish and the two girls end up in a mock fight, satiated bodies wrestling for dominance.

“Again, Lexa, these are all hypotheticals.”

The brunette gives a bellicose exhale, successfully pushing aside for now all images of Costia and Clarke lounging at the baths together, to try and focus on the contentious matter at hand. “So, hypothetically speaking, would my people be able to seek care in this structure of yours?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“How many what?”

“How many of them would you take?”

“That’s not how it works. It’s less a question of numbers and more a question of need. If the person is in need of immediate attention, then we’ll take them.”

“Irrespective of their clan affiliation?”

“Yes.”

“You expect me to believe that a facility entirely run by Skaikru, staffed with Skaikru, and built on Skaikru “land”, would offer its services to my people equally?”
“Not just your people, anybody really. And yes, that’s exactly what I’m trying to explain.”

Lexa’s eyes turn suspicious. “Indra told me about the Ice Nation you treated. Some were bandits responsible for many innocent deaths over the years. Enemy warriors who deserved to die.”

“It’s the Hippocratic oath. Medical ethics if you prefer. A code of conduct every healer abides to – from where I come from I mean – passed down from generation to generation. We treat whoever’s in need, period. A doctor – a healer – is not there to judge a person’s actions, affiliations or beliefs.”

She takes a moment to try and grasp the concept. It’s quite…different from her people’s ways. She had of course instructed her healers to treat civilians from other clans but never a wounded enemy or a criminal. She ignores for now Clarke’s “where I come from” which never fails to make her bristle. It’s about time Skaikru stop referring to their so-called heritage and embrace their new context. Clinging on to old ways won’t help their integration along.

“But the idea is not to do it on our own. If we can count on your help, the cooperation of the Trikru villages around Arkadia at the very least, then we could make sure the hospital has enough beds for everybody.”

Lexa’s eyes turn mutinous once again. “Did you not just say it is not a question of numbers?”

Clarke lets out a loud huff. “It’s not. But say we only have 20 beds and they’re all full, and another person in need arrives, we’ll have a hard time finding space for them, that’s all. So we need to make sure we create a big enough capacity from the start.”

“What type of support do you expect from us?”

“My people won’t be able to build it on our own. We need extra manpower. A lot of manpower.”

She frowns, deep in thought. “For how many days?”

Clarke makes an apprehensive grimace. “I’m afraid we’re talking about months here, not just mere days.”
Lexa falls silent again. The project is not unappealing per se. In fact, she would go as far as to admit that her curiosity is piqued. It’s just very… ambitious, for an area and a people that are still recovering from the Mountain’s terror.

“How will you motivate people to come to your…”

“Hospital” Clarke helps her out.

“Yes, hospital.”

“What do you mean?”

“My people may not be inclined to test medicine and treatments we are not accustomed to. Especially if part of the structure will be housed inside this metallic construction I remember. It is too… foreign for us to feel welcomed there.”

Clarke remembers Costia and Lincoln’s obvious discomfort when spending prolonged amounts of time inside the fallen Ark ruin.

“Mhhh, that’s a good question. I’d like to think people, especially in the area, already know we offer good quality of care. I’m pretty sure they’ve all heard of the mass casualties from the fighting at the border.”

“You will need something familiar for my people to trust you. And how will you communicate with the patients from Trikru and other clans? Need I remind you your people refused to introduce the learning of Trigedas leng as compulsory for Skaikru children and adults?”

Clarke gives a tired sigh, nodding her head.

“That’s not fair, Lexa. We’ve already discussed this and you know exactly where I stand on this issue. But you’ve got a point. We could maybe have a couple of Trikru healers working with us? It’d be a reassuring presence for Trikru patients and could foster a real exchange of knowledge…”
Lexa’s managed to bring the blonde exactly where she wanted, without the latter realizing it. She pounces: “I want half the trainees and personnel to be Trikru.”

“What? Lexa, that’s not possible. Come on, can you imagine how hard it’d be to manage such a place, with half the staff speaking only Trigedasleng and half speaking only English?”

“Half if you want our help. It’s not negotiable.”

“We should extend the same curtesy to the other clans as well, then …”

“Half now. We’ll worry about the other clans later.”

Clarke’s too tired to argue further. “Fine. Half now. Who will identify them?”

“We will, do not worry. You said your mother will run the facility? I want her to do so with Nyko. You will also have to meet with each village chief in the region to explain your project. And you’ll have to invite them to see for themselves. Otherwise suspicion will endure.”

Clarke’s apparently too tired to fight her on Nyko’s de facto promotion. “If by “you”, you mean Skaikru, sure we will.”

That gives Lexa pause. “Why wouldn’t it be you?”

“I don’t know yet what I’ll do when I return, once the negotiations are done. But I’ll see who Kane wants to assign for that specific project and I’ll let you know.”

Lexa’s so used to thinking of Clarke as a Skaikru representative she’d forgotten the girl hasn’t really found her place yet among her people. She decides to tread with caution. “Well, what is it you want to do?” She doesn’t add the last part: “when or if you return.” She likes to pretend that question is still left open.

Clarke furrows her brows, slightly at a loss, before she looks back up at her, with embarrassed honesty in her blue eyes: “Look, I… I don’t really know… I haven’t had the time to sit down and think about this. But I guess it’s about time I do, isn’t it?”
Clarke slowly wakes from the fog of sleep, burying deeper into the warm cocoon, which automatically grows tighter. She gets restless after a little while and shifts, trying to find a slightly more comfortable position to lie on her side.

The sudden friction against the inside of her right leg feels… nice. She pushes back a little bit more, left leg falling forward. The sensation increases and this time it’s… more than nice. There’s a flash, the memory of a dream, dark skin rubbing against hers. She tries to follow it but the thread is loose, with every frantic pull she loses it a little bit more.

“Mhhh” comes muffled from behind.

Her body grinds against the source, unconsciously chasing the feeling of relief the contact brings.

A hand comes to grip her hip, fingers digging into her skin, the heat and pressure behind her increasing.

“Fuck, Griff” the same voice rasps.

Wait…

Raven?

Clarke’s eyes shoot open. She blanches.

Ew. EW. EW.

She scrambles forward, anything to get her out of her friend’s sleepy embrace.
“What the FUCK Ray?”

Raven blinks, grimacing at the light bathing the room in its soft morning glow.

“Oh, no way you’re pinning this one on me, Griff! **You** started it!”

Clarke flinches involuntarily, her whole body recoiling at the idea of her shamelessly rubbing herself against her best friend. Ugh.

The mechanic doesn’t seem to be going through the same cringe-worthy embarrassment though, as she only smirks with a suggestive raise of her eyebrow.

“Looks like someone’s in a sexy mood today… Why don’t you come back here and we can see about… quenching this thirst?” She wiggles her eyebrows for good measure.

With one last shudder, Clarke gives the sheets one forceful pull and sends the brunette flying out of the bed. Raven lands rather ungracefully on the floor.

“Ouch! Griff, what the fuck!”

“You’re supposed to be off on your road trip with the Commander, remember? I really recommend not making her wait…”

“Alright, alright, alright. All work, no play, I see how it is” her friend sighs dramatically.

Raven scrambles back up, but instead of heading towards her stack of clothes to get ready (because yes, Raven’s clothes have slowly started appearing all over Clarke’s room, to the point where the blonde just gave up and cleared a designated space for the messy brunette), she stays standing, facing the blonde on the bed, her face scrunched up in thought, as if pondering a particularly tough puzzle.

“Seriously though, why haven’t we?”

“Why haven’t we what?”
“Had sex, of course…”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Absolutely not. You can’t tell me you’re not a little bit curious. I mean, if this were a story, then I’d sure as hell be wondering right about now why the heroine – yours truly, brunette extraordinaire – and her pretty blonde sidekick haven’t had wild lesbian sex yet! Look at us! We’re both hot as fuck, horny and single, what’s stopping us?”

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah!”

“Uh… maybe because you’re not gay or bi or remotely interested in girls?”

“One: what’s up with all the assumptions? Two: even if that were true, it’s but an inconsequential footnote in the grand scheme of things, blondie.”

“…not really… But anyway, I mean, we’re friends. It took us this long to get over… you know… all that… stuff. It’d be stupid to jeopardize that just to get off…”

“First of all, fuck Finn. No, seriously, I loved the guy” – Clarke notes the use of the past tense – “but what happened happened, we’ve both put that behind us and moved on. Second of all, I’m insulted you’d think sex with me would just be a quick “let’s get off” kind of affair! I’ll have you know I’m pretty awesome in bed and can go for days!”

“Why are we even talking about this, Ray? You have to get going. We’re friends. It’d just… It’d be too… It’d mess things up, we both know it. And I’m most certainly not “horny” as you so poetically put.”

Raven snorts loudly in disbelief. “Tell that to your dreams, or have you forgotten we’ve been sharing a bed for the past month?”
Now, Clarke likes to think that she knows Raven’s poker face pretty well. And well… her friend’s current facial expression screams premium blackmail material.

She stays in bed, wisely opting for silence and nursing her bashfulness. Meanwhile, Raven jumps around the room, trying to put a shirt on, tie one of her boots, stuff a bunch of junk down her backpack and brush her hair all at the same time. It’s a recipe for disaster and sure enough, Raven manages to get reacquainted with the floor twice before she’s presentable.

The blonde speaks up before she leaves though: “Ray, when you’re back, we need to talk…”

The seriousness in her tone stops Raven dead in her tracks, right leg still bent at the knee, her fingers tangled in her shoelaces. “Now that sounds ominous, should I be scared?”

She sends her friend a genuine smile. “No. It’s just. There’s something I need to discuss with you, that’s all. Nothing… Nothing to worry about.”

“Uhh… ok. Whatever you say, Griff.”

“You seriously have to get out of here, Lexa really doesn’t like having to wait.”

“I’m going, I’m going. Any parting words? You never know, I may never make it back!”

Clarke shakes her head, amused yet exasperated at the same time. “How about: don’t do anything I wouldn’t do?”

Raven who was in the process of opening the door bursts into laughter at that, holding her sides. “Oh man, that’s rich Griff. Good one!”

Clarke looks at her, wrinkling her nose. What could Raven possibly come up with this time?

“Considering you’d probably let the Commander do a whole lot of nasty stuff to you, not exactly the most thought-out advice there, blondie. Have I mentioned you talk in your sleep?”
That’s it. She needs to die. Right now. Whatever the way, she doesn’t care. Float her off the tower, let her choke on soup. Anything. Anywhere. As long as it’s right now.

With Lexa gone, Clarke suddenly realizes how much time she’s been spending with the Commander these past two months. Not only that, but her whole daily schedule has come to revolve around the routine the two slipped into without really noticing. Clarke would simply squeeze in additional activities here and there whenever possible, not once calling into question the fact that time with Lexa is her number one priority. Which would make sense were their meetings still about negotiating the best possible deal for Skaikru joining the coalition. Yet, more often than not as of late, they’ve been about anything but stately affairs.

Her absence also serves as a staggering confirmation of how much these moments with a relaxed and open Trikru leader have come to mean to her (even if it does entail getting her ass handed to her in chess by a not so secretly jubilant Lexa so often she’s lost count – turns out the Commander isn’t the Tower’s only sore loser).

That being said, it does free her up at a most opportune moment. Since bumping a couple of days ago into none other than Niylah, the girl who had welcomed her, Damian and that idiot Nathan at Sinchuk’s trading post – or, as she likes to remember her: the girl who had definitely been into Clarke and with whom something could have happened – the two have spent several afternoons together, Clarke accompanying her on her strolls through Polis, hunting down supplies.

With traffic through the now liberated area expanding, Niylah’s father’s trading post has gone from a small shack offering the most basic commodities to the rare visitor to a sought after centre for basic and rare items of all sorts. And Niylah, who had been so adamant she doesn’t mind the solitude during their previous encounter, is quite obviously loving the change of pace.

It’s strange, this easy connection they share, when in fact all they had really had in the past was a short lived awkward moment about a year ago. Niylah’s an excellent companion to roam the city with: a good listener, open to sharing about herself with no expectations of reciprocation, patient whenever Clarke has questions about the stalls and crafts they come upon (miles away from Ryder’s gruff piece meal explanations) – and as the Skaikru is quick to ascertain with a pleased gleam: very much still attracted to her.

She learns of Niylah’s childhood, growing up in the shadow of a mystical enemy that could strike at any moment, with the ghost of a disappeared mother and a heartbroken father retreating further and further into himself. She can picture this oppressive home in which the mention of a loved one has
become so taboo it’s taken on a presence of its own; can picture the young teenager, who would spend more time in the company of placid stable animals than fellow humans – always within the confines of the shrinking perimeter her father had set for their safety. She learns of the first time Niylah had to fend off the too insistent advances of a visitor interested in more than trading for wares; of the girl’s frantic attempt to hide the incident from her father; of the tears she had shed when, putting two and two together, her father had sent the visitor on his way, barely able to stand on his own two feet. Niylah speaks openly about her father’s reluctance to join the army meant to protect Skaikru after the Ice Nation attack; about his distrust for any clan other than Trikru; about his stories of her mother and the happy gleam they never failed to light up in his eyes; about the fact that she hasn’t heard these stories in years now.

And how ironic: not helping Bellamy lies heavy on her conscience, but that may well have saved Niylah’s father.

They do not talk about partners. They don’t need to: Clarke doesn’t miss the stolen glances, the fleeting press of a hand in the small of her back, the brush of fingers against hers. And though she may have denied it some days ago, when Raven had called her out on it: Clarke is painfully aware of how much she’s craving physical contact – of a different nature than cuddling with the mechanic that is. It’s a dance, some sort of seduction ritual, slowly working the blonde up to a point where the tension coiling inside of her is turning unbearable, almost solidifying into a constant state of arousal.

Which brings her to here and now. Here being Niylah’s small chambers, in the attic of a building where the trading post guild offers lodging to visiting traders. Now being Niylah’s last day in Polis, before she’s due to start on the journey back home. Clarke had unsubtly asked Niylah to show her her temporary dwellings (and so what if it was still technically morning: Clarke’s feeling brave – Raven would be proud) and the girl had eagerly acquiesced, sending her a hopeful look.

So here they are: Clarke’s straddling her, her hand at the nape of her neck, holding her head level with hers. Niylah’s warm hazel eyes mirror her own desire, her hands resting lightly on Clarke’s hips. It’s Clarke who leans in first, this time around. She goes in with all the frustration of a year without sexual intimacy, of weeks spent fighting her attraction to Lexa’s lover, of days sneaking teasing touches with the Trikru trader. And GOD. How could she have gone without kissing anybody for so many months, when it feels this good?

Their tongues dance around each other before Clarke brings teeth into play. Fuck how she wants to bite. She surges forward, pressing her upper body flush against the Trikru, whose hands slip down to the curve of her ass and pull her impossibly closer. Niylah’s puffs of air against her lips resonate down to Clarke’s core, leaving delicious goose bumps on the way.

Niylah’s shirt is the first to go. The girl’s gorgeous, all lean muscles and sun-kissed skin. Clarke’s own follows quickly after, the blonde too impatient to let her lift it off slowly. She gave up on trying to squeeze her breasts into her rags of a bra a while back. The sight of her bare chest seems to render
the Trikru speechless, fuelling Clarke’s confidence. She gives a small tug to Niylah’s head, gently urging her forward and down. The girl executes herself immediately, diving in tongue first and making quick work of Clarke’s already excited nipples. She keeps the girl’s head firmly squeezed against her while she starts a heady back and forth with her hips, the rhythm soon coaxing Niylah into rocking up into her.

Fuck, the friction feels so good.

But she needs more. She trails her left hand down the girl’s right arm until she reaches her hand. With a gentle tug she brings Niylah’s fingers up. She wraps her tongue around the first one before sucking it into her mouth. The Trikru’s completely lost her previous focus on her chest and is now watching, mesmerized, as one by one, each of her fingers receives a bite, a lick and a suck. Her haggard moan is such a reward. Their eyes meet and there’s so much need there. Clarke gives one more roll of her hips before trailing Niylah’s hand down from her swollen lips, past her chin, down to her throat, her sternum echoing her heart’s frantic beating and her breasts. She doesn’t let go of the girl’s wide eyes.

She takes a shuddering breath when it reaches her solar plexus and clenches her thighs in a vice grip around the sitting girl, in anticipation. She continues leading Niylah’s hand down: her bobbing stomach, the top of her loose pants. Niylah’s eyes bore into hers while she unbuttons them. It’s a little clumsy. A little nervous. 1. 2. She struggles the most at the third button, that seems to be stuck. 3. Her hand slips down. Clarke doesn’t think she’s ever wanted anything more in her life. She leaves her hand on Niylah’s, although there’s quite obviously no need to guide her anymore. She leans forward, her forehead coming to rest against the Trikru’s while the girl’s hands slowly explore her, sliding effortlessly up and down and around her swollen sex.

“Fuck” she exhales, not realizing she’s spoken it out loud, her hips following Niylah’s fingers and seeking more, always more.

Her hand makes its presence known again, pushing Niylah’s fingers further down, where she’s the wettest, the hottest, the most desperate. She lifts up a little to grant her better access. With one little nod to the blown pupils fixed on her, she closes her own eyes. Niylah slips into her effortlessly. Clarke almost cries at how good it feels.

She rides the day deep deep into the night.
“Fuck Griff, I can’t even describe it in words. It was just… so… mind blowing! A temple to wires and all sorts of cables. Years and years of collecting, of meticulous sorting, of classifying and storing them away, one by one. With this… And she says they’ve got more… The things I could do…”

Her friend is clearly still under the spell of her 2-day turned 1-week long outing with Lexa, voice in awe of the sudden unlimited possibilities within her reach. Clarke had expected as much, yet her enthusiasm is contagious and she can’t help a wide smile from appearing on her lips.

“I mean, we always knew there’d be stuff to scavenge and recycle here and there, but this, this completely changes the game. Not only is everything already gathered but it’s preserved. If the other warehouses are similar – and she says they are – then we’re not just talking repairs or recreation of old tech anymore. I could actually have the resources to put together new tech, be creative and invent from scratch.”

“Can I assume you two made up, then?”

Raven grimaces, shifting uneasily on the cot, while Tijan frowns at seeing his work so easily reversed.

“I don’t know what to think, man. Finn was… Finn was on Finn, ok. The torture about the poisoning incident though? Now that was completely unjustified and uncool, I deserved the benefit of the doubt, even if her most trusted advisor or whatever was misleading her on purpose. I don’t know her well, so I can’t be too sure, but… Well, if I’m not mistaken, she apologized for it on the second day. In her usual veiled style, mind you, but yeah. So… I don’t know. Made up no, definitely not. Plus that would imply that we were ever on friendly terms. Which: hello? But we might be reaching some level of understanding I guess?”

Raven is over the moon about her discovery and Clarke’s happy her friend is potentially softening towards the Commander. What she’s not too sure about is how sneaky Lexa is being regarding this new development. Showing Raven her warehouses has now guaranteed the mechanic is hooked. Will access to these resources be free or will the Commander ask for something in return? Clarke’s been around Lexa for long enough to know the latter’s far likelier. The question now is: what does the Trikru leader want?

“What else did you two talk about?”

“Oh, you know. Usual bonding stuff. Me, my work, my life. My sex life. You. A lot. Some more about you. Actually, it was always just about you.”
“Ha ha.”

“I’m not joking. She wanted to know what your favourite colour is – I said green, I hope you don’t mind, there’s nothing quite as satisfying as some well-placed ingratiating. Whether you drool in your sleep – which hello, you do. Oh, and if your boobs are real.”

“Very funny.”

“Come on, admit it, I got you all flattered and worried at the same time there for a second, didn’t I? All joking aside, we kept it strictly about work, plans for Arkadia, plans for the radio network. There’s this one warehouse she told me about – now, her descriptions weren’t the most detailed but it sounds like it may be full of rusting bicycles. Can you picture reintroducing bicycles, Griff? We would take Trikru by storm!”

“They couldn’t ride them…there’re no roads, Ray.”

“Pfff, we don’t need roads. All you need are clean and flattened dirt paths at best. Now, I’m no Commander, but looks to me like there’re so many warriors out of a job now that there’s peace, I’m sure this could be done in the blink of an eye.”

“If the peace lasts, yes.”

“Am I missing something? I thought we were over this? Isn’t it a done deal that we’ll join the coalition?”

“Yes, I mean, I think so, but you saw what happened at the border, even their coalition is no guarantee for actual peace…”

“Way to dampen my spirits, Griff!”

Clarke chuckles.
“Does she want you to build weapons?”

“Nope. I mean, if she does, she didn’t bring it up. We went through the list of people she’d like to have trained for the radio. She wants all of them to be able to not only operate it but repair it as well, so that’s going to take a while. Plus they’re not just from Polis, she’s having people from all over come to be trained, in case I manage to extend the network even further. Oh, and she wants us to organize a demonstration for the other ambassadors. I’ve started seeing a couple sniffing around my workshop and that bloke you get on with so well, what’s his name?”

“Lotrien?”

“Yeah, that guy’s now started sending me little gifts.”

“That sounds like Lotrien all right. Did you ever think of taking on one or even several apprentices? This all sounds like a lot of work for just you, Ray.”

“Obviously. Damian already kind of is, in a way. It’s just… You’re not going to like this but it came up and well… she made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Damian won’t ever be allowed to play any sort of role here in Polis, be it training Trikru on the radio, operating it himself, you name it.”

Clarke huffs, anger rising fast whenever Damian’s situation comes up, despite Thalia’s unrelenting hands grinding the tension in her neck into dust.

Raven beats her to the punch. “Look, before you start off on a tangent – as we both know you’re about to do – I just want to say that I hate this as much as you do, ok. If it were all up to me, we’d impose Damian as a part of the package. You, me and him: simply non-negotiable. But… well, there’s his safety to take into account here, right? And, from what I’ve understood, it could really put him in harm’s way…”

She can tell Raven is genuinely concerned.

“I don’t understand this, none of it! They’re cast away, yet Damian was tolerated in Sinchuk with me. They’re shunned, yet here he is, in Polis, walking around freely and even able to trade. Lincoln spent weeks hunting the pauna with him. They’re even sharing a roof now for Christ’ sake! I don’t understand where they draw the line. What’s acceptable and what’s not!”
“I feel you. It’s a crazy sort of taboo with fluctuating rules. I think it’s somehow easier for Damian though, since he can… you know… hide it. If it were to get out, I’m not sure Polis would be so safe for him anymore.”

“Fuck. I hate this.”

“Yeah. Anyway, we can figure something out. We still very much need Damian back in Arkadia anyway. Monty loves working with him. Oh, speaking of Arkadia, she also wanted to know what our plans for the dam were. I tried to stay as vague as possible.”

“Mhhh, good” Clarke replies distractedly, mind still on Damian’s opaque in-between situation. She’ll have to get Lincoln or maybe even Costia to explain it to her. And she’ll also have to make it clear to Lexa that in all matters concerning Damian, she’s the one the Commander should talk to. “Where’s Costia by the way, I thought she was supposed to come with you?”

Raven chuckles. “Her lover was away for a week, I’m guessing the two are… getting reacquainted, if you catch my drift.”

Yes. Clarke is not an idiot, she does understand Raven’s unsubtle innuendo. And no, her mind will most certainly not wander to what the two girls could possibly be doing right about now. Or which position they could possibly be in. Or…

“Speaking of which…” Raven sits up, avoiding her left side, “this has been fun, but I believe my own bed partner has been patiently waiting for me, so…”

“Oh. Right. Of course. Yes. You’re going.” Clarke hadn’t realized Tijan had left the room. The sudden prospect of enjoying the baths on her own puts a slight damper on her earlier enthusiasm for the place.

Raven is still sitting and turns almost shy then, looking down, hand coming to rest around the back of her neck.

“Unless of course… you’d like to come take a look. You never know… Or… I mean, I know Tijan wouldn’t mind additional company…” She looks nervously back up at her, from under her eyelashes.
Oh.

Oh?

Oh.

Her friend’s uncharacteristic hesitation suddenly makes a lot of sense. Didn’t they talk about this, just a week ago? Didn’t they agree to leave it be? The silence that follows feels like an eternity to Clarke, thoughts and feelings racing through her mind so fast she can’t quite settle on any.

Raven’s a friend.

She’s curious. Tijan’s attractive. Raven’s attractive.

Raven’s a friend.

The only certainty is that her night with Niylah’s had an effect similar to that of slamming a door wide open: Clarke’s been noticing people more, her eyes lingering on shapes and her body thrumming with unfocused sexual energy.

Raven’s a friend.

She sits up, holding by reflex the towel up to cover her chest. Their eyes meet.

Raven’s a friend.

She’d like to.

Yes.

She wants.
The decision makes her blush, the awkwardness of the moment persisting. She gives a small flustered nod, heart hammering inside her chest and turns to Thalia, who either understands more English than she lets on or Clarke and Raven’s body language is more transparent than the blonde would like. The older woman sends her the Trikru equivalent of a knowing smirk and turns around, gathering her utensils.

Clarke follows Raven out into the adjacent corridors on uncertain feet, deaf to anything else but the sound of her heart.

She leaves the towel behind.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Several things happen in close succession then: she’s about to reach her destination when Costia suddenly rounds the corner. And. This is nothing of course. Sure, Clarke’s soothing warmth is currently pressed against her own chest, lips inches away from her collarbone, close enough for Lexa to feel every single intake and exhale. But it is nothing. Yet she’s also not clueless enough to ignore what it looks like. She freezes, swallows once, eyes on Costia, trying to decipher the girl’s minute expressions.

Chapter Notes

2 new scenes for you today! It all starts at "AlphaKilo, this is CharlieBravo, over". We’ve got about 5 scenes left in this chapter and then it’s on for a whole new phase.

Thank you all so so much for the comments, the support, the kudos, the patience!

It’s not awkward.

It definitely wasn’t awkward at the baths, Tijan the perfect bridge to calm the two nervous friends (and relax they did eventually. Several times. But Clarke’s not one to brag).

And it certainly hasn’t been awkward ever since.

The fact that Raven reverted to sleeping in her own bed these past two weeks is simply the result of the girl’s increasingly erratic work and sleep schedule, with odd trips out to Lexa’s warehouses. The fact that neither of the two found the time to visit the baths in question since – at least not together – is simply due to their respective agendas being too full at the moment. And the fact that Raven and her have only exchanged monosyllabic greetings in the same timeframe is because… She’s just busy, ok.

What she’s trying to say is that there’s a perfectly sensible explanation for it all and assuredly nothing more to it.

They bump into each other in the kitchens, of all places. Clarke almost stumbles when she comes to an abrupt halt upon entering the warm room. The brunette is wearing her usual mix of dark skintight
pants and a top of an unidentifiable colour, both splattered in different shades of stains. Leaning with a familiar slouch against the wall and about to bite in a raw carrot, Raven looks like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Oh, uh… hey.”

“Hi, hey. I mean hi.”

She’s known Raven long enough to read it as a little bit too… over enthusiastic to be genuine.

The two fall silent.

It’s not awkward.

“How… Uh… How are things?”

“Oh… things are good. Yeah, not bad.”

It’s the most they’ve spoken to each other in two weeks and Clarke has no idea how to move forward, when the brunette’s eyes continue so obstinately to evade hers.

“Are you here for Heda’s supplies, Clarke kom Skaikru?” a young voice interrupts, oblivious to the stilted exchange.

Clarke realises with a start she failed to notice the third person in the room: Klio.

“Uh, yes. The supplies, sure.”

The young girl gestures to a small package wrapped in a piece of cloth, lying on one of the high counters lining the room.
“I packed it with the usual and added those small buns you like so much,” she explains, throwing a cheeky wink in her direction.

“Oh, mochaf, Klio.”

“You are very much welcome to help yourself to anything else you’d like, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

She’s repeatedly asked Klio and Ajax, twin orphans helping in the kitchens and whom she had won over with her constant gushing over the cooks’ soups (and gluttonous sampling of the compact almond paste buns – a “tower specialty” if she’s to believe them), to call her only by her name, but to no avail. At least it’s not “Wanheda”, so there’s that.

She grabs the bundle, indulging in a small fond smile when she glimpses its contents. She’s come to understand that “supplies”, when it comes to Lexa, essentially means apples – a secret the whole tower seems to be in on. Kilos and Kilos of apples. The girl’s quite steady in her addiction.

She has a small moment of panic when Klio turns to exit the room, which would leave her and Raven alone. The chicken in her hyperventilates at the prospect.

She throws Raven an almost fearful sidelong. “I…” she holds the heavy package up and motions to the door. “So, I… Yeah… I better get going. Uh… All the best.” She hightails it out of there, cringing at her parting words. “All the best”, really?

It’s awkward. Totally awkward.

And it needs to stop.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“So you will be like… Athena, watching over the Achaeans?”

She can tell Aden’s trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice. She hopes Costia never hears of the inexperienced Nightblood likening her to the Greek Goddess of wisdom and war, or she’ll have a
very amused brunette on her hands. Although, on second thought, the combination of a brazen lover and her hands… But this is neither the time nor place.

“That would be an… imaginative and flattering way of putting it, Aden. What do you think, ready to lead your armies into battle, young Diomedes?”

His pupils grow imperceptibly wider and the tip of his ears redden. He nods three times. Oh yes, Aden is definitely very excited.

“But if you’re helping us, who’ll assist the others?”

The oldest Natblida, always so fair.

“I was thinking of Costia and Clarke.”

“Clarke kom Skaikru?”

“Yes. Do you find that choice suitable?”

More frantic nodding. “But… if they get two, then could we as well? Maybe Lincoln could come and help us? Not that you wouldn’t be enough of course, Heda!”

She’s surprised he would mention the disgraced Trikru, considering all they shared was one lesson, at Clarke’s request.

“Did Lincoln tell you and the others about his recent mission?”

“Fighting the pauna? Yes, he spoke about it, a little bit. Iro had many questions.”

“Well, then you know that Lincoln was banished and killing the pauna secured him a pardon. However, as long as the ceremony hasn’t taken place, his interactions with you and I are to be kept to a minimum. I agreed to the drawing lesson and hope you and your fellow Natblida found it useful but that is as far as we can bend our customs for now.”
“He said a boy – about my age – assisted him in hunting the beast.”

Clarke’s second. She suppresses a sigh and remains silent, wondering where Aden’s going with this.

“Will you honour him too, at the ceremony?”

Aden already knows what she’ll say, yet he’s going through the trouble of asking her anyway.

“I cannot, Aden. I will, as promised, pardon Lincoln in exchange for the service he rendered our people. That will be the extent of the ceremony.”

She can see the boy’s carefully choosing his next words. “But doesn’t it seem unfair? The boy bled for you. He risked his life for our people…”

She knew this story wouldn’t let her be. Damn Clarke. It’s a very delicate subject to discuss, particularly with Aden. “The boy is a Stained One, Aden. As Heda, I have to uphold our ways.”

She can tell by the sudden rigidity in his shoulders and back and the widening of his pulis that neither Lincoln nor Clarke had disclosed the boy’s status. That’s something at least. But now she has to deal with a disappointed Natblida. Aden tucks his head to the side, away from her, in an obvious attempt to hide from her eyes and swallows. She waits patiently for him to open up.

“My brother also carried the stain” he finally reveals with a small voice.

The slight tremor gives away how affected the boy is.

This is old news, of course, Titus always makes sure to know everything about each Natblida. But to her knowledge, it’s not something Aden’s ever discussed, at least not with any of his tutors.

He still hasn’t looked up.
“I… I still remember the day they cast him away…”

A sniff.

She tentatively places a comforting hand on his knee. When he turns his head down, as if surprised by the touch, she brings her palm up to his chin and gently nudges his head up, until she’s looking into his brimming eyes.

“I’m very sorry for what happened to your brother, Aden” she offers.

He looks conflicted, probably reluctant for her to see him so vulnerable. A tear slips down. Followed by another. A second sniff.

“How is it possible, Heda, for him to be stained and for me to have night blood? We share the same parents, the same family, the same blood…” His lips give another sad tremble.

She wipes the tears with her fingers.

“I do not know, Aden. These are things that escape even my knowledge.”

“Sometimes” he starts, before choking. “Sometimes, I wonder whether… it’s because of me. Whether he had to be… like that… for me to get night blood.”

Her heart breaks a little bit then. He dips his head down, hastily rubbing at his cheeks and nose with his sleeve, clears his voice and turns his head away again. She withdraws her hand and places it back on his knee with a squeeze.

“I may not master all the secrets of our blood, Aden, but I know for certain that this gift is not to be confused with the danger the stain represents.”

“But isn’t it all the same in the end? Aren’t both… an anomaly? Who decided to differentiate? And why?”
“You already know why, Aden. Black blood is the sign that its carrier is destined to lead Trikru. Whereas the stain is an unfortunate remnant of the old world.”

She expects him to prod further, for not so long ago, Lexa was the one asking these very questions to an irritated Titus.

The boy surprises her though: “Will we be able to communicate through radio?” he rushes out.

She knows he’s trying to change the subject but decides against calling him out on it. “You heard about the radios?”

He nods, eyes still red. “Yes, Clarke kom Skaikru explained it to us. She said she would have a friend of hers, a genius, show us how it works.”

Clarke’s making promises and planning the Natblidas’ schedule without checking with her first. Again. The girl’s incorrigible. Lexa’s starting to think she’ll simply never learn.

“If Clarke announced it, then I suppose we’ll have to organize this presentation. For this first outing, however, I would rather you work without technology from the sky.”

“Skaikru’s weapons must be… formidable” he switches to a different topic again. At her questioning eyes, he adds: “For Skaikru to vanquish the Mountain. For Lincoln and the boy to be able to kill the pauna so quickly and on their own…”

Oh. “I suppose so. They do have items that could turn very useful in the future.”

“Will they give them to us? Will you teach us to fight with them?”

“With their weapons?”

“Yes, Clarke says bullets fired by fayogons can travel for miles. Double or more the range of an arrow.”
She clenches her jaw. Now that is definitely outside of Clarke’s purview. She’s careful to school her features into mild curiosity. “Does she?”

Something in Aden’s sudden hesitation tells her she may not have been so successful at hiding her annoyance. It would stand to reason: she can’t expect to be the only one learning to read the other well during these private sessions. It’s only a matter of time before Aden, Naqib and Iro learn to spot – and use – her tells.

“Shouldn’t we know at least how to fight with or against the weapons that exist out there, Heda? Even if just to know what we may face, one day? You always said we should be prepared for any potential threat and able to wield any resource at our disposal.”

She reaches out, patting tenderly the top of his head. She doesn’t know how to explain that she’s just trying to protect them because what bullets do to bodies has so little to do with the way the clans have been waging wars. And that is without even mentioning the potential havoc Rayvon kom Skaikru can wreak with her inventions. To think that Cage Wallace would call her people savages when their weapons don’t even give an opponent a fighting chance, vulgarly crushing down bones and tearing through flesh in their wake…

She sighs, remembering one of her last conversations with the previous Commander. They had discussed the gradual refusal by a former country (an island, if she remembers correctly) to adopt gunfire. The ban had worked for quite a while, until reality had caught up with them and they had been forced to adopt the despised weapon and spread its use among their armies to ensure their survival. “Modernisation” is inescapable.

She lets her hand softly fall away. “I suppose you should. Doesn’t Titus teach you about the Mountain’s weapons?”

“It’s too… abstract. Half of the time it feels like… he doesn’t even know what he’s talking about, Heda.”

She can see it costs him a lot to criticize his tutor.

“Mhh” she exhales. This is her fault. Gustus used to be the one teaching the Natblidas about weapons and tactics. And though she herself has tried to fill in for Anya’s lessons on hand to hand combat, she’s failed so far to find a suitable replacement for her former bodyguard.
“So it’ll be me, Iro and Silas?”

Aden’s apparently jumped back to this week’s programme.

“‘Yes.”

“With you?”

“And with 20 members of the guard.”

“Against Naqib, Flora and Ruben, aided by Costia and Clarke? I mean, Costia kom Trikru and Clarke kom Skaikru” he corrects himself at the familiarity. “Will they, too, be travelling with members of the guard?”

“Yes, the guards represent the men under your command. I will see if Indra can come help your side as well, for it to be more balanced.”

He nods: “That sounds fair.”

She gives him a small smile and taps his wrist with two fingers.

“How is your injury?”

“Healed, Heda.”

“Healed or healing?” she presses, because Aden isn’t fooling anybody. She’s seen how he still tends to favour his other hand in single combat these days.

He ducks his head, before murmuring in capitulation. “Healing,” quickly followed by: “But it’ll be completely fine by the time the game starts.”
Lexa has to suppress a cringe at the word “game.” She had tried – they had tried, for Titus is just as scandalized, if not more – to impart to the Natblida the seriousness of the impending field exercise. But see, Clarke had gotten to them first, blabbering excitedly about this “wonderful adventure” and “oh how fun this game will be” and from then onwards it had been a lost battle.

If she’s honest, it would be hypocritical for her to complain, as the word “game” is also what enabled her to convince Costia to join. So, all in all, an acceptable bargain.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

------

“He must have been… a good friend.” She needs to tread carefully. Clarke speaking so freely is new, and even though the blonde is undeniably more relaxed these days, Lexa’s very careful not to say or do something that could jolt this delicate development.

“He was” her opponent replies with a sad smile, eyes slightly dimmed. “The best” she continues with a sigh. “I…” She never finishes the sentence, switches to something else instead. “He was Jaha’s son. You met Jaha, right?”

Oh.

That doesn’t match at all the image that had started to form in her mind when wondering what the boy who meant so much to Clarke – Wells – would look and be like. But now that they’re on the topic…

“Is Skaikru in touch with Thelonious Jaha?”

Clarke frowns, shaken out of her reminiscing.

“No. At least, not that I know of. He just left with a group of Sky People one day and hasn’t been seen since…”

She files the information away. She recalls the beaten man who had first approached her in the cell. The arrogance with which he had described her people as “primitive.” Respectful of the younger girl in the beginning, yet foolish enough to believe he could negotiate his way out by taking her captive, oblivious to the fact it had been Lexa in disguise all along. There is no trace in Clarke’s accounts of
Wells, of his father’s ruthless streak.

“I find it difficult to reconcile the stories you shared of your friend with the man I met” she admits. Although Clarke did paint a picture of a very lonely boy...

The blonde gives a small chuckle at that, forced smile back on her lips. “Yeah. Let’s just say their relationship wasn’t the smoothest. Wells was a really sweet guy.” Her smile blooms into something real while she loses herself in a memory, before returning to the present. She looks thoughtfully at Lexa.

“He would have liked playing against you. I think.”

Lexa thinks she may have liked playing against the young Jaha too. It wouldn’t have come anywhere close to her time with the blonde Skaikru, but still, she wouldn’t mind a more… challenging adversary.

“Did he…” Careful. Clarke’s only shared stories of the two of them up in the Sky, nothing about him coming down with her. And she had revealed a while ago that the boy was dead. “Did Wells not make it to the ground?”

Clarke shifts, a dark look crossing her features. The smile turns bitter. “Oh no, he did. When he heard we were being sent down, our initial group you know, the 100, he did something stupid, damaged a tree in order to be arrested and sent down with us.” Her eyes are shining in the candle light. “All just to be with me.”

Yes, tree violence aside, Wells does sound like her kind of guy. Too soft, for sure, but a loyal friend, protective of Clarke.

She won’t push, opts for remaining silent to see if the blonde wants to elaborate.

Clarke swallows a heavy sigh. “He just didn’t make it a week on the Ground. He died on the seventh day.”

What had Thelonious Jaha said in that cell? She combs through her memory of that day. “We did not come all this way to die”? The irony’s not lost on her. The sentence, combined with Marcus Kane’s voluntary sacrifice of slitting his wrist had left a deep impression on Lexa: cornered people with
everything and yet also nothing to lose.

“I am sorry to hear that, Clarke.”

The girl lets one long exhale out. “Yeah, me too.” She ducks her head, dabs a finger at the corner of each eye, before clearing her throat.

This must be some kind of record for Lexa: bringing two people to tears in the course of one day.

“Anyway, so when are we going on that Nightblood trip?”

The full story on Wells will apparently have to wait. Which is fine, Lexa’s patient. Eager to continue catching these glimpses of Clarke’s life – these small precious insights she’s collecting and which, when assembled, build an ever more complex and fascinating whole – but patient enough to let the blonde come to her.

“The group you and Costia will be shadowing should leave in two days’ time. You will benefit from a half day lead over mine.”

“Costia and I?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

Lexa stops, furrowing her brow. Costia had been the one suggesting she join Clarke’s crew instead of her own (“why don’t we make this a bit more interesting?” had been her lover’s exact words, with a dangerous twinkle in her eyes). She hadn’t hinted at any disagreements or tensions between them.

“Is that a… source of concern?”

“No, no, of course not, no. It’s great! Costia’s great! No problem at all. I just… I didn’t know, that’s all.”
She returns to the board, frowning, perplexed by the blonde’s fumbling but pushing it aside for now. Let’s see: if she moves her rook, but no then Clarke would have a clear opening to… Any displacement of her pawn that side would leave her knight wide open. And she’s lost her two bishops already. (She’s well aware of the rather childish part of her that systematically sacrifices the bishops first.) Mhh. Is it possible Clarke is actually getting better at this the more they play? Or are Lexa’s – Nimzo’s – go-to diversions getting a little old?

She continues to ponder her options. At one point, Clarke sways forward, no doubt to get a better view of Lexa’s positions, before jolting back. She doesn’t really pay the girl any mind, too concentrated. The blonde repeats the movement a second time – that must be some serious plotting. Is she missing something? Is one of her troops (she doesn’t like calling them “pieces”) more exposed than she thought? Lexa only registers the girl’s antics in the periphery of her vision and settles on moving one of her pawns. It’s not a game-winning move but her options are currently rather limited, so it’ll have to do.

She looks up.

Oh.

Clarke is anything but scheming. It would appear the blonde is… dozing off, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, her upper body dipping a little bit more forward with every breath out (leaving a little bit too little to the imagination). Before a reflex thrusts her chest back, seemingly without waking her. It’s all quite… unsettling and leaves Lexa rather indecisive.

Now, what to do...

She ponders her options for a short while. Her mind made up, she approaches the Skaikru quietly and manages to gently coax her to recline and lie down on her side, on the lounging chair. She finds a small pillow to prop the girl’s head up and promptly ignores the small whimper of contentment that escapes the blonde’s lips once she’s completely settled. Clarke must be really tired, for she remains deeply asleep throughout the whole process.

“Unsettling” is maybe not quite the right word. “Endearing,” maybe?

Lexa could leave, return to her own quarters, now that the game is clearly postponed. Costia will soon be back from her short scouting mission ahead of the outing with the Natblida. She decides to stay. Leaning back in her own deep and comfortable armchair, she tucks one foot under her thigh.
and attacks My System’s third part.

She doesn’t manage to read much. The words don’t seem to form into full-fledged sentences. Her mind keeps wandering to the week ahead. While her eyes... her eyes stray towards the sleeping blonde. She must admit she’s slowly warming up to her shorter locks and tousled look.

Clarke mutters something unintelligible in her sleep.

Yes. Endearing.

She doesn’t know how long she stays stuck on that one page but when she decides to call it a night, Clarke is still deep in her slumber. She could leave the blonde here: she’s safe and could then make her way back to her room on her own once she’d wake. Lexa decides however that the most considerate course of action is to take the blonde herself, now, to her quarters.

Clarke doesn’t even twitch when she delicately scoops her up, right hand holding the girl’s head against her shoulder. Any self-respecting Trikru would have had a knife at her throat by now. Skaikru are truly not of this world.

The real dilemma comes when, upon arriving at Clarke’s chambers, her guards inform her that Rayvon is not present. It’s probably incredibly forward and presumptuous of her, maybe even unwelcome, but, well… the two are an item after all, so… She turns around and makes her way to Rayvon’s quarters instead.

Yes, this is not impolite. Lexa herself would appreciate it if someone were to bring her a sleepy Costia.

Would she do this for any ambassador? No, of course not. But Clarke’s not just an ambassador to them – to her – is she? She’s…

Several things happen in close succession then: she’s about to reach her destination when Costia suddenly rounds the corner. And. This is nothing of course. Sure, Clarke’s soothing warmth is currently pressed against her own chest, lips inches away from her collarbone, close enough for Lexa to feel every single intake and exhale. But it is nothing. Yet she’s also not clueless enough to ignore what it looks like.
She freezes, swallows once, eyes on Costia, trying to decipher the girl’s minute expressions.

Her lover seems just as rooted to the spot, taking in the scene. She’s still wearing her long assemblage of water-proof fabrics to protect from the rain, hair tousled and damp, her face wearing a day’s worth of riding at a fast pace. Then she gives a small shake of her head with an exaggerated sigh, eyes narrowed, yet curious. The gesture dislodges a couple of water drops, they roll from her forehead down her cheek, assemble around her lips, reach her chin to noisily drip on the floor – Lexa follows their path, suddenly very distracted.

“And where, pray tell, are we carrying the Skaikru ambassador at this late hour?”

“To Rayvon kom Skaikru.” Lexa’s voice is maybe not as firm as she’d like.

Costia looks with bewilderment at her then. She seems about to say something but decides against it, an amused glint slowly flitting through her eyes.

“Well then, who am I to stand in your way? By all means, let’s pay Rayven a visit.”

She gestures for Lexa to continue and falls into step at her side. When they reach the Skaikru’s chambers, she cocks her head and lets Lexa awkwardly try and knock on the door, while making sure not to jostle the blonde package in her arms.

A disgruntled Rayvon Lexa’s now quite used to see, answers the door on the third knock. There’s this moment – it feels very long to her, maybe because said package isn’t as light as one’d think – where the artisan looks from her, to Clarke, to Costia, back to Clarke. And again. And again. On the fourth round, Lexa discretely clears her throat and motions for the Skaikru to let them cross the threshold. She’s a little bit unsure what to say, now that she’s in front of Clarke’s lover.

But the brunette doesn’t budge for another moment, an embarrassed grimace on her lips, before she huffs: “You know what, I’m not even going to ask.”

She opens the door wider for Lexa to step in. This is not exactly the warm welcome she was expecting from a relieved lover, but it’s too late in the night to ponder the girl’s lukewarm reception. Lexa deposits Clarke on the bed, catches herself before she’d be tempted to tuck one of the girl’s rebellious locks behind her ear.
Rayvon doesn’t seem to really know what to do, now that Clarke’s comfortably situated in her bed, but that’s for them to sort out.

When she straightens up and her gaze crosses Costia’s, there’s a torn look on the girl’s face, one that disappears immediately. She joins her outside and the two walk quietly towards their quarters. Costia wordlessly slips her hand into hers and Lexa thinks that maybe, even though she has a feeling this is not the last she’ll hear about the position Costia found her in tonight, it’ll be ok.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

-------

It’s with a sinking feeling that Clarke wakes up in unfamiliar – or at least unexpected – territory. That hasn’t happened in a while, but the instantaneous rush of alarm is there all the same. The fact that she quickly places the room as Raven’s quarters does alleviate her initial second of panic somewhat. The fact that said girl is currently sitting on the floor, at the foot of the bed, staring at her with an unimpressed tilt to her lips, however, is… very confusing.

“What the hell am I doing in your room?” she groans, rubbing her eyes. She feels hot, her clothes clinging stiffly to her skin. She’s wearing the same ones as yesterday she notes. She passes a hand over her mouth.

“And a very lovely morning to you too, sunshine. I personally had a horrible night. What about you?”

“Ray…”

Probably sensing the blonde’s distress, the brunette deigns to reply honestly: “The Commander brought you here last night. You were out cold.”

“Lexa?”

“No, the other commander.”

Clarke stops. What other Commander?
“Yes, Lexa, you idiot” Raven comes to her help, seeing as Clarke is obviously not catching on.

Clarke is… lost. She pinches her right arm. It hurts. So this is really happening. What did she do last night? She can remember playing chess against Lexa in her study… Remembers talking about Wells… She must have fallen asleep and for whatever reason, the Trikru carried her here… Fuck, how does one ask the Commander of the 12 clans why she chose to bring you to your friend’s room instead of your own after you bewilderingly dozed off in the middle of a game?

“Why the hell would she do that?”

“Yeah, look, beats me. That girl is weird. She starts all our conversations with either detailed descriptions of the weather outside or waxing poetic about my workshop’s ceiling. Complete weirdo.” She stretches with a grimace and gets with some difficulty onto her knees before rising to her feet. “Yikes” she grumbles, stretching out her protesting limbs a second time.

“Wait… Did you sleep on the floor?”

“Well, where else was I supposed to sleep?” Raven replies in an accusatory tone.

“Oh, I don’t know, in your freaking bed maybe? This thing is huge, Ray!”

Raven rubs nervously at the back of her neck. “Yeah well, considering how weird you’re being about… everything, I’m not particularly looking forward to creating new… awkward situations, ok!”

“I’m being weird? You’re the one who’s been avoiding me for three weeks! This project to finish, that place to visit, this lame excuse and that unbelievable pretext…”

Raven looks at her as if she’s grown two heads overnight. “You’re not even able to look me in the eye, Clarke!”

“And you’re not able to string together a full sentence without fumbling in my presence!”

Raven counters with: “Oh, because “All the best” was so eloquent!”
The blonde flushes at that. Her friend does have a point. Clarke hasn’t exactly… been relaxed or articulate in the brunette’s presence either, lately.

“I thought “All the best” was actually pretty inspired” she snickers, with a grin.

And it must be infectious, for the mechanic promptly follows with a grin of her own. The two girls look at each other for a beat before shaking their heads at how ridiculous they’re being and laughing it out.

“Man, it’s good to have you back!” Raven exclaims between giggles.

“For real though. It has been awkward. How do we move past that?”

“We just do. There’s no manual, no 12 step programme. We’re friends. We’re hot. We got kind of curious. Kind of horny. We fucked. I was into it. You were definitely into it. I was amazing. You were… what’s the word I’m looking for? Oh yes: average. It’s done.”

“You bitch” Clarke chuckles out, before getting back on track: “So what… we go back to how things were before, to being friends? Just like that?”

“Yeah! Now come on, get out of my bed, you spoilt princess. I’m hungry and I have to tell you about this latest thing Tijan does with his tongue.”

“Ew, I don’t want details and certainly not over breakfast.”

“Deal with it, Griff. You’re my friend. Probably best friend at this point – let’s be honest, it’s not like there’s a line of hopeful candidates queuing outside – and well, that’s what friends do. They talk. They over share. Part of the package. And my best friend just had sex after a dry spell of God knows how long and I haven’t even debriefed about that sexy experience. Now chop chop, let’s get moving!”
“So what am I supposed to do while you two crazy kids are gone mentoring the little hedas? Heck, I may even miss the Commander!” Then, when noticing Costia’s raised eyebrows, Raven promptly adds: “No offence Costia, but your girlfriend and I kind of have history.”

The warrior smiles and shakes her head slightly. “None taken. I believe you are not the only one in that situation” she throws with a loaded look in Clarke’s direction.

“Well, it’s not like you’re short on projects, right? Plus, we won’t be gone that long” Clarke gets them back on track.

“Yeah but tinkering on my own’s no fun.”

“Isn’t that kind of your thing though, working on your own in your atelier? It’s what you like doing…”

“It is, it is. I mean, don’t tell Monty I said that, but sometimes I could really use someone to bounce ideas off of. And well, he’s not too bad at that, you know. Speaking of which, have you figured out what you’re going to do when we go back to Arkadia?”

She takes a long swig of the same honeyed concoction Lincoln had introduced her to a couple of months back, only this batch is much less bitter and served hot in small glasses. And more treacherous, Clarke notes, as the trio is already on their fourth small serving bottle.

Costia turns a questioning look to Clarke, small frown creasing her brow: “You are leaving?”

“Uh… No, I mean… eventually, yes, of course. These negotiations have been going on forever as it is. I’ve been here for…” She counts it out on her fingers: “Shit, it’s already been 8 months! We should soon be able to wrap it up. And when that’s done and the alliance is officialized, then there’s no need for me to remain in Polis…”

“Yeah, only Griff here, is in the middle of an existential crisis, because she doesn’t know what to do back home and this ungrateful artist refuses to become my assistant, even though I’m hiring!” Raven fills Costia in.
“Like you’d want me as your assistant. I know nothing about mechanics, wires, frequencies or any of that stuff” she replies playfully.

“What is it you like to do?” Costia asks her then, squinting her eyes in her direction.

Clarke passes a nervous hand in her hair to shake it out of her face. She feels strangely vulnerable, sharing these particular doubts and dilemmas with Costia.

“That’s the thing… I… There’s a few things I already know I do like. Drawing for instance I really love. Capturing special moments on paper… Trying to translate a person’s personality into a picture…”

“You’re welcome. This feels as good a time as any to start discussing an agent’s fee” Raven butts in cheekily.

Clarke just shakes her head at her friend’s antics, while Costia silently prompts her to continue.

“Then, well, my mom trained me as a healer, so that I could do. I’m not great at it, but I reckon I’m not bad either, you know. It was fun playing the part of a village doctor back in Sinchuk, so, with a bit of coaching I could get good at it. But I’m not sure I want to do this in Arkadia… I don’t know. Remember the project I told you about, the hospital we want to build to cater for the whole area?”

The two girls nod.

“Well, that’s going to be pretty awesome if it does see the light of day. But I don’t think I want to be, you know, a manager, worrying about the day-to-day problems that will invariably arise. And I don’t think I want to be a head of department either. You know, head of nursing, or head of the maternity etc.”

“Wow, you guys are really talking big, if you’re envisioning entire departments, Griff…”

“Yes, I told you: it’s a really ambitious project.”

“Lexa looks quite keen on making it happen” Costia reveals.
“She does. And it’s great. It’s just… I don’t know how I could contribute to it.”

“Do you want to?”

“I think so. At least the planning and launching phase, they sound the most challenging, you know.”

“And my girl does like a challenge!” Raven throws with a wink in her direction, downing her glass.

The “my girl” nickname is… new. Raven’s attempt at mocking their ridiculous embarrassment after the bathhouse. And surprisingly… it kind of works.

“I’m sure Lexa mentioned there would be need for extensive negotiations with the villages potentially impacted by the project…” Costia offers.

“But see, that’s the thing. First of all, let’s be real here: I’m not a negotiator. I don’t know how I got appointed to that role. Most of the time I have no idea what I’m doing, how to best approach an ambassador, which arguments to prioritize in order to change their mind… And with Lexa… fuck, it’s more… fighting and shouting than anything else! Second, even if I were any good, there’s other people who’d be much better at it than me.”

“Like who?” Raven wants to know.

“Well, Lincoln for instance. With the kill order revoked, he could become the Chancellor’s liaison for all the neighbouring villages… I know Kane’s been thinking about it…”

Costia looks thoughtful. “Lincoln is indeed a useful resource that Skaikru would do well to use to its full potential. Although it remains to be seen what Octavia and Lincoln will do, now that he is a free man and she continues to prove herself admirably as Indra’s second. That being said, it looks to me you are unaware of how… talented you are at obtaining things, Clarke.” She pauses then and reaches out, resting her hand on Clarke’s forearm. “Your… peculiar dynamic with Lexa aside, you’ve accomplished something quite extraordinary here. Do you remember our conversation on the way to Polis? None of the clans were on Skaikru’s side, except for Trikru. Within a few months, you’ve been able, through discussions with their ambassadors, to gain their respect and awaken a certain curiosity about Skaikru’s potential contribution to their people’s welfare. That is not to be minimized.”
Raven nods vigorously: “What she said! Although, I do think we should emphasize a little bit more the role a genius mechanic played in all that acceptance and a little bit less Clarke’s blue eyes and great rack, you know.”

Raven it would appear, has had a little bit too much to drink. And the task of carrying her from the night market all the way up to her rooms in the Tower is probably going to fall to her. Great.

Lincoln suddenly appears out of nowhere, slightly out of breath. He seizes her elbow but doesn’t pull.

“Clarke, you need to come with me. Damian got into a fight. I broke it off but the group he was battling it out with, had already landed a couple of hits. He’s in our room.”

Shit.

She’s out of her seat in a jump. Costia lets her arm go and nods: “Don’t worry about Raven, I’ll get her back to her quarters safely.”

It’s all Clarke needs to spring into action. She catches Raven’s insulted protest that “she can handle her liquor just fine” and that “she wants to see Damian too”, before rounding the corner at full sprint, hot on Lincoln’s heels. Her mind is one single prayer on repeat: “please, please, let him be alright!”

“**You have got** to be kidding me!”

“I do not make it a habit to “kid”, Clarke” Lexa replies, proud she remembers the Skaikru expression yet at the same time unnerved they’re having this conversation at all.

“Damian **deserves** to be there. His participation in this mission **earned** him a place on that stage. Show him he has your gratitude, acknowledge his involvement” she volleys back heatedly.
“You do not understand…”

“Here we go again!” the blonde interrupts her, throwing her hands up.

She chooses to ignore the sarcasm and over the top dramatics and closes her eyes for a second, taking a deep breath.

She’s of a patient disposition. She knows that, because it’s been pointed out many times before. She inherited the trait from her father, or at least that’s what he used to claim proudly to visitors. She can almost see him, calmly trying to bring her mother down from one of her customary tirades, but can’t remember what used to draw the woman’s ire. Some act of mischief by her or her sister, most probably.

And it’s not that her patience hasn’t been tested in the past. Costia knows a thing or two about that. But Clarke’s capacity to launch into agitated rants in the blink of an eye, all bare teeth and all-consuming rage, can be… trying sometimes. She exhales, before starting over.

“The challenge was issued to Lincoln. To lift a banishment that was his only and of his own doing.”

She ignores the blonde’s scoffed: “Oh, is that what we’re calling it these days? ‘Banishment?’ It was a floating kill order, Lexa!”

Still composed, she forges on, unperturbed. “Lincoln fulfilled the terms I set. In exchange, I will now lift the order on his head. Hence the ceremony. Your… The boy was never involved in this matter. The fact that he chose, of his own accord, to accompany Lincoln is irrelevant to me and I fail to see why I should contemplate having him there – leaving aside for a second his status.”

“His stain you mean” the blonde spits at her.

And here it is: the real reason behind Clarke’s anger.

“The Stained Ones are a matter of concern for the 12 clans, Clarke. Rest assured that I’ll seek your council on topics pertaining to Skaikru when it is required.”
She chalks the unnecessary bite in her tone up to being absolutely done with this unwelcome exchange. In fact, she was done with it the minute it started. Does Clarke not realize Lexa wouldn’t allow any ambassador to waste her time on the fate of a single one of their subjects, a child no less, let alone in such a tone?

“Damian is my second. Anything pertaining to him concerns me” the blonde parrots back. “Just yesterday, a bunch of assholes ganged up on him and beat him up. You can change all that. You can show your people they are as deserving of respect as anyone else!”

Costia had filled her in on what had happened and she can see the subject is quite an emotional one for the blonde. Although Lexa’s priority when hearing of the altercation had of course been to make sure the boy was alright, she can not reveal that, not even to the Skaikru.

The fact of the matter is: Clarke is overstepping, yet again. A reminder of exactly who she’s in the presence of shouldn’t hurt. “I am aware of your rather unorthodox relationship. It is only out of respect to you, that I did not have him chased out of Polis the minute you brought him here.”

Unlike with anyone else, her attempted intimidation only serves to fuel the girl’s fire. Something Lexa should have anticipated. She already feels drained, just by looking at Clarke reeling back to better charge again.

“Who the FUCK do you think you are? Where do you get off? We’ve been through this before, you do not get to decide who lives and who dies, who deserves to start and live a life and who doesn’t!”

She clenches her jaw hard. “And therein lies the heart of our misunderstanding, Clarke. Because that is, in a nutshell, exactly what I do.” She throws one last look at the blonde before striding out.

One step forward, three steps back. It’s… disheartening.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

In the end, she’s the one to bring it up. She’s not entirely sure why. It hasn’t particularly been on her mind. Maybe it’s because of how off-balance the fight she just had with the girl in question has left her. Maybe it’s because she’s smart enough to know she’d better force this conversation before it bursts out of Costia at an inopportune moment. Or maybe she truly is a clumsy fool when it comes to women. Either way, it’s happening and it’s happening now.
The timing’s ironic because exactly a year ago – give or take a couple of days – Costia walked out on her, pulling the rug from under her feet. It had left her going through the motions, still with a sense of purpose of course, but without any warmth or taste to her life.

“You haven’t said anything about… Clarke” she starts with resolve, dread she’d be loathe to acknowledge pooling in the pit of her stomach.

Costia’s reclining in one of the two small lounging chairs in front of the hearth. She doesn’t look up from her book when she asks: “Clarke Clarke or you and Clarke?”

Lexa swallows and decides against playing this game. The silence stretches on.

Costia finally turns to face her, closing her book with a resigned sigh. “What is there to say, niron?”

She feels brave, so she crosses the room in just two strides and takes a seat next to her. Close, but not touching.

“The other day, what you saw, I was just carrying her to bed. Her bed. It wasn’t…”

“I know.”

Costia’s the one to reach out, which is a good sign, she thinks. She cradles one of her hands in hers and diligently starts tracing the lines, creases and scars on her palm with one of her fingers. The touch is soothing, but it gives her lover an excuse not to look at her. And if Lexa’s learnt anything, it’s that… that is not a good sign.

“I… I understand. What it is you see in her” Costia continues. “Clarke is…” she seems at a loss, shakes her head, frowns and changes course: “She is not your equal.”

“Not in title, no. But her spirit is…” she leaves the sentence incomplete, not sure of the word she’s looking for.
Costia doesn’t reply, just nods her head in response. She pauses and grits her teeth. Her fingers stop their pattern but she keeps Lexa’s hands in hers. “I love you enough to know how formidable the two of you would be together.”

It sounds… rueful, painful and sad. As if dragged out of her under duress. Lexa doesn’t move, doesn’t make a sound. She’s probably stopped breathing too.

Another pause. “And I respect her enough to be able to see she could be good for you, in her own way.”

She gets up with a huff, letting go of Lexa’s hand. “You can’t… I never told you this but shortly before she was taken, Leïla made me promise something to her. She must have sensed trouble was brewing, that sixth sense of hers. She made me promise to love you completely and unselfishly. To put your needs above my own, always. And at the time…” She shakes her head, finally looking into Lexa’s eyes. “At the time, it seemed so unquestionably self-evident. You were my heda, my lover, everything. You still are. So, I promised, with no hesitation whatsoever. And here I am, breaking my word. Too selfish to step aside. Too in love with you to let you go.”

The words. The tone. The promise. It’s all too much. Too heartbreaking. Too raw. How rubbish she must be at this, if her lover still thinks she wants another. She gets up, comes to stand in front of the dark-skinned girl and cradles her face in her hands, bringing their foreheads together. The gesture is too forceful to be gentle, yet too earnest not to be caring.

“I do not want you to let me go” she whispers with naked honesty. She needs Costia to comprehend that. It’s too important. She’s too important. “I want you. I do not want to be with her.”

“You should. She would be good for you.”

“You’re good for me.”

“I want to believe I am” she starts, before correcting: “I know I am.” She sighs. “And yet it’s not enough, is it?”

“It is, Costia. It is. You are. Beyond anything I could have ever hoped for. You’re everything to me too.”
Costia gives her a small sad smile then, their foreheads still pressed together, noses brushing each other.

“I understand. That you can’t say it. That you probably don’t even allow yourself to think it. It is who you are after all. That loyalty and honour. It’s part of why I love you.” She kisses her. It’s gentle. Soft. Sad. Not broken, yet not whole either. She leans back, tenderly brushes a strand of hair behind Lexa’s ear and whispers wistfully: “You could never lie to me.”

“Costia…” Lexa doesn’t want to let her go, but her lover’s hands are already gently prying hers away from her face.

“I have to go. Wulan challenged me to a sparring session in the fighting pits tonight.”

“Will you…” she swallows, not sure this conversation’s meaning has fully sunk in yet. “Will you be back?”

Costia grabs parts of her guard uniform and reaches for the door. She doesn’t turn back but gives a small nod before exiting.

Things are… inexplicably tense. She replayed in her head all their interactions as of late, but to no avail: Clarke can’t think of any situation, of any potential faux-pas, that could explain Costia’s sudden more reserved disposition.

And it… she doesn’t like it.

So she left the brooding Trikru to her own devices and has been trying to engage in conversation with Lexa’s little ducklings instead. And that… well, let’s just say she still has a lot to learn about Trikru culture.

“What did you three want to become, before you were chosen to… train as the next Heda?” she tries.
She can see Naqib’s frown all the way from here, Flora’s disconcerted tilt of her head to the side. Thankfully, Ruben barrels through his friends’ surprise, as eager as always: “We know from the moment we are born that we are Natblida, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

Yes, ok, she figured as much, what with Ontari’s “black blood reveal” and all, but that’s not what she meant.

“But imagine you hadn’t been… gifted with black blood, what do you think you would have liked to become? Warriors? Traders? Farmers?”

This follow-up question is met with the exact same startled expressions. Only this time around, even Ruben seems at a loss. And the resemblance with Lexa’s face of puzzled concentration is… uncanny.

It’s Flora who tries to set her straight: “We… We were destined to be Natblida, Clarke kom Skaikru. Imagining another life is… impossible.”

“It is the highest of honours” Naqib chimes in, slipping a little bit further forward on his horse, back straight.

Well, there goes that conversation, then.

Flora surprises her by continuing thoughtfully: “But my sister is learning to be a healer. There is honour in becoming a healer, I would think. Maybe that is a path my spirit will choose in another life.”

Clarke latches on to this titbit of information, desperate for anything but silence. “Oh, really? My mother trained me as a healer as well!”

“I know, Clarke kom Skaikru” Flora replies, almost rolling her eyes. “You tutored her. She told me all about it, could not speak of anything else but you for months afterwards.”

She… What? This can’t be right…
“I… are you sure that was me, Flora?”

The girl scoffs good-naturedly. “Of course it was you. You stayed in her village for some time last year. You helped a girl in her class.”

Wait… No way…

“Sinchuk? Your sister lives in Sinchuk?”

“Sha, together with my parents.”

The revelation immediately transports her to a time that seems so long ago now, so far removed from the life she’s living here, in Polis, that it leaves her disoriented. In the past year, she returned to her people and faced some of her demons. Yet… there’s still so much left to do and so much lingering uncertainty.

The resemblance finally clicks: “You’re related to Soko?”

Flora’s visibly pleased that she memorized her sister’s name and nods happily.

“Sha, she will be honoured to hear Wanheda remembers her.”

What a small world after all! She recalls the eager student very clearly from both her stint in Sinchuk and the girl’s subsequent visit to Arkadia.

“Shabir didn’t tell me a Nightblood was found in Sinchuk…”

“My family only moved to Sinchuk after I came to Polis for training. They fled the fighting at the border with Ice Nation.”

That Shabir had definitely talked about: waves and waves of refugees, most continuing onwards, but some finding a new home in Sinchuk, despite the persistent threat of the Mountain.
“What is Soko up to these days? There wasn’t anybody to train her when I left Sinchuk.”

The girl gives a solemn nod. “Heda chose her to train with your people, in preparation of a… big health post, to be built near Lake Audo.”

Clarke almost falls off her horse at the news. The hospital? Her mother didn’t tell her anything about starting trainings already. She’s delighted to hear things are moving in the right direction, yet a little bit hurt she wasn’t kept in the loop. But this is neither the time nor the place.

“She instructor is Jackson kom Skaikru” Flora continues.

She experiences a flash of… envy for a hot second. The idea of being out there, working on such a symbolic and collaborative project day in day out, while training young Trikru talent is appealing. If she’s honest, more so than hashing out finer alliance details with Lexa over a chess game she’ll inevitably lose. Yet, at the same time, there’s something about Polis, something in Polis, that makes her almost feel melancholy at the idea of leaving. Strange.

“And how is she liking it?”

Flora regards her for a minute, trying to gauge how honest she can be.

“The cohabitation on site seems… not devoid of challenges. She says that certain of your people’s customs are complicated to understand. But other than that, Jackson seems a capable teacher she can learn much from and he’s shown himself to be open to some of her suggestions.”

Clarke couldn’t possibly imagine anybody not liking Jackson. The guy is gentle care personified. She pushes any impudent memory of her aborted tryst with the doctor far far away and laughs openly at what must no doubt be a very politically correct rephrasing by Flora of her sister’s rants.

“I imagine our customs must indeed come across as quite peculiar. I’m glad to hear your sister chose to persevere in that field. Your parents must be very proud of their two over-achieving daughters” she throws in the girl’s direction.

Flora becomes beet red at that and Naqib, who Clarke’s noticed never misses a chance to tease her,
jumps on the opportunity to kindly mock her, quickly joined by Ruben. Flora ignores the two boys and straightens her back in her saddle. It takes her a while to recover from the compliment, but when she does a small shadow passes over her face. Naqib, who’s much more perceptive than he lets on, ceases his ribbing on the spot.

“I imagine they are.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are not… We do not see each other” is all the girl replies.

Clarke frowns. Sinchuk is what, 2 to 3 days ride away from Polis, why wouldn’t Flora be in touch with her parents, especially considering she seems to be talking with her sister?

Naqib tactfully comes to the girl’s aid: “We are not allowed to see or talk to our families, Clarke kom Skaikru.”

This doesn’t make any sense. “But… with your sister…”

Naqib throws a surreptitious look over his shoulder, lowering his voice: “Flora’s been sneaking letters to her sister in and out of Polis” he reveals. “You can not tell anyone, Clarke kom Skaikru! Titus would be very displeased to learn about it.”

She nods gravely.

“Why just Flora, then. Why not all of you?” she whispers back.

Naqib shakes his shaggy jet-black hair, a touch of sadness in his eyes. “None of our families can read and write.”

“So… none of you all…” She choques, the idea too disturbing. “You haven’t… But your parents, they must want to know how you’re doing…”
“They would be notified if anything were to happen to one of us.”

“So, no news is good news?”

Naqib seems to ponder her words, the expression clearly unfamiliar, before nodding with a surprised frown. “Yes, no news, good news.”

Clarke swallows down her shock. “You can trust me with your secret’ she swears, trying to be worthy of the faith placed in her.

They make for an odd little trio: Naqib, ever the overconfident fighter with his two curved daggers slung snugly over his back; Flora, the quiet and cautious scout, most agile with a spear twice her size; and Ruben, impulsive and brave, his axe firmly in his grasp.

She understands that she somehow earned the right to be here, by launching the idea, but is still at a loss as to what she could possibly have to offer to aid their small party in their mission.

She’s happy for the chance to leave Polis though. Spending an entire day at Damian’s bedside, trying to clean the wounds on his bloody knuckles, while the boy laid on his side and stubbornly kept his back turned to her, facing the wall, refusing to let her see the rest of his body, had been trying, to say the least. If she’s honest with herself, the frustration had no doubt been part of the reason why she had come out so strong in her subsequent fight with Lexa, which had put a – hopefully temporary – damper on their interactions and led to an unofficial suspension of their chess games.

Is that why Costia is giving her the cold shoulder?

She shakes the negative thoughts away. Damian is in good hands, with a very capable Lincoln and an overbearing Raven at his side. And Lexa is far away, coaching her own little troupe.

“I remember your sister was indeed quite good in reading and writing. I taught an English class in Sinchuk for a brief time.”

Flora nods, again clearly already in the know. Clarke can’t help but wonder what the young Soko had to say about her new and rather inexperienced teacher at the time.
“Clarke kom Skaikru” Naqib tries to catch her attention. He throws his two co-riders a short conspiratorial look, before turning, determined, to her. “We were wondering if maybe… the messaging device you spoke of the other day…”

“Messaging device?”

“Voice messaging?”

“Oh, you mean the radios?”

“Sha. We thought that maybe, the… radios… could help us communicate with our families.”

Oh boy… Of course they could and she’s incredibly flattered they’re coming to her about it, but she can’t possibly promise the three now hopeful pair of eyes trained on her anything before discussing the matter with Lexa first.

She shifts uncomfortably in her saddle. “Uh… That’s a very clever idea. And I’m pretty sure they could, I guess, I mean, provided your parents’ villages are within the radius currently covered by the Tower. But you should probably discuss this with the Commander, no?”

Naqib nods, serious. “We will. We just wanted to know whether it was a possibility.”

“Tell you what, maybe we can check in with Raven first, when we return. And then make a plan on how best to present it to Lexa?”

The trio looks very pleased with her proposal.

“Raven is the gifted inventor you spoke of?” Flora wants to clarify.

Clarke chuckles. “Yes, she is, though don’t call her that, her ego is already big enough as it is.”

“Is Raven your partner, Clarke kom Skaikru?” comes from a pink Ruben and Clarke can see from the corner of her eyes his two co-conspirators lean in.
“Uh…” The question comes as such a surprise, it takes her a while to formulate a response. “You mean, life partner? Or lover?”

Ruben is now scarlet red and nods in response.

Clarke bursts into laughter. “No. You’re not the first ones to ask me that though” she reveals, throwing a fond look back to Costia who’s riding some way back.

“Are you open?” Ruben wants to know in a hoarse voice.

Open? Clarke likes to think of herself as someone who’s rather open, yes. But open to what? Or… is that… the Trikru word for bisexual?

Flora tsks the boy and corrects him, while Naqib sniggers: “Ruben would like to know if you have anyone in your life.”

“Oh!” She turns in her saddle to look at the boy in question, who looks back almost terrified. She tries to calm him down with a playful smile. “As a matter of fact, I do not, Ruben kom Trikru. Why, do you have someone in mind?”

It seems to be a little bit too much for the boy. His two friends dissolve into mocking giggles while he tries his best not to fall off his horse.

The whole exchange leaves Clarke feeling lightly wistful.

---

“How was the boy when we left?”

Oh, so now she’s decided to speak to her? Clarke hesitates for a split second between pettily ignoring Costia or making peace, before giving in.
“Damian was… ok. He didn’t let me care for his wounds, but he didn’t seem to be in too much pain either. And Lincoln – because of course Damian lets Lincoln in and not me – says he was fine” she replies, unable to prevent some petulance from seeping into her voice.

Costia nods. “I am glad to hear it.” She keeps her eyes trained on the three youngsters currently caring for their horses.

Ruben dragged two heavy buckets of water back from a nearby stream, Naqib is busy feeding them and Flora is grooming hers, while checking for bruises and cuts.

Clarke thinks she’s going to leave it at that, uncertain how to deal with a moody Costia.

But the dark-skinned girl continues: “You shouldn’t push her too much, you know.”

Oh. There’s no question as to who she’s referring to. It’s about her shouting match with Lexa, right? So, does that mean it is the reason for the girl’s attitude today? She wants to interject, but Costia beats her to it.

“She’s already improved their situation tremendously.”

“Really? Because from where I stand, Costia, it looks like the so called “Stained Ones” are shunned, abandoned and left to die. All because of some supposed imperfect development.”

The Trikru releases a tired sigh, still supervising the Naiblida from afar. Flora’s now moved on to checking her horse’s hooves and Ruben’s off to refill the now empty buckets.

“I understand that the boy has come to… matter to you.”

“The boy has a name. Damian. And he doesn’t just… Damian’s my family now. I don’t know how else to explain it. What’s happening to him, it’s so unfair. I want to be there for him, just like he was for me… He’s the one who found me, back in the forest. He brought me – a complete stranger – to a place where he was anything but welcome and stuck around for as long as it took me to recover.”

Costia frowns: “You were injured?”
“I… that’s not the point. The point is Damian or anyone else in his situation, they’re just like you and me. Nobody deserves to be treated this way! They’re her subjects, too, her people. How can she tolerate such harassment?”

“Previous Commanders used to actively hunt them, Clarke” Costia reveals, angling her face towards the blonde. “At least now they have a fighting chance. There is only so much Lexa can change.”

And fuck. Seriously? The thought of hunting campaigns makes her shudder. But she’s too… riled up to concede, doesn’t want to try and see things from Lexa’s point of view. Doesn’t want to understand, or worse, empathise. Not tonight.

Naqib interrupts their tense exchange, calling for a strategy meeting around the fire. Clarke grabs her bedroll on the way and is surprised to see Costia unfold hers next to it. Maybe this isn’t a fight. The thought is… reassuring.

---

Costia’s a Godsend. The girl didn’t just pack supplies to last them for the two to three weeks this outing is supposed to take. She also brought that honeyed liquor Clarke’s developed a soft spot for, enough for an entire regiment. The blonde takes a contented sip before passing the waterskin back to the Trikru.

“Thalia wanted to know if she should expect you back at the Baths any time soon.”

Something in her tone tells Clarke the girl knows exactly why she’s avoided the place these past weeks.

She grimaces tipsily. “Ugh, you know.” She brings her two hands up to her face, wishing she were able to hide right now. “Alright, who talked? Was it Thalia?”

Costia shakes her head no, smirking. “Tijan is a good friend of mine.”

She groans. “Of course he is! God forbid there’d be some minimum amount of privacy in Polis.”
“I used to be a member of the Polis Guard, Clarke, Polis has no secrets from me.”

She gives a frustrated grunt in response, not knowing how to change the subject.

Costia however doesn’t seem inclined to let it go just yet. “I understand the appeal. Tijan is quite the skilled lover and Rayven is… a stunning woman and close friend. Tell me, was the experience as pleasurable as you’d hoped?”

Clarke latches on to the waterskin as if it’s a lifebuoy. “No, nuhu, you and I are not going to discuss any of this and most certainly not Ray’s many attributes or how… it all went down!”

She shakes her head at the whole situation (and her decidedly poor choice of words), setting aside for now the puzzling question of how Costia could possibly know Tijan’s prowess in that department. She’s got enough on her plate already, what with needing to find a way to make herself useful with the Nightbloods on this quest. Including how… appealing Costia looks illuminated by the fire’s flames. And how close her bed is to hers tonight.

Yet her mouth doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo, for she suddenly blurts: “Have you ever been with anyone else?”

What

The

Fuck

Did she… No. She can’t possibly. No. There’s no way she would ever have been so forward. So stupid.

Costia is clearly startled by the question.

And there go 6 months of painstakingly slow progress, trying to grow closer to the Trikru. Well
done, Clarke! Stupid, stupid, STUPID.

Costia completely floors her when she cocks her head to the side and asks, peering intently into her eyes: “In what sense?”

Wow. Ok. So… this is happening. They’re actually having this conversation.

Clarke can feel the rush of blood to her neck and face. “I mean… uh…” Shit. Isn’t the follow-up question already an answer in itself though? “Been in the sense of… you know…” Fuck, what vocabulary do Trikru use? She feels even clumsier than Ruben with his “open” question. “Lain with someone… I… It’s just… Since you mentioned Tijan and…”

Costia’s penetrating gaze remains on her: “With or without Lexa?”

…

…

And some more …

Is Costia smiling? Is she laughing at Clarke’s best impression of a deer caught in headlights? As it is, the blonde is unable to compute the question, the implication just… too much.

She must decide at one point that Clarke’s suffered enough for her incorrigible curiosity – she blames the alcohol – for she finally offers, softly: “Lexa is enough. She is… my family,” echoing Clarke’s words of earlier.

The blonde can sense there’s something there. Something she’s supposed to understand. But she doesn’t know Trikru codes. How is she supposed to know what Costia means by “family”?

Lexa’s lover seems to be waiting for something. For the second half of the question, perhaps. But Clarke can’t bring herself to stutter it out. She wants to know but also… doesn’t, if that makes sense. Because if the answer is… then…
Costia laughs some more at her, while Clarke playfully pushes her, complaining: “Stop laughing at me, it’s no fun.”

“I’m sensing speaking of such matters is not as common for Skaikru as it is for us…”

Yeah, that’s one way to put it. “It… definitely isn’t.”

“Mhh”

Let’s lighten things up, shall we? She relaxes back on her elbows, sagely deciding she’s had enough inebriant for today. Her head hits the ground with more force than her calculations of space and distance would have predicted.

Yep, it’s time to call it a night.

“Do you think Lexa’ll be able to really stay out of it this week? I can’t really see her sticking to an observer role. I mean… she can be rather… competitive.”

Costia’s eyes crinkle in laughter, that same bright laugh Clarke’s come to cherish. “That she is” she agrees, throwing Clarke a knowing look. “We’ll just have to outsmart them.”

Clarke scoffs. “Yes, like that’s going to happen! I don’t know about Aden and co, but she’s a freaking strategic mastermind!”

Costia cocks her head to the side, as if surprised Clarke would so readily praise her lover. “Have faith, Clarke. I’ve been with Lexa long enough to know how she thinks. I would venture the guess that you’ve also come to understand some of her thought processes and methods in the time the two of you spend together. If we combine our knowledge, I’m pretty sure we stand a chance.”

Mhhh. Her head hurts. Her mind’s buzzing pleasantly but the back of her head definitely aches in an unpleasant way. Clarke closes her eyes and forgets to reply.
She dreams of playing chess against an invisible opponent, hiding in the thick of the forest. Only this time, her most valuable piece is a black knight.

First comes the frustration upon discovering information missing or misrecorded in their maps. No surprises there, the whole idea for this outing does come from Lexa wanting them to learn the difference between superfluous, useful and vital information. Naqib and Flora bicker for an entire day over the absence of charted clearings, while Ruben tries to make sense of skewed distances with a cute little puzzled frown.

The mounting tension between the three leaders in training doesn’t escape their party’s notice.

Clarke spends these days reminiscing, for around the same time last year, she was traipsing through similar terrain on her own, her nights inhabited by the dead and her days consumed with cursing a young green-eyed leader to hell and back. She’s wearing the same clothes, yet so much has changed since then. Sure, she and Lexa still have their problems, but she finds it hard to remember, let alone summon, the raging hatred she used to feel towards her. She can describe it in words; the emotions however, are gone.

And the nights? The nights she spends getting very very drunk with none other than Lexa’s lover.

Then come the endless arguments over strategy, once they’ve reached their destination. Flora suggests a group discussion, a rather surprisingly democratic choice coming from a potential future Heda. The rules are clear: their sash needs to be placed somewhere within the designated perimeter. Opinions differ however, on how to protect it best: by hanging it at unattainable heights up in the trees – Flora’s Trikru through and through, Clarke muses – or barricading it in a cave somewhere.

She discovers with a shiver that Nightbloods and warriors alike, seem to consider her somewhat of an expert on how to defend and storm a natural stronghold. The thought is preposterous but with Costia’s help, she plays along.

Naqib vetoes that they all vote on it, insisting instead the decision be left to the three of them plus Clarke and Costia, which turns into a rhetorical exercise for each little one to try and convince their two advisors. Ruben is the first to rally to Naqib’s side. To make things more interesting, Clarke gives her vote to Flora, effectively putting Costia in the delicate position of tie-breaker. In the end, they settle on a decoy in the trees and a fortified base half underground.
Peace descends on the trio for a couple of days.

It’s when essential equipment starts vanishing that the atmosphere takes a turn for the ugly. Ruben’s shoelaces go missing and Naqib surprises them all by offering two of his braids in replacement. Nobody thinks anything of it at first. They wake up the following morning to discover several of their waterskins pierced. Some of them start suspecting foul play. They double the patrols along the perimeter and increase the number of sentinels, which means less warriors for scouting duty and sets their initial hope to discover the other group’s whereabouts and base back. The disappearance of all of their horses, two days later, leaves no space for doubt.

Clarke is surprised at how good of a team she and Costia make, not once does anyone suspect them of sabotage. Freeing the horses had been a piece of cake: she had sneakily worked Naqib and Flora up over the course of two days, discretely goading each one into challenging the other to a fight. The duel had offered the perfect diversion, allowing Costia to make quick work of the animals’ leads and shoo them away. She can see how the girl would make for an amazing scout: silent on her feet, deadly efficient in her actions and quick in her thinking.

After the initial shock, consternation, panic and shouted accusations, the nightblood trio decides to interrogate each warrior in their party, one by one, trying to suss out the traitor. Or “traitors”, plural, as Flora is quick to remind them. Torture is not yet on the table, but Clarke fears it’s just a question of time. Yet it doesn’t even cross their mind to include Clarke and Costia on the list of suspects.

She sinks down with a tired sigh next to the silent liaison, whose eyes are trained on the tent where Naqib and Flora are presumably playing “good Trikru bad Trikru.” The girl doesn’t look at her but lifts the bottle she was sipping from in a silent welcome. Clarke rubs at a sore spot on her arm, trying to put her inner turmoil into words, while reaching for Costia’s delicious brew. She’s beyond relieved that part of their tasks is behind them, but senses they won’t get much sleep tonight.

“I have to say, I expected this whole adventure to be more fun. I was against the sabotage idea, by the way. Fighting their way through unfamiliar terrain with faulty maps seemed enough of a challenge to me.”

Costia gives a small smile then. “I know. I was the one who suggested it.”

And… Well. Fuck.

Of course she did.
“Don’t you feel… I don’t know. I can’t help but think we’re messing with these kids. How are they to learn to trust an adult figure once they discover we’ve been behind this all along?”

Costia seems so surprised by her question she momentarily forgets about the nightbloods and turns to her. “Heda can trust no one, Clarke. This should serve as a reminder to all of them never to let their guard down.”

“Seriously, you too? See, what I don’t understand is how Lexa, how Titus, how you even, can tell me that, when she clearly does trust people. She’s got advisers. I saw how much Anya and Gustus meant to her. Hell, she’s got you. How can that possibly fit in such a distrustful world view?”

Costia’s eyes change then. She tilts her head and looks about to say something but remains silent for a while. “We spent years earning that trust, Clarke. And… the principle still stands.”

That doesn’t sound at all like what the girl wanted to say. “Nah, I’m not buying it. I don’t think you believe in this for a single second.” She takes a long swig. There goes her decision to remain sober tonight.

Costia’s staring at her. “Is that so?”

Clarke squints her eyes, scrutinizing the Trikru girl who shares Lexa’s bed. That Lexa would in her twisted head find a way to disassociate a sacrosanct principle from her own practices, she’s willing to believe. But Costia looks like somebody who must have fought, so damn hard, against these very teachings. For her to now defend them… She realizes with a frown she’s actually never seen Lexa and Costia together in the same room, despite staying in Polis for months now. Strange.

“In fact, I think you profoundly disagree with Titus on that point – because it is him, who’s coming up with all these bullshit rules, isn’t it?”

Costia lets out a long exhale, her eyes wandering back to the tent. “I think you confuse caring with trusting.”

This makes her pause and throws her back to a whispered conversation in front of a burning pyre, what feels like ages ago. She looks away, unable to face Costia for what she’s about to say.
“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do use trusting and caring interchangeably. But I don’t see and I don’t want to differentiate between the two. You know I actually… I didn’t know about you in the beginning. When she said all these things… She spoke of Leïla and I thought…”

“She mentioned Leïla to you?” Costia interrupts her, and she can see the girl is fighting a frown.

“Kind of. I… I had just lost someone who… meant a lot to me. I think it was an attempt to… offer comfort. Anyway, I really thought she believed in what she was saying. About caring being a weakness. But then I hear she actually has you… and I don’t… I don’t understand, why she would say these things. How she could possibly think them, with you in the picture.”

Costia looks undecided before she replies: “Lexa tried… You are correct, there was a time I profoundly disagreed with Titus’ teachings. What I didn’t understand at first, not really, is how… different it all is for someone in her position. I’ve seen too many attempts on her life, Clarke. Too many betrayals. I… may not necessarily agree with forbidding the Natblida to care about others and may have fought for her to let me in, but I do think that Heda can not afford the luxury of fully trusting anyone.”

“But you are there. By her side. Day in, day out. You have to believe that exceptions to the rule are necessary or useful at the very least. Clearly you must think it’s made a difference, had a positive impact on her or her rule” Clarke pushes.

“I… I need Lexa.”

The raw admission, so simple and yet so beyond anywhere the two ever ventured to before, is like a punch to the gut. “Need” is yet another concept, more sanguine, almost desperate. Clarke’s always been a little bit of a masochist, so why stop there…

“And she needs you.”

Costia looks uncomfortable at her words – a first – and doesn’t reply.

“I saw your interactions with your mother, Clarke. You care for her, yet you do not entirely trust her…”

A bitter smile makes its way to Clarke’s lips at the reminder. “Point taken. So, we both agree that
caring is allowed, better yet caring should be encouraged. And will argue some more about whether that includes trusting the person or not, deal?"

They share a small grin before falling into a strange silence. Clarke sneaks occasional looks at the brooding Trikru, wondering if she went too far. She scratches her chest.

“So you’re ok with all this” she nods in the direction of the tent. “They’re losing precious time…”

“What would you have done differently in their situation? All signs point to treachery. Their only mistake so far is to have completely overlooked us.”

Clarke sighs. Costia does have a point: she’s not sure she’d have handled the situation any better. Something’s itchy and she rubs her arm against her leg. “Are they really going to have to fight – to kill – each other, to become Heda?”

“That has been the fate of all Natblida so far.”

Yes, but that is not really an answer to her question. “Is that another one of those things Lexa can’t change?” Clarke challenges, with less bite than she’d like.

“What makes you think she wants to change it?”

“I do have eyes. I’ve seen how Lexa looks at the little ones. Hell, I’ve seen how they look at her. I don’t see Lexa – as attached as she can be to past traditions – willingly sending them to slaughter each other in the night.”

For a beat there, Costia looks like she’s about to remind her of how presumptuous she’s being, assuming she knows or understands anything about Lexa. Yet when she does speak, it’s to admit: “The conclave is one of many things Lexa is considering making some… adjustments to.”

“What’s stopping her?”

“Titus is rather… set in his ways.”
Clarke chuckles, finishing the last drops Costia’s left for her. “That’s one way to put it. What’s up with this guy? I don’t think I’ve ever felt so much hate or contempt, depending on which day of the week it is, radiating off of anyone in my presence.”

“I can assure you, you’re not the sole focus of Titus’ disapproval” Costia replies with a smirk, producing a second bottle from behind her.

She hadn’t thought about it, but it makes sense. If Costia is one of the reasons why Lexa broke the “code”, that would probably make her enemy number 1 in Titus’ eyes. In fact, this makes much more sense than why the man would have a problem with her.

She chuckles. “It’s so unfair, if you think about it. I mean, you’re sleeping with his most precious nightblood, of course you’re going to draw his ire. Whereas, I didn’t do anything! I just protected my people. And even his whole spiel about Lexa appearing weak because of me doesn’t really stand, since she’s got everyone convinced we owe our victory over the Mountain to her.”

“Whether fair or not, it’s an acceptable bargain, I assure you” Costia replies with an evil glint in her eyes.

It takes Clarke’s brain too long to catch on, still stuck on the girl’s teasing grin. Of course destroying the Mountain was worth it, even if Lexa reappropriated their victory – at least among her people. Why…

Oh.

See, the thing is, she did – does – want to get to know Costia better. And well, she’ll admit that she may be just a tad curious about her relationship with Lexa. But hints on how great their sex life might be? Nope, Clarke did not sign up for that.

She scratches her arm before reaching for the bottle. It looks like she’s going to need much more liquor tonight than anticipated.

Costia frowns when she catches her gesture. “That’s the sixth time you do that.”
“What, drink?”

“No” Costia doesn’t elaborate, extending her palm instead and nodding in the direction of Clarke’s left arm.

The blonde lifts it slowly, uncomprehending. Costia takes a hold of her wrist and gently rolls her sleeve up. And fuck. There are at least ten little angry-looking red dots visible to the naked eye. The scratching of earlier suddenly makes a lot more sense. The sight eclipses the touch of delicate fingers on her skin, growing hotter by the minute.

“Shit.”

“When did the itch start?” Costia wants to know, passing a light finger over the scratch marks, before releasing her arm.

Clarke shakes her head in thought: “Today, I think.” She lifts her shirt and sure enough, similar dots can be found on the left side of her abdomen. Yikes. She gets up, agitated. “Shit shit shit shit shit.”

Costia pinches her lips, suppressing a smile at her antics. “I’m afraid you may have made problematic friends, Clarke.”

No shit, Sherlock.

“No, this can’t be happening.Fuck! Do you think they’re in my clothes?” Worse: her underwear? The idea is so gross she makes a disarticulated full-body jolt. “Please, please, please don’t be in my clothes!”

Costia throws a look to the tent, where Naqib and Flora are still at it, the line of guards they have yet to speak to long. “We can look for them together, if you wish.”

For their own little witchhunt, the two retreat to a quieter sheltered space not far away from camp, with Costia carrying a long torch for them to see.

She reaches for the hem of her shirt and stops. “Do you mind?” she asks the girl pointedly.
Costia looks like she doesn’t understand at first, before she gives a loud laugh and turns away with an unapologetic smirk. “We visited the Baths together, Clarke. Besides, daylight is almost gone.”

“Yeah, well, if you’ll recall, I was still… wearing things in the bathhouse…”

“Oh, I recall alright.”

She decides to ignore the comment, not sure how to read it. “Not everyone is comfortable with walking around stark naked in front of others. And god knows what these little buggers have done to me… So I’m probably doing you a favour.”

She strips in the torch’s flickering light and reaches for Costia’s offered spare clothes. The girl is taller than she is by at least a full forehead. Her shirt is a little too tight around the chest and loose around the shoulders, which must look quite weird, but she’s not really in a position to complain.

They kneel down, heads close and breaths mingling and meticulously comb through her clothing without finding anything. Costia seems… distracted and Clarke huffs in annoyance once they’re done.

“You should burn those. Just to be sure.”

It’d be the sensible thing to do. Yet the thought of losing her blue jacket, one of the few last things she’s got left from the Ark, is a little bit too much for her right now and she hastily grabs it back from Costia. “Maybe later,” she offers, embarrassed.

Costia chooses not to argue. “You also need new ones” she offers, gesturing to Clarke’s bra.

Discussing her underwear is pretty high on her list of topics she wishes not to discuss with the Trikru girl, but Clarke must admit the item in question – or rather the few strings that remain of it – do look quite sad.

“Yeah, it’s on my list of things to do in Polis before heading home.”
Costia nods, seemingly satisfied with the answer. “We can check your cot next.”

Discovering bugs in the folds of her bedroll is a bittersweet victory. For she knows the Trikru’s solution to it, even before she says the words and Clarke watches her sleeping bag burn, with a single question running around her head in a loop: where the hell is she supposed to sleep tonight?

Their evening is quite uneventful after that. Naqib and Flora finish their sessions with the agitated frustration of empty handed inquisitors, while Ruben looks secretly relieved. The general atmosphere remains tense, all their plans temporarily put on hold. When the trio comes to them for advice, Costia and Clarke stick to a role of observers and refuse to provide any, as agreed upon with Lexa beforehand.

After the third bottle, the time comes to call it a day. Clarke, who is more than a little tipsy by now – God how she loves the lightness that comes with it – looks dejectedly at the ashes of her cot, unsure of how to proceed. She turns away and discovers that Costia’s silently deconstructed her own to make space for two.

And well, what choice does she have but to accept?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

Aden comes to her at nightfall, when she’s wrapping up her meditation. She hears his quiet footsteps on the dark moss approach, keeps her eyes closed until he’s standing in front of her. He must have come to learn her routine, to know he’s not interrupting her any more. She opens her eyes.

He waits for a beat, before sitting down next to her, in a less relaxed pose than she’s grown accustomed to seeing in the privacy of the library. He doesn’t look at her.

“This is not just an exercise for us to learn to read maps and elaborate strategies accordingly, is it?” he asks her in English.

And she’s… ashamed to admit she may be a little bit surprised that he figured it out. It’s twice now Aden surpasses her expectations. She should know better by now.

“What else could this be?”
“You testing us. To see how well we handle different – difficult – situations.”

She looks at him and allows herself a small proud smile, while his eyes remain trained to the side.

“There is no traitor, is there? I mean. There is, but it’s you, isn’t it?” he starts over. “This is all just a test…”

“What makes you think that?” she wants to know.

“It… makes sense” he gives a small rigid shrug. “I understand. It’s a useful experience. Something Athena would do” he shrugs again.

She knows what he doesn’t say. That he doesn’t like it one bit, doesn’t like arguing with Iro and Silas, doesn’t like this air of suspicion that’s been hanging over them all. “How will you proceed?”

“First, I need to know: are the others going through the same thing? Were their water supplies also tampered with? And their mounts taken?”

Lexa inclines her head in assent.

“So they’re probably squabbling, just like we are” he concludes with a contemplative whisper and serious eyes.

She doesn’t offer anything, interested in following his line of thought.

“This is an opportunity to tip the scales and gain an advantage” he looks up, searching her face for validation.

“Maybe.”

It seems to be enough, for he rushes to his feet and runs back to camp, no doubt to share his findings.
with his fellow Natlida. She’s happy to see that even through this ordeal, the trio, while suspicious of everyone else, continues to find strength in each other.

“Will you stop moving anytime soon?” the Trikru asks in mock irritation.

“Will you stop pulling the blanket to you anytime soon?” she parrots back with a childish huff.

“Is this how you treat all your bedfellows?”

“Is this how you treat yours?”

Costia laughs, soon joined by Clarke. And… laughter is good, perfect even, for she needs the distraction. Otherwise she’d obsess over the fact that she’s currently sharing a very small space in very thin clothes with none other but... Lexa’s lover.

How the hell did that happen, seriously?

Costia turns to her, propping her head up on her hand. She seems to ponder a retort and settle on: “You are planning on sleeping, correct?”

“Yes, although I’d love to sleep and not catch a cold in the process.”

“Oh, so it’s not about sharing a bed and simply how you usually reward kindness, then, by making people’s life impossible?”

And there it is again. That playful double entendre. That teasing glint. The alcohol is making her head fuzzy, her heart beat a tad faster. It’s one of those multiple crossroads: she could ask Costia how she would like to be rewarded instead. She knows how to play this game. But…

She goes for an in-between. “I find it hard to believe the Commander lets your thieving hands
Costia is stunned into silence by her reply, disbelieving eyes regarding Clarke with amusement. It would appear she’s had a bit too much to drink too, if the stars in her eyes are any indication.

“Oh, I can assure you the Commander has no recriminations when it comes to my hands…”

Not so much of an in-between, now, was it? Great, how is she possibly supposed to catch any sleep with this type of banter and the images it brings forth? Shit shit shit. She feels feverish and slow. Boundaries, that’s what they need. Clear ones – in addition to Costia being the partner of their world’s most powerful leader, that is.

Clarke clears her throat trying to bring some much-needed wetness back. “The other day. When I asked about… you and Lexa… it wasn’t… I shouldn’t have. It’s not my place, none of my business.”

It doesn’t take Costia long to understand what moment she’s referring to and Clarke is not sure she’s able to read the multitude of emotions that run through her expressive eyes correctly.

“I was surprised you’d want to know about… our arrangement.” Her eyes are trained on Clarke, searching.

The air is so charged right now, she feels their bubble could burst any moment. Costia’s being honest. Clarke’s not sure she can repay her in kind though. It’d be too…

“I… Well, with what happened with Raven and Tijan I… It’s maybe opened my eyes to… I don’t know, I’m just curious to hear about other couples, that’s all” she deflects, avoiding the girl’s gaze.

“Mhmhh.” Costia lies back down, eyes to the stars.

Clarke closes her eyes and readjusts the blanket. Time to give sleeping another shot. She’s started drifting when Costia brings her back to the present.

“I’d imagine it would take someone we’ve both come to… care about a lot, for Lexa and I to ever
invite them to our bed.” She turns her back to Clarke and doesn’t say anything else after that.

Yeah, she’s not going to get any sleep tonight.

Ruben flees, speechless, the following morning upon discovering Clarke spent the night in Costia’s bed, while an awkward Naqib remains behind, pondering the scene. The three Nightbloods look profoundly relieved when Clarke shows them the spots on her arms and explains what happened. Ruben kindly offers her a pair of thick green socks, before launching into a spontaneous camp-wide collection of superfluous clothing items for Clarke. His suggestion the blonde woman take his bed instead, is met with good natured hilarity, and it doesn’t look like Naqib or Flora are going to let him live this one down any time soon.

Just like that, their group of misfits moves past the heavy tension of the past week and throws itself into fortifications and planning with renewed enthusiasm. She’s now wearing a decidedly strange mix of various items, but what the ensemble may lack in aesthetics, it makes up more than tenfold in warmth and comfortableness. Costia’s undershirt in particular, is soft and soothing against her irritated skin.

She’s presented with two new garments that evening: another pair of Ruben’s socks. These ones are red-orange and just like the previous ones, were sent to him by his family, a blushing Ruben explains. And loose grey pants, offered to her by a rather alluring female warrior. An imposing redhead, whose nose looks like it’s been broken one too many times, with sparkling eyes and a flirtatious smirk. When the guard in question offers to show her how to tie them and pull the top flap down over her midsection, Clarke’s pretty sure she’s not imagining the implied promise.

“I’m sure Wanheda can figure out how to put trousers on, on her own, Saskia” Costia intervenes with an annoyed glare Clarke remembers all too well from their first interactions back in Arkadia.

Saskia seems on the verge of saying something but decides against it. She throws Clarke a laden “The offer stands, should you change your mind. Or grow tired of present company” before departing, sharing a last look with Costia.

The girl in question huffs, before rummaging through her satchel for a little something sweet to drink.
“Any reason why you so rudely sent her away?” Clarke wants to know, more curious than upset. She doesn’t remember hostile interactions between the two, but there has to be history there.

The girl rolls her eyes. “Saskia is… She can be very forward sometimes.”

“Maybe forward is good? Welcome even? Besides, I could swear someone told me Trikru were… what was it… so much more open and relaxed about these things than us common folk from the sky…” she replies with cheek.

Costia shakes her head at her with a smile. “I shouldn’t have intervened. I apologise, Clarke” she starts, serious, before adding, with a twinkle in her eyes: “You should indeed be able to receive all the help you need to clothe yourself.”

Clarke playfully pushes her arm. She looks back at the warrior – Saskia – who’s now sparring with a man Clarke’s seen once or twice around the tower. She hesitates, because this isn’t Raven or Octavia. Costia was always… different. But hey, she herself ventured there last night, so she might as well follow her lead.

“She’s quite hot.”

Costia furrows. “Hot?”

“Sexy?” she tries to find a synonym.

The Trikru’s frown deepens.

Explaining her meaning is turning out to be trickier than anticipated. “Uh… You know, how you would describe Lexa, for instance: appealing?”

“Oh. Why would heat determine interest?”

“It doesn’t, it’s an expression.”
“To signify appeal.”

“Yes, or how attracted one is, I guess.”

“Mhh. Hot.” The Trikru seems to try out the word for herself. “Lexa’s hot. Wouldn’t you say?”

Yeah, no. Nope. No way. And they’re not even drunk yet. She throws the girl a quick look: she still looks friendly and playful.

“Nuhu, I am not going to answer that.”

“Why not?” Costia challenges her.

“Because it’s a trick question!”

The dark-skinned girl opens and turns her palms up, puzzled: “There is no trick, Clarke…”

“Not like that. If I say no, you’ll probably be offended in your… in her name. Worse, word will get to her and I’ll have to deal with a bruised ego when we get back – not that I think Lexa gives a shit what I think or is vain, mind you, but the girl can sulk. And if I say yes, then I’ll be lynched because “how dare I say that about your girlfriend or look at the Commander like that.” So no, you’ll have to excuse me, but I’m staying out of this one.”

Costia interrupts with an even more pronounced frown: “Lexa’s not a friend.”

…”

“I know that…”

“You said she was my friend…”
“What? No, I… Oh! You mean girlfriend? “Girlfriend’s” a word we use in these types of situations. It means partner… lover.”

“Oh” she mulls it over. “So, I could say that… my girlfriend is hot?” she throws to Clarke with a cheeky smile, quite proud of herself for playing around with Skaikru terms.

The words have an extra quality to them, on Costia’s lips, a foreign sound that makes them more appealing. Sexier.

Clarke hides her face in palms. “Yes, I guess you could say that.”

Once they’re tucked under Costia’s pelts, Clarke’s thoughts running miles, fuelled by the heady feeling that comes from warm alcohol, she’s suddenly reminded that her skin is very much still itchy.

“Not this again” Costia protests weakly when Clarke starts rubbing her arm, jostling their whole sleeping arrangements in the process.

“It’s not my fault. I’m the innocent victim here” Clarke whines.

“The more you scratch, the more it’ll itch, Clarke.”

“But it burns!”

Costia sits up with a displeased sigh, looking sternly down at her. The fire’s dying flames play hide and seek in her hair. The sight is… distracting.

“If you do not cease immediately, I will…” she seems to look for an appropriate threat. “I will…” she pauses again.

Clarke continues, undeterred, desperately trying to quench the need.

Costia throws the covers off, cutely miffed. “Enough. Get up” she growls.
“Why?”

“Get out.”

“What? What do you mean “Get out”?

“Get. Out.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Clarke exclaims, scandalised.

“If you won’t let me sleep, then you’re on your own.”

“But… where else am I supposed to sleep? You’re the one who burnt my cot down!”

“It looks to me you’ve received plenty of other offers recently as to where to spend your nights. You would make Ruben the happiest boy in all Polis were you to take him up on his offer. And Saskia is… how did you put it? “Hot.” So explain to me, why you should bear this burden, when you show so little consideration for my own needs and are clearly not in want of options.”

This sobers Clarke up. She knows Costia’s not really exasperated but understands the sentiment as genuine.

“Fine, fine” she capitulates, throwing her hands up and trying to convey sincerity. “I won’t move. I promise.”

Apparently reassured, Costia nods her head once, before lying back down.

Clarke has to concentrate so hard on not scratching herself, she can’t even think of striking up a conversation. Which is why Costia’s next words take her quite by surprise.

“The other day, you spoke of someone dear to you.”
It takes Clarke a while to place the reference. Finn. She grimaces involuntarily.

“Yes.” She takes a deep breath and releases it slowly, all thoughts of scratching herself momentarily gone. “His name was Finn.”

“The boy you held a wake for with Raven?”

She nods. She’s ashamed to admit she had completely forgotten that Costia already knew about Finn.

“I’m told I can be a good listener, should you ever desire to share.”

Clarke chuckles darkly. “If you think my relationship with Raven as it is, is fucked up, then I don’t even want to imagine what you’ll think hearing this.”

Costia seems disconcerted by the sarcasm. “I do not consider it… “fucked up” Clarke. It seems to me a very strong relationship you can rely on. In my experience, those are the best kinds of friendships.”

“Yeah, no, you’re right. I don’t know why I said that. Raven and I happened to… date or fall for the same guy.”

“Finn”

“Yes. Finn… He came with me and the others. The first group of Skaikru.”

“The 100, correct?”

“Oh, right, I forgot you actually already know all this.” It’s funny that although as non-intrusive as it gets, Clarke doesn’t really consider not replying to Costia’s gentle prodding. “So, we all came down together, and… well… Finn and I grew closer. It was all such a… mind blowing experience, you know, coming down to Earth, discovering it’s not a death sentence, feeling like the only people alive and then discovering it’s already inhabited. Finn, he was… charming, strong willed, so certain we could live in peace with you. Something happened. Between the two of us, I mean. We were never
together, you know. But there was… something. We connected. But then Raven arrived.”

“Rayven did not come with the rest of you?”

“Oh, no. Raven actually came down on her own. It’s a completely mad story. when you think about it, you’ll have to ask her to tell you some time. Basically, my mom and her rehabilitated this old pod.”

“Pod?”

“Uh, a pod is a vessel to navigate space. And Raven used it to come down on Earth. Anyway, when she did, I discovered that Finn was in a relationship with her, back in the Ark. And not just any type of relationship, we’re talking first love type of connection, you know. It led to a lot of drama.”

“You could not join them?”

The idea is so beyond the realm of possibilities in Clarke’s mind, that it takes her quite some time to catch on. “Uh. That’s not how it works.”

“You joined Tijan and Rayven, did you not?”

She’s got a point.

“It’s… different. That was a one time thing. Finn and Raven, they were in a committed relationship. Just the two of them. You know.”

It’s Costia’s turn to inhale and exhale slowly. “People change. So do relationships.”

“Yeah, I don’t think Raven nor I were anywhere ready for these types of questions back then.”

“Mhhh. But you would be now?”
There’s something about the question that makes her suddenly nervous. So she answers fast and off kilter. “With Raven? No. We… I mean, what happened at the Baths was great. And I really needed it. But, we’re just better off as friends, you know?”

“Anyway,” she continues “we fought. Finn and I. Raven and I. Raven and Finn. It got really messy. And then, then the Mountain happened and Finn, I don’t really know what went through his head, but he kind of lost it while looking for me in the forest and… he started shooting at Trikru in a village.”

“I remember hearing of the slaughter. 17 innocent people lost their lives.”

Clarke swallows. “Yes.” It comes out garbled. “Lexa made his death a pre-condition for peace talks. We fought with the council on whether we should or not give him up. In the end, he surrendered on his own. And, well, the rest you already know. He was sentenced to death by a thousand cuts.”

“But you intervened.”

“Intervene” is… not exactly the word she would have used. “I did. Lexa told you?”

“We did not speak of the incident, but I heard the stories.”

“Stories?”

“Word travels fast amongst armies and warriors bring back tales of their time away when they return to their towns and villages.”

“There are stories about Finn?”

“There are stories about you” Costia softly corrects.

“About me killing him?” Clarke’s not sure how she manages to utter the words, considering the huge lump in her throat.
“About you offering him a sweeter death.”

“Is that what the stories talk about, me robbing Trikru of their justice?”

Costia seems to weigh her response. “No. They’re about you – Skaikru – granting justice without us needing to take it for ourselves.”

That’s not exactly how she remembers the reaction of the crowd that evening. As willing as she was to give Costia the big picture, she’s not sure she’s ready to delve into the aftermath, at least not when it comes to her.

“They shouldn’t… Finn was so much more than this one horrible thing. He deserved – deserves – to be remembered for so much more.”

“Which you and Rayven are ensuring.”

“Raven was… devastated.”

“I imagine she wasn’t the only one.”

“I… I’m… It doesn’t hurt as much. But it took time, for the two of us to rebuild some semblance of friendship” she deflects. She turns to her side, back to Costia. It’s not that… she’s not upset. She just suddenly feels very tired, drained even. Her head is heavy, the delicious exhilaration gone and she’d like to go to sleep now. She’d like to stop talking about this.

She doesn’t fight it when an arm slowly slides around her midsection. The gesture is… completely unexpected yet at the same time comforting. Welcome.

“Thank you for trusting me” comes muffled from behind.

“She was wrong.”

“Mhh?”
“Lexa. She said something. That his death would haunt me forever. But it’s nothing. Nothing in comparison…”

Costia remains silent.

Clarke scoots back, molds herself to the body she’s now enveloped in and focuses on her breathing. 1. 2. 3. She’s out at 4.

Maybe it’s the relief after the Nightbloods announce they’re abandoning their unfruitful manhunt for potential traitors. Maybe it’s the collective excitement upon entering their third and last week or the scouts claiming they caught a glimpse of what could be their opponent’s base. Or maybe it’s Clarke turning into a walking patchwork of hand-me-downs, which becomes some sort of running joke in their party. For whatever reason, the atmosphere around the camp morphs into expectant joviality, bringing their group tighter together.

Or maybe it’s all in her head, fuelled by Costia’s treacherous mead and deep and restful nights.

Days are spent fortifying their camp and fine-tuning their strategy. Clarke is enjoying getting to know each Nightblood: their quirks, individual characters and particularly likes catching the little glimpses of Lexa she inevitably finds. Nights are spent trading stories with Costia in the warmth of the girl’s bed, all awkwardness linked to physical proximity gone the moment she woke up in the girl’s arms with a little bit of drool and no recollection of nightmares.

(She won’t compare. She refuses to. Yet she can’t help but note that the body behind hers fits, it’s strength strangely pliable. And no, her thoughts do not stray. Not once.)

These past few evenings have seen them all – Nightbloods, Clarke, Costia and guards alike – bond around the fire. Though there are still quite a lot of jokes in Trigedasleng that continue to evade her, Clarke feels included in the friendliness going around.

They all want to know about the Mountain of course, but also about life in the sky. Although she’d much rather prefer hearing stories from them, it’s refreshing to be able to share with Trikrus other than Lincoln about their way of life before the Earth. She’s discovered that Costia isn’t alone in her
fascination with stars, as her audience wants to know how close to the stars the Ark was. When she
explains that no, they weren’t close enough to touch them; that in fact they were closer to the Earth
than any potential star, it leaves the Nightbloods and more than a few adults looking rather
disappointed.

The redhead – Saskia – has redoubled her efforts in explicit overtures, while Costia’s limited her
meddling to pesky groans and to rolling her eyes with pursed lips. Clarke can’t deny she’s enjoying
the attention – a lot.

All in all, life is good.

What she’s trying to say is that it was of course too good to be true. The end comes, as always, too
soon, and they’re as unprepared for the onslaught as it is brutal.

They come at sunrise.

Clarke wakes to the sound of shouting, clashing swords and to a cold and empty cot. She barely has
the time to slip out, still in her sleeping attire, before she finds herself face to face with not one, not
two, but three warriors she doesn’t recognise.

They must be from Lexa’s party. Which means: they’re under attack.

Their plan – Flora’s idea – requires her in such an event to climb up the tree with the decoy and
pretend she’s protecting it, to mislead the enemy. But in order to do so, she first has to get away from
these three guards.

Strangely enough, the Trikru do not charge. They circle her, keeping a cautious distance, eyes flitting
from her empty hands to her bare legs and back up again. All around them, guards are fighting. She
doesn’t realise her eyes immediately go searching for Costia, but the warrior is nowhere to be seen.
She ignores the twinge of fear: Costia missing doesn’t necessarily mean anything. She catches a
glimpse of Flora and Aden going head to head, while Naqib guards the girl’s flank. He’s already lost
one of his curved daggers but is holding his ground. Ruben too, seems to have disappeared and the
knowledge fuels her courage.

It’s the type of situation that cruelly reminds her of how much she could have benefitted from joining
Lincoln, Octavia and Damian in their sparring sessions. There’s no use in regretting past decisions,
however. She shakes the last remnants of sleep from her body and brings her fists up with what she
hopes is an intimidating frown, determined to put up a fight.

They don’t attack. She’d assume it’s because she’s at a clear disadvantage: outnumbered and unarmed. Yet, there’s something else there, something in their eyes, something in the looks they share. As if… Are they… scared?

There’s a flash, the image of a girl with strands of barley or wheat in her hair, charging on her own and against all odds. She can do this. If she rams into the tallest one at full speed, she should be able to get to the tree before any of them catch up with her. She waits, follows their silent exchange, and when finally, one of them apprehensively charges, she uses his momentum against him. He assumes she’ll fight him, doesn’t expect her to simply evade and feint. He crashes into his colleague and Clarke makes her escape.

She gets to the tree, reaches for the first branch and is about to lift herself up when….

A pair of strong arms circles her waist and brings her back down without much effort.

“Running for the trees, Clarke?” comes a whisper right next to her ear and Clarke knows instantly who the amused voice belongs to. She shivers.

The warrior unceremoniously pulls her down but doesn’t let go, hands still firm on her skin (her top must have ridden up in the commotion). Her attempt to elbow them in the face is met with a chuckle. They readjust and manage in one sweeping gesture to pin Clarke’s arms down.

There’s no denying it: she’s at their mercy. The situation is familiar, yet the feelings it brings forth have so little to do with the instinctive panic and survival mode that had kicked in during her short scuffle with Roan. In fact, these feelings are… completely inappropriate in such a situation.

A warrior she assumes to belong to the other party steps forward and Lexa abruptly hands her off with a warning: “Careful, Wanheda still has some fight in her.”

Clarke doesn’t need to see her, to hear the smile in her voice. How embarrassing to be seen squirming pathetically – in Costia’s sleeping wear no less (or is it underwear, she’s not sure) – against and very much overpowered by the Commander. What she wouldn’t give for a normal morning, waking to the soft sounds of a rising party and lazing around in similarly strong arms.
She’s dumped nearby among other warriors from her side, all defeated and now forced to watch their last comrades try to save face, yet clearly overwhelmed. Lexa climbs the tree agilely – just an observer, my ass – and seems wholly unsurprised when she announces the piece of cloth is fake bait. Saskia is the last one to fall, defending the entrance to their underground shelter. After a small debate under the proud watch of their Heda, Aden, Iro and Silas disappear into the shelter together, with the eagerness of victory within their grasp.

When they come back out, however, it’s with empty hands, discarded weapons and looking a little worse for wear. The mystery doesn’t remain for long: a fierce looking Costia, two swords at the ready, jumps out behind them and Clarke… Clarke’s never seen the girl like this before. But if she thought the warrior was a sight to behold earlier, then this… this is something else: eyes ablaze with the gleam of determination and satisfaction of subjugation, skin covered in dust and caked blood and wild braids framing her face.

Their attackers take a collective step back, while Costia crouches into a defensive position in front of the entrance.

Lexa is the only one to dare take a step forward: “Your side has lost, Costia. Your camp: reduced to ashes. Surrender and you’ll be spared.”

“Maybe so, but you know me well enough not to expect me to let my swords down, Lex” Costia grins in challenge.

Clarke can pinpoint the exact moment understanding dawns on Lexa. Her attentive eyes never leave Costia’s figure, while she calls out: “Count them. I want to know if anyone is missing.”

Iro replies immediately: “Ruben is. I saw him when we infiltrated their position but haven’t seen him since.”

Costia’s grin widens and Clarke can feel a tremor of hope and excitement pass through her group of sitting warriors.

Lexa looks chagrined, probably upset she hadn’t anticipated the move. She taps the pommel of her sword and flexes her fingers around it.

“Very well. Assuming Ruben is indeed on his way to steal our own flag and assuming you knew its exact location beforehand, I suppose I don’t have another choice but to swiftly defeat you and take
control of yours, before he does.” She pauses. “Would any one else care to challenge Costia kom Trikru?” she throws to the assembled fighters.

When no one volunteers, Lexa takes another step forward and unsheathes her own sword. Clarke could swear there’s the faintest trace of a smile on her lips.

What follows is essentially the second most magnificent fight Clarke’s ever seen. The two warriors move – dance – around each other with the precision of years of hard training, the ease of experienced sword-wielders thrilled for a challenging fight and the elegance of lovers who know each other by heart.

Costia gives as much as she gets, parrying, cutting and feinting with superb aplomb and Clarke suddenly finds herself unsure who she’s rooting for, this time around. She isn’t the only one under the spell, as every single warrior present seems entranced by the fight, wincing when their Heda takes a hit and leaning forwards when she attacks. The Nightbloods look on in fascination.

The urgency of time confers Lexa’s blows that extra bit of strength, while giving Costia the advantage of stalling, immensely irritating her opponent in the process. Whatever she tries, Lexa doesn’t manage to dislodge Costia from her position guarding the shelter.

“I can not afford to play games, Costia” Lexa huffs on the third evading tactic.

She falls back, eyes flitting from her lover to the entrance. She seems to be contemplating her next move and Clarke can see Costia take a step back and brace herself for an attack.

“Oh come on, we haven’t fought each other in ages, you can’t really blame me for trying to drag this pleasurable experience out as much as possible” the girl replies, shaking her arms and cracking her neck.

Clarke’s not sure what happens next and would be completely unable to retell it to Raven. One minute Lexa seems to be turning away from the fight, her back fully exposed. The next, she’s kicking the ground, dust and dirt rising up, and running full speed at Costia, a warcry in her lungs. For a beat, it’s hard to make out their two silhouettes. She thinks she sees the lunging shadow turn at the last minute, kick at a nearby treetrunk and use the momentum to fall down on the dark-skinned warrior.

All she knows for certain, is that once the dust settles, Lexa has a weaponless Costia on her back and
is straddling her, her hands holding the girl’s arms down and a knife at her throat.

She’s too far to hear the words the two women exchange, but the tone remains light, playful, and when Lexa’s grip relaxes and Costia’s hand sneaks around her neck, the Commander offers only mischievous resistance, before she lets her head be pulled down to meet the girl’s impatient lips.

The sight is… She doesn’t know what it is exactly, but it leaves her feeling…

A groan to her left interrupts her staring and she turns to discover Saskia, shaking her head at the display and rolling her eyes.

“Better let these two… finish this in private, Clarke kom Skaikru. Knowing Costia, this could go for hours.”

Saskia gets up and offers Clarke a helping hand. She feels a little bit dizzy when she climbs to her feet and the Trikru is there to catch her sway and help steady her.

It looks like the time has come to pack their things and leave their idyllic spot. She doesn’t look back at the two girls, but can tell they haven’t separated.

---

The ride back is animated. Flora is having a hard time admitting their defeat, while Naqib, Iro and Aden debrief animatedly. When Aden reveals the sabotage scheme, Clarke finds herself blushing ashamedly in front of three stunned Nightbloods. Costia of course, is otherwise occupied and can currently be seen riding with the Commander in an intimate embrace, leaving Clarke to defend their actions on her own.

She’s… a jumble of emotions. Unsettled yet unsure as to why. Overall, she’s glad to have traded her sleeping attire for proper day-clothes and sad their little adventure has now come to an end. Yet the energy of the little ones is contagious. She finds herself laughing at Naqib’s and Iro’s exclamations of surprise when the trio compares how things unfolded in each camp and listening intently to Ruben’s timid account of his lonely quest. As luck would have it, Ruben had managed to slip out of camp and find the others’ base, but fallen to one of the many traps Lexa’s party had laid around their base. When they had found him, the poor boy was hanging upside down from a rope, attached to the highest branch of a tall tree. It had taken four warriors to dislodge him safely.
The excited chatter is the perfect background to let her thoughts wander.

Her eyes inevitably fall to the two Trikru warriors riding a little ways ahead to her right. Costia is reclining against Lexa’s front and must have said something amusing, for Lexa smiles and her frame shakes as if in laughter. The two riders move in sync with the horse, their bodies glued to each other. The movement is almost…

Yes: unsettled.

A blue bird from a species she’s often seen hanging around their horses flies down and perches on her mount’s mane. Unperturbed by the puffing and the blonde’s inquisitive gaze, it pllops down, as if completely at home. Clarke’s fingers twitch for a pencil and some colours.

“Skaipeka” she murmurs, remembering one of Damian’s first lessons.

Flora, who is riding next to her, asks: “Did you have those in the Skai too, Clarke kom Skaikru?”

It’s uncanny how such a simple question can be both an evidence and an absurdity at the same time. She shakes her head, eyes still on the small creature that keeps on sliding to the side with the horse’s movements and has to get back up on its little legs and readjust its position every time, with increasing displeasure.

“No, there weren’t any birds on the Ark. As a matter of fact, there weren’t any animals with us up there.”

That garners the attention of the rest of the group: six young dumbstruck and disbelieving faces turn to her at once.

“No animals? What about gapa?” Naqib asks, fumbling for the English word.

Clarke chuckles. “No, no horses.”

He seems to think it over. “What about trilipa?”
The concept is clearly so foreign to them, Clarke senses she could spend her afternoon responding to a long list of individual animals if she doesn’t put a stop to it now.

“No animals, Naqib. Not a single one. Only men, only people like you and I.”

The stunned silence stretches on. She sees Silas whisper to Iro, no doubt to make sure he’s understood the exchange.

“It’s not so… strange, you know” she starts. “I understand of course how alien it must sound to you, but you need to understand that your world had 100 years to redevelop, for animals to reconquer the earth without too much interference from men. The world my ancestors escaped from, the world of the nuclear apocalypse, was already a world with less and less animals. They had birds – sora – dogs – fecha – and cats” (she searches for the word in Trigedasleng for the latter, sure Damian told her, but can’t find it).

“What did people eat then?” Ruben interrupts.

She remembers a documentary Wells had insisted they watch on the food revolution of the 21st century: how industrial mass production of chicken and beef meat had been replaced by artificial meat cells grown in laboratories. How do you explain that though?

“We… it’s complicated to explain. People were still eating meat, just not from live animals they killed. It was meat developed – so to speak – in laboratories.”

She can sense she’s lost them completely.

“So, no… horses in the old world?” comes again from Naqib.

Clarke smiles at the boy’s obvious need to confirm the existence or absence of the animals he’s used to.

“It’s not that there were none. It’s a bit more complicated than that: basically, there were no wild animals anymore, no spaces for animals to live on their own. Most of the really big ones: elephants, wales, giraffes, rhinos and so on had all gone extinct. All remaining animals were… small and
domesticated ones. There were still some big ones, like some horses, a couple of lions, a few deers – *trilipa* – but all owned and controlled by men and always a privilege of the rich.”

Iro nods to herself: “They were not free.”

“No, they were not.”

“But why would people do that?” comes from Silas.

“Leave no animals to be free?” Clarke wants to clarify.

All six heads nod.

“I… I would guess that it was not so much a conscious decision and more… an inescapable development, instead. Look around you, all this land is free, no?”

“It is *Heda’s*” Aden corrects her.

“It is, but animals are left to live on it away from men, are they not? And you only hunt here a little bit. This didn’t exist in the old world anymore. All game that could be hunted was hunted to the point of extinction. All existing land was either directly occupied by men living on it or exploited in some other way by men, disrupting and preventing animals from living there.”

“So animals were either all hunted or had… nowhere to go?” Naqib wants to clarify.

“Pretty much.”

“But we can live with animals…” Naqib counters. “You say land was occupied, that doesn’t mean there is no place for animals on it – unless it’s a pauna of course, then it is our responsibility to hunt them, like Lincoln kom Tirkru did.”

Clarke sighs. “I agree with you, in principle. But it would appear the civilisation the old world created did not… make cohabitation possible.”
“I do not like the old world you speak of” Naqib replies with a frown, his hand coming to rest on his horse’s side, as if to reassure it or himself.

His friends seem to share the sentiment and Clarke watches as the little bird, unable to find a comfortable position from which not to be dislodged, shakes its azulean feathers, vexed, and flies away.

She remembers puzzling over the contradiction back in the Ark, between a world with no animals, producing a mass of entertainment products centred on them. The cartoon about the orange fish or the one with the baby lion, the movie about the whale: she had seen them all. She remembers the fervour with which their teacher would paint images of concrete megalopoleis and technological advancements in their lessons. A world in which, indeed, there hadn't been any space left for anything but man and its creations: man's needs, man's whims, man's hubris – and even that sometimes only barely. A world which they had been told, so many times, was what they should strive for, what they should aim to recreate.

She thinks she much prefers this world to the old one, too.

“I shared Clarke’s bed.”

She’s experienced time slowing down to a complete standstill like this only on very few occasions before in her – admittedly short – life. What she doesn’t remember is ever being so utterly shocked into speechlessness.

She feels the need to sit down but resists, her body as rigid as a bowstring about to break under the pressure.

Her throat is dry. Her mind is… unresponsive. Her hand is itching for something to fiddle with. And her insides seem to have decided to launch a rebellion.

There is a memory there: seeing and feeling familiar garments on the blonde Skaikru. Ones that do not properly fit her. Garments that definitely do not belong to the girl and are, she would argue, more at home on the floor, at the foot of Lexa’s bed.
She has no idea where she finds the strength to ask: “Pardon?”

“You heard me.”

It would appear Costia’s decided to revert to her infuriating ways. Fine. She’s familiar with that penchant of hers and familiar is good. Lexa can handle the familiar.

Costia’s watching her like a hawk. “Or rather: she shared mine. I thought you should know.”

She regroups. Falling back on her meditation routine, she retreats into her mind, switches to deep breaths from her abdomen and focuses on the tingle of air passing through her nose. She then turns to her thoughts and emotions, observing them from afar and not lingering.

Yet she’s never found it so hard to detach. This can not mean what she immediately thought. Costia wouldn’t… Clarke isn’t…

“I’m assuming there’s more to this story you’re not telling me?”

The girl bites the inside of her cheek and looks almost disappointed. “I forgot how boring you could be sometimes” she huffs.

The exchange teeters precariously between lazy banter and a fight. And Lexa would give anything not to fight right now. They just spent a whole afternoon reveling in each other’s skin – Lexa starved for Costia’s taste, Costia’s tongue, Costia’s pleasure – and she was about to call for heated water to take a bath. Hopefully together.

These moments are too few, too perfect, too precious, to be wasted on useless arguments. Why can’t Costia let her – let them – be?

And what is she supposed to do now, with these pestering images of Clarke and Costia intertwined?

“What do you intend to do with Clarke?” her lover pushes.
It’s petty, but she doesn’t feel like a straight answer. Doesn’t owe her one either, if Costia refuses to elaborate on her earlier revelation.

“Her fruitful mission as an envoy is coming to a close. I imagine she yearns to return to her people.”

“Now who’s playing games? Are you really so scared of answering me truthfully? You obviously feel something for her.”

“Inconsequential” she dismisses with a gesture of her hand, physically trying to push the conversation – the implications – away from her.

This brings their exchange to a screeching halt, Costia reeling back from her seated position on the bed, eyes wide, as if recovering from a particularly vicious hit. They’re alone, but for some reason, the girl reaches for the sheets to cover her exposed chest. She stares at her with a mix of anger, hurt, and overwhelming surprise.

Lexa herself stays suspended in the moment, startled by the word, or rather: the sentiment. Gutted to feel it’s truth settle so surely into her bones.

How…? When…?

No…

“So we’re acknowledging it now” Costia swallows, her mouth a nervous frown. She nods, pursing her lips, as if to steel herself. “I suppose that is… progress.”

“I love you” Lexa volleys back with force.

“We’ve already gone through this, Lex. I won’t let you ignore it and do nothing about it. I… I wouldn’t be able to live with myself, knowing I came in the way of your happiness. So, what is your plan?”
There is no plan! Why would she have one? Why can’t Costia leave this alone? “Happiness” is not a word a Heda has to trouble themselves with and Costia knows that.

“Clarke will travel back to Arkadia.”

“Since when does Heda run away from complications?”

“I am not running away” she bites back, insulted.

“My apologies, you are sending them away! I’m not sure Anya would have appreciated the difference.”

She scoffs. “Anya would be relieved to see Skaikru leave Polis’ walls!” She loses her concentration and continues, irked: “I do not have time for this, Costia. There are too many disputes and complications requiring my full attention these days.”

“Then why bring Clarke here in the first place? I spoke to Marcus kom Skaikru, he claims you explicitly requested her to be their liaison. Then you spend hours cooped up with her in your study. You open up to her. She opens up to you. You introduce her to the Natblida and encourage her to spend time with them. Why go through all that trouble, only to not act on anything in the end and send her away?”

“Because it was the only way to bring you back!” Lexa explodes.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Speak true, had Clarke remained in Arkadia, would you have considered returning home?”

Costia falters in disbelief. “You were challenged to a fight to the death, Lex. By Azgeda, moreover. Of course I would have come back for you! I did!”

Lexa shakes her head, agitated. “I needed you here. The Coalition faced its most dangerous challenge to date, this past year. So much happened after the Mountain. Before the duel. I needed you here” she repeats.
Costia slides her legs over the edge of the bed and leaves the comfort of the sheets. She strides over to the trunk with a simmering frustration in her steps and reaches for her red robe.

“I will not apologize for needing time for myself, away from you” her lover replies with a warning in her eyes. She ties the knot around her waist with three upset movements and runs a distressed hand through her hair.

“Nor will I apologize for needing you by my side and doing what I had to do to get you back. You went to Arkadia because she was there. I knew that ordering you to return would only further sour our relationship. So, I invited her here, instead. And you followed.”

Costia cocks her head to the side. “I don’t know if you’re intimately convinced of this or actively lying to yourself, but don’t you dare use me to justify your desire to see her!”

They need to take a breath, need to come down from the dangerous edge they’re balancing on.

“So, what are you going to do?” Costia repeats.

“Nothing” Lexa spits, positively annoyed now. They’re talking in circles. This is a waste of time, one she can not afford.

“I won’t accept that” Costia replies, shaking her long braids.

“Why are we even discussing this? Clarke is with Rayvon, Costia.”

Her lover looks at her with exasperation then, rolling her eyes dramatically. “Oh Lex” she sighs. “No, she’s not” Costia reveals. “In your defense though, the two can be quite confusing at times.”

... 

Ignoring Lexa’s growing confusion, Costia pushes the heavy doors open and whispers something to the guards, before letting them fall shut and turning back to face her.
“Clarke and Rayven are not an item. Never were” she repeats, more softly.

“Of course she is. They are. You told me so” Lexa protests, trying to make sense of what Costia just divulged.

“I did not tell you anything, Lex. I merely let you run with whatever fantasy assumptions you needed to construct in your mind, in order to believe the time you spent with her was innocent enough and carried no implications.”

No. This can not be true.

She tries to remember the first signs that led her to conclude the two Skylings were an item. The way Clarke would speak of the artisan, with a mix of pride and protectiveness. (Although, looking back now, she spoke of Bellamy and still speaks of Wells in similar tones, the protectiveness simply laced with profound sadness.) But the biggest tell of all had simply been Rayvon answering Clarke’s door in the middle of the night.

“So… all this time…?” She sinks down onto the edge of the bed. “I made it a point to systematically praise Clarke in Rayvon’s presence and vice versa. I forced myself to take an interest in the Skayon’s personality and work. I sat through hours of incomprehensible Sky-talk about the new messaging device. I shared… All this time, you knew and let me act a fool?”

Costia looks sheepish for a second, before countering: “This is not about that and you know it.”

Lexa exhales. She does. She’s just… not necessarily ready to face a reality where Clarke is – could be – a possibility. No, “possibility” is not the right word. Clarke is everything but a possibility.

“Lex” Costia coaxes.

“I couldn’t – I can’t – bear the thought of losing you.”

“Who says you would?” her lover reveals, eyes fierce.
She frowns. This is... What is Costia trying to say?

“I can’t ask that of you.”

“As long as you don’t, you’ll never know” Costia finishes, coming to stand in front of her, her red shimmering robe calling for Lexa’s touch. She tucks one of Lexa’s locks back behind her ear and lets her fingertips drift along her jaw.

Lexa looks up, taking this beautiful woman in a short robe – the finest Trishanakru silk, a gift from her after a prolonged absence – in, inch by inch.

“Now come. I was promised a bath with my hot girlfriend” Costia continues with a secret smirk, offering her hand.

...

With who?

It’s with the sneaking suspicion that her lover’s newfound jargon has everything to do with the object of their heated conversation, that Lexa follows a disrobing Costia.

“Eureka!”

She supposes it’s a good thing Raven’s not completely naked, when her friend barges into her chambers, looking utterly dishevelled.

The mechanic comes to a sudden halt with barely a wince, refastens the short towel around her tighter and asks: “Wait, do you think it’s pronounced “youreeka” or “oireeka”?”

Clarke takes her time before answering, her eyes traveling from the brunette’s mud-covered feet, to
her bare legs and higher, until they reach red cheekbones and dilated pupils.

“Are you… okay?” she asks, tentatively, closing her sketchbook with a snap and rising to her feet.

Raven frowns. “Why wouldn’t I be? Fuck it’s cold in here.”

“Just a thought, but maybe that’s because you’re… not wearing any clothes in the middle of the afternoon?”

Raven’s frown deepens. She throws a cursory look down and seems positively surprised to discover her current state of undress. “Oh, you’re right. I forgot about that.”

“I’m… flattered, I guess, that my return is cause for such… enthusiasm. I’m happy to see you too.” Clarke admits, moving in for a hug.

“Uh?” Raven leans away. “Wait… Oh… You think I came here… to welcome you back? Wow, no offense blondie, you know you’ll always have a special place in my heart, but you’re not that special either…”

Ouch. Raven, always the diplomat. She loves her, she does, but sometimes, Clarke could do without the blunt honesty.

“Do you want me to go fetch your clothes from your room?”

“I’m not coming from there” Raven dismisses her distractedly.

“Ok… Please don’t tell me working naked in your workshop is “a thing” now, because there is no way that’s a healthy work environment for Damian…”

Raven waves her concerns away: “I was at the Baths” she explains, like it’s a foregone conclusion.

“The Baths?”
“Yeah, the Baths. Anyway…”

“As in, the Baths on the other side of town? About half an hour from the Tower, on foot. Those Baths?”

“Yeah, I guess, didn’t seem that long though. Anyway, that’s not the important point here…”

“Ray” Clarke cuts her off again. “Please don’t tell me you just ran across Polis in nothing but a towel…”

“Oh. Mhh…” She seems to seriously ponder the question for a minute. “Now that you mention it…”

“Raven!” Clarke exclaims.

“Look, I’m touched. Really, I am. But see, no missing limbs, my leg is fine, I can’t feel a single twinge in my back, I’m not even that cold… Plus exercise is good (haven’t you and I been talking about being a bit more active?) – not that I really need it, of course, but you have to see the girls who lounge there sometimes: abs on legs Griff. Think Costia but with more… Actually, no, just think of Costia, period.” She cocks her head, eyes scrunched up in thought: “Damn! How come I never noticed how hot she is before now?”

Clarke ignores the images, ignores the fluttering, ignores it all. “It’s not you I’m worried about, it’s the people in the street! They must think we’re all a bunch of lunatics!”

“Please! We’re talking about us, Skaikru, right? We already talk, dress and walk funny to them. We triumphed over the mountain, for Pete’s sake. And before then, remind me again how many warriors we burned alive that day at the dropship? Trikru already think we’re batshit crazy. Plus, come on, they’re no angels either. Half of them probably consider the battlefield to be home. I’m pretty sure they’ve seen more shocking things than a sexy genius in her birthday suit! Besides, stop interrupting me. Okay, here goes. No, wait, sit down first. Yeah, you’ll want to be sitting when you hear this.”

She grabs Clarke by the arm and pushes her back to the couch, forcing her to take a seat.

“Okay, are you ready?” She pauses for dramatic effect. “Actually, you know what, I would like
some clothes. It’s awfully chilly in here.”

“Raven…” Clarke warns.

Her friend smiles guiltily. “Okay, okay! Geez, so impatient! But if I’m sick tomorrow, it’s all on you!” She straightens her spine, purses her lips and opens her arms wide: “Picture the movies of the old world they used to show us on the Ark: what’s the one thing people were always shown to have and need on Earth?”

“Uh… you’re kind of putting me on the spot there…”

“Off the top of your head…” Raven interjects impatiently.

“Art?”

“Language? Religion?”

“No no no no no! A physical item. Or a family of items, rather. Come on, you got this.”

“Oh, clothes!”

“No, not that type of item! Something I could be working on! Since when am I a floating tailor!”

“Ok… it’s not food then?”

“Focus princess, it’s like you’re not even trying!”

“Oh, I know: housing!”
“Man, how can you not get this?”

“Hey listen, I didn’t sign up for being insulted right upon my return!”

Raven lets out a frustrated huff and crosses her arms. “Fine, you just completely ruined my thunder, but whatever. Tadaa: I’m bringing bikes back!”

“Bikes?”

“Yes, bikes!”

“Bikes bikes or bicycles bikes?”

“Bicycles!”

“Ok… It’s just… I mean… There’re no… roads here. Right?”

“Good point, I see we’re starting to understand each other! That’s why my bicycles have big fat tyres on them. So they can be ridden in the forest and on dirt trails.”

Careful to mask her scepticism, Clarke asks: “Don’t they kind of… already have horses for that?”

“Jesus, don’t choke on your enthusiasm! I said it before and I’ll say it again: you lack imagination, Griff! Bicycles eclipsed horses within a couple of decades in the old world. No need to feed them, no need to tame them, much less maintenance, you know. So, I’m basically just reintroducing this previous revolution.”

“How? Did you find a way to fabricate some out of… what, scrap metal? Wood?”

“I’m glad you asked! And well… The idea just came to me, so it’s not like I already have a functioning prototype. But the Commander has a whole warehouse full of rusty bicycles more or less
still in one piece. I reckon I could probably salvage some parts, combine them with other materials…”

“Ok… But Trikru… On Bicycles? I don’t know, Ray… I don’t see it…”

Clarke has to suppress a smile, thinking of Ryder helping a struggling Titus out. The image inexplicably morphs into Lexa losing her balance and Costia coming to her aid. Where did this come from? She has to physically shake her head to get that last scene out of her mind.

“See, that’s the beauty of it! The twist is that they’re not to solve a transportation problem – which may or may not exist. Or at least that’s not their sole – or even primary – purpose. Do you remember how I’ve been struggling to solve the conundrum of how to provide energy to the equipment needed to run the radio network? So far, the Ark’s been supplying freshly charged batteries to the various villages around Arkadia on a monthly basis, but that system can’t be replicated here. For practical reasons, because Polis is just too far, but also because the whole thing wouldn’t be sustainable in the long run. It’d drain the Ark from the limited amount we’ve managed to continue to produce within mere weeks.” She has to take a breath after speaking so fast. “Now, as you know, I’ve been trying to put together solar panels, but it’s not coming along as well as I thought (I’m not giving up on those babies yet, mind you). And sure, there was this one idea we had with Monty to put in place giant rat cages and have them run for ours but well, we all know how that ended. Anyway, all this time, the solution was right under my nose: bicycles! People actively participating in generating their own energy.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. It sounds like a truly brilliant idea. But would you mind putting some clothes on? I’m getting cold just watching you.”

“Please, like we don’t both know you’re loving the free show!” Raven throws with a wink.

She decides to ignore her friend and goes to rummage through her chest to find something for her to wear. “I’m a little bit short on tops these days, so this’ll have to do. Damian and I are going to the tailor next week to get some new stuff to wear.”

When she turns back around, Raven looks a little… green. Maybe the cold is getting to her? Her eyes fall down to the mechanic’s hands, currently clutching… her sketchbook.

There’s a sense of burning dread, that starts in the pit of her stomach and slowly builds.
Green with guilt for taking a peek at her sketches when she had her back to her or not, her friend’s never been one to hold her tongue.

The brunette scratches the back of her neck: “So, you know me, I’m all for respecting each and everyone’s private sphere. I didn’t say anything way back when you used to disappear in her tent for hours at a time. I kept silent when you started spending more and more time in that study of hers. And float knows how hard it was not to say something when she carried you – floating carried you bridal style – to bed. But I kept my mouth shut, ok.”

What is she talking about? Where is all this coming from?

“And I’m not even going to start on how insulting it is for you to pine after her when you’ve had acces to all this” Raven gestures to her body.

She pinches her nose and continues, agitated: “I draw the line at porn though, Clarke. I’m sorry.”

“What the float are you talking about?”

Raven lifts the sketchbook accusatorily: “I’m talking about this, you hopeless Gillette blade! Why would you have a picture of Costia and Commander bitchface getting it on…”

It’s her drawing, so she shouldn’t feel so… thrown off by the question. Shouldn’t feel so… caught red-handed. Plus, it’s all just a big misunderstanding.

She decides to counter with righteous indignation: “If you think, for a single second, that I’m going to let the fact that you’re snooping around my stuff go…”

“And I’d apologise for it, if you weren’t turning into a giant tomato and looking guiltier by the minute. Is this… Oh my God, you’re totally flustered!”

“What? I don’t look… I don’t have… There’s nothing! should feel embarrassed for here! It’s not… they’re not “getting it on” as you ever so crassly put. These are some of the illustrations I brought back from the outing. People I spent time with or who wanted me to draw them. That’s all this is.”
Raven opens the sketchbook to the last page and points to the drawing Clarke was working on: “So that one does not show the Commander straddling Costia, then?”

Clarke is feeling very warm all of a sudden. Very warm indeed.

“Because, and I mean this as a compliment:” her friend soldiers on, “if it were anybody else drawing them, maybe these two figures wouldn’t be recognisable. But… you’re good, you know. And this one is definitely Costia and the other one who’s holding her arms down and looks about to take her bdsm style…”

Weren’t they talking about bicycles just a minute ago? How the hell did this conversation get so out of hand so fast?

“They were fighting, ok! It’s nothing dirty. Nothing sexy. Like I said, it’s sketches from the outing. They fought and Lexa wrestled Costia down. It was… a turning point. Costia was the last one of us left standing. So, it felt important I commit it to paper.”

Raven looks back down to the drawing, turns it one way, cocks her head, turns it the other way. “Huh. Fighting? Beg to differ on the “sexy” part. I never thought I’d say this, but fuck if this doesn’t make me a tiny bit curious about what these two get up to behind closed doors” she muses.

Clarke most certainly does not understand where the brunette is coming from. There was absolutely nothing remotely appealing about the way Lexa crawled over Costia. Or the way the other girl eagerly surrendered all control. Or… Yep, nothing sexy there at all.

“Anyway” she snatches her sketchbook back. “What’s the plan with the bicycles, now that you just had your little epiphany?”

“Look at you, all eager to change the subject all of a sudden!” Raven teases, yet she thankfully lets it go and launches into a riveting description – that most certainly does not all sound like gibberish to Clarke – of what she now needs to do, which spare parts she needs to find and exactly how she expects the blonde to help, namely by testing the future prototypes in town, a phase Clarke is not particularly eager to start.

When Raven excitedly runs out to return to her workshop, needing to investigate one of her theories right away, Clarke sinks back into the couch. Dragging her feet, she reopens her sketchbook, just for a quick check, just to be sure.
And well, yeah... It’s easy to see how Raven could have mistaken the drawing for her own personal spank bank. (Which, for the record, she does not have. And it goes without saying that were she to have one, then it most definitely would not include the two girls in question.

She turns to the portrait on the next page, the one she’s most thankful her friend missed. And it’s… it’s nothing untoward. Nothing lewd or inappropriate in any way.

She’s not attracted.

It’s just your normal, every day kind of appreciation of the female form. If anything, it should be considered as flattering of a fellow… a fellow… Human being.

She closes the book and is careful to stash it away this time, her mind full of a certain Trikru girl.

See the thing about portraiture, is that… it’s actually a real floating pain to get a cooperative model.

If her earlier subjects had been downright twitchy about Clarke drawing them – remember the blacksmith? – then her current one is the complete opposite. Between silent unease and active participation, she’s not sure anymore, which type of “customer” she prefers.

“Bad.”

Correction: she knows which she prefers.

“I’m sorry?”

“Bad” he repeats with the same offended look. He pauses then, seemingly searching for words. “Not good” he enunciates carefully in accented English.
“Yes, I know what “bad” means, thank you.”

And who can honestly blame her if her “thank you” sounds an awful lot like “fuck you”? This day is turning into a nightmare.

“Ugly” he starts again, furrows and adds: “Garbage.”

He looks even proud of his newfound vocabulary. A real master of the English language.

“I said: I get it” she hisses, snatching the parchment out of his hands. “An artist can only do so much with what she’s presented with, you know” she snaps for good measure. Because seriously: fuck this shit.

He returns to his earlier spot. The daylight streaming from the small opening falls just right onto the side of his face. He reaches for his axe and strikes a pose.

“Again” he grunts, motioning for her to pick her charcoal up.

There’s only one thing Clarke detests even more than having her work criticised and that’s being told what to do.

She’s got half a mind to write this day off, but she promised Raven, so… She has to at least try and salvage what she can. Why her friend still needs to barter for trinkets, when the Commander’s warehouses are hers to scavenge, is not clear. She suspects this transaction has less to do with official Skaikru business and more to do with one of the mechanic’s – many – whimsical side-projects. She’ll have to add today to the long list of things Raven owes her for.

Gin – for that’s his name – has, it turns out, strong opinions on where and how Clarke should draw him (everyone’s a critic these days) and a certain flair for the dramatic. He corrects his stance on his own, which brings them right back to the very reason why this isn’t working out in the first place: he moves all the floating time.

“Seriously, you have to stop gesticulating or we’ll still be at it in a week!”
He looks at her with a bewildered frown.

“Move. Stop” she tries in Trigedasleng. The words feel clumsy on her tongue.

“Oh!”

He goes off on a tangent that flies way above her head, arms all over the place. She suspects it has something to do with the light, but it could just as well be about him needing to relieve himself (that’s how good her Trigedasleng has become).

When he notices her blank stare, he shakes his head and stomps away.

Who would have thought Trikru could be so… fussy.

She rubs the charcoal between her fingers with a sigh and notices too late that Gin’s grabbed the sketchbook she left on the corner table. It takes her even longer to remember what he could stumble on in there. A familiar cold dread takes hold of her. The parchment forgotten, she crosses the room in three lunges and skids to a stop at his side.

She’s almost relieved to see he hasn’t found any of the cartoons displaying a certain regal raccoon in various humorous situations (Flora’s even developed a system to slip her new drawings behind Titus’ back every week).

Almost.

Because what he has found, are her sketches of Lexa fighting. (One more page and he’d be on the one Raven’s coined her “Thirsty as float Period”.)

He gives an approving grunt.

“Heda!” he exclaims, delighted to have recognised the subject.
Gin seems to have finally found material of hers he approves of. It’s a shame, really, that she doesn’t catch half of yet another one of his digressions, for it sounds – for once – complimentary. And not just of the subject, mind you, but her technique as well.

He hesitates, turning back to her: “*Heda* strong.”

Sure. Yeah. She’s willing to acknowledge Lexa is indeed an excellent fighter. That being said, she already spends most of her time with starry eyed admirers of hers, chief amongst which Aden & Co., so you’ll understand that Clarke isn’t particularly eager to jump on the bandwagon and publicly gush about the girl’s skills with a stranger.

Especially not when said girl has been nothing but a ghost ever since they came back from their simulation with the Nightbloods. No private audiences, no eye contact during public ones. No chess games, that goes without saying.

It’s not like Clarke cares. Because for the record: she doesn’t. She never needed Lexa to begin with. Doesn’t need her stupid face. Doesn’t miss her stupid smile. And maintaining the peace must of course be time consuming. But… well…

She’s not *lonely*, ok (to claim otherwise would be factually wrong and awfully disloyal). Her schedule is chock full of private meetings with ambassadors from the other clans. She’s been spending even more time with Costia, further exploring Polis’ secrets (the girl’s been a delightful constant these days). And she’s been assisting Raven in training the future radio operators (you go teach the phonetic alphabet to illiterates and see how easy that is). She thought about boycotting the whole project, since Damian’s excluded from helping out but he had convinced her not to.

She’s just…

Hurt isn’t the right word. (Ha, like she would ever give Lexa the power to hurt her!)

No… She would have appreciated a head’s up, that’s all.

“*Wanheda* strong” Gin continues, squinting at her.

She winces, caught by surprise by that floating name again.
He seems to size her up. She’s too stunned to move away when one of his hands goes to grab her biceps. He gives it a squeeze and frowns, visibly displeased.

And well, sure, she’s not particularly what you would call “buff.” (Or athletic, period.) Octavia may even on one or two occasions have referred to her arms as pitiful noodles. So what? First he sings the praises of bloody floating Lexa and now this?

He releases her arm and pokes an unwelcome finger into her stomach. The fact that it sinks in without encountering any resistance seems to inflame his indignation.

“Enough” she grits out, embarrassed, swatting his hand away.

She supposes she could put a bit more effort into working out. Not for floating rude as fuck Gin but the discipline would do her good. Plus Costia did offer to train with her.

Her annoyance must get lost in translation, for Gin continues his antics unperturbed.

He nods, thoughtful. “Wanheda strong” he repeats in his gruff English. “Battle Mountain, yes?”

Oh boy.

Just her luck. Today’s difficult model is also a chatty one.

“Uh… Yeah…”

“Skaikru fayogon?”

This is new… Even the Natblida seemed to loathe the idea of seeing a gun, let alone holding one.

“I don’t have one on me, if that’s what you’re asking…” She tries in her hesitant Trigedaslang, patting her empty pockets for show: “Ai nou gada.”
He shakes his head impatiently.

“Brolgeda Maun-de: skaikru win au kom fayogon?”

Of course: she looks like such a weakling to him, he concluded they must have won the battle through fire power. Being hauled back to that day is the equivalent of taking one of those ice-cold showers she dreaded so much in lock-up.

“No” she shakes her head in rapid succession. “No.”

She takes an involuntary step back.

Gin looks… sincere though. More solemnly curious, than eager for gore.

How is she supposed to explain what happened, though?

She realises she never had to so far. Is it possible no one ever asked her how they managed to vanquish the Mountain? Shabir hadn’t brought it up. Costia hasn’t broached the topic either. Neither have Damian or… Lexa. Niylah had probed, yes, but not outright asked.

The thought alone makes her dizzy. She feels like throwing up.

Raven had offered some much-needed form of catharsis for Finn, but the two of them have yet to speak about what happened inside the Mountain that day. And after everything they’ve gone through, she hasn’t felt the need to talk it over with Jasper.

Her mother’s words come to her all of a sudden: “Maybe there are no good guys.” Things have been so strained between them since her return that they too, didn’t find the time or space to discuss it further.

The only one… Bellamy. She could have… She would have liked to talk about it with him. Bellamy would have known what to say and what to keep between the lines. Well… the old Bellamy, that is.
The new Bellamy hasn’t been in her life for quite some time now. (And whose fault is that…)

Gin must sense that something’s wrong, for she suddenly finds herself sitting on a low stool – where did that come from? – and holding a glass. Its yellowish content isn’t exactly what she would describe as mouthwatering, but Gin gives her an encouraging bump and empties his own.

Maybe her model isn’t as clueless and insensitive as she initially thought.

The liquor – for it’s alcohol – is floating strong. Creamy, though. Overall, not bad. (Not as good as Costia’s one of course, which remains by far her all-time favourite.)

Alcohol, it seems, is the go-to remedy for a wide range of social situations when it comes to Grounders. She’s lost count of the number of bottles she’s downed in the company of Lotrien, Otis or Joao.

She gives Gin a small nod in thanks. He promptly fills her glass for a second round, with a delighted smile.

He gestures to the bottle before pointing at himself.

“Oh, you make it yourself?”

He nods.

“It’s very good” (a little bit of flattery never hurt anybody). “What’s in it?”

Gin’s third tirade of the day in Trigedasleng follows. She doesn’t understand a single word of it. It gives her the time to observe him, however. All difficulties of earlier aside, from the right angle, Gin looks almost… jovial.

That’s one word she’s seldom associated with Trikru. (No, that’s unfair to Shabir and Lincoln.) Great, now she feels almost bad for dismissing his question. She could let it go, segue into a comparison of beverages she has a soft spot for, anything but bring the Mountain back into their conversation. She doesn’t.
“No… Battle Mountain” she repeats. “Nou fayogon” she stumbles over the words.

He stops, picking up on the shift in her tone.

She grimaces, sees Dante, eerily pale in his blue shirt, gaunt features and tired eyes. She can’t remember how it – how she – felt, pointing the gun at him. A single bullet. That’s all it had taken. So technically speaking, guns had been involved. They just hadn’t caused… the most damage.

She shakes her head. How does one describe mass asphyxiation?

(Mimicking it is… out of the question.)

She exhales.

“Air. Poison?” she whispers. The word eludes her: “Feisbona. We… We poisoned the air.”

Nothing to rave about. Definitely nothing to be proud of.

The old world had created a word for gas chambers: genocide. Or maybe the word had existed before. In any case, the act itself had been labelled and condemned as a crime against humanity. “Humanity”, not just you, me, them, no: Humanity as a whole. That’s what Clarke had committed. That’s what she now has on her conscience. In her lungs. Deep inside her bones.

Are there truly no good guys left or is that what bad guys tell themselves to be able to sleep at night and go about their days without, one morning, turning the gun on themselves?

There had been an overwhelming sense of urgency, that much she remembers. Self righteousness too. Hot and all so easy self righteousness. That one she carried with her for a while. In fact, it’s probably still there, lying in wait. Despair, the creeping panic of being backed into a corner, of running out of options. This “them or us” type of inhumane choice Lexa seems well versed in.

It’s a fine line to balance on: from self righteousness to hypocrisy. She stopped wondering on which
side she’s fallen a long time ago.

He seems to mull it over. (See, even loquacious Gin doesn’t know what to do with this piece of information.)

She can’t explain what compels her to continue: “Goufa. There were children. Innocent people.”

He pours them a third round.

She gulps it down in one go.

Saying it out loud is even worse than when Raven had unilaterally told her this would be her new codename from now on. She understands the “C” of Charlie, but what the “B” stands for is unclear: Raven’s alternately informed her it refers to her “raging bisexuality”, her “blonde hair, duh” and “It’s a subtle salute to all the babes out there, get it?” Why the mechanic wouldn’t let her use her family name is beyond her (and no “Golf sounds like such a bore, Clarke!” does not count as a valid argument against its use).

Her conclusion stands: Raven’s having way too much fun with creating their codenames.

The radio remains silent.

She grabs the mike, presses down and repeats: “AlphaKilo, this is CharlieBravo, over”

The radio finally roars to life.

“Affirmative. Over.”

“Can you read me well? Over”

“Affirmative. Over”

“And Raven’s sure this line is 100% secure?”

“Yes, she assured me no one can listen in on this very frequency.”

“Great, well, then we can start I suppose. It’s good to hear your voice, Clarke. How’re you?”

Marcus is genuine, she can hear that much, despite the robotic delivery. She’s not in the mood for his solicitous tone, though. She should be excited: she hasn’t spoken with anyone from the Ark in ages, yet she feels… antsy for some reason.

“Good, yeah, good.”

“And how is Damian?”

She appreciates Kane’s thoughtfulness, but won’t go into details when it comes to Damian’s trials and tribulations.

“He’s adjusting to Polis. What about you?”

“We’re doing fine. Very busy of course, but I suspect that’s true as well for you.”

Something tells her this “we” does not refer to Arkers in general and rather to her mother. Although the latter has remained conspicuously silent about Kane in the few letters they’ve exchanged, Clarke’s pretty certain the two are still an item. The thought doesn’t make her cringe anymore.
Marcus sighs and she can see him all so very clearly run a tired hand through his hair.

“We’ve had to deal with a lot of illegal deforestation these past couple of weeks and we’re sure Arkers are responsible. Which brings us back to the fact that we still haven’t decided on the best Rule of Law model, something that is becoming more pressing with each passing day. As you can imagine, these discussions aren’t exactly smooth. After a lifetime spent… constrained, many of our people aren’t taking too kindly to restrictions of any kind.”

She can’t help the snort: that’s quite the understatement. Before her journey to Polis, more than a few Arkers had called for general gun distributions. Sure, the threat of Grounder attacks had been on their mind, but she suspects the desire had just as much to do with defending one’s space and one’s – perceived or actual – rights against a power long seen as non-representative.

She would have thought they’d have solved all those issues by now, though. Wasn’t Marcus himself on the justice committee? With Lincoln, no? The few discussions she had attended at the time had been almost as tense as her own collaboration with Costia (which is saying something!). Several members had advocated for not altering their rules, arguing that their people were going through enough change already and needed familiarity when it came to Law & Order. Executions would replace floatings, while regulations over forbidden behaviour would endure as is. Others meanwhile, traumatised by the Ark’s tendency to resort to the death penalty much too enthusiastically, had called for a system of mediation and forgiveness, instead of punishment.

Her curiosity piqued, she asks: “What are you going to settle on, then?”

“A restorative justice model, for sure, with mediation conducted by volunteers. We just have to fine-tune how to implement it. It should work for one-on-one infractions, once we all grow accustomed to it, but when it comes to breaches that impact only indirectly the whole community, such as deforestation for instance, it becomes much more complicated.”

She’s never heard about restorative justice before. She wonders where the council drew its inspiration from.

“And policing?”

“Well, what you sent us on the set-up in Polis was a very interesting read. Do relay to the Commander our gratitude for the information she provided. Polis is a much bigger city than Arkadia, but we’ll have a lot of traffic too, what with the hospital and trade. And we want the most democratic
system possible, of course. An idea would be to have unarmed volunteers, each patrolling a cluster of houses, on a rotation basis. Such a system is vulnerable to corruption though, so we’d need to maintain at all times an open channel to report unethical behaviour.”

“What about the Guard?”

“First we transfer internal policing to civilians. The Guard’s rather… heavy-handed approach in the Ark has left its mark on people: I see too many look at them with more apprehension than respect. Then we’ll see about external threat management. Eventually, and I’m sharing this with you in confidence, the Guard’s role will inevitably have to be curtailed. Nobody wants a repeat performance of the Pike incident, with easy access to weapons by untrustworthy elements. That being said, I do not think now’s the time. You saw what happened with the displaced Ice Nation families: without the Guard and its allegiance to the Council, we would likely have seen violent incidents. We’ll have to be… strategic, in how we eventually usher in that transition. If it comes down to it, we may even have to ask the Commander for support.”

“Lexa…” How to put this? “I don’t think you realise the negative impact us using these weapons has on our image. The Commander’s eager for us to do away with trigger-happy soldiers wearing firearms. She’ll welcome any plan for disarmament.”

That too, is an understatement. Lexa’s made sure to raise the issue at every single one of their meetings. (That is: back when they still used to meet.) And when she really wants to drive her point home – because Lexa floating knows which ones of her buttons to push – it’s not Pike she brings up but Finn.

She shakes her head, trying to clear her thoughts: “What is the latest with the refugee families from Ice Nation?”

The radio crackles with another sigh.

“When the Queen’s death was announced, several decided to return to their home villages. Her son…”

“Roan” Clarke fills in.

“Yes, Roan seems to enjoy quite a bit more support and goodwill amongst them. We coordinated the transfer with Indra and a young Ice Nation man Octavia knows well. I believe his name is Athol.
He’s apparently been put in charge of our section of the border.” He pauses, before admitting: “I’m afraid we had to ask the remaining families to settle outside of the boundaries of Arkadia.”

“What?”

“It couldn’t be helped, Clarke. Our people fought very hard for the right to this land and… let me put it this way: we currently have little to no space for empathy towards another’s suffering. It’s… I wish circumstances were different, but for our stability and their own safety, it was the most reasonable course of action. Now, we didn’t force anyone, we didn’t physically remove them from Arkadia: we made a deal and helped them establish themselves a little ways from here, on the lake banks.”

“On whose land? Because if it’s Lexa’s, then we should have informed her…”

“We arranged it with TonDC. My understanding is that the Commander put Indra in charge of ruling over this area.”

So Lexa’s delegating now. Then why the float doesn’t she have any free time anymore?

“How is the hospital going by the way?”

“Your mother’s by far the best person to ask, but overall, I believe the launch has been quite successful. In fact, the teams just performed their first delivery. The woman came to us at the very last minute, with complications, but Abby and Jackson managed to save both her and her baby.” She can hear the smile in his voice. “It’s concrete examples like these, which will lead to more people from the neighbouring villages coming for treatment.”

Clarke can’t help but smile: one more step towards building understanding and trust with Trikru. “Lexa will be pleased to hear things are going well.”

There’s an awkward silence, one that tells her Kane is unsure about the question he’s about to ask.

“How has the collaboration between the two of you been?”

There you go. Collaboration hasn’t been going anywhere, since a prerequisite would be to actually
speak with each other. But Kane doesn’t need to know that. The question remains though: where do they stand these days?

“She strongly disagrees with our decision not to teach Trigedasleng, as you well know. Her… displeasure had a direct impact on material support: I’m certain she would have been open to sending the cattle for free, instead of the exchange we settled for, had we not refused her offer of a teacher exchange. I hope to revive our discussion about sending Arkadians to learn specific trades soon. Thankfully, Raven’s progress here, especially with the radios, has worked in our favour – and not just with Trikru.”

“Yes. Raven’s achievement is remarkable, I’m supposed to send her Sinclair’s congratulations. We have so far four registered men who would be willing to travel to Polis for an apprenticeship. And thank you for all the trade deals you negotiated these past weeks.”

The agreements in question have, if she’s honest, just as much to do with the enthusiasm of other clans for the radio network, as with Clarke having all the time in the world now to cosy up to them.

“Actually, I don’t think we should send people only to Polis. Tala offered to receive Arkadians to learn sustainable fishing techniques. And since we live right by this giant lake and the only suggestions I’ve heard so far are to use bombs that would kill absolutely everything down there, it seems to me a skill we’d want to invest in…”

“We decided against this bomb idea, Clarke. Remind me again who Tala is?”

True, the idea had been dismissed. What Kane knows just as well as she does, however, is that the motivation behind that decision hadn’t been an ethical or a strategic one, but simple logistics: they couldn’t spare an engineer to work on underwater bombs at the time.

“She’s the ambassador for the Boat people.”

“Alright. That sounds promising. We’ll announce it and see if anyone’s interested. How far away do the Boat people live?”

“To the East of Arkadia, only a couple of days’ ride, less than a week if I’ve understood correctly.”

“Perfect then. We’ll have to see about ensuring our people’s safety, if they’re not all in training in
“Ok, but not with guns, Kane.”

“Yes, yes, not with guns. We’re on the same page there, Clarke. Is the Commander ready to officially start talks for us to join the coalition?”

See, were Lexa to be speaking to her, Clarke would have an answer to this question. But since she isn’t, all the blonde can do is speculate and hope.

Maybe this silence is nothing but a negotiation technique? If so, then she’s falling for it like a blushing novice.

She tries to remain as vague as possible: “I still have to see about that…”

“We fulfilled most of her demands, didn’t we?”

“Yes, I’ll speak with her. In any case, if we do start them, these will be very long negotiations, Kane.”

“I suspect as much. Do you feel up to the task?”

A couple of weeks ago, Clarke wouldn’t have hesitated to respond with an assured “absolutely.” Now though?

She’s shaken from her musings when red hair pokes out from the side of the door and Iro’s serious face appears. Clarke motions for the girl to step in.

“I need to give it some thought, Kane. I’ve got to go, actually. Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“No, I think we covered most of it. I’d like to have these talks at least once a month, if that’s fine with you. It helps me better brief the Council.”
“Sure, no problem. Will you want to speak with Raven as well?”

“I’m fine, but someone else asked to: Jonah. Would you mind asking her to arrange it with him?”

She grins: she doesn’t know where he fits in Raven’s current picture, but Jonah’s definitely hooked.

“No worries, I’ll let her know. Over”

“Perfect. Well, it was a pleasure speaking with you. Your mother sends her love. Stay safe. Over.”

“Bye. Over.”

She hangs the mike back up, takes Raven’s table recording all codenames and locations and changes the frequency to the village where Iro’s parents live, the latest one to be connected. She smiles to the girl and encourages her to take a seat next to her, so she can show her how to use the mike.

She’ll have plenty of time to reflect on where Lexa’s silence leaves her and what she wants to do about it. Right now, there’s an adorable little Nightblood who’ll speak with her parents for the first time in years. And most probably an enraged Titus pacing somewhere in the tower.

All in all: an excellent day.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
-------

“Bad.”

For someone who, only a couple of days ago, was struggling just as much as Gin currently is, she’s enjoying this way too much.

He throws an offended look her way.
“Ugly” she continues and adds: “Garbage” for good measure.

His eyes widen in recognition and she thinks he’s about to laugh, when the momentum catches him off balance and he promptly falls off the bicycle for the seventh time that day.

How did people in the old world do it, if it really was that important a mode of transportation? Because as Clarke can attest, learning to pedal on these things, while not falling to the left or right is not an easy feat. They look and feel neither comfortable nor practical.

Which explains why Gin’s one of the very few still giving it a shot. The curious Trikru and ambassadors who had come to observe Raven’s inaugural trial last week had all walked away after the first dramatic nose-dives. Raven still has a lot of work before her, if she wants to convince the general public that her accident-prone machines are a viable alternative to their beloved horses.

Gin’s left leg is trapped and the more he tries to extricate himself from under the torture device, the more painful it looks.

She walks over to help, not without throwing a cheeky: “Terrible” though, because she is incorrigible and boy is it fun to see someone else make a fool of themselves for a change!

“Again” Raven shouts from her seat, jotting down notes.

Yeah, nope. They’re done for the day. Gin’s pretty banged up as is, not to mention he looks positively ruffled by his crushing defeat in this battle against steel. And Clarke has zero desire to get back on a bike any time soon, thank you very much. Her ass is still painfully sore from last time and she’d like to avoid Thalia’s disappointed frown when discovering blooming marks on her skin. Because when in a mood, Clarke’s discovered, Thalia’s massages take a rather… forceful turn.

Raven can find herself some other guinea pigs.

Speaking of which, Damian comes back around for his umpteenth lap around the arena, all proud and all ridiculously cute, on this vehicle that’s twice as big as he is. In fact, his bicycle is so tall, he can’t even sit on the saddle and needs to physically throw his weight forward at every turn of the pedals.
With a triumphant smile, he lets go of the handlebars for a second.

What a show off.

Although she is relieved to see him look happier than he has in a long time, particularly considering their most recent incident at the tailor’s. (“Relieved” is not the right word: she’s so damn overjoyed.)

Damian had only just started letting Clarke in again. As the bruises on his body slowly faded away, he even resumed training with Lincoln in the mornings. And then along comes that cretin of a tailor. (Clarke’d like to state at that point in the story that she does not harbour ill sentiments towards tailors as such. It appears an honourable profession. That being said, there’s one in this town she’d like to murder.) The bastard had refused point blank to hand any of the clothes he had fashioned for them, once he’d seen Damian’s exposed torso.

Which, in hindsight, Clarke should have anticipated. In truth, she hates herself for not preventing it and not protecting Damian better from this floating nonsense.

She’d like to think, however, that she could not have handled the ensuing row with the imbecile better. (Damian though, did not seem to share that opinion and dragged an irate Clarke away from the shop, before she could physically assault the prick.) They may still be wearing their tattered clothes, but Clarke is adamant their pride made it out unscathed.

All things considered, Damian seems to be recovering from this latest episode much faster than the fight a couple of months back. (Which is not necessarily a good thing, is it, if it means he’s just getting used to daily persecution? Is putting up with it really the adult, “bigger than though”, thing to do or should they nurture their capacity for indignation instead?)

Clarke on the other hand is… rattled. Because it’s not just her anymore. It’s Damian and her, now. The Arkers had been downright rude once Damian’s distinctiveness had been revealed. And here, Lexa turns a blind eye to – no: her silence downright encourages – violence and intolerance from her people. To the point where Clarke and Lincoln – knowing full well Damian would never agree to it, if in the know – have taken to scheming behind his back to make sure he never finds himself on his own in town. A secret chaperone system, if you will.

This isn’t peace. This isn’t safety. At least not for him. Surely, there has to be a place on this damn Earth they can both find their happily ever after?
Her second seems to enjoy the rush of speed quite a bit, too. She takes a moment to savour the sight: Damian, ear splitting grin firmly in place, is flaunting his zigzagging skills. She has to stop herself from shouting out words of caution and sighs. Trust Raven to find a new way for her to worry about his safety. (She’s got enough as it is.)

Gin grunts a reluctant “Mochof” when she helps him up and seems relatively well, considering his recent tumbles.

Clarke knows just what he needs to recover from today’s ordeal: “Yu gaf souda, Gin?”

And sure enough, Gin’s not one to let her down.

She can count on the fingers of one hand the number of Trikru she enjoys relaxed interactions with. And though Gin still has his moments – lets an occasional “Wanheda” slip out or freezes, unable to reconcile the legend with the tipsy woman, rambling in bad Trigedasleng (that gets worse by the second), swaying in front of him – she’s come to really enjoy his company. She hasn’t given up on finishing that portrait of his, but in the meantime, they’ve found something the two of them find much more enjoyable.

“Hey, wait, where do you two think you’re going?” Raven wants to know.

“We need a break and a drink, Ray.”

“You can’t just quit like this! You’re my focus group! Your feedback is essential to this pilot phase!”

“Look at us, Ray. Gin is barely able to stand and I’m not sure I’ll manage to make it back up the Tower tonight.”

“Clarkeeeeeeeeeee, I need you!”

She doesn’t think Raven’s ever sounded like such a five-year-old. (A very dictatorial five-year-old, mind you.)

“I’m not your minion, Raven. Gin and I are done for the day and that is final.”
“Ugh, you guys are such wimps. Suit yourself, don’t participate in this historic milestone, see if I care. Where the hell is Costia anyway?”

Now that is actually an excellent question: where is Costia?

Because if there’s one person Clarke would have expected to brave – and successfully so – Raven’s creation du jour, it’s Costia. But the girl hasn’t been seen in 5 days and Clarke’s getting worried. (Which is ridiculous of course, because, hello: wife of the Commander!) But it’s also not her style to disappear without a warning or a goodbye…

First Lexa, now this. She has the unsettling feeling of being part of a game she doesn’t know the rules to.

“Stop whining, come have a drink with us, you misunderstood genius.”

For all her talk of milestones, Raven’s out of her seat and packing up in a blink.

“And what are we drinking to forget this time? The Commander being too busy to play with poor abandoned Clarkie or the fact that her hot as fuck partner isn’t there for you to drool over? I’m good either way” the mechanic throws at her.

Yeah… she throws a cursory look around: a beat up Trikru who she doesn’t understand more often than not, a hyper teenager and a sassy brunette whose jibes hit too close for comfort…

She needs new friends.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!