The Journey to Us
by Girl_with_a_Quill

Summary

After the massacre of the peacekeepers, the Sky people are brought to Polis to face justice. Given the gravity of the crime against the Coalition, the clans demand more than just the execution of Pike’s group. They demand retribution and give them 2 choices:

- The death of 300 Sky people in payment for the 300 lives slain, or;
- Abby and Sky leaders are put to death as atonement.

Unless there is a third choice? A rare tradition, seldom invoked, could be their salvation. If Clarke and Lexa accept.

“Three bindings for the next three moons. Until the Gon Ogeda, when two halves become one,” Titus concluded with solemnity.

Clexa Political Marriage AU, kinda

Notes

In this world, more time has gone by since the bombs. I always thought 97 years was too little time to develop new languages, religion, clan structures, etc.

Anyhow, chap. 1 and 2 will be a lot of setting-up and might be a bit long. So sorry for that!
Hope you enjoy it though! All comments are welcome and appreciated! :)

What's Left

Chapter Summary

(The website that was hosting the images for the photoboard seems to not exist anymore so all images were erased from the first 5 chapters. Just re-uploading them. Don't mind me. BUT the NEW chapter 6 will be up in a few hours! :) )

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“The death of the twenty-five sky rebels is not enough. Three hundred of our warriors under the banner of peacekeeping were slaughtered!’’

“It is the most treacherous act under our laws, short of attacking our beloved capital and Heda herself!’’

“No one bearing the white flag of peace has ever been attacked in four hundred years since the Great Darkness.’’

“They were murdered in their sleep! The sky cowards did not even give them the chance to defend themselves, to die with honor in battle!’’

“Three hundred lives must be paid with three hundred deaths! It is what is owed as retribution!’’

“Em pleni!’’ the voice of the Commander growled low but dangerously.
At once the roaring in the throne room was silenced. The meeting started mere minutes ago and already the heated clamor for blood from all the clans had exploded throughout the room.

All clans were present, mostly through their ambassadors, as these resided in Polis. Only two clan leaders had managed to reach Polis in time for the council, Luan kom Floukrı (Boat People) and Rohana kom Ingranrona (Plain Riders). King Roan of the Ice Nation had never left. Several village chieftains in the vicinity of Polis had also arrived on behalf of each of their clan.

Lexa sat rigid on her throne, her face ashen and her eyes hard but unreadable in their intentions. Her gaze swept across the room, steely eyes posing themselves on each delegation in the room, a message clear in them that more outbursts would not be tolerated.

The loudest had been the ambassadors and chieftains, while Luan and Rohana had remained in silence, looking at the Commander and waiting for any signal from her. They were two of her most loyal and powerful allies. Roan had also remained deathly silent, but had been listening and studying the other clans intently.

Lexa then trained her eyes on the Skaikru delegation, led by Abby, Kane and Clarke at the center of the room. Also part of the delegation was Fuji, Jerry, Raven and Octavia, who had offered to come with the three other guards accompanying them.

Abby and Kane’s faces were a mixture of fear, embarrassment and desperation. Clarke, who hid her emotions better than both of them, was still visibly stricken. Despite that, Lexa could see past it and read the stubbornness and determination to fix the situation shining in them. She could see the wheels turning in them frantically. They held each other’s gaze for a few seconds until Lexa finally broke it to look at Abby again.

“Chancellor Abby, leader of the Skaikru, you are here today to answer for the crimes committed by your people against the Coalition. The massacre of three hundred peacekeepers. Three hundred peacekeepers sent to protect you,” Lexa emphasized, gritting her teeth. “This is not only considered an act of war but capital treason.”

“We have surrendered the rebels, Commander, the group of people responsible for the attack, to face justice,” Abby replied gravely, turning to look at the group of chained sky people against the side wall of the room, an iron ring around their necks and a tight, thick strip of leather between their teeth tied around their head to prevent them from speaking.

“Attacking anyone under the ogonzaun bana, the white flag of ceasefire and truce, is considered the most villainous crime and punishable by death to those who directly attacked.” Titus paused.
“However, attacking anyone under the sacred ogonzaunkepa bana kom Heda, the Commander’s peacekeeping banner, is treason against the Coalition and against Heda herself,’’ Titus explained. “The entire clan is held responsible, not only the attackers.’’

As Abby opened her mouth to reply, the heavy doors of the room opened and a tall, slim figure advanced through the crowd towards the throne.

“Sybil, Blinka kom Polis,’’ Titus announced to the council with surprise and solemnity, immediately bowing his head deeply. ‘‘Sybil, The Eye of Polis,’’ he translated for the Sky people who looked at each other with quizzical expressions, as others whispered ‘blinka’ (eye) around them dropping their heads in respect as well.

The old woman with cotton white hair and a long grey robe nodded to him and extended her arm, placing her wrinkled hand on top of Titus’ lowered head. ‘‘Fleimkepa,’’ she replied in salute and then stood in front of the Commander.

“Heda,’’ she said, as she bowed in front of her and then stood back up with a warm smile on her lips.

"Oma,’’ Lexa murmured taking the old woman’s hand and raising it to her forehead, pressing it slightly over her headpiece, without however inclining herself other than with a minute tilt of the head.

The Commander bowed to no one and this was the only reverent gesture a Commander ever made to anyone, as a sign of respect given only to The Eyes, as well as a symbolic acceptance of the blessing they bestowed. ‘‘You have returned from your retreat in the Canyon of Needles a full moon earlier,’’ Lexa simply observed.

“I gleamed I might be of service to you, Heda,’’ Sybil answered with equal simplicity, her calm passive face not betraying the silent exchange she just had with Lexa, answering the question the Commander had been careful to keep out of her tone. Sybil had seen something and came to either warn or guide the Commander, as was her duty. This heightened Lexa’s alarm with the whole situation, but showed none of it on her face.

“Your guidance is always welcome, Blinka,’’ Lexa replied.

Sybil then turned around to look at the Skaikru delegation, stunning them slightly as they realized
than even though she looked at them, she in fact could not see. Or so it would seem. She was blind.

Her eyes were milky, almost pale blue in their whiteness. Her face was beautiful, high cheeks and a proud brow were still prominent under her wrinkled skin. Her lips were slim but seemed to permanently form a calm smile. The shape of an eye was tattooed with thick black ink in the middle of her forehead, oddly reminiscent of Lexa’s headpiece, except larger and the lines surrounding the circle were more detailed and sinuous. She wore a simple robe with a hooded cloak fastened to it, its high black leather collar jutting up. Her ears and hands devoid of jewelry with the exception of a ring with a large, dark stone.

Despite her seeming blindness, she nevertheless looked at them, first at Abby and Kane, and then stopping at Clarke, holding her gaze. Clarke felt a tightening in her stomach, as if someone were opening the recesses of her soul. She clenched her jaw and blinked trying to block the sensation.

Sybil’s tight-lipped smile only grew and she nodded to herself. She then went to stand near Titus without a single word, as if signaling that her greetings – and examinations, Lexa thought to herself–, had ended and the meeting could continue where it had left off.

“Our laws are clear. The clan must pay three hundred deaths with three hundred deaths,’’ Titus continued, as if the interruption had never taken place.

The sky delegation gasped in shock, with the exception of Clarke. “Commander, that would wipe out the Sky people almost entirely! Almost no one would be left,’’ Kane said desperately.

“Less than a hundred. About forty actually,’’ Lexa specified with surprising accuracy, making it clear that the Commander knew their numbers in great detail. Three hundred had survived the fallen stations in Trikru land. What remained of Farm station was currently chained in the room. The forty in excess were the last of the original hundred. Nothing escaped Heda.

“Then you can see, Heda, this would effectively end us,’’ Kane added pleadingly. “The life of the rebels is already at your disposal. Is this not enough?’’

“Why punish those who are not guilty? This is revenge, not justice!’’ Abby added. Lexa almost laughed bitterly at how similar Abby sounded to Clarke, with whom she had had almost this exact argument the previous days for what seemed like endless hours.

“The clan and their leader is accountable for failing to control their own people! Mere two days
after joining the Coalition, Skaikru rebels slaughtered three hundred peacekeepers under the nose of your people. Under your watch, Chancellor Griffin!” Indra exclaimed with seething rage.

“Wamplei kom Hefa,” the ambassador from the Lake Clan spoke up. “If the clan will not pay the price of retribution, this is the only alternative.”

“Commander, if there is another way, then we shall accept it. Surely anything is better than killing three hundred of our people, surely…”

“It is unwise to accept a sentence before knowing what it is,” Lexa admonished Kane, then posed her eyes on the ambassador who had spoken before.

“Might I remind you, Loui kom Podakru, that only the Commander can invoke Wamplei kom Hefa and only if the clan either refuses to pay retribution or voluntarily proposes the sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?” Clarke’s voice had croaked out.

Lexa had been avoiding to look at Clarke, as this was an option she had sought to avoid or even mention to her at all costs. She would not, could not ask Clarke to make another choice of this kind. She had spent the previous day and night raking her brain trying to find an alternative, even when she knew there was none.

Their eyes finally met. Clarke’s were a combination of both hope at a possible alternative and fear at how much worse it would be. This was the reality of the world they now lived in. A flash of anger also crossed her features in silent accusation. Why hadn’t Lexa mentioned this before during their heated argument on their way to Arkadia and then back to Polis? But it was the fear that took over when she read the pain in Lexa’s eyes.

“Wamplei kom Hefa is the Death of the Chief, the death to the clan leader,” Lexa answered gravely. “They must sacrifice their life to atone for their clan, to pay for failing their people and the Coalition, instead of the lives owed in retribution.”

At this Kane rose to his feet, standing protectively in front of Abby. “I offer my life in the Chancellor’s place, Commander. Take me, I beg you,” he insisted, deaf to Abby protests behind him.
Lexa smiled wryly. “You misunderstand, Kane. Both your life and Chancellor Griffin’s would have to be sacrificed….”

At this, the Sky people’s delegation erupted into shouts and laments, but were immediately silenced at Lexa’s raised hand.

“The clan leader is the one that is held to account when treason has been committed. They are accountable to their clan and therefore it is their own clan who carries out the sentence. They punish their leader for failing them. They carry out the sentence, each and every member of the clan having to make a cut, to remind their leaders and themselves the consequences of failure.” Lexa explained patiently, ignoring the outburst that had interrupted her, knowing it was expected.

She looked directly at Clarke, watching as the meaning sunk into the sky girl. The Sky people themselves, every single one of them, would have to execute Abby and Kane, carrying out the death by a thousand cuts. With no exception, meaning Clarke herself would have participate in the death of her own mother. *This* was the choice before her.

In the midst of her terrible realization, Clarke also understood the gruesome intention of this tradition. She had spent so many hours arguing with Lexa about grounder notions of justice, that the meaning now seemed all too clear.

It was a punishment of the leaders themselves, but it was also a punishment for the people who carried out the sentence. The loved ones, the family, the friends, the entire clan sinking in the knife into someone they loved and followed, instead of leaving it to some faceless executioner. Their pain and blood forever on their hands, as reminder to be more vigilant of the actions of their next leaders and of the clan as a whole. Any signs of rebellion or hint of offense against the laws would be squashed quickly by the clan itself, becoming its own police, keeping itself in check.

It was a macabre but brilliant deterrent, Clarke thought to herself rancorously, but she would be damned if she accepted any of it without a fight. Before she could open her mouth, however, Abby spoke up.

“But why Kane? I am the Chancellor, the one to be held responsible.’’

“It is customary for the clan leader to be the mark-bearer of the Coalition. It signals they are both responsible before their people *and* before the Coalition. By refusing to take the mark and asking Kane to bear it instead, Chancellor Griffin, you made him accountable to the Coalition as its representative. In its eyes, he has failed to uphold its laws,’’ the Commander further explained their grim predicament.
“They who lead the people, they who bear the mark, receive the reminding cut,” Titus recited ominously. “They are usually one and the same, but now both must pay the price.”

Abby and Kane just look at each other, with resignation and sadness in their eyes. Both knew they would do anything for their people, even sacrifice themselves. “I’m so sorry, Marcus,” Abby said with watery eyes. “I never thought you’d –”

“What about the Mountain, Commander?” Clarke’s voice rose thunderously. “What about the lives you forced me to take when you betrayed our alliance and left Skaikru trapped inside the mountain?! Have we not paid already?!”

Clarke knew she was being unreasonable and unfair to Lexa, that the offenses committed by the Sky people with the peacekeepers could not be forgiven as payment for the demons that now haunted her, but she had to try anything. If that also gave her the benefit of lashing out with her still burning anger against Lexa for Mount Weather, then even better.

“No one is demanding justice for the Mountain Men, Ambassador,” Lexa replied evenly. “As for the retreat, our previous alliance was only a temporary one. No oath was ever sworn, but I did have a sworn duty to protect my people.”

“So your word is not worth anything?! Your honor?!” Clarke spat. She knew it was one thing to challenge Lexa in private, but to do it before the Council and several clan leaders she was playing with very lethal fire.

“An alliance depends on both side keeping their side of the bargain. You forfeited the moment you could not fulfill yours. The people your inside man was supposed to set free were re-captured by the enemy. Five hundred brothers and sisters held at gunpoint to be put to death unless we retreated. Should I have sacrificed them all so we could attempt to save 42 of your friends? An outcome that would be unlikely without the help of that same freed army from within? Are their lives more valuable because they are your friends, because they are sky people?”

“You left us to die,” Clarke accused.

“You people outside Mount Weather retreated with my army, Clarke, under my protection.” Lexa countered. “Plans change in battle and I did what I deemed to be the best outcome. That which would save most of our people. We cannot always save them all,” she added tiredly. “You know this.”
“Wanheda does not respect Heda or this Coalition! How can we trust she will not retaliate in revenge after the Wamplei kom Hefa, with the Mountain as her excuse? She has too much power, too much thirst for revenge and no respect for our ways,” the ambassador from Ouskejon Kru (Blue Cliff) and Azgeda’s closest ally furiously exclaimed.

“How can we trust Heda when she betrayed us once before?” Octavia angrily replied.

Other voices were raised in the room once more. The grounders demanding the death of the Sky people, the death of Wanheda, while the Arkadians insulted the grounders. Over the roar, Indra’s voice won out.

“Heda risked her own life, the most sacred vessel of the spirit, in a fight to the death for you! To bring Azgeda to justice for what they had done to your people, as she had promised you in this very room, Okteivia kom Skaikru!” Indra hissed, having descended from her spot next to the throne and towered menacingly over Octavia.

“She was on her way to Arkadia with the body of the Ice Queen when your treacherous brother and his people slaughtered my army!” she continued, moving to face the prisoners who flinched at her approach. She then spat on Pike and struck Bellamy with her fist, the only two prisoners who had dared to glare challengingly at her.

Lexa only sighed, warning Indra with a quiet ‘enough’ barely above a whisper.

She was tired and angry, her frustration mounting as she realized that no matter what decision they reached, the seed of doubt and hatred had already been planted and would only sow more conflict. Her entire reign as Heda, she had strived to build the Coalition brick by brick, to bring stability and peace to her people, and right now it all seemed it could crumble at any minute.

“Discord will be never-ending, like a man chasing where the ground meets the sky in the horizon, forever running ‘round like a snake after its own tail.” Sybil finally elevated her voice in an ominous, almost prophetic voice.

Lexa almost snorted. The old woman loved to speak in riddles and sound purposefully obtuse for her own amusement most of the time, but today Lexa had no patience to decipher the Eye’s
enigmatic words.

“Blinka, please…” Lexa paused searching for a way to ask clarification without sounding contemptuous. “Do you see a way?” she tried, even though she knew it would be futile.

Sybil, like every Eye she had met, thrived by remaining vague, preferring to plant ideas in people’s head without them realizing it rather than spelling out a solution. Stubbornness and arrogance lived in the hearts of men, Sybil had once told her. Telling them what to do often lead to the opposite result, as they vainly attempted to prove they could defy fate. On the other hand, warning them of too detailed and specific threats and dangers often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. The more people attempted to avoid it, the more they themselves brought it upon themselves.

“It is only when one stops chasing and stands still, that one will realize they are what unites sky and ground.” Sybil answered with an amused glint in her eye, at her sage sounding words.

Lexa repressed the urge to roll her eyes. She did believe in Sybil’s wisdom and had always faithfully listened to her guidance. Her antics nevertheless, especially at this very moment, grated on her already worn patience.

In the murmured silence after the Blinka’s words, Rohana, the leader of the Plain Riders rose on her feet and exclaimed with haste as the idea struck her.

“Gon Ogeda!” she said almost excitedly, looking around her and at Heda, but then added when she saw Lexa furrow her brow in confusion, “Tu Heda Gon Ogeda!”

At her words, a tide of gasps and electrified murmurs erupted and swept across the audience, except the Sky people.

Lexa’s eyes widened and she rose on her throne. “Absolutely not!” she roared, raising her voice for the first time during the entire meeting, her nostrils flaring.

“Heda, binding Heda and Wanheda in the sacred bond would be the only way the Sky people could truly become one with the ground for good.” Rohana continued undeterred. “The unbreakable bond is the only thing that could guarantee without fail that Wanheda could never strike against the Coalition and that Heda could never strike against her or Skaikru.”
“Rohana, the great stallion of the plains, is right, Heda’’ Luan spoke. “Wanheda would pay with her life if she did. It is the only way the clans would rest easy, knowing she cannot move against you or the Coalition at the risk of her own life. I suspect it is also the only way the Sky people’s fear would be put to rest, as your life would also be bound by it.’’

Lexa had she descended the steps of her throne and was slowly pacing, hands behind her back, deep in thought as she took their words in.

“I cannot,’’ was all she uttered looking at the floor, as she continued to pace.

The Sky people had remained silent trying to understand what it all meant. Kane was the first to realize as he translated the meaning of the words to himself, but did so out loud. “Tu heda gon ogeda’’ he pronounced awkwardly. “Two Hedas come together…two Hedas united?!’’ he jerked his head up as he exclaimed. “You’re proposing a political marriage between Commander Lexa and Clarke?’’ he asked wide-eyed.

Abby immediately shrieked beside him, the rest of the Sky people joining in a chorus of ‘no’ and ‘this cannot be!’

Clarke on the other hand had frozen in her place when she had heard the words, a bolt of molten electricity and shock had shot through her, stunning her into dazed silence and blurry vision momentarily. She felt her knees tremble and her chest constrict at the sheer notion. Her hand flew out to her side where her mother stood. Abby grabbed her hand, interpreting the gesture as a plea for her mother’s protection. Clarke had only needed her support to make sure her legs didn’t give out. Clarke was more shocked than afraid, and that realization sent her spinning even more.

Finally finding her voice, she asked hoarsely “What… what does that mean?’’

“Clarke!’’ Lexa warned under her breath, shaking her head slowly.

“It is not a marriage, mark-bearer,’’ Rohana replied Kane. “In a marriage one’s life is only owed to one’s houmon (spouse). Each vow to protect the other, give their life to protect the other if need be,’’ she continued.

“Gon Ogeda, on the other hand, is a sacred bond. Those who enter it pledge their life not only to their bonded one, but to their bonded’s people, their clan. Their loyalty owed to both their clans. They vow to protect it with their life, but it means not only protecting them from danger. It also
means that if they ever attempt striking against their bonded or their clan, they will pay with their life,’’ she sentenced.

“Which is why it is rarely entered,’’ Luan commented, “but also why Rohana has proposed it. As Commander, Heda Lexa’s people are not only Trikru from whence she was born, but the Coalition as a whole. It would protect all the clans against any action Wanheda and her Skaikru took against Heda and the Coalition. And the other way around. The guarantee: their own lives.’’

Luan was Lexa’s oldest and most trusted ally, the first to join the Coalition. He never rushed into decisions and Lexa greatly valued his judgement. His level-headedness had led the rowdy Boat People into a period of reduced hardship, thus bringing their days as naval raiders almost to an end. He looked at Lexa calmly with his blue eyes while he spoke, his dirty blonde hair shaved at the sides, revealing the small swirling tattoos of his clan on his scalp, and leaving only a thick, long braid that started at the top of his head down to his back; a wiry, short beard starting at the temples. The fact that Luan was actively proposing this gave Lexa pause.

Clarke had been looking at Lexa while both leaders had been explaining, her eyes following her unusually agitated demeanor. Something about their words rung familiar. The tightening in her chest became almost unbearable at the recognition and at the simultaneous realization of what her decision would be. The warring emotions within her stemmed from the reasons behind her decision, too contradictory and overwhelming for Clarke to even admit them to herself.

“To be Heda is to be alone!’’ Titus, who had been too livid to speak, finally managed to get out. “Commanders cannot be bonded. It cannot be so! It is forbidden!’’ he repeated, his voice shaking and his brow beaded with clammy sweat.

“That it has never been done is not the same as not as it not being possible, bother,’’ a calm voice said.

It was Casio, the new ambassador from Delphi, a young man with stunning grey eyes and dark, long braided hair. A large circular tattoo resembling a sun or a star also adorned his forehead like Sybil’s, but he also had a thick black stripe tattooed on each side of this face, descending from the corner of his eyes and curling over his chin.

Delphi was the spiritual center of the grounder clans, where the order of Flame Keepers had emerged. The Eyes, who were revered as oracles, were sent there to train. The very few justa ( justices) and skriba ( scribes) that existed also usually came from Delphi. Few knew the laws and the traditions as well as the people from Delphi.
“A Heda has never united, but nothing in our laws actually forbid it. They did not do so before the Coalition existed, when Heda merely mediated between the clans, to avoid granting preference to their loved one’s clan or have them threatened by others. Now that Heda rules and protects all clans equally, no reason remains,“ Casio’s paused voice remarked.

“Heda Adrian had almost ten children, Heda Krisa had the same bagon (lover) for many years even if they never shared a roof. They say Becca pram Heda even had a houmon before her ascension.” Luan noted.

“Even so, these are not our ways” Lexa said quietly, coming out of her trance.

"Jus drein jus daun had always been our way, Heda, for almost four centuries since the bombs. You taught us that our ways can change, that violence does not always have to answer with violence. You built the Coalition so we could have peace, so that our people would not blindly spill blood in a never ending cycle of revenge, so that our children could flourish without the shadow of death. You showed us our ways could change. Perhaps this is the next step.” Casio spoke.

“A union would only weaken the Commander. Love is weakness!” Titus insisted with distress.

“Perhaps for a less strong Commander,” Sybil wittily retorted, challenging Titus to contradict it.

“This is not the issue, this is… it cannot be,” Lexa struggled at a loss for words, a sight no one had ever beheld, her gaze still cast on her feet as she had begun pacing again.

“Commander, with respect, if you allow it?” Roan’s deep, gravelly voice rose above them, in a request to address her. He continued when Lexa had stopped walking to lift her gaze to him with a raised eyebrow and acquiesced with a slight nod.

"There is no precedent for… Heda Gon Ogeda,“ he named the union unsurely, "but if Rohana and Luan are right, then the pledge of loyalty to each other’s clan must be Heda’s Badannes-de."

Lexa immediately tensed up and quirked her head to the side in question, trying to determine if Roan was being underhanded in any way.

Badannes-de was the pledge of protection every ascended Heda offered to each clan of the Coalition, while they pledged their service and loyalty to her. It was the same pledge two people
joining in *Gon Ogeda* pledged to each other’s clan.

Since she said nothing, Roan continued.

“If *Wanheda* were to unite with the head of our Coalition, she would have to pledge her loyalty to all clans and not only *Trikru*. And if *Heda* wished, she could pledge her protection not only to *Skaikru*, but also renew her pledge to the other clans on the same journey,” he proposed.

“*Azgeda* would be honored to receive *Heda* and her consort in our border city of Bofalo, ready to re-pledge our loyalty to *Heda* and her sonraunon-to-be, if this should be the decision,” he finished, bowing on one knee.

Lexa was stunned. Everyone in the room had been stunned speechless, not only by the idea but by the offer coming from the King of Azgeda himself, the nation Lexa had been in bitter rivalry with from the beginning of her reign. Lexa understood exactly what Roan was doing, the olive branch he was ingeniously offering, thinking to herself he had definitely inherited his mother’s intelligence and shrewdness.

“*Sha, Badannes-de raun trei kom Kongeda!*” the perpetually hasty Rohana agreed. “Apologies. *Heda*’s Pledge around the Round Road of the Coalition, through the 12 *bodageda*, our border towns,” she corrected, translating without however explaining it further to the Sky people. “The Plain Riders would also be honored and ready to do so, *Heda*.”

“As does the *Floukru,*” Luan said.

“And Delphi,” Casio added.

“Wait!” Lexa finally spoke up, before the rest of the clans could pronounce themselves. “*Gon Ogeda* is a sacred bond, it’s not for –”

“I accept!” Clarke strong voice interrupted, surprising even herself.
Two days before

“It wasn’t Kane. It was Pike and Bellamy, and eight other armed Skaikru.” Indra clutched her shoulder, grunting in pain, but continued. “They only let me live so I could deliver a message.”

“What message?” Clarke asked.

“They reject the Coalition. They reject the Chancellor. They reject the brand. This is their land now. We can leave, or we can die.”

“Rona!” Lexa bellowed to her mounted warriors. “Send riders. I call upon the armies of the 12 Clans. In two days’ time, we march upon Arkadia!” she seethed.

“Commander, please wait!” Clarke decried, still trying to recover from the shock of seeing the slain army and the news it was her own people who had inexplicably done it. Lexa ignored her.

“Ride and rouse the garrisons in the 12 bodageda and order them to send their 1st regiments to me. The rest are to protect the borders, deploy sentinels throughout them. Send word through the relays to the clan capitals and Polis to double their guards.”

“Lexa, I don’t think my people would attack anyone else. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Then explain this!” Lexa said through gritted teeth. Clarke opened her mouth but failed to produce a sound. It didn’t make any sense. None of it did.

“Ryder,” she called out. "The Trikru garrison is the closest, just a few hours away. Go. I want them to surround Arkadia before the sun sets today. No one goes in or out. Tell whoever is in charge a kill order is in effect.”

“A kill order?! Lexa, wait. Give me time to fix this,” she pleaded, already motioning her departure.

“I can’t let you leave, Clarke,” she replied, which caused the other warriors to bar her way.
“So I’m a prisoner now, just like that?’’

Clarke saw a flash of hurt cross Lexa’s features in response to her accusation.

“No,’’ Lexa said with a tense, offended look, “but you are my subject now, Clarke. No one is going near or inside Arkadia unless I order it.’’

Clarke didn’t relent. “Lexa, let me go to Arkadia, try to talk to them, try to understand.’’

“No,’’ she said stubbornly. Seeing Clarke’s enraged huff, she added. ‘‘Clarke, we don’t know what’s going on inside Arkadia. I can’t send anyone in until we know more. I will not risk it.’’

_I will not risk you_, was left unsaid but heard by both.

“We can’t lose time, Lexa. What if they have my mother? I need to go –’’

“Haste is seldom the companion of good decisions, Clarke.” Then she turned back to her warriors who had not left due to Clarke’s interruption of Lexa’s instructions.

“Snifa! she summoned.

Suddenly, out of seemingly nowhere and without making a sound, almost two dozen grounders came out from the trees, bushes, and apparently invisible hideouts all around them. They wore the unmistakable signs of the scouts: padded boots; faces completely streaked in black and brown camouflage; dark, fitted clothes designed to avoid making sounds or slowing them down in any way; and a small, whistle-like artifact made of bone hung from a cord on their necks. The scouts were masters at imitating bird calls and other animals, in signals only they knew and were impossible to detect by anyone else.


They disappeared into the wilderness just as mysteriously as they had appeared.
“Penn, help Indra to the tent and get the healer. Tell the others to be on the ready. We set camp in the caves a mile from here once she is able to ride,” she concluded, walking toward the tent herself.

Clarke had stayed behind helping Indra, despite the protests of the latter. When they all entered the tent, healer in tow, Lexa was already pacing inside, hands neatly folded behind but visibly fuming.

After they set Indra down and Desda, the healer who had accompanied them on the journey to Arkadia, took over – at least one always joined the Commander’s trips –, Clarke immediately went to reason with the Commander.

“Commander, please! You can’t march your army on Arkadia. You can’t just kill everyone,” Clarke begged.

Lexa stopped dead on her tracks, a momentary glimpse of the same hurt from before flashing in her eyes. She looked at Clarke, her voice almost sad as she said quietly, almost rhetorically, “That’s who you think we are… who you think I am.” The question more in her eyes, than in her tone.

“You just summoned your army to march on my people! You set a kill order!”

“Not to attack. To contain!” she said pointedly, the wounded look still not completely leaving her gaze. “At least for now, until we know more.”

“Heda, we should lay waste to Arkadia and everyone within its walls!” Indra hissed. “This treachery must be avenged!”

“Indra, justice and revenge are not always one in the same. And justice cannot be achieved striking blinded by anger.”

“Respect, Heda, but this has been an act of war! All sky rats deserve to die! They’ve slaughtered those come to help them. The clans will not accept anything less!”

“Indra, our people act as if war is easier than peace. If that’s so, should we not try and achieve the more difficult goal?” Lexa said passionately, walking toward where Indra lay with Desda still working on her shoulder.
“But make no mistake,” she said lowly after a pause, looking at Indra and Clarke. “The blockade will contain any further attacks, but we are also marching on Arkadia to seek justice for what has been done. *Anyone* who has had a hand in this will meet their death at the end of a blade.” she sentenced harshly.

“Lexa, these are my people. We can’t just execute them. Pike…Pike was a teacher. Bellamy is my friend. There has to be a reason. Something must have happened. You can’t just kill them, I beg you.”

Lexa frowned and cocked her head to one side, looking at Clarke. “So their life is more valuable than my people’s, because they are friends with Clarke Griffin? Are their lives not deserving of justice, because they’re not *your* friends?” Lexa asked, with disbelief and anger coloring her voice.

“Come,” she commanded Clarke and exited the tent in quick strides. She walked into the field of dead bodies, a confused Clarke trailing behind.

She stepped over the bodies with a grim, pained expression, examining their faces. She stopped over a woman and pointed.

“Kendra. She was Semet’s wife, the chieftain of a small village of elders to the east of here. She was one of their best hunters, fed many of their families during the harsher months.”

She continued walking and stopped after a minute. She bent down, swallowing with difficulty, her face stricken and brokenhearted.

“Drica. Jon.” She pointed to a young man and woman not half a foot apart from each other. “They lived by the Silent River and collected red weed, made medicine from it, to prevent blood poisoning. They came to Polis often to trade it,” she almost murmured, remembering. “They have a son, Gavriel. Not ten winters old. He came with them the last time wanting to pledge to the Snifa…wanting to train to become a scout. Now he has no parents.” Lexa finished gloomily.

After a few paces, she recognized another face. “Josec, the last of Arleo’s brothers.” At Clarke’s puzzled face, she clarified. “Arleo was one of Indra’s seconds from TonDC. He was our guard when we were caught by the *pauna*. When it killed him.”

Clarke remembered at once the horrific scene when the beast had seized him and struck him
against a rock. “Arleo had five bothers. Four taken by the Mountain and Josec, the youngest and last, who was training as a healer,” she said sadly.

Clarke was devastated. She felt the tears threatening to spill. “All of them were friends to someone, Clarke. Lovers, wives, husbands, brothers and sisters to someone. Are their lives less valuable because they are not yours?” Lexa asked bitterly and then continued without waiting for Clarke’s answer.

“My duty is to protect all of them, without difference, without favoring ones over the others unfairly. If their lives are to be sacrificed to save the greater number, then it shall be without picking and choosing based on personal attachments! Just as justice must be sought and punishment has to be given equally to all those who are guilty. No one’s life can be treated as more important than the other. That is our duty to our people, Clarke. Save the most, protect them all the same.”

“But when does the cycle end, if blood always has to have blood? If death always provokes more death? How does it ever stop? Can’t there be place for mercy?” she countered weakly.

She knew Lexa was right, but couldn’t conceive she would ever be able to take out emotions out of the equation. How could Clarke ever stop trying to protect those she loved, her family, her friends? It wasn’t in her nature to do so.

“Mercy would be weakness, Clarke.” Lexa said it in a tired tone, as she walked back inside the tent.

“Your army was here to help us, and my people slaughtered them. You have every right to respond, every right to wipe us out, or you can change the way you do things. A place where mercy can exist–”

“Clarke, mercy is not the same thing as impunity,” Lexa interrupted. “Mercy is for those who wronged by accident, by circumstance, not by malice, by cruelty, by… this!” she pointed outside to the bloodied field.

“Your people were there when I promised them help in Polis! They killed peacekeepers, Clarke!” Lexa said in angered exasperation, then breathed deeply trying to calm herself.

“You think our ways are cruel, but if we do not punish a crime today, then what is to stop others
from repeating it tomorrow if they fear no repercussions? Impunity for a few and endanger the rest by creating a world where criminals go unpunished?”

“So imprison them, banish them. The only way ‘blood must have blood’ ends is with everyone dead. You can be the leader to show the world a better way. Someone has to take the first step. Let it be you.”

An indignant scoff was heard in the room. “Apologies, Commander,” Desda said for her interruption when they all turned to her. The healer then trained her eyes on Clarke.

“What do you think Heda has been doing since she ascended, sky girl? Before, a death was paid with many, only the thirst of blood and vengeance on our minds. Heda has taught us real justice. No punishment is ever greater than the crime. They pay by losing what was taken. Before Heda Lexa, bandits and war ravaged our lands. She has showed us a different way.”

Desda returned her attention to Indra, covering her now stitched wound with thick bandages. “She is ready to ride, Commander,” she announced, getting up and bowing her head before leaving the tent, contempt on her face.

Silence reigned inside the tent for a few beats. Then the soft, pondering voice of the Commander was heard.

“If fear of punishment is not deterrence enough, what would be? We cannot patrol everywhere, all the time, Clarke. Have everyone as prisoners? Able-bodied men and women in a cell instead of outside to pay back what they’ve taken, what they’ve stolen? Place the burden of feeding them, providing for them on others, when so many are hungry as it is? Justice has to include both punishment and retribution. And be a warning to others.” Lexa attempted to answer Clarke’s earlier question.

“It is not an easy lesson to teach, Clarke. Many are reluctant even after so years. To make exceptions without a reason would destroy our efforts.”

“Then let me go find out the reason, Lexa. There has to be a reason they did this. Maybe they thought it was an attack or Azgeda. Maybe it was a mistake…” Clarke tried.

“I radioed them our position, sky girl. They knew we came under the white banner.” Indra spat.
“Your friend Bellamy knew the difference. He was with Kane at every meeting where we discussed the clans, their territories, their marks. Where we warned against Azgeda and their desire to destroy the Coalition. Pike and Bellamy were there in Polis, when Azgeda confessed for the blast in the Mountain! They knew they were attacking innocents,” Indra continued enraged. “Skaikru just want to take our lands, to kill us all. We should end them, all of them, Commander, before it is too late!”

Lexa lifted her hand to silence her. “No decision will be taken until we know more, Indra.”

She did the same when Clarke was about to speak again. “You will go, Clarke. Once the scouts are back. Once we know what is happening. Once I know…you’ll be safe,” she finished with a quiet voice.

Clarke nodded, relieved.

They left not long after and camped inside caves a few miles further, closer to Arkadia.

They built a small fire inside one of the narrower but deeper caves where Lexa and Clarke would rest for the night, guards and lookouts posted at the entrance and several ridges around it. The forty other warriors, still left after the riders and scouts had gone to Arkadia, occupied the rest of the caves around them, several camped outside and in the trees as part of the watch.

Clarke was sitting on a roll of fur, staring into the fire, trying to figure out a solution, trying to see a reason in the things that had happened, trying to understand the world she was now a part of, trying to understand Lexa.

Lexa. The one who left her. Lexa. The one who saved her from the clutches of the Ice Queen. Lexa. The ruthless leader who might wipe out Sky people. Lexa. The savior in her people’s eyes. Lexa. A never-ending conundrum that Clarke could not figure out.

Lexa came into the cave carrying a plate with roast rabbit that some of the hunters had just caught earlier. Without a word, she offered it to her and was about to leave when Clarke stopped her by the wrist. She just sighed. Lexa understood and sat next to Clarke, the plate between them. They ate silently for a few minutes.
“Why was he there? Josec. Why were they all here? A healer, medicine makers, not warriors...?” Clarke trailed off in an almost whisper, her eyes still on the fire, the question on her mind for a few hours now.

“Volunteers.” Lexa answered just as quietly. “Ogonzauna. The peace defenders. They’re a defensive force that don’t engage. They’re not part of the armies. They volunteer from the surrounding villages to defend both parties when truce has been called. No one dares attack them. Not bearing the white banner.” Lexa explained, sorrowfully. “It’s considered the worst crime... a curse on those who commit it…”

Clarke closed her eyes, exhaling harshly. She knew then, maybe even before, that the dice were cast. Nothing short of a miracle would save them.

As if coming to confirm Clarke’s worst fears, a commotion was heard outside. Messengers sent by Ryder from outside Arkadia with the Trikru regiment.

Pike, Bellamy and several other heavily armed Sky people had been spotted making their way to Semet’s village, apparently on their way to carry out another massacre. They were given chase and had doubled back to Arkadia, taking refuge inside its gates.

After they had narrowly escaped pursuit, Pike and his group had given an impassioned speech in the courtyard about what they had done, bragging about striking down the threat outside their gates, calling for an insurrection against the Chancellor and the Coalition, calling for an offensive stance on all grounders.

He was met by a mostly silent, stunned crowd of Arkadians who, only a few days before, had cautiously celebrated the news they had been welcomed into the Coalition and that trade routes were to be fully established before the winter crept on them. Pike waxed poetic about how this was their land now, before the Chancellor had them tasered mid-sentence and taken into custody.

Abby was still the Chancellor. When they had put forth the idea of an election after returning from Polis, people had rejected it. After all, Abby had kept the ceasefire intact for three months. Three months of peace where they had initiated trade talks with the grounders. The medical bay was up and running. Hydroponics were being scaled-up to increase their food stores. Additional buildings had been added. The guard was recruiting and training. With Indra’s help, they had been steadily mapping their surrounding areas. Abby had been doing a good job. Even if agreeing to Pike’s request to go into Mount Weather had been a mistake, she had only authorized an exploratory
mission, not a settlement like Pike had started without her knowledge.

Arkadians instead proposed the Council be re-established, to avoid unilateral decisions being made by Abby again, but mostly to distribute the burden of building their new life on more shoulders than just on hers.

Fuji, the only remaining Councilman from the Ark after the Unity Day blast, was re-elected for the science and education seat.

Jerry, a young and feisty woman from Factory station, was elected by the workers.

Marcus was elected as Councilman for Internal and External Defense and Clan Relations.

Much to Raven’s surprise, who was unaware she was on the ballot, she had been elected almost unanimously to fill the seat for Habitat Systems, which included everything from energy, to infrastructure to ‘anything else Raven can fix the hell outta’ as she put it when she accepted.

Callie Cartwright, one of Arkadia’s own miracles – she had been severely injured during Alpha station’s crash-landing and been in a coma for the first two months –, filled the last seat for Livelihood: food production, water and now trade. Callie had been born on Farm Station, but she had become an officer for the Council and had moved to Alpha.

Abby rounded out the Council as Chancellor and vote tie-breaker, as well as Councilwoman for Medical Affairs.

The had only been finishing confirming the results of the Council elections that day, when Pike and his group had been imprisoned and, amidst the shock and chaos of it all, two hundred grounder warriors had arrived at the gates of Arkadia demanding the prisoners.

Ryder informed the Chancellor of the massacre, the blockade and the army on the way. He had demanded the traitors be handed over. Abby stubbornly had refused, wanting the Council to come to an agreement first. She had insisted they would bring them to justice themselves and that she had them in lockup already. She was stalling for time.
This did not go over well with the Commander when she heard the news. Not only had the massacre been an act of war and treason, refusing to hand in the prisoners, refusing to submit to Coalition laws as they had vowed when taken the brand, only made matters worse for everyone.

Lexa flexed her jaw in fury and huffed inside the cave, wondering to herself if blind and foolish stubbornness was a trait borne by all Sky people. She said nothing however, waiting for the end of the report. The rest of the regiments were riding full speed, not stopping at night, and would reach Arkadia at noon the next day.

She nodded. “’We leave at dawn,’” she simply informed her people awaiting instructions.

No one slept that night.

Especially not the two of them. The Commander had to tell Clarke the worst part of what was to come. “The prisoners will not be enough,” she whispered with defeat. Clarke only exhaled. She already knew.

They rode to Arkadia early the next day, arriving at its gates a few hours later in the mid-morning. Much to Clarke’s protest, she was allowed to go into Arkadia only if accompanied by Ryder, Penn and two other guards.

What she learned through her mother and Kane once inside only further broke her. Twelve people had been caught sneaking back in the rover, back from their failed second massacre at the village. The original ten and, to her shock, Jasper and Miller.

To make matters worse, if they had managed to slip out twice with weapons, someone on the inside had helped and no matter how much prodding had been attempted, they would not the give names of their accomplices.

This is where they were at. Clarke told Abby and the other Council members that in a few hours the two hundred warriors outside would become two thousand, and they would invade if the prisoners were not turned over. The prisoners and those who had helped.

Clarke naively still thought that if she could get through to Bellamy, things could be explained; whatever madness this had been would be explained.
She went into the holding cell where they were, telling her guards to stay outside much to their dismay. And she tried, she really tried talking to him. Instead, Bellamy spat hate against all grounders, blamed everything on her, all the deaths, his own actions, accused her of leaving him to deal with everyone.

She kept to herself the retort that she had left her friends safe in Abby and Marcus’s hands, and the hands of almost three hundred other adults that had come down. But she didn’t want him to shut down if she said anything of the sort.

When she finally thought she’d reached through to him, when he’d squeezed her hand with tears in his eyes, the last thing Clarke expected was for Bellamy to violently turn her around and arm-lock her by the neck. He started shouting, threatening to break it if they didn’t let them go. All the other prisoners had stood up and the guards had been ordered by Abby to open the jail door. They were tensely making their way out of the cell with Bellamy in front, when Clarke was left with no other choice.

She had swiped a shock baton from one of the Ark guards before she had entered the cell, Lexa’s words in her ears about never facing an enemy unarmed especially a cornered one, and she had shocked Bellamy until he was writhing on the floor. Pike took a swing at her, which she evaded and kicked him in the jaw with her knee as she scrambled out of the cell.

It was Monty who saved them ultimately. He asked to talk to Jasper in a separate cell. He managed to lock the door from within before anyone could stop him. He set a small vial he had stolen from Lincoln on the table, the poison used on Finn, and asked Jasper to give him the names. Jasper only laughed maniacally, asking Monty how he was going to force Jasper to take it with his spaghetti arms. Monty only looked at his friend, picked up the vial and swallowed all of it in a swift motion. This shook Jasper out of his jaded state.

He begged Monty to leave, to go take the antidote. Monty refused, telling him he was the only one who could reactivate the door lock and, unless he talked, Monty would die there and then. It took twenty minutes of protests by Jasper and denials from Monty. When Monty started shaking profusely as the minutes dragged on, Jasper finally spilled and gave them all the names they needed.

By the time the rest of the armies stood outside the Arkadia, all other accomplices, twenty-five in total, were in custody, consisting mainly of the remaining Farm station members.

Still, the Council grappled with the decision to hand them over. Clarke knew Lexa would not grant them much more time. She wouldn’t want to but also couldn’t afford it. By now, all the clans were
aware of the massacre. Sky people not complying with their laws on top of the massacre could be fatal to all of them, including to Lexa herself.

“They’ll be executed like Gustus? Like Finn was supposed to be?” Raven asked in a small voice.

Clarke took a minute to answer. “I don’t know. Maybe… probably.”

They all looked at each other with grim faces.

“We can’t let them do that, Clarke. It’s barbaric. Why can’t we try them ourselves?”

“Because the attack was against grounders, Abby. Against a peace force. We are under their laws now.” Marcus reminded them, but was clearly conflicted. He’d been the one closest to Bellamy all these months. He still couldn’t wrap his head around what he had done.

“What’s barbaric, mom?” Clarke asked dejectedly. “If you had seen what they did… if you’d seen that field… they were executed like animals, shot in the head at night. Volunteers from the villages…” Clarke tried, her voice breaking.

“They already gave us a free pass before,” Fuji said calmly, “when Finn…when that village was massacred. They compromised, accepted only one life for the eighteen he took. If these peacekeepers were volunteers from the nearby villages too, we can’t deny them justice. How will we live here? Surrounded by people who hate us?”

“They won’t have time to hate us. The clans will kill us all before this day is even over if we don’t hand them over,” Jerry stated sarcastically.

“How will we live with ourselves if we do hand them over, to be killed so horrifically?” Callie countered, ever the kind soul.

“They condemned us all when they did this,” Fuji replied. “We would’ve floated them on the Ark for far, far less.”

The spent almost two more hours debating it heatedly, while the chant of the clans started to be
heard from outside. *Jus drein, jus daun*, their voices reverberated.

“I think we need to take a vote,” Kane said finally, lips tight.

Four votes with the same decision were cast and one abstention from Callie.

This was their first vote as a governing body. This is how Arkadia's first ground Council was baptized by trial-by-fire.

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**Back in present time**

“No, Clarke, you don’t need to do this,” clamored Abby. “You don’t have to do this for us,” Kane said almost in unison.

Clarke ignored them and advanced to the middle of the room where Lexa stood.

“I accept!” Clarke said again.

“You cannot, Clarke. You will not!” Lexa replied with exasperation.

“I can and I will.”

Clarke was growing furious at Lexa. Not only was she being stubborn, refusing the only solution that could perhaps spare her people and her mother, but also refusing to marry Clarke as if the mere idea were a foul one to her. While she did not admit it at all, this hurt and enraged Clarke even further, perhaps more. She should be the one shrinking at the idea of marrying someone for political reasons, refusing adamantly to join the woman who had betrayed her and who she still doggedly resented.
“You cannot accept what I have not offered,’” Lexa said clenching her jaw, her eyes ablaze.

“Then I offer it,’’ Clarke retorted. Neither had noticed how close they had become in their heated argument, their faces flushed, their eyes shining with equal stubbornness and with something else many had noticed before but never so blatantly. If anything, it convinced them further of the idea, but they kept those thoughts to themselves.

Lexa closed her eyes and heaved a heavy sigh.

“Nobody is to leave the capital. We shall reconvene the Council tomorrow morning. Take the prisoners back to their cells, their fate is already sealed regardless. Chancellor Griffin and Kane shall stay in the tower guarded by the sentries at all times. Now, everyone, leave us!’’ she bellowed.

Everyone started filing out quickly.

“Titus, Sybil, please stay close in case I need to summon you.’’

“Yes, Heda,’’ they both answered as they exited the room and closed the doors.

Lexa stood with her arms folded behind her back, her face dark with an emotion Clarke could not read. The candles in the room flickered over her features, as she sighed pensively gathering enough will to continue her argument with Clarke.

Clarke was the first to speak up, walking to stand a few paces in front of Lexa. “Please, Lexa, we need to do this. There is no other way!’’ she pleaded softly, softer than Lexa had anticipated at least.

“It cannot be, Clarke. You do not fully know what this means. You cannot do this, nor can I. It is not a real choice to be considered,’’ Lexa said resolutely.

“Why? Why not Lexa? Because between exterminating my people and having to kill my own mother, I would think marrying you would be the lesser of three evils!’’ Clarke growled.
At this, a flash of pain crossed Lexa eyes. She lifted her chin and swallowed thickly, the muscles in her jaw tightening.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that, Lexa,” Clarke sighed, “I just…”

Clarke was furious and confused. On one hand, she was almost childishly satisfied for the hurtful jab she’d made at Lexa. She couldn’t understand why Lexa was so unwavering in her refusal to even contemplate it, especially considering the alternatives, but also because it hurt Clarke’s pride. Clarke had never been vain and she knew pride was the last thing that should be occupying her mind, but she still felt the sting of it.

If Clarke were being honest, which she was not remotely ready to be, she was alarmed at how easily she herself had accepted the idea not seconds after Kane had uttered the words without an instant of doubt. She should’ve pushed back, been indignant at the idea, should’ve felt outraged at the very notion of being forced into an arranged political marriage of sorts, with Lexa of all people.

Aside from the shock however, Clarke had not hesitated, her mind flashing that one word, the one thought that she kept trying to push to the furthest recesses of her being whenever they tried to surface, after spending these weeks with Lexa in Polis. Once the worst of her anger over Mount Weather had begun to subside.

The one thing she knew but couldn’t name, that she filed away for ‘later’, for ‘someday’ after being in Lexa’s company during their campaign against the Mountain; their night trapped by the pauna; that day in Lexa’s tent after their fight over Octavia. If Clarke were being honest and she wasn’t, ever since she had first walked into the Commander’s tent and Lexa had lifted her eyes to her from her throne, dagger in hand. She had sensed it, in fact had nearly been knocked on her feet by it, but war, pain, betrayal, death, blood, everything else had occupied her every waking moment obliterating all other thoughts.

But when Kane had spoken, the knowledge that swam in the darkest, most guarded waters of her consciousness reared its head for a second and made her dimly realize that that ‘someday’, when she needed to face it, might be sooner rather than later. She was still not fully aware of it and, once again, the circumstances they were in paradoxically obfuscated them. Clarke Griffin’s well of denial and ‘things I just can’t deal with right now’ had its lid firmly in place.

“I meant, it’s not like I ever imagined myself married at 18,” Clarke tried again, her attempt at a joke only half-hearted. “Don’t ask me to plunge a knife into my mother, Lexa,” she said with slight break in her voice, tears coating her eyes. “Not when we could avoid it if we married.”
“But it is not a marriage, Clarke. That’s what I’ve been trying to say. It’s not just a marriage.’’ Lexa said just as brokenly.

“Then explain it to me. Tell me why?’’

Lexa sighed deeply again. She took a few steps closer to Clarke, in the way Lexa had of entering her personal space that always both overwhelmed and comforted her. Lexa had her head tilted downward, the exhaustion evident in her face and her shoulders.

“Very well,’’ she said quietly. “But this might be a long conversation, one better not made in haste or with a weary mind, Clarke. Especially if I’ll be hopelessly going up against such a stubborn opponent.’’

At that, Clarke’s head shot up. She had been avoiding looking directly at Lexa, but now she could not help the beginning of a smile and asked with an amused tone, “Commander, I thought mockery was not a product of a strong mind. Are you mocking me?’’

Lexa’s face was impassive, but the glint in her eye and the struggle to keep the corners of her mouth from turning up were evident.

Lexa leaned forward a bit as if she were about to share a secret. “Don’t tell Titus, but my mind might prove ‘less than strong’ right now, famished and dust-covered as I feel right now.’’ She crinkled up her nose at that last part and then let her mouth turn into a half-side smile.

Not being able to help it, Clarke let out a loud chuckle and grinned broadly at Lexa’s unexpected humor. Inwardly, it made Clarke sigh in relief and longing, remembering the odd but welcome place she and Lexa had reached just a few days before they had stumbled upon the massacred army.

After Clarke had raged for a week refusing to see Lexa following her forcible arrival to Polis, trying with every fiber to hate her and not really managing to, she had studied Lexa in her element from her grumbling, furiously angry state.

Angry at how much she knew Lexa was right. How frustratingly logical the reasoning behind her actions were, logical in a way Clarke could never fully be when it came to making decisions about life and death where her own gut and heart often had a deafening voice.
Angry at how earnest Lexa was in her hopes to give peace and stability to her people.

Angry at how the convenient image of savage warlord she had strived to build for Lexa in her mind, which was easier to hate, crumbled before her when faced with the images of Lexa teaching children –the future generation of leaders–, about things like wisdom and compassion.

Exasperated at Lexa’s stubborn and stupidly admirable courage to face the fight to the death without anyone’s help or letting anyone take her place.

Enraged at how coolly she accepted her possible death as if she were just Heda’s vessel and not someone others would suffer from losing as Lexa herself.

Furious about how frustratingly beautiful and calm, and forgiving Lexa was, because she was supposed to hate her and instead she found herself battling between the impulse to either punch her or slam her against a wall by her collar and kiss her until her lips made her forget why she was angry.

So, much to Clarke’s chagrin and despite herself, that anger had unexpectedly given way little by little to quiet moments where Clarke observed her from afar, her face not betraying her curiosity or her surprise at something Lexa was doing. It had given way to small moments of silence and soft eyes between them. To tiny bashful smiles when Lexa would tell her she would return a hero to her people or teased her in front of Aden. To heavy, loaded gazes in her room after Lexa’s battle with Roan. But all that had seemed thrown into the fire when they had found the slain peacekeepers, placed at odds with each other again.

Seeing a brief glimpse of the tentative familiarity that had been emerging between them, smiling at each other like they were now, Clarke felt relief. As with everything, it was short-lived, when Lexa spoke again.

“Would you come to my bedchambers later?”

Luckily for Clarke, Lexa had been rubbing at specks of mud on the sleeve of her coat with mild disgust. Lexa’s extreme distaste at being dirty and her enthusiasm for bathing all the time was something Clarke had discovered during their days at the war camp before Mount Weather, and it had endlessly amused her. Had she been looking at Clarke, she would’ve seen her eyes widen comically and almost choke in panic when, for a second, she had thought Lexa was skipping ahead in this whole marriage business. Luckily she recovered before Lexa raised her eyes and added the reason behind her request.
“I would take a bath and eat something before. Actually, would you join me for a light meal? We haven’t eaten anything since this morning,” she almost trailed off. “In about hour?”

Clarke was still calming her erratic heartbeats and internally chiding herself for the silliness of her thoughts, when she answered, “Yes, that fine.”

They had indeed not eaten or stopped to rest since they left Arkadia. The prisoners and the delegation Abby had assembled left Arkadia that same day and, at Lexa’s punishing pace, they had arrived in Polis after sundown. They had barely dismounted when they made their way to the meeting.

The tension and horrors of the day made Clarke feel bared to the bone, the tumultuous heated discussion in the council had finished draining her. A bath and some time to herself before what could be another life-altering discussion seemed like the best idea to Clarke. So she nodded again and made her way to the doors with Lexa. Outside, the Flamekeeper and The Eye waited.

“Titus, Sybil. Clarke and I need to discuss the matter further and I am afraid it might take quite a while. You can retire.” Seeing Titus’ alarmed expression then added, “but rest easy, no decision will be made without both your wise counsel. Tomorrow before the council, I would require you both in the side-chamber.”

“As you wish, Heda.” Titus bowed and left.

“I am terribly sorry we could not have a moment tonight to catch up. I have missed you dearly, Oma,” Lexa said softly and then surprised Clarke when she took the old woman’s hand and brought them to her lips, placing a small, tender kiss. At this Sybil, mirrored the gesture and placed a kiss on Lexa’s slightly bent head.

“Don’t worry about me. We shall have enough time yet. Tonight and for now, set your eye to see the hidden path. It might reveal what the heart might not want yet to see.”

Lexa snorted. “Oma,” she chided, “it is just us now. You can stop talking like a riddling palm-reader at the harvest fair.”

“Well, Clarke is still here,” she replied, testing the waters.
“Precisely, it’s just us. No need for the enigmatic rhymes,” Lexa replied dismissively, without paying attention to the old woman’s satisfied smirk.

“You know, if you weren’t *Heda* and just my granddaughter, I’d put you over my knee for your impertinence.”

If Clarke hadn’t already been almost gaping at the whole exchange and Lexa’s teasing, intimate demeanor with the old lady, her mouth would’ve fallen open at this.

“You’re her grandmother?!’’ She was looking at them both, her eyes flitting from one to the other, wondering how she had not caught the similarities. Both women had the same proud high forehead, the chiseled cheekbones, the defined jaw. They were both tall and long-limbed, the same regal straight stance, expect Sybil had wider shoulders and a broader frame, and was a few inches taller than Lexa.

“Yes, and by the looks of it, I am to become yours as well,’’ Sybil smiled mischievously, “so you can call me Oma too.’’

Clarke just widened her eyes, but Lexa’s face grew somber, all traces of her smile gone.

“Blinka,’’ she admonished.

Sybil raised her hands in mock surrender.

“Will you stay in the tower tonight?’’ Lexa asked, trying to regain her composure.

“No, my dear child. I long for my own place. I’ll be at the hill house but will return to the tower early in the morning. You know I cannot rest where there are others. I cannot sleep hearing so many of their thoughts and… hidden desires.’’ She shook her head and chanced a cheeky glance at Clarke who had grown several shades of red.

In response, Lexa just rolled her eyes, an actual bonafide eye roll. “Oma, do not amuse yourself at Clarke’s expense. It is undignified for the great Eye of Polis. Clarke, she only wishes to intimidate you, it’s how she works you. She cannot actually read minds,’’ she said with a serious face but amusement in her eyes.
Unbeknownst to Lexa, Sybil’s antics had been intended not only for Clarke, but also to once again gauge Lexa’s reaction to her behavior towards Clarke. What she had already seen at her retreat in the Needle Canyon continued to solidify and confirm itself now that she could see it, in her own way at least, here in the flesh.

Before Sybil could leave, Lexa stilled and then quietly and seriously asked. “Blinka, did you really return because you saw something? Something that can guide us to decide wisely?” She knew once again it was futile to ask directly, to seek explicit answers from any Blinka, but she looked at her with worried, pleading eyes.

The old woman smiled enigmatically at her. “There is a road in the forest that takes you to a large clearing out of the woods. You lead your people when you find a large boulder completely blocking the way. Your men however can see through the rock and the clearing just beyond, their sight as far as the beautiful horizon in the distance. They can see the rock is in fact not there. You must decide if you believe them and walk through the boulder or you turn around because the rock cannot be crossed.’’

With that, Sybil turned around and started walking away. Lexa sighed in resignation, shaking her head and muttering loud enough for the Blinka to hear her.

“Or maybe I just came back because I grew tired of eating roots and sleeping on those hard rocks up in the mountain. Who knows…?!’’ Sybil said laughing lightly, as she continued walking away.

“I am sorry for Sybil, Clarke.’’ Lexa said beside her.

“She’s… surprising,’’ Clarke replied, “I take she wasn’t the one who taught you about the mockery thing.’’

Lexa suppressed a smirk. “No, she did not.’’

After a few minutes, they reached Clarke’s door which was just before Lexa’s own room. “So, I’ll see you later?’’

“Until then, Ambassador.’’ Lexa nodded with her eye lids, as was her custom. “Till then, Commander.’’
When Clarke knocked on Lexa’s door an hour later, she prayed Lexa was wearing something else than the flimsy nightgown she had seen her in the night after the fight with Roan. Clarke was sure she wouldn’t be able to string two thoughts together if she were faced with so much skin on display again. She’d barely made it through the other time. She let herself in when she heard the faint ‘come in’.

She entered the perpetually candle-filled room, looking around for Lexa in the room until she spotted her outside on the balcony. The balcony in Lexa’s room was large. It was fitted with a big, plushy sofa covered in furs and cushions and a low table, which was now held a few trays of food. Lexa was sitting against the arm rest, her legs folded to the side partially covered by a small fur. She held a cup in one hand and book in the other, as she looked up at Clarke.

Clarke had to blink rapidly to shake herself from her momentary daze. It didn’t matter if she saw Lexa daily, she was still always stunned by how beautiful she was, especially like this. She was freshly bathed, her skin glowing with a recently scrubbed pink glow. Her hair was free of all braids, still damp and parted to one side. She was thankfully wearing a simple, long-sleeved dark grey robe over her nightgown, tied loosely to the waist. The sweet, airy scent that always accompanied Lexa was coming off her skin and hair, from whatever it was that she used to bathe herself. It was intoxicating and Clarke had to stop herself from emitting an appreciating hum.

Lexa set down her book and sat up, enough so she could grab a cup for Clarke and ask her, “Wine?”

In all this time, she had never seen Lexa drink wine or the musky beer or sweet mead the grounders made. She knew in the camps grounders never drank, being alert at all times was the difference between life and death. Here in Polis however and in her three month of wandering, she had seen taverns and drinks served at other gatherings. She had never seen Lexa indulge.

“Thank you,” she acquiesced with a nod and took the metal cup with the red liquid.

“I am glad you could join me, Clarke.” She motioned for Clarke to sit. “Help yourself. You must be hungry,” she gestured at the food on the table.

The trays had various fruits Clarke was still familiarizing herself with. There was also a large plate with what looked like coarsely shredded, roasted, poultry of some sort that made her mouth water. A basket of a thin, flat, oval bread, and a small plate with cubes of white, fresh, herbed cheese she had tried before and loved.
To her mortification, her stomach growled at the sight of all the food, which caused Lexa to laugh lightly. It was the very first time she had heard Lexa laugh and it made her smile shyly in return, attempting to ignore how the sound had filled her chest with warmth.

To prompt her, Lexa took some herself. With only one hand, she expertly cut a small piece of the bread with her thumb, index and middle fingers, the side of her palm holding down the rest of the bread. She then used that small piece of bread to pinch a little amount of shredded meat into a perfect bite and put it in her mouth, her fingers never touching the meat. Even when Lexa ate, Lexa was so… well, so Lexa.

Clarke silently feigned she was about to imitate her. Instead, she took an entire flatbread, side-eyeing Lexa all the while, then scooped a copious amount with a wooden spoon onto the middle of the flatbread and rolled it into a large cylinder. She shrugged showing it to Lexa and simply said ‘taco’ and bit into it.

Lexa smiled, even if she didn’t even know what taco meant. Clarke didn’t either really, aside from something she had seen from the very few movies the Ark memory banks had.

“You enjoy being contrary, don’t you?’’ she said rhetorically, shaking her head, with a small smirk.

Clarke nodded and thought to herself that if it got Lexa smiling, she should be contrary even more often, right before scolding herself internally for the thought.

Clarke continued munching contentedly on her rolled bread, watching Lexa’s distracted but precise way of eating her food.

“What is this? It’s delicious,’’ she asked, not knowing how to start the conversation they needed to have, maybe even wanting to delay it a bit, grateful for the brief reprieve.

Lexa thought for a moment, as if looking for the word in English. “Grouse,’’ she offered finally. “It is hard to find out of season. They usually only flock in the autumn and winter,’’ she added seeing the silent question in the sky girl’s face, no doubt still learning about the ground that was now her home. “They are more plentiful in the Ingranrona territories in the west, that’s the Plain Riders. They bring it as part of their trade in Polis. Rohana brought some as a gift when she came.’’
“And that’s cheese of the mountain goat with wintergreen leaf,’’ she said pointing at the white cubes and taking one to her mouth, and then sipping more of the wine. She lay her head on the back of the couch, looking up at the sky.

“I used to watch you,’’ she said quietly.

At Clarke’s confused expression, she pointed up. “Up there. The moving star in the skies.’’

“The Ark?’’ Clarke whispered in realization. “Did you know what it was? That people were up there?’’

Lexa nodded. “Legend has it that some escaped before the blasts to become guardian spirits and watch over us. Others believe it was there before and had sent the bombs to cleanse the ground, coming back one day to finish.’’

Clarke thought about how these beliefs might influence the fear grounders had of Sky people and the absurd stories of Wanheda’s power she had heard during her three months living among them. Before dwelling on that, she asked, ‘’What about you? Did you know what it was?’’

Lexa lifted her book. “These told me enough to know otherwise,’’ she said simply without offering more. “I did wonder if it was any easier, up there. More peaceful? When our rivers and ground ran red…’’ she trailed off wistfully.

“Instead we brought more blood and death,’’ Clarke answered with a pained expression. “Lexa, what are we going to do?’’ she sighed heavily.

Lexa sat her cup down and shifted to face Clarke, knowing they could not put off their conversation any longer.

“Life on the ground is often short and violent, Clarke. Most avoid making promises, commitments, attaching themselves… preferring to live day by day. Especially our warriors and our kefas (chiefs). It is not so common for them to take a houmon. It means making one home between two,’’ Lexa explained as the meaning of the word dawned on Clarke: ‘home one’.

“Being always on the move, it is difficult for a warrior to have a home. Instead they prefer to take bagon, umm…lovers,’’ she translated, her ears tinting red, “wherever they are. A marriage means
taking care of the other, of their home, and only being with the one while in the marriage. Promises that they would likely not keep with lives that end so frequently,’’ she noted sadly.

“Something Rohana did not explain however is that a marriage is temporary. They enter it if they desire to share one roof and then end it when they do not wish it anymore. There is no… obligation, no bind for it to last. Since it is voluntary and can end at any time, only fidelity and loyalty is expected. If one does not wish to grant it anymore, one leaves instead of…”

“Betraying the other?’’ Clarke asked.

“Yes,’’ Lexa replied, “and they can ask for punishment if that has been the case. It is the same if one raises a hand to your houmon or attempt on their life. A hand for a hand, a life for a life.’’

“So people would rather not go to the trouble of committing, of breaking promises, of being punished. That’s why having a houmon is not too common?’’ Clarke thought out loud. Lexa nodded.

“But a marriage is also an affair that concerns only the two houmon, not their clans. Whatever loyalty is only owed to the each other, not to their houmon’s clan. This avoid conflicts when there is war among villages or clans, if the houmon are of different people. They can protect the life of their houmon but can only take the side of their own clan.’’

Clarke understood how important loyalty to one’s people was in a tribal, clan society. She also now understood better Lincoln’s predicament. He’d taken a home with Octavia, they were houmon in Trikru’s eyes. If he had gone back to the Mountain just to save Octavia, it would’ve been his right, but going against the decision of his clan and taking Sky people’s side in the conflict had made him a traitor.

Clarke also realized why Lexa had kept telling Clarke that the council’s proposition was in fact not a marriage. From what Lexa had just told her, taking each other as houmon would not allow them to extend their loyalty to the other’s clan, in fact it very specifically didn’t it. It would not solve their problem at all.

While Clarke took the information in, her mind then drifted back to something else Lexa had said. Marriage was temporary. As if the Commander had read her mind, Lexa spoke again.

“If the issue had been to protect us from the other, ensuring that we would not lift a knife to the
other’s throat,’’ she smirked, “becoming houmon would’ve been… an option. Once the clans would have been convinced that we are not in fact a threat to each other, we could have given each other our freedom back. It would have been a viable solution, Clarke.’’

“But the main issue is between the clans,’’ Clarke finished Lexa’s thought.

“Yes. Clarke, what is being proposed, it is not like taking a houmon. The Gon Ogeda is our most sacred vow, the unbreakable bond. It binds us for life and in the journey of the spirit that comes after. Nothing, not even death frees us from it. We would be bound to each other in this lifetime and in the next. There is no law, no excuse, no exception, no ritual that could unbind us.’’

So this is what Lexa had been so troubled by, Clarke thought. That their arrangement of convenience could not be undone once things had settled between their people. Clarke was stunned silent, the enormity of what this meant shaking her to her core.

“The Gon Ogeda is also a bond with the other’s clan. We pledge our fidelity to each other’s people as if it were our own. We could never strike against them or our lives would be forfeit. You could never strike against any of the clans of the Coalition and I could never betray Skaikru. It solves the fears and mistrust among our people, but you and I… we’d be… Clarke, we would be solving a temporary problem with a permanent solution,’’ Lexa said entreatingly.

“Lexa, the death of my people IS permanent. The death of my mother, of Kane, is permanent.’’ Clarke answered angrily.

“Clarke, the Gon Ogeda cannot be taken for convenience, to solve political problems. It would be a sacrilege!’’

Clarke snorted in reply.

“I do not know what spirits or gods you pray to or believe in, but I DO believe in mine. We would be binding our lives in false intentions. We would be joining our spirits to roam together forever when they perform the teina (twining) ritual. It would be a desecration,’’ Lexa said in agitation. “Gon Ogeda is rarely performed because it’s meant to tie those already tied, those whose spirits already belong to each other, whose hearts have been given to…’’ she tried to finish, clearly distressed.

Clarke understood in a way. She herself did not know what she believed in, but the Ark had never
been a religious environment. Science and cynicism would describe them better. She could see
how for the grounders and for Lexa especially, whose entire life hinged upon the belief that she
was the vessel for the spirit of the Commander, spirits were just as tangible as flesh and blood.
Whatever rituals were to take place wouldn’t just be play pretend in Lexa’s mind, they would be as
concrete as the floor they were standing on.

“What choice do we have, Lexa? If I have to do this for my mother, for my people…”

“I cannot make you pay that price, Clarke.”

“But I’m willing to pay it, Lexa, if that’s what it takes…,” Clarke retorted, more surprised that she
was in fact still agreeing so unflinchingly to take on such a monumental step.

“What if someday you meet someone your heart truly desires, Clarke?” Lexa tried from another
angle. “You could not be with them. You could not even take a lover. Our people would hang you.
I would turn a blind eye and help you hide it, but the risks could be fatal.”

“What? No, Lexa…” but before Clarke could continue, Lexa spoke again.

“You are young, Clarke, with all your life ahead of you. You cannot bind yourself to me for life
when your heart does not truly wish for it. In haste. The price of forever for a problem of today.
Sacrifice your life for theirs.”

“I would, I will!” Clarke assured obstinately with a frown.

“Because you are stubborn!” Lexa countered, annoyed. “But also because your heart is that of a
true leader, who would do anything for her people,” Lexa softened. “That why I…” she started,
“that’s why you’re you,” she corrected, hoping Clarke had not heard the words that had almost
slipped out. Except Clarke had raised her eyes to Lexa’s and was fixing her with an unreadable
look.

Clarke blinked rapidly breaking their eye contact looking down instead, but then breathed, “and
that’s why you’re you.”

Lexa was frozen in place, her heart in her throat, unsure of what Clarke was saying, convincing
herself that she was merely complimenting Lexa as a leader. She could not afford to allow herself
to think anything else by it. So she stood up and went to lean her elbows on the balcony, looking down on the small lights of the city below.

“Me. What about me?” she asked quietly and said nothing more for long moments. “I had just seen my eleventh spring when I ascended as Heda,” she started again, with a distant voice. “The great wars were still raging, the ground bled everywhere. I had spent all my time before preparing, training, but nothing can really fully prepare you for that. I’ve spent ten years trying to bring peace, building the Coalition, sparing no sacrifice, wanting… asking nothing for myself… as Lexa. The only thing I ever had, that I allowed myself to want was Costia,” she recounted in a small voice.

“We were friends since childhood. She would come to Polis only for the harvest season once a year. We only became… more when I was 18. The Coalition was still on shaky legs. All clans had joined except Azgeda. Nia refused but the pressure from the other clans on her, to yield, was great. They closed trade routes with them. One day, Prince Roan came to me with a message from Nia saying she accepted and presented me with a box, a present to celebrate our new alliance. Set the box on my bed.” Lexa’s voice grew tight. “When I opened it… it was Costia’s head.” Lexa’s eyes had filled with tears she refused to shed.

Clarke’s heart broke for Lexa, her own tears running down her face, her throat constricted with pain.

After a few moments in which Lexa struggled to swallow, she continued. “She was taunting me. Roan didn’t even know what it contained. She wanted me to break, to strike down Prince Roan in revenge, to give her an excuse to declare war, to send the Coalition crumbling. If I did, all I had done would’ve been for nothing, all my life. Costia’s own death would’ve been in vain. She had no intention of really joining, never thought I would do anything else but avenge my love.”

“So I accepted her offer. It was in writing with her seal. She could not take it back. Prince Roan was kept in custody in the tower as an insurance, more for her people’s sake than for her. She had been willing to sacrifice his life without qualms, but she could not anymore, not once the word spread.”

“I could not even mourn her, Clarke. All of my heart, all of me died that day and only Heda remained. What little remains of Lexa that I have not given to them, the few, quiet private moments between these four walls where she breathes her fading breaths… it is that last shred of me that you are asking me to give, to sacrifice for my people, for the Coalition. That is what you are asking of me,” Lexa whispered, weakly.

Clarke’s heart was so shattered listening to Lexa’s pain, she couldn’t even utter a word, feeling like her chest and her throat were being crushed in a vice.
“To give it to someone who hates me, who’d be happier to see me dead rather than swear her life to me,’” she added bitterly with a watery laugh. “The fates it seems have a morbid sense of humor.’’

At that Clarke gasped in shock. “No, Lexa!’’ she shook her head furiously, trying to find her voice. “I don’t hate you, I don’t… I… I was angry… maybe I’m still angry… but I couldn’t, I could never hurt you, not really… I… Lexa… I…” Clarke breathed with difficulty, trying to calm down and make Lexa understand. What, she wasn’t entirely true.

“I see you. I’ve always seen you, Lexa. I… even when you try to hide yourself, I… I see you. The last thing I could ever do is hate you. I don’t believe your heart died. I know it’s in pain, but it’s there and it shows no sign of weakness either. That’s why you’ve built all this, because you love your people, because you hope, you fight, because you want them to do more than just survive. You want them to live, to love. You wouldn’t do any of this if your heart weren’t the strongest I’ve ever… Lexa, how can you not see that? See you, the you I see? And I am angry at you,’’ Clarke rambled on, not allowing Lexa to even react.

“I don’t know when I will stop being angry, but I don’t hate you, I can’t. I…” she breathed harshly.

She sighed getting up, too agitated to fully face what she was saying, what she was confessing and what she was leaving out. Embarrassed to look at Lexa, to face her, to face herself, she started to walk out of the room. When she reached the door, her hand on the handle, her back to Lexa, Clarke used the last of her courage and spoke again.

“When you decided to fight Roan to the death and I went to try and convince him and Nia, I told you I was doing it for my people,’’ she paused. “Roan had already offered me an alliance between Skaikru and Azgeda. Nia was ready to swear a blood oath that she’d protect me and my people. I still tried to poison her, even if that meant giving my life trying to save yours.’’ She swallowed. “I… I’ve already pledged to protect your life with mine. Freely. Inside me, Lexa. If I have to stand in front of your priests and gods and swear it again, I will. I offer it.”

“My heart is broken too. I don’t know if I know what love is anymore, if I could ever feel again, if I could ever give it,’’ she said, ignoring why that part felt like a lie, “but if pledging you my life is enough, if I were to bind myself for life to someone…there’s no one I’d rather…” she breathed shakily, unable to finish.

That one word that’d been pushing at the edge of Clarke’s consciousness rattled, wanting to get out. Not now, not yet. It would stay hidden for now.
With that, Clarke turned the knob to leave the room without glancing back, leaving a stunned, speechless, floored Lexa behind, adding in a whisper before stepping out.

“If you will have me.’’

Chapter End Notes

TRIGEDASLENG:
Blinka: eye
Rona: rider, runner
Wamplei: death
Wocha: village chieftains (from: watcher)
Gon Ogeda: union (from: come together)
Houmon: wife/husband (from: home one)
Ogonzaun: truce, ceasefire, peace (from: all guns down)
Bana: flag (from: banner)
Badannes: allegiance, loyalty, service
Badannes-de: the pledge of loyalty
Raun: round, circle, around
Tu: two
Kongeda: Coalition
Trei: road, path (from: trail)

TRIGEDASLENG I MADE UP:
Bagon: lover, bed partner (from trig word bag: bed)
Bodageda: border town. (boda from: border) (from trig word geda: get together)
Jusa: judges, justices (from trig word jus: blood) (and from English word: justice)
Hefa: clan leader (from: chief/jefa/jefe)
Ogonzaunkepa/Ogonzauna: peacekeepers or abbreviated as ‘peacers’
Skriba: scribes (from trig verb skrab daun: scribe down)
Snifa: scout (from: to sniff out)
Sonraunon: my One Life, used for your bonded for life/joined by Gon ogeda (from trig word sonraun: life)

NAME ORIGINS:
Arleo: name of the actor who played him, but was credited simply as ‘the guard’.
Thought I’d give him a name.
Casio: for the watch brand, lol
Desda: from Bethesda, in D.C.
Loui: derived from French name Louis, a hint of where the Lake people are located (no, not Canada)
Luan: I did not like Luna, so made her an older, male version. Luan is an old Celtic name said to mean both ‘light’ and ‘warrior’. It’s also a Chinese name meaning ‘uprising’. Might be tied to his backstory. :)
Oma: informal, affectionate name for grandmother in German, a hint of their diverse ancestry.
Sybil: was the first name given to the oracle in the ancient greek city of Delphi. A sybil was also the term people used for the oracles in general, or women prophetess.

Rohana: derivative of a rare American-originated name Rohon, meaning ‘horse country’.

Tumblr: girl-with-a-quill
Sorry it took me so long to update! My computer went and is still on the fritz, so I can't edit text (and I lost all my passwords including 4 this account LMAO). Hope not too many mistakes or formatting errors escaped me. I love comments to hear what you think! Thanks for reading! :)

Trigger-warning: Bellamy's presence...briefly LOL XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The morning came and with it a sense of dread. The uncertainty of what decision was to be made frayed at everyone’s nerves, especially Clarke’s. They had brought food to her early in the morning and she forced herself to eat some of it, trying to suppress the nauseous rumbling in her stomach.

She and Lexa had agreed to see Titus and Sybil before the Council meeting began. Clarke arrived
at the side-chamber and fidgeted in front of the door, calming her nerves at the thought of facing Lexa. Facing her after the things Clarke had almost confessed in her frazzled state, brought on by the stress of the events, the exhaustion, the wine and the pouring of emotion from Lexa herself.

"It's just a door, dear. I’m pretty sure it doesn’t talk back," said a teasing voice behind her. Sybil.

Clarke turned around, but instead of trying to come up with an answer, she simply greeted the woman and knocked before they both went in.

"Good morning, Heda." Sybil dipped her head, serious now. "Fleimkepa."

Lexa lifted her gaze toward Sybil and only then caught sight of Clarke beside her. If it was Lexa’s early, freshly-bathed face the one responsible for the slight tinge on her skin or something else, Clarke tried not to notice it, too busy trying to keep the temperature of her own face under control.


"Good morning, Clarke," Lexa replied evenly. "Oma."

"So have you two reached a decision?" Sybil asked, getting right to the point. She looked between the two young women expectantly. Only silence filled the room for long seconds.

"No." Lexa’s low voice came.

At this, Sybil sighed in defeat. Clarke tried not to be disappointed, but the lurch in her stomach told her otherwise.

"As it should be," muttered Titus in the back of the room.

"What are the considerations that are impeding it?" Sybil inquired again.

Lexa scoffed. "Everything."

Sybil turned to Clarke with an arched eyebrow in question.

Clarke shrugged tiredly. "Lexa has explained to me in detail what the union means… I have accepted it. I maintain my offer. It’s her decision." Lexa glared at Clarke in return.

"Heda?"

In reality, Lexa was more at a loss than anything else at this point. The last thing she ever expected to hear was Clarke’s words to her the night before. Acceptance to unite with her for a lifetime. Her loyalty. Her willingness to protect her at the risk of her own life, when just a week ago Clarke had put a knife to her throat, her eyes blazing with such furor. Lexa didn’t know what to think anymore.

On the other hand, she knew what she felt for Clarke, what she had been incapable of stopping from feeling and how it grew everyday no matter her efforts to the contrary. Now having to be united to her only in appearance, having to share the things they would have to share, a roof, a life, without truly being together. Lexa could not think of anything more torturous. To know Clarke felt admiration at best but nothing more, and was willing to sacrifice her life for her people by bonding with her. Yet that would be the extent of it. It would be agony. They would forgo the possibility of being with someone else until the end of their days and at the same time not really be with each other. It wasn’t a sacrifice that should be asked of either of them.
However if she didn’t, her entire life’s work, her legacy could and would probably be destroyed. Did she really have the right to take the possibility of a better future for her people over her personal qualms? Had she not been born only to serve her people? A conduit, a human vessel for Heda and nothing more? She had no right to want anything for herself. She had been born but with one purpose: carry the spirit and be the protector of her people. She had to be stone and steel, unselfish and unfeeling.

Lexa made a last attempt.

"They’ll know. If they find out it is not real, that we’re taking the sacred vow in pretense, we’ll be lost. We’ll be dead."

Sybil huffed. "Is this what concerns you, my child? Lexa, they already think you two are together, that you’re at the very least bed companions. Why would they doubt?"

"What?!" both exclaimed in unison.

"Lexa, Heda never shares her tent with anyone. Ever. Yet during the entire campaign for the Mountain, you and Clarke slept together. Even here, you visit each other’s rooms until the late hours of the night. People think you’d taken Clarke as your bagon almost as soon as you met. I heard the whispers about it as soon as I left the canyon, as far away as the Rock Line lands!"

"No, but… we were planning… talking. We… we didn’t. It would get late. It seemed more… practical," Lexa almost sputtered defensively.

Clarke just stood there gaping, thinking she should also deny it, but then the flashback of Lexa kissing her in her tent came and she felt guilty as charged.

"Lexa, you think Rohana would come up with this idea out of thin air, and that Luan and the others would support it so readily if they didn’t think you and Clarke already were inclined in that direction?"

"No, Rohana came up with it because you put the idea in her head with your silly, barely concealed riddles about the sky meeting the ground! It wasn’t exactly subtle," Lexa countered derisively.

"Heda, the prophecies should not be mocked as silly. I can only say what I see," she said seriously.

"The prophecies?" Lexa exclaimed.

"It doesn’t matter right now. The point is, Heda, what the leaders think about your private love affairs is not as important. If they already had suspicions before, many were further convinced given how you both behaved yesterday. But at the end of the day, they are politicians who are thinking about what would be the most beneficial solution and this presents it. What truly matters is what the people believe and they already believe you are… involved. All you need to do is not deny it and it will take little more convincing."

"How we behaved yesterday? What do you mean, Sybil?" Clarke asked, incredulous and a little shocked at the idea that there were rumors everywhere about her and Lexa as lovers. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks with blood and quickened her pulse.

"Clarke, not a living soul would ever dare raise their voice at Heda the way you do because they would be kicked off the tower before they blinked. The way you challenge her, question her openly and live to live another day. Only two lovers quarreling would explain and excuse Heda’s extreme
leniency.’" Sybil chuckled, side-eying Lexa.

Clarke felt her head swim. As if she needed one more thing to make her feel guilty. Not only had the Sky people come to crashing into their lands, set fire to their villages, massacred 18 kids and elders, slain an entire peacekeeping force, but her own behavior had made Lexa’s people question her authority and her strength to lead. Nia had challenged her to a death duel. And much of it could be traced back to Clarke, to the 'mighty' Wanheda, putting their Coalition at risk. Maybe having Sky people exterminated, herself included, wasn’t such a bad idea, Clarke thought cynically.

However, before she could say anything, Lexa asked. "Is this true, Titus? About the whispers? About what people say?"

Titus, who had remained uncharacteristically silent throughout the conversation, looked at his Commander in that jittery way he held himself. After a moment, he nodded.

"Yes, Heda. It is true, but that is no reason to do this. This is madness."

"Why hadn’t you told me? You are my main advisor. Did you not think it was important to tell me about the whispers?"

"It is not my place to question who you invite into your bed, Heda. Only to advise you on who is a threat based on real dangers. I did warn you about Wanheda."

"You believed them to be true," Lexa rightly concluded in surprise. "That’s why you said nothing. And yet you advised me to strike Clarke down."

"To take her power as Wanheda. Not because… it was irrelevant if she was your lover."

"You told her to kill me?" Clarke asked indignantly. "When?" It didn’t matter, Clarke thought, but she wanted to know.

"The day you bowed down to her, Wanheda." Titus said without guilt. "I was only trying to protect her," he added with a little less bite.

_The day she bowed down to me_, Clarke thought.

It was this realization, the memory of Lexa’s words to her that night, that removed any residual doubt in Clarke. Lexa had already pledged her loyalty to her and to her people, freely and sincerely. Lexa might not love Clarke, might never love her, but this was enough.

"Lexa, I maintain what I said last night. I don’t know what your decision is, but in the meeting I will ask you to unite with me again. My words remain true and what I’ve offered… it… that will not be offered falsely. I need you to remember that."

Lexa only looked at her impassively. She finally spoke.

"I’ve heard all the counsel I need to hear on this matter. I will give my decision during the meeting."

"Only the matter of the prisoners needs addressing. I’ve made my decision already and I want to make it clear once more," she continued.

Clarke’s heart clenched. She swallowed with difficulty.

"Are we in agreement, Clarke? Can I count on you to ensure Skaikru complies?"
"Yes."

It was the only word she was able to make her mouth pronounce. They had discussed it on their way to Polis. There was no other alternative.

"Very well. Titus, convene the Council within the hour." And with that, Lexa exited the room without even waiting for a reply.

"Mom," she exhaled. She could see Abby’s red-rimmed eyes with dark circles underneath. She had also forgone all sleep it seemed.

"Are you ok? Honey, I’m sorry about all of this –"

"No, mom. This isn’t your fault. This was Pike, Bellamy, this was… it wasn’t you, ok?"

"Clarke, did you speak to the Commander?" Kane asked.

"I did. We did. We talked," Clarke sighed. "She has to decide, but I’ve made up my mind. I’m willing to do it and it’s the decision that would best suit her, all of us, that would bring more stability to the Coalition."

"No, Clarke. No, baby. You can’t marry her! I can’t let you do that. I can’t let you sacrifice yourself."

"Mom," Clarke exhaled, taking her mother’s hands in hers. "I need you to listen to me, Mom, please." Abby nodded, tears already brimming her eyes.

She had known Abby would try to dissuade her and Clarke wasn’t sure she could take much more of it. She felt like the string of a guitar being tightened and tightened, and any minuscule tap would make her snap. She also worried that if she didn’t convince Abby, she could ruin everything with an outburst in the middle of the Council.

"When you sent me to the ground, you told me my instinct would be to protect everyone, to take care of them. It’s what I’ve been doing all this time, taking care of us –"

"But you don’t have to," Abby interrupted.

"I do! It’s who I am, mom, because of you and dad, it’s who I’ll always be. You have to trust me. This is what’s best for all of us. We’re here now, we are grounders too. We need to become a part of this world. We can’t ask the entire world to change for us. We need to change for it. We might not completely agree with how they do things, but we can’t impose our ways on them, in their home. If we want a chance of a life here... it’s going to take Lexa."

"How can you say that? How can you trust her after everything? After Finn? After the Mountain? And now we’re gonna let them kill Pike and the others like barbarians? Force you to marry the Commander?!!"
"We killed people on the Ark for taking a vial of medicine, for taking an extra ration of food! Our Council sent a 100 kids to Earth to die like our lives meant nothing. How are they the barbarians? Their punishment is equal to the crime, never more, never less. Isn’t that more just?" Clarke insisted, raising her voice.

"And Finn… Finn killed 18 children and elders. He got punished with his life. We owed them 18 lives, mom, and they just asked for one, for Finn. Did Lexa not keep the truce even after the Mountain? Didn’t she offer us trade, offered us a place in the Coalition at the risk of her own position, of her own life? Didn’t she risk her life to give us justice against the Ice Nation?"

And then looking at them darkly, Clarke added in a low voice, "And Arkadia, you… you… no one in Arkadia even wanted to go looking for us when we were trapped in Mount Weather. They might have retreated to save their people, but they were at least willing to help. Lexa gave us her entire army without hesitation. It’s more than our own people were willing to do."

Kane and Abby looked at her guiltily. Clarke exhaled, tired of arguing, exhausted of defending herself to everyone.

"If we start pointing the blame finger, then we’ll never move forward," Kane said. "Clarke is right, Abby. This gives us a chance to save our people today, but it is also our best bet to build a future. Maybe we need to trust her, to trust them both."

"Why? Why do you trust Lexa so much, Marcus? I know you spent time with her but... " Abby trailed off quietly and with defeat in her voice, mystified that he always seemed willing to put his trust and faith in the Commander.

Kane looked at her and exhaled. "My mother used to say that the most telling thing about a man's heart was how he measured his fellow man. That what he measured him by was the most revealing thing of his own nature."

He smiled sadly at the memory of his mother but continued when he saw the frown on the two Griffins.

"Did I ever tell you how I first met the Commander, when Thelonious and I were held in TonDC? She came into the cell pretending to be a village girl," he chuckled at the memory and at Abby and Clarke's expressions of incredulity.

"She wanted to learn from us rather than rely on what others might have told her about our guilt or intentions. She was... testing us, in a way. When the ruse was over, do you know what her very first words were?" he asked, looking at them both.

"It's clear your intentions are honorable. Your desire for peace true." He repeated the words, smiling slightly.

"Don't you see? Most people would have used that time to get information on our defenses, our weaknesses, how to beat us, what to take from us, how to use us as bargaining chips. But the Commander... she was sizing us up, and her measure was our desire for peace," Kane said passionately. "That told me the most important thing about her, about who she is."

"Abby, most among them and even most among us don't think like that. She’s the best chance we all have for this place, for our new home," he concluded.

"Be that as it may, why Clarke? Why does Clarke have to marry her?!"

The truth of the matter was that this was her real point of contention. The fate of the prisoners had
been decided the moment the Sky council had voted to hand them over. They had already discussed it for hours inside Arkadia and on their way to Polis. Abby had always been fiercely against the death penalty, on the Ark and anywhere else. She had always been the voice of morality on the Council, appealing to their greater sense of ethics and compassion every time they had been faced with a similar decision, but seldom managing to convince her colleagues to revert a sentence. She knew deep down that in this case she was not even justified in trying to, given what Pike and his group had done. What they had almost done a second time.

No. This was mostly about Clarke. Her daughter. Her baby. The thought of her being handed over like a thing to a 'warlord', even if it was to the contradictory 'peaceful' warlord, was too much for her. It was madness, no matter what anyone said otherwise.

"Mom, if it’s any consolation to you, the Commander is the one refusing the union. Nobody is forcing me. I’m offering. I’m trying to convince her. Let’s hope, for all of our sakes, that she’ll take me.”

With that Clarke left, hoping against hope that Abby wouldn’t ruin all her efforts during the meeting.

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The Council had gathered once more in the throne room with the leaders or ambassadors sitting on the now 13 chairs of the Coalition. Other members of each delegation filled the room to brim. Titus and Sybil flanked each side of the Commander’s throne. The prisoners had once more been brought and chained to one side of the room, to receive their sentence. Clarke’s nerves were tightly wound up and she struggled to keep herself from fidgeting. The tension in the room was palpable, loud murmurs vibrating all around them. Only Lexa was missing.

Suddenly the large doors were opened by the enormous sentries posted on each side, spear in hand. At this, Titus bellowed out the ritual salute.

"All Hail the Commander of the Blood!” he pronounced, while Lexa made her way to her throne in long, rapid strides, her black coat and sash flurrying behind her, and finally sat.

"Hail Commander of the Blood!” the rest repeated, all kneeling simultaneously.

Lexa nodded, her face stony and impenetrable. "Rise."

They took their places again, the silence in the room absolute.

She took the room in with her roaming eyes and finally spoke.

"We are here today to settle the matters of the attack on the Coalition’s peacekeeping forces without further delay," her voice rang out, crisp and clear.

"The 25 Skaikru rebels responsible for the massacre of 300 peacekeepers under the white banner are guilty of murderous treason against the Coalition. Their cowardice and treachery can have only one price: they will take the Tree of the Natrona to die the death by a thousand cuts. As is our law,
the clan of the traitors and the clan of those slain will make the first cuts. ANYONE who attempts to end their suffering with a merciful death will also be put on a tree, to suffer the same fate. *WanNatrona* will begin at noon," Lexa sentenced with fiery authority.

Abby and Kane’s faces were as white as paper, as was that of the rest of the Sky people, but all remained silent without protesting. They had known that the execution of the rebels was a certainty, but had not envisaged having to participate in it.

The sound of feet stomping in unison as soon as the Commander had given the sentence startled them however.

"*Raitnes!*" they all bellowed at once.

The Sky people would later learn this was a sign they overwhelmingly agreed that the sentence had been a fair and fitting one. An exclamation reserved for when they felt justice had been made.

After the surge of loud approval had quieted down, the throne room was once more plunged in nervous silence, as Heda sat on her throne with lethal power emanating from every pore and a steely expression on her face, one that made warriors cower in fear and leaders shrink in submission.

"Bringing the *Skaikru* into the Coalition in haste, that was a mistake. I see that now," she stated gravely, an ominous implication freezing the blood in every Arkadian present.

"Laws can be enforced, but trust and understanding cannot be imposed, they are built over time." She paused, deep in thought.

"*Skaikru* come from such a different world," she continued. "We cannot expect them to understand our world in such little time, anymore that we can pretend to fully understand their ways. We cannot expect the fear and hatred among our people to subside overnight. If that is so, should we punish an entire people for the actions of a few who are already facing punishment?" Her words hung in the air, the contained breaths of everyone in the room tangible.

"I do not believe so," she announced, provoking hushed whispers of relief among the Sky people. "The crimes of the *skai natrona*," she spat looking at the prisoners, "cannot be answered by all their people. We will not take 300 hundred of their lives to pay for the crimes of a few."

"But a crime of the most treacherous kind has been committed. One that the Sky leadership failed to prevent," she pointed out with contained distaste, looking at Abby and Marcus. "If the *Skaikru* are to live among us, are to become one of us, while we learn to trust each other for as long as that might take, I have a duty to protect our people from further attacks. To ensure such heinous actions are never repeated. I believe there is only one way to prevent it, to let us move forward."

The tension in the room doubled, all aware this decision would be a turning point in their future shared history as united clans. One decision would lead them onto a less treded path, one they had shakily embarked upon already when each joined the Coalition with other clans they had once waged war against. A path where compromise and reconciliation sometimes took the place of revenge. A path they still struggled with.

Another decision would teach them a lesson in blood, would force their submission and obedience through fear. It would likely sow more resentment and mistrust between the Sky people and the other clans, but it was a type of blood justice they understood and had lived by during centuries.
Lexa made her way down the steps of the throne to the middle of the room, her hands folded behind her back, spine straight and head held high. She walked a few slow paces in front of the gathered audience, pensively.


Clarke felt her heart jump in her throat, dread shooting through her at the realization that Lexa had decided not to spare Abby and Kane.

She scrambled up and hastily made her way to the center of the room where Abby and Kane had gone to, both kneeling on one knee, elbows leaned against the other one, head bowed, awaiting their judgement.

"Commander, as Skaikru ambassador, please, I request the right to speak," Clarke exclaimed coming to stand next to Lexa, trying her best not to sound challenging but too alarmed to keep the desperation out of her tone.

The Commander lifted her hand to silence her.

"Heda, please. I would like to offer again –"

Lexa raised her hand again with a stern "Clarke", succeeding in stopping her from continuing. Then she turned her gaze upon the Council.

"Who will witness me?"

An immediate rumble of gasps rose simultaneously through the entire room.

The first one that seemed to recover from the shock was the ambassador from Yujleda (Broadleaf), a tall and thin woman with cropped hair and two lines tattooed on each side of the bridge of her nose, rose from her Council seat and made her way to the center in front of the Commander. She kneeled on one knee and said loudly.

"Ai na sin yu in. Yu na ge sin in, Heda."

The ambassador from Sankru (Dessert Clan), a tan, grey-eyed man with a hard face who had mostly remained silent during the meetings also rose from his seat and exclaimed, "Ai na sin yu in!" and came to the center also kneeling.

Rohana, Luan, Roan, Indra and all 12 other Council members followed and came to the center to bow, repeating the same phrase. The rest of the room filled with delegates and chiefs also knelt from their own places, the words on their lips.

Only Clarke and the rest of Skaikru remained standing, with confused frowns and widened eyes. Titus and Sybil on the other hand came down the steps.

Sybil flanked the Commander to her right and knelt solemnly. "Blinka kom Polis na sin yu in. Yu na ge sin in, Heda."

After a moment, Titus nodded wordlessly. He walked towards the side-chamber, disappearing inside for a few moments only to emerge with a dagger. Lexa’s dagger.

Finally, he bowed deeply without kneeling and repeated the words in a hushed voice, this time in gonasleng.
"I will witness you. You will be witnessed, Heda."

The fear in Clarke’s body invaded her further, imagining some brutal execution ritual Lexa was about to carry out on Abby and Kane right there in throne room, and was asking the Council to witness justice being carried out.

"Lexa, please!" she tried, raising her hands imploringly.

"Clarke," the Commander said calmly, gathering the sky girls wildly gesticulating hands together between her own. "Clarke," she repeated in a quiet voice.

Clarke looked at Lexa, unable to understand how she could be so collected given what was about to happen, and yet the feeling of Lexa’s warm hands on hers, Lexa earnest eyes trained on hers, had an almost magical soothing ability. And as much as this wasn’t the time, she could never deny the paralyzing, electrifying effect Lexa’s touch, Lexa’s gaze, had on her.

They had only held hands briefly three times: when she had held on desperately to Lexa as the pauna tried to take her; after Lexa had bowed before Clarke; and when she had changed Lexa’s hand bandage after the duel. Each of these moments had each held an overwhelming realization.

The first, with the pauna, was when Clarke realized that she would protect the Commander’s life at all costs. The second, when Lexa bowed and swore to protect Clarke, was when Clarke knew in her heart, could see in Lexa’s eyes the truth in her words and in her promise. The third was when Clarke realized that not only could she never harm Lexa herself, the thought of any harm coming to her, the thought of losing her, filled her with soul-crushing anguish and unbearable pain. So even though she knew Lexa’s healers had taken good care of her hand, changing her bandage was just an excuse to touch her, to see for herself that Lexa was there, was real, was alive and breathing sitting next to her and out of harm’s way.

And in this moment, this fourth time, came perhaps the most staggering realization of all in its significance, in its power to alter the course of her own blood, the setting of her bones, the flow of air in her lungs, and the crevices of her own soul now drenched in crushing solitude and guilt. It was that with Lexa, hands in hers, gazing into her eyes, she was instead flooded with healing solace, soothed by the recognition of the only other pair of eyes in which she saw absolute understanding, not tainted by the judgement, resentment, disappointment or blame that so often colored the eyes of her purported friends and even her own mother on occasion.

Lexa had seen Clarke’s demons, the horrors, the losses, the impossible decisions she had had to make and never once looked at her with anything other than respect, with empathy, and with an expressed desire to nurture the greatness she saw in Clarke. After all, Lexa knew all too well of horrors and losses, of duties. Hers was the heaviest crown, hers a life of unimaginable responsibility and painful choices.

Even if Clarke recognized the role every one of her friends, her mother and Kane had played in helping them survive until now, she’d always felt desolately alone having to bear the decisions no one wanted to take. She’d always felt that emptiness, even before coming to the ground. Until she had met Lexa. It was why she had felt her heart rip apart when Lexa had left her at the Mountain, more than anything else.

With Lexa she didn’t feel alone anymore. Even when they disagreed, she felt she didn’t have to face the abyss by herself. She felt like she could face all the terrors and challenges the world threw at her, if she was beside her. Whatever were to happen in this moment, with her mom, with her
people, with whatever short and violent future that awaited her, the sense of relief, of calming
strength Lexa’s presence gave her, made her feel like she could take it on. A realization of such
magnitude that it took her breath away. Even if the one word, the name it bore, still refused to
make itself known, this realization alone still changed everything.

Deep into these thoughts, Clarke squeezed Lexa’s hands unconsciously, seeking that comfort,
bracing herself for the dreaded words that were about to come about the fate of her mother.

"Clarke," Lexa said once more, with a hint of soft hesitation. It was enough to shake Clarke out of
her trance.

"Will you accept me as your future One? Will you give yourself to me and unite our people in
peace through the sacred bond of Gon Ogeda?" Lexa said with searching eyes and a vulnerability
in her voice she had not quite managed to mask, at least not from Clarke.

All air left Clarke’s body, replaced only by a buzzing vibration that rang through her, one she soon
realized was her thumping heart threatening to beat right out of her chest. She only dimly heard
Abby and the Sky people gasp somewhere near, but none of the grounders. She half-dazedly
figured that the ‘witnessing’ had in fact been for Lexa’s proposition.

Clarke could scarcely put her thoughts together long enough to even understand if she was being
proposed to or if this was the actual bonding. In her frazzled state of mind, she only understood one
thing. That she didn’t care. Well, actually two things, the second thing being the next word her
mouth produced.

"Yes."

She saw how Lexa’s eyes widened slightly and how she swallowed thickly. The protests that she
expected to hear from her mother never came however. She missed Abby’s arrested attempt at
speaking up. As soon as she had opened her mouth to speak, she had seen something that made her
stop. All she did then was to lift her hand in a silencing signal for the Sky people delegation, in
case anyone else had been tempted to speak up.

All this Clarke missed, her eyes trained into Lexa’s. What Abby had seen she would only tell
Clarke exactly three months from this day.

Lexa let go of Clarke’s hands but did not break eye contact, reaching for the outheld dagger from
Titus. Taking it with her right hand, she cut her left index finger deeply, while reciting slowly, first
in trigedasleng and then in gonasleng for Clarke’s sake.

"Kom ai jus yu jus, ai stein yu op bilaik ain," she said lifting her cut finger to Clarke’s face in a
voice that faintly wavered. "Until my blood is your blood, I mark you as mine," Lexa translated as
her finger trailed a delicate line of blood down the middle of Clarke’s face, starting on her forehead
just below her hairline, down her nose, hesitating with a slight tremble and decreasing pressure
when her finger passed over Clarke’s slightly parted lips, both taking a shaky breath that did not go
unnoticed by those around them, then finally ending on her chin.

"Nau tu, kom taim yumi na gon bilaik won," she inhaled, her eyes still briefly distracted by Clarke’s
lips, until she lifted them back to her eyes, "Now two, until we become one," she finished softly,
with a brew of emotions swimming in her gaze that Clarke could not fully decipher.

Clarke could scarcely make out her own thoughts through the frantic beat of her heart ringing in
her ears and drumming through her body, while she stood unmoving staring at Lexa. It wasn’t until the brunette lifted the dagger to pass it to Clarke that the sky girl blinked quickly to come out of her daze.

She pressed the blade to her right finger, drawing blood with a small wince. She lifted her hand unable to hide her trembling as well as Lexa had, while attempting to repeat the words she had just heard.

"Until my blood is your blood, I mark you as mine," she said, too overcome to control the distinct quiver in her voice as she traced a similar line down the middle of Lexa’s face, feeling heat rising to her cheeks and in her belly as her finger passed over Lexa’s closed lips. "Now two, until we become one," she managed with a tight throat.

Her gaze bore into Lexa, hypnotized like a moth to a flame with the brilliant green depths of her eyes. Before she could react, Titus took the dagger from her hand.

"Lexa kom Trikru and Clarke kom Skaikru have marked each other for the sacred union. Tomorrow on the new day, the Hafons will begin the trials of Gon Ogeda. Three bindings for the next three moons: Givnes-de, Badannes-de, Glong-de. The Giving, The Pledging, The Joining. Until the Gon Ogeda, when two halves will become one," Titus concluded with solemnity.

He then gestured for them to turn around. Unsure, Clarke followed Lexa’s lead as she faced the crowd and proceeded to gather her hair to one side, exposing the back of her neck, the sky girl mirroring her movements. Titus then drew the blood left on the blade and pressed the tip of his stained finger once at the base of each of their necks, then repeated the motion bringing the finger to his forehead leaving a simple small dot.

"You are marked. I have witnessed you."

"Yo don ge sin in," the crowd intonated, all still on one knee in front of the two girls.

"You have been witnessed," Titus repeated.

With this, he ended the Council meeting and dismissed all. People left the room in hurried whispers, Abby and the sky people delegation – still in custody until the execution –, with them. Titus and Sibyl had disappeared quietly, Clarke not having taken notice of anything as she stared blankly before her, reeling from it all.

She took a heavy breath and pressed her lips together without thought, trying to gather herself. This made her let out a small gasp, as she had unwittingly tasted Lexa’s blood on her lips. It’s not that tasting blood shocked her. After all, she had been soaked in blood ever since she landed, to the point where she thought blood had invaded her every pore, the smell, the coppery tang of it lodged in her nose, in her mouth, in her soul forever. It was the taste of Lexa’s blood that took her by surprise. It was, for a lack of a better word, almost sweet. Clarke knew the natblidas had something different in their blood, since it was a slightly darker hue than regular blood. Not by much but enough to be distinct, and Clarke had wondered what exactly it was that made it different. She had briefly theorized it might have a mutated protein but had not given it further thought. She would’ve never anticipated that it would taste different too. It still had a faint hint of copper, but was… well, she had really no way of describing it.

Clarke reflexively brought her hand to the mark across her lips.
Lexa, who had been watching her, walked slowly towards her. She stopped only when there was barely couple a feet between them left.

She lifted her hand and traced the line on Clarke's face in the air hesitantly, without touching her.

"Stein op. When two who are divided in half, discover and see the other, they mark each other. So that the eye can behold what the soul already does: that they are split in two, but belong as one. The mark of the Hafons. The half ones," she explained in a reverent whisper, as her eyes traced the line of blood on Clarke's face, "who begin their journey to come together."

Her eyes got momentarily distracted on Clarke's lips, the urge to dip down and capture them between her own was so powerful, Lexa almost swayed toward Clarke.

Instead, she swallowed and walked away, hands folded neatly behind her.

"You may wash it off later. At dawn, for the second stein op ritual," she commented tenuously, attempting to dispel the previous dizzying moment.

At Clarke’s frown, she added, "The real one will stain our skin with a mark that can never be erased," she explained, gaze dark and distant, while bringing her hand to touch the spot Titus had made on the back of her neck.

Clarke turned fully to her. "You changed your mind," she said both as statement and question. After all, Lexa had been so adamantly against the idea of the union the night before.

Lexa seemed to think about it for a minute and then slowly answered, "I did it for my people, for our people... as I swore to you I would."

For a moment, it seemed like she would say nothing more and was about to leave. However, she demurred and looked at Clarke, as if searching for the right words.

"I will be in my chambers... until noon," she said with hesitation, in an attempt to avoid referring to the execution by name, "should you require me, hafon" she added softly.

Then, with a slight nod, she left the room. Clarke remained frozen in place watching the retreating figure of her regal and indecipherable promised one.

Clarke jostled in the elevator as she rode down the tower. Once outside, she followed Ryder's large frame through the streets. Behind her, Penn and two sentries were following her, as her assigned bodyguards in Polis. They turned several corners after the market square, leading to the southeast quarters of the city. After a few more minutes, they arrived at an oddly intact red brick archway that stood alone, like an ancient ruin defying the passage of time.

Beyond it, was a broken, small, grey building. They entered it and zig-zagged a few corridors until they descended a set of stairways. They reached an underground maze of limestone columns and more red brick archways that joined together into tunnels in all directions. The construction seemed very old to Clarke. It was slightly dark and cool. Several simple round iron circles hung from the
domed ceiling holding a few candles, flickering their golden light off the walls every few meters.

Finally they arrived to a large room that held a hexagonal construction in the middle, like an old furnace with tiny vines growing between the bricks. The room was lit by sunlight rays that streamed from small openings from the ceiling and tiny windows on the walls.

Against the right wall of the room, the 25 Arkadian prisoners were chained up.

These were the Polis holding cells, Ryder had gruffly told her upon questioning. Their only purpose was to detain those awaiting judgment until a sentence was pronounced, which explained why all the other rooms they had passed were empty of people, and mostly filled with sacks of grain and wooden barrels.

She was unsurprised to see Octavia there, sitting crossed-legged in front of Bellamy, with a pained frown on her face. Upon hearing the decision of the council in Arkadia to hand them over, Octavia had insisted she was coming with them. She knew what fate awaited them, what fate awaited her brother.

Clarke merely nodded to her and walked past them. She was here to see someone else. She saw him in the corner, hair shaggy and dirty, arms and head hunched over his knees.

"Jasper," she called weakly.

She could barely believe this was the same carefree, goofy boy who had followed her the first day just to impress Octavia. Finn, Monty, Octavia and Jasper were her first friends on the ground. She’d gone with them on their first adventure to search for Mount Weather, all of them still innocent and hopeful, chatting about all the things they would do now that they were free from the confines and rules of the Ark. It was only on those few days of hike she had had genuine interactions and connections with any of them, when she really thought about it.

Once Jasper had been speared, it had all been a hellish run for their lives ever since, escaping from one horror to the other. In the end, it was those horrors and surviving them that had created their bonds as a group, as morbid as that sounded.

Jasper lifted his head and fixed his wild haggard eyes on her. "Her Majesty Grounder Princess in the flesh! What an honor!" he said scornfully. "Have you come to save us again? No. I know! You're here to ask our forgiveness to make yourself feel better, aren't you Clarke?"

"No." Clarke spoke quietly. "But I am sorry," she said, crouching in front of him. "I am sorry I didn't protect you better, Jasper. That I didn't get to you soon enough in Mount Weather. I am sorry for what you lost," she said with watery eyes, "I never wanted to hurt Maya. I never wanted any of this for you. I had to save our people."

"I was going to save everyone."

"I wish you could've."

"Shove your regret up your ass," he spat.

"Why?" she continued undeterred. "I know you were hurting but why? Why did you join them, Jasper? How could you go along with what they did? How?" she asked, as her voice wavered.

He hung his head down, silent for a while.

His voice was barely audible when he replied. "I wanted the pain to go away. I wanted the fear to
go away."

"I see her all the time. I see all of them. Every night. Every single time I try to sleep. I hear them screaming. Maya dying in my arms. Someone coming to get us in the night. To take us. To kill us." he rambled on, his voice cracking and tear-filled eyes wide with terror and anguish.

"I just wanted it to stop. If I killed them first... maybe... I... I just wanted it all to stop," he sobbed.

Clarke's tears flowed down her cheeks. Her heart constricted in pain seeing Jasper so broken, so haunted. She herself had not slept one single night since she had killed Finn, since she had pulled the lever in Mount Weather, without seeing their faces, without hearing their screams. She had not slept one night in peace without fear making her jump awake ever since she had landed on the ground.

But she was also furious. Livid. How could Pike, how could Bellamy take advantage of his trauma, of his broken spirit, to enlist him in their hateful plans?

"I do regret one thing more than anything," she said loud enough for everyone to hear her, "and it was to leave you with them. To trust them." She looked directly at Bellamy as she said this.

She then took something out of her pocket and she showed it to Ryder to make sure it was okay. He nodded. It was Jasper's goggles. The very first night, as they all sat around the fire on the hike, he had told him the goggles were all he had left of his father, who had also been a chemist and used them in the lab.

She put them on his head gently and kissed his cheek. As she did so, she whispered in his ear. "Take it when you think you can't bare it anymore. It will numb the pain. It will take it all away" she promised, as she pulled back.

They looked at each other with tears rolling down, a silent realization and understanding passing among them.

As Clarke stood up, Jasper spoke up in a small voice.

"Clarke... I'm sorry too."

Clarke only nodded, too overwhelmed to say anything else.

"Do you think I'll see her?... Maya... that she'll be waiting for me?" he asked with a hopeful smile.

"I hope so," she replied tightly.

Before leaving, she looked at all of the prisoners. More of her people she couldn't save. More blood on her hands.

Most of them were Farm Station survivors. She could scarcely imagine their ordeal. Landing in the Ice Nation to be hunted down one by one. Escaping only to be blown to bits in Mount Weather and now were to be tortured to death. Earth had been a nightmare instead of the dream they all once had on the Ark.

Clarke understood rationally that they bore the blame of their fate, but she also knew that they had trusted and followed their leader, had let his bloodlust and hatred blind their own reason. She still couldn't understand how someone who was once a teacher like Pike could have become such a
tyrannical leader. Then again he had always been ruthless and cruel, even as a teacher, once even pummeling Murphy with his fists to get his point across.

Perhaps the harsh realities of survival on the ground only revealed people's true nature to its deepest core. Jasper and Finn had been kind souls. Their spirits too soft, too weak in a way, to face the terrors of the ground. And it broke them irreparably.

Hannah, Monty's mom, was the same. If it wasn't for Monty's extreme intervention, after he had overhead bits and pieces of Pike's plans and his mother's potential involvement, she'd probably be in this very cell too. He didn't hear enough to fully understand what it was they were up to, but enough to recognize his mother was not herself. He had drugged her as she was getting ready to leave with them on their nocturnal raid. He had imprisoned her in their room, unbeknownst to everyone, trying to get through to her. She'd been under Jackson's care ever since, whose main specialty on the Ark had been psychological therapy. Centuries trapped in a metal, dying, space coffin did things to people's minds and there were always a few doctors like him who treated them.

Miller was another story. She wanted to be surprised, but she really wasn't. Miller had been one of Bellamy's henchmen from the very beginning. It was one thing when you were forced to do terrible things to survive, but it was quite another to enjoy them. Miller and the others followed his every command, but they had also enjoyed terrorizing the other delinquents in their first weeks, bullying them, denying them food, even torturing them into submission. She still remembered their laughter as they held the wrist of several kids over the fire to force them to get their bracelets off. Whatever darkness they had in them was there before the ground.

Then of course there was Bellamy. The one she was most disappointed and conflicted by. He had been the leader of the bullies in the beginning. He had been the only adult among the delinquents, the one with the gun and therefore the power of coercion, and he had decided to use that power to his own advantage, to his own cruel pleasure, to his own whims and selfish interests. But he had also been a brother-in-arms, her second-in-command, once he realized they would only survive if they all worked together. He was protective of those around him, trustworthy and loyal, and had proven he was capable of great sacrifice when he went alone into Mount Weather. Yet his good deeds didn't erase the things he had done, the darkness within him.

She had wanted to believe in him, to see the good in him, to see past his reckless impulsiveness, to overlook his tendency to refuse blame. Maybe she had been wrong to trust him that much and to trust him with her people. Or maybe she should have been a better friend, an actual friend to him, to them all, instead of limiting her exchanges with them to attack plans, ammunition counts and perimeter watches. Maybe she should have stayed and been there for him, for Jasper, for the remaining hundred. Clarke didn't know anymore.

You are not in charge now and that's a good thing because people die when you're in charge!

You left me. You left everyone.

His words. His accusations to her. In a single breath, he had blamed her if she did, and blamed her if she didn't. Deaths were her fault when she was there and deaths were her fault for not being there to tell them otherwise.

They were looking at each other now from across the cell, Bellamy glaring at her.

"If it's forgiveness you need...I can't give it to you. I doubt you can even forgive yourself, but I hope you at least realize what you did. That you're sorry for what you did," she said evenly.

"Fuck you, Clarke."
That was perhaps the true nature of Bellamy Blake. Arrogant, quick to lash out and incapable of self-accountability. But also capable of selfless love, at least when it came to his sister and to those he let in. Most crucially, however, he was lacking a moral compass unless it was provided to him by his mother, by Octavia, by Kane, by Pike, by Clarke herself. And that made him an incredibly dangerous person. One that wasn't compatible with the home they all wanted to build in this new, wild world.

"Goodbye Bellamy," she uttered sadly, as she left.

Octavia stayed behind and would stay by his side to the very end.

The sun beat with inclement force on the dusty square where the 26 tree posts had been erected, one more left there as warning to anyone who dared to mercy-kill any of the prisoners. The first days of summer were fast approaching and the air felt thicker, buzzing with life, quite a contrast with what was about to happen.

The mood in Polis was off-kilter. On one hand, the news that Heda was entering the Gon Ogeda with Wanheda had filled the streets with bewildered excitement. A Gon Ogeda union was so rare, few had witnessed one in their lifetime. The union of a Heda was absolutely unheard of and challenged what they had always been told about their Commanders. It was even more puzzling given the stoic and reserved nature of their present Heda Lexa who, it was said, had kept her bed empty for years and years. And not for a lack of willing bodies. Lexa kom Trikru left sighing admirers everywhere she went, a few bold enough to even make their interest discreetly and respectfully known, but she always declined.

Some others not so discreetly, like the magnificent twins the Shallow Valley clan had sent to the harvest festival games the year before. They were magnificent in their beauty and in their skills. Their clan was one of the best in hand-to-hand combat and the use of short blades, and the twins had been some of the very best the games had seen. Early on, as soon as Heda had welcomed the warriors and opened the games, the sister and brother had been taken by her. They had playfully pledged to the audience to win the games for the affections of their Heda. The crowds had never been bigger ever since. When they both stood victorious at the center of the arena, their muscles glistening under the sun, everyone had cheered wildly and expectantly. Yet, the always serious Heda had been diplomatic in turning them down much to their disappointment, but as a consolation prize had offered to fight them. Together. At the same time. They both ended up on the dusty floor, bloodied and grinning. They had been summarily beaten, but just fighting with the legendary Heda Lexa was the greatest honor for a warrior and enough of a reward to soothe their broken hearts and prides.

Despite this, rumors had been wildly circulating for months about the fiery sky girl who wielded death with her hands but had also captured Heda eyes and, many said, her bedsheets. Many clans revered Lexa for all she had accomplished, but in Polis where more common people than soldiers lived and where they saw Lexa most of the time, they loved their young and lonely Commander and welcomed the idea of a union. If that meant also keeping the unpredictable sky lioness in check, even better.
On the other hand, an execution no matter how righteous, was never an occasion to be celebrated. They could demand justice fervently, but once it was granted, the execution itself was regarded as a somber event.

Faced with the news of their Heda's stein op and the execution of so many Skaikru on the same day was therefore puzzling and had many Polis citizens unsure of how to feel. Nevertheless, they gathered in droves around the square.

All the ambassadors, chieftains, leaders and Lexa were assembled to one side of the square, standing in silence. Clarke, Abby, Kane and the rest were also gathered there, waiting with grave faces.

The prisoners were finally brought out, Octavia trailing behind Bellamy and Jasper. One by one they were tied to each post, their ropes tested and secured. As this was being done, Lexa came to stand silently beside an increasingly distressed Clarke. She said nothing, but the gesture did not go unnoticed by Clarke.

In the silence of the crowds, Lexa finally spoke.

"Oso hit choda op deyon, kom tona gou fou nau, hashta ai op hef na wan op. Tona hef wan op," she said with solemnity.
(We come together today, as we have countless times before, to watch a man die. Many men die.)

"Emo kripon kom Skaikru na ste gada in kom dison natrona."
(The crimes of the Sky people will be answered by these traitors.)

She then looked at the prisoners, addressing them directly.

"Kom natromanes gon yu Heda en yu kru, yu nau na teik in Wamplei kom Thauz Kodon."
(For treason against your Commander and your people, you will now suffer Death by a Thousand Cuts.)

Her address was short and to the point. She then signaled to Titus who handed a simple blade to Abby. This was a task Abby could not delegate or pass on to Kane or anyone else. As the Chancellor, she needed to set the example and show her compliance with grounder laws, but it was also a punishment for her, to cut into her own people. This was failure under her watch.

Clarke could only imagine the agony Abby faced at this moment. She had taken an oath as a doctor to do no harm, to give life, not to take it. But Abby was also a leader now and that meant hard, grim sacrifices. She would learn that lesson more than ever today.

She advanced towards Pike, the one of the first post, hand trembling.

"You have disgraced us all, Charles."

"You're weak. You'll be all dead soon," he answered venomously.

"I failed them by not stopping you, but I will never fail them again," she answered with resolution coloring her shaking voice.

She ran the blade along the skin of his hip.

She cut every single one in the same place. Abby, whose nature was incapable of willful cruelty,
Abby the surgeon, chose the place where she knew they would feel less pain, the fatty deposits of the hip where fewer nervous endings existed. It was the only small grace she could grant them.

She had managed to keep the tears from spilling until she reached Jasper, the last on the long row of death.

"I'm so sorry, honey," she said to the lost, broken boy. "I'm so sorry," she repeated with a watery voice, as she dragged the trembling blade across his side.

Kane had been handed another blade and had begun his own pilgrimage of cutting right after Abby. On the Ark, Kane had carried out countless executions. He stood there as a guard pushed a small button to open the airlock and watched as the vacuum sucked them out, freezing them almost instantly, watching as their lifeless body floated away into the dark nothingness of space.

This was entirely different. He felt as the warm blood covered his fingers after every cut, felt their faint pulse as the blade was caught in their flesh, heard the gasp of pain from the lips at less than arm's-length from him. For the first time, he fully understood the cost of justice on the ground for both sides, the responsibility and weight it bore down on them by insisting each hand in the clan carry it out.

The only consolation he could provide them and himself was to bid them farewell in the Sky people's custom. His calm voice started reciting a line of the Traveler's Blessings in front of each prisoner, as his unwavering hand cut them. Then he would start the blessing all over again.

Clarke was the third in line. She said nothing, listening only to Kane's quiet voice in the air.

"In peace, may you leave this shore..."

Pike was staring at her with disgust. "Who would've thought my very best student would end up whoring herself to the enemy," he jeered.

Before she could even respond, Ryder appeared in front of him and punched him with full force with his massive first. Clarke heard the unmistakable crack of broken teeth and bone.

"You will mind your tongue and respect Heda's hafon or I'll cut it out of you, natrona!" he berated him furiously.

Kane had momentarily stopped. Everyone looked on with bated breath.

Clarke didn't even want to give him the satisfaction of reacting to his hateful vitriol. She sank the blade deep into his hand tied above his head and said nothing.

"In love, may you find the next..." Kane's voice resumed once more in the distance.

She looked them all directly in the eye as she cut them each, sinking the blade into their hand. Silent and unflinching, memorizing each of their faces.

"Safe passage on your travels..."
Miller looked at her defiantly. She raised her blade, only speaking then.

"For the deaths brought by your hand," she croaked as she plunged the knife into his palm.

"Until our final journey to the ground..."

Bellamy. He stared at her with contempt but also with a hint of fear.

"What? No final words for me, princess?" he asked sardonically.

She shook her head. She had said her piece to him already. She took no pleasure in feeling the blade cut through his hand, to hear his pained grunt.

She was about to walk to the next when he spoke up again.

"Wait. Clarke!"

She stopped and looked at him.

"Take care of my sister, Clarke. Take care of her for me."

"In case you haven't noticed, Bell, she can take care of herself."

"Clarke, please promise me. Promise you'll keep an eye on O. Please!" he begged, his voice breaking.

"I promise," she acquiesced in a small voice.

Bellamy sighed with relief, letting his head fall against the pole, eyes raised to the sky, looking up to his old home.

"May we meet again..."

Jasper stood shaking before her. She tried to be gentle with him, keeping the wound as superficial as possible. She smiled with tears in her eyes as she saw the goggles on his head.

"May we meet again," she whispered to him shakily.

She then walked back to where the others were gathered, going to stand next to Lexa. They exchanged a long look, before fixing their gazes back on the prisoners.

A queue of people had formed to take their turns. The first ones after her had been the families of the slain peacekeepers. Other Trikru and the ambassadors of every other clan also took their place in the line. To Clarke's surprise, many of the Sky people that had arrived in Polis that day also dotted the queue here and there, while the rest decided to just bare witness to the execution.

After their sentence had been confirmed, Abby and Kane had radioed to Arkadia with the news. The Arkadian council deliberated briefly, half of them in Polis and half of them in Arkadia. Kane and Fuji insisted a large as possible delegation of Sky people had to come to Polis as a gesture of compliance. They had to show they were part of this world now.
No one would be forced to come but, to their surprise, almost 50 sky people volunteered and had
piled into several rovers with grumpy grounder warriors squeezing into the vehicles to guard
them, per Lexa's orders. Arkadia and all Arkadians were under guard until the sentences were
carried out to the end.

On their way to Polis, they had watched from the windows of the rovers the bloodied field still
strewn with the slain peacekeepers.

Some of the original delinquents had come. Harper, Monty and Mel, the girl Bellamy and Murphy
had saved from the cliff at the Factory Station crash site. Bryan, a Farm Station guard who had
refused to go with Pike's plans, was also there to see the last of his people go.

Sergeant Miller, Nathan Miller's father, had also come and with him, a small contingent of the
Arkadian guard.

There was never any jeering or sneers from the crowd during the whole ordeal. They muttered the
name of their fallen brother or spouse when they took their turn cutting then returned to the crowd
quietly, solemnly.

It went on for hours and well into the night. What had started with muffled grunts of pain had
eventually escalated to wails and screams of pain from the prisoners, as the wounds accumulated
and swelled their bloodied bodies. Jasper had been braver that Clarke anticipated. He screamed at
every cut but it was only after about four hours that she saw him discreetly chew the pill Monty
had made for him, meant to be hidden in the hallow 'spy' molar he had once drilled into himself as
a drunken game. A pill Raven had managed to conceal inside the straps of his goggles.

Monty had assured Clarke it would be undetectable. It was a potent anesthetic that would numb
him and eventually make him pass out in a stupor. If they were lucky, it would make him go into
cardiac arrest. Clarke had learned some people, especially those not trained as warriors, would faint
from the shock of the pain, some even died from the stress of the torture a few hours in. She hoped
no suspicion would be raised if he did.

Half an hour later, she saw his body slowly go limp, his screams reduced to small grunts every time
a blade would strike him. It took another half hour for him to finally go still. Deathly still. Clarke
contained a sob at the back of her throat.

The others took much longer. So much longer. Pike's body was mangled to an indescribable
degree. They all knew he was the leader of the Sky rebels. When Ryder had taken his turn he had
cut out his tongue as promised, to the Sky people's horror.

Bellamy, Miller, all of them had screamed throughout the day and night. The only other sound
heard were the sobs of the assembled Sky people.

An eternity later, once everyone had taken their turn, it was Lexa's turn to deliver the fatal blow on
those still left alive. 23 in total. A few hours after Jasper, the life of another prisoner had dimmed
from his eyes.

"Yu gonplei ste udon," she said to each as she plunged her sword into their chest. Just before
finishing, with only Bellamy left and a limp Jasper who were the last on the line, a voice was heard.
"Respect, Heda," came Octavia's voice into the night, as she knelt in front of Lexa. "May I...may I request the kill?"

Lexa turned to her with an unreadable face, studying her.

"My brother, my responsibility," she explained with a strangled voice.

"Very well, Octavia kom Skaikru," Lexa nodded after a second, stepping aside.

The brunette approached her brother gingerly. She had been standing there, only watching, keeping her brother's eyes on her as he suffered the drawn out torture.

Ever since his incarceration, she had visited him every day in Arkadia and then on their way to Polis. She had berated him, blamed him, raged on him, asked him how he had done this. They had yelled at each other, given each other the silent treatment, cried with each other. But now was no longer the time for reprimand. This was to be their final goodbye.

"Bell... Bell," she called out to him, lifting his bloodied face up to look at her, tears already streaming down her face.

"O," he said weakly.

"This is it, Bell... it's time," she said between sobs.

He nodded. "I'm glad it's you," he murmured, as she unsheathed her long dagger.

"I'll always be looking over you, little sis."

"May we meet again, big brother," she choked up, as her blade plunged into his chest, the beat of his heart making it pulsate between her hand.

"May we meet again, O," came his last words, as his head slumped on her shoulder.

Abby turned around and hugged Kane, not trying to contain her tears anymore.

Octavia stayed there. She slipped to her knees and sat on the balls of her heels in front of him, weeping silently. She stayed there even when everyone started to leave the square. She stayed until the guards began untying the bodies and placing them in wheeled carts. She stayed there with his body on the ground, his head on her lap, until they had to take him too. She stayed long after sitting in that same spot, ignoring one of the last spring drizzles falling unto her in the darkness. Then she got up and disappeared into the forest.

It was almost midnight when they returned to the tower. Kane had suggested they all gather together in Abby's room, to be with each other on this desolate night.

Clarke entered her room first and went to wash the blood off her hands furiously. She desperately wanted to bathe. She stared at her reflection in the rusty mirror. The line of Lexa's blood had faded with the heat and tears of the day but was still visible on her face. She would have to wait to wash,
so instead she just changed clothes.

She exited and made her way through the corridor. She knocked on the door and went in when she heard a reply.

She had meant to go to Abby's room, but her feet had brought her to Lexa's by their own volition.

Lexa was yet again sitting on her long balcony sofa facing the city. She held a mug of tea in her hands. She too had changed into a thick, long-sleeved robe but still had the line of blood on her face.

Clarke sat next to her and sighed. Lexa said nothing but poured her another mug from a clay pot on the low table.

The taste was bitter, a mix of strong herbs with hint of honey.

"It's a calming brew," she offered.

They sat there for a long time, sipping their tea without talking, only staring at the city below, small fires and torches flickering in the darkened streets.

Clarke felt numb, empty and infinitely sad. There was also a feeling of relief, of finality, the end of this particular cycle of horror she had yet had to face.

On this night like never before, Clarke thought about the nature of her people, of people in general and those who had the responsibility to lead. She thought about what Pike and Bellamy had done with that power, guided by instincts of selfishness and blind hatred. She thought about the Jaspers of the world, easily used by men like them.

She thought about Dante, the seemingly kind president of Mount Weather, who had allowed the macabre draining of grounders for decades while they all dined in pearls and listened to the piano, pretending to be civilized and moral. As long as those they drained and made into monsters 'looked' different, were classified as savages, he had no qualms about it. They were in the end like many of their ancestors who had countless times justified slavery and invasions on 'others' they deemed lesser humans. She thought about Cage and his arrogant belief that the Earth was their birthright alone and that they could take the lives and land they wanted.

Nia. Jaha. Dr. Tsing. Was that the true nature of people?

Clarke thought about her own actions, dread invading her. What if she was the same? Blinded by the belief that her way was right. How many had died because of it? She saw the faces of all her friends blaming her, berating her, scolding her and judging her every decision. Maybe they were right.

People die when you're in charge!

This is all your fault.

Why do you get to decide who lives and who dies?

Their blood is on your hands. And I'm afraid you won't be able to wash it off this time.
"What if I'm like them?" she murmured.

Lexa turned to look at her with a frown.

"What if I'm just like them? Blind and convinced it's what's right, while I destroy everything?"

Her voice was anguished and distressed. Lexa turned to her fully. She looked at Clarke, her gaze flitting between her eyes.

"Clarke, you are the very opposite of them," she exclaimed earnestly. "They do not care about the lives they take, the lives they sacrifice to get what they want. You... you feel every loss, every death with your entire heart. Should people have a leader who gives no weight to their lives and those of others, who is indifferent to their deaths? Or a leader who gives every life the utmost importance, who would go to the ends of the Earth to save every single one of them?

"48 of your friends were trapped inside of the Mountain and you came back with the armies of the entire Coalition to save them. Even after I left you, you brought the Mountain down alone and saved them all."

"That's what makes you different from any leader I have ever known. How much you care and how much you fight for each one of them. That's why there is such greatness in you, Clarke," Lexa declared passionately.

Clarke eyes had filled with tears hearing Lexa's words about her. Even at their worst moments, even when they disagreed and challenged each other, since the very beginning Lexa had always been a stark contrast to the harsh judgment Clarke received from everyone else.

"How do you do that?" Clarke asked with quiet incredulity.

"Do what?"

"See good where others only find fault?"

At that, Lexa gave her a small smile.

"Because I see you too," she replied, echoing back Clarke's words to her the night before.

The emotions that Lexa provoked in Clarke were overwhelming. They burned and soothed her all at once. Because of how she saw Clarke in a way no one else did. Because of the clashing feelings she had for the Commander: an almost addictive magnetic pull on one hand and the still lingering furious resentment on the other. And because of the Commander herself. The most fascinating and puzzling creature Clarke had ever met, whose true nature seemed to contradict every preconception about her. Lexa, the great Commander of 12 armies, whose measure of a person was their desire for peace, whose measure of Clarke was the strength of her heart. Lexa, who stood as the single most powerful person on their known corner of the Earth and asked not a single thing for herself, who wielded that power for the well-being of her people and was willing to sacrifice even the last shred of herself for them.

Clarke might not yet know if she was the leader Lexa saw in her, but she was certain of one thing that day. That Lexa was. In the depths of the wild, raw power and sometimes ruthless rationality of Lexa's mind, what ruled supreme in her heart was something undeniably good and selflessly
beautiful. That was Lexa's true nature. This lonely, brave sphinx of a woman was a rare spirit, an enigma Clarke found herself wanting to unravel more than anything she had ever wanted to before.

However, at this moment it was all too much for Clarke. Her own swirling emotions, the intense sincerity in Lexa eyes, the traumatizing events of the afternoon, the life-altering decision of the morning. It was all too much. She felt she would crumble and be swallowed under the magnitude of it all.

So she broke their eye contact and turned to stare out once more over the city.

"What's going to happen tomorrow at dawn?"

"The second marking. Someone will come to mark our skin with ink," Lexa said. "Do not worry, it will be just us. There is no... ceremony. And then we can finally wash."

Clarke just chuckled. They remained quiet for another long beat, drinking the warm, spicy brew.

"Can I stay here for a little longer? I don't want to..." she trailed off.

"Rest, Clarke. If your dreams should haunt you, I'll be here," Lexa replied, reading the fear in Clarke's face. She knew them all too well.

"Do they ever go away? The ghosts in the dreams?"

"No," Lexa answered sadly, "but it gets easier to chase them away... with time."

After a while, Clarke set her mug on the table and slipped further down on the couch, getting more comfortable. Before long, she had drifted to sleep. Before long, the screams, the bloodied faces came. Before long, she jumped awake like every night. But this time, Lexa's warm hand grabbed hers to calm her down.

"It's ok. You're safe. I'm here," she said softly.

Clarke erratic heart beats slowed down, the mist of her nightmares dissolving quicker than usual, Lexa's hand grounding her to reality.

Neither made a move to let go. Instead, Clarke lightly squeezed her hand in a wordless thank you.

They remained hand in hand until Clarke dozed off. She woke up two more times and every time, she would find Lexa's hand still in hers, watching over her awake, ready with soft murmurs of reassurance. The third and last time she woke up, Lexa herself had finally succumbed to sleep but had kept holding on to Clarke's hand.

Clarke studied Lexa's beautiful but tired face, looked at their clasped hands and thought to herself that even if the idea of the union might still seem a bit outrageous, it was worth it if only to have Lexa's hand anchoring her down in this mad world and keeping the horrors of her sleep at bay. It was worth it if only to keep discovering the infinite universes that lived in Lexa's soul.

And for the first time since arriving on the ground, in fact, for the first time since she had been imprisoned in a box on the Ark, for the first time in a year and a half, Clarke was not dreading the next day. She was looking forward to it.

She looked at Lexa once more and whispered into the night, before sleep claimed her again:
"I'm here too."

Chapter End Notes

TRIGEDASLENG:
Badannes: allegiance, loyalty, service
Blinka: eye
-de: the
Givnes: gift, giving, sacrifice
Glong op: joining, join with
Gonasleng: English (from: gunner slang)
Gon Ogeda: union (from: come together)
Natrona: traitor
Raitnes: justice (from: rightness)
Ai na sin yu in. Yu na ge sin in: I will witness you. You will be witnessed.
Yo don ge sin in: You have been witnessed.

MADE-UP TRIG:
Bagon: lover, bed partner (derived from trig word bag: bed)
Hafon(s): half one, halves
Stein op: to mark, the marking (from: stain)
WanNatrona: death of the traitor

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Miller is not gay in this fic (no BYG here), so no Briller. Bryan is though. Maybe he'll find a bf! ;)
The speech at the execution is a modified version of Lexa's speech at Emerson's almost execution. I kinda wanted to use some of the canon and how Lexa chooses to verbalize things... also she sounds hot af in trig, LOL. Here's the vid of it (min. 1:34)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oS0mYijXLsw
Don't worry! It's not the last we see of Octavia.
I'm trying to figure out how to put trig translations (in the text or at the end). I did a bit of both here.
I left tiny clues about where Polis is located, but it will be revealed soon.

Anyways, another long chapter that finishes setting-up the canon divergence. Next chapter will finally begin to tell the core of the story: lots of clexa getting to know each other, angsty pinning and thirst as they beginning the trials of their three month engagement period, grounder style!;

http://girl-with-a-quill.tumblr.com/
What We Dream Of

Chapter Notes

This chapter caused me so much writer's block! I might rewrite it at some point hehe...

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Clarke wakes up the next day when dawn is barely seeping its milky light into the darkened skies, slowly yawning the first pale sunrays over the horizon. She slept slouched on the sofa outside Lexa’s balcony, their hands still loosely intertwined, Clarke notices immediately but doesn’t move to extricate it yet. Instead, she takes in Lexa’s sleeping form in the quiet of the morning. Before she can let her mind wander on the genetic wonders of her cheekbones, Lexa’s eyes open suddenly and fully alert. And that’s when she hears it. The knock on the door. It’s the sound that had originally woken her up, she realizes. She watches Lexa’s eyes instantly scan her surroundings in a trained manner and wonders almost sadly if the Commander is ever truly at ease, if her mind ever rests, even here inside the walls of her own room.

“I’ll get it,” she whispers with a voice still raspy with sleep, disentangling her hand from Lexa’s and making her way to the door.

Clarke congratulates herself inwardly when she doesn’t physically jump even if her heart does when she opens the door to an eerie figure standing outside. A cloaked man with designs covering his face awaits. She knew someone was coming to mark them, but only relaxes when she sees Sybil over his shoulder, standing a few paces behind, a small smile on her lips.

The man simply inclines his head to her in respect, before she signals him to come in. Sybil however sits back down and doesn’t make a move to enter with him. She stays outside waiting.

Lexa soundlessly appears next to her beside the door.

“Clarke, this is the memom masta. The master of symbols of Polis. Masta. Wanheda,” she says as way of introduction, using their formal titles rather than their names.

The man only nods his head once more.

“He will speak to us separately before. Then will mark us together,” she explains to Clarke. “I will be in my study.”

When she sees Clarke open her mouth to ask for more explanation, she reassuringly offers more.

“He’s… an interpreter.”

At Clarke’s quirked eyebrow, she adds, “He interprets signs… people…,” then pauses, hesitating briefly. She’s knows Clarke well enough to know she doesn’t believe in these things. “… the nature of their spirit unseen to the naked eye. He marks them so that they can see it. He will design our union mark.”

Clarke frowns in puzzlement.

“It will only be a few questions.”

Clarke wants to ask more about the ritual, but doesn’t when she sees the man’s solemn and
unsettling painted face.

Lexa leaves the room through a small door she had failed to noticed till now on the left side of the bedroom.

The man signals Clarke to take a seat and gets busy unfolding a battered tin box wrapped in a leather roll. He sits at a distance, at one of Lexa’s small tables. Inside he fetches some pieces of parchment, black ink bottles, an assortment of serrated needles mounted on long wooden sticks, and what looks like a heavy but small, hammer-shaped mallet.

The next fifteen minutes are bewildering to Clarke. The man asks her the strangest and most random questions she could have possibly imagined, while he simply assents when she answers and occasionally scribbles on a piece of parchment with a thin charcoal stick.

Clarke knows the grounders have beliefs she has yet to fully understand most of the time, but still. Who would ask things like “Did you see Heda’s spirit animal the first time you met? What was it?”

“A panther,” she had answered swiftly without hesitating. She hadn’t missed the way his hand halted midair, hovering above the parchment. His face however didn’t betray a thing, as disciplined in the art of masking his expressions as Lexa. More so even.

She hadn’t missed her own lack of hesitation at answering such a harebrained question either. She distractedly thought about this as he asked her if she had heard this somewhere or if it was what she saw.

“It’s just obvious,” she had faintly jested, half joking and amused at the seriousness of it all.

Yet it was. It was the first thing that came to her mind the first time she had seen Lexa, when those striking emerald eyes had lifted and focused their piercing attention on her, shining with danger from her black face paint. When she had gotten up from her throne, she had sauntered like a feline stalking its prey, slowly, gracefully but lethally. She had gotten into Clarke’s personal space and Clarke had struggled to keep her thoughts straight in every sense of the word. She was there to negotiate a ceasefire for her people, to offer a deal save them all, and yet when Lexa had bared her teeth and asked Clarke to prove it and to show her Lincoln, she could barely blink under the Commander’s intense stare, like a deer caught in the headlight, battling with the instinct to both flee and offer her neck to her predator at the same time. It took her an inordinate amount of time and willpower to make her mouth and brain break away from her trance-like spell.

The odd, senseless questioning had continued. “What was the first words to each other?” She had noticed his hand pause once more at her answer, but had resumed with the scribbling a few seconds later.

“What would you give for her?” “What was your last dream about?” “What lies beyond the horizon?”

On and on it went. She had thought briefly on answering with sarcasm, but the truth was that even if she didn’t understand it, she did respect their beliefs. Who was to say what was true? What was right? The world had turned out to be so different from what she had once thought it would be like. She herself had become unrecognizable to her old self. He had also told her at the beginning that her words would only ever be for his ears. So she had answered truthfully and it had been oddly therapeutic.
He had thanked her and told her to come back once he was done with the Commander. She waited in the study for about another fifteen minutes while he was presumably interrogating Lexa in the same manner.

When she came back, he instructed her to lie facing down on a thatched mat rolled on the floor with a thin, long cushion at one end. The inks and wood-mounted needles were lined up at its edge. The curtains of the room had been drawn closed and more candles lit. A shelled plate with burning herbs was set near the mat and was giving off a thick, heavy, bluish stream of smoke, filling up the room with a musky, earthy, dizzying smell.

Clarke lay down as instructed and was slightly startled when Lexa did the same and stretched next to her, laying her head on her crossed arms over the cushion, her face turned to her, but not before lifting her hair away from her neck. Clarke imitated her movement and brushed her hair aside, then set her head facing her too, nervously holding her gaze. Their bodies were not touching but they were close, so very close, Clarke could see the tiny freckles peppered over the bridge of Lexa’s nose and just below her eyes.

The man kneeled in front of their heads and picked up his tools. After a few deep breaths, like a free diver expanding his lungs before plunging into the dark waters, he started to make the most unsettling noise. To Clarke it sounded like it was coming from the depth of his throat and stomach. It was a deep, vibrating noise unlike anything she had heard. From the recesses of her memory, her unconscious brain flashed the image of saffron-robed monks chanting, a glimpse of something she had seen on the Ark’s digital banks as an infant. After a few seconds, she realized the sounds contained words, even if they were distorted by the droning incantation. They were too warped and her own handle of trigesdasleng too poor to make them out.

“Weron keryon kik raun, stein op den ai na sin em in,” Lexa spoke, “where the soul lives,” she translated, just as the ink-laden needle was placed on the back of her neck, right where the dot of blood had been placed by Titus the day before, and the mallet struck the head of the wooden stick. It tapped quickly several times then lifted just a fraction to the side to continue the drawing, repeating the motion. Lexa didn’t even flinch. “Where the soul lives,” she repeated, “marked so the eye can see it.”

The man continued his chant repeating the same verse. However, Lexa went ahead, knowing the words by heart, even if they were almost never heard by anyone.

“Tu ringa teina, memom-de tu keryon gon ogeda,” she anticipated. “Two circles entwined, the symbol of two souls come together.”

Just as she did, the man started the new verse with the words the Commander had just preempted. Once he started croaking out the words, however, Heda’s face flashed with surprise and concealed alarm.

“Masta?” she asked with a confused, quiet voice.

He did not heed her call, either too caught up in his chanting trance or not bothering to answer.

He had changed the words. This is perhaps what she had been fearing all along. They could fool the people, but not the spirits. Her stomach lurched with worry and perplexity.

“Hey,” Clarke whispered, bringing Lexa’s eyes to focus back on her. She had seen the knotted brow, the bewildered, agitated eyes.
Lexa looked at her again. She swallowed thickly, still worried but feeling the concern lessening in the company of Clarke’s blue gaze.

The man chose that moment to switch sides and brought the needle down on Clarke’s exposed neck. Constantly switching between the betrothed was a part of the ritual of tattooing them at the same time. No stencil, no previous drawing on their skin to guide him. He did it in fluid motions in his hypnotized-like state. Clarke herself was starting to feel like she was in a daze, with the dim lights, the heady incense, the reverberating chant and, above all, Lexa’s eyes and overall presence so close to her. It made her feel almost drunk.

Even so, the first prick of the needle made her hiss in pain. Just as quickly, Lexa’s hand came from under her crossed arms and was placed between them, palm up, in a wordless invitation.

Clarke took it and placed her hand in Lexa’s without breaking their eye contact. She continued feeling the needles breaking her skin, but the warmth from Lexa’s long, slender, soft fingers soothed the pain somehow. Or maybe it was the increasing intoxication she felt staring into her eyes uninterrupted, not averting away from their magnetizing pull as she always used to do.

She felt like she was standing over the edge a cliff, wanting to plunge head in, feeling Lexa’s eyes stare into every corner of her being. Into the abyss created between their connected gaze, she could see their shared hurt. Her own seething anger reflected back at her. The bleeding sorrow at her betrayal. Lexa’s aching solitude. Her unmovable determination as Heda. Her ruthlessness. Her bewildering and contradicting tenderness. Lexa’s painful regret. It was like an entire conversation was being had between them.

Clarke had never imagined how hard and how overwhelmingly intimate it was to stare into someone’s eyes for such a long time.

Over an hour went by like this, until the outline of their intricate tattoos was done. The fill-in would be added as the final part of their bonding ritual in three months’ time, he informed them before leaving the room, tools in hand and a bow to his head.

Even though both itched with curiosity to see the tattoo, because of its placement, the only way they could was asking the other to see theirs but neither could bring themselves to. They wouldn’t see it fully until several nights later when an utterly mortifying – in Lexa’s opinion – and forgotten part of the ritual had to be carried out. Only glimpses of it at awkward angles would be caught by Lexa with her hand mirror until then, of the beautiful and intricately patterned thick circle with a head biting the tail of the same single ring on each side: the head of a panther on one side, the head of a lion on the other. It confirmed her dread and confusion at the changed words of the memom masta.

They did not see the man running into Sybil outside either.

She stood up expectantly, waiting.

“Won.”

It was the only word he uttered. Sybil’s eyebrows rose impossibly high on her forehead.

The monk then tilted his head in reverence as a farewell with a solemn ‘Blinka’ from his lips.
Inside, they stood awkwardly, alone in the room again, their eyes cast down, overcome by the intimacy of the last hour.

“Will you join me for morning meal?” Lexa asked almost shyly.

“Ye… yes,” Clarke stuttered, as if she had forgotten how to speak.

Lexa nodded silently and headed toward the bathroom.

Clarke thought she had gone to retrieve something but when after only a few moments she heard the sound of the uneven, sputtering shower – a contraption Clarke had failed to use for many days upon her arrival in Polis, confused about what the copper, banged-up box with jagged holes punched through it was –, and the sigh of relief Lexa made when the water purportedly made contact with her skin, Clarke felt herself turn twenty shades of red.

She quietly made her way out of the room and into her own, internally cursing herself for the images her brain had conjured up for even a second.

She decided to clean herself up too, remembering the day Sonja, one of the girls that would bring her food up and fix her tub with hot water during her first couple of weeks in the capital, had finally broken into a huff and grabbed her wrist, yanking her into the bathroom.

“Wada klin!” she had said angrily, pointing at the unused tub for the 9th day in a row. She had walked to the shower and placed her hand on a small lever, lifting it and lowering it several times like a pump, the water in the copper box gurgling and falling forth. “Wada klin!” she had said again, annoyed, gesturing with her hand under her nose, clearly telling Clarke she smelled.

It’s not like they had showers on the Ark, not with the extreme water rationing they had. They would get small tissues impregnated with antiseptics and once a week they got ‘misted’ with a combo of antibiotic and other pungent chemicals. It would often get pumped into the air vents too, to minimize the possibility of infections and outbreaks.

But it wasn’t until her first encounters with grounders that she realized how differently they smelled. Sure, they weren’t used to bathing and had been running and sweating around in the forest for days, but so had the grounders. It was more than that. They had spent their lives breathing in the stale, metallic-smelling, recycled air, being doused in chemicals. The sky people smelled like toxic disinfectant to anyone else. She remembered how Anya had smeared mud on her, telling her she was leaving her stench everywhere.

It was only as the weeks passed that she noticed it herself, as their bodies took in their new diet, because it wasn’t only the air and the chemicals, it was also what they ate. You are what you eat, she had remembered someone saying once.

On the Ark, Farm Station wasn’t really a farm. Oxygen, water, minerals, their most prized and scarce resources were needed to grow any type of plants, and most fruits and vegetables consumed great amounts of all three. The human body was also wasteful, eliminating a large part of it through digestion. So the station had been designed to grow only a few crops that needed the least water and which combined provided all the nutrition they needed. The labs would synthesize it into
tablets and use the rest, the fiber and other substances, for the many chemicals they needed to keep the Ark running. But it was only when their last carriersonship had finally fallen into definitive disrepair two decades ago, which took the dropships to mine on the Moon for the hydrogen, helium, nickel, iron and nitrates, that they had gone on full rationing, having to live on their reserves.

After that, Farm Station had been limited to only producing three things: nopal cacti, which was packed with vitamins and some proteins, and needed almost no water; a genetically modified version of black-eyed peas for its iron; and desert peppers for its vitamin C and the capsicum which they also used as a source of analgesic and anti-inflammatory medicine. After it was processed into tablets and various powders, some of it was transformed into a tasteless mush they served in the mornings, a few spoonfuls for each. The medical officers had argued that their stomachs still needed to ingest something or it would become a shrunken, vestigial organ, a trait they could not pass on to their descendants if they ever returned to Earth. None of them had eaten anything resembling food, let alone meat, before coming down, contributing to making them the chemically, synthetic smelling beings they were.

The grounders on the other hand were the very opposite. Their hearty diet of meats, fruits, bread, honey and spices made them ooze flavor off their skin, in their sweat, in their breath. It had been inebriating to Clarke at first. It still was. They smelled of earth, of leather, of smoke, and spicy musk. Or in Lexa’s case, of sweet flowers, pines and, as she would later find out, vanilla oil.

All but this last part she had been babbling non-stop to Lexa, she had just realized.

After the shower, she had gone out and found her in her small study, where she learned she took most of her meals.

She had been waiting for Clarke, sat at the small table in the middle reading a book. The room itself was stacked from ceiling to floor in shelves of faded, bristling books of all types. Smaller desks were pushed against the walls, littered with scrolls, maps and candles. Potted flower-plants and a long fur lined sofa against a large window, completed the room. Even with the worn items in it, the room, the shelves, everything was spotless without a speck of dust, much like Lexa’s room.

Lexa had looked up shyly and tight-lipped from her book and had spoken a soft “please join me” before going back to it. She was fresh-faced and changed, but still missing her shoulder guard. She wore only tight, black pants and a long-sleeved back shirt. As soon as Clarke sat, none other than Sonja come in with a large tray of food and drinks. Clarke’s mouth watered at it. Most of it consisted of fruits. Freshly baked bread and a tub of butter, a recent discovery and possibly Clarke’s favorite thing ever. Honey, eggs and thick strips of pink meat sizzled on the plate. Strong, dark tea completed the feast.

She started eating silently, humming with pleasure, still amazed by the variety of tastes and textures of the food on the ground. She discreetly watched Lexa as she ate. The Commander seemed to favor the fruits, she noticed. When she had consumed an inordinate amount of them, she went on to dip pieces of bread into the honey. Clarke wondered if Lexa wasn’t part humming bird with the amount of sugar she ingested with everything she ate. She had apparently been openly staring at her now and Lexa had looked up catching her.

Trying to distract her and break the awkward moment, Clarke had started rambling on about her love for butter, the lack of shower facilities on the Ark, their cactus mush food and the oddly smelling sky people for a good twenty minutes. Luckily, Lexa had seemed fascinated, her book and nervousness long forgotten. She had barely concealed her horror and had interrupted her with a
shocked ‘you had never bathed before?’. Of course, Lexa would focus on that! She had not seemed surprised about the fact they drilled on the Moon, something that puzzled Clarke. She had seemed positively engrossed and bewildered that they had never eaten real food, and had listened intently when Clarke explained how the Ark was run.

Finally, Clarke had ended her rant and silence had befallen them. It was odd how their conversations often flowed at length like this, when they veered away from the underlying tension that always seemed to accompany them. How easy it was to lose themselves into details of things they both found interesting and feed off each other with questions and tangents. And then it was as if they would remember who they were to each other, or who they weren’t, and silence would return as it had now.

Lexa stood and walked until she was facing the window, looking down on Polis, hands folded behind her, mind lost in thoughts.

Clarke had long since finished eating and went to stand next to the Commander. A brief moment passed.

“What do you want now that all is over?” she asked quietly, echoing a conversation that seemed like a million years ago to Clarke, in front of the gates of Mount Weather.

She furrowed her brow and answered sincerely again. “I don’t know.”

This time however she had been looking at Lexa and saw a flash of what looked like disappointment in her eyes. She wanted to explain to Lexa what she meant but she wasn’t sure how. She wasn’t sure why Lexa even looked disappointed. Or maybe she didn’t want to think about it.

“Did you know I was a prisoner on the Ark? Sentenced for treason,” Clarke said in an almost whisper, now looking out the window too. Lexa quirked her eyebrows at Clarke’s sudden turn of conversation and unexpected confession.

“My father was the engineer in charge of keeping the Ark running. He found out the it was dying. It was a miracle we were even still up there after four centuries. The Architect, our founder, designed the stations to be self-sustaining. They didn’t need to be re-supplied on Earth. They produced their own parts and repairs, drilled for materials. But they were the first generation of their kind, a prototype, a test.”

She smiled sadly at the memory of her father gushing about the Architect, his personal hero, every chance he got.

“This first generation wasn’t supposed to last that long, but then the bombs happened. We lasted for so long we could, biding our time until Earth could be habitable again. My father and I wanted to tell everybody what was happening. Instead, Jaha found out. They floated my father and they imprisoned me as a traitor, put me in a box.”

“We barely had any resources left, so every offense was punishable by death. If you were a minor, you would go to prison until you were 18 when they reviewed your case. If it had been a truly small offense, maybe they would reconsider, but most time they would float you, especially the last years when things had gotten worse.”

Clarke paused and looked at Lexa.
“I was in for treason, Lexa. Had been imprisoned a year and eleven months. I knew Jaha would never grant me mercy. Every day was one day closer to my execution. Every day was one less day I had. I only had a month left when we were suddenly sent to the ground. Even before prison, I was just… waiting. We were a means to an end. We would never see Earth. We lived so our descendants might one day. We worked only doing things to keep the Ark running. And every day since I landed I have been running for my life, only thinking about surviving the next few hours. I’ve never… I’ve never had a chance to want a tomorrow, to think about who I would be if I had one,” she finished, a knot in her throat, hoping Lexa understood why she had answered the same way on both occasions when Lexa asked her what she wanted.

The softness in the Commander’s eyes told her she did. Somehow, she did.

“Even a man awaiting his death, dreams. Even if it’s the impossible,” Lexa said softly, a question in her tone. “Did you dream, in your box?”

Clarke chuckled humorlessly.

“I dreamt of the ground,” she said with a hint of irony. “To feel the sun on my face, to breathe real air, see trees all around me, the scent of wildflowers on a breeze,” Clarke said wistfully.

Sadly, Clarke hadn’t. Not really. The moment Bellamy had stepped out waving his gun and making his bully militia terrorize everyone, or when a spear had hurtled into Jaspers chest, what contemplation of the ground she had dreamt to make had vanished. Even in her three months of wandering, Clarke had kept her gaze stuck to the ground, filling her days with tracking animals and hunting with awfully poor results. But it helped distract and exhaust her to the bone. Anything so she wouldn’t have to remember the Mountain, so that green eyes didn’t haunt her.

Yet those green eyes were looking at her now, big, beautiful, infinitely expressive eyes, patiently waiting for her to finish her thoughts.

“It’s hard to appreciate the view when you’re constantly being hunted down,” Clarke shrugged, not wanting to go into further detail. Not when a lot of the hunting had been done by Lexa’s people and vice versa.

Lexa looked at her pensively.

“The hearings and the Council will convene shortly, but will you come with me somewhere this afternoon? As part of the Givnes-de.

“Givnes-de?” Clarke asked.

“We have started the first trial, Clarke. Givnes-de, the first month of Gon Ogeda.”

“Please tell me that doesn’t entail me having to wrestle a bear or that you have to fight my mother to the death, or something?” Clarke asked half-jokingly, half weary of grounder customs.

“Well, not a very big bear,” Lexa mused.

Clarke lifted her head only to find an amused half-smirk on the Commander’s lips.

Lexa’s humor never stopped being unexpected to Clarke, yet a small smile also made its way on her face.

“We give each other something every day for the next month. Givnes-de. The Giving,” she explained.
“Gifts?” Clarke asked incredulously. “That’s the trial?!” she nearly shrieked, thinking the Commander was really pulling one over her again. Surely these strong, burly, wild grounders didn’t do such innocuous things. Surely?!

Lexa only nodded in confirmation, a hint of mirth in her eyes.

“Like what?” Clarke wondered confusedly.

“Only what you wish to give, Clarke,” Lexa answered simply.

For someone who was exceptionally eloquent like Lexa, at times she could also be infuriatingly sparse and cryptic with her words.

She walked away from the window to where her coat and shoulder guard were thrown on the sofa and started to put them on. She turned around to Clarke again, now fully clad as Heda.

“The hearings are about to start. You are always welcome but not required to join. The Council, on the other hand, begins at high morning right after and all Ambassadors present in the city are always expected to attend,” she explained.

“The hearings?” Clarke asked following Lexa out of the study and down the corridor.

“Public hearings. Any citizen of the Coalition can come to put forth a request or a grievance, or seek guidance from Heda,” Lexa explained.

“What about their own leaders? Why not go to them?”

“They do but most disputes are settled by the jusa. Sadly, we do not have many and the jusa of the northeast died in the bombing of TonDC,” she swallowed gloomily, before adding. “People from Blue Cliff, the Shadow Valley clan and south of Azgeda now have to come all the way to Polis.”

“Why was he in TonDC?”

“It was the middle point to their three border towns, closer to them than Polis.”

“So people come here when they do not agree with their local justice, to ask Heda for another ruling?” Clarke tried, processing the intricacies of grounder politics.

“Sometimes. Sometimes all they seek is counsel, guidance, aid,” Lexa said. “Whatever they wish to ask of the Heda.”

Clarke was about to ask another question when she realized that she had inadvertently followed Lexa into her room. She had thought they were going to the great hall and had simply, mechanically followed Lexa.

Once more Clarke was left standing in the room awkwardly. She stuttered and excused herself, telling Lexa she would see her later. She didn’t see the small smirk on Heda’s lips at her hasty retreat.
A few minutes later Clarke entered the throne room. It was already full and Lexa was there talking
to Titus and the head of the scouts. When she saw Clarke, she approached her in that way she had
of getting into her space and that Clarke still didn’t realize she was half responsible for, always
stepping into her as well. She was close enough she could see each eyelash, smell the mint on her
breath, making Clarke realize just what the Commander had returned to her room for. She
would’ve chuckled at the thought if she hadn’t been distracted by the woman herself.

“I’m glad you came,” Lexa said, as if they hadn’t just seen each other five minutes ago. Clarke just
nodded in acknowledgment. They stayed like this a few seconds too long, unaware of the eyes on
them, until Titus called the hearing into order.

The hearings were quite a thing to behold for Clarke. On the Ark, government was a something its
residents seldom had any access to. Each group on the Ark elected a councilperson and just hoped
against the odds they would defend their interests, but without having any sort of glimpse into the
inner workings or deliberations of the council, or any way to remove them or demand
accountability. Protests while not illegal were swiftly and harshly cracked down on, as Clarke had
more than once witnessed, having been at the end of a shocklash baton for instigating them herself.

The first time had been over the rationing of nutrition tablets which had been imposed only on the
workers, a punishment for their failure to fix one of the oxygenators on Alpha station quickly
enough. The engineers at the head of the repairs, her dad included, had not been punished however
in one of the council’s more overt but customary and elitist double standards, and had led Clarke to
stage a protest with a few other kids in front of Jaha’s quarters. Being a Griffin sometimes had its
privileges, but this did not extend to mercy from the guard. She was given 5 lashes.

It didn’t deter Clarke from protesting Jaha’s questionable decisions every time she could, often by
herself but usually supported by her parents and by Abby’s attempts at swaying the council’s
decisions or Jaha’s veto power. Abby was more pragmatic than Jake because, unlike him, she was
faced with the realities of leadership as an elected councilwoman. Nevertheless, like Jake, she
insisted they didn’t have a right to survive and return to the ground, they had to deserve to return,
and she argued they wouldn’t if they kept crossing every moral, ethical line in the sand. Clarke
often wondered if Jaha hadn’t been just waiting for the opportunity to get rid of all the Griffins and
lock her up the minute she slipped up and broke the law. Maybe he would’ve if their families
hadn’t also been bound by a lifelong friendship.

These grounder hearings, however, were so foreign to Clarke. Person after person of all ages,
genders and clans came one after the other. They would bow in front of Lexa and then plead their
case. Often long deliberations were had, Lexa asking questions, considering the issue from several
angles and then would come to a decision. More remarkable perhaps was the notion that anyone
could attend the hearings as a simple onlooker and could offer their opinion if so inclined. It was
bewildering to say the least.

Clarke was still hazy on most trigedasleng, but early on Casio had sat down next to her and had
been translating everything for her. Most were land disputes between villages and not individual
people. Land belonged to the entire village, Casio had told her. Others were concerns over bad
crops and hunting grounds. A sickness that had decimated several villages to the south. Wells.
If Casio was translating correctly, Lexa ‘rulings’ in the majority of cases were worded in such language that they seldom sounded like orders or decisions. She appealed to their common sense, argued for the other’s point of view, suggested alternative joint solutions for both parties, reminded them that a temporary disagreement should not cause a permanent rift between neighbors. It was a mystifying governing style in Clarke’s eyes. One in total contradiction of the Lexa she knew would not hesitate to kick a man off the window of the same room, although she had been told that had been an extremely rare occurrence. She did remember, however, what had been said a few days ago when they had called Heda ‘the mediator’ before she joined the clans into the Coalition. It made Clarke wonder about the Commanders in general and how they had come about. Questions for another day.

In other instances, Lexa asked her advisers in the room about food aid that could be spared for the villages subject to bad crops or hunts, and in return asked them for their help in repairing roads or the failing wells. It was like a perfect dance of give and take Heda carried out. Everyone was helped and made to help in return.

Even a couple of blessings for infants were brought before Lexa. All who wished presented them to Heda at the age of five, Casio explained, pledging them to honor the Commander and sometimes asking for them to be placed in one of Heda’s many orders in the future: the scouts, the army, the sentry, the city hompleinon or hunters, the badanon who served in all sorts of tasks in the tower and around the city.

“Why five?”

“A great many die at childbirth or in their first years. Those who survive past five have greater chance of staying alive,” he said simply, making Clarke’s chest constrict in quiet pain at the harsh realities of her new world.

If Lexa agreed, the scribe who had inscribed the child’s name, clan and village would add the date of when they would be brought back to train under their chosen trademaster, most by the age of twelve. They would be retained only if they were deserving of it, Lexa always reminded them.

Once all who came had been heard, the Council begun with many of the missing Ambassadors joining in. Lexa’s tone become more decisive yet still generally conciliatory in her dealings of clan disputes and official grievances sent by clan leaders, only imposing a decision when the two sides adamantly refused to come to an agreement and her decision usually entailed a trade-off. It was clear she was an extremely cunning politician who acted more like a justice maker than a ruler, and for Clarke it was a fascinating glimpse into Lexa’s mind.

After she dismissed the Council, the Commander set off to train with the sentries and asked Clarke to wait for her at the stables at midafternoon.

At around three, Clarke found the Commander and a small group of six warriors of Lexa’s personal bodyguard, all preparing their horses. One awaited Clarke already and she mounted it grimly, still weary and untalented at riding horses.
They set out on a road to the north of Polis she had never taken, their small group traveling quietly on the narrow but well-kept path, the invisible scouts no doubt ahead and all around them. Clarke still had no idea where they were going but they only took about an hour, their horses going uphill, up the winding path. Finally, they rounded a large curve and dismounted, the warriors setting out in different directions to form a perimeter somewhere, something Clarke had learned on her various trips with them.

Lexa unhooked a satchel from her horse and nodded her head to the side, signaling for Clarke to follow her. They left the path and climbed a soft hill. Once they rounded a cluster of trees, they came upon a clearing of sorts, a small curved plateau high up on the mountains. Clarke’s breath stuttered and was caught in her lungs at the sight before her. A large, beautiful, pine-covered, dramatic mountain range sprawled across the horizon, while the valleyed plateau they stood on had high grass and blue and red wild flowers strewn across it. The sky was glowing orange, casting a fiery light on everything, making all the colors seem more vivid, its setting rays blazing over the mountain edges. It was the most beautiful thing her eyes had ever beheld. It surpassed anything her imagination could have ever conjured.

She turned her head to her side quickly looking for an explanation from Lexa, although she was pretty sure of the reason. Lexa was already looking at her with soft eyes. She raised her hand motioning for the scene in front of them.

“You’re safe here,” she said as way of an explanation.

But she didn’t. She didn’t need to explain. Clarke took it all in. She closed her eyes and felt the sun on her face, breathed real air in, heard the rustle of the trees, smelled the wildflowers in the breeze.

She opened her eyes, tears welling in, overwhelmed. She looked once again at Lexa and corrected herself. This sight, Lexa in this field looking at her with tender eyes, giving Clarke the one thing she had ever dreamed of, was the most beautiful thing Clarke had ever beheld.

This however she would not admit to herself. Not now. Not yet.

They sat on a small mantel Lexa had brought in her satchel and had laid on the grass. A book and a few apples the rest of its contents. Lexa busied herself with her book, sensing Clarke’s need to just sit in silence and contemplate their sights in peace. She drank it in, marveled at all the colors, the way the sun changed them, reflected off them. Her eyes didn’t tire of it. She ran her hands at the edge of the mantle, feeling the grass, pickling a few blue flowers and breathing them in.

She could finally look. Take it in. Unhurried. Safe.

After a while she absent-mindedly reached into her own bag. Pressed between her folded cloak, were a few pieces of parchment she had traded two furs for a few months ago at an outpost, but had never used them. She hadn’t drawn since the Ark. She took it out and fished a small stick of charcoal from the bottom. She began drawing, a far-away look in her eyes and a small smile adorning her face every now and then. Lexa noticed but said nothing.

To Lexa’s own surprise, she had dozed off at some point, her head resting on her satchel, the book she had been reading still in her hand. She startled awake. Clarke came to her and rested her hand on her thigh.

“It’s ok. You’re safe,” she reassured the Commander.
In her rush to come over, she had held on to the drawings she had been making. Lexa eyes went to them and was surprised to see that they didn’t contain the scene in front of them.

Clarke had followed her eyes and tried to keep the nervousness from coloring her voice. She adjusted herself so she sat next to Lexa.

“They’re for you. My… my gift,” she said lamely. After a beat of silence, she added. “This is my dad,” she explained with a tight voice, while pointing to the face of a smiling man that covered most of the first parchment.

His hair was fair and his smile broad, eyes light and kind with a twinkle of mischief in them. He looked so much like Clarke, Lexa thought.

“Jake. His name was Jake.”

“The healer,” Lexa said.

Clarke frowned. “No, my mother is the healer.”

Lexa gave her a small smile and shook her head. “Your mother healed people. Your father healed the Ark,” she clarified. “You are driven to take care of everything, of everyone too. They must be proud to see who you have become, Clarke Griffin of the Sky People,” Lexa said with unwavering certainty.

Clarke swallowed thickly, her eyes glistening with tears for the second time that day. “He would have liked you, you know?” she let out a watery chuckle.

Part of that statement was true. Another part was a distraction, a deflection from the emotions Lexa’s words had on her. It was such a jarring contrast to how people usually viewed Clarke and she still didn’t get used to it.

“He would?” Lexa asked with surprise.

“So much,” Clarke answered in a breath.

And she really thought so, had thought so from early on. Her father would have been fascinated by the young Commander. Jake was a bleeding heart, an idealist, a dreamer, who used to quote historic leaders he admired. He believed in doing the right thing and in seeing the best in people. He might not have seen eye to eye with Lexa on a great many things, but he would have appreciated her straightforward honesty and how deeply she pondered each decision to ensure the needs of the many prevailed.

He was also the biggest nerd known to man and from Clarke’s observation of Lexa, she could see that her constant reading and knowledge about anything and everything surpassed the necessities of her duty, and was the result of a curious, brilliant mind. She could see them having long and winded conversations. She refused to make the parallels, however, about how much Clarke herself was like Jake and had inherited many of his passions, and that it explained why she herself was so intensely drawn to Lexa.

“He would always wake us up every morning by singing very badly and very loudly,” Clarke laughed sadly at the memory of her goofy father, pausing before continuing.

“He wore a watch even though it was pointless up in space. The Ark orbited the Earth several times a day so day and night weren’t relevant, but he said it reminded him it was always time to be kind to someone and that it was never late to do the right thing.”
“He sounds like an honorable man. I would have liked to meet him very much,” Lexa said sincerely with a warm smile.

The next drawing was Jake and Wells being encircled by Abby’s arms, all three sitting on the sofa in the tiny living room of their quarters. “Wells. We were friends since childhood. He died a few days after landing,” Clarke said in a small voice.

The next one was bits and pieces of the Ark, a rough draft of various scenes. The station up in dark space, a mechanic geared up in a zero g-suit, her sky box filled with drawings on the walls and floor.

Clarke wasn’t entirely sure what had moved her to draw these for Lexa. A part of her felt the need to show her what she could of her world the way Lexa had been trying to show her hers. As with so many things though, it seemed she didn’t need to explain. There was that instinctual understanding they had of each other.

“Thank you for sharing it with me, Clarke,” Lexa said quietly, her eyes focused on the images, running her fingers over the drawings.

“I… I didn’t know what to get you. I…”

“You honor me with what you have given,” she reassured, a strange emotion in her eyes.

Clarke blinked and broke their gaze to interrupt the heavy, charged moment.

“What about you? If you hadn’t been called to lead you people, what life would you have wanted?”

Lexa arched an eyebrow in question.

“What about you? If you hadn’t been called to lead you people, what life would you have wanted?”

Lexa arched an eyebrow in question.

“Do you ever wish you could just… I dunno, leave it all behind, go live peacefully and quietly faraway, worried only about growing corn or something,” Clarke joked.

One side of Lexa’s mouth lifted in a small smirk. After a moment of reflection, she shook her head.

“I do not deny it is hard at times, the sacrifices I have made to lead, but… I do not see it as a burden, but as an honor. To serve my people. To have a chance to provide them something better. There is so much more that can be still done,” she trailed off.

And Clarke knew, had always known, that Lexa was born to do this. If ever there was anyone destined for greatness it was Lexa kom Trikru. Not because she deserved to lead, but because the people deserved a leader like her, selfless and visionary. She couldn’t see Lexa being content with having a life where she wasn’t doing something for others instead of just herself. However, she pressed on.

“A wise woman once told me that even a doomed man dreams of the impossible,” she echoed back her words to her. “There must be something you want, that you dream of just for yourself, Lexa?”

Clarke had been twirling a small flower in her fingers, looking down at her hands. She missed the way Lexa looked at her for a long moment longingly, how her eyes roamed her face, stopped at her lips.
“Maybe I do,” she whispered.

The familiarity of those words, of that tone made Clarke lift her eyes, heart speeding up in her chest.

“Heda!” a gruff voice broke into the silence behind them, making Clarke jump. Ryder approached them.

“Word from Polis, Heda. A large trade party has been attacked. 30 dead.”

Lexa had stood up and was now facing Ryder, a sour expression on her face.

“What?” she asked with a steely voice.

“Yujleda,” he replied, then looking at Clarke, corrected himself. “Broadleaf. With the last spring shipment of wheat headed for Polis, Heda. All lost.”

“What was this?”

“Lorens river.”

“Floukru rogues?” Lexa asked, with worried surprise in her face.

“No, Heda. Boat clan was escorting them as usual. The escort was also killed. Only two survived. Escaped swimming. Hefa Luan and the Broadleaf Ambassador have requested an emergency audience.”

“Any indication of who was responsible?”

Ryder only shook his head.

“We ride back at once,” Lexa said and turned to Clarke, an apology on her face.

Clarke only nodded as if to say that an apology wasn’t necessary.

She turned to look back for a second at the mountains and the setting sun. Even if reality had come shocking them back into the turmoil of the ground, she had not remembered a time in the last two years when she had smiled more than in the last few hours.

She had failed to tell Lexa that she only drew things she dreamed of, things that made her happy. She had also failed to realize that in the spur of the moment, the first drawing she had done had been inadvertently mixed between the pages she had given Lexa who was now rolling them up and placing them securely among her things. Before drawing her dad and the rest, her hand had had a mind of its own and had focused on the dozing figure in front of her.

Clarke also failed to realize the word that had been on the tip of Lexa’s tongue before they were interrupted.

You.
TRIGEDASLENG (Some made up):

Badanon: city/public servants (from trig word badannes: service)
Floukru: Boat people
Hefa: clan leader (from: chief/jefa/jefe)
Hompleinon: the hunters order (from trig homplei: hunt)
Jusa: judges, justices (from trig word jus: blood) (and from English word: justice)
Lorens: St. Laurence river, between Canada and the US
Masta: master
Memom: symbol
Wada klin: wash (from water clean)
Won: one
Yujleda: Broadleaf clan

Next chapter: Clarke learns what The Giving/Givnes-de trials are 'really' about. The tattoo kinda gets explained. Also Lexa's endless collection of nightgowns and Clarke's thirst will make a lead appearance haha
What We Give

Chapter Notes

This chapter totally got away from me...and grew to a whopping 25.5K. Sorry? Hopefully it will make up for the long time it took me to update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“So who here can tell me what the Ark’s biggest system is?”

About two dozen pairs of teenage eyes stare back, some bored, some confused, some thinking hard.

“The oxygen system!”

A loud scoff.

“The electrical system, obviously!”

He hears the huff again.

“Waste management,” someone pipes up.

“What kind of literal bullshit?!” the girl who had been scoffing hissed besides the boy who’d said it.

“You obviously know the answer. You can speak up or I can just go on and on,” he whispers cheekily to her. She rolls her eyes.

“Why are you even in this class?” she mutters, but she knows.

They both know why. If he hadn’t signed up with her, she would’ve never come. She would have ended up making up any excuse and ditched it. Even though she had dreamed all her life about this class, even though she knew she was good enough, smart enough to be there, she had grown up to be told she wasn’t worthy enough of being anything else but a lowly worker like her mother.

Both their parents were at the bottom of the Ark hierarchy. Space stations weren’t just filled with fancy scientists, engineers and pilots. Other people had to be brought up to scrub the proverbial grime. Her mother had worked in the smoke room, as they called it, a dark section of air duct tunnels where the air filters were constantly being cleaned and patched up. A thankless job that shot her lungs and had her coughing blood all the time. Her mother had died when she was barely six years old and she had sworn to herself she would never end up like that, even if that was supposed to be her fate. “Once a tunnel rat, always a tunnel rat,” the other kids taunted her, always picking her last for their games.

Except her best friend and now boyfriend. He came from an equally bad background. His parents were part of the janitor crew. His father had died in a work accident, at least that’s what they said, and his mother had followed a few years later working herself to the bone. And yet, he always had an easy smile on his face, with a source of eternal optimism she never really understood. They were each other’s family now. He would see right through her proud bravado and know that’s how she hid her insecurities. Instead of calling her on it, he’d do things like this. Sign up with her to things he knew she wanted but didn’t want to admit to. Say silly things to force her to speak up the answers they both knew she knew. Even though she didn’t say it enough, she loved him. She couldn’t imagine her life without Finn Collins, despite his stupid floppy hair.

”No, I know! It’s the communication system!” he tried again, grinning at her.

“Oh, for god sakes!” she grumbles loudly.
“Do you have another answer?” the tall man with the sandy blond hair who was teaching the class, asked her amused.

“Ark”, she mumbled.

“Come again?” he asked humorously.

“The Ark. It’s the Ark.”

A huge grin slowly spreads on his face, beaming with giddy excitement. It’s the first time any of his students has guessed correctly in his several years teaching this class.

“You are absolutely correct,” he exclaims. The rest of the students look confused, so he continues.

“See, the Ark was designed as one large, complex system, with each of the stations playing a specialized function working together…”

“What? That can’t be. Everyone knows the stations belonged to different countries. They only joined after the bombs,” a lanky kid interrupts, confused.

The man smiles warmly.

“They weren’t supposed to come together so soon, but they were ALL designed as a piece of a whole. This place we all call home is one of mankind’s greatest achievements, the embodiment of a paradigm shift in space history!” he gushed, but the kids scrunch their brows in confusion, so he composed himself.

“See, the founders revolutionized the space program, changing it from scientific exploration to colonization. Before, each spacecraft was a big hunk of metal built to last for one mission, two at best. We used to spend millions on a one-use ship just to collect dirt off planets and ponder about the origins of the universe. Each country doing basically the same. Each ship or station having to produce everything for each crew, just in the name of ‘knowledge’. The only way a real leap in the space program was going to happen was when there was a vested interest from everyone, not just for the geeks like me,” he chuckled.

“You see, it wasn’t until the objective was colonization and even mining that we were thinking about aeronautics and aerospace engineering for the long term. But for that, how do you make a ship to last for decades? Theoretically even forever? Think about it? Instead of using most of the weight limit for supplies like food or water…”

“Dude, we’re in space! Nothing weighs if it wasn’t for our fake gravity,” a blond kid burst out, pleased with himself.

“How do you think it got all off Earth, genius?” the girl scoffs at him. “Do you know how much tetroxide and hydrazine you need to burn off to break from the gravitational pull of the planet and get anything off the surface? Much less with tons of metric cubes of dehydrated mac and cheese!” she jeers.

The teacher looks elated at her.

“If you’re just going for a spin and then coming back with your jars of dirt, you take that mac and cheese,” he resumed chuckling, “but if you’re in it for the long haul, like say, building a Mars base and then colonizing it,” he looks at them as if he’s revealing Santa does really exist, “which is exactly what we were trying to do, then you need stations that are independent from Earth supplies.
Ever wonder why Hydra station is 80% water recycling facilities or do you think India just liked floating into space with a huge amount of water and just a few cabins for 30 astronauts? Or the Brazilians thought it was a fantastic idea to have a huge floating mechanical bay, you know, Mecha where we are right now, to randomly produce and fix machinery? It’s because all 13 stations were built as the first permanent, habitable, multiple generation, self-sustaining, space colonizing joint station system!"

He had achieved the desired effect. The kids were wide-eyed and looked to him with excited, bated breaths.

“So why hadn’t they joined since the beginning?” someone asked.

“Because all stations, the whole thing was a prototype. You have to understand, ships, stations before it, they were extremely inefficient. I mean, they used to use huge solar panels before, for Pete’s sake. Earth was dying long before the bombs, maybe not visibly for everyone, but for enough people. The idea of the Ark, the possibility of having a Plan B sparked a frenzy of innovation. The solar tiles that cover every inch of the Ark that Tesla station produces now and that give us residual energy, they came as a result of that. The food synthesizers, the oxygenators, almost everything that allows us to sustain ourselves was a new technology, most of it thought up by the Architect, one of the founders that designed it all. The new space program, the Ark, it’s subsystems, Mars base, everything,” he enthused, as he usually did when talking about his personal hero.

“As with everything new, it was a huge risk. It had to be tested. We are living in prototypes that were originally designed for a 75-year test run of sorts. There were being tested while they built Mars base, then they’d be overhauled, perfected. Farm Station and Factory station were orbiting near the Moon, drilling into it for the minerals needed for the synthesizers of materials and food, building a reserve. Chandrayaan-8, Hydra today, was on the lunar dark side loading up on the ice deposits for the hydrogen and oxygen.”

“Huh. Chandrayaan-1 was the name of the Indian probe that first found lunar water ice back in 2008,” the girl mused nonchalantly, trying to hide her bursting curiosity.

The teacher smiled widely at her again.

“So, how are we producing more oxygen now that we lost our last Moon driller? I mean, I know we recycle and clean it, and that the biocells on the outside tiles produce small reserves of it through their algea photosynthesis, but it can’t be enough…” she rambled.

His smile faded a bit.

“There are three fail systems to everything on this station. We have the oxygenators (three had gone into disrepair and they were relying on the very last, but it was in good condition and should last, he was sure), the tiles do produce a residual oxygen reserve (it had produced 20-years worth of oxygen but they had been using it up since their driller broke down), and if all else fails, we have the hydrazine you mentioned. We don’t need as much of it since we’re not going down or up anytime soon. We can break it down and get oxygen from it (if Jaha had not stupidly burned more than half of it on a foolish attempt to harvest a passing meteor, when all the scientist on board had rightly calculated it was passing too far off. Jaha insisted, cause it was his ‘destiny’ to save them).

“But… that’s the subject of out next quarter, if you stick around,” he said. He hadn’t missed the girl’s proud pout the first few days and her friend’s obvious attempts at getting her to speak up. He
knew a bright intelligence brewed beneath those brown eyes, and he had seen her grades in other classes. Who knew she was kind of a genius, especially considering she was barely 14.

“Anyways, Alpha and Mecha went on to Mars orbit and started producing the parts we’d need for the base and dropping them off on the surface without having to even go down there. Mir-3 and Shenzhen, that was Russia and China, were each at the polar caps, melting them off to create a thin atmosphere…”

“What? For real?” one of the kids gasped in shock, interrupting him again.

“Yep, sadly we were only at 13% when the first bombs went off. That’s why it took two years for the stations to dock together. The time for them to come back.”

“Wait, you said 13 stations? There’re only 12 stations,” the boy named Finn commented in confusion.

Oops.

It was policy that the 13th station should never mentioned, a rule he had always thought silly, so he decided to indulge them a bit.

“Well, what I’m about to tell you is a secret,” he said conspirationally, lowering his voice in jest. “There was a 13th station. Polaris, financed by the founders who also funded a huge chunk of the other 12 stations even if they were government programs. Polaris was state of the art. It was launched just as the last wave of bombs went off so it had top-notch technology based on everything we had learned with the other stations after several decades. It was the last part of the puzzle, you see, the reason this whole thing was really called the Ark.”

“Isn’t it called the Ark because of the Architect?!” one of the teenagers asked.

“Well, that too in a way, but no, not originally. It was because of the precious cargo aboard Polaris, before it was blown to bits by the other stations.”

“What? Why? What the hell?” came the multiple voices in the class.

“Why would we do that?” the girl asked.

“As a warning,” came a male voice at the door, with a raised eyebrow, glaring at the teacher’s indiscretion. Polaris was a banned subject.

The teacher chuckled nervously, even if he was technically the other man’s boss.

“That’s all for today, kids. See you next Monday.”

As the kids shuffled out, he made his way to the door and smiled at him, scratching his neck sheepishly.

“It’s a stupid rule,” he muttered, but then lit up when he saw someone else waiting for him outside.

“Hello, husband.”

“Hello, wife!” Jake Griffin beamed and kissed Abby.
“You look guilty. What’d you do now?” she asked, chuckling.

“He was telling them about the 13th Station,” the other man said.

Abby widened her eyes.

“Jake!” she whispered in alarm. Only few people knew about it. A trusted few in engineering, some on the Council. She knew for entirely different reasons.

They were interrupted as the last two kids exited the class and walked past them. The boy talking loudly.

“I’m so coming back to this class. Yep. I’m never quitting this class. Anyone who quits the class is a stinking potato head,” he claimed theatrically.

The girl finally giggled and nudged him with her shoulder. “Thanks,” she whispered to him. He only smiled and placed his arm around her as they walked away.

“That kid,” Jake said with admiration. The other two adults followed his gaze.

“There are 4 types of people in this world,’” he started, his gaze shifting to Jaha and Kane who were exiting a meeting nearby.

“The rule keepers, so narrow-minded they think people serve rules and not the other way around,” he pronounced sourly looking at Kane grimly.

“Those who always want to lead,” he continued, looking at Jaha, Abby frowning at the curious wording, but dismissing it for Jake’s antics. He was always making up sayings and silly pearls of wisdom.

“The compasses, the moral conscience and advisors for kings,” he said looking to his wife, even though both were similar in this regard.

“And the solvers. The geniuses who can look at an unsolvable problem and find a solution like it’s nothing. That girl there, she’s one of those.”

The three of them turned to look at the retreating couple again.

“Keep an eye on her. If we’re ever in a bind, she might be the only one to get us out of it.”

“What’s her name?”

“Raven Reyes.”

The other man blinked and then reacted, jogging after her.

Jake and Abby watched as he approached the girl and introduced himself.

“Reyes?” he asked.

“Who wants to know?” the feisty brunette asked, making the Griffins chuckle.

“I’m Sinclair, deputy chief engineer. Have you ever heard of this little program I’m setting up for zero-G mechanics?” their voice trailed off, as they looked on.
Neither knew that less than three years later that last oxygenator would go into total system failure, and that the last of the reserves and hydrazine would give them maybe 15 months. 12 when a carefree but careless Finn gifted Raven with a spacewalk to cheer her up after her initial rejection into the zero-G job she’d been training for under Sinclair, and 3 months of oxygen would be lost when the airlock malfunctioned.

Neither knew Jake would get floated and Clarke imprisoned for wanting to tell people.

Neither could know that Raven’s name would pop into Abby’s mind when all seemed lost because of this moment, and she sought her out convincing her to make her an escape pod to go save her daughter.

Neither could’ve known Jake was right and when Abby couldn’t reach the pod in time and Raven took her place, she would save the delinquents each time they were faced with an unsolvable, impossible problem, and that because of her, in a way, the two women he loved the most, Abby and Clarke, would one day be reunited on the ground while his frozen body floated eternally watching over them.

This would all come much later, but neither knew of the events that were set in motion that day.

“I’m worried about Clarke,” Abby said as they walked in the other direction, towards Alpha where they lived.

“She said she didn’t want to celebrate, Abby. We can’t force her.”

“But that’s just it, that she doesn’t want to. She’s just turning 13 and she’s more… lonely instead of less. She’s just a kid. She should be excited, want to play with her friends, have fun. I worry about her.”

“Me too, sweetheart, but she’s never been one to make many friends. I mean, it’s not like she doesn’t know every single person on Alpha. Everyone looks up to her, they love her.”

“She has friends. It’s just she’s always trying to help them, instead of… connecting with them.”

“Well, she has Wells… and she’s been hanging out with that Meg kid lately. Found them in the living room the other day looking suspiciously rumpled...” he laughed mischievously.

“You know she’s only doing that to rebel against us, because Meg is from Factory. Like we’d care, like we’re some elitist snobs. She’s just too in her head, too…” Abby trailed off, not managing to put into words what she wanted to say.

“She’s special. Good special. Wonderfully special. She just needs to find someone as special to keep her interest, to connect. Don’t worry, honey. Let’s go home give her her present, why don’t we?” he said smiling, wrapping his arm around her waist.

As they entered their small apartment, if you could even call it that although it’s considerably larger than the single space workers had, Jake stopped in his tracks just before rounding the tiny living room. He signaled his wife for silence with a finger on his lips and a glint in his eye. He craned his head silently to look out onto the low table where his 13-year-old daughter was leaning
over, sitting on the floor with a serious face but calm face. Wells sat at the other end, his back to them, seemingly equally fixated on the table, his hand hovering in the air. After what felt like an eternity, he finally moved it and exclaimed:

“Checkmate!”

Clarke smiled sweetly even though it didn’t reach her eyes.

“You did great, Wells,” Clarke said to him.

Jake and Abby don’t make their presence known and instead enter their small bedroom, the automatic door barely making a quiet woosh as it open and closes.

“You love watching them play, don’t you?” Abby smirked, amused at her husband. “I’m so glad she has him as a friend,” she added distractedly, shedding her medical jacket.

“You know he only learned because he’s head over heels for her, but she’s been letting him win since they’re 10.”

“Like she’s lets us win?” she chuckled.

“What? You know about that?”

“Of course, husband. We taught her after all,” she smiled reminiscing their weekends teaching a six-year-old Clarke how to play chess. “You think she could ever feel the same?”

“He’s a nice kid, but she’s too smart for him. She’s too smart for all of us really,” he grinned proudly.

“That doesn’t mean she can’t like him eventually,” she counters. “I’m just glad she has... someone. At least, someone to play with, so she’s not by herself,” Abby says with a hint of sadness, referencing their earlier conversation.

“She’s been playing by herself from the day she was born, honey. And she will be until she finds someone who truly challenges her. Someone as unique and extraordinary as her. See, there are 5 types of people in the world...”

Abby rolled her eyes at her husband’s ever changing and totally made-up, on-the-spot philosophical musings. He was like a walking fortune cookie. She loved him regardless. She loved him for it.

“She’s the fifth kind.”

At his wife’s raised eyebrow, he added.

“A game changer. That’s what your daughter is. A maverick. One of a kind. She’s all heart but also so strong, so smart, so compassionate. The kind of people that change the world. She just needs to find her own game changer.”

“How will we know when she does?”

“When she looks at them the way I look at you,” he said with a giant, dreamy grin.

Abby rolled her eyes but chuckled and brought up her arms to circle his neck.

“You’re such a romantic sap, Jake Griffin.” She tutted, then pecked his lips.
But the truth was that she loved him just as passionately as she did the moment their eyes met. Jake was a fresh-faced engineering recruit from Mecha newly transferred to Alpha, lost and trying to find his way through the corridors when they met as she was coming out of her rounds on medic bay. He’d stop dead on his tracks and grinned at her, with a dopey smile and starry eyes.

“Good morning, wife,” he’d drawled.

“What?” she’d stuttered, although equally in trance.

“I’m gonna marry you one day. Thought we’d get used to calling each other that,” he’d ridiculously, cheekily claimed, a huge blush betraying his brazenness.

She’s laughed and yet, instead of simply walking away, she’d played his game.

“Well, you look lost, husband. Can I help you?” she’d countered.

He had blushed even harder and then laughed. They both did.

Abby knew she’d love Jake Griffin until her last dying breath, like that day, like today. Like every single day after. She could only hope Clarke would find a love, a happiness like this one day.

Abby snapped out of her reverie.

“Are you going to give it to her today?” she asked.

He nodded and crouched underneath a cabinet to get a large metal box with a lock on it. He opened it and pulled out a worn, hardcover book. He flipped the first page and ran his thumb along the rubber stamp on the inside: Dr. A. Griffin, Polaris Foundation.

“It’s time,” he smiled.

The ride back to Polis had been grueling. Lexa wasn’t making them going full speed, but fast enough for Clarke to have made her sore and exhausted when they finally had made it to the capital. She still had trouble keeping herself correctly on the saddle or make the horse heed her messy instructions.

Luan and the Broadleaf Ambassador were already waiting for them, along with Titus, Indra and a few other advisers. It wasn’t a fully-fledged Council. After all, attacks on trade convoys still happened. The expanse of the Coalition territories too wide to patrol everywhere, the transition to rule of law under it was still shaky after four centuries of rampant lawlessness and desperate survival. Yet attacks were now usually small, unorganized and typically made away only with small amounts of loot, at the hands of exiled and rogue groups that lived mostly in the Wastelands. The large-scale raids of the past, the clans attacking each other for food or land openly seldom happened anymore.

More surprisingly, the Boat People being bested in their own waters was almost unheard of. They were the best sailors, unrivaled in their talent for offensive attacks. They had been the terrors of the
waters for so long, responsible for the raids on the Five Lakes and surrounding villages in the past, attacking Azgeda settlements on the north shore, Trikru on the south shore, Broadleaf on the west up Lorens river and the Gulf, and had even on occasion raided the shores of the Shallow Valley on the ocean to the east beyond Statue Island even. The only ones they had never attacked, at least not recently, was the Glowing Forest to the west of Thunder Bay. Most people were too afraid of them and legend said that anyone who entered the forest was never seen again.

Now however, in exchange for a good portion of food from the great grain-makers of Broadleaf – the reclusive clan up north the Otokebekoah territories who were the only ones who grew crops on a large scale–, the Boat People escorted all trade barges to and from the different clans in the region. It’s how Lexa had brought them into the Coalition. That and the fir, oak and cedar Trikru provided so their fleet of boats could grow – and consequently Heda Lexa’s Coalition naval force, the undisclosed clause of their deal–, conveniently concealed in small creeks, streams and coves along the south shore of the lakes, away from prying eyes, especially Azgeda’s.

Some Boat People rogue groups existed that Luan had not yet managed to fully control, but none that could carry out a big operation like this. At least, none that he knew of.

Before returning to Polis, Lexa had already sent a rider from her own party up north to Siracusa, Broadleaf’s border town, with an order for a regiment to be deployed up the river to reinforce the guard and look for the bandits.

The meeting was tense. The Broadleaf Ambassador suggested with suspicion that the shipment to the Boat People the week before – their payment for the season –, had gone without trouble and now only the one intended for trade in Polis had been coincidentally attacked on the waters the Boat People controlled. Luan had avoided taking the bait, as he was inwardly troubled, but had directed his own suspicions towards Azgeda, given that the attack had been near the north shore where the Ice Nation began to the west. Roan had angrily rejected any involvement, even though he had yet to return to his own homeland where he now ruled as the new King.

“How much was it?” Lexa asked.

“Two months’ worth of wheat for Polis,” Consus, the man in charge of the capital’s grain storage replied.

“What about the grain reserves? Can we cover it?”

“Only just about, Heda. If the late spring barley harvest is bad, the reserves might go empty,” he said grimly.

“And the first corn harvest is more than five moons away, Heda,” Pekko, the Broadleaf ambassador reminded them, from under her fox headdress. “We could face a shortage,” she added.

Lexa frowned pensively, her hands folded behind her.

“Luan, you will provide escort to Broadleaf without payment until the autumn.”

“But Heda…” Luan protested defensively.

“Is it not for your protection that you are paid your share? Was it not on your waters?”

“Yes, Heda,” he acquiesced with a grumble.
“Roan, it is my understanding that part of the Ark crashed north of Lake Tario and that its contents have not yet been returned to Skaikru?”

“Umm, no Heda. As it fell in Azgeda, Queen Nia claimed it…”

At Lexa’s impassive glare, Roan corrected himself.

“…but as a sign of goodwill after Mount Weather, Azgeda will be returning it, Commander.”

“Ambassador Griffin, was Farm Station not carrying special seeds in its storage banks?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Special seeds?” Consus inquired curiously.

“High yielding seeds of different varieties. They’re in dormant state and need to be brought out of stasis but they grow in fast, short cycles,” Clarke explained.

During their morning talk about Farm Station, Clarke had told her how it only produced three varieties of food that used the least water, but had a huge bank of fast growing, resistant seeds of all types of crops they might one day need if they ever returned to the ground, or if they had ever reached their original destination.

“And would Skaikru be willing to trade some of these fast grain seeds with Broadleaf in exchange for enough of their harvested crops?”

Smart, Clarke thought to herself, seeing Lexa’s meaningful gaze clearly giving her an opening.

“Yes, we could trade them and provide knowledge on how to grow more. Not many Farm Station members survived, but we could teach you covered cropping and irrigation, and learn from you. Learn from each other,” Clarke said remembering what she could of her Earth skills classes, although she had been better at survival techniques rather than agriculture. “In exchange for our annual food stores to be filled.”

“Is that not asking for too much?” Pekko exclaimed somewhat sourly.

“We are only 340 people, Ambassador,” Clarke countered, “a small village to you. We would grow the grain ourselves, but we have no land except the rocky surroundings around Arkadia. And our seeds are exceptional. You will be growing far more than what we would be getting in return. It is a symbol of our retribution to the clans… after everything,” she said with a hint of guilt, not wanting to reference the massacre by name.

Pekko nodded in agreement.

“Clarke, do you think Arkadia would be capable of producing longviews?” Lexa asked, then added seeing Clarke’s puzzled frown. “Telescopes. For the boats,” she explained.

Clarke had to suppress a smirk seeing the shrewdness of Lexa’s mind.

“Yes, I have no doubt we could.”

“Luan, would you agree to trade with Skaikru? Better longviews for the escort fleet so they can better spot would-be attackers? For some of your catch perhaps or whatever Skaikru wishes to trade for it?”

Luan who had been downcast since his reluctant acceptance of giving free trade escorts to
Broadleaf for the months come perked up at this. Their long views were crude and had a one-mile range at best.

“Fish?” Clarke asked.

“If you are interested. There has not been much trout this year, but I think we could come to an agreement that benefits us both,” Luan mused.

Clarke nodded to him. “I think we could start with that.”

“Very well. In that case, we shall discuss more once the scouts are back with news tomorrow,” Lexa said. “And rest assured Luan, the Coalition will do everything to find those responsible,” she assured, extending her forearm to grab his in promise.

After the others left, Clarke and Lexa exited the throne room and made their way slowly down the corridors.

“How do you do that?” Clarke asked.

Lexa lifted her eyebrow.

“Turn something bad into… an opportunity?” she tried.

“If only everything were so easily resolved,” Lexa shrugged in return.

“I only had to think about my people. You had to juggle it all…” Clarke trailed off trying to find the words. “How?”

Lexa quirked a brow. “You tell me how. You know. You did rather well in there too, Clarke,” Lexa, slipping in teacher mode, asked with a calm smile.

“Even if it wasn’t his fault, Luan had to feel the consequences of the loss and pay it back to Broadleaf with free protection, but does not walk empty handed. Instead, he gets better ships to better defend the trade on the lakes. Broadleaf gets help from us to recover and we get food from both. Roan gets reminded he still needs to prove his allegiance,” Clarke recapped and Lexa nodded proudly at Clarke’s sharp mind.

“But why help Skaikru, Lexa? Why did you help us, after what just happened?”

“Our union might have calmed tensions for a while, but it does not mean they trust you. Now you have two clans with a vested interest in Skaikru as part of the Coalition. The hungry will be better fed through this alliance. Our boat fleet will be stronger. Skaikru will be able to fend for itself through its first winter while you learn the ways of the land and be seen as less of a threat because of it. Our Coalition will be more stable. Win win,” she said as if it were the most simple thing in the world.

“But Clarke,” she added after a beat, pausing in her steps and turning fully to look at her, “you are my people too.”

“Good night,” she said after another beat of Clarke’s silence. That’s when Clarke realized they had arrived at her door and Lexa was bidding her farewell.
As Clarke’s restlessness would have it, after about two hours of impatient patience, she found herself knocking on the Commander’s door. For what, she was not sure. She had this inexplicable sense of unfinished business, of their conversations and moments being constantly interrupted all day, and all of it ending abruptly. It was after all her engagement day, the first of it officially, and it had been cut off anti-climatically. She shouldn’t really care. It was merely a political arrangement, one she would have had to have been dragged kicking and screaming into had the lives of all her people not hung in the balance. No, they would have to have done it over her literal dead body, just a few months ago, if anyone had told her she’d have to marry some burly barbarian warlord to keep her friends alive.

Except, well, Clarke had not so much as screamed and kicked to refuse but instead to insist on it. And Lexa was anything but barbaric. Or farther from a warlord. Also, she certainly wasn’t anything in the vicinity of burly. And it was Clarke’s very much alive body that was thrumming with restlessness knocking at Lexa’s door, unconsciously annoyed that their day had been unceremoniously cut short. But to admit all these things to herself, Clarke had to be brave with the one thing she wasn’t yet: her own broken but wildly beating heart.

So to all the questions and doubts wanting to surface right now, she turned a blind eye and a deaf ear. She was good at ignoring the voices of her reasoning, shushing them with a stubborn shake of the head.

What she had not had anticipated in her exhausting war of denial, as she made her way to Lexa’s room, was finding the sight before her. Lexa in another one of her inexplicably procured, post-apocalyptic, overly dramatic nightgowns that almost sent Clarke running back to her room, overwhelmed by the effect it had on her.

Lexa was the most extreme opposite of burly and any related words. She’d be the picture next to its antonym. She was goddamn forest nymph, an Aphrodite of the woods, some divine goddess with the magical powers to make Clarke go into pulmonary and cardiac failure. At least, that’s how she looked to Clarke right now.

She stands in the middle of the candle lit room with a surprised frown on her face, clearly not expecting Clarke. She’s wearing something that can only be categorized as illegal, at least in the blonde’s mind. It reminds her of some extremely old and grainy movie her parents used to love watching on the Ark about cavemen and cavewomen battling dinosaurs in ridiculously skimpy leather outfits. Lexa’s nightgown is brown and it’s ripped across her thighs diagonally as if someone had teared it off to ravage her – at least that’s the image Clarke’s brain conjures before she can stop it, that’s the one and only thought she seems capable to produce right now, and it reveals her long, tan legs and exposes her left leg all the way up to her mid-thigh. Like the previous one she’d worn, this also bares her beautiful collarbones and elegant neck, except it’s a bit tighter around her body altogether. Lexa is thin and long-limbed but all graceful curves at the same time. Her hair is loose and curly, parted to the side but tousled as if she just got up from sleeping in haste.

How can the lethal and indomitable Heda be the same person as this soft, exquisite creature? She’s like an ancient mystery whispered since the dawn of time that Clarke can’t possibly think to ever decipher, blinding in her beauty and deadly in her deceitful delicacy. The kind of apparition that make men drown in rivers and shipwreck sailors, like in the old legends. But she’s also just a girl, so young, so human, capable of painful tenderness and filled with such heart-breaking sadness and hope.
Clarke is rooted to the floor, overtaken by a blazing flush of want spread all over her, her mind blank. She can deny her feelings with furious abandon, but her attraction to Lexa has never been a secret to her. She’s been drawn to her the minute she laid eyes on her and has struggled with it every time she’s in her presence. Resenting her and attempting to hate her had made it slightly easier, but met with this sight has Clarke on the edge of resistance.

“Is everything okay, Clarke? Are you okay?” Lexa asks with worry on her face.

Clarke blinks rapidly and swallows.

“Ye… yes. Sorry. I shouldn’t have come so late. I’ll let you get back to sleep,” Clarke apologizes uneasily, feeling like a fool for letting her feet carry her here so late in the night, uninvited and without a real reason.

“No, it’s okay,” Lexa says softly. “I was not yet asleep,” she explains, pointing towards her balcony. “Stay.”

I couldn’t sleep either, her eyes say.

“You’re worried,” Clarke states, as she makes to follow, but almost drops her book when she lowers her gaze as Lexa walks in front of her leading them outside, seeing material taut over her…

Clarke curses herself and looks back up.

She notices the cushions on the sofa where it seems Lexa had been lying on before she came. The Commander sits back and brings the fur to partially cover her, snuggling into it even though the night is not very chilly. Clarke is both momentarily thankful and disappointed to have less skin on display. Then Lexa puts her bare feet on the edge of the low table and the fur slips off her legs, making her gown ride up just a fraction more than the short length it already is. Her treacherous brain flashes images of her hands running up those thighs, hiking the gown higher, parting her legs and Clarke jolts up.

Embarrassment floods her. She’s never felt this out of control before. She wonders if Sonja put something in her food or something, like the one time they all got high on jobi nuts by accident. Or maybe it’s just that today is the first time she’s not suffused with crippling fear in so many months, the raid of the barges notwithstanding, and her body is more attuned than ever to itself. She had woken up ravenous in the morning, her stomach growling with insistence in a way Clarke was not used to. And just now. She had practically devoured her dinner tonight, her appetite stronger than she could remember.

Before, hunger had been a faint, barely-there feeling just before her daily mush on the Ark. Then an acid pain on the ground, mixed with and indistinguishable from all her other injuries, scratches, bruises and exhaustion, their bodies not used to the exertion with their considerably atrophied muscles nor accustomed to the full gravity of the ground. And then the fear, the flight, the stomach churning horrors had pushed everything to the background of her consciousness, making her almost oblivious to anything but anxious dread.

Until that day. Until now.

Or maybe it was just that Lexa was the most sinfully attractive person she’d ever met and she was only human.
“I’m… umm… wine. I’m gonna get some wine,” she stuttered getting away from the sofa and serving herself a large mug, with her back turned to re-compose herself, even though she felt Lexa’s gaze on her. She drank it whole and served herself again, breathing in deep, finally turning back and making her way to the sofa.

Lexa seemed to sense that Clarke doesn’t want to talk about whatever had got her acting like this, so after a beat she answers Clarke’s initial question.

“I am always worried in some way, but it does no good to dwell on it. We will know more when we know more,” she says in that simple, pragmatic way of hers.

Clarke by then had sat back, slouching back a bit like Lexa, who seemed so… oddly… relaxed tonight, despite what she had just said. She looked in front of her to keep herself from getting distracted with more highly inappropriate thoughts.

She sees Lexa move her hand from the corner of her eye and hovers over the book Clarke had brought with her.

“May I?” she asks softly. Clarke nods.

“When the first people went up to the stations, they signed up for a lifelong mission. They left everything behind, but they were allowed a small crate, a box really, of personal belongings. They couldn’t fill the stations with non-essentials, you know,” Clarke spoke into the night, while Lexa perused the pages of the book.

“They knew there wasn’t going to be a whole lot of entertainment up there. They had some digital movies and books, but I guess some people were old fashioned and liked the real ones. This book was the one the first Griffin brought with him to Alpha station. My parents gave it to me when I was 13,” Clarke smiles wistfully.

“I was never…,” Clarke hesitates, not knowing how to fully explain what she wants. “Even before prison, I think I always felt… disconnected? Wells was my friend. He was quiet and kind. I talked to the kids in my classes and to my mother’s patients when I practiced with her. I knew almost everyone on Alpha by first name, but… I think I always felt… by myself, in a way.”

“Except when I was reading this. It sounds crazy but it was the one thing that kept me company, made me feel less…”

“Alone?”

It’s the one word Clarke didn’t like to use, but it was the most honest one, so she nods silently.

“What is it about?”

“Some very moody and philosophical German angels looking over humans,” Clarke chuckles, thinking it most sound terribly silly, “until one is interrupted in his existential musing when he realizes he loves a mortal woman. He can’t be felt or seen or heard, so he ‘falls’ to be with her.”

Clarke’s young self had rationalized she felt like one of the winged, brooding creatures of the book, forever looking longingly down to Earth, feeling desolate and incomplete in the cold space above, the unbearable pull to fall never out of her mind.

Lexa’s face is unreadable at this, until she simply asks quietly, “would you read me some?”

Clarke obliges and choose one of her favorite passages. “This part is called ‘The Songs of
“When the child was a child
It walked with its arms swinging,
wanted the brook to be a river,
the river to be a torrent,
and this puddle to be the sea.

When the child was a child,
it didn’t know that it was a child,
everything was soulful,
and all souls were one.

When the child was a child,
it had no opinion about anything,
had no habits,
it often sat cross-legged,
took off running,
had a cowlick in its hair,
and made no faces when photographed.

When the child was a child,
It was the time for these questions:
Why am I me, and why not you?
Why am I here, and why not there?
When did time begin, and where does space end?
Is life under the sun not just a dream?
Is what I see and hear and smell
not just an illusion of a world before the world?
Given the facts of evil and people.
does evil really exist?
How can it be that I, who I am,
didn’t exist before I came to be,
and that, someday, I, who I am,
will no longer be?”

She stops to look at Lexa. The brunette is looking up, a faraway look and just the hint of a smile on the corner of her lips.

“It is beautiful, Clarke,” she whispers. “Would you… would you read me some more, from the beginning? That is, if you are not too tired,” Lexa adds quickly, as if guilty she’s asking it of Clarke.

“I’m not. And I would,” Clarke reassured with a small smile. She flips the pages to the beginning and starts.

They sit outside for a long time with Clarke reading her the first chapter. She’s turned her body to the side, this time focusing on Lexa, enjoying the variety of emotions that fleet across her face at
different passages. She’s at times pensive, amused, curious, confused but mostly enthralled by the story.

When she reaches the end of that first chapter, she lowers the book and says nothing for a few moments, letting the last words sink in the air.

“It’s getting really late. I should let you rest,” she says with worry.

“It is only midnight, Clarke. Exactly midnight,” Lexa replies, with just a hint of a frown.

“Exactly midnight?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“How do you know?” she furrows her brow, a bit amused.

Lexa merely points to a cluster of stars as if it’s obvious.

Clarke has been taught how to roughly navigate by the stars and tell time by the sun, but she’s never been very good at determining time at night unless the moon is very visible or full. Well, she knows a few tricks in theory, which doesn’t mean she’s found it easy in practice, let alone to state an exact hour categorically. However, she also secretly likes how Lexa explains things, so she looks at her a raised eyebrow in question.

“Do you see that small star? Just above the peak of that mountain?” she points, leaning towards Clarke to show her. It is not the biggest star by far and with so many out, it’s not as easy to pinpoint.

“That’s Hou. It’s the one star that never moves across the sky. It is always in the same place. If you are ever lost, you can use it to find your way back.”

“Home,” Clarke repeats knowing the meaning of the word.

“The first Ancients called it Polaris. The star of the north,” Lexa explains. “By the stars around it, you can tell the time. It is called Hozon,” she gestures to the constellation Clarke now recognizes with the mention of the North Star, but is curious to know how it has changed from their old iterations.

“Hozon Drop Of Niron. The Lovers Forever Lost,” Lexa says.

“Legend says the great blast broke two lovers’ soul in half, one cast to roam the dark ground, the other thrown to the Sun. They promised each other if they ever got lost, they would find each other at Hou. So every night… do you see those four stars? That’s the head of Deimeikalona… she comes down,” Lexa explained as she traced the stars that Clarke knew as the big dipper going in an anti-clockwise circle, “to look for Keryongifa and walks around Hou calling for her.”

“Those other four stars,” she motions to the little dipper, “are the head of Keryongifa. And every night Gifa comes from below to go meet her and circles Hou too, but they never manage to cross paths, always on opposite ends, chasing each other around. Kom Hozon. For eternity.”

“When Deimeikalona has gone around once and is back up exactly over Hou, it marks the beginning of the new day, where she has to wait until the next night to start all over. When Deimeikalona is exactly above Hou, and Gifa is exactly below, that marks midnight.”

“That’s so sad,” Clarke whispers, her gaze fixed on the twinkling stars above.
Lexa frowns. “It’s supposed to symbolize their eternal love for each other, their determination,” she counters, then pauses for a moment. “They never give up,” she finally adds.

Clarke turns her head to look at her. “I thought love was weakness,” Clarke says with the beginning of a teasing smile.

Lexa resists the pull of her own smile, but one corner wins the battle and minutely curls upwards.

“It is merely an old folks’ tale, Clarke,” she tries to chide and deflect, but is unable to keep an amused huff from her tone.

“I was actually waiting for that,” the blonde says. “Midnight I mean. It’s technically tomorrow so I can give you this,” she explains motioning the book.

It was the reason she had come to Lexa’s room until she realized foolishly they had already exchanged gifts that day and had felt embarrassed at her own inexplicable eagerness, at her frustration for the way their first day had ended before.

Lexa blinked in surprise. She’s both conflicted and overwhelmed. The book is something clearly important to Clarke. It’s her companion in the solitude she confessed to feeling. Lexa’s instinct is to reject it as too much. On the other hand, she doesn’t wish to insult Clarke by refusing it, even though it confuses her that she would choose something so deeply significant to her.

For the briefest of seconds Lexa had thought about the words Sybil had once said to her, as the young Commander asked for advice regarding her shifting relationship with Costia which had just turned from friendship into something else. She didn’t like discussing with her the difficult decisions she faced every day as Commander. Costia was a kind soul and she never liked to worry or upset her. They shared calm, silent moments with each other and lately Costia’s bed, which Lexa would leave shortly after. “Sharing one’s solitude is sometimes the most intimate thing one can give the other,” Sybil had told her.

A tiny flicker of hope ignites just as quickly as she snuffs it out. She refuses to read into it. Clarke is just trying to rebuild trust between them. She’s trying and to Lexa that’s more than she can hope for.

“Clarke, I… are you certain?”

The blonde stands up from the couch and Lexa moves to follow. They stand facing each other, Lexa fiddling the book unsurely in her hands.

Clarke nods in answer to Lexa’s question.

“I don’t need it anymore,” she states.

As the words tumble out without thought, the monumental meaning behind them hits them both at the same time, eyes wide and frozen on the spot.

It’s the reason why Clarke has been so restless this night, unable to put a finger on the root of her uneasiness. As soon as she was separate from Lexa. They had slept out on her balcony together, had woken up and had spent a dizzying hour holding each other’s gaze during the marking ritual. They had eaten together, spent all morning in each other’s company during the Council and their
afternoon in the mountains, and even later during the tense meeting with the three clans. They had spent the entire day together and still she had inadvertently followed Lexa around as if her presence was the most natural, automatic state of things.

If Clarke thought about it, with the exception of her three months of self-imposed exile, ever since she had met Lexa this had been the case, always in each other’s orbit even when it wasn’t warranted and they were no longer discussing war plans against the Mountain. She spent every night in Lexa’s tent simply because there was nowhere else she wanted to be. She went to poison the Ice Queen simply because a world without the Commander didn’t compute in her brain. Even during her exile, she kept an ear out for any mention of Polis in the outposts and dingy taverns she sometimes frequented, trying to gauge its location without outright asking and constantly doubling back and going in circles so she never strayed too far. She unconsciously sought her out all the time because the opposite – her absence – was the anomaly.

Whatever they had been – rivals, allies, enemies, budding friends – and whatever they were to become – political partners, forced future spouses, lifelong consorts –, and regardless of whatever might come of the attraction or denied feelings she had, there was something between them that went beyond that that she had never found before, a void that was filled.

She understood now the reason for her agitation that night. She didn’t want Lexa to think that their union, untimely as it was, was only based on obligation and political necessity. She loathed the possibility that the Commander might think she was only bound to her by force, when instead she not only enjoyed her company but wanted it. Sought it. Needed it.

It didn’t yet need a name or a romantic connotation, or the acknowledgement of feelings. In fact, it was something that went beyond it all. It was something much more fundamental.

She somehow wanted to make her understand that while her anger and resentment was temporary and would eventually pass, whatever invisible force bound them wasn’t and wouldn’t. She was the missing constant variable in the hitherto unsolved equation that was Clarke Griffin. The lost atom to the previously unstable chemical compound she was made of.

The book was not the symbol of Clarke’s loneliness that she was sharing with her. It was a symbol of the end of it.

Still, these are things too colossal and wholly overwhelming for Clarke to put into words yet, to confess out loud with her own voice, to make their meaning vibrate in the space between them. She just hopes the gesture is understood.

When she looks to find earnest eyes and a warm albeit tight-lipped smile spreading beautifully on Lexa’s face, when she hesitantly moves one step closer and reaches for her hand – one of the rare times Lexa has initiated any physical contact – and squeezes once, Clarke is pretty sure Lexa understood. Hopes she did.

She lets their hands linger for a few seconds then flees the scene, her heart beating too wildly with the realization of what transpired, and Lexa displaying so much skin again not helping matters. Well, she doesn’t exactly flee. She politely says goodnight and leaves but it feels like fleeing. Fleeing the pull to step into her, to let her heart, and her hands, and her mouth do the speaking her words still refuse to.

That night, when sleep eludes them both as usual, it is not due to the worries and the nightmares that normally keep them awake. It is the memory of the day and the nervous, hopeful anticipation of the next.
The next day finds her making her way to breakfast with Lexa. It’s almost a natural reflex, seeking her out, eating together, just being. She wonders for a moment with some alarm as she crosses the door, unsure if she’s not assuming she’s invited to share a meal with her. The day before the Commander had asked her, but not today. Her fears are washed away as soon as she sees a slightly tired looking Lexa raise her eyes to her. There is warmth in them, not surprise. A second place is laid out on the small table. She’s expected.

“Good morning, Clarke,” the Commander says quietly, setting a scroll down, her eyes a bit bleary but her body is relaxed.

“Good morning,” she murmurs back, somewhat relieved.

The Commander picks up her scroll again and resumes her reading, one hand bringing pieces of fruit and honey dipped bread to her mouth every now and then, as usual. After a while, they talk softly into the morning-lit room, quietly, of things of no consequence. Lexa tells her about how last night the jasmine shrubs bloomed, signaling the full start of spring and how she can faintly smell it in the air all the way up the tower. Clarke tells her how she’s heard of the flower, but as with many things, she only knows about tastes, smells and textures by name, relying only on her imagination on how they really are like in real life. She’d always read and tried to imagine the taste of chocolate and it wasn’t until the day Monty gave her a taste of his chocolate cake inside Mount Weather that she put an actual sensation to the name. She has only begun to associate them to the names she’s learned: the smell of the rain wetting the ground, the crunchy texture of nuts ground into the bread on her tongue, the scent of ripe berries, all the hues of green in the forest and in a certain Commander’s eyes.

After breakfast, they depart each other’s company only for minutes and are back together again at the daily hearings and Council meeting.

Word from the scouts have returned and no trace of the stolen grains or the bandits have been found yet, which surprises everyone, including the Commander. A shipment that size and the boats used for the raid seem to have vanished into thin air so far.

Heda frowns and orders an additional half regiment of each clan to patrol their respective trade routes and sends a small team of her best trackers to continue the search. Aside from the that, the clans receive the news of the different agreements between Azgeda, Broadleaf and Skaikru favorably.

Amidst the slight worry about the attack that takes up a part of the discussions, however, Clarke and Lexa’s eyes keep locking every now and then, always finding each other, as natural as the rhythmic comings and goings of the waves on the shore, as the muscle reflex of lungs filling and heart tissue contracting. There is something that lights both pairs of eyes that day, a knowledge of something just barely confessed with gestures and hidden meanings, but no less significant because of it.

The meeting ends and as people file out, Lexa comes to stand close to Clarke, her hands behind her
back and calm eyes.

“Would you like to join me for a walk, Ambassador? Say, after your report?” she adds, knowing Clarke relays the discussions of the Council back to the Ark daily, on a small radio station the Skaikru delegation had set up for her in her room during the massacre negotiations.

She tells them about the different decisions reached, consults their own positions and, as Lexa had sagely advised, keeping them well informed on clan affairs will not only help them understand each other better, integrate more and above all it will make them realize they have a way to channel their worries and problems, instead of striking blindly in ignorance and fear.

Clarke nods, accepting the invitation.

They stroll through the main market square and take a left on a small adjacent road, passing vendors in small wooden stalls and small stores on the sides of cracked buildings. There are several stalls with stacks of drying red and brown colored plates, vases, mugs and large amphoras made of clay, some plain, others covered in various designs in black paint. Other stalls have long, colorful strips of cloth hanging from strings. Inside of these shops she can see more cloths wrung and dripping water leaving puddles of brown, black, yellow and otherwise colored water running on the dusty floors.

Finally, at the end of a road, they come to a tattered curtain on the right side of the long wall and enter.

“Masta Picton,” Lexa calls into the large room filled with tables, shelves and cabinets to the brim with pots, shells and other recipients with all types of powders, thick pastes, grains and watery substances that blind Clarke with so many colors and contrasting smells.

A man with a short, grey, wiry beard comes out from another room to the left, covered with a similar cloth hanging precariously from a side doorway. He is slim, with buzzed hair on the sides and a thick braid coming from the center of his head and all the way down nearly reaching his waist, in a style Clarke has learned is favored especially by people in Floukru clan, like Luan and shockingly Gustus, who she had recently learned was his distant cousin. The cunning political symbolism of Heda – placing a Floukru, her greatest ally and a potentially powerful opponent as her closest adviser and personal bodyguard – continues to baffle Clarke. The masta is wearing a bluish robe with brown spattered pants, his hands darkened to the wrists with a stain that looks like it has been there for years.


“Picton, oso gaf lev kom yu op,” the Commander said simply, while he nods in acquiescence.

We have come to learn from you, she has told him.

“What is this place?” Clarke asks in wonder looking around.

“Picton is one of the best pigment makers in the capital and he has kindly agreed to teach us.”

Clarke turns her head to her in surprise, so the Commander adds.
“He makes pigments for the cloth dyers, the leather makers, the clay bakers, for the warriors too,” she lists as she dips one finger into a small wooden plate with the black kohl she’s seen her do her face paint with, rubbing it with her thumb and then cleaning it off with a stray cloth. “Some can also be used to write and paint as well,” she continues explaining.

After finding out Clarke enjoyed drawing the day before and the sorry state of her two measly sticks of charcoal, she had come to Picton to ask him a favor.

Clarke is reeling with the idea. She’s never drawn or painted in color and at the same time she is touched at the Commander’s thoughtfulness.

“This is your gift today?”

A nod.

“Why not just give me the pigments?” she asks curiously.

“I thought you might it more enjoy learning how to make them, so you can produce them yourself to your liking whenever you wish,” Lexa shrugs. “You seem to prefer to do things yourself rather than just have them handed to you.”

Clarke can’t help how widely her smile blooms on her face at this, and Lexa can’t help how she reflexively stretches her own lips in response and slight surprise at Clarke’s reaction. Not for the paints. She knows. It’s the recognition of the other that so often seems to startle them, and at the same time feels like muscle memory, like the familiarity of her fingers with the ridges of an often read book or the way her legs guide her thoughtlessly through the dark on her frequented paths.

Clarke is also surprised at the fact that the Commander stays with them and listens just as attentively at Picton as Clarke does, as he explains and demonstrates how he mixes the different elements together, and where each ingredient is obtained: how he crushes charcoal and mixes it with chestnut oil he trades with Myron, the scent maker a few roads down to make the thick paste for the kohl; the leaves of indigo he buys from Lake People traders coming from the south, that he then ferments, mixes with lye and dries into large bricks of compact powder of different hues of blue and purple, which he sells to his neighbor Sabian, the dyer; the yellow and red ochre he makes by heating and then grinding blocks of rock he himself collects at the base of the Mountain, and mixes them with eggs to bind them together; the berries he forages around Polis to make the wine colored watery paint; the lime he buys from Azgeda traders and pays it back in the form of the white face paint they use, by mixing the riverbank-gathered lime with animal fat and white ashes.

Clarke is enraptured with all of this and, by the looks of it, so is the Commander underneath her calm, stoic, hand-folded demeanor. Clarke can see the curious gleam in her eye, the way she almost invariably but delicately dips one finger into each paint to feel the texture and occasionally even sniffs it, asking questions every now and then about the terms of trade for each one.

Just as she’s opening her mouth to inquire about Skaikru processing capabilities – she has seen the machinery all around the Arkadian camp whirring and setting off smoke – Clarke blurts out at the same time that Arkadia could prove helpful in some of the trades with their drills and synthesizers. They both stop to let the other finish, amused at how their minds are as usual attuned to each other. Great minds, after all, think alike. They decide to let the practical possibilities for later and continue to listen to Picton, turning to look at each other whenever something interesting is shared,
both reveling in the knowledge being imparted, clearly enjoying the lesson and the other’s enjoyment of it.

Clarke also knows that all this is in part Lexa’s way of distracting her for as much of the day as possible. That day had been the burning ceremony of the Skaikru rebels and those slain, at the same field where it had taken place. Abby and Marcus would be attending. Clarke had declined. She had done her duty. She had said her goodbyes. Her place was here now, in the capital, where the decisions were made for all of them, for their present, not for their past. She was silently grateful to Lexa, however, for this distraction.

They leave the pigment master shop with calm smiles, with an open invitation for Clarke to join Picton whenever she wants to practice, as they stroll back into the market streets, a tiny basket of the things Clarke did manage to make that day under her arm.

As the Commander leaves her at her bedroom door after their walk, Clarke fetches the small tin box with kohl, the one thing she had managed to make remotely well, and extends it to the Commander.

Lexa only lifts an eyebrow and claims “You already gifted me today, Clarke. The book,” she reminds.

“I was never one for following rules,” Clarke shrugs with a hint of mischief.

Heda give her a one-sided smirk. The stubborn Sky girl at least recognizes it. Before she can react, Clarke is running two fingers on each side of her face, laden with the black paint, leaving behind two small lines on each cheekbone, underneath her eyes

“Besides, a warrior can never have too much war paint,” she says cheekily, before closing the tin box and placing it in the Commander’s stunned hand. Both are oblivious to the rapidly beating heart in each other’s chest, equally surprised at the boldness and playfulness of the gesture.

Later that night, when Lexa shows up at her doorstep to have what now seems their usual meal together and read a few chapters of their book before sleep, she wears her face paint proudly, the small glint in the eye the only indication of mirth under the façade of her serious pose.

The next day, right after breakfast, Clarke skipped the morning hearings after an idea had come to her mind and she had set off bright and early into the market roads to see if she could get ahold of what she was looking for the Commander. She had found a tradesman who, after a lot of gesticulating and then sketching, had finally understood and agreed to what Clarke needed. She had to haggle and beg to get him to make it for that same day, promising her own help (which earned her a scoff) and a steep price: a beautifully crafted dagger she had traded at Nylah’s outpost in exchange for her hunt. Little did the man know Clarke hated the dagger if only because it was Azgeda craftsmanship and maybe Clarke was a little petty.
She remembered the slightly forward blonde from that outpost, whose flirting had turned into sudden anger and alarm when Clarke had walked her out to where she had her hunt. She cursed in trigedas leng and growled in distress, not explaining to Clarke why she was acting that way. She simply barked at her to help her take it behind, where she proceeded to cover it with a tarp next to a large fire pit she had. When Clarke still demanded payment for her hunt, the blonde eventually conceded and gave Clarke the dagger, some dried meat she had on hand and a bed to spend the night. She made her promise to never ever hunt the night creature again, the natgifa, she called it and never utter a word about the kill to anyone.

Her tone had considerably softened later that night when she helped her clean the wound the panther had made, a clear invitation for more in the way her hands touched Clarke’s back. Clarke considered it for a second, tempted by the momentary comfort it might bring her, but then a pair of familiar eyes flashed in her memory and she turned her head back around, claiming she didn’t want to talk. The words I don’t want anything else were clearly heard by Nylah who backed off.

She left the man’s shop just in time to sit in the Council, and then came back for a few hours to survey and help along. She left the shop around one with the promise to come back after sundown to help him put the finishing touches.

As she was leaving, she spotted the Commander coming towards her.

“Clarke, I have been looking for you,” Lexa said.

“Is everything okay?” Clarke asked with a bit of worry.

“Everything is fine. There is something I would like to show you today,” she noted calmly, nodding her head to the right for Clarke to follow her.

They arrived at a little hill that looked above Polis, with a semi-circle of rocks covered in moss and a stone well to the side. Penn and Ryder were already there, standing next to a table.

There Lexa proceeded to take of her coat and her shoulder guard. At Clarke’s quizzical expression, Lexa said:

“I wish to teach you how to fight.”

Clarke scoffed in surprise.

“I know how to fight, Lexa.”

“I know you can, Clarke, but it does not hurt to improve one’s skills.”

“The last thing I want to learn about is how to kill more, how to fight, how to bring more death.”

“It is so you can defend yourself, Clarke. You will always have the best bodyguards watching over you, I will always defend you, but if we’re ever not present…”

“I can take care of myself,” Clarke spat, getting angry for reasons she had been trying to forget. “I can defend myself, I don’t need anyone looking after me.”

“I am well aware of your capabilities, Clarke. I have trained since I could walk and I could have easily lost to Roan. I could just as easily fall any day, because I fail to see a blow coming that day. When I fail, I know my people have my back just as they know I have theirs in battle. We take care
of each other, we protect each other, whether Heda, warrior or commoner. We protect each other. We have each other’s back.”

“You mean, like when you turned your back at me at Mount Weather?! No, wait, this is even better, you want this little training game so you can pretend stab me in the back like you already did in real life?!” she hissed, with venom, shocked at her own sudden outburst.

Although, to be fair, the blonde is aware that the resentment and anger over the Mountain had been pushed down rather than overcome, but it was still there, bubbling underneath and festering.

“How can I trust you to ever have my back, Lexa?” Clarke added weakly, with a defeated, watery voice. She could see the intense hurt she had caused the brunette, who was now working her jaw hard and swallowing, but she couldn’t help the pain that still stung deep within her.

After a few moments of silence, Lexa whose face was turned to the side, eyes on the ground, just whispered.

“Don’t do it for yourself then. Gift me this,” she pleaded quietly, lifting her big eyes to Clarke. “If something happens to you and I’m not around, at least I’ll know you have a better chance… that… you’ll be safe.”

This shattered Clarke’s ire and resolve. The concern the Commander expressed for her, that fact that she considered Clarke’s safety a gift to her peace of mind, threw her off balance. It made her heart constrict and expand in ways she couldn’t ignore.

She exhaled sharply and finally nodded her consent, tight-lipped and shaken by emotion.

When a few minutes later, Lexa was showing her the correct position to hold the bow, her nimble fingers barely touching her to reposition her arms or her hips or her knee, Clarke almost wished she had continued arguing. Her proximity, the graze of her hand, the nearness of her voice, was making this a torturous exercise for Clarke and her legs, which were determined to feel suspiciously similar to her Ark mush, at least in their incapacity to keep her upright and steady.

Nevertheless, the fact that Clarke seemed to be naturally talented with the bow partially distracted her. Lexa was however determined to start her off with the hardest of tasks instead of working her way up to it, and insisted Clarke first practice with tiny, moving targets in the bush or high up in the branches.

_The person attacking you isn’t going to stand there and wait for you to shoot them, nor will a rabbit waiting to be hunted for that case_, Lexa had claimed and Clarke knew she had a point, as slightly annoying as it was. She managed to land at least three…out of about a hundred. Rome wasn’t built in a day after all.

Throwing the dagger required less contact and was therefore less stressful for Clarke, although she was woefully bad at it and they moved on from it.

Then came the swords. Lexa gave Clarke one of her own swords, instead of a wooden practice sword as she would have thought, saying she had to be familiar with its real weight and feel. The first part was learning how to hold it properly, and how to place her feet and balance her weight, which required a few too-close-for-her-heartbeat’s-comfort touches from the Commander who lightly placed her hand on top of hers to show her to leave it loose, to bend her elbow, to carry her upper body or hips with the movement of her arm. She could feel Lexa behind her, not close
enough for their bodies to touch – sadly and thankfully at the same time –, but enough for her to feel the heat of it, enough to make the hairs at the back of her neck stand every time her voice came from so close from behind.

She concentrated all her energy on focusing and not letting herself get lost in the sensation. It helped that Lexa was methodical, precise, patient and explained everything with ease. She was a natural teacher, demanding discipline and the best effort without being unreasonable, and giving just as much as she asked of her student. They moved on to practicing defense and attack moves, with Clarke mimicking Lexa’s movements beside her. After an hour of this, they squared across each other, the cutting edge of the blades turned to the other side and Lexa defending Clarke’s offensive blows. When it came to switch and for Clarke to defend from attacks, Lexa stopped and asked Penn to step in. Clarke frowned at this but said nothing.

It wasn’t until later, when they had started a similar routine of hand-to-hand combat, first going through practicing and mimicking moves, that Lexa summoned Penn again when it came to face off and actually fight.

“Why aren’t you practicing with me?” Clarke asked, trying to mask her annoyance.

“I will do you good to practice with someone stronger, bigger.”

“Bullshit,” she answered, having seen a momentary hesitance from Lexa.

“Clarke, it is more than likely that your adversary will always be bigger, stronger, mightier. The ground breeds and lets only the strongest survive. When one is not,” she said gesturing herself, “it would be foolish to rely one’s own strength to beat one’s opponent, or it will always be a losing battle. You need to learn how to use their size and strength against them, rely on your speed and agility, try to foresee their every possible move.”

“Even if that’s true, if that was the reason, you’ve asked Ryder to fight me instead of Penn.”

Lexa just froze, clearly caught, her mouth opening and closing without saying anything, but she quickly recovered and sighed.

“Just train, Clarke,” she said with exasperation.

“You are the best fighter in the land, Commander. I would rather learn from the best,” Clarke countered stubbornly. She didn’t even know why she was being so testy. The whole afternoon everything had been tense between them. It surely had nothing to do with having secretly looked forward to feeling Lexa’s body under the pretense of sparring. It absolutely, unequivocally had nothing to do with that.

“I… Clarke… I cannot. I…”

“Why not, Commander?” Clarke countered, huffing.

“I would never raise a hand against you. I do not wish to hurt you. I could not… ever…,” she almost whispered, looking to the side, clenching her jaw.

Without another word, she took her coat and shoulder guard and nodded to Penn in a silent request to continue with the training, and left looking anywhere but at Clarke.

Clarke was left there speechless, looking at her retreating figure.
After training with Penn for another good hour and feeling all her bones ache, Clarke left and made her way to the shop. She still had the gift to finish. She felt a heaviness and an unease from everything that had happened and wasn’t sure how to process Lexa’s behavior. And even less her own.

She returned to the tower somewhat later than she thought she would, and took a much needed shower after sweating and being smacked down into the damp ground more times than she could count. She could feel the pulsating heat from a bruise Penn had given her on the edge of her jaw and so many more on her body. She briefly considered taking her dinner in her own room but then shook her head and made the short trip to the pair of doors she couldn’t seem to stay away from.

A tightness in her stomach told her she was nervous but also something else that only intensified with each day that passed in the brunette’s presence in her life. Anticipation. Adrenaline. Relief. Frustration. All mixed together.

Part of her almost felt satisfaction at getting a rise out of Lexa, seeing the hurt cross her face, the ugly, dark part of her. The rational one told her that Lexa was the only one with something to apologize for, to pay for her sins. And yet, here she was, at Lexa’s threshold, once again. The big, beating heart her father used to tell her she was 90% made of was the one who ended up winning over, the one that made her feet move, addicted to the contradicting thrill and soothing comfort Lexa’s presence gave her.

She lifted her hand to knock just as the door swung open.

“Clarke,” the Commander said surprised. “I was just coming to see you.”

They froze in the doorway silent for a few seconds, a shadow of embarrassment and uncertainty about where they stood with each other filled the air with tension.

“Come in, please,” Lexa said finally breaking the awkwardness, stepping to the side to let Clarke in.

Lexa was wearing the black nightgown she had seen before and Clarke struggled to keep her eyes from lingering on the slit that revealed her leg. The blonde cursed internally at her treacherous hormones for the umpteenth time.

“I brought you something,” she announced as they made their way inside the room, gesturing the wooden box in her hands.

Instead of going to the balcony, she set it down onto the low table in the middle of the room and grabbed a cushion to sit on the floor, wordlessly inviting Lexa to do the same.

“I had this made for you,” Clarke said a bit shyly. “It’s a game.” She cleared her throat, still tense and slid the lid off the box to reveal a set of small wooden figures. She flipped the lid and set it on the table, a checkered board painted on it in black in white.

“You had it made? For me?” the Commander swallowed, a bit nervously, fliting her gaze from the board to Clarke’s face.

“Yeah. Well, I also helped with the paint. Be careful, it might still be a bit wet.”

Lexa lifted a carved piece and examined it closely, to occupy her hands. Her eyes suddenly grew wide and she threw a questioning look at Clarke.
Clarke kept her mouth from smiling and simply explained.

“It’s called chess. It’s a game of strategy between two players. The aim is to take out the other’s King by moving the pieces across the board. Each piece can only move in a certain way. You have the pawns, they can usually only move one square at the time,” she demonstrated lifting the piece to show it to Lexa.

The pawns were little short, squared off pieces of wood with the face of a gorilla, the *pauna*, a fierce fanged mouth painted in a growl. Lexa suppressed a chuckle, pressing her lips to prevent the smile that was threatening to break.

“Then you have the rook, it can move in a straight line as many squares as it wants,” the blonde continued, showing Lexa a piece shaped like a tower, except a little flame at the top was painted. It was obviously Polis tower. Lexa looked at Clarke, surprised at the humorous interpretation the sky girl had clearly given the game, unless they had gorillas in the sky. Clarke only shrugged her shoulders, keeping her serious face to mask the silliness that had inspired her at the wood shop.

“Then you have the knights, they moves in an L in any direction.” Lexa inspected the piece with a frown until she recognized the telltale uniform of the nightbloods. She smiled warmly at that.

“You have the bishop. It’s a pretty powerful piece. It moves diagonally like so.” This was the piece Lexa had first picked up and when she heard it was the bishop, her suspicions were confirmed. A short male figure with a big, bald head and a painted frown was clearly fashioned to resemble her trusted advisor, Titus.

“Clarke,” she breathed a chuckle, in a failed attempt at chastising her.

“I didn’t paint his head tattoo. He’ll never figure it out,” Clarke defended, with a glint of amusement.

Lexa couldn’t help the smile that pulled her muscles involuntarily. She shook her head, repressing the laughter that was bubbling up her chest.

“This is the King. He can’t move much, but he’s the one everyone is trying to attack or defend.”

Lexa inspected the tall, thin, smooth piece, trying to understand what it was. Until she saw the marking on one side. The symbol of the Coalition. The King was their people, the one to defend at all cost. She smiled again at this.

“Then you have the Queen, she’s the most powerful piece on the board and can move vertically, horizontally or diagonally. The greatest defensive and offensive piece, the best warrior, the ultimate strategist,” Clarke said as she herself was now trying to not smile.

The piece was clearly Heda herself, a long coat and face paint unmistakable. The wood master had nearly had a fit when Clarke asked him to carve it to Lexa’s likeness. He had adamantly refused so she had to use paint, later in her room, to make it look like her.

Lexa looked up at Clarke with mirth and wonder in her eyes, holding the piece. Then she abruptly stood up and left, startling Clarke. She strode into the bathroom and came back after a minute.

She set down the piece, still dripping water. She had washed off the black paint on the hair and facemask, revealing the pale wood it was made off. At Clarke confused face, Lexa explained.
“Heda,” she said pointing to the intact piece in Clarke’s hand. “Wanheda,” she gestured to the one in her hand, now sporting fair hair like Clarke’s. “TuHeda chess, like our marriage,” Lexa added before her brain caught up with what had slipped out from her mouth and she blushed bashfully.

It was Clarke’s turn to try and suppress a laugh, something that didn’t work. She barked out with laughter.

“I guess,” she said, still chuckling.

Clarke went on to explain all the rules, the moves, the point system. Lexa listened with a serious attentive face, making questions when she hadn’t understood something.

They played several games which Clarke won easily. Lexa always started with a different piece, asking again when she was unsure about a move. Clarke explained and still beat her in a few moves. Lexa started repeating previous moves and Clarke was surprised Lexa would repeat her same mistakes.

After a few more rounds, Lexa suddenly said, “Okay.”

And then, well, Clarke still beat her, but it took her more moves each time. Lexa preempting Clarke’s go-to offensive moves and surprising her by taking different routes, avoiding her routine defensive moves. After a few hours, they were at a near standstill. Lexa had taken almost all her pawns, her two rooks, one knight and one bishop. Clarke had left Lexa only her two knights and a bishop, and they were now aimlessly following and avoiding each other around the board.

“How the hell…,” Clarke huffed. Lexa only smirked, until it dawned on Clarke. “You threw those games at the beginning, didn’t you? You were studying my moves?”

“Lose a battle to win the war,” Lexa said with a lopsided smile. “But no, I did not lose on purpose. You beat me, but I was learning your tactics by trying different approaches or repeating to see if you changed strategy. Patience and observation of your enemy is sometimes the best weapon. It’s how you can predict the next move.”

After a few more minutes, Clarke did manage to beat her still.

“Well, that was… it’s been a long time since someone actually gave a run for my money,” she snickered with disbelief, and then explained her expression at Lexa’s confused frown. “That someone challenged me, made me work for it. But now I know your moves too, Commander,” she grinned with defiance.

“I look forward to… umm… ‘make you run for your money’… again in the future,” Lexa replied warmly.

“Well too,” Clarke said looking at her, resting her chin on her hand, with a smile filled with wonder. She shouldn’t really be surprised, Clarke thought to herself, considering Lexa’s sharp mind, but still.

Lexa looked down, bashful under Clarke’s open gaze, the candlelight making her beautiful eyelashes and cheekbones glow, a hinted smile on her gorgeous mouth. Clarke sighed quietly, with a longing ache that hit her hard.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa whispered, breaking Clarke out of her contemplation. “For today.” For my weakness, Lexa wanted to say. She had been foolish and weak, denying Clarke of the best training
because of the feelings she had for the blonde that she could not get under control.

However, after realizing just how brutal and unforgiving grounders’ training had been, how Penn had not held back and pummeled her to the ground every chance he got, telling her ‘the enemy will not take mercy on you’ and this was the only way to truly learn, Clarke could not imagine striking Lexa that way.

“No, it’s okay. I think it’s better this way too,” Clarke answered. They held each other’s gaze for a heavy second too long, Lexa trying to read the meaning behind Clarke’s words.

Clarke thought about her next move for a moment, if she should tell her what she meant or if she should just show her. Her mind briefly flashed to pushing Lexa against the table and pressing against her. Maybe that would be a better way to release her frustrations and anger, because Clarke knew part of the never-ending tension in the air between them was sexual frustration, on her part at least. Mixed with the anger and resentment, and her resistance against her repressed feelings, there was also this unbearable attraction she had for Lexa and it was driving her up a wall, making her grumpy and exasperated, making her lash out and have an erratic behavior.

She internally cursed the idiot who had ever come up with the tradition of waiting until after a wedding to consummate it. They weren’t religious on the Ark, but this was one of the many dumb customs they had retained under the guise of romantic tradition, even though many broke with tradition. And Clarke had always favored breaking the rules. It seemed this folly of an ideal had prevailed on the ground too, however, much to Clarke’s chagrin, since the Commander had never made a move.

Shouldn’t sleeping together be one of the first things though, Clarke mused silently, to make sure people are compatible in that regard before committing to the other forever. And the reality was that she was joining herself to the Commander, the decision was taken, and that meant a union in every sense. She would join her bed at some point. Maybe it would be better to get over with it. Maybe it would help ease things between them, reduce the tension, so their political alliance could be stronger. This would totally be better for her people, Clarke reasoned then promptly cringed at her hypocrisy. She wanted Lexa, preferably right now on this table, and this was the one thing she wasn’t going to lie to herself about. The very obvious reactions of her body wouldn’t let her even if she tried.

As if sensing the heavy atmosphere, Lexa got up from the table.

“It is very late,” she said looking out the window with some surprise. They had been so immersed in the game, the hours had gone by quickly. It was half past two in the morning already.

Clarke was relieved. A minute more and she would’ve done something she might regret. Or not. The day had been a whirlwind of emotions and Clarke suddenly felt drained. She got up and made her way to the door.

“Clarke, wait,” Lexa said quietly behind her. The blonde turned around.

“I… I had meant to take you to see the jasmine blooms today after our training, but…” she hesitated unsurely. “I got some for you… for your room,” she stumbled.

She took a roll of coarse cloth on one of the tables near the door and unrolled it to reveal a few stems filled with small, delicate white blooms. The sweet, intoxicating fragrance hit Clarke at once. It was one of the most amazing thing she had ever smelled.
She took it from Lexa’s hand. The Commander did not meet her eye, looking almost as if she regretted saying anything in the first place.

Clarke looked wide-eyed at the blooms and back at the Commander. She breathed them in and hummed blissfully.

_Goddamn this woman. Goddamn._

“Lexa,” Clarke whispered breathlessly. She took a step closer to the Commander who stepped back startled. Clarke took another step, taking a fistful of her nightgown in her fist to stop her from retreating again. She lowered her head and exhaled, resting her forehead on Lexa’s collarbone. She felt the brunette stiffen.

“How was she supposed to resist this goddamn soft, flower-giving, inexplicable creature? How?! She lifted her head and turned it to the side. She pressed a slow, but light kiss on the Commander’s cheek. She then turned around, not daring to look back and bid her goodnight before leaving the room.

If she had looked, she would have seen a gaping, flushed, wildly heart-beating Lexa, rooted to the floor in shock.

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The next morning, they spent it in relative silence, casting furtive, shy glances to the other while they ate breakfast.

The morning meetings went on without much trouble. Azgeda was departing that day with a Skaikru delegation up north with a few rovers to retrieve what they could of Farm Station half buried in the snows. The King was also finally returning to his kingdom that day.

Rohana was also leaving. The bison migration had arrived to the eastern plains with the spring, when most of the females would give birth and in a few month mating season would begin again, and this was the best time for the Plain Riders to start tracking the herds for the hunt.

A report also came from a scout sent by the trackers of the bandits. A clue had been found and was being sent to Polis, to the Commander. No word on what it was, however.

After the meetings, Clarke followed Lexa to the south of the city, a part she still hadn’t ventured into. They came upon a large building and entered a rounded doorway. Inside, it had high ceilings and large columns. One part of the inside wall had crumbled partially and gave way to a large
courtyard. Makeshift beds were everywhere outside in rows, filled mostly by children. So many were thin and looked weak, others were coughing. Rows to the left were mostly adults with bandages and bloody injuries.

Clarke looked at Lexa in puzzlement.

“Fisageda. Our place of healing.” Before she could continue, a red haired, tall woman came out and bowed at Heda.

“This is Brigid, Fisa kom Polis. She’s the head of the healers in Polis. She has agreed to teach you our healing techniques.” By the sour look on the woman’s face, she wasn’t terribly pleased with the idea.

“Brigid, Clarke kom Skaikru is the daughter of Chancellor Abby, the master of healers from the Sky. She trained under her. I am sure there are things we can learn from them too.”

Clarke was excited by the idea. She had loved when she had started her medical training on the Ark, even if it was abruptly cut short once she was imprisoned. That said, she was slightly confused that this might be Lexa’s gift of the day.

She turned to ask her when Lexa spoke again.

“The Fisa are greatly regarded among our people. The givers of life, the conquerors of death,” she said looking at a pregnant woman who came in at that moment grunting, her robe stained with a growing patch of wetness. She came in walking, rubbing her belly and grumbling. Another fisa came to her and took her to a chair, chatting idly as if the woman wasn’t in the middle of labor.

Lexa had planned to stay with Clarke in the same way she had at the pigment master, but a sentry came to her and whispered in her ear at that very moment. Lexa frowned.

“Clarke, Brigid. I must attend to something. I must leave you.”

“Is everything ok?” Clarke asked.

“I do not know. A report was sent from Delphi. I must see to it,” she said with apologetic eyes.

“Go. I will see you at training later?”

Lexa nodded and left.

Her afternoon with Brigid was exhilarating. Brigid was grumpy and spoke not a single word of English, with Ryder serving as their translator, but Clarke learned so many things. Most of the kids were sick due to malnutrition, most of them from sent from outside Polis and were being strengthened by a regimen of liver broth and beans. The cough on the other hand had been an illness they had been unable to treat. Their lungs bled and fevers wrecked their bodies. They crushed mint and drumstick leaves into hot water and made them breathe in the vapors. This helped but didn’t prevent many to succumb to the illness.

The adults, on the other hand, were mostly injured. Brigid taught her how the process the red seaweed with honey into a paste to avoid blood poisoning. Clarke tried explaining how to suture wounds in several layers, but without instruments it had been futile.

Brigid had then taken her to her medicine workshop, showing her the different herbs and roots, and
their uses. Rue oil for snakebites, crushed ginger for upset stomach, cooked flax seed to purge, lavender tea for headaches, valerian to bring sleep, vinegar and elderflower baths for fevers, potato peal for burns.

Ryder had struggled with their English names and gave them their literal translation which was completely different from how she knew them. It helped that Clarke had excelled in Earth Skills when it came to medicinal plant identification, so she could tell many by look alone. Although it had been highly entertaining to see Ryder huffing trying to name ginger, which in trigedaslen was something like ‘spicy old man’s toe’, or valerian which they apparently called ‘maiden’s nipple’ because of the small, rosy flowers. It had made the large man blush furiously. Clarke was failing miserably not to laugh at him.

They were interrupted when a commotion outside. The pregnant woman who had come in was in the final stages of labor, but she was in distress.

They had her crouching grabbing onto a pole, while one of the fisa held her from behind to take some of the weight off her legs. Another was kneeling with a blanket ready to receive the baby. She heard one of them curse.

“What’s happening?” she asked Ryder.

“It’s coming wrong,” he tried, frowning. “It will likely die.”

Clarke looked at him in shock. She crouched near one of the fisa and saw what was happening. She was fully dilated but instead of a head inside, a foot could be seen and the cord tangled onto its tiny purple feet.

“You need to turn the baby,” Clarke said with alarm.

“It is coming wrong,” Ryder said again, repeating Brigid’s words.

“I’ve seen my mother do it once. I can try. Let me try!” she said more forcefully.

She asked them to lay her down for a minute while she washed her hands in a basin.

“Tell her this is going to hurt. She has to stop pushing completely.” Ryder did as told.

She positioned her hands on the belly and applied pressure the way she had seen it done, pushing around to turn the baby around from the outside. The woman grunted harshly. Clarke continued when she felt it start turn, pushing harder to make it quicker, when she finally felt it gyrate in place. She used her hand to feel inside and felt the little head.

“Now. Push. Tell her to push!” she pleaded.

The fisa lifted her from underneath her arms to a crouching position again. It made it easier for both mother and child. The head finally breached.

“One more, c’mon. A big push,” she instructed. Once the torso came out, Clarke gently helped pull it out. The baby was purplish, the cord all tied around it.

Brigid moved quickly to cut the cord while Clarke and the other fisa untied the cord from around its neck. They maneuvered the baby girl upside down to clear her airways from amniotic fluid and then set her down. She still didn’t breathe. Clarke pressed her fist on her chest to get her to react
but still nothing. Clarke’s heart was beating so rapidly as she thought of what she could do.

She closed the baby’s nose and lifted its head. She breathed into to its tiny mouth twice and waited. Then did it again once more. She put two fingers on its chest and did compressions, her hand shaking, then blew air into her again.

An acute wail suddenly resounded all around the *fisageda*.

It was the baby girl’s cries as she pinked up.

Clarke cheered and smiled with tears suddenly bursting out of her eyes.

“You’re okay, baby girl. You’re going to be okay.”

She looked up, as she wrapped her with the cloth.

Brigid, Ryder, the other *fisa* and the mother were looking at her, mouth gaping. They had seen the dead baby. They had never seen anyone come back from death. They stared at Clarke and at the baby in shock, until they suddenly broke from their daze and started exclaiming wildly in grounder. She heard a word that sounded familiar, but she was too elated with everything to pay attention. She held the baby close to her, with teary eyes.

The others finally calmed down and focused on delivering the placenta, while Clarke busied herself with checking the baby’s vital signs. She might have been too long without oxygen, but the telltale signs of hypoxia weren’t present. Clarke examined her as thoroughly as possible and would radio Abby later to check. She cleaned the baby with a wet cloth and when the mother was finally done, she went to deposit her in her arms.

The tired, sweaty woman spoke to her in grounder. Clarke had no idea what she said, but it looked like she was thanking her.

As Clarke finally left after watching over them for a little while more, Brigid followed her outside.

She extended her arm and then said something, which Ryder promptly translated.

“*Fisa* Brigid says she would be honored to have you train with her, *Fisa* Clarke,” he emphasized the last part, smirking. Clarke only nodded as she gripped her forearm, still too overcome with emotions to say anything.

She had never experienced something like that. To give life, rather than to take it. Not even when she had healed Finn or revived Lincoln with her mother had she felt something like this. She wondered if Lexa had made her visit the healing house because of that. If that had been the intention of her gift.

She had been making way to the training grounds when her contemplation had made her stop distractedly in front of a knick-knack shop, filled with fixed and repurposed things. She was deep in thought when a voice come from behind.

“You do know it is not about gifts in the literal sense, Clarke kom Skaikru?”

Clarke turned around. “Sybil,” she smiled.
“Givnes-de does not mean gifts. Not really,” the old woman repeated, mistaking Clarke’s presence at the shop. The truth was she already had what she was going to give to Lexa that day, but she had been unsure until now.

“What is it about then, Blinka?”

“It is not about gifting things. Givness-de is about what you give of each other to each other.”

At Clarke’s quirked eyebrow, Sybil continued.

“People can be together for a long time as lovers, as houmon, but not everything of oneself might be revealed. Our lives are harsh, Clarke. Sometimes our people do not share their woes or their darkness with others to avoid burdening them even further. They do not share each other completely. Gon Ogeda is forever though and this month is about revealing oneself to the other, our light and our dark places, or fear and joys, our memories and our dreams. Not only to know them but to gift them to the other, to cause them. Even the time we wish to gift.”

“The time?”

“Most of our time is spent surviving. Fighting. Tilling the ground. Making it to the next day. Time we are willing to gift the other, the company given, the desire to share one’s time, is a gift. Most couples during Gon Ogeda usually see each other at least once a day.”

At this, Clarke suddenly felt the heat creep up her neck and cheeks in guilt. Once a day? It hit Clarke like a ton of bricks. The amount of time they had been spending together of their own volition, most of it initiated by Clarke, by the need to just exist in the same space at all times of the day and night.

Before she could process the meaning of it, another realization dawned on her. The real reason behind Lexa’s gifts. Clarke, whose only shattered dream had been to see the ground, counting the days until her execution, and had never allowed herself to want, to dream a life for herself, a future, a purpose. So Lexa had gifted her the view of the ground, and then everyday had shown her a choice, the possibilities of her world. Even though Lexa was convinced Clarke was a natural born leader, she was gifting her possible dreams and purposes for Clarke to decide for herself.

She’d learned of Clarke’s love of drawing and she’d taken her to a paint master, to learn his craft under him instead of just giving her paints. She was teaching her to hunt and to fight so she could protect herself, but now her random remarks throughout their training made sense. “Hunters are highly regarded among our people...or... It is an honor to serve as a warrior, it is a respected occupation.” And after her breakdown at the training grounds, sick with the idea of taking life, Lexa had gifted her with the possibility of giving life instead, as a healer.

_Lexa goddamn Trikru_, Clarke thought. _Could this woman be more…_

She didn’t finish her thought. She looked at Sybil and shook her head.

“Your granddaughter...she’s kinda one of a kind, isn’t she?” she asked rhetorically with a disbelieving smirk. “I have to go,” she added not waiting for an answer. Sybil’s knowing smile was answer enough.

Clarke jogged away before she turned around after a few paces and shouted out.

“Have dinner with us one day?”

Sybil nodded to her, clearly amused at the loud, vivacious, unusual sky girl.
Clarke was still high after the birth she had helped with and her encounter with Sybil, when she made it to the training grounds. Lexa and Penn were already there, while Ryder was following her. Clarke gave them all a smile. Nothing could change her good mood today. Not even the beating she was about to get.

Lexa studied her, arms behind her back, but said nothing. They went through the routine. Clarke was definitely good with the arrow out of all the weapons, her aim getting better and better. She did not do terribly bad with the swords and ended up sore from head to toe with the hand-to-hand combat, but improved with Lexa’s calm guidance at the side. Stopping Penn when he managed to land a blow and demonstrated how she could have blocked him or struck him. Clarke then stayed on to watch Lexa train the nightbloods, wincing when she saw how relentlessly Lexa attacked them and got back almost as hard, especially from Aden who was excellent with the staff.

They finally left for the tower together, walking side by side silently and only parted when they reached their respective bedrooms.

“I’ll see you for dinner,” was all Clarke said to Lexa.

After a thorough shower, trying to soothe her aching muscles, she made her way to Lexa’s room, her gift in her hand. Whatever uncertainty about giving this particular present she had before, it had vanished after today.

While they ate the delicious concoction the kitchens had made, Clarke animatedly recounted her day with Brigid and the baby they had delivered. When Lexa heard the part where she had revived the baby with CPR, Lexa’s spoon stopped midair. She tried to mask it and resumed eating.

“What does deimeika mean?” Clarke asked. “They kept saying it to me, well something like that. It sounded like the name in your story the other night.”

At this Lexa froze and set her spoon.

“It can mean several things. It can mean the Sun, the day maker, but we also call giving birth deimeikon, meaning giving light. Deimeikalona is the Sun Lioness, she gives birth to the new day, she breathes life from the skies,” Lexa frowned.

“Yeah, it sounded like that,” Clarke brushed it off and continued talking distractedly about how hard it had been to understand each other. “I should really try to learn more trigeda.”

“How do you say ‘thank you’?” Clarke asked after a bit.

“Mochof.”

“‘Today’?”

“Deyon.”
“Mochof kom deyon, Leksa,” Clarke tried. “Did I say that right?”

“You did,” Lexa smiled. “And you have nothing to thank me for. You saved that child, I merely convinced grouchy Brigid to take you on if you wished to be her apprentice. I should be thanking you for saving one of my people.”

“Our people,” Clarke countered.


“Wait, give me a minute.” Clarke got up and went to go get a parchment and a charcoal stick. After, instead of playing chess like she had planned, Lexa began teaching her trigedasleng. She would ask Lexa words and she’d write them down, in both languages, at least what she thought they might be written like phonetically.

“Most of our people don’t read. Those that do have learned because of they’ve been taught English, but many would rather not learn the tongue of the enemy. We have no written language of our own. It makes learning what we know more difficult,” she motioned to the books on her shelves.

They continued this way for an hour. They stopped when Clarke asked Lexa to teach her curse words, and the Commander had huffed, rolled her eyes and refused. Clarke had done it for no other reason than that predictable reaction, and chuckled.

“Lexa, I really wanted to thank you. Not just for today. I know what you are trying to do,” Clarke said quietly.

Lexa shook her head.

“You taught me first.”

“What?”

“That maybe life should be about more than just surviving.”

Clarke looked at Lexa for a long moment, startled at the apparent change. She wondered if Lexa really allowed herself to believe that for herself too.

She took out her present and gave it to Lexa.

“I wanted to give you this. It… this was my father’s,” Clarke said thickly, placing her dad’s watch in Lexa’s hand.

“Clarke,” Lexa exclaimed stunned, “do you not need it?” she continued, shaking her head in refusal.

“My father said some people were meant to be our compasses, to remind us about who we are and point us in the right direction. My parents were like that. This watch reminded him of that rather than to keep the time. See,” she pointed to a tiny arrow compass inside a circle behind the shattered glass. “Besides, it doesn’t work… and you taught me to read time another way,” she noted, pointing to the stars outside.

“Clarke, is it not the last thing you have of him? I cannot take this from you.”
“Lexa, you are making me learn how to fight so I can defend myself in case you can’t lend me your strength one day. I want you to have this, in case I’m not there one day to remind you that sometimes the right thing is to listen to your heart and not your head. That that can be the best compass.”

Lexa was staring at her with big eyes. “Are you sure?” she asked softly.

“It was never mine to keep anyways,” Clarke told her. Lexa furrowed her brows in question.

“My maternal grandfather gave this to my father when he married my mom. He always said he’d pass it on to the ‘lucky chump’ who married his own daughter. So I guess it actually belongs to you,” she shrugged smiling.

Lexa swallowed down the thick lump in her throat, not trusting her voice yet to answer Clarke. She looked at the watch, caressing the broken glass.

“Would you like me to fix it?” she finally asked.

Clarke shook her head. “Aren’t we bonding for forever and all that? This seems more fitting.”

Clarke left after that. She failed to mention to Lexa that her father had been very precise in his conditions.

*I’m going to give this to the lucky chump who makes my broody daughter smile and dream one day.*

*It was fitting,* Clarke thought to herself.

The next day, Sonja knocked at her door and woke Clarke up early, something that had never happened before. The waking up at least. She usually only came around about an hour after Clarke, who is an early riser, was already up. The blonde was half convinced she only did so to check if she has showered, now that she took her breakfasts with Lexa instead of having food brought up to her room. These days, she lingered until Clarke let her comb her hair among huffs and rolling eyes. When the blonde voiced yet again the ridiculousness of being groomed like this, it was Sonja, in her thick English who matched her eye roll and expressed her own frustration.

“You are just like the Commander! Stubborn as a mountain mule.”

At Clarke’s puzzled expression, Sonja explained.

“She won’t let us dress her like all Hedas. She only lets us do her hair because it is too long for her to do it herself, but she still does not like it. She makes her ‘face’.”
Clarke can’t help but snicker, knowing exactly what face she meant.

She doesn’t let Clarke go to breakfast with Lexa, instead ushers her to the ground floor and leads her to a huge room. The kitchens. There are about 30-40 people all rushing around, stirring pots and kneading doughs, chopping herbs, plucking feathers from boiled birds tied upside down from their feet.

“So, Wanheda, what do you need? I will help you,” Sonja inquired.

“Umm, what are we supposed to be doing here? Sonja, I have the hearings and the Council to attend to.”

Sonja shakes her head. “No meeting today. Full moon day,” she said, as if was evident.

“Full moon day?”

Sonja scrunched her brow as if confused with Clarke’s confusion. “Full moon day. Rest day. No meetings. So today is your Triad,” she tried.

Clarke just stared at her. “If it’s rest day, what about all these people?” she asked, still puzzled.

“Volunteers today. The living are always hungry, Wanheda.”

As Clarke shows no sign of understanding, Sonja motions for her to follow. They walk outside to an inner courtyard that look like old, unused stables. Several fire pits are roaring here outside too, meat on spits turning around. There are easily a couple of hundred people sat at wooden tables, eating quickly and giving their places as soon as they’re done. Many are missing a limb, more are kids in tattered clothes with determined frowns on their faces. An old man with shaking hands is trying to eat soup. Clarke turns to Sonja in silent question.

“The orphan children. The injured who cannot hunt. The old and weak. No one goes hungry in Polis. That is Heda Lexa’s law.”

Clarke has so many questions but the look on Sonja’s face tells her now is not the time. She follows her back inside.

“Now, we start?”

“Okay, I’m going to need a little help understanding here. What is it we are doing?”

Sonja huffs as if Clarke is being purposefully obtuse.

“You cook for the Commander. I help.”

“What? I have to cook for the Commander?”

“Yes, it is your Triad, Clarke kom Skaikru,” Sonja insists again as if she’s supposed to know what that means.

“You nurture, protect and care for your halfon. The Triad,” a familiar voice tells her.

“Casio,” Clarke greets.
"It always falls on the first full moon day of Gon Ogeda, Ambassador, as it gives you time for all three," he continues.

"So I’m supposed to cook for the Commander?" she asks again unsure. He nods.

"It’s a symbol that you nurture your other, that you can provide for them," he explains calmly.

"Casio, I’ve never cooked in my life, aside from roasting a few things I managed to hunt," Clarke stresses.

He shakes his head. "The idea is to share the meal you treasure the most," he supplies pensively.

Clarke frowns. *Do food tablet count?* she wonders, but then an idea hits her.

"This is going to be a disaster," she winces darkly.

Casio had stayed to help, or rather to watch with curiosity what on earth Wanheda was making. They had got to talking about Clarke’s desire to learn trigeda and the scrolls that Delphi scribes had been working on.

"I would be more than honored to teach you trigeda, Clarke, if you wish," Casio was saying to a smiling Clarke as Lexa came into the kitchens and froze at a distance.

A cold feeling hit her chest at that.

Casio was a handsome man. Lexa didn’t favor laying with men, but she could admire physical beauty and he was pleasing to the eye. He was one of the most promising Ambassadors she had had and he was often one of the few she genuinely enjoyed talking to at social gatherings of the Coalition. He was smart and well-spoken, and extremely well-read. It would not be surprising that Clarke could find him of interest. Or that she would prefer him to teach her trigeda, even if Lexa didn’t catch Clarke’s answer.

Lexa was not unreasonable. She didn’t actually think anything was happening between the two Ambassadors, but it could, eventually. It reminded Lexa about the real nature of this arrangement. It was a political union and nothing more, maybe a good partnership of minds and someday maybe they could be friends, but Lexa was foolish to think it could ever be anything more. Clarke after all had told her that was all she could offer, her heart or anything else was not on the table. So it was only a matter of time that Clarke might seek it elsewhere and Casio would be a rather admirable choice.

As long as they were very discreet about it, as getting caught could be deadly to both, it was not Lexa’s place to say anything. If anything, maybe she should put Clarke’s mind to rest in case she had any fears and thought she was expected to share her bed.

As if sensing her presence, a flour-covered Clarke suddenly turned around and gave her a small smile.

"Lexa."

"Clarke, I was looking for you."

Clarke’s smile faded as she saw Lexa’s stony face.
“Well, I’m done. At least I think I am. Where should we…?”

“Upstairs,” was all Lexa said, to hide the sudden sadness that had invaded her. She waited patiently for Clarke to gather her things, thanked Sonja and Casio for their help, and they went up.

Instead of going into Lexa’s bedroom, they went to a door at the end of the corridor. When they went in, Clarke was shocked to see it was a small sort of kitchen. It had a fire place with iron hooks to hold pots above the fire. A heavy wooden table with small bundles of dried herbs hanging, breads, cheese, eggs and fruits.

“What is this place?”

“My kitchen,” Lexa offered. “I had it set up when I moved to the tower.”

“Why? Don’t they literally cook for an army downstairs?”

“I often arrive late from scouting or stay up late. I do not think it fair to wake them up just because I am still about,” she shrugged.

Clarke was bewildered as with many things regarding the Commander, her selflessness chief among them. It seemed she refused to enjoy even the slightest potential perks of being a leader.

“It is only for small things in any case,” Lexa tried to play it down. She seemed to remember her pot at that moment and went to inspect it and stir, with furrowed brows. “I hope this will be to your taste. I do not often make it. I do not often make anything beyond tea or a bit of broth.”

“What, you cooked for me too?”

“Yes, it’s our Triad. I apologize for forgetting to tell you. I had not realized it myself until Oma came knocking and nagging this morning. I should have explained before.”

“It’s okay. And trust me, whatever you are making will be miles better that what I did. It smells amazing. I have no idea what I was doing,” Clarke chuckled derisively.

They sat and Clarke unfolded the cloth she’d been carrying around.

“So I’m pretty sure this is totally made up. Umm. My parents sometimes would ask the kitchen to give them their ration of the gross paste we ate in the mornings. It was basically cactus and bean powder turned into a porridge like monstrosity. Well, they’d get the powder. My dad fashioned a heating metal in our quarters and my mom would mix the powder with our water for the day and pretend to make pancakes,” she chuckled. “We didn’t know what pancakes were other than what they looked like in some movies. I guess it was just to change it up a bit, to at least chew something differently. They were gross by the way, their pancakes, but it was fun pretending.”

“Sonja got me some wheat flower and helped me come up with something that won’t totally make you throw up, I hope. At least it’s shaped the right way,” she said sheepishly.

Lexa was curious and a bit confused with what Clarke meant by all that, but always enjoyed the stories of her family up in the stars. It was such an absurd concept for Lexa somedays.

“May I?” she asked, her hand breaking a piece of the round dough.
“Wait, you’re supposed to put something on it?”

“Like what?”

“Um, something sweet I guess?”

Lexa thought for a moment and reached for the honey jar. She dipped it in and chewed.

It was, well, chewy and a weird mix of savory and sweet.

“It’s horrible, isn’t it? You’re making a face.”

“I am not. I’m merely contemplating its taste.”

Clarke snorted and rolled her eyes, deciding to try for herself, and scrunched up her nose.

“It’s weird. So that’s a no for grounder pancakes,” she grimaced. “At least I didn’t ruin the cherry pie,” she exclaimed sarcastically.

Lexa frowned.

“My dad said the first Griffin to ever reach the ground, his first duty would be to make cherry pie in celebration. He was obsessed with the idea even though none of us knew what that actually would be like either. He was a silly romantic who watched old movies and dreamed of random old world things.”

“Like cherry pie?”

“Like cherry pie,” she smiled. She didn’t have many happy memories, but her parent’s antics were one of the few of them she treasured.

After a moment, Lexa got up and hummed it was ready.

She poured a thick, red soup into two clay bowls and sprinkled something on it, then set one in front of Clarke.

“It’s something my mother used to make on cold days,” Lexa smiled nostalgically.

“Your mother?” She had never talked about her mother, but of course she had one. She hadn’t magically sprung from thin air.

“She was the Keeper of Words of Polis. And a great warrior when she had to be one too.”

“What is that?”

“She made sure the knowledge was kept alive. She cared for the written words. Since the dawn of our time, Hedas have been tracking down all the books they could find. Most were brought to Polis, many have been sent to Delphi as well for the scribes. Most of them were lost, burned by the fires, crumbled with time. Centuries of history and knowledge gone. We are like the child in your book, stumbling and blind, sometimes. The Keepers were tasked by Hedas to preserve as much as could be found. I have tasked our scribes to reproduce as many as possible, especially those that may be of use. The challenge is for more people to learn to read.”

“Where do you keep all the books?”
“At our library.”

Clarke’s eyes widened like coins.

“You have a library in Polis?!”

“Yes. I can show it to you, if it pleases you.”

“Yes, it would. Greatly,” she said with excitement. “Now I feel foolish to have given you a book when your mother had the damn Alexandria library of the grounder world,” Clarke winced.

“It was not just a book, Clarke,” she looked at her meaningfully. Clarke nodded, suddenly feeling a blush rising.

Thankfully Lexa interrupted the heavy moment. “How do you know it’s called Alexandria?”

“What?”

“Our library?”

“No, I meant that as a joke, you know the great Library of Alexandria. Wait, that’s what it’s really called?”

“Like the one burnt down during the First Ancients, yes.”

“Lexa, were you named after it too?” Clarke’s smile widened.

“Yes.” Lexa said simply. “My mother was a wise woman. She taught many of our leaders, many of our people. She was the head of the scribes and keepers.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was traveling with a convoy near Blue Cliff, north of TonDC. The Mountain Men came,” Lexa said quietly.

“Lexa…”

“She was a great swordswoman. She took six of them down before they killed her. The rest of the convoy disappeared inside the Mountain, never to be seen again. Now we know why,” Lexa recounted quietly.

“So you grew up with her? She lived here in Polis?”

“I did until I was six, when I was called to train as a nightblood. She lived just outside Polis, in the hill house were Oma… where Sybil lives now. Once you enter training, ties with your own family are discouraged. I would see her in town sometimes. She was killed when I was eight. I remember the falls at the hill house though. She would make this soup and play the piano while I read something she had brought me that week.” She wasn’t smiling, but there was warmth in her eyes as she remembered.

Clarke had been too absorbed to eat, but now she tried the soup, curious. She couldn’t help the small moan that escaped her as she did.

“This is delicious, Lexa. What is it?”
“It’s nothing complicated. Roasted tomato soup with shredded lamb.”

“Heaven on a plate,” Clarke sighed, taking another spoonful. “I’m sorry Lexa, but I think it’s safe to say if we ever have to fend for ourselves, you’ll be the one cooking. I can hunt?” Clarke tried with mirth. “I’m told I need to prove I can provide for my future spouse.”

“You’ll have to get better with that arrow then,” Lexa responded with an amused glint in her eyes.

“Hey, I’m getting better!” Clarke protested.

“You are. You are naturally talented with it.”

“What about your father,” Clarke went back to their conversation. She was fascinated to learn more about the brunette.

“He was the general of the Shadow Valley cavalry.”

“Your father was from another clan?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re both Trikru and…?”

“Louwoda Kliron kru. In a way, but the child is always his mother’s clan.”

“So it’s matrilineal?” This was news to Clarke.

“The first Heda was a woman, so yes. The clans trace their lines to the first Heda.”

“Wait, I thought the Plain Riders were the ones who had the cavalry?”

“They make most of it, yes, but Polis and the Shadow Valley have their own, although they are much smaller. Brigid, who you met yesterday, she’s Louwoda, from both parents. Most look like her.”

“You mean redheads?”

Lexa nodded. “She came here with the last Heda who was Louwoda. Many Hedas and nightbloods have come from that clan. The spirit has chosen them often.”

“What happened to your father?”

“He died in the great wars. My mother and him, they never… they never were houmon. He came here during the festivals to see us.”

“Do you remember him?”

Lexa acquiesced. “He was thin, young, with a short reddish beard, his grey-green eyes always serious. He wore his hair the like Louwoda, in thick dreads. Taught me how to ride. He was quiet. He was killed a year before my mother,” she reminisced pausedly.

Clarke couldn’t imagine growing up without parents, like Lexa did. Their’s only a distant memory. Was it the same for all the nightbloods, sleeping scared and lonely in their beds barely big enough to carry a weapon, with no family, doing nothing but training and preparing to sacrifice their lives for their people? It was incredibly sad.
They finished eating and then went to Lexa’s room to retrieve something they would need for the next step of the Triad.

While Clarke waited, that’s when she noticed for the first time that one of the tables in Lexa’s room was in fact an old, very worn piano, covered in white cloth.

She had seen one inside Mount Weather, so she recognized the shape.

She sat down and opened the lid. She touched a few keys softly. She was distracted and didn’t notice Lexa walking behind her, until she sat next to her.

“Do you play?” the brunette asked.

Clarke shook her head. “I know some basic notes. Some people up on the Ark fashioned some guitars and a violin with recycled pieces of aluminum and wires, but no. Kinda hard to get a piano up in space. Do you?”

“Some. My mother taught me to read music, but most music sheets she had were burnt when the house was attacked during a raid. The piano was thankfully saved and brought here. I can’t seem to remember her favorite piece. I’ve tried to recreate it from memory for years, but... I’m not sure what is memory and what is imagined anymore.”

“Will you play it for me?” Lexa stared at her for a beat then nodded seriously.

She started playing a slow, melancholic piece, her long graceful fingers grazing the keys delicately. It was beautiful but unusual. There was something oddly familiar about it Clarke couldn’t place.

“That’s all I know or think I remember. I can never get it right,” she knitted her brows.

“Play it again. I think I’ve heard it.” Lexa complied but Clarke couldn’t place it, so she relented.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

In the next days, Clarke would find herself humming the tune so she wouldn’t forget it. It pulled at the edge of her mind, like a lost memory, crouched in a corner where the growing morning light of the window is almost touching it but not quite.

It was getting harder to ignore just how much she wanted to learn about Lexa. She felt it was like filling and adding minute details to a painting that had just been a sketch before. She felt guilt, however, guilt for wanting to learn more. For maybe letting her guard down. Lexa was just overwhelming to her.

“We must go,” Lexa said finally and closed the lid, breaking her out of her daze.

“Where are we going?”

“The joining of weapons. We join our weapons.”

Clarke remembered Casio’s words from earlier. “The hafons protect each other,” she realized.
“Correct,” Lexa replied. “Your weapons are kept by the sentries. They will bring them to you.”

They made their way through the city until they reached a fortified pavilion with heavy metal grates for gates.

“The sentry fort,” Lexa explained. “Blacksmiths are only allowed to work here. No weapon goes in or out without their permission.”

The yard had long lines of blacksmiths pounding on pieces of molten metal, forges burning behind them. Some were pouring liquid metal into casts to make arrow heads and spearheads. Other huge, muscular, soot-covered men were forming blades, heavy hammers in hand. After a few hits, they would sometimes plunge the reddened blades into shallow pools of water, vapor hissing in thick clouds when they did.

They went to an old man with slanted eyes and a greying hair. He was wearing a navy colored robe and had beautiful blades on display, very different from the crude ones in other stalls.

“Masta Amakuni.”

The man bowed. “Heda.”

“Clarke, this is Amakuni, our best blademaker. He will make our new weapons.”

Just as she said this, a sentry appeared to the side and set down a roll of leather. Inside were Clarke’s gun and the Azgeda dagger she had traded, as well as a small blade she used to skin her hunt.

“I traded that,” she said confused.

“I know. It is surprising you managed to smuggle it past my men. The wood maker turned it in. Weapons really are forbidden in our cities, Clarke. Only Heda and city sentries can carry them. But you know this.”

Clarke didn’t even pretend to look guilty. “What about him?”

“He was compensated.”

Lexa suddenly unsheathed her two swords strapped at the back. She gathered both in one hand.

“This were my mother’s swords. She died with them. Then they were mine and have served me well.”

Without another word, she snapped them in two on her knee. Clarke gasped.

“Lexa, they were your mother’s. Why?”

“Now they will be ours, forged anew. We will be each other’s blade,” she said solemnly as she gave them to the master blacksmith. He did quick work of the handles and placed the pieces under to forge to start melting them.

Clarke looked at the already melting blades, imagining all the history they had, the blood they had drawn, the legacy they carried, the nation they erected from the ashes.
She picked up her gun. This thing with which she had taken so many with the pull of a trigger, only to see their eyes dim and their clothes tinge red. Like Dante, like the snipper, like so many more. But she had protected with it. Without it, Lincoln would have died, those trapped inside the Mountain too, including her mom. Life, death, weapons. They weren’t black and white. How you wielded them did make a difference. The fact that the people they used to call savages completely forbade them from their cities had been the ultimate irony.

She handed the gun to the blacksmith, who looked at it with some mistrust. He used a large iron plyer to take it from her to avoid touching it, and set it in the same hollow rectangle where the swords had already nearly melted.

Maybe it was fitting to see their weapons, and their history with it, merge into a single common source to protect them both.

“I will be your blade too,” she repeated the words, watching the gun become red as it heated and started losing its shape, bleeding its dark color into the bright metal of the swords.

“Heda, chit stein?” Amakuni asked.

(Heda, what marking?)

Lexa turned her back to him and moved her hair aside. Amakuni at first widened his eyes, but masked his reaction and studied it closely, so he could later engrave it at the bottom of the hilt. Clarke had the sudden urge to see what it was. She’d contorted herself in the mirror to get a good look and could only see a thick ring of sorts, but before she moved Lexa had already turned back.

The man told them it would be ready in a week or so and gave Lexa a temporary sword for the meantime. They left the fort and walked through Polis. The roads seemed to be less crowded than usual, which reminded Clarke something she had been meaning to ask.

“So on the day of each full moon, there is a day of rest?”

“Yes, trade lessens that day as do most occupations. Time to spend with… others. Time to reflect. To slow down.”

“I saw the kitchens. The kids.”

“Wards of the city, of the Coalition. Most have lost both parents and can’t feed themselves. Not yet or not enough. We make sure they can one day when they are stronger. They can train with any of the orders if they wish. For now, they help with what they can. Forage. Stable work. Some of the hunters take them with them, as they can burrow easily into rabbit holes or shell digging with the fishermen. But it is not required, although most do seek to contribute. Many come to Polis because of this. The majority of clans struggle to feed all their people, especially after hard winters or those that chose to live in the sands or the rock mountains. We struggle too but we try. It is our duty.”

“But how can you feed so many? How do you provide for so many that can’t for themselves?”

“They may not now, but most eventually do. They can join any of the city orders as volunteers as soon as they are old enough for a time. Those who survive usually do. They see it as their duty too, as a question of honor. A people who cannot care for those yet not able to is not a people than can survive Clarke. The volunteers in the kitchen today, those who serve during full moon days, were
all fed there in the past.”

“Is there a reason rest day is during the full moon?” Clarke asked more curious than ever about this new world she was now a part of.

“The full moon makes people more… agitated, some say. More brawls are started, more predators come out at night to hunt, more ships are lost to strong tides, more women go into labor, more children are… conceived,” she added, the tips of her ears coloring slightly.

Clarke briefly wondered if this was the reason her own hormones had been in disarray lately, but one look at the woman beside her told her it had nothing to do with the lunar effects and all to do with the raw appeal of the green-eyed beauty herself.

“So it’s better when less people are about? Safer?”

Lexa nodded and hummed.

“Speaking of which, we should perhaps be getting back,” the Commander said pensively, but lead them the long way back to the tower. It was early afternoon after all. They strolled quietly, enjoying the somewhat empty streets and Clarke enjoying the calm demeanor on the Commander. Surely no one deserved a day off more than her.

Once they got to the tower, they wordlessly and without actually agreeing to went to Lexa’s room and spend the afternoon together. They played some chess and then Lexa busied herself with a book, while Clarke drew. She didn’t leave even when Lexa fell asleep on the couch, book in hand.

Clarke didn’t realize it was so late until someone came knocking on their door, which startled Lexa.

“Enter,” she said after fully awaking, giving Clarke time to hide her drawings.

Sybil, Sonja and three other girls entered.

“Blinka, to what do we owe this honor?”

“Oh, I was just nearby and saw Sonja. I was told you had not fulfilled your last Triad and wanted to come give you my blessing before.”

Lexa glared at Sonja who paled visibly.

“Heda, I did not say anything. She tricked me with her words,” Sonja stuttered in trigeda.

“Don’t scare this child, Lexa.”

“We are not doing the last one. It is not necessary.”

“But it’s tradition,” Sybil scolded playfully.

“Tradition is not law. No one will know,” Lexa defended. “It’s… an absurd tradition.”

“The spirits will know,” she replied facetiously, making Lexa scoff.
“What exactly is this about?” Clarke asked, a bit worried although also somewhat amused at Lexa’s annoyance.

“Nothing. It’s unnecessary.”

“A hafon must nurture, a hafon must protect, a hafon must take care,” Sybil recited. “It is the ways of Gon Ogeda.”

“Lexa, if we have to do whatever it is we have to do, I’m sure it’s not so terrible, and if it’s important, I don’t mind… I think.”

Not so terrible? Lexa thought. Why did the spirits punish her this way?

“Fine,” she muttered and left for the bathroom with two of the girls scurrying behind.

“Why she gets this upset over a silly little tradition, I don’t understand,” Sybil faux wondered. “I trust you won’t let her get out of this, Clarke?”

“That’s good enough for me. If anyone can out-stubborn her it is you,” the old woman chuckled and left.

Sonja and the remaining girl took Clarke to her room and ordered her to take a quick shower, something that sounded the alarm bells in her head.

She finally demanded to know what was happening and when they told her, she chuckled and wondered why Lexa had made such a fuss. That is until they showed her what she was supposed to wear. Clarke swallowed hard.

If they hadn’t pushed her through Lexa’s doors she would’ve probably just stood there all night, heart pounding and then fled.

She entered and breathed in.

Lexa was already sitting on the couch with her hands crossed on her lap.

“Clarke, I’m sorry…” she said getting up and then the words died in her throat.

They were both facing each other. Barefoot, hair loose, lathered in scented oil the girls had helped them put on, making their skin glow golden with the flickering candle lights. They were wearing a white, thin, short wrap that ended high on their thighs and tied around their necks, leaving very little covered or left to the imagination. Their backs completely uncovered cut to their lower back. A pillow case was made of more cloth than they were wearing, Clarke had thought when they had handed it to her. It was taut over their chest but also low cut, slightly looser in the mid-section and tighter again around their thighs.

They were wearing nothing underneath, anywhere.

Lexa swallowed thickly. She couldn’t help her eyes roaming over Clarke from head to toe, drawn like a moth to fire to her ample, otherworldly cleavage. Clarke wasn’t faring any better, her eyes magnetized to Lexa’s long, tan legs and her beautiful chest, perky and delicate. The fact that the
material was so thin didn’t help either. Lexa was utterly mortified when she felt her nipples harden under the intensity of Clarke’s gaze and her body’s treacherous reaction to the vision before her. She averted her eyes suddenly, impossibly embarrassed and moved to break the spell. If she hadn’t she would have seen Clarke react in the same way.

*It’s just the cold, the wind, yep,* Clarke tried to convince her mind, even though the room felt like it was suddenly 100 degrees.

“I’m sorry, Clarke. This… this is a… tradition… I…” she tried, her brain unable to string words together. Clarke’s had entered system shutdown. She didn’t even try. So she walked closer, needing to move before the shaking of her legs betrayed her.

She went to tremulously sit on the cushions that had been set on the floor, and Lexa followed sitting on her knees in front of her.

“We don’t have to. They would never know,” Lexa tried again, anything to get out of this torture they had her submitted to. Being this close to Clarke, dressed like that, having to touch her and not being able to do anything… death was preferable.

“It’s okay,” Clarke croaked out. She cleared her throat. “Why?” was all she could muster.

“Why the tradition?”

Clarke nodded, struggling to keep her eyes on Lexa’s face.

“To nurture, to protect, to take care.” Talking was good, it would distract her, Lexa thought. “Training, tilling, hunting, scouting, all that we do leaves our bodies weary. *Hafons* should take care of each other’s body,” her voice slightly trembled at the last part. “Help soothe it, cherish it, restore it.”

She uncapped a small oil bottle on the low table and poured some on her hands. She turned her palm up and Clarke slowly put her hand in hers. With both her thumbs, Lexa pressed the center of Clarke’s palm and massaged it outwardly in circles, slowly and tenderly. Clarke’s blood roared in her veins at the unusually long and intimate contact, setting off tiny lightning storms roaming across the landscape of her skin.

And this was just one hand.

Lexa stroked and pulled each finger, pressing on her fingertips, soothing and burning, calming and scorching, all at once, like the delicate breath of a lover on one’s neck, simultaneously tender and shiver-inducing.

Just a goddamn hand.

Or two, as she motioned for the other hand and repeated the same treatment.

With a quirk of an eyebrow, she asked permission to continue with her arm. She massaged Clarke’s arm with such delicacy, slowly like she was handling fragile porcelain, her long fingers warm and soft, but causing her skin to set alight, to yearn for her touch almost painfully.

There was a flood of relief that engulfed her with each brush of a fingertip, like an errant man in the desert’s first glass of water. There had been this electric, unspoken pull between them since day one, of dancing around each other, daring to barely graze a hand, touch an elbow, hover closely to
each other, always holding back. Finally, feeling Lexa’s hands now roam and kneed and overwhelm her skin all at once was inebriating.

Wordlessly, Lexa moved to her other arm, keeping her gaze set on the task instead of meeting Clarke’s eyes.

She then passed the bottle to Clarke and offered her own hand. *Hafons care for each other.*

So Clarke softly took her hands, not daring to linger lest she get lost in the sensation of holding her hands for the sake of it, for the comfort of it, like a storm-ravaged ship finally setting anchor.

She recreated the same sequence, but she would be lying if she wasn’t secretly enjoying being able to touch Lexa’s beautiful golden skin to her heart’s content. She could never get over how soft and delicate every inch of Lexa was. How on Earth did she manage to beat men twice, thrice her size, was something Clarke didn’t understand. She wasn’t muscular like all grounder warriors she had seen. Even Octavia after a few months of training was bulking up, but Lexa, Lexa was all grace like some sort of mystical river nymph who spent her days dipping her toes among the water lilies. She was the most beautiful thing Clarke had ever seen and now touched.

Lexa then moved to sit to her side, gesturing to her legs and Clarke thought this was both the best and worst thing she ever had to endure. She had nearly lost it with just hands and arms.

Lexa poured more oil on her hands and massaged both her calves, loosening the aching muscles Clarke did have after her days training with Lexa and Penn. It felt wonderful. It also gave her all the freedom to look at Lexa’s face, eyes lowered and set in concentration. She took in all her features at her leisure, drinking her in, mapping the tiny freckles that dusted her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, her parted plump lips, that absurd jawline. If Clarke had any wits about her, she would’ve noticed the dazed smile on her own lips as she examined Lexa. She would’ve acknowledged the aching longing for the woman had her heart not been beating wildly in lust and wonder, obfuscating everything.

She was brought out of her reverie when Lexa’s hands suddenly hovered over her thighs, unsure. Clarke finally managed to catch her eye and only nodded in reassurance. She heard Lexa shakily exhale as she set both her hands on one of her thighs and massaged upward then down again, trying to avoid getting too near the edge of her poor excuse of a nightgown. She was thankful, lest the extent of her arousal be made evident to Lexa, yet at the same time thought she was going to die of need and of effort to suppress the sounds her throat fought to push through. Lexa made quick work of her other leg, her cheeks sporting a deep blush but also relief when she was done.

It was Clarke’s turn. She mimicked Lexa’s movements again, her heart galloping like those soon-to-be hunted bison, making the thunder of their collective hooves roll through the plains. There was so much smooth skin under her fingers, Lexa’s skin. The woman who had haunted her since she set eyes on her was wearing a napkin, and nothing underneath. And she was touching her. She ran her hands up her thighs, perhaps a little too suggestively, too lingeringly, too dangerously. With one hand on each thigh, she squeezed and ran them up, her thumbs getting burningly close to dipping under the edge. She was only human.

She looked up to see Lexa breathing heavily and flushed, the material over her breasts showing how not at all indifferent this was leaving her.

Maybe she should let her hands follow their natural course. She wanted her. God, how she wanted her.
But Clarke realized that no matter how much she wanted her, she wasn’t ready. There was still unresolved resentment and mistrust, even though she wanted to overcome it, and she didn’t want to do anything until she could give herself truly, fully, if Lexa wanted her too.

“Clarke!” Lexa nearly squeaked, when her hands had in fact brushed underneath the edge of the gown while she was distracted with her thoughts.

“Back,” she managed to stutter and moved away from her hands.

She positioned herself behind Clarke. “I’m going to do your back. Is that okay?” she asked, her voice almost unrecognizable.

“Okay.”

She started with her lower back.

God, she hoped she could overcome it quickly, because it took every single shred of self-control not to turn around right now, push Lexa down on the furs and get rid of that flimsy handkerchief of a dress.

She wanted to tell her though. Tell Lexa to give her time. That she wanted more. She just needed more time.

Just as Lexa grabbed the knot of the dress on her neck and pulled it up, Clarke spoke up.

“Lexa, I…”

Lexa removed her hands as if burnt and sat up.

“I’m sorry, Clarke. I was… I just wanted to look at the tattoo properly. I wasn’t…”

As chance would have it, Lexa was having her own internal battle at the same time than Clarke.

Her thoughts however had gone to Clarke probably hating her if she knew how much she wanted her. To Clarke eventually wanting other people. To Clarke not wanting her. She only asked the spirits to give her strength to resist this pull she had towards Clarke. Because it was unfair to Clarke. She had never asked for Lexa to spring on her her feelings or her desires.

But then she had gotten distracted. She could finally see the tattoo and she had wanted to nudge the dress where it was tied over it to get a better look. And Clarke had probably been thrown off, thinking she was trying to undress her and that’s why she had spoken up. To protest surely. Nothing distressed her more than Clarke thinking she might be forced to share Lexa’s bed as part of this arrangement. Her stomach turned just at the very thought that this was something the blonde could be worried about.

She stumbled to her feet.

“I’m sorry, Clarke. You have nothing to worry about.”

Clarke got up and faced her, brows furrowed in confusion.

“It’s okay. I just wanted to tell you something.”

“No, you don’t need to. You never need to worry about this… about us… about you having to…
having to give yourself… that was not part of the arrangement. I want to make that perfectly clear. Nothing, nothing will ever happen between us in that way.”

Clarke felt like she had been punched in the heart. Had she been misreading the signs? Was this something Lexa did not want in any way? Had Lexa first kissed her just in the heat of the battle, like something you do on a whim before facing death? She couldn’t really want to spend their lives together without being together, completely? Were they supposed to become basically nuns and never be with anyone? Why?

“Lexa…” was all Clarke could muster, embarrassed, confused, self-conscious.

“I hope this clarifies any fears or misunderstandings, Clarke,” Lexa said, her chest constricting as she uttered every word, swallowing the sinking feeling she felt enveloping her.

“I think I will take a walk in the gardens,” she said after a beat of silence, slipping on a robe and sandals.

“Goodnight, Clarke,” she said as she made her way out of the room, wanting to escape the pain of what she had done, what had to be done.

Love was weakness.

Clarke stared at the door, rooted to the floor, heart aching, bleeding. Maybe the full moon did make people act crazed. It was how she felt right now, but most of all, most of all, she knew. She knew at this moment what she had not wanted to admit to herself until now. That it wasn’t just lust or wonder. This was about the shattered, tattered, mangled thing in her chest barely being kept together by her ribcage and sheer obstinance. This stubborn, trampled muscle who, against her will and purposeful blindness, had already given itself to Lexa. It had from quite some time now.

It had from the start.

She left for her own room and tried to find sleep but that night, instead of her usual nightmares, they were replaced by dreams of Lexa.

Agitated, confusing, hazy dreams, but dreams nonetheless.

Chapter End Notes

TRIGEDASLENG (some made up):
Deimeika: Sun (from: day maker)
Drop of: lose, lost (from: drop of)
Fisa: Healer (from: fixer)
Fisageda: healing place, hospital of sorts*
Geda: place; town (from: get together)
Gifa: giver (can also mean carer of)
Hou: home
Hozon: forever, never-ending (from: horizon)
Keryon: soul (from: carry on) although for grounders soul and life are almost one in the same
Lona: lioness (from: Leona in Spanish)
Niron: loved one, lover (from: near-one)
Natgifa: panther

NAME ORIGINS:
Amakuni: legendary swordsmith who first created the first single-edged longsword with curvature (eventually katanas) in Japan around 700 AD
Brigid: Irish goddess associated with healing (no, she’s not irish by coincidence)
Consus: Roman deity who was the protector of grains and storage facilities.
Myron: derived from Greek meaning ‘sweet oil, perfume’
Pekko: an ancient Finnish god of crops, especially barley and brewing
Picton: inspired by the Latin word ‘pictus’ meaning painted, and where the Picts got their name
Otokebekoah: from the tip of Lake Ontario to all eastern Quebec. A fusion of words deriving from French phonetics
Sabian: orginated from an Arabic word meaning ‘dyers’ or ‘immersing something.’
What We Build

Chapter Notes

Grab a mug of tea and read it in several sittings. LOL. It appears I am incapable of writing shorter chapters! XD
I hope the length makes up in some measure the long delay. Happy new year!!! May 2018 bring you joy! Love you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The new day warmed the tree tops above Polis with golden beams of sunshine and stretched its sleepy arms of blue, cloudless skies and cheerfully chirping birds to rouse the city awake. The air was crisp and fresh, carrying the scent of the sweet bluebells and white asters flowering in the rolling hills of the woods surrounding them, as the last remnants of winter thawed and the ground burgeoned with tender green tendrils and buds erupting from the brown earth, opening their petals and uncoiling new leaves under the warming sun.

The fearful silence that reigned in the winter, hushing even the animals with the sense of an ever-present looming menace lurking in the shadows, had now been driven out with the brightening days and a flurry of activities had taken over in the waking forest. Hibernating animals burrowed out and scurried about in search of their first meal after their long sleep. The cocoons had burst open and butterflies dried their frail, quivering, newborn wings in any patch of sun they could find, before spreading their bright colors and flying off, the nectar of the blooming flowers like a siren’s call to them. The white-tailed deer stomped their hoofs as they milled about, the bucks scratching their new fuzzy antlers against tree barks and the does foraging the forest floor, gathering strength before they gave birth to litters of fawns that currently swelled their bellies and would be born in the coming weeks.

Lexa stood at her balcony breathing the air in, watching the city and the forest around her awaken
from its slumber. Spring was secretly her favorite season of the year, when new life emerged and burst forth everywhere, filling the ground with the scent of promise, of possibility, of a new chance.

The river gulls were making a raucous chorus too just west of the city. That meant the last harvest of mussels was starting near the harbor. Their annual spawning would happen soon, when they reproduced and spread downstream, so the fishermen closed the season with one last harvest before, to ensure the new generation could sprout and grow uninterrupted until the end of the fall when the new harvest of the precious shell would begin anew. As the fishermen lifted their basket filled with clusters of mussels pulled from long ropes in the water and cleaned them with coarse brushes, the gulls were having a feast next to them, squawking noisily as they managed to steal a few and fight over the leftovers. In the next few days, the streets of Polis would be filled with the fragrant steam coming from them, as the taverns and homes in the city cooked them quickly in iron pots or directly on grates over coals, as they spoiled easily and couldn’t be stored.

A small smile appeared on her lips at the memory of Gustus who would eagerly wait for this week each year and would wolf down bowl after bowl, until he had eaten twice his weight and then grumbled in pain from over-eating.

This year everything looked more lively than usual, teeming with life, unburdened now from the shadow the Mountain cast on them for so long. If they only knew what Lexa knew, the clue the trackers of the stolen shipment had found and sent to Polis with a scout, maybe they’d be looking over their shoulder in dread again. But the burden of this potential new threat brewing was hers to carry as their protector and they deserved a respite.

No one knew yet. Not even Titus.

Not even Clarke.

Clarke.

Her first instinct had been to tell Clarke, but she had hesitated and hesitation turned to doubt, so she hadn’t yet. To make matters more complicated, everything with Clarke had been strained ever since the night of their Triad.

Several days had gone by and the awkward tension still loomed between them. They weren’t avoiding each other per se. Every morning they still had breakfast together, but it was a mostly quiet affair where they exchanged only shy glances and brief discussions of whatever was happening in the Council. Lexa still trained Clarke every evening too, just as thoroughly and meticulously as possible, but their talk was limited to whatever exercise they were practicing.

There were no night visits to each other’s room to play chess, read or exchange gifts. Lexa had been spending her nights meeting in secret with her spies and scouts from across the lands, interrogating them on every detail they had seen or heard in the pasts months that might have gone unnoticed but perhaps could shed light on who was behind everything. She poured over all the coded missives she received weekly from informants, looking tirelessly for more clues until late at night.

They still exchanged gifts. The Commander would leave them in Clarke’s room with a little note in Lexa’s neat but curling flourished handwriting, often times consisting of a single line. Clarke would leave them in her study once she noticed Lexa started spending the night away from her room every day. While it was a mere coincidence that she had been so consumed with the search
for clues, it had also been a small mercy, not having to face Clarke after that awfully awkward night.

And a small torture at the same time.

Lexa craved Clarke. Her presence. The way her sparkling blue eyes focused with such intensity at everything, brow slightly furrowed with that mix of stubbornness and curiosity that had captured Lexa from the very first moment she had laid eyes on her. She craved the way she felt, for the first time, in the presence of someone who understood the burdens of her life with such innate empathy and how that made her feel lighter. Comforted. Accompanied. And now faced with a possibly large threat, she couldn’t go to Clarke about it.

Conversely, she had never felt the need that she felt with Clarke to share in her burdens. To comfort her in return. To accompany her when she could see the ghosts that haunted Clarke darken her mood, ghosts she was partially responsible for. To think of ways to make Clarke forget them momentarily and make her smile, even though she herself had almost forgotten how to.

It seemed absurd to Lexa, to feel and think this way, but she had been helpless to stop it. To stop Clarke from crawling between her ribs and taking residence deep inside her. Her efforts to stop it would have been as futile as screaming at the sun to stop from rising over the horizon and bathing everything in its light, or trying to stop the furious winds of the eastern storms with her small, bare hands.

Clarke was like that first big wave that had crashed over and nearly drowned Lexa the first time she had gone into the ocean.


“I would like for you to teach me the ways of your people, Gustus kom Floukru. Is that such an unreasonable request?” the strange child said, with hands folded behind her back and facing the rough sea.

Gustus had been furious when his Hefa, the Boat People leader, had ordered him to take care and train the odd, unsettlingly serious, small natblida. A child barely ten Springs old who had arrived at their capital the night before. She had shown up all alone, with nothing but a satchel and two swords bigger than her strapped at the back, on a huge Arabian white stallion. She looked so small atop it, like a tiny crab on the big boulders of their beach, Gustus had thought.

A natblida, they had said, coming to train with them. Such a thing had never been heard of. Why their leader had agreed to it was a mystery to him, but putting him in charge of her must have been some sort of punishment. After all his hard work, his loyalty was repaid by babysitting a child. Right when he was about to stand in the challenge to become one of the captains of their raiding boats.

“What do you wish to learn?” he asked still angry, but reigning in his bitterness.
Natblidas were highly revered and he owed them his respect. His own clan had sent two nightblood novitiates to this conclave. A brother and sister. Quite a rarity.


“Why?”

“If the spirit chooses me to become Heda, I need to know my people, all the people, to protect and guide them better. A true leader cannot point in the right direction if they don’t know where the people wish to go,” she answered calmly. “Without wisdom, a leader is a blind soldier, Gustus.”

Gustus looked at the child. He had never seen such a serious goufa. He knew Trikru were stoic types, almost as strange as the solemn Delfikru or the reclusive Yujleda farmers, but this girl had the eyes of an old soul, a really old soul. Nothing like a Floukru goufa. The Boat People, his people, were rowdy and boisterous, and although they were unbeatable in the water, he really couldn’t yet see what he could teach a natblida that the wise Fleimkepas couldn’t.

“Why did the others not come too? What if the spirit chooses another natblida and all you learn is for nothing?”

“They chose not to come,” the girl shrugged, “but everything I am learning, I am keeping record of, so when I go back my brothers and sisters in the blood can learn too. This way whomever the spirit chooses can serve best.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise at this. His people weren’t exactly inclined to share the fruits of their labor with each other, be it knowledge or loot from the raids. Even though each shipmate technically had a share in every raid, they still regularly went to blows against each other to take more. Ship captains were challenged every year on the last Spring moon by new sailors, so they guarded their knowledge greedily to prevent the challengers from succeeding.

And yet this goufa, who was risking her life by traveling enemy clans at war and who would have to compete against the other novitiates, would willingly share her knowledge with her competitors, so whoever won would be a good Heda regardless. It was a selfless mentality that Gustus wasn’t very familiar with and made him think the child was even more unusual.

“Even if I tried to teach you how we fight, I’d break you like a twig,” he looked at her unsurely. She was skinny and small like the driftwood the tide washed in. Just one of his forearms was bigger than her torso.

“If I can beat you, will you promise to teach me without any more complaints? And without holding back?” the child asked, a tiny half-smirk on her lips.

Gustus laughed heartily at the mere suggestion.

“If you manage to knock me down, I’ll not only shut up and teach you how to sail and fight like Floukru, I’ll even give you my mother’s secret mussel stew recipe!” Gustus continued laughing as he answered.

Suddenly, the poised and calm hand-folded girl changed in the blink of an eye, her body crouching backwards, one leg straight forward nearly parallel to the ground and the other knee bent, one hand extended and the other at an angle near her face, her fingers curled like claws. He had never seen a fighting stance like that, not even from the deadly Louwoda warriors from the Shadow Valley. Her face morphed into a fierce expression, her emerald eyes gleaming dangerously under the black kohl surrounding it. She looked like a feline predator ready to strike down its pray.
Gustus would never admit it, but his heart momentarily jumped at the sight, if only for a beat.

Perhaps that was the first moment he knew who was standing before him.

Gustus charged with all his might wanting to end this with one blow, but before he could realize what was happening, the girl had jumped to the side and bounded off a tree trunk with one foot using that to turn in the air, landing with both her feet on his shoulders and using his own forward motion to bring him down, face squarely hitting the sand. At some point while he was falling, she had also gripped his arm and held it at an impossible angle behind him to lock him in place. She let go immediately and stepped off him. Gustus lifted his head spitting out sand in shock.

Once he had gotten up and dusted himself off, he faced her, still stunned.

“Allright, Little Panther, a promise is a promise,” he huffed resignedly.

After a little while he added. “If wish to be like one of us, the first thing you need to learn is how to swim like us.”

“I know how to swim,” the girl answered.

“In lakes and rivers maybe, but not in the ocean.”

Before the girl could ask what he meant, he had lifted her up like she weighed nothing and hurled her far into the raging waters. Just as she managed to come up for air, a huge wave had crashed over her, sinking her down and tumbling her in the violent, whirling funnels underwater. When she finally surfaced, sputtering and coughing water, she heard Gustus’ booming laughter from the shore. She let herself be pushed in by the waves and stumbled out still coughing.

This was how they taught their children to swim. They’d push them in the water not long after birth so they would never forget how to float and swim like they did in the mother’s womb, although granted not in the waves of the ocean at first. His pride had been hurt when the girl had made him eat sand and maybe he wanted a little revenge. He certainly got a good laugh from it.

She came to stand by him while she caught her breath, both looking out the water. Once she was breathing normally again, Gustus spoke.

“You can never win against the mighty sea, goufa. It will swallow you whole when it gets a chance. But you can trick it by moving like it. Swim like you are one more drop of water, like you are the foam on the shore, the swirl of the current, the crest of the wave.”

“That is what my father used to say about horses,” the natblida child said, with a small smile on her lips

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind. Again.”

She didn’t wait for an answer and instead trudged back into the waves. Gustus stayed on the shore, thinking she’d soon grow tired and would need the warmth of a fire. Winter was just giving way to early Spring days and the waters of the Gulf of Niufonlan were always ice cold, no matter the season.

As Gustus would learn over the next month, however, what the little girl lacked in size and strength, she tripled in determination and sharpness of mind. She spent over three hours doing laps in the choppy waters that day until the sun set, when she finally came out teeth chattering and lips
He covered her in several furs and fed her soup in front of the fire. They sat for a long time in silence that first night, staring at the flames crackling beneath the stars.

“What would you be doing if you weren’t... wasting your time... with me?” she asked, with a small smirk, knowing how frustrated he had been to be stuck with her.

“Training. For the challenge. I wish to command my own ship.”

“Will your chances suffer? Because of me?” she asked with concern.

“I doubt it. My best competition is my cousin Luan. He will surely think this will give him an advantage. He is cunning like a weasel, but I have been sailing for far more years than him while he is barely 17 winters old,” Gustus chuckled.

“Luan?” she asked. “I have a message for him.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm,” she answered distractedly, not saying more.

“What about you, Little Panther? What are you really doing?” Gustus asked after a while.

She turned slowly to look at him.

“If I become Heda, I will unite the clans and end the wars.”

Gustus barked out a laugh and stopped midway when he realized she was serious.

“Goufa, we have been at war since the dawn of our times. It is our way of life.”

“The greatest enemy of peace is the belief that war is an inevitability.”

“And what are you going to do about it?”

“Learn how each clan thinks so I know how to better convince them otherwise?” she stated, one corner of her mouth upturned.

Gustus threw his head back in laughter again. The girl should had been startled by how much and how loudly Gustus laughed, but she was used to it by now. One of the Floukru nightbloods, and her dearest friend, was as loud as Gustus. He drove Titus mad.

“You’re funny. You couldn’t tell by that serious frown you always have on your face, child,” he said a bit mockingly.

“Is the notion really so unimaginable?”

“Do you remember the last Heda that tried to broker a ceasefire? You were probably just a thought in your mother’s belly, but if you were alive, you wouldn’t have such silly ideas in your head.”

“I was born that day actually,” Lexa said with a distant look in her eyes. “What happened was the Mountain’s doing, not Heda’s. But more importantly, he was seeking a ceasefire. I’m talking about peace.”
“Peace is impossible.”

“Impossible is something you haven’t tried hard enough.”

Gustus just chuckled and shook his head.

For the next weeks, she stayed in the Floukru capital, training relentlessly. Swimming, sailing their narrow fast boats, pulling the heavy nets, throwing the long harpoons Floukru used not only to fish but to accost the other boats they’d raid. They would tie the heavy harpoons with thick rope and hurl them through the air, ramming them into the hull of other boats and then pull them to their side to board them. Smaller spears were used to take out as many sailors on the deck as they could before boarding. Although she had to use the smallest harpoons and spears they could find, because the normal ones were heavier than her, she had deadly accuracy.

What time she didn’t spend training, she went about the village talking to people, although she asked questions and then mostly listened. She could spend several hours scaling fish with the fishmonger, asking about the seasons of scarcity and the types of catch. Or an entire afternoon with a cloth tied around her mouth and nose as she listened to the old man who rendered the fat and blubber from the whales and seals they sometimes hunted, to make it into oil lamps and the smelly soap they used. She watched stone-faced as their Fisa fed a few drops of milk to the children who’d barely made it through the famine of the winter, more bone and skin than anything else, clenching her jaw when she heard how many more had not made it. She had long private chats with the Hefa and she would sit at the feet of their Blinka, as he muttered on about nothing in particular. She was never without her leather journal, scribbling away in it until late at night.

Despite his initial annoyance, Gustus had grown fond of the little girl. She never complained and trained until exhaustion claimed her, and he never ceased to be impressed with both her mind and her agility as a fighter. What maybe surprised him the most, however, was her quiet kindness.

She would wake up at dawn and go into the forest with her spear. An hour later she would come back with a few rabbits, birds or other animals and give them to the Fisa for the children, and for the old crazy lady who lived alone in hut at the edge of the village. He would then hear her own stomach grumbling all morning long. She would mend the nets of old Olgur whose hands shook too much for no other reason than because she could. She would routinely hop on a bench and re-braid Bjorn’s braid, the tavern keeper who had gone partially blind and kept leaving his hair crooked, prompting the children in the village to follow and laugh at him.

And people liked to talk to the strange little nightblood. She gave good advice and soon many would come to ask for her opinion and use her to settle small disputes. Gustus couldn’t help but stare in amused wonder. She was fair and that made people instinctively trust her. She was special. He could see that. Anyone could see that.

She even got the virtually mute Trikru boy to talk. He had been pledged as a bondservant for the raiding season to settle his father’s debt with their clan and had arrived a few days ago at the end of her stay. He was young, his warrior tattoos still fresh, but was already tall, lean and muscular. He would make a fine hammer fighter on the boats.

Gustus never heard what she said to him. He only saw her sit next to him. He had bowed his head to her respectfully and then studied curiously some drawings she showed him in her journal. She then left him an empty one from her satchel the day before she left. He would have never guessed their paths would cross many years later.
On her last night, Gustus had come to her cabin to say goodbye. He found her asleep, her head resting on her arms over the table, her journal open. He took it in his hand and squinted in the dim light, his Gonasleng not very good, but good enough to understand.

“Even if our markings and our clothes are different, even if we pray to different spirits or speak different tongues, we are all in the end one and the same. We hurt when hungry. We bleed when struck. We cry when our loved ones die and rejoice when they return safe one more time. And we all share the same single wish: that our tomorrow be better than today. I believe we can achieve it. If we stop fighting each other. If we build it. Together.”

Gustus looked at the small, thin child, her brow knitted in determination even in sleep, hands red and bruised from the relentless training they had been doing. He closed her journal and blew out the candle, and then left the cabin they’d given her, a shack really, filled with old ripped fishnets and rusty harpoons. He made his way to his Hefa that night to tell him about his decision.

The morning after, when the little natblida with the eyes of the panther finally left their clan onwards on her journey, Gustus followed her.

Her never doubted again that Lexa kom Trikru would be Heda one day. That she would unite the clans and bring peace.

He never left her side until the day he died by her hand.

He died knowing he was right.

Clarke had felt the last days as endless as those spent in her sky box prison. Her agitated nightmares had returned and she felt worn down by restlessness. The silent tension that had settled between her and Lexa was affecting her more than she would have imagined, since everything else had seemed to reach a state of temporary cooling down.

She had made progress negotiating terms for the new trade deals Skaikru was forging with the Boat People and Broadleaf, with lengthy discussions every day between her and the Arkadia council on radio and the ambassadors from both clans. She updated them with other news from the Coalition clans, mostly irrelevant goings-on to them, but as Lexa had recommended the more they learned about them the better Arkadia would integrate.

She also visited the fisageda almost daily. It energized her. The feeling of helping others heal, seeing them getting stronger and knowing she somehow had soothed away their pain or set back their illness filled her with excitement. It also gave her mind peace during the hours when she was there. Every other worry faded away, her mind consumed with the cases before her or with learning about the vast bounties the ground gave them that could be used as medicine. Brigid would teach her by demonstration and hand gestures mostly, and repeating the words in trigeda which were helping Clarke to learn faster. And even when they lost people, she was glad she had at least gotten the chance to help. To try.

But all the hours in between, especially those spent in the presence of Lexa, were unraveling her.
They saw each other every day, several times a day, and yet the silence that now would stretch during most of their time together was deafening.

Having her present but so distant was worse than being completely apart, Clarke thought.

The exchanges had continued, although she had enjoyed hers mostly by herself when she would find them in her room. One day it had been long feathers, each with a single little flower tied to it with a twig.

*My mother used to make them for me, to mark the page in a book,* a note next to them would say.

The only acknowledgement of it that Lexa had made was when she saw the book Clarke had been reading and brought into breakfast with her. She noticed the feather sticking out and frowned as she passed the table. She stopped, opened to book and turned it around, placing the feather inside the page, and the flower sticking out by its thin stem.

“The feather marks the page. If you crush the flower in it, it might rot the pages” she had said distractedly, as she made her way to her seat.

“Then why the flower?” Clarke had asked.

“It’s pretty,” she shrugged simply.

Clarke had wanted to chuckle, because of course something seemingly innocuous yet whimsical as that was, so very Lexa as she was learning. But she didn’t. She stayed silent, looking at Lexa’s tired face, concentrated on yet another message scroll.

Another day she had found an assortment of savory and sweet treats laid out in a table in her room, a little name under each scribbled on a torn bit of coarse paper.

*Among these are some of my favorites. Maybe you will discover some of yours too,* a larger note said.

The next it had been a beautifully crafted coat and cloak made of dark grey wool and blue-tinted leather laid out on her bed. The cloak’s hood had a thick, soft, white fur lining its hood and collar. The coat had a small shoulder guard made of metal connected to a strap that crossed the chest. All of it was sleek and close-fitted, similar to how Lexa usually wore her clothes, but they were made to Clarke’s size almost to perfection.

*I hope it will keep you warm for many winters to come.*

When Sonja had found Clarke admiring it that morning, she had remarked the craftsmanship was *Ouskejon Kru,* the Blue Cliff clan that lived at top of the Apalakia mountain range east of Polis, who were the finest wool weavers in the Coalition rivaled only by the *Inuk,* Sonja had commented, an ancient tribe at the northernmost territories of *Azgeda* where the snow never melted. The fur was made of a mighty beast the Commander herself had killed, she added as an afterthought.

At this, Clarke was a bit stunned. She didn’t know how to feel about that last part, although she couldn’t really say anything considering what her own endeavors to gift the Commander had been in the last days, albeit of far less considerable danger and of a much less impressive nature.
She had felt the unusual need to prove herself to Lexa, as strangely primal as that sounded to her, even if that meant doing things that ended up being stupidly risky. More than any proof of bravery, she ultimately wanted to make Lexa smile. She was also glad almost no one had witnessed her nearly disastrous attempts, aside from her two tiny co-conspirators and a grumbling Ryder.

Lexa’s love for honey and the inordinate amounts of it she consumed a day had given Clarke the idea to get some for her. She remembered Lexa once commenting how she missed eating it directly from the honeycomb, biting into the crunchy soft texture of it, but that the traders in Polis wouldn’t sell since they traded the wax with the candle makers. That had given her the brilliant idea of procuring some herself and had been trying unsuccessfully to get Brigid to show her. The head healer would look at her confused and kept repeating the word ‘market’ to her.

That’s when two little girls she had seen loitering around the fisageda had approached her and had told her in broken English they could help her. At first, Clarke had thought they were twins, but then realized one was about a year or two older than the other. Their skin was tan, with straight black hair and clothes unlike any of the ones she had seen in the streets of Polis. They smiled widely with a mischievous twinkle in their beautiful brown eyes. Ryder shook his head and huffed, telling Clarke not to listen to ‘the little terrors’, which only made her more inclined to do so.

“If we show you, what we get, Xihuitl?” they haggled, exchanging giggles with each other.

At the odd name, Clarke looked at Ryder and Brigid with a lifted eyebrow. Ryder had translated the short explanation Brigid had given them.

They were wards of the city. They were called Tzitzi and Zilli, sisters brought to Polis by a Sankru trader, the Dessert clan in the south. Their mother, a trader too, had been found dead by the man as he made his annual trip to Polis and passed by to pick her up, since they usually made the trip in a small caravan with their spices, dried chilies, snake skins, and the powerful and prized hallucinogenic cactus root used in many rituals to enhance visions and trances by the several spiritual orders among the clans.

The drought had been especially bad that year and many had starved and died from lack of water. He found the two sisters on the brink of death some years ago and had brought them with him to the capital, where they had been nursed back to health at the fisageda. They spoke in the tongue of the Wixaritari, people who had lived in the same way for thousands of years deep in the arid southern mountains even before the bombs. The traders who came to Polis usually had learned some English and ispaniak, the language of Sankru and of many in the south of the Rock Line and Delphi clans.

Brigid didn’t speak wixarika or ispaniak, so she couldn’t understand them completely, but claimed they were mostly harmless kids, even if they amused themselves at haggling and tricking unsuspecting traders passing through the city.

Ryder added they were nothing but trouble. He knew them given that Heda sometimes sent them on errands, he had said, in exchange for food and a little hut at the edge of the city. An unfair bargain in his opinion.

That had intrigued Clarke even further and decided to strike a deal with them. They’d get half of anything they helped her get.
She had followed little Tzitzi and Zilli into the forest, one of them carrying an old clay pot, the other a tin can filled with burning coals. They walked for a long time until they found a massive beehive in a tree.

Once they came to a stop beneath it, Zilli, the smallest one, had filled the tin can with dried leaves, making large wafts of smoke come out of it.


Clarke had eyed them suspiciously. They looked up at her, batting their eye lashes in an exaggeratedly innocent manner.

“No worries, chela. They get drunk like the men when they eat peyote,” Zilli had supplied gesturing at the smoke and then imitating a drunk person wobbling about and laughing.

Clarke had no option other than to climb the short distance and follow their instructions. She got close and left the smoke envelop the hive for a little while and then gingerly sank the knife into it, getting more nervous by the minute at the hundreds of bees buzzing around her increasingly irritated. She felt the first sting as she took out the piece of dripping hive and let it drop into Tzitzi’s pot down below.

As it fell in, the little girl put the lid on it and they both took off running with it, among loud giggles and scurrying feet. By then, the swarm of bees had gone in full attack mode and Clarke nearly fell out of the tree. She had to run nearly two miles with very angry bees following her, until she finally lost them by jumping into a stream. She cursed her way out of the forest, hissing at the various sting marks she now sported on her hands, and muttering about the many ways she was to strangle the little treacherous girls who had scammed her. To her surprise, however, she found them waiting for her at the edge of the forest, howling with laughter at her dripping angry figure.

They had given her her half and then had left, whispering and laughing between each other.

Lexa’s face when she had laid the honey-filled jar with the golden honeycomb inside it that morning at breakfast had been worth every sting. She had looked up surprised at Clarke, who had merely shrugged, and said “Got it for you”, preferring not to reveal her highly embarrassing ordeal to get it and letting Lexa assume she had convinced some trader to sell it to her. She didn’t really care.

The small smile, the hum when she bit into it, the way her eyes shone with delight as she savored it, the whispered “thank you, Clarke,” was all that mattered. Clarke would brave thousands of angry bees thousands of more times to see that again.

And so she did the next day.

This time she had another goal in mind. She had noticed Lexa always eyed what they brought for breakfast on the look-out for this strange looking, deep red fruit with tiny, crunchy black seeds that sometimes was brought in. It seldom happened and it usually was only a single fruit. She tried to keep the disappointment from showing on her face the mornings it didn’t come and never outright asked for it.

When it did, though, a little curve on her lips appeared and she always kept it for last. She ate it at
the end when she had usually gotten up from the table and made her way around the small studio filled with bookcases. She’d stop on the different small tables around the room strewn with maps and parchments, taking books out and making notes on them. She would have the fruit in her hand and her little curved knife. She’d cut a slice and eat it while she perused around, and invariably for every slice she ate, she cut one and laid it on Clarke’s plate. She always did it distractedly, automatically, like she didn’t realize she was doing it. Clarke had been startled the first time and that’s how she had noticed Lexa’s love for the fruit.

She had asked Sonja about it and if they could bring it more often for the Commander. Sonja had huffed and said the Commander had forbidden them to go out of their way from getting it just for her, something they had once attempted. It was a rare fruit, a climbing plant whose fruit only grew on high tree tops, so some traders only brought them to the market when they found them in low-hanging branches or if they had fallen from the trees and hadn’t splattered on the ground from so high up. There wasn’t much taste for them in Polis, so they didn’t risk climbing to get it. The fact that Lexa shared this rare treat she obviously loved so much with Clarke without even thinking about it did things to the blonde’s heart.

So Clarke had no choice but to enlist the help of the two little cheeky fiends from the day before. This time, at least one of them went up with her. The youngest, Zilli, climbed so easily with just a thin rope tied to her waist and curled around a strong branch, with Tzitzi on the ground holding the other end in case her sister fell. Clarke struggled much more and her legs shook the higher up she went, as she tried and failed not to look down. Her muscles burned and quivered with the effort and the uncertainty of finding her footing, knowing she’d break her neck if she fell. Zilli just sang in her little voice as she went up in front of Clarke like it was no effort at all.

They managed to reach them and get half a dozen fruit, Clarke cutting her hands on the large spikes the plant had and on the bark on her way down when she clumsily slipped more times than she could count, to the girls’ suppressed giggles. It was another highly embarrassing performance on her part but at least she had gotten what she needed.

During their excursion, Clarke had chatted with the two little girls, intrigued about them and their connection to Heda. She learned their full names but not much more. The youngest was called Huitzilli, meaning *hummingbird*, because her mother said she was as fast and restless as the little bird. The eldest was even more so, constantly crawling away to go explore and getting lost as a baby. Her mother had resorted to putting little metal chinks on her wrist bracelet to always hear where she was and called her Tzitzitlini: *the sound of little bells ringing*. The people in Polis called them Tzitzi and Zilli for short, finding their names too difficult to pronounce, unfamiliar with their language. They aptly dodged Clarke’s not so subtle questions about Lexa and departed with half of their loot with their usual giggles and a ‘goodbye, chela’ as they ran back into the busy streets of Polis.

That morning when Lexa had seen the small ceramic plate filled with the fruit on the table, she had immediately turned to Sonja to ask for an explanation. Before she could, Clarke had spoken up.

“I got them for you.”

“How?” she had asked surprised.

“I have my ways,” Clarke replied simply, not wanting to recount her awkward ordeal, including falling squarely on her behind at the very last step off the tree. She might have, had they been on better terms and in not this sorry state of tension.

But once again, the way Lexa’s eyes shone, how she couldn’t stop the small curve of her lips, how she briefly closed her eyes and hummed at the first bite, made it all worth it. She’d climb the
highest tree to give even if just a small moment of pleasure to this woman who gave everything to everyone and refused to ask anything for herself in return. And yet again, when she did eat it, she absentmindedly cut one slice for Clarke for each one she ate herself.

The third day, she had stumbled upon what she would give Lexa that day. She had been enraptured with a man sitting outside his stall with a small chisel and metal file working tiny pieces of what looked like silver, making intricate carvings and shapes. She perused the items on display and saw rows of short beads and cylinders, the type many grounders used to decorate their braids. There were also about a dozen little flat stars laying forgotten on his table. He told her he had made them one day to practice new shapes, but wasn’t sure what he would use them for. Maybe a necklace, maybe nothing. She had him mount them on the little silver cylinders instead. They looked beautiful.

Clarke left them in Lexa’s chambers that day, but she didn’t leave a note. She didn’t have Lexa’s ability to make a few phrases sound poetic, but they had spent many nights looking up at the stars, with Lexa telling her about the stories in the constellations, and how she would trace the lights of the passing Ark in the sky when she was a child. Nights together that Clarke missed. She hoped the message would be understood but Lexa said nothing when they saw each other through the day.

That was how their days had been since that fated night. And every day there came that moment where she held her breath, hoping it would be the day things would change back to normal, whatever that meant with them.

Every day when she left the fisageda on her way back to the tower, she passed the market square. At this same time, Lexa was always making her way to the other side of the city, always a few ambassadors and advisers on her heels trying to catch her ear, passing the market square from the opposite side.

Unbeknownst to them, the traders and people that milled about had noticed the daily passing by of Heda and Wanheda. They had grown accustomed to seeing them joined at the hip in the streets of Polis, engrossed in their conversations with each other, eyes shining with each other’s presence. So they had noticed the distance of the past days and the dimmed look in their young Commander’s countenance.

They had seen her grow up in the streets of Polis, through her training days as a nightblood, her face fierce and full of restrained hope and determination, always kind and curious as she talked to people. She had always been a serious child, but she had smiled back then, brightly and shrewdly when she was making trouble alongside her loud Floukru friend and fellow natblida to annoy Titus. Or sweetly when she took walks with her pretty Costia friend who would come for the annual harvest festival with her parents each year. And even sweeter when the young Commander took her as her lover and would visit her tent at the trader camp that would be erected just outside the city during that entire month. They had seen the pain steel her features when she had lost her Floukru friend and devastate them when she had lost Costia, to a point where they thought she would turn to stone. She never lost her kindness though and would always walk about the city and town, asking and listening to people, even if the light seemed to have died from her eyes completely.

Until Wanheda had fallen from the skies. They had seen the fire and pain in the looks between them, but it was a fire notwithstanding, brighter and more powerful than they had ever seen. It was like the air around them itself crackled and vibrated when they were in the same room or in vicinity
It was true Heda Lexa always had an uncanny ability to mask her feelings, better than most and left people in the clans unable to read her, but here in Polis they had seen her all her life and picked up on the subtle changes better than anybody. And they loved her, in that stoic silent way of the Trikru, but they loved the young Commander nonetheless. As soon as she had been presented as part of the new cohort of natblidas, when she peered at them with her green piercing eyes, none had a doubt she would be the next Heda. One they grew to love and admire.

So they pretended to go about their day, but held their breath as well when they spied the daily dance of the Hedas in the middle of Polis from the corner of their eyes. They saw as the two leaders lifted their gaze as the other passed on the opposite side of the square, going in the opposite direction, their eyes forlorn and hesitant, their steps slowing down as if waiting for the other to cross the divide. They saw as Heda Lexa zoned out whatever one of her ambassador was yapping on about. They saw as the sky girl seemed to forget people and stalls were before her, her sad gaze too focused on the Commander, so they discreetly stepped out of her way. Their mouths would open as if about to say something or call out to the other, but every day they just stared at each other and then shook themselves out of their reverie and went on their way, looking even more crestfallen.

Later in the day, in the taverns that dotted the market district, traders and warriors and other city dwellers would silently murmur about it and joke lightly, as they sipped on bitter ale or spicy wine. It had become the highlight of their daily gossip, not that they would admit they gossiped because they were too proud, even though the market of Polis was in fact the center of whispers and speculation of the Coalition.

Being the most protected city in the lands, one where many clans mixed and people exiled from their own could seek temporary sanctuary and judgment from the Heda, it made them feel safer and looser. And with more safety, a part of their worry-filled minds was freed for more superfluous concerns. Especially here, at The Angry Boar, a tavern favored by clan soldiers and traders because of its famous hog blood stew, a hearty Trikru specialty. It was here that the rumor of the two leaders being lovers had started and spread to the other clans, unknowingly giving credence to the notion of their union when it was presented to the Council.

“I thought Wanheda was going to walk into that basket of tomatoes today,” one would say to roars of laughter.

“Heda should throw the Skailona on a table and make her forget whatever they’re disputing about,” another would suggest with a smirk on his ale-covered mustache. The barmaid passing by smacked him in the head, causing chuckles around. No matter how racy their conversation would get, they were usually respectful when talking about the Commander.

“Maybe tomorrow it will be different,” another supplied wistfully.

Mmms and grunts of acquiescence were heard around the room, as they hoped things would change the next day yet again.

So after days of this, Clarke had had enough. She couldn’t sleep well. She couldn’t bare the paused silence. She couldn’t take the overwhelming need she always felt for the brunette and only stare at her from across a square or a room or walk on eggshells when they trained or ate in the mornings.

She had been hurt by Lexa’s rejection of any possibility of there being more between them, but the
simple fact was that Lexa was inescapable to her, like the Moon who couldn’t escape the pull of the Earth.

Clarke dealt with her denied feelings the same way she held a grudge. Relentlessly and stubbornly until she decided to forgive and she’d let go completely. So once she had finally decided to stop ignoring that her feelings for Lexa were far more than just physical attraction and were rather like the invisible pulse that set the rhythm of her heart, she stopped fighting it.

She wouldn’t impose them on Lexa. She would respect her boundaries, but she wouldn’t lie to herself. And if they were going to be sharing a life together, even if it was limited to a platonic companionship, they needed to learn a way to be. Clarke could only hope that maybe someday Lexa would feel the same.

She set out that morning on her quest to break down the walls that had risen between them armed with her best sledgehammer: her unrelenting stubbornness.

When she knocked and heard the soft ‘enter’, she tried to suppress a gasp as she made her way into the room. Lexa was already dressed for the day in her black pants and black soft shirt, but was missing her forehead piece, her hair down and slightly damp. She was facing the balcony, her gaze on the outside, her eyes still a bit sleepy and a placid small smile on her lips, the early morning sun lighting her features beautifully from where Clarke could see her profile.

She was breathtaking.

Clarke had momentarily stopped, lost in the sight before her, but quickly resumed walking and at that Lexa immediately turned before she even spoke.

“Clarke?” she asked surprised the moment she heard the blonde, the sound of her specific footsteps one Lexa had already learned to recognize as she did of all the people she knew well.

“Good morning, Lexa,” Clarke greeted.

“Is something the matter?” she asked with worry.

“No. I’ve come to braid your hair,” Clarke responded with a small smile, trying to mask her nervousness.

“You…? Why? Clarke, there is no need. I… Sonja can manage. But why?” Lexa stammered a bit confused.

“Well, I know you don’t like to be tended to, that you feel it’s not their duty to do something just for you, so I want to do it.”

“It’s not. They are city workers, Clarke. It’s not their duty to tend to my personal needs,” Lexa explained. “At least, not of this kind.”

“Well, I mean, I kinda get it. I’ve only recently managed to get Sonja to back off and stop fussing around me,” Clarke chuckled lightly. “But I know it bothers you because you feel they do it out of obligation or something. That’s why I’m replacing them,” she concluded pleased with herself.

“It’s not your duty either, Clarke.”

“Oh, but it is,” she countered having expected that. “I’m your hafon. It’s my duty to take care of
“You do not have to do that, Clarke. You do not need to pretend when it is just the two of us,” she said morosely, looking down.

Clarke furrowed her brow annoyed.

“Is the idea that I want to do something nice for you so crazy?” Clarke asked earnestly.

“That it pleases me to do something for you that you might enjoy? Not because of our… union, but because I simply want to? You do everything for everyone and don’t allow yourself to want anything. Let me give you this small thing. Let me give you peace of mind that you’re not forcing anyone to do something outside their duty and that I’m doing it cause I want to.”

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Lexa said overwhelmed, digesting all the things her words conveyed.

“Don’t say anything. Just get used to it, because I’ll be doing this for you from now on.”

Lexa looked up at Clarke again still in disbelief.

“So I can also give you a few more moments more before you have to be Heda every day.”

Lexa’s hand had automatically lifted to her brow to where her missing headpiece should be.

“I wasn’t expecting Sonja until a little later,” was all she could muster in her hazy state, stunned at how Clarke understood that once the first person entered her room, even if it was Sonja, she had to slip into her role as Heda and that had always been a part of her reluctance too.

“I know,” Clarke whispered. “Now please sit down.”

Lexa didn’t resist anymore and sat down in front of the small mirror, trying to not stare at Clarke too much from it but mostly failing.

Clarke was a little nervous at the thought of actually going through with it. At the closeness and intimacy of the act, especially after the last few days and their general lack of physical contact. She steeled herself and before lifting the wooden comb, she first ran her bare hands in Lexa’s hair. She had to keep herself from breathing in too visibly when Lexa’s characteristic intoxicating smell reached her nose, rising from her freshly washed hair and skin.

It was full and luxuriously soft, more so than Clarke had imagined. Lexa momentarily closed her eyes and hummed as she ran her hands again, under the pretense of untangling it. Clarke smiled seeing Lexa’s relaxed shoulders and passive features.

“So you’re not afraid I will mess up and make your hair look like a complete disaster?” she asked jokingly before she got too lost staring at her.

“If you do, you simply will have to try again,” Lexa shrugged, ever the pragmatic one. “Also I’m sure if you offered, you might have an idea of what you are doing,” one side of her mouth curved up.

“I might have,” Clarke said.

She had spent hours upon hours daily learning from Sonja and practicing on as many heads she could, including several kitchen workers and a few of her patients. She undid them right after. It
was Lexa’s hairdo after all and only belonged on her head.

She went through each motion just as Sonja had taught her, having to re-do some braids a few times, but she took her leisurely time doing it, enjoying the quiet peace between them. It was silence but not tense like it had been the past days. Lexa would close her eyes for long moments at the time, as if reveling in the feeling of Clarke’s hands in her hair, on her scalp, the warmth of her behind her.

The end result wasn’t perfect but it was good enough.

Clarke put her hands on her shoulders to study her handiwork while Lexa turned her head in both directions to survey it in the mirror with a pleased hum. Unexpectedly, Lexa put one of her hands over Clarke’s.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, looking at her through the mirror.

Clarke only nodded then watched silently as Lexa lifted the headpiece from a small metal box and placed it in the middle of her brow, her eyes assuming a seriousness they had lacked just a few moments ago.

Heda was back.

Even so, her gaze momentarily softened again when she looked up at Clarke’s reflection once more.

“Shall we go have breakfast?”

Clarke acquiesced with a small smile and they walked together to the studio.

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“Clarke?” she asked, waiting for her to look up before continuing, while they ate that morning.

“I am sending a group of hunters to Arkadia to train Skaikru. It is my gift for today.”

“Why?” Clarke asked a bit confused.

“It is customary to sometimes gift the other’s clan. A demonstration of the commitment.” Lexa tried.

“I assumed, but why this exactly?”

“Hunting with firearms scares the prey away, not only from Arkadia but from surrounding villages. Knowing what to hunt, when to hunt and how to hunt it will prevent over-poaching. We’ve had reports of younglings and weening mothers being hunted. With breeding season upon us, it would be best to prevent further… incidents. We must live in balance with the gifts of the land or we cannot survive.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know they were doing that,” Clarke said, cringing internally at yet another misstep from her people.

“It is not your fault or your people’s, Clarke. You did not know. You’ve been living in the stars for nearly half a millennium. You can’t be expected to know the ways of the ground,” she reassured.
“Besides, you’ll run out of bullets someday,” she continued. “My people will teach them how to make arrows, spears, traps, migration routes, that sort of thing, so your people can survive better.”

“That’s… that’s wonderful, Lexa. I’m sure Arkadia will be as grateful as I am.”

And she was.

If the people going to Arkadia were half as good a teacher as Lexa was, they stood to learn a great deal. Clarke herself was. Her own daily training was not only limited to combat. Lexa had been teaching her how to track, how to hunt, how to hide, how to forage.

She had once been convinced she knew enough being one of the best Earth Skills students, but after a few days on the ground she had realized how small and incomplete her knowledge was. And how precise and generous Lexa was in her sharing of everything. What a contrast it was. She remembered acutely how Finn had been their best tracker and how he always went ahead, never bothering to show her or others how to better do it, making himself in a way indispensable. Lexa on the other hand was always turning to her to show her something, to explain, to share. She saw her do it with the nightbloods when she stayed to watch their training. She did it with others as a natural instinct.

It seemed that her philosophy was that the more everyone knew, they better they could work together and achieve something for all. She had done it with Clarke, imparting on her what she had learned over years of experience of leadership when they barely knew each other, when Clarke was still arguably her enemy. It was a worldview so counterintuitive to the way leaders she had seen before behaved. On the Ark, every decision was kept out of people’s grasp, pretending the council and the Chancellor always knew better.

Once Lexa had finished her meal, she moved to her little study tables as was her custom and started scribbling away notes and consulting books. Clarke wanted to keep up the progress they had made. She had also always wanted to know what Lexa always seemed so absorbed by.

She slowly got up and pretended to peruse books while she made her way over to the table Lexa was now occupying, writing with her brow scrunched up and using a small rectangular object to trace lines. She came up behind her and gasped when her eyes caught sight of it.

They were drawings. Dozens of them scattered on the table with notes all over them in Lexa’s neat handwriting. They were drawings of what seemed like machines with notes on scales and measurements. They were beautiful and precise, not necessarily made with the eye of an artist, but that of a methodical and keenly observant eye. Their dimension and perspective faultless.

“What are those?” Clarke asked in awe.

“Just some sketches for our builders. That one is for the grinding mills,” she gestured at the one Clarke had picked up.

“I’m trying to figure a way to distribute better the weight because the gears break too often. But the one I can’t yet find a solution is this,” she pointed to the one she was working on.

“The water wheels aren’t enough to lift and feed enough water for most of the city since it is more elevated than the river. I was trying this water screw idea but…” she trailed off when she saw Clarke’s slack-jawed, wide-eyed expression. “What?” she asked concerned.

“Hold up. Back up. How? You’re making these, Lexa? What?” Clarke blinked and asked in
confusion.

Lexa’s cheeks tinged a bit.

“They must seem quite primitive to you. I realize that, Clarke, but…” Lexa tried explaining, her cheeks reddening further in embarrassment.

“No! No, that’s not what I meant,” Clarke corrected. “These… these are amazing, Lexa. How? Where are you even getting them from?”

“From everywhere in these I could find,” she pointed to the books around.

“I’ve read and brought up as many as I can find from the library, but most of the books we’ve been able to find… it’s all bits and pieces of the knowledge left. Of history. Of science. Pieces of the puzzle. Some in languages I’ve yet not learned. Most far too advanced for any of our builders or the materials we have or can produce, but I found these that have been more helpful…” she showed a few thick, extremely old-looking, hardcover books, faded and worn at the edges, that were open on the table.

Clarke picked a few up to read their titles.


A 1521 Italian edition De Architectura by Marcus Vitruvius.

She looked at Lexa again with wide eyes.

Eventually, when Lexa would take Clarke to their ‘library’ many days later, she would find out that one of their biggest book finds had been in the ruins of an actual library in the east, near the coast. A part of the underground levels had survived only because they were in a reinforced section built like a vault where they had kept a ‘rare books and ancient manuscripts’ collection to better preserve them. A ‘Greek and Roman Classics’ and an ‘old editions of Encyclopedias’ sections on the level beneath the vault – the sections people rarely consulted and were forgotten in the lowest levels, Clarke assumed–, had also escaped fairly undamaged. That would explain many of the books she had seen Lexa read regularly and made Clarke wonder if that’s the period Lexa had often referred as the time of ‘the First Ancients’.

“So you take ideas from here and transform them into these?!” she asked still completely stunned.

“Well, as you know, very few of our people read. Our head builder, Pollio, he is smart but can only read very little. I try to draw them for him and the others so that it is easier for them to try and replicate them.”

“Lexa, these barely have any illustration in them. You just interpret it?”

“I deduce it, yes, from what I can understand, but I guess that’s why so many have not really worked. At all,” she curled one side of her lips upward, like she was mocking herself. “Some have worked, however, after many trials and errors, and Pollio’s improvements.”

Clarke kept staring at her. Lexa wasn’t just content with building political alliances and peace, but spent her spare time literally trying to build their cities. Using ancient books that, from one look through their pages, were filled more with mathematical principles and formulas than actual explanations on how to translate them into things. As if Clarke wasn’t sufficiently infatuated with Lexa’s mind and overall self.
“You’re… this is incredible, Lexa,” she breathed out.

Lexa blushed prettily, making Clarke’s heart thump even harder. She lowered her eyelashes and looked at the papers in front of her.

“Not enough it seems. I can’t solve this one yet,” she furrowed her brow.

“What is it?”

“A water screw pump, to elevate the water from the river onto higher ground. See,” she shuffled her papers and showed her what seemed to be a map of the city.

“All this part of the city bordering the river on the west is not much of a problem since it’s flat. We’ve diverted part of the river into small channels to feed the cisterns and fountains. The water kept going bad if we just stored it, but we’ve made it so it flows constantly. It is always moving, flowing in through clay filters and then back out into the river further north, like a circuit. The problem is the rest of city because it rises into the mountain hills. We’ve built a few water mills that elevate the water to their level and channel it with wooden aqueducts, but it is not enough. These water screws might give us more volume of water. If we can keep a constant flow with that pressure, we might be able to re-use part of the old waterpipe network the city already had. Until then, they have to fetch water at all the wells on the west side. And all the public baths are also limited to the west,” she rambled, not noticing Clarke’s increasingly awed face and slowly stretching smile, until she looked up given Clarke’s silence.

Clarke blinked but didn’t bother hiding her smile.

“Of course you have public baths!” she teased, not at all surprised at this point and well acquainted by now with Lexa’s excessive enthusiasm for bathing.

“Lack of clean water is what has brought down civilizations throughout history, Clarke, or has impeded them to advance. It’s what causes so much of our deaths and illnesses. Not having a source to drink clean water or a way to keep their bodies and cities clean. If we succeed in Polis, we could do so much more for the clans,” she replied passionately but quite aware that Clarke had been teasing, feeling warmth bloom inside her at the smile that was stretching on the blonde’s face.

“Would you show me?” Clarke asked quietly. “Some of these things?”

“Of course. Bryan kom Skaikru and Raven’s delegation is to survey the grain storage with Consus later today. If you wish, we could also tour the grinding mills. I trust they will find them interesting too.”

“Great. She’s supposed to arrive after noon,” Clarke nodded, certain that the clever brunette would indeed like the idea as well.

They had initially planned for Callie Cartwright, the council woman in charge of Arkadia’s livelihoods and food, to come but she was still recovering from her injuries. The grain recovered from the fallen station in Azgeda would be transported back to Polis, stored temporarily there until they could build their own silos, and one small shipment would then go to Broadleaf to be planted and harvested.

Many in Arkadia were not happy with the arrangement, saying grounders would basically keep it from themselves, but Clarke’s union and Bryan’s clever reminder that the grains needed to be brought out of deep stasis or would be worthless – something that required knowledge grounders
didn’t have –, would be the guarantee.

Raven, at Clarke’s insistence, was the one who took Callie’s place. She would put in place the modifications needed in the Polis grain silos following Bryan’s instructions, but most of all help her with the various projects Clarke was working on for Lexa. At least that was the main excuse she used to convince her.

Bryan had stayed in Polis after the execution of the Sky rebels. He was considering staying in Polis for a while, maybe even for good. He had no desire to return to Arkadia. Most of his people from Farm Station had died and the few left reminded him too much of what they had gone through. What they had let happen.

And once he met the rest of the Ark people from other stations, especially the kids his age and what remained of the 100, he felt out of place as well. He’d heard from many of them the stories about Clarke Griffin, the girl who had saved them time and again, who had sacrificed everything for them, now even her freedom, to make sure they lived. Yet some of them spoke with resentment and blame, and had preferred to align their loyalty with Bellamy, the guy he’d heard had starved them and tortured them for their bracelets when they had arrived. He couldn’t understand them and couldn’t trust people like that.

Although he certainly wasn’t free of blame. He had remained silent with what Pike had done and was guilty as a result.

When they had crash-landed in an icy valley of Azgeda territories, Pike had quickly assumed control of their group. Many had camped outside during the day marveling at nature, while Pike barked orders about perimeters and fixing the radio. He had the gun cabinets open and had handed out riffles and guns to people. On the second day, as they busied themselves outside, an angry snarl had startled them. A huge man with white face paint and blood smeared at the sides of his face had scared them half to death, barking at them in some gruff language they didn’t understand. The surprise had made them jump so that Pike had accidentally swirled around and shot them man. A wail was heard and they only then noticed a woman in similar fashion was just a few steps behind him, jumping to his aid. This time Pike shot her on purpose.

As the gunshot resounded in the air, a small cry was heard from the tree lines. A child, probably their son, was standing there and had watched it all. He ran away back into the forest.

Pike had argued that he had shot them to defend them from what had been an attack. Before anyone was able to make up their mind, the real attack did come that same night. They killed everyone who had been sleeping outside. They sieged them for several days, picking them off one by one if anyone dared to go outside the ship. The little boy watched them from the tree lines.

It was a miracle they managed to escape one night, but with their numbers drastically dwindled. Everyone was terrified. So when Pike shot two young girls when they crossed paths with them in the forest as they made their way south, even though they were clearly not a threat, no one protested.

They would go back to their village and get others to attack, he said.

When Pike killed anyone they saw, no one spoke up. He didn’t speak out. All they wanted was to
find refuge, find the others, survive. Fear paralyzed them all and they let Pike’s ‘pull the trigger first and ask questions later’ philosophy run free. It was keeping them safe. He was keeping them safe. He had even goaded others to do the same. He had goaded poor Hannah Green to the point of breaking so she would shoot one of their captured ‘enemies’. It was a lesson in his eyes.

_The only way they would survive_, he kept reminding them.

So when they had finally found Arkadia and Pike insisted in taking residence inside Mount Weather, something expressly forbidden by the negotiations Abby and Marcus were leading with Commander Lexa, Bryan refused to join them. He wanted nothing to do with him.

But he said nothing. He knew Pike’s intention of staying there and said nothing. And people died.

When Pike was recruiting Farm people in Arkadia to go kill the peacekeepers, he refused point blank. But he said nothing. He had foolishly thought they would never get past the guards. They’d get arrested and that could only be a good thing. At worst, ten measly people would be no match for 300 warriors and Arkadia would be a better place without Pike and his gang. How wrong he had been.

He had said nothing and people died.

So he couldn’t stay in Arkadia and see his people’s faces. He had let so many terrible things happen by not speaking up.

Thus, when the plan to make the exchange with Broadleaf came up, he spoke up. He volunteered. He refused adamantly to go with the mission to recover the grain, too traumatized with Azgeda to return there. Plus, the retrieval was well guarded and didn’t need him. An entire regiment and 20 of their Guards were travelling with the Ice Nation King and the Skykru delegation. But he would lead the mission to Broadleaf. He would stay there, help them plant, harvest. It would be his penance. Each grain fed to someone was his retribution for the lives he had allowed to be lost.

He had also always dreamed of farming. It was his vocation, what he had trained for his entire life, even though the idea he would actually get to do it had always been unrealistic. Until now. Also, Broadleaf were reputed as being hardened but peaceful farmers and he was itching to see the vast, fertile _Yujleda_ lands where they lived.

In the meantime, he would prepare the mission in Polis. And he would help Clarke with the project she had asked help with some days ago. Something that would quite honestly help their entire endeavor, but Clarke had asked him to keep it secret for now. At least from the Commander.

He trusted Clarke. He could see how she was haunted by the choice she made too, just like him. Worse in a way, but honorable unlike him. She always fought to keep as many alive on all sides. She had even begged the enslaving, blood-draining Mountain Men to not force her to condemn them, Monty had told him one night. She was good. He trusted her.

His silence, in this very specific instance, wouldn’t cause death. Quite the contrary, he was certain.

“Holy shit! Are you serious right now?! You did this?”

“Well, Pollio and his kru built it.”
“But you designed it?”

“More or less. I have some books—”

“Hot damn!” she whistled, interrupting. “Who knew you were like some grounder Da Vinci and shit!”

“Don’t be offended. That’s a compliment in Raven speech,” Clarke cringed and looked at Lexa apologetically.

“Sorry, Commander,” Raven immediately apologized, more subdued. “I’m just really impressed with what you’ve done.”

“No apologies necessary,” Lexa replied sincerely.

After the Council, Clarke had greeted Raven and a small group of Arkadians and had let them rest and ate with them. They then joined Lexa, Consus, Bryan and Casio and toured the massive grain silos with them, discussing the amount of space and modifications they would need. They then walked in direction of the river until they saw a row of large water wheels, that both lifted water but also ground grain inside with the motion of the river current. It was one thing to see on a drawing, it was an altogether different sight to behold with its massive wooden and metallic beams and gears making it work from the inside.

But it was the odd, thick, wooden cylinder sticking out of the river that Raven was looking at now in wonder. It was unfinished but Clarke recognized it from the drawing Lexa had shown her earlier.

“It is the first test. It needs some… corrections.”

“Clarke,” Raven whispered loudly. “Do you realize your grounder fiancée made an Archimedes’ screw? Like an actual, real life, Archimedes screw?” she said still shocked and excited to see one with her own eyes.

“I would find any of your advice to improve it most useful, Raven kom Skaikru.”

“Wait, for real?” Raven asked incredulously.

Lexa nodded.

“Holy shit! Sorry, your… umm highness? Not sure what I should call you. I mean, I have so many ideas already. We could start by—” she rambled but was cut short.

“Raven, I’m sure the Commander would love to hear your ideas, but at another time. We’re late.” Clarke stopped her before she could go on one of her never-ending tirades.

As they all made to walk back, Clarke and Lexa at the front, Lexa spoke up.

“I thought you had wanted to see the baths too.”

“I did, but I also just realized it’s the middle of the day. People will be there.”

Lexa looked at her blinking as if not understanding.

Why would she? Clarke had learned by accident just how unconcerned grounders were with nudity. It would seem Sky people, on the other hand, had inherited many prudish hang-ups about it that had not survived on the ground.
After the bombing of TonDC, while they marched towards their new war camp, they had stopped at the edge of the river. Clarke had assumed it was to let the horse drink and fill their water skins, and had walked to the edge herself. She was unprepared to see most grounders start shedding their clothes, ALL of their clothes, both men and women, and casually get into the river to wash off the grime and blood after the explosion. She had gone beet red and turned her heels around to where Lincoln and Octavia were sitting. Octavia seemed unbothered by it. In fact, she was blatantly staring at everyone.

“I wish someday Indra will let me wash her,” was an actual thing that came out of her mouth, much to Clarke’s shock.

Seeing her reaction, Lincoln had explained what Octavia meant, while she furtively glanced over her shoulder to see many grounders pair up in the river and take turn washing each other’s back.

“It’s a show of trust. It’s an honor when someone lets you wash their back,” he said calmly.

“Wait, washing someone else is an honor? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Clarke asked puzzled.

Lincoln smiled.

“Their back is turned to you. You could stab them, cut their throat, attack them. It’s a show of their absolute trust in you. It means they trust you with their life. That’s why warriors do it among themselves, to renew their bonds as brothers or sisters in arms. Or once a second is ready, the greatest honor is for the master to let their backs be washed. It means the second is ready and even the master would put their life in their hands.”

“It’s just a gesture,” he added shrugging lightly, “but one never done lightly unless you mean it.”

Clarke was learning just how so much tradition on the ground was steeped in heavy symbolism but also in the harsh brutality of their world.

“What about other people? Leaders?” Clarke asked, seeing the Commander not getting in.

“Heda is our protector,” Lincoln answered following Clarke’s gaze. “She does not need to carry it out as it is her very purpose. We trust her with our lives every day at all times. It is her duty to sacrifice her life protecting the people if she needs to.”

“And does she let anyone… do her or whatever?” Octavia asked.

“All warriors and clans are vowed to her, but her life is too important to risk, even for something like that,” he shook his head. “Despite the pledge of loyalty, there have been attempts and quite a few who have succeeded in assassinating past Hedas,” he said sourly. “That’s why Hedas can’t even share a bed with their lovers.”

“Wait, what??” Octavia asked with raised eyebrows.

“Not like that,” Lincoln said amused. “They can, they just can’t… stay. They’d be defenseless when they fall asleep. An easy target,” he explained. “To be Heda is to be alone,” he added sadly.
Clarke followed his eyes. Lexa was standing on a large boulder by the river bank, her back to the people inside the water, her gaze focused on the perimeter and her hand on the hilt of her sword, solemn like a statue. Always guarding, always vigilant, always protecting.

Always alone.

But Clarke had no time to consider all this information. TonDC was just bombed. Finn’s blood was still visible under her dirty fingernails. Her friends were still trapped inside the Mountain. She had no time to think about this mysterious and beguiling Commander.

Not yet anyway.

Clarke remembered that day at another river bank and thought it would be wise to not risk the rest of the Sky people dying of embarrassment walking into public baths with a bunch of naked grounders parading about.

“Maybe another day. Before they are open?” Clarke tried.

Lexa furrowed her brows but then nodded with just a flick of her eyes, not insisting.

After a few minutes walking, Lexa excused herself, having matter to attend to nearby. They waited for her to be out of sight, before Clarke turned to the rest and led them into a crumbled building on the edge of the town. That had been the only reason she had invited Casio along on the tour.

“Now that we’re all here,” she said. “Let me show you what I’m planning.”

Much later and somewhere else…

“Raven, this is Fisa Hua,” Clarke gestured to the old man with slanted eyes and greying hair.

“S’up, doc!” Raven greeted. “So, what are we doing in this grounder hospital, princess?”

Clarke hated the nickname but dismissed it.

“Hua helps people who have been badly wounded and have chronic pain. He uses an ancient method, but most of his patients have told me it helps.”

Raven widened her eyes and a flash of betrayal crossed her eyes.

“Look, my mom told me you don’t want to get the operation, but the pain is getting worse.”

“You didn’t really need me, did you? You and that Wu chick seemed to have it all figured out already,” Raven asked rhetorically, referencing their earlier ‘secret’ meeting after the tour. “It was just a ruse to get me here!” she accused, her nostrils flaring.

“Would you have come if I hadn’t tricked you?”
The brunette only lifted her chin defiantly but said nothing.

“Yeah, didn’t think so.” Clarke shook her head. “Just once. Give it a try. What have you got to lose?”

“What makes you think these grounders can do what our medical technology can’t?” she tried.

“If I’ve learned anything these past weeks is that we can learn a lot from each other. I think you saw some of that today at the river.”

“Hmm… so what does this dude do anyway? Chant around to heal me or what?”

Clarke rolled her eyes at their prejudices about the ground, some she herself had been guilty of.

“It’s not a cure, Rae, but it might help you manage the pain, until you decide if you get operated or not.”

The old man had been calmly setting his work tools beside a flat, wooden cot, while they argued. That’s when Raven’s eyes caught a glimpse of them.

“No way. Is that… acupuncture?!” she gasped.

“Incredible, isn’t it? Then again, the technique had already survived hundreds of years. Makes sense it would still.” Clarke smiled.

“Are we sure those are clean? Not gonna get some ground cooties or something?” the brunette half joked.

“Relax. It might look like we’re in the middle ages, but they know more than we might think. They know about germs. They boil and sterilize everything,” she tried to reassure.

The man patted the cot.

“Well, can I get at least some privacy, princess?”

Clarke sat on a chair, turning her back while Raven took of her brace and stripped down to her undergarments. The blonde had already seen Hua do the procedure. He’d stick extremely fine needles in different parts of the body and then light a thin wick that was rolled at the end of each needle.

After a little while of silence, as the Fisa worked without talking, Raven spoke.

“Clarke?”

“Mmm?”

“I… I never thanked you.”

“We don’t know if it’s going to work.”

“No, not for this, although this too. I mean, what you’re doing for us… I know we’ve given you a hard time, that sometimes we expect the impossible from you and it’s unfair… and yet, once again, here you are, saving us and paying the price.”

“I’ll always do what I have to for our people.”
“You shouldn’t have to, Clarke!” Raven countered hotly. “We put too much on you. It’s not fair.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe it’s what I’m meant to do,” Clarke mused quietly.

“I’m sorry. If I ever... if I’ve taken it out on you. You don’t deserve it.” She was whispering, thankful she didn’t have to look at Clarke while she unloaded.

It was hard for her. She was proud and didn’t apologize easily and it would always be a scar, everything that had happened between them with Finn and Lexa, and even Gustus. It had taken her a long time to get to this point and put herself in Clarke’s shoes.

“Now you’re sacrificing yourself, married for life to her, some grounder queen who betrayed you. I mean, she’s quite easy on the eyes, like really, really... and she’s like a secret genius, so you could do a lot worse, but still. I could never. I could never go through with it. Give up my life like that. Like you’re doing for us. It’s not fair, Clarke.” Raven said bitterly with sadness in her voice.

“It’s okay, Raven.”

“It’s not.”

“Are we okay?” Clarke asked after a beat.

“We’re okay. We’ve always been okay, just took me a while to get my head out of my ass,” the mechanic said apologetically. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get over what happened with your future... wife, but... I’ll try, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

The next morning woke lazily, gray clouds filtering the Sun as if to keep people from realizing the day had begun, dripping fat languid droplets of Spring rain to lull its inhabitants into a sleepy, yawning mood. Clarke was a ball of nerves, however, and had risen early to start the day at once. Today her plan would be unveiled, and she was anxious about Lexa’s reaction.

Braiding Lexa’s hair in the morning brought a quiet, peaceful moment that calmed her down momentarily, as she enjoyed the view of rosy cheeks and the slowly blinking eyes the Commander sported at this early hour, still slightly unguarded and relaxed.

The morning went by fast. They briefly went over the preparations of the mission to Broadleaf, now that messages had arrived confirming the arrival of the retrieval party at the Farm Station crash in Azgeda and the first carts with the precious grains were being loaded. The hearings and Council were uneventful. Lexa had told Clarke they would be training a bit differently that evening and would have to start earlier, so she had to change the timing and improvise a little.

The original plan was to bring it to the tower, but instead she decided to take Lexa. They walked in silence to the little building she had taken the Sky people the day before and entered.
A beautiful woman with jet black hair and porcelain skin was waiting inside. She wore a blue robe that was familiar to Lexa as were her features, but she couldn’t place them. She bowed her head reverently to Lexa with a quiet “Heda”.

“Lexa, this is Wu. She’s Masta Amakuni’s niece and they say one of the best metal workers in the city,” Clarke smiled. “She’s been helping me with a project. Well, many have really…” the blonde scrunched her brows, as if gathering her thoughts.

“I asked Raven to look into the Ark mainframe database if she could find anything on how to make one of these. She gave us some ideas, but it was Wu here who solved it.”

“With respect, Wanheda, do not be modest. We both have,” Wu insisted, “but it was looking at little Zetian playing that I figured the last problem. Zetian is my goufa, my child, Heda,” she added seeing Lexa’s very confused face.

“Maybe we should just show you,” Clarke chuckled nervously.

She stepped up at the large table in the middle of the room and pulled a coarse cloth that was covering something under it.

There was a large wooden frame on top of the table with two beams standing horizontally on it, a large block between it that seemed to come down if pulled by an iron lever. The surface of the block facing down was a thick iron plate. Under it, a parchment was placed on the table. Clarke moved to it and took a plate filled with a thick black substance.

“Picton and I tried so many combinations of this, so it wouldn’t drip but still work on the parchment,” she said as she pulled the lever bringing the plate on the block down and dipped into the pasty black ink.

She then removed the ink plate to the side and then brought down the lever once more, until it pressed into the parchment, holding it there for a few seconds then lifted it again, pulling the parchment out and extending it to Lexa.

By this time, Lexa had figured out what it was and was staring with wide, disbelieving eyes, flicking between Clarke and the extended page, mouth slightly open.

“Clarke…” she exhaled, voice tight with emotion.

“You’ve told me several times that there is so much knowledge in the books Hedas have been collecting, knowledge that could help our people learn better ways to survive, to live, to solve things, if they could have access to them, if they weren’t rotting away with time, if they could read and that your scribes aren’t enough to reproduce them and you’re afraid it will be lost,” Clarke rambled.

“Clarke,” Lexa breathed again swallowing thickly, her eyes brightening with a hint of moisture.

“So we made this. We can make more, many more. Your scribes could copy books so much faster with this. We can show them how to operate them. It’s quite easy.”

“We thought we’d have to make a new plate for each page,” Wu volunteered. “A whole plate with fixed letters,” she explained, as she took the metal piece out to show it to Heda. It was an iron frame with small, perfect, separate squares, one for each letter sculpted in relief, set next to each other in many lines.
“But then I saw Zetian playing with her abacus, learning her numbers, pushing the little wooden balls left and right on each line, and that’s when it came to me to make a separate square for each letter, that can be taken out and rearranged to make the next page and the next,” she smiled.

“And while some scribes can copy books faster with these printing presses, that means that some can have time to help with this,” Clarke pointed to the page.

That’s when Lexa focused on the actual words printed. For a moment, her mind didn’t seem to process it, not understanding what was written, until she realized why. It wasn’t English or any of the languages she had encountered and in some cases learnt to read.

It was Trigeda.

Written phonetically, staring out at her from a page in perfect letters, with the still fresh ink Clarke had concocted. Her own language, which had never before been put in written form.

“Casio offered once to teach me Trigeda,” Clarke recounted quietly. “I said no. It was… I liked my lessons with you,” she continued shyly.

“But it gave me an idea. I had been taking notes of all the words you were teaching me, writing them the way they sounded to me, so I wouldn’t forget. He’s trained as a skriba, so I asked him to help me figure out how they would be written, to create a written vocabulary of Trigeda or a dictionary, or whatever you want to call it. He assigned a few Delphi scribes to help.

Bryan also joined and we thought that could be the most useful starting point. His mission. Casio told me you always send a scribe on those types of missions to record everything and Bryan will have to teach Broadleaf all about the seeds and how to harvest them, so we’re translating all the useful words for that and figuring them in Trigeda. And they’ll continue that part of the work all throughout their mission there and it’s something they can share and leave in Broadleaf when they return, and I’ll continue here. Right now, we only have a few pages,” Clarke said showing a small stack of parchments on the table.

“But do you see, Lexa? It might take years, maybe a lifetime, but we could teach the people to read in their own language once we have it. Eventually someday, we could translate things, books… or people can write down their own stories, songs, anything.” Clarke rambled excitedly non-stop and getting more nervous by Lexa’s silence.

“Was it a terrible idea? Please say something,” she breathed to Lexa who only continued to stare at her wide-eyed.

“Clarke,” Lexa repeated for a third time in a small voice. She took a tentative step towards Clarke, then another more decisively standing close to her.

“You… this. It is… it is extraordinary, Clarke. What you have gifted me, what you have gifted our people is extraordinary, Clarke. Words fail me to properly convey what this means to me,” she said into the small space between them, her eyes soft and fiery at the same time, brimming with emotion.

“Do you really mean it?” Clarke asked, wanting to make sure.

She had been afraid at times she was crossing a line, an outsider imposing her will and shape on another’s people language, feeling it wasn’t her place even though some of the best Delphi scribes were working alongside with her.

Lexa smiled.
“My only lament is that mother never got to see this. She would have been as touched and as thrilled at the possibilities as I am,” she said meaningfully to Clarke, her gaze locked onto blue eyes. “The things we could accomplish,” she sighed still smiling.

“We could have schools one day for the kids,” Clarke offered with excitement. “And for the Fisas too! By the way, do you think Pollio could help repair and add a wing to the fisageda? I was talking with Brigid and we could take in more people if we had more space….” she trailed off seeing a smile slowly stretching on Lexa’s face.

“What?” she asked in a whisper.

How could Lexa possibly explain all the things she was feeling? For so long, in the midst of preventing war and holding on to their frail Coalition, she had been alone and with no one to share with the millions of ideas that racked her brain day and night of things that could be done. Created. Built. So her people could have a better life. And here was Clarke, this girl who had fallen from the Sky, who had been so haunted and burdened like her, with eyes shining and dreaming up a world for them too.

“You alone will have to find your purpose in life, Clarke, but just remember. Not every leader has to be a warrior. In a time of peace, some leaders will be the world builders. Maybe that is your destiny,” she mused smiling softly.

She had been careful to never force Clarke down a path, instead wanting to show her possibilities. Even though Lexa was convinced of Clarke’s strength to lead, it was something she alone could choose.

“Says the woman who literally is designing machines in her spare time,” Clarke deflected, cheeks warm by Lexa’s compliment and her unshakable faith in her.

“Seems I’m not the only one,” Lexa nodded her head towards the printer.

“Well, that was 90% Wu and 10% confusing instructions from Raven over the radio. I just came up with the idea,” Clarke shrugged with a hint of a smile.

“Yet you made it happen, getting everyone together to make it so.” Lexa countered undeterred.

“Lexa, you do realize that is you too? Everything you’ve done, everything you continue to do. The fact that you see that in me, is because that’s how you see the world. What it could be. You’ve never just tried to survive. You’ve dreamed it a better place and have tried to make it so. Do you see that?”

“Maybe we are two birds of a feather then,” Lexa smiled softly, wanting nothing more than to touch, to reach out to her.

To make sure she didn’t, she tried to break the moment.

“Will you show me some more?” she asked referring to the wonderful gift Clarke had created.

Wu, who had disappeared during their conversation to give them privacy, came back into the room and they spent time animatedly discussing their new invention.

At the end of their visit, Clarke added to her list of words a new one, a word that didn’t exist in Trigeda because they had just invented the machine in question. She insisted it have the name of the inventor so they would be always remembered.
That afternoon, instead of their usual training ground on the small hill overlooking the city, Lexa was guiding her out of it on a small forest trail. The light rain and grey skies of the day making the air have a light chill to it. Lexa wouldn’t say where they were going so Clarke simply followed, enjoying the sights around them of colored buds and tender green foliage springing all around them.

About half an hour later, they came upon a clearing where the lack of grass and rain had produced a slightly muddy terrain at the center. Two majestic looking horses were unsaddled and grazing at the edges. The massive black one she had seen before, often ridden by Lexa. The white one she had never, but it was breathtaking. It was as tall as the black one but slimmer, and its mane curly and beautifully wild.

They unmounted the horses they had come on and tied them at the edge. Lexa removed her swords, hooking them on the saddle, as well as her shoulder guard and coat.

“So I take it we’re training with horses today?” Clarke said in an unsure voice.

“Yes, I have been noticing you ride unsteadily. I do not wish you to suffer a fall,” she said distractedly, as the black horse had immediately walked over to Lexa, softly nickering and pushing its muzzle into Lexa’s hand. She scratched it affectionately whispering in Trigeda.

The white horse had stayed where it had been but was watching from afar, ears raised and tail flipping, seemingly suspicious of the newcomers.

“But that is not all” she resumed. “If you are to really learn, you need to learn on your own.”

“Is this yours?” she asked Lexa, still not fully understanding what she was getting at.

“Yes. This is the last horse my father’s war stallion sired. He gave her to me about a year before he was killed. Trained me like he did his cavalry riders,” Lexa remembered fondly, still caressing the neck of the gorgeous black mare.

“But you don’t always ride it?” Clarke gestured to the horses they had arrive on.

“No. We change horse often to let them rest, but only I ride this one. She’s a herd leader. They only let the rider they chose ride it. Don’t you, girl?” she asked warmly. The horse neighed softly, as if it understood.

“They choose the rider?”

“These ones do. For life. The dominant mare that leads the band. She’ll choose the rider who will be its partner and run with her.”

Clarke looked expectantly at Lexa.

“The best way to learn is on the one who will be yours for life,” Lexa explained, her eyes lifting to the white horse across the clearing, Clarke eyes following her gaze.
“That one was brought to me recently by Rohanna. The Plain Riders mostly breed horse like us, but every now and then they take a few young ones from the wild herds that run in their plains. She found this one alone. It is rare to find a feral mare alone. Even its breed is unusual. She brought it to me because she could not tame it. She said she was probably meant to find an equally stubborn mistress,” Lexa chuckled lightly. “Our stable people haven’t had any luck either. She throws them all to the ground.”

Clarke stared at her with alarmed eyes.

“She’s such a beauty though,” Lexa remarked, proceeding to then click her tongue and call on the horse firmly. “ Stubborn, untamable,” she continued, as the horse reluctantly approached, snorting loudly and almost defiantly. “I thought you’d make the perfect match,” she turned to look at Clarke, a small smirk on her lips.

“I’m not stubborn,” Clarke grumbled with a frown in protest, but as spoke she registered the full description Lexa had given and felt her heart momentarily lurch.

A beauty.

Surely Lexa was speaking only about the horse and had not meant anything by it. Surely. Clarke swallowed thickly nonetheless, warmth spreading on her cheeks.

“So you want me to get on a horse that not even the Riders and your horse people can tame? Are you crazy, Lexa?” Clarke said, slightly agitated. She still did not get fully used to riding on these large, strange beasts, let alone one that was wild and could throw her and break her bones.

“Yes. The horse is yours. Even if she rejects you,” Lexa said still half smirking.

“Mine?”

She nodded.

“They feel your fear, Clarke. Remain calm and everything will be alright. I will show you.” Lexa said patiently.

“The Plain Riders don’t like to train the horse on wet ground, fearing they will slip, but the Shadow Valley people like my father believed it was best, especially to break the wild ones. Not when it’s too muddy, but just wet enough it will make the horse step more cautiously,” she explained, approaching the horse who had stopped just short of them.

“You will behave,” she suddenly and very firmly scolded the horse, who stopped for a moment its agitated breathing, as if sensing the authority Lexa emanated. It defiantly snorted again but stayed put.

“Come,” she gestured Clarke, wordlessly prompting her to caress the horse’s neck like she was doing, letting them get acquainted for a while, though the horse was still clearly restless.

“To mount it, you grab its mane and then swing your leg over,” she said, doing it with effortless speed, mounting her black mare who she’d summoned with a click of the tongue.

Clarke wanted to protest and ask why on earth she had to do it without a saddle and on an apparently crazy horse, but she knew Lexa would tell her that the best way to learn was by starting with the hardest parts, not the easiest. It’s how she had been training her to fight and to hunt.

“It’s not only because it’s hard,” Lexa said as if reading her thoughts, “but the saddle, the reins are
just distractions, crutches to cling on. Riding is all in the legs and learning to align your balance with the horse’s. You won’t if your using the safety of the mount,” she continued, dismounting and walking back to Clarke.

“I don’t know what all that means,” Clarke said, unconvinced and apprehensive.

“How about I go first?”

“Won’t she throw you?”

“She’ll probably try… and probably succeed, but she’s seen me ride her friend and she trusts her. I’ve had them come out here together for a week,” she added a bit slyly. “Hopefully that will help.”

She stroked the white mare again, this time on her back and her sides, as if to calm her, although she talked to her in that scolding tone again but whispering it to her while she did it. After a moment, she repeated the movement, grabbing her mane with her left hand and in one swooping movement swung her leg over it. As soon as she did, however, the horse immediately neighed angrily rising its front legs repeatedly trying to shake her off, then kicked her hind legs when that didn’t work. Lexa dug in her heels and braced her legs, keeping herself on it despite all the trashing. It then took off on a fast gallop around the clearing, still trying to dislodge Lexa.

Clarke had stepped back at first in panic but now was trying to follow, afraid Lexa would fall. Lexa’s horse, however, had immediately sprang into action and had ran after them until she surpassed them and placed herself in front, forcing the white horse to slow down its pace. It had momentarily slowed down but soon enough it tried to outrun it. Lexa’s mare had however turned her neck around and violently bit the younger horse, asserting her dominance with loud snorts and a kick in the chest. The younger mare slowed down and stepped back behind.

Lexa’s mare was older, putting her higher up in the hierarchy, but she was also THE leader of her herd and seemed unconcerned that the youngling wasn’t even part of her band yet. she still was domineering enough to put her in her place. Clarke wondered if that hadn’t been a part of Lexa’s plan.

They went around for several minutes, tiring the young mare and calming her aggressive attitude, although she occasionally would still kick up. They finally trotted and slowed down, stopping next to Clarke. Lexa’s cheeks were beautifully colored from the exertion, wisps of hair flowing around her hair, mouth slightly open as she breathed heavily with a small satisfied smile.

“She really is terribly stubborn,” she said between breaths. “Come,” she extended her hand down. “I’ll try to prevent you from falling.”

Clarke still did not trust the horse not to break all their bones. It was still shaking its head up and down, clearly unamused by having Lexa on it, its skin shuddering and its nostrils flaring. But, she had to try.

“Use my foot as a stepping point and grab the mane with your other hand,” she instructed. Clarke wobbly complied and managed to lift herself and land with an oomph in front of Lexa.

The mare who had been fidgeting immediately went still. Lexa did too as if surprised.

Clarke, on the other hand, completely forgot about the horse, about everything, once she realized just where she was. Her entire body was pressed up against Lexa, from shoulder to knees. She could feel every curve, ever swell of Lexa’s front against her back, her smooth legs bracketing her
own, her behind squarely pressed between Lexa’s legs.

Clarke felt electricity and heat burst through her, inflaming her neck violently, making her heart thud heavily inside her chest and then shooting down low in her belly. Clarke froze, taken by surprise as if she hadn’t thought what getting up in the same horse would entail. But it was the soft clicking ‘Clarke?’ that Lexa breathed so close to her ear that nearly undid her.

She held her breath to prevent herself from gasping or shuddering or anything that would make it awkward, but it was nearly impossible. Especially given Lexa’s disposition since they had gone back on speaking terms and particularly after the last gift. Lexa had a spark in her eyes and a soft smile every time she spoke to her and it was weakening Clarke’s resolve to not let her feelings take over her actions. To reach out. To sink in.

“Are you ok?” she asked softly again.


“Hold on to the mane. One hand here. The other lower. You see.”

“Uh huh,” she pronounced mutedly, as Lexa’s arms snaked past her waist to grip the mane in demonstration. Clarke was certain she wouldn’t learn a single thing in their current situation, incapable of focusing on anything but the feel of Lexa surrounding her.

“Bend your knees a little and then use your thighs, tighten them to hold yourself,” she continued, unaware of Clarke’s predicament, thought silently suffering it herself. “Ready to walk a little?”

“Mmm.”

Lexa clicked her tongue and lightly tapped the side of the horse with her feet. The mare still startled and jumped a little before walking, fidgety and clearly irritated two humans were on her back. She was about to stand on her hind legs again to rid herself of the pests, when Clarke seemed to come out of her stupor.

“Don’t you dare,” she hissed. “Stop it or I’ll turn you into steak!”

The horse went completely still.

“Clarke,” the brunette breathed out a chuckle.


The horse restarted on a slow walk, uncertain and snorting its displeasure.

Clarke regretted it immediately however. The horse walking only made their bodies push into each other with each step and Clarke couldn’t take it.

“Can I… can I try by myself?”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“Very well.”

She made sure to descend slowly, not wanting the horse to start up with its antics. It was a young but powerful horse, still mostly wild. If Clarke lost control of it, she could get very hurt. So she
kept her hand on the horse’s neck, as they slowly walked in case she needed to pull Clarke back or get back up quickly to subdue it.

“Don’t tense up. Don’t fight the movement. Move with it,” she said, seeing Clarke sitting stiff and awkwardly and like she would slip off at any moment.

“Use the muscles inside your thighs. Press them harder.”

“I am!” Clarke said a bit harshly, more from fright than actual annoyance. Lexa was doing her best not to show her amusement on her face.

She continued teaching Clarke the basics, including what to do if the horse suddenly fled at full sprint. The animal was beginning to calm down but still tried to shake her off every now and then. Clarke felt her legs burning from the exertion after a while, her hands cramping from holding on so tightly.

She kept grumbling and threatening it as she wobbled on, tiring from Lexa’s constant instructions and corrections.

“Now let go and extend your arms to your sides. Learn to balance just with your legs.”

“Lexa, are you insane!!”

“That’s how we learn.”

“That’s how I break my neck.”

“Do you want to learn?”

“No. Thanks very much. Who needs a horse anyway? I’ll walk.”

“All the way to Arkadia?”

“I’ll take the rover.”

“And other places?” Lexa continued, her smirk growing at Clarke’s absurd stubbornness.

“I’ll send letters. Who needs to go anywhere anyways?! Got everything I need in Polis,” she huffed at a particularly jostling move, noticing the horse was attempting to trot, bored of just walking.

“Just try,” she tried.

“Fine! There!” she let go of the mane and extended her arms. As she did, the mare began to trot and a few steps in went into full gallop.

“Fuck! Fuck!” Clarke shrieked, her arms coming to wrap around the thick neck of the animal. “Stop! Stop now or I swear to god, you’ll be dinner!”

The horse stopped abruptly. The sudden halt made Clarke get thrown over the head of the animal.

She landed with a loud thud in the middle of a watery puddle, mud splattered on her clothes and part of her face.

Lexa came over quickly, but her concern quickly morphed into one of amusement when she saw the blonde’s state and her deep, grumpy frown. She kneeled beside her not being able to fight the smile she was trying to suppress by pressing her lips tightly.
“Are you hurt?”

“My horse is trying to murder me,” Clarke said shaking her hands from the dripping mud, pushing a strand of hair with the back of her hand.

“In her defense, you threatened to eat her,” Lexa chuckled.

“Ha. You hear that, horse? The Commander cracks jokes when nobody is watching!”

“Don’t call it that,” Lexa chastised, although still smiling while she helped Clarke sit back up.

“You need to name it.”

“The horse? Why?”

“Why do you have a name?”

“How do I name an animal, Lexa?”

“Some warriors name them after their first battle together or a memory shared with them. Others just something they think will suit them,” Lexa shrugged.

“Muddy!”

“You can’t call her that!” Lexa said affronted.

“Well you said a memory we shared. She made me eat mud. Muddy it is.”

Lexas rolled her eyes. “You have to honor the horse, Clarke. Give it a name that is worthy.”

“So Grumpy Face is out of the question?” Clarke asked with cheek.

“Well… it is something you do both share,” Lexa said with an amused half-smirk and a playful glint in her eyes.

“Lexa!” the blonde gasped after a pause as the words registered, a smile spreading as she did, her brows scrunched in mock offense.

Before she could realize what she was doing, Clarke saw her own hand fly up and smear a large handful of mud across Lexa’s face. The brunette stilled in shock, mouth agape, eyes wide and blinking slowly.

Clarke suddenly panicked internally. She had just disrespected the Commander of the Twelve Clans, the sacred Heda. What on earth was she thinking?!

But then her heart stopped and her body froze as a sound pierced the silence of the clearing.

It had come from Lexa.

A rippling, melodious and soul-changing sound coming from her mouth.

Lexa was laughing.

A joyous, surprised, toothy, body-shaking laughter, eyes shining with mirth and shock as the beautiful sound spilled out of her mouth.

Clarke’s own mouth opened in a gasp, awe-struck from the breathtaking vision before her, not fully
processing what was happening. The most she had seen or heard from Lexa had been half smiles and quiet chuckles. Nothing could have prepared her to see the complete transformation on the brunette’s face.

Before Clarke could come out of her shock, she felt a cold, wet blob of mud on her face. She hadn’t even seen Lexa grab a handful and smack it across her face.

Clarke sputtered out, her eyes wide and disbelieving at Lexa who was now laughing even harder, head thrown back and eyes crinkled, as if she herself couldn’t believe what she had done but too amused at Clarke’s now muddy face to manage to stop.

“Lexa!” Clarke half gasped, half huffed in astonishment.

This time she saw Lexa go for another handful, so she got up on her knees and thrust her hands forward to grab Lexa’s wrists.

To her surprise, Lexa didn’t put up any resistance and the forward motion resulted in her toppling over the Commander, wrists held up over her head and Clarke narrowly missing bumping her head into her.

Clarke froze over her. Not out of fear or surprise anymore, but awe.

There lay Lexa underneath her, with a half-muddied face, breathing heavily as her laughter tapered off softly, her cheeks pink from the exertion and eyes brimming with warmth and mischievous joy. A lightness she had never seen before and that she suspected came from the peace of forgetting for one moment about everything except the moment they were in.

Had Clarke not already been on the floor, she would have fallen awe-struck at the beauty in front of her. Her eyes glistened lightly while her heart hammered wildly in her chest, enraptured by Lexa and at the overwhelming pull she felt towards her.

She realized, between each violent heartbeat, that she was almost breathing Lexa’s own air, their bodies flush together from chest to thighs. Thighs that were currently entangled, one of hers firmly between Lexa’s. She was helpless at stopping her eyes from flitting to her lips, a devastating desire to dip and feel them with her own erasing all her inner protestations about respecting Lexa’s request.

The Commander had suddenly gone still, as if sensing the shift in Clarke and the charged atmosphere between then, entranced herself by the electric pull towards the blonde’s lips.

All Clarke could feel was her heart thudding in her ears, threatening to beat right out of her chest.

She swallowed thickly before leaning in when she felt her head being thumped on the side, breaking the spell and her intentions.

A soft neigh rumbled next to her ear before her head was nudged again by the soft nuzzle of the horse.

Her bratty horse she was about to strangle for interrupting. Before she could open her mouth to scold it with threats of the many meals she was going to make from it, she heard Lexa’s soft chuckle beneath her.

“Looks like she has chosen you after all,” she said lifting a corner of her lips up.
Clarke huffed but then seemed to remember herself, shifting to get off Lexa and helping her to sit up.

“Sorry,” she muttered, looking away with embarrassment.

“It’s okay,” was almost whispered by Lexa, a timid smile on her lips. She then proceeded to attempt to wipe all the mud of her face but not succeeding too much.

Clarke spoke, wanting to break the awkward silence.

“So give me an example. Of a name I mean.”

“My father’s stallion was called something like ‘the mighty hammer’ in yoksleng, the tongue spoken in the Shadow Valley,” she explained. “It saved him from certain death on their first battle by crushing a man’s head under his front hoofs.”

Clarke widened her eyes in barely-concealed horror. Lexa saw her expression but continued.

“It was a name worthy of a legendary horse for a legendary warrior.”

Not wanting to disrespect Lexa’s father, Clarke tried to change the subject.

“What about yours?”

“Mine?”

“Yes.”

“Well…” she hesitated. “Nontu named him more than I did, really. He gifted her to me the year before his death. He would take me out and teach me in the ways he did his cavalry warriors, the first lessons always at night,” she reminisced, as she passed her hand in her dirtied hair.

“At night? Why?”

“He said it was only when we could not see anything, when we were not distracted by our surroundings, that we could learn to become one rider with the horse. Be aware of nothing but its rhythm, learn to breathe and move like one with it.”

“You said a year before he passed. You were six then?” she asked stunned. Lexa only nodded.

“It is the good age to begin, even if one is less… disciplined then,” Lexa faintly smiled. “He would often find me laying on its back, looking up at the night skies, instead of following his training exercises. He called us the star gazers. He said I always was. Gazing up.”

Clarke smiled at the image it conjured. Of a small enough Lexa to fit laying down on the back of the big horse, hands behind her head, looking up at night.

“So, what you’re saying is that the mighty Heda’s horse has a romantic name like ‘star gazer’ instead of some fierce, scary name?” Clarke lightly teased.

“Stah Wocha,” Lexa corrected, refusing to let her mouth curve up once more, but the gleam in her eyes showed her amusement. “And though that is its meaning in yoksleng, wocha also mean chief in trigeda,” she shrugged, pleased with herself.

“So people think it means chief of the stars? The Heda of the skies?” Clarke shook her head with a chuckle.
“I do not command them what to think, Clarke,” she rebutted with a half-smile.

“You do realize how ironic that is?” the blonde raised one eyebrow. “That you are actually marrying… well, uniting with the sky ‘leader’?” she said using air quotes, teasing her further.

“That… fortunate coincidence had not escaped me,” she replied, holding Clarke’s gaze for a few seconds too long.

It did not go unnoticed that Lexa had changed the term and with it, its implication. It made Clarke’s heart hammer in her chest once more and made her wonder if Lexa meant it.

Before she could overthink it, she whispered.

“Tombon Faya.”

At Lexa’s questioning gaze, she added.

“My horse. That’s what I’ll call her. Tombon Faya… did I say that right?” she asked hesitantly, not being able to meet the Commander’s eyes.

“Heart of fire,” she swallowed nodding. “It’s a good name.” She didn’t add how she thought it described Clarke herself to perfection.

“Or fire in the heart,” Clarke said softly, still refusing to look at her.

It was fitting for everything Clarke had felt that day. Witnessing the breathtaking vision of Lexa laughing. Basking in the intimacy and privilege of having Lexa share precious memories with her again. Feeling her heart nearly beat out of her chest when she pinned Lexa underneath her and almost kissed her, if it were not for her horse’s untimely interruption.

It was fitting for their restless, confused hearts as they rode back to Polis between shy glances and the memory of each other’s breaths on their lips.

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After they had made their way back to the tower, they had brief encounter with Titus in one of the corridors. He’d clenched his jaw and the vein on his forehead looked ready to burst when he saw the muddy state they were in, and the guilty but slightly amused expression on their faces. He said nothing, however, just bowed his head and continued on his way.

They had planned on having dinner together, the first after many days, but just as Lexa had been wiping her face with a damp cloth in her room, some guards had come to fetch her and she left with them.

Clarke decided to wait for her there, biding her time reading and trying to play of chess against herself. As the hours passed by, she began to worry. It had gotten very late and there was still no trace of Lexa. Clarke felt cold grip her stomach, a bad feeling taking over her.

Just as she was about to go out and ask the guards again if they had any news, the doors burst
Half of Lexa’s face, her coat, her hands were all covered in blood and grime. She was grimacing and clutching her side in pain.

Clarke’s heart froze in panic as she rose immediately to run to her side.

“Lexa!” she choked out. “Oh my god, Lexa! What’s wrong?”

Her hands flew all over the Commander’s body trying to figure out where she was injured but not being able to settle in a single place. Her mind numb and her hands shaking with gripping fear.

Lexa grunted again in pain, holding one side of her stomach.

“We were attacked. They came out from everywhere. Shot at us.”

Clarke felt her legs wobble and felt faint. She had medical training, she had to focus. Assess, treat, repair. But this was Lexa. Her brain was not cooperating at the thought of Lexa being shot. At the possibility of losing her.

She could only gasp in response to the information and mutter ‘where?’, ‘where?’ as she set to frantically unfasten all the belts and buckles on Lexa’s coat. When she was pushing it off her shoulders, she finally tuned into Lexa’s voice.

“It’s not mine. Clarke, the blood is not mine.”

It seemed the brunette had been repeating it, but Clarke hadn’t heard over the buzzing chaos in her ears.

It’s only then when she looked up that she realized she was just a few inches away from Lexa, invading her space, and that she was now slowly taking off Lexa’s coat. Taking off Lexa’s clothes. She swallowed.

“It is not mine, Clarke,” she said again, with warm eyes and a soothing voice, breaking Clarke from her stupor.

It was only when Clarke finished pulling the coat sleeves off her hands, that Lexa winced again, her hand flying to her side once more. Clarke instinctively put her hands on Lexa’s as if to stop whatever bleeding was happening, even though Lexa insisted she was not injured. She then tried to lift her shirt to survey the damage, but only earned the Commander’s insistence she was fine.

“Sit! Let me check you!” Clarke said sternly, gently maneuvering her to sit on the couch. She kneeled and lifted the shirt up.

A large, purplish bruise was blooming on her side and lower back, but no skin had been broken. She pressed the tips of her fingers around, as her mother had once taught her, to check for broken ribs, palpitating to assess internal bleeding. She knew it wasn’t enough. She wouldn’t be able to tell with certainty.

“Take deep breaths and tell me if it hurts?”

Lexa silently followed her instruction, shaking her head in reply and watching Clarke intently.

“It is just a bruise, Clarke.”

“You don’t seem to have any broken ribs, but you could’ve injured your spleen or liver by the location of the hit. I need to scan you,” Clarke said while she continued her examination, brows
deeply frowned.

“I am fine, Clarke.”

“They have a hand scan on each rover. It’s one of the new rules set out by the Chancellor. Which means the one that arrived in Polis has one. It’s not very accurate but it will have to do until I take you to Arkadia to get really checked,” she continued, as if not having heard Lexa.

“I will not go to Arkadia, Clarke. I am fine. Brigid can take a look at me later if you desire, but I’m fine.”

“Like hell you are. Lexa, I’m getting that scan and you can’t stop me! Then we’ll go to Arkadia.” The blonde’s face was ashen. Her lips set in a straight tight line.

“Get the scan. Quietly. Tell no one what or who it is for. Then we shall talk,” Lexa conceded but her demeanor did not mask the seriousness of her request.

It took Clarke little time to go down and back up the tower and then to use the small flat screen to scan Lexa. The image was not very good. They had been crudely put together by the small group of engineers left in the Arkadia with the parts of the original scans that had survived the crash and bits and pieces of solar panels to power them.

Even though she was not very convinced, she relented after a few minutes of checking again and again.

“What happened out there, Lexa?” she squeaked, still shaken.

“A unit didn’t come back from its patrol of Polis’ borders. Another one went out to search for them. They found them a few miles out. Slaughtered. That’s why they came to get me,” Lexa swallowed harshly, clearly upset.

“We got there and were retrieving the bodies and trying to find clues of the attack when arrows came from all around us. We were completely surrounded. That’s when I heard it.”

“What?”

“The click. The click of guns.”

Clarke was stunned silent.

“I know its sound anywhere, Clarke,” she said grimly. “Before I could tell everyone to take cover, they fired from several directions. Penn was a few feet from me, his back to me. I heard the whistle of a bullet graze me, but another hit him in the shoulder. The bullet jerked his arm back and he hit me with the hilt of his sword.”

“Is he okay?”

Lexa nodded. “Brigid is patching him up. Seems to not have hit anything but muscle. Others were not so lucky,” she said clenching her jaw. “Had I not ordered another unit to follow us at a distance. Had they not intervened, we might not have made it.”

Clarke shuddered at the thought.

“Why did you go, Lexa? Couldn’t someone else check it? It’s too risky. Too dangerous… you can’t always risk yourself…” she said, trying and failing to get her voice not to shake.
“I am the protector, Clarke. It is my duty. I had to go and see for myself.”

At that, Clarke lifted her eyes to her.

“You suspected something?”

Lexa nodded slowly.

“That’s why you took that second unit?”

Another nod.

“How? What is happening, Lexa?”

Lexa got up gingerly, her hand still holding her side. She went to a wall and opened a hidden compartment with a locked box. She retrieved a bundle of cloth from it and walked back to Clarke, handing it to her.

“What the scout found near the attack of the trade barges,” she said solemnly.

Clarke looked up at her and then to the bundle on her lap. She opened it slowly and froze when she saw what it held inside.

A gun.

A gun, two empty, fired casings of a larger rifle and an arrowhead.

She swallowed thickly, dread filling her up inside, knowing what this could mean.

“When did the scout come?” she asked.

“A few days ago.”

“You’ve known this whole time?” Clarke pressed agitated. “Lexa, I have to warn Arkadia. When people find out, they’ll attack us,” she continued, getting up.

“You cannot say anything about it, Clarke,” Lexa countered decisively.

“What? Why?!”

“The matter is being investigated. If word gets out, the culprits would be alerted that we’re onto them.”

“I’ll just tell my mother. Or Kane. So they can prepare.”

“And who will they tell? If someone in Skaikru is responsible, we cannot let them be warned.”

“So you do think we did this?” Clarke accused.

“It is one of the possibilities, yes. And as such, it needs to be considered.”

“Why would we do this, Lexa? We couldn’t have!”

“You cannot know for sure, Clarke. Just as you could not have known that the Sky rebels would strike,” she said calmly. “Just as I cannot be sure what every single one of my people is doing or if
anyone is involved.”

She gazed at the contents on Clarke’s lap meaningfully. Clarke followed her gaze.

“The arrow tip. Its shape. It is Trikru,” she said grimly.

Clarke was even more shocked and confused.

“You think someone from Skaikru and Trikru conspired together to attack the trade barges?” she furrowed her brow even deeper.

“At least that is what someone might want us to believe.”

At the blonde’s confused face, Lexa continued.


Clarke still didn’t understand.

“Unless you are on the battlefield, every single arrowhead is recovered when hunting. The metal is scarce, they are expensive to trade. The arrows get pulled out the animal. If it breaks off when the animal falls, it’s dug out from the wound to re-use the arrowhead. This was found on a deer carcass at the camp the scout tracked them to, where he found the gun and the shelling.”

“Maybe they were in a hurry…?”

“The fire had long since been cold. If the arrow had broken and they had forgotten the rest inside the animal, the shaft would be broken, not perfectly cut. Do you see, Clarke?”

“You think they wanted it to be found? To put the blame on Trikru?” Clarke asked incredulously.

“It is a possibility,” Lexa mused. “Everything is as a possibility, including that both our clans were the culprits. I have to consider every suspicion and the people behind it cannot know we suspect a conspiracy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Clarke asked with a small voice. “You don’t trust me?”


“But?”

“Had I told you, would you have not rushed to tell Arkadia just as you were about to? Even if I had asked you not to?”

“They’re my people, Lexa. I have to protect them.”

“I know, Clarke. It is one of the reasons I admire you, but if this is to work,” she said gesturing between them, “if this partnership, if this union is to work, then you have to think above you clan. Your loyalty must be to the Coalition. We need to be a united front. Or I will always have to conceal things from you. Don’t you see?”

Clarke shook her head. “How Lexa? I am supposed to just sit back and let my people be attacked instead of fighting for them?”

“By trusting that anything I do will always put the greater good in first place. To do this, I cannot favor one clan above the other. I cannot turn a blind eye or fail in bringing to justice whoever
breaks the law to protect the many. If I have to keep the whole truth from you in fear you will do everything to protect only Skaikru in detriment of the rest, we will never be able to fully trust each other.”

“If it’s blind obedience you want, I can never give you that,” Clarke replied ashen.

“I don’t want that, Clarke. I want you to stand beside me, to build a better future for all of us, for all our people. As Wanheda of the Coalition, not just of Skaikru. It is my destiny to walk though this life shouldeering this duty, creating that tomorrow for all the peoples of our land. Join me. Walk with me as my equal, as my true hafon,” Lexa pleaded passionately. “Are you with me?”

After a long pause, Clarke responded weakly. “I don’t know if I can. Stop trying, for them I mean.”

“I know. It is not easy to have to order the punishment of Trikru when they have wronged another clan. But it would not be fair to others if I didn’t. It would be an injustice and bred lawlessness.”

“If Skaikru is involved, what will happen to them?” Clarke asked with a tight throat.

“The punishment will be proportional to the crime,” she answered vaguely.

“If the attack had only been on the trade convoy, we could have paid it with the grains on Farm Station and the 30 lives taken,” Clarke deduced slowly, “but they attacked you too,” she realized with horror.

Lexa nodded.

“With the slaughter of the peacekeepers so recent, if anyone finds out, not even our union will quell the wrath of the clans, Clarke. They will not wait for the whole truth to emerge. I might not be able to stop the violence of their vengeance on Skaikru. On you.” Lexa explained gravely. “This is why no one can know yet. Not until we have all the facts and we know exactly who did it and why.”

“What about the guards with you who saw it all?”

“The scouts and sentries are sworn to secrecy. They will not speak even under torture.”

After a pause, Lexa spoke again.

“I have been going every single report from our informants in the past months, trying to find clues. I cannot see a pattern yet, but… I fear something bigger is underway, Clarke,” she said quietly. “Whatever it is, I promise I will do everything to protect you.”

Clarke’s head was swimming. Things had just started to improve and now everything was unraveling again. She looked up at Lexa. Her earnest eyes gazing at her in concern when she was the one covered in blood, bruised and battered.

“Lexa,” she whispered softly, reaching to grab her hand lightly. “Go wash up. I have to tend to your injuries still.”

“I will not go to Arkadia to get checked, Clarke.”

“I know. And you call me stubborn,” Clarke smiled sadly. “Still, I need apply a salve to keep the swelling down. Go. Wash then take a bath. The warm water will help,” she commanded softly.

As she watched Lexa retreating to the bathroom, Clarke knew what she had to do.
She came back to Lexa’s room after a short visit to her own, but giving Lexa time. She made her way to the Commander’s bathroom as silently as she could. She steeled herself for a second, heart hammering for what she was about to do, but completely resolute in her intentions.

Lexa was in her tub, head resting on the edge, eyes closed as a faint scented vapor steamed off the surface of the water.

“Don’t open your eyes,” she commanded.

She saw Lexa reflexively tense at the unexpected intrusion. The Commander fought with the instinct to do just that and open her eyes, but didn’t at first. Not until she heard the sound of Clarke getting in the water. Her eyes opened to the vision of Clarke’s naked shoulders sinking in front of her.

She stilled in stunned silence, her heart beating erratically.

“What are you doing, Clarke?” she asked faintly.

“I would be honored if you washed my back,” Clarke replied with emotion shaking her voice lightly.

She heard the quiet gasp behind her.

“I do trust you, Lexa.”

She paused, gathering her thoughts before continuing.

“I want this to work. I want us to work. Not because of the Coalition, but because…” she breathed out unsteadily, feeling she wasn’t explaining herself well, so she tried again.

“I’m sorry. I never apologized to you. For lashing out the first day you tried to train me. What I said… was unfair to you. I was angry, but not because you broke our deal at the Mountain. I mean I was mad at that, but I understood your decision. But mostly I was afraid that you left me. That I lost you just when I had finally found you.”

She felt more than heard Lexa sucking in a breath.

“Even if we had never been made to enter our union for our people, there’s something here. Between us, isn’t there?” she asked not expecting an answer.

“Since we met. A connection. Something we share that I had never… I had never found before. The thought of losing it, losing you, it broke something inside me... When I saw you covered in blood and in pain again today…” Clarke whispered with a broken voice, “I’m still afraid.”

“Don’t be. I’m okay” Lexa breathed out, finally finding her voice. “I don’t want to lose this either,” was said closer to her but just as softly from behind.

Clarke then felt the warm water slowly being poured over her back in small scoops. “You honor me with your trust, Clarke kom Skaikru,” she said pouring more water on her careful not to touch her skin with her hands, however.

“You asked me earlier if I’m with you?” Clarke referenced her question when they had argued. “I’m with you, Lexa. I might not always agree with Heda and I won’t just sit and accept things
“I expect nothing less,” Lexa said with a smile coloring her voice.

“But I’m with you, Lexa. We’re in this together.”

Lexa felt emotion swelling her heart, both because of Clarke’s gesture but most of all because of the acknowledgment of the unique bond they shared, irrespective of Coalition and forced union.

As Clarke and Lexa.

That she wasn’t alone in feeling that intense kinship. That she too had ceased to feel the void, the loneliness she had always felt, when she had found Clarke. That she had found her equal in every measure of intellect and strength, and someone with such a passionate and good heart. It overwhelmed her.

“Clarke…” she tried. “Will you… would you give me the gift of washing my back too?”

The blonde heard Lexa turn in the water. She turned herself, not having expected Lexa to reciprocate what was considered the act of utmost trust for grounders. So great, Hedas would not risk it.

“It would be my great honor, Heda,” she swallowed shaken by the gravity of the offer and by the view of Lexa’s naked, beautifully smooth back.

Her eyes widened at the intricate tattoo covering her spine, sprawling against her tan skin. She lifted the small bowl and poured the oil-scented water on the brunette’s back, her senses overwhelmed by the delicious aroma that was Lexa’s characteristic smell, that inebriating sweet aroma that she carried on her hair and skin, that was surrounding now her and seeping into to her every pore like she was drowning in Lexa herself.

She tried to steel herself, not wanting to cross any lines or change the solemnity of the moment, despite the aching temptation to do so, having a completely naked Lexa in a bath with her.

She couldn’t stop her hand from reaching out, however, running her fingers lightly over the tattoo.

“This is beautiful.”

Lexa felt shivers everywhere Clarke ran her fingers, but controlled her body to conceal them.

“I got it on my Ascension Day, a circle for every Natblida lost when the Commander chose me.”

“7 circles. So there were 8 novitiates at your conclave?”

“9.”

“What happened to number 8?”

Lexa tensed. “Can we talk about something else?”

“We don’t have to talk about it, but… I have been dying to see our tattoo. Can I?” she asked, softly touching the spot on her neck behind Lexa’s hair.
Lexa nodded. The blonde moved it tenderly over her shoulder, her fingers immediately tracing the revealed ink.

“Wow,” she exclaimed quietly. “What does it mean?”

Lexa hesitated. She didn’t want to tell Clarke that after a brief glimpse, she had avoided seeing it, afraid of the truth, or rather the lie, of their arrangement being reflected back at her.

_Gon Ogeda_ tattoos consisted of two rings intertwined, one for each one of the souls uniting. The patterns and symbols varied depending on the interpretation of the pair and the union made by the _Memom Masta_. What little she had managed to see one day in her mirror had shown a single ring.

It could only mean no real union was taking place, no souls being merged and entwined. She imagined the _Memom Masta_ had no choice but to give each their own individual symbol to at least appear to fulfill the marking ceremony, but their charade was clearly drawn on their skin.

“What do you see?”

“There’s a thick ring. On one side it has a panther head biting it, on the other a lion? Maybe. Except it doesn’t have a mane, but it’s different from the other. Like they’re both chasing each other around the circle. There’s so stars. I don’t understand the other symbols,” she trailed off, distracted with the intricate design. A mix of stylized geometric shapes and swirling vines and minute patterns filling each shape.

“What?” Lexa said with alarm, straightening up. “Two heads? Are you sure?”

“Well, yeah. Mine is the same. I hadn’t seen all the details with the little hand mirror I used the other day.”

“Show me,” she interrupted. “Please?” she added more calmly.

She waited until she heard Clarke turning around. She gingerly pushed her hair aside and widened her eyes when she saw it.

It was unmistakable. Even with the beautiful artistic rendering of the _Masta_, there was no mistaking the very recognizable symbols.

That of Deimeikalona and Keryongifa.

The lioness and the panther.

The two most powerful symbols for grounders, never drawn together, were staring back at her.

Together.

On one single ring.

“What is it?”

She waited a long moment before she replied.
“I think we need to pay the Blinka a visit.”

Lexa slept very little that night. The entire day had been a filled with a wide array of emotions, from the joy she felt during her riding lessons with Clarke and the wonderous gift the blonde had given her; the rage and concern over the ambush she had suffered; the overwhelming significance of their bath and shared confessions and pledges; to the looming danger brewing somewhere in their lands.

But most of all, it was Clarke and her stubborn insistence to ‘monitor’ her through the night.

*We can’t fully rule out internal bleeding, Lexa. I'll keep you under observation for the night,* she had said with a determined frown and had planted herself in a chair next to her bed with a book intent on watching over, despite all the protestations and eye rolls from Lexa.

When the blonde had finally succumbed to tiredness, slumped over in the chair, Lexa had huffed and roused Clarke from the chair in her near sleep state, insisting she at least rest on the bed with her.

She had done it without thinking, but once she had the blonde’s warmth breathing deeply and peacefully next to her, she couldn’t keep her heart from galloping in her chest. Memories of Clarke’s glistening skin in the bath flashed in her mind, of her hands tenderly rubbing the salve on her stomach and lower back afterwards, of the words ‘I’m with you, Lexa’ echoing in her mind.

She also had never shared a bed since her ascension. It not had gone unnoticed to her how many times she had fallen asleep unconcerned in the blonde’s presence, but never in the same bed.

Despite her agitated state, she smiled. She turned her back to the blonde in complete trust and certainty, feeling her warmth close behind her calm her as she finally closed her eyes.

Spring, the season of blooming promises, possibilities and new life, was definitively still her favorite.

Later that day, at the market square, the citizen of Polis imperceivably stilled as they saw the two leaders approaching from different directions and on different sides of square as usual. The Little Panther, as people took to calling her as a child and during her first years of rule, who had now become the mightiest Heda they ever had, lifted her eyes and locked gazed with the wild Sky Wanhed.

As if in slow motion, they both crossed the square, a hint of a smile on their lips, oblivious of anything and anyone around them. After days of dancing around each other and never crossing paths, they came together in the middle of the square.
“Clarke,” Lexa said quietly, simply, her eyes roaming the blonde’s face intently as if they hadn’t seen each other that same morning and every day.

“Lexa,” the blonde replied, tentatively reaching to brush the Commander’s hand, briefly squeezing it in a silent greeting.

“Are you in a rush?”

Clarke shook her head.

“Walk with me?”

Clarke smiled and nodded.

“I’ll walk with you.”

As the two leaders left the square side by side, with shoulders brushing and bashful gazes, the people in the square breathed an imperceptible sigh of relief and knowing, pleased smiles. Mugs of ale would clink and overfill later as the tavern-goers huddled together, speculation already running amok through the capital, among chuckles of happy laughter and racy innuendoes. At the Angry Boar, whispers of mysterious lore and old prophecies had already ignited quietly.

A lone figure in a corner table listened attentively, but even that silent figure, that of Sybil Blinka kom Polis, was smiling that day. She had seen in her visions the approaching darkness coming.

But she had also just witnessed the two powerful forces once foretold finally meet and walk together.

Chapter End Notes

NAME ORIGINS AND OTHER USELESS NERDY TRIVIA ¯\_(ツ)_/¯:

Chela: how many Spanish-speaking people call blondes, akin to saying ‘blondie’.

Hua: Hua Shou was the Chinese physician who wrote the classic text of acupuncture back in the 14th century.

Pollio: Vitruvius Pollio was a Roman engineer in the 1st century BC. At lot of what we know about Roman engineering (aqueducts, irrigation systems, water mills, heating, public baths, filtering water pipes for drinkable water, steam machine and a bunch of military machinery) comes from him. Also, Da Vinci’s famous drawing, the Vitruvian Man (the naked dude in the circle). Da Vinci and architects created the illustrations of his machines and buildings based on his texts centuries later, so what Lexa is doing is possible! Moreover, Vitruvius referenced the works of a large number
of philosophers, physicists, artists, engineers and kings of antiquity, which Lexa could also be using since they're closer to their level of technology and capabilities.

Xihuitl: name in nahuatl meaning "comet", which is what the little girls call Clarke. Huitzilli and Tzitzitlini are also nahuatl (what many indigenous groups in Mexico and Central America used to speak). Tzitzitlini was also the name of a cat I once had, lol

Wu Zetian: the only female emperor in the history of China who was the earliest and most important sponsor of printing and helped massify it in the 7th century. The oldest printed book in the world that still survives today is a work commissioned by Wu Zetian, now in a Tokyo museum. Thought I’d pay her a little tribute. :)

The Inuk and Wixaritari, that I briefly mention, are groups of people that actually exist and have lived for thousands of years in pretty much similar conditions, making them small pockets of population that could survive an apocalypse, since they’re self-sufficient and are in remote locations:
- The Inuk or Inuit live in the artic region of Canada.
- The Wixaritari is how the Huichol native tribes call themselves and Wixarika is what they call their language. They live in deep in the mountains of the Sierra Madre region of Mexico to the north, and retain much of their traditions, clothes and beliefs. They’re the last people who still practice medicine and authentic rituals with peyote.
How We Begin (or The Little Panther and The Flame)

Chapter Summary

"What a tangled web we weave" is the only summary I can think of for this chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
As a child, nothing filled Clarke with more wonder than seeing the sunrise over the round horizon of the beautiful Earth from the bay windows of the Ark, watching the dark shadow of the night recede quickly as the sunlight advanced in an almost perfectly defined arched line revealing the verdant green of the land masses and the shimmering ocean waters. She’d sighed, dreaming of the ground and all the wonders it held.

It was a daily spectacle for those floating on the space station above the planet they had once called home. The Ark orbited the Earth from an altitude of 10,385.25 km from the surface, its gravity pulling the manmade satellite around it at a breakneck speed of 17,554 km per hour. Their mid-Earth orbit was an unusual one. Most communication and scientific satellites launched into space, like the old ISS, had a low orbit staying close to the Earth and avoiding the first of two natural radiation belts that surrounded the planet, but it also meant low orbit was the most densely populated piece of space real estate, with thousands of satellites and space junk that could be collision-hazards for the Ark. The fact most had been shot out of the skies during the bombs was further determent for the Ark to set it as its new location.

Weather satellites and the hundreds of GPS and GLONASS satellites had orbited further out into mid- and high-Earth orbit, but were within the second Van Allen radiation belt, making it inviable for human-habited stations. In addition, they had also watched in horror as these other satellites had been remotely re-routed and maneuvered to change their orbital path and set on the same one, resulting in all of them crashing into each other one by one. The Ark stations were out of range and had a closed-off system from any Earth controls, one of the many oddities of its design that had saved them.

So once everything had settled, the individual stations reassembled into a single one in the ‘Van Allen slot’, the safe space between the two radiation belts and the debris rings that now also circled below and above them.

The fortunate result of this “location” for young Clarke had been the four sunrises she got to witness every six hours instead of just one a day, as the Ark turned around the blue and green planet four times every 24 hours. But as she grew up and the realization that she would in fact never step foot on its surface dawned on her, she began to resent them. They reminded her of what she would never have, what she would never witness on the ground. So she started making sure she
was never around any bay window at the times they happened. She’d avoid them for months on end and then her resolve would break. She’d go peek out with wet eyes and a frown, then go back to avoiding them for several months more.

Once on the ground, in the deep, thick forests of Trikru territories, the dense canopy had shielded her from really seeing any sunrises.

But not this morning.

Unlike the past few days of agitated sleep, Clarke woke up from a deep slumber and tranquil dreams, feeling warm and content. When her eyes opened, however, her heart jumped when she saw the sight before her and the memories of the previous day came to her at once.

Lexa had been attacked. Injured. She had insisted watching over her that night but now found herself in Lexa’s bed, the Commander’s beautiful back facing her. She vaguely remembered Lexa dragging her half-asleep self from the chair, insisting she rest properly while Clarke stubbornly grumbled in protest, even with her eyes already closed.

Her heart hammered in alarm thinking about the damage she had sustained, and her hand flew to Lexa’s lower back but then stopped and hovered without touching her, then dropped it. The brunette was breathing steadily and peacefully, resting on her non-injured side. Had she been suffering from any internal injuries her breathing would’ve been labored, and Clarke knew she didn’t have any after checking with the scanner half a dozen times the previous night. It still didn’t stop her from worrying.

So instead of getting out of bed immediately, Clarke lingered. It was still very early, the pale dim light of dawn seeping slowly into the room, forging a path of warm sunrays across the floors and walls of the room, silently reaching the end of their bed and pushing forth across their bodies.

Clarke let her eyes roam over the sleeping figure of the Commander next to her. She’d pushed off most of the furs during the night which now only covered her thighs, her right leg hooked over them and her back unencumbered. The blonde was transfixed by each inch of skin the sunlight revealed as the minutes passed and it rose behind them.

The impossibly soft skin on her long, beautiful legs that Clarke had once felt under her fingertips when she massaged her for their Triad. The intricate tattoos seemed like planets in the daytime skies of another world, among flecks of glitter that seemed to always live on her skin now shimmering under the growing light. The smooth expanse of her back curved, swelled and dipped from her hips to her shoulders to the delicate slope of her neck, becoming golden with the morning sun journeying along her body.

Clarke experienced an entire sunrise played out on the skin of the woman who ruled the ground she had dreamed of and who set her own heart alight.

It was the most beautiful sunrise she had witnessed yet and her favorite one.

Clarke remained there a while, drunk by the same sense of wonder she had once experienced from bay windows up in the sky, but this time by the woman she would be waking up to in the future for the rest of her life. She would be lying to herself if she didn’t long for those days to come sooner
rather than later, but Clarke wasn’t lying to herself anymore. Not about this. Not anymore. She wanted more sunrises like this, watching them bloom on Lexa’s skin, in her bed and in Clarke’s own heart. She wanted as many as this troubled life would gift her.

She trailed her eyes on the brunette’s lower back, the low-cut of her nightgown leaving most of her back naked. She could see the edges of the dark bruise, the reminder of how close she had been to losing her. She raised her hand again and kept it hovering over the bruise, as if wanting to heal her through sheer will power. Then she propped herself on one elbow and pressed the back of two fingers lightly on Lexa’s temple to make sure she didn’t have any fever.

Eventually, she left the addictive warmth and scent of the brunette’s bed with reluctance and got up as silently as possible. She left the room just as quietly, looking back for a moment at the sleeping figure, sighing longingly, wanting nothing more than to crawl back into bed and curl herself around Lexa but forcing herself to leave before she did just that.

It would be later that day that the divide was finally crossed in the market square when they had come together and had left walking side by side. The veil had fallen the night before during their bath, and both had acknowledged the deep and uncommon bond they shared. Both had admitted that true sentiment and choice bound them more than political obligation. That they both wanted to walk together.

“I was on my way to the fisageda,” Lexa said as they walked out of the square.

“I just came from there.”

“I know. I was actually hoping to catch you there before you left.”

Of course Lexa knew. Clarke left the fisageda every day at the same time, right before they crossed paths daily in the market.

“Are you finally going to listen to me and let Brigid examine you?” Clarke asked with a hint of a smile, to distract herself from the pleasant warmth it had caused her to hear Lexa was seeking her out.

“No,” she said simply, “I was not going there for that, but I will if that will set your mind at ease,” she continued with an amused glint in her eyes. “I wanted to check on Penn and talk to Brigid.”

“I saw Penn. He lost a lot of blood, but the bullet went through mostly muscle luckily. He won’t be able to use his arms for several weeks, but he should recover full function.”

Lexa nodded and they walked back to the fisageda. She then talked alone with Penn in quiet voices, a few curt nods and held his arm in salute.

What came after though caught Clarke’s attention. They had retreated to Brigid’s herb room where the head fisa quickly assessed Lexa first, coming to the same conclusion’s Clarke had arrived to the night before. But afterwards, Lexa asked her about the medicine reserves.
The blonde’s trigedaslang was improving a lot, especially in the medical field given the amount of
time she was spending at the fisageda, so she understood some of what Lexa requested from
Brigid.

To build up the reserves to their maximum capacity. To send gatherers and foragers quickly and
quietly. To prioritize medicine for injuries, burns and poisonings, which is what had alarmed
Clarke more.

“What was that about?” Clarke asked once they left.

“We will talk back at the tower later,” Lexa replied and though her face didn’t betray anything,
Clarke had seen the Commander subtly check with her eyes all around them as if concerned anyone
might hear.

They walked to the southwest border of the city where she hadn’t ventured yet. They came to a
row of long buildings that looked like warehouses, made of the same red brick than the tunnels of
the holding cells where they had kept the Sky Rebels not far from there, just on the east side. They
looked just as old. They had crumbling chimneys, some of the same brick while others were metal,
soot-covered pipes.

The smell suddenly nearly knocked her over in its power and its contradiction. On one hand, it was
a mix of strong delicious fragrances wafting in the air and, on the other, a near rotten pungent stink
seemed to float in from somewhere.

Seeing Clarke’s face, Lexa pointed to the row of buildings.

“The scent oil makers and distillers work there. We set the leather tanneries here next to them,
that’s the other, less pleasant smell,” she said with a half-smile.

“Why?” Clarke wondered, nostrils flaring.

“The wind in Polis blows towards the west, so it carries it out of the city. And we thought the
distilleries would help mask it too,” she said, signaling Clarke to the left where the tanneries were.

They didn’t dwell and headed inside one of the buildings. Clarke was grateful as the assault on her
senses from outside were immediately soothed. The entire air inside was almost a mist of delicate,
delicious aromas that were almost overwhelming in their intensity.

“Heda!”

A beautiful-looking man in his early fifties approached them. His skin was tan, his eyes blue grey
with thick eyelashes curling up, framed by dark eyebrows. His hair was grey and wavy, framing
him well. He walked with a graceful, almost regal countenance, yet there was something warm and
kind at the same time.

He wore impeccable white robes, as did everyone else inside the large room they were now in. On
top it, he had a thick apron made of natural-colored leather.

Lexa nodded to him when he bowed to her with a smile.

“Myron, this is Clarke kom Skaikru.”

“Ah, yes. Aftaim hafon kom Heda. The future one-half of the Heda,” he translated immediately, in
as perfect an English as Lexa’s, bowing his head shortly with a broad grin. “Myron, at your service.”

“Clarke. Nice to me you too,” she returned dumbly, sticking out her hand to shake it. He took it and shook it amusedly.

“We have come to check the progress on the regimental supplies. How are we doing?”

“Yes, yes. On schedule, Heda. We should be done by the half moon and we shall send them out.”

“No. Parcel them in batches. Take different routes than your usual ones. In fact, disguise them in the ale barrel runs. Don’t send word ahead, don’t announce any changes here.”

The man stilled but his smile did not falter. He nodded and just said “very well”, not questioning her orders as they walked.

Inside the warehouse-sized room, there were long, long tables with intricate metallic pipes that curved and looped around each other, hissing softly and dripping slowly into glass containers where they boiled under little flames and evaporated again into another set of pipes, that Clarke identified as condensers. She had never been good in her chemistry classes, but she did remember several students being caught stealing equipment from the lab to make moonshine, just before her own incarceration. The guards had questioned all the students and shoved pictures of said condensers in their faces accusatorily. She remembered them only for that. The place was a huge distillery from what Lexa had said. Of what, she wasn’t too sure yet, but by the smell she had an inkling.

They passed another large room with furnaces and huge copper vats and descended stairs into an underground gallery. Here workers were filling metal barrels using a thick pipe that came from the ceiling opening and closing a valve at the end.

Clarke inhaled. She felt like she was in the middle of the forest instead of a few meters below the surface in a brick underground.

“Pine,” Lexa said. “More specifically cinnamon, pine and eucalyptus oil. For the regiments.”

Clarke looked at her befuddled. “That’s for the armies?” she asked uncertain.

The idea that scented oil was being made for burly warriors seemed somewhat absurd and yet not wholly unexpected given Clarke’s fascination with how delicious they smelt since her first encounter with them. Still, laughter was threatening to bubble up, so she pressed her lips together and managed to get a chuckled “Why?” out.

“To keep their skin healthy and from cracking due the exposure to the elements. Pine and eucalyptus keep their everyday scrapes and scratches from infecting, and keeps skin pests away,” Lexa explained.

“They both have mild anti-septic and anti-fungal properties, Wanheda,” Myron suddenly added. “They help with minor swellings and cinnamon helps lessen pain for small bruises and repels insects.”

Clarke looked at him with wide eyes at his use of medical language.

Lexa had a small smile on her lips seeing the blonde’s expression.
“Myron is a great student of the kemekal texts, Clarke. He is the head of the distilleries in Polis. He specializes in the oils, but he oversees the production of some medicinal supplies for the fisageda, like fire water.”

“Alcohol,” he supplied.

“And he is Myriam’s bother. Myriam is Brigid’s wife. His pastime is reading the medical books in our library and then arguing with her. Myriam mediates,” Lexa said with amusement in her eyes.

Myron laughed heartily. “My sister has the patience of a lamb putting up with us, but Brigid is a wise woman, even if she refuses to read the language of the ‘foto baga’, the ‘evil enemy’ as she calls it.” The man shook his head.

After a brief pause, they turned to the barrels again and Lexa continued.

“Pine and eucalyptus are also the most common trees in Trikru, Shallow Valley, Azgeda, Boat People, Glowing Forest, Broadleaf and some of the north of Rock Line territories. It helps them blend with the smell of the surrounding.”

“That’s… that’s really smart,” Clarke said, always surprised at how much strategic forethought went into grounder customs, or at least the ones Lexa promoted.

“We make a different mix for the regiments in rocky, sandy territories of Sankru and Delphi and the south of Rock Line. Quite another for the swampy heat of the Lake People lands, or the grassy plains of the Riders,” Myron added.

“So you make it and give it to the armies?”

“Those pledged to the banner of the coalition on active duty, yes. As part of their payment. Kohl, oil, flour, a ration of hunt, lodging and their share of cambitas. Similar to all coalition and city workers.”

“Kohl? For war paint?”

“Yes and no. War paint is only worn in battle, but kohl is used by those who spend most time outside. Be it in snow or desert or forest, it helps with the glare of the sun,” she said as if it was self-explanatory.

Clarke had noticed of course. Lexa didn’t wear her face paint in Polis since they returned from Mount Weather. No one did. But they usually did have kohl smudged around their eyelids. Lexa did too, but instead of crudely smeared paint like many, she delineated her eyes almost perfectly with a thin line, more decoration than an effective way to deflect the sun. She had seen her do it in the mornings, sometimes while Clarke braided her hair. She would use a thin wooden stick with the tip of a feather at the end and dip it into the kohl, and then would run a smooth line with practiced precision.

“And what’s cambitas? I’ve heard it before.”

“It’s a barter item. Whatever is more abundant that season in their territory is used to barter for other goods. Each gets a small share.” Lexa explained as they made their way back to the first room, Clarke avidly absorbing everything about this fascinating society, far more complex than she had ever imagined.

“Oh, we have started a new batch for you, Heda. Now that the last shelling season is upon us,” Myron said as they passed a table where two people were working together.
They had a mountain of mussel and oyster shells on the table. One was scraping the pearlescent inside of the shell with a small metal file, depositing the crumbly dust into a bowl. Another was using a mortar to crush pearls of all sizes into a powder. Next to them, Myron had two tubs of oil, a copper bowl and a several smaller glass bottles, one set with a strainer on top.

“I just finished the first sample. Care to check it?”

Clarke furrowed her brow and got close next to where Lexa had stepped up to and was bending over to smell the contents of the bowl. And that’s when Clarke caught the scent and knew what it was, a delighted smile stretching on her face. The mystery of Lexa’s shimmery skin.

Myron noticed the look of recognition on Clarke’s face and smiled.

“Crushed pearl, jasmine oil and a hint of vanilla, Heda’s special blend,” the man recounted, proud of his craft.

Lexa was watching Clarke now, enjoying the blonde’s evident curiosity.

“Can I?” she asked pointing to the two tubs.

Myron nodded and opened the first.

“This is the flower. The one you gave me from the shrubs that had just bloomed,” she said turning to Lexa, seeing a faint pink dust her cheekbones as she acquiesced.

“They are my favorites,” Lexa admitted softly.

Clarke then went to the second and hummed when she recognized the scent from Lexa’s skin, though here in all its potency.

“This is vanilla?” she asked.

“Yes, it is a pod that grown on vine in the Lake People lands. “It is very strong, so we add just a hint of its extract. Then we mix with the pearl powder.”

“And what are the benefits of all these?” she inquired.

Lexa suddenly furrowed her brow, as if genuinely never even considering it.

“I do not think they have any. I just enjoy their smell, though the pearl smoothens the skin I guess,” she added as an afterthought.

“Actually Heda, they do. They say both jasmine and vanilla are aphrodisiacs, just like eating watershells, though I doubt that property is passed onto the pearl,” he chuckled. “But the flowers at least are said to. I have yet to see the evidence that this is true, but people believe it,” he said shrugging, missing completely Lexa’s eyes widening and her mouth opening but pausing as if too stunned to speak.

It was clear to Clarke by Lexa’s expression that this was the first she was hearing about it, which only amused her further seeing the tips of the Commander’s ears redden.

“I have never heard of such a thing, Myron,” she managed finally, though the redness then spread to her cheeks as if further registering what the man had said.

On their way there, they had passed several stalls cooking the catch of the mussel harvest and Lexa had told Clarke how she had once earned Gustus’ family recipe by knocking him down when she
had met him as a child and how he used to make himself sick by overeating this time of the year. She had told Clarke they could maybe try some when they returned. In true Clarke fashion, she’d answered the best moment was always now instead of later, so they had shared a small bundle of baked mussels wrapped in old paper on their way to Myron’s.

Clarke’s own cheeks heated up at that same realization and she pressed her lips together tightly to stop herself from laughing at the hilarity of the situation.

“I doubt there is anything to it really,” he mused. “Would Wanheda like me to prepare her a blend of her own?”

“Yes, Clarke you might enjoy that,” Lexa said, grateful for the interruption of the awkward moment. “In fact, it could be my gift of the day. I had something else planned, but there is always tomorrow,” she assured, her eyebrow up in question.

“Um, sure,” the blonde said, “though you’ll have to help me. I’m still learning what smells go with what name,” she chuckled.

“What say you, Heda? What do you suggest for your *hafon*?”

Lexa looked at Clarke with an appraising, lopsided smile.

“Orange flower,” she started pensively. “Honeysuckle and maybe… something spicy? Just a hint?”

“Umm, yes. Yes. Very good. Perhaps clove?”

“I think that could work well,” Lexa answered as the man had busied himself looking for little sample bottles of those oils in the shelves behind them. He took them out a dropped a few drops of each into a little plate, adjusting after smelling them once. Then he extended the plate with towards both women. They both inhaled and hummed at the same time.

“I think it suits you.”

“I love it.” Clarke said at the same time.

They both chuckled.

“I daresay it does. You have a good nose, Heda,” Myron said.

Before either could answer, a sentry entered the building hurriedly.

“Heda, a message has arrived at the tower and the *Sankru* ambassador has requested an audience. Titus asks if you could come back.”

Lexa immediately tensed then acquiesced. She looked at Myron silently and then at Clarke.

“Perhaps Myron can show you around a bit more if you want, Clarke?”

“Are you sure? You don’t want me to come with you?”

“I’m sure it is nothing. They’re always calling me back for something. Ambassadors are never content it seems,” she dismissed, though she couldn’t help but worry.

“Okay,” Clarke replied unsurely, stepping close to Lexa as she made her way across the door. “See you back at home?”
Lexa nodded, a tiny smile at her lips. Before Clarke could process what she was doing, she was leaning in and giving Lexa a kiss on the cheek in goodbye. With the most natural familiarity, as if she did this every day.

Instead she froze when she realized what she had done, her eyes widening to match the slight surprise on Lexa’s face. The brunette’s eyes flitted over Clarke’s face quickly. For a split second, Clarke thought they stopped at her lips but immediately went back to her eyes, as if reading Clarke’s uncertainty and then softening with warmth. Lexa took Clarke’s hand and ran her thumb across her knuckles twice in reassurance, a bashful smile to match.

“I’ll see you at home,” she said softly.

Clarke stood there for a few seconds, watching her go, willing her heart to slow down from the violent thudding it was doing in her chest.

When she turned around, Myron was looking at her with a toothy smile.

“Do you want to see the tanneries or the ale makers first?” he asked, to her relief.

Clarke had stayed for a while. Myron had given a tour of the other warehouses where they made the fire water, then the many ale makers, those who made thick oil to grease machineries and cooking, and the ones who extracted the pine resin for fires and the tower flame. Even a few who made different pastes from their by-products, like the odd paste they used to wash their teeth, many pots of which lined Lexa’s bathroom and were second only to the brunette’s bathing obsession. Sonja had shoved it in her face multiple times at the beginning too, mimicking a toothbrush motion like Clarke was a child. They had something like it on the Ark, except it smelled like industrial detergent. This on the other hand was made of crushed mint, *trononsoda* – a salt-like mineral mined by the Rock Line clan in the far west –, and a white paste they rendered somehow from iris flower oil. Clarke liked the grounder version so much better.

Then they had headed outside, where Myron had shown her the tanneries from afar, but had given her a cloth put over her mouth and nose because the smell was so strong. On a high platform leading all the way to the edge of the forest, were endless rows of clay square basins filled with animal hides and white lime that made the flesh come off, gradually leaving only the tanned leather. A few of the last rows had a variety of colors of dye where the leather was being treated for its final stage. Farther off were pelts set on wooden frames, the inside of skin smeared with the same white substance. The smell of the decaying flesh mixed with everything had been dizzying, and they had ended the tour there. She had thanked Myron, who had promised to send her new oil blend with the Commander’s once it was done, and she hurried to the tower, still a bit worried at the message that had recalled Lexa.

However, as she was nearing the tower, a dark shadow dodging into a corner ahead of her caught her eye. Clarke furrowed her eyebrows and went after it.

Lexa was in her study, pacing up and down, her face ashen. She had started worrying that Clarke was taking longer than usual, but it was the situation she had come to encounter upon her return to the tower that had her head going a million miles.
Suddenly, the door opened.

“Clarke,” she breathed in relief, happy the blonde was back and somehow yearning to have her by her side. “I –,” then stopped abruptly when she took her in.

“What is that?” she asked seeing the bundle in her arms.

“You gave me a horse.”

“Your present?” the blonde replied, uncertain with a slightly guilty expression.

“My present?”

“Your present?”

“Your present?”

“Your present?”

“Your present?”

Clarke only opened her mouth several times thinking of a good reply.

“But it’s an animal.”

“So you got me… that?” she asked, her eyebrows up in confusion.

“Yes.”

“A feline?”

“A kitty. An adorable kitty.”

“Okay,” Lexa said, her brow furrowed but not wanting to hurt Clarke by rejecting her present.

“Look at her, Lexa! She has big, beautiful green eyes just like yours,” she stumbled, realizing she’d called Lexa’s eyes beautiful. “I mean, she’s so pretty and soft, and just… Didn’t people used to have animals as pets?” she deflected, stuttering and getting a bit flustered.

“She?” Lexa asked, a bit amused at Clarke’s awkwardness.

“Yes. I saw her in the streets and I swear I was just petting her, but she followed me. The shopkeepers told me she has been roaming by herself for a few days, crying and alone. They had been feeding her scraps, but she’s still just a baby and that her mom had probably died. At least that’s what they told me. She doesn’t have a home. I thought we could…” she trailed off.

Home.

It was the second time that day that Clarke had called Polis, the tower, their abode, home. It filled Lexa with such deep warmth in her chest and through her veins, with longing of what could one day be.

Or perhaps it was just an expression with no meaning behind it.

Right now, the present unexpected situation is what she had to focus on.

Lexa approached peering at the little animal. It was completely black with two big, green emerald eyes looking back at her curiously and sniffing. And then it let out a chirp.
She bent down to its eye level.

“Natgifa,” she said slowly, in reverent greeting.

The little animal chirped again at Lexa and wiggled in Clarke’s hand trying to get free.

“I think she wants to meet you,” Clarke said, extending the furry thing to the brunette who took her in her hands carefully.

It immediately sniffed her and licked her fingers, and then promptly started purring.

“I think she likes you,” Clarke chuckled delighted.

Lexa was looking down at it with a puzzled, awed face.

“So, can we keep her?” she asked after a while.

Lexa looked up to look at her.

“Clarke, this is a wild animal. They cannot be domesticated. Not really.”

“Yes, it can. It’s a cat.”

“No, it is not.”

“Okay, it’s a kitten. Same thing.”

Lexa shook her head.

“You do not understand, Clarke. This is a natgifa. A panther. A wild animal.”

“What? That can’t be. It can’t be. It’s a little kitten. It’s too small.”

“Yes, a cub. Maybe a week old.”

Clarke looked at Lexa then at the little animal in her hands, disbelieving. It fit in their hands. It was tiny.

“What would it be doing in the city. How? How is that possible?”

“We are surrounded by forest. They usually keep their distance, but this area of Trikru is their natural territory. If its mother died, it might have stumbled accidently into the city and no one would dare do anything to it. They are considered… sacred.”

“So, we can’t keep it,” she frowned. “We need to release it?”

“Yes, though it will not likely survive. Not this young. Not when it hasn’t even been weaned.”

“So we keep her?”

“I do not know. Once it grows… it is a wild animal,” she reiterated. “It will attack and hunt people if she’s around them. If we keep her, she will not learn how to survive on her own once we release her.”

“Well, I’m not just gonna let her die, Lexa. Maybe we can, just for now?” she pleaded.

“Very well. But she cannot stay in the room.”
“Why? We can’t leave her outside!”

“They’re dirty, Clarke. Carry pest on their skin. It will climb on my bed, leave hairs,” she wrinkled her nose.

Clarke chuckled. “Lexa, you do know your bed is covered in furs, right?”

“Furs of animals that no longer walk around picking up filth and that are washed frequently.”

“I’ll wash her. I mean, your tub is large,” she teased, watching with amusement as Lexa’s eyes widened in horror.

“Kidding. I know, mockery is the product of a great mind.”

Lexa contained a roll of her eyes.

“I actually already washed her in the laundries downstairs. One of the helpers gave me something to rub on her after. Says it keeps them free of ‘pests’, she air-quoted. “I do know you, you know, and your distaste of uncleanliness,” she quipped, smiling at her fondly.

Lexa shook her head and looked down but was smiling too. She then reached out and took the cloth Clarke had brought the cub in from her hand and set it down on a chair, laying down the sleeping cub on it slowly.

Then she extended her hands once more to Clarke, taking her hands loosely in hers, to the blonde’s surprise.

“Thank you, Clarke. It is the most… surprising thing I have ever received,” she said with a soft smile, lightly running her thumbs inside Clarke’s palms. Then she frowned when she felt the deep gashes on them and turned them up.

“What happened? Did she hurt you?”

“No, no. Not her.”

“During training? These are pretty deep, Clarke,” the brunette said inspecting them, then frowning deeper when she saw red sting dots too.

“I… umm… might have slipped? Down a tree?” she replied, embarrassed.

Before Lexa could ask her what she meant, a knock interrupted them.

“Enter.”

“Hola, Hedita!”

(Hello, lil’ Heda!)

“Hola, Chelita!”

(Hello, blondie!)
“Gran Akbal Ocelotl!” the first one said again, looking at Lexa.

(Great Night Jaguar of the Spirits!)

“Quetzal Xihuitl!” the second one followed, her gaze pointed at Clarke.

(Plummed Comet!)

The two little figures giggled and did an exaggerated flourish.

Lexa lifted her eyebrow at the greetings they had directed at Clarke.

“I am glad you could come this fast. Clarke, these are-”

“Tzitzi and Zilli. Yes. We’ve met.”

“Chelita, any day you want us to go get honey or more pitayas, lets us know. We make you good deal again.”

Clarke lowered her gaze to her gashed hands and then looked at Lexa again from under her lashes, shrugged.

Understanding crossed Lexa’s face. She looked at Clarke for a beat, a mix of astonishment and delight, and then open affection on her features. But only for a moment. She schooled her face and turned to their two guests.

“Novedades?” Lexa asked, suddenly no longer speaking in either English or Trigeda.

(Any news?)

“La Serpiente en La Arena escupe con furia. Promete venganza si no hay recompensa,” Zilli answered.

(The Serpent in the Sand spits with fury. Promises vengeance if there is no compensation.)

“Pruebas contra los acusados? Como tiene certeza?”

(Proof against the accused? How is she certain?)

“Lo oyeron. Al Caballo que Silba,” Tzitzi replied. Then emitted a low whistle.
Lexa’s face grew disquieted. This detail had not been relayed to her either in the message she received or in the audience she had with the Ambassador.

“Por eso dieron la alerta y salvaron una parte. El hierro,” the little girl continued.

(That’s why they sounded the alarm y saved part of it. The iron.)

“Mantengan el ojo en La Serpiente. En los tekis y metaleros. En kualk pasante tripi o sospech.”

(Keep the eye on The Serpent. On the tekis and metal buyers. On any strange or suspicious traveler.)

“Sí pues, Gran Hedá!”

(Yeah sure, Great Heda!)

“Bye, Chela.”

They bid goodbye as they left the room.

“What is happening, Lexa?”

“I apologize for not speaking in English with them, Clarke. I needed to make sure no detail would escape.”

“Don’t worry about that, Lexa. I understood a bit. That was Spanish, right?”

“Ispaniak. Like English for Trigeda, Spanish is its root, though its form has remained more pure, less altered. It is the tongue of the southerners. Do you speak it?”

“Not really. I understand something. The descendants of one of the 12 stations still spoke it on the Ark. But tell me, what’s happening?”

Lexa let out a tired breath.

“The Forge has been attacked.”

“The Forge?”

Lexa nodded. “Yes, in Sankru, the Dessert Clan. They are scavengers of teki. Parts of old technology. Some they reuse for their machinery, but mostly to melt it. Theirs is the biggest forge
in the Coalition. They transform it into bullion. Blocks of iron, or copper, or tin. Their land is arid, mostly dessert, with very little to hunt or grow or to use for barter. Aside from the spices and medicinal herbs from Tzitzi and Zilli’s tribes under their rule, it is their main trade. It fetches a high price and that’s why they can survive. Clans barter it to make their weapons and hunting tools, fences, machines, everything.”

“And it was attacked too?”

“Yes, to steal from them. And they are blaming Ingranrona.”

“Rohana’s clan? The Plain Riders?” Clarke asked, disbelieving.

“That is what they claim. They heard their whistle.”

Seeing Clarke’s questioning gaze, Lexa continued.

“The Ingranrona live and travel over vast prairies and plains, in large numbers of riders. Whistling carries farther. It’s how they communicate between groups and distances, especially the cavalry.”

“If people know that, wouldn’t they try to not give themselves away?”

“Precisely,” Lexa agreed. “There is something else. The Forge is one of the most heavily guarded places in the Coalition. To even breach it by surprise, they would have to have been studying them for a long time. Every moment, every change of guard.”

“Like the trade barges attacked on the lake? You think they’re connected?”

Lexa nodded.

“If they took so much care in planning it, why was the execution so rushed? Alert was given and Sankru managed to protect the iron. The most valuable metal of all.”

Clarke was silent for a moment in deep thought.

“Because you didn’t respond or make your own attack public? Maybe killing you wasn’t their intention. It was the scandal. Now they want to force your hand with this. But why? What would anyone gain from it?”

“It’s not all. I’ve been going over all reports over the past months. Any unusual movements, attacks, thefts. Any clue. There is one more attack I had dismissed at first.”

“When?”

“Not long ago. The first time I took you to the fisageda. When they came looking for me.”

“What happened?”

“A small convoy from Delphi was robbed. No one died. They were knocked out and some of their cargo was taken.”

“What did they take?”

“Manuscripts. Copies of the few books and records, but none vital, which is why I had overlooked it.”

“So why do you think it’s related if the stolen things aren’t useful?”
“Because, as I later remembered and confirmed, that is not what that convoy was supposed to contain. It was a last-minute change.”

“So you think they were after the original cargo?”

Lexa acquiesced.

“And what was it?”

“Maps. We’ve had people mapping all the lands in the Coalition and beyond. In Delphi, they get standardized, corrected, put together. The maps were scheduled to arrive in Polis that week but got delayed because the cartos, the mappers, sent north of Azgeda took longer. However, Delphi still decided to send the convoy. The birth and death registries of the season were due, and also the copies of some books that were water-damaged during a flood in library. They didn’t warn ahead, just sent the convoy.”

“So they were after maps? Are you sure?”

“Yes, this had been the longest mapping mission yet, the most ambitious. Every village, every major feature of the terrain, every border, every new road and all leading trails into cities, every regimental patrol pathway, the layout of every major capital. Three years of work.”

“If anyone wants to mount an attack, it would be the perfect guide,” Clarke exhaled as it dawned on her.

“Think about the things that have been stolen, Clarke. Do you see the pattern?”


“Maps of every clan to plan any attack anywhere. Metal for weapons. And enough food supplies to feed an army for an entire season,” Lexa spelled out, face grave.

“Where was the Delphi convoy attacked? Where there any clues the attackers left like in the others?”

“No. It happened in the northeast, on the road to the Shallow Valley border town. They were collecting the last of the population registries and coming back to Polis,” Lexa said, seeing Clarke brows concentrated in thought.

“What is the Shallow Valley’s relationship like with the Coalition and Heda?”

“Reluctant, but not opposed. They are very… opinionated and do not shy from voicing their dissent when they think the Commander is in the wrong. It is the clan who has had most nightbloods become Heda. They respect the position, though often think they might know better. They show me some deference considering my father was the general of their cavalry, but familial blood is irrelevant in leadership.”

“Except in Azgeda?”

“Yes. They inherit it.”

“But all things considered, would the Shallow Valley be more likely to support the Coalition if something happened?”

“Yes. They are not a very united clan. They are dispersed, living in small groups in the ruins on the
eastern seaboard and hard to govern for their leader, but their cavalry and skirmishers have never failed the call of the Coalition.”

“And Broadleaf?”

“Mostly neutral. They usually side with Heda but will not commit troops for combat, only patrol.”

“Delphi?”

“Not neutral,” Lexa said decisively. “They are the spiritual center of our people, those who carry the traditions of the Flame, but also of our laws. Flamekeepers, judges and scribes are trained there, as are all the Eyes. They usually favor ruthless action against those who would endanger Heda but will also be the quickest to call for the Heda’s head if they fail their duties.”

“So an ally if you follow the rules?”

“Yes.”

“And Sankru?” Clarke asked, seeing Lexa realize her train of thought.

“Not an ally. But not a declared foe either. They’d rather not be part of the Coalition and at the same time most clans see them with unfavorable eyes. They’re an unpredictable player and one with a temper.”

“Do you see what I’m seeing?”

“I’m afraid I am,” Lexa nodded, a worried frown marking her forehead.

“All clans involved didn’t only have something valuable for a potential attack. All the clans, the ones hit as well as the ones being blamed are all your allies and reluctant supporters, even those on the fence that could be easily turned against you,” Clarke explained, still grasping at all the lines of loyalty between the clans.

“Broadleaf is hit and my greatest allies bear part of the blame: Boat Clan for their failure to defend it and a Trikru arrow is staged to implicate it. Sankru is hit and my other greatest ally and army, the Plain Riders are blamed. Delphi is hit and an important ally like Shallow Valley could be pointed as the culprit,” Lexa expanded.

“The most loyal are blamed and the more questionable but still allies are faced with a loss of a resource. But to what end?” Clarke questioned.

“To destabilize the Coalition. You do not need to convince those opposed to it already, but the ones that defend its need. If it fails to defend them. If there is chaos and mistrust even among its most loyal, it falls more easily.” Lexa paced, her hands neatly folded behind her despite her clearly troubled countenance.

“Have the loyalist turn against each other?”

“It would seem so,” Lexa answered, absorbed.

“And Skaikru?”

“Just like Azgeda.”

“What do you mean?”
“Both are unpredictable new players. Your people have just arrived. I have betrayed you. They might have tried to recruit your people before and our union might have been an unexpected snag in their plan. Or they did successfully recruit them and are in on this.”

“What? Lexa we talked about this-”

“We don’t know, Clarke!” Lexa interrupted.

“That is the bottom line. They used guns. You have guns and a reason to hate Heda. Arkadia has attacked our forces before so we must consider it as one of the possibilities. Azgeda is the other. They were not directly involved in the attack of the barges, but it was in front of their coastline that it happened. The clues found by the scouts was on their land. Their new King just swore his allegiance to me, but we can’t be certain if it was done in good faith or they’re the masterminds. We can’t know for certain which one of the clans are behind it, allies or not. It is what we must find out.”

“I know. You’re right. I’m just… who would go to these lengths?”

“I do not know, Clarke, but this is something on a large scale. Something that has been planned for some time. Planned well, despite the failures in some of its steps.”

“The maps were accidental, but the other two they managed to get most of it.”

“The food yes, but not the metal. We make weapons from iron and they lost it by rushing it. Weapons made of copper or tin are weak. We have that to our advantage. What we need to know is if they have more guns.”

“How?”

Leya looked at Clarke with some hesitation.

“I need to show you something,” she said finally.

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They walked briskly through the dark streets of Polis in silence, an uneasy feeling settling in Clarke’s stomach when she saw the crumbled brick arch and realized where they were going.

The Polis holding cells.

They made their ways inside the tunnels, small torches lighting the way. They went into a different corridor than the one she had taken to see her friends. The now executed rebels. A shiver ran through her spine at the memory and lodged itself in her throat, Jasper’s sobs still haunting her dreams.

The door of the smaller cell they went into was open. At the center, there was a withered wooden table with a stool. A stool that was, to Clarke’s surprise, occupied by Indra. She stood as soon as the Commander entered and saluted her.
It was the person sat on the floor who really floored Clarke however.

“Lincoln?!” she exclaimed, looking at him and then at Lexa in questioning.

“Heda, Clarke,” he bowed his head.

“What… what are you doing here?” she asked unsurely, not wanting to jump to conclusions. Before he could answer, a voice from the shadowed corner spoke up.

“Oh, you didn’t know your little grounder girlfriend was keeping us prisoners?” it said with disdain, as the figure stepped into the light.

“You will respect the Commander, skai girl!” Indra hissed.

“Octavia?” Clarke exclaimed in shock.

Lexa’s face had remained impassive during the outburst, almost bored.

“You are not a prisoner, Octavia kom Skaikru. The door is open. You have been offered lodging. You may leave at any time.”

“So you can separate us? So you can kill him while I’m not here?”

“If I wanted to kill him, I doubt there is anything you could do to stop me,” Lexa answered flatly.

“I am not a prisoner either, Okteivia. You know this,” Lincoln added softly.

“What exactly is happening?” the blonde asked again.

“Lincoln was found by the patrols a few miles outside of Polis. He had been following Octavia from a distance since she left the capital after the rebels’ execution,” Indra supplied. “When Lincoln was brought back to Polis, she followed and demanded to be let in here.”

“The kill order,” Clarke realized.

Lexa shook her head.

“I have lifted the order as part of the agreement with the Chancellor during the summit weeks ago. Lincoln has asked sanctuary and an audience, as any clansmen can when coming to Polis.”

“If you lifted the order, why would he need sanctuary?”

“The Commander accepted my plea of pardon when I did not follow orders at Mt. Weather. She was not aware I had taken Octavia as my houmon and went back to ensure her safety and guarantee she retreated too.”

“But it is Trikru who has to accept him back. They do not trust him after the betrayal and will not accept him without any sort of consequence,” Lexa explained calmly.

“So the mighty Commander has decided to send him on a suicide mission!” Octavia spat.

“I volunteered,” Lincoln offered calmly, as if used to the outburst of his partner.

“It is for Trikru to decide his fate, not mine,” Lexa added.

“Our people will not accept anything less than an extreme show of loyalty to serve Trikru and the
Coalition,” Indra continued. “He must convince he is willing to give his life for them, overcome a
dangerous challenge to protect the clans that leaves no doubt.”

“And what exactly is the mission?”

Lincoln looked at Lexa as if asking for permission. Lexa imperceptively nodded with her eyelids.

“To infiltrate the punka,” he said lowly.

“The punka? What is that?” she asked unsurely.


“They are the unaligned,” Lincoln tried.

“Like defectors?” Clarke asked, trying to understand.

“Some, but most are people who were never under the rule of any clan and would not accept it. 
Traitors, banished and wasterlanders have joined their ranks,” Indra supplied.

“It is said they came from under the ground. That they had been living in tunnels even before the 
bombs, with the rats and vermin under the great big cities. The forgotten, the clandestine gangs, the 
toxic underbelly of the old world,” Lincoln recounted.

“They live mostly in the territory of the Shallow Valley but have spread into parts of Trikru and 
some reports place them even in the border region of the Lake People. They emerged from under 
the ruins near Statue Island a few years after the bombs and now live deep in the forest in loose 
groups. They do not have an actual leader. They believe they only owe loyalty to themselves and 
kill anyone who tries to rule over them. They have no laws, just anarchy, violence, savagery,” Lexa 
continued.

“So you think they-”

“Some reports would indicate unusual movements,” Lexa interrupted, looking at Clarke 
meaningfully, signaling with just the slightest tilt of an eyebrow that Clarke shouldn’t continue.

Of course. Much of what they knew about the attacks, and especially the attack against Lexa, had 
not been disclosed even to Indra. And with Octavia present, the wise choice would be to keep that 
information to themselves.

“They could be planning something. Given they were the only other group besides the Mountain 
that we know have some been seen using firearms,” she said her eyes trained on Clarke in silent 
communication, “they are a threat not to be taken lightly. Even though we know the weapons in 
their possession are no longer in great number, if this has changed somehow, we need to know.”

Clarke understood now the potential connections. Lexa had told her the day they had discussed the 
gun found at the bandits’ campsite that Skaikru was a possibility, but not the only one. The punka 
were the other, it seemed.

“But why does it have to be Lincoln? Why can’t he do something else? You’re sending him to his 
death,” Octavia said, more pleading than angry as this point.

“Because it is my duty. It is what I do best.”

“What do you mean? Being a spy?” Octavia replied confused.
“We have spies everywhere. Spies keep an eye on certain people and things of interest. They watch from afar, gather only essential information. This is different,” Lincoln said, looking at Lexa as if asking for permission.

The Commander nodded lightly.

“I am a sika. A seeker for the Commander.”

“It is missing the two thin stripes of white at the end of its wings, and the skin between the fingers.”

The child was sat on a log, close enough to the tree where the young man was chained to during the day when he wasn’t training with the sailors. It was not a coincidence she sat there, but she had not heard him approach from behind. His voice was softer than she had imagined from his imposing figure even at his young age, his warrior tattoos still freshly made on the seventeenth year of birth as was Trikru custom.

“How do you know it is not another bird I am drawing?” she asked curious, turning to look at him.

“Most birds left two weeks ago at the end of winter, flying to their other home in the south. Only the azdovis remain in numbers as they are traveling in the other direction, back to the eternal ice of the north. They only leave two moons from now.”

“How do you know? I am told you have only recently arrived to these lands,” she tested.

“I heard the villagers planning their end of spring dovis soup celebration,” he said with a hint of a smile.

The child nodded.

“And this?” she asked as she turned the page on her leather journal, showing him her crude drawings of the spears she had seen in this clan.

“This one with the curl at the end is the seal hunting spear,” he pointed. “They aim at the neck. The curl at the end is to sever the jugular as they pull it out, giving the animal a quick death. This other is the chest piercer. They are light and thin, thrown at the sailors on deck of the boats they accost. It is the one you have been using to train out there in the water.”

“You have a keen eye, warrior.”

“I am no warrior.”

“Your tattoos say otherwise.”

“Not everything is always as it seems. I was given no choice by my father,” he said, lifting his bound hands. “Pay his debt as a warrior servant or starve the family. Even without this, he’s been trying to make me a monster since I was just a boy,” he added sourly, his jaw tense.

“You think being a warrior makes you a monster?” she asked, lifting her eyebrow.

“Apologies, revered one. I spoke in haste,” he replied quickly, as if momentarily forgetting who he
was talking to. “I just find no pleasure or sense in spilling blood mindlessly.”

“Sometimes spilling blood is necessary to defend your people or to prevent even more from spilling,” the child said easily.

“If we didn’t always strike first without thought, perhaps we wouldn’t have to,” he replied.

A spark shone in the child’s eye at this, but she only nodded.

From afar, Gustus watched as the nightblood had managed to make the silent Trikru bondservant speak for the first time. He had not uttered a word since his arrival.

“And what does the son of tanners truly want to do? What is your true wish?” the child asked, changing direction of the conversation, but still measuring the reluctant warrior.

“How did you know what my parents do?” he frowned.

“Your hands,” she nodded and lowered her gaze to his hands, “your nails and the tips of your fingers bare the pale stains of the tanning pools. And the vest you wear is made of the finest, smoothest Trikru leather, far too fine for a family in debt unless it is made by themselves,” she shrugged.

“You have a keen eye as well, revered child,” he said surprised.

“You are not the only one who watches,” she said, one side of her mouth upturned.

After a moment of silence, the young man spoke again, answering the original question.

“I do not know, but I know being this is not it,” he spoke sadly, then after a beat. “Sometimes their fisa lets me help collecting the medicine roots. I enjoy that a little. But instead I will be forced to get on their ships and help them in their savagery of killings and raiding,” he growled in anger.

“Are they any different from Trikru in that? Or any other clan? Are they really guilty if they know nothing different from that?” she said calmly and almost rhetorically.

He simply shrugged.

“You will be spending six moons among them. You have an opportunity. Do not let anger and hate blind you from it,” she suggested.

“An opportunity for what?” he replied, confused.

“To learn from them. To let them learn from you.”

“What am I to learn from them?”

“We live in a land full of dangers from beasts and men alike. Knowing how to fight is necessary to defend oneself and those you love, and it would be foolish to think otherwise. But that is not the most important reason. Why do you watch the birds?”

“To know when they come and when they’ll go. To know what it means when they flock around fish banks or when they cry out for predators.”

“To understand them?”

“I guess. So you say I should spy on them? To use it to our advantage?”
The child shook her head.

“No. Why do we fear the Boat People? Why do they fear Trikru? Or any other clan? We fear what we don’t know. What we don’t understand.”

“So I should learn why they are... the way they are?”

“You just described their two main weapons. Both designed to give their prey, animal and human, the quickest, most painless death. Why is that? If they were cruel by nature, would it be so? They are loud and boisterous and the most ruthless raiders among the clans, but if they were given other choices, other ways to survive, would things be different?”

“I do not know.”

“Me neither, but I would hope so. How will we know if we don’t try, however?”

The warrior looked at her without answering, so she continued.

“Do you think they would understand us better if they got to know us as just people too? If you talked to them instead of remaining silent, resenting them for a debt that was not their fault. If they got to know you and see you as someone who is not the enemy, do you not think the next time they encounter another Trikru or even have you at the end of their spear, they will not think twice? And that you would extend the same thought to another Floukru?”

“You think I should become friends with Boat People?” he asked unsure.

“At the very least not be their enemy.”

“But what difference will one man do?”

“Not only one. Also every Floukru that stops seeing you as their enemy too. Our world needs bridges. Bridges among our clans.”

“Is that what you are doing here? What you do in that journal of yours? Watch, learn?”

The girl nodded. “In a way. It also helps me keep track. Record in detail. Take back what I learn to others.”

After a pause, she spoke again. “You could help me.”

“To do what?”

“To do the same. Study. To collect... understanding. Of these people. Of everything around it. The animals. The weather. When the forage becomes scarce. Everything.”

“The weather? Forage?” he asked, even more befuddled.

“If I am ever chosen to become Heda, and I know the Boat People face starvation in the last weeks of winter because there is nothing to forage and nothing to hunt, it means they will suffer more deaths and also ramp up their raids to other clans in that same period. If you can predict, you can prevent. And you can assist.”

The warrior looked at the child, brows furrowed as if seeing something he had never encountered.

“I must confess I do not know if I have ever believed Hedas truly carry a spirit, but you carry great wisdom in your heart, revered child. I can see that.”
“And you carry peace in yours, even with the anger in your young blood, you are a man with a keen eye and mind. That is a powerful combination.”

“Powerful for what?”

“To let us see where we can build those bridges,” the child smiled. She reached into her satchel and took out another journal, still new and empty.

“Send it with the traders to Polis when you have filled it. Or a copy of what you found more important. Keep sending them for as long as you wish. I will ensure they’re compensated for its transport. If I am chosen and you ever want to serve the Heda, come find me.”

The girl got up and extended her arm to the young warrior.

“Till our paths cross once more, Lincoln kom Trikru.”

“Lincoln is an observer. He studies and observes the customs of our people, their behaviors, seeks understanding of them. He has been the seeker for the Boat People for years, until he was reassigned.”

Octavia’s eyes widened.

“Is that why you were are the Drop Ship? Why you were with us at Arkadia all this time? Spying on us?” she accused.

A flash of hurt crossed Lincoln’s face.

“Lincoln was reassigned to TonDC. The main jusa… the judge for northeastern clans was based there. He observed the trails to understand the main complaints, the grievances, the reasons people resisted compromises. Officially, he was the fisa’s second in the village,” Lexa defended him.

“When your ship fell outside TonDC, I deployed Anya’s unit and spies, but I needed someone like him, one who sees beyond, to give me a different point of view. It is not his usual duty nor is it the reason he then followed you to Arkadia, though I can only commend his desire to bridge our peoples,” the Commander smiled faintly.

“What do you mean you needed another perspective?” Clarke asked curious.

“Anya told me how many you were. That a man with a fire gun was the leader. That you tried to establish contact with the Mountain. A threat.”

“But Lincoln’s account told me you seemed like lost children, trampling through the forest loudly, scaring the hunt and alerting the predators. He said there was conflict among you. One band terrorizing the other. That there was a power struggle between the man with the gun and the real leader, the girl with hair like the sun. He said you were all scared and didn’t seem like you were an army sent to attack.”

“Why do you think Anya was told to only guard and watch, instead of attacking for weeks? It was thanks to your houmon, sky girl,” Indra reprimanded Octavia.

“But you did attack. Jasper!” Octavia tried.
“He went into the forbidden zone, into Mount Weather territory. Shouting and waking up Maunon, making it set its eyes on all of us,” Lincoln reminded.

“So you were just going to kill him?”

“Anya simply followed our law. No attack was ever carried on your camp after, not until…”

“Until we burned down the village with the flares,” Clarke finished sourly, sighing with the memory.

“It is of no use to dwell on the past now. Lincoln has both a challenge he must overcome to be accepted back into his clan and he has skills that would be useful to infiltrate those who pose a potential threat. More importantly, he has the perfect cover.”

“What do you mean?” Clarke questioned.

“His betrayal,” the Commander replied.

“Only the leader of Trikru and myself will know of this arrangement. Only the suspension of the kill order will be communicated to the sentries. To the rest, he is still a traitor, an outcast, banished by his clan. Just the type of people that seek refuge with the punka,” Indra supplied.

Clarke nodded in understanding.

“If he goes, I go too,” Octavia spoke.

“No. Octavia, you cannot. It is too much of a risk,” Lincoln said softly, though his sagging shoulders made it seem he had already resigned himself to her stubbornness.

“You know I’ll follow, even if you tell me not to. We’re stuck together for good.”

“Very well,” Lexa said surprising everyone. “That is your choice and you are free to do as you wish. It will only strengthen your cover,” she added when she saw their questioning gazes.

“His kill order was lifted because of his houmon. It would not be believable that he left for banishment without her,” she said simply, ever the practical strategist.

“A horse and supplies will be left at the scout cave 3 miles outside of Polis at dawn. You should rest and leave when the city is asleep,” Indra got up from the stool ready to leave. “Do well by us, brother,” she said clasping his arm.

“Try not to die, sky girl,” she said with a hint of both sarcasm and sincerity to Octavia. Then she left.

“Aren’t you going to try and stop me?” Octavia asked, lifting her chin in defiance. A façade Clarke was well acquainted with. So instead, she stepped to her and grabbed both her arms.

“Only you know where you belong, O,” Clarke said squeezing her upper arms. “If when this is all over you decide it’s here, you’ll always have a place with us. Don’t forget that.”

Octavia only nodded, her eyes wet, the words she’d once said to her brother about feeling she didn’t belong anywhere echoing in her memory.

Beside them, Lexa was saying her final words to Lincoln too.

“This might be the most important service you ever carry out for the Heda. The fate of the
Coalition might depend on it, *sika.**

Even if he had not been told much and his mission had been explained simply as an assessment of a threat, he had sensed something grave was at play.

“I will not let you down, Heda.”

“Until our paths cross again, Lincoln *kom Trikru,**” she said, as their arms interlinked the same way they had for the first time more than a decade ago in a distant land near the shore, when he was just an angry young slave and she was just a little nightblood with old spirits in her eyes.

Neither of them slept much that night. They had spent some time in Lexa’s room quietly at first, a million thoughts worrying their minds but comforted by each other’s presence, until Clarke had finally broken the silence.

“It was for the better, not telling Lincoln the whole situation?”

“Mmm. I did not want to predispose him of a foregone conclusion.”

Clarke nodded.

“So, what will you do about the demand from *Sankru?* They expect an answer soon.”

“The only thing I can do. Deny the request.”

“What? Why? Won’t that make matters worse?”

Lexa got up and started pacing slowly in front the balcony doors, looking out to the city at night.

“The Dessert Clan are a bit like nomads.”

“Like the Plain Riders.”

“No. The Plain Riders follow the hunt, the migration. They move with the seasons in the high flat grasslands, setting camp where they stop. Only a few permanent settlements exist on the west of their territories run by the *mish* in their clan. Like most clans, however, they seldom venture outside their territories. Only the traders do when they come to Polis or to neighboring border towns.”

Clarke scrunched her brow unfamiliar with the term, but let Lexa continue.

“On the other hand, *Sankru* used to move through all the territories scavenging and trading their *teki* and trinkets in their caravans. Every time they passed through a village, disruption, theft and small assaults would follow. Not to mention, there were often complaints of deceitful trading and scamming.”

“So people don’t trust them?”
“Even today, after many years since they have ceased their old customs, they are the first to be accused when something goes amiss. The metal buyers keep trying to pay them less, accusing them of making hollows bars or mixing the metal. They are reviled. Unjustly for the most part.”

“So you think the clans won’t accept if you decide to grant them compensation for what they lost?”

“Word has already spread. Titus tells me several ambassadors have already accused them of staging the theft. That they saw how we compensated the theft of the grain and want to take advantage by pretending their bullion was stolen.”

“So they get nothing? Just because the others hate them? How is that fair? Won’t it make it worse?”

“Probably, but I must refuse.”

“Why?”

“Because whoever is behind this expects me to.”

Clarke contemplated her for a minute, unsure she was understanding.

“You want them to play their next move?”

Lexa nodded.

“Isn’t that a big gamble? Won’t Sankru attack the Plain Riders? Or worse. Join whoever is behind all this out of anger.”

“Maybe that can be a good thing.”

“Lexa, that makes no sense.”

Lexa gazed at her and a small, closed-lip smile stretched on her face.

When Lexa proceeded to tell her what she had in mind, Clarke chuckled in surprise. Of course, Lexa would already be two steps ahead.

It was bold.

It was risky.

It was brilliant.

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Clarke had barely been able to rest. Worry had coiled inside her and chased off her sleep every time it had snuck up on her. She was tired but had gotten up at her usual time, just as the sun was starting to rise. She had already showered and was lazily finishing to get ready, giving Lexa time to be up before she went to braid her hair as had become their custom now, when a soft knock on her door was heard.

She never expected the Commander to be on the other side of the door, dressed as she was and coming in quietly.
“Come with me somewhere?” Lexa asked in almost a whisper.

Clarke stood there for a second stunned. She thought she might continue to be stunned for the rest of her life at how beautiful Lexa was every time she saw her again, but especially when she caught her off guard in something different.

Lexa had her hair down, damp from her shower and smelling like the sweet flowery oil she used on her skin. It was parted to the side, as she usually did when it was loose. She had no eye paint nor was wearing her forehead piece. She had old gray pants and brown boots she had never seen her wear, and a green sleeveless shirt with frayed edges. It was such a contrasting look to her usual black and coat.

Clarke couldn’t help but admire her graceful shoulders and arms uncharacteristically uncovered. Two cream-colored arm bands were wrapped around of her upper arms to undoubtedly hide her arm tattoo. That’s when Clarke realized Lexa didn’t want people to recognize her. If any doubt remained, the brunette held head scarves for them in her hands.

They made their way to the small kitchen Lexa had installed on their floor. Behind a cabinet, Lexa revealed a small metal door. It gave way to a hidden, narrow stairway, all the way down the tower, below even the street level. They then used a dark tunnel that lead them all the way past the edge of the city, about a mile deep into the forest but still within Polis territory. They trekked a little bit up the soft hill north of the city, until they arrived at a plateau with a beautiful, large creek and a clear-watered stream feeding it. From it, they could see the entire city with its flaming tower in the middle.

“Wow,” Clarke exclaimed as she took in the view.

Lexa hummed and took of her head scarf and set it on a big fallen log, where she then sat admiring the view as well.

“Did you know not all Hedas have lived in the tower?”

Clarke turned to look back at her and walked over.

“Really? I thought they had to.”

Lexa shook her head.

“It provides a great vantage point to survey the city and any outside attacks, but no. It is not required. Some Hedas have taken homes around the city. The first Heda even left Polis several years after it was founded and went east. She never came back. She sent instructions on how to hold the first Conclave to choose the next Heda but was never seen in Polis again.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Some say she was looking for someone she lost. The accounts are not clear. We only know she was still alive for years to come. She was the one sending back the books she found in ruins of Statue Island in the Shallow Valley… among other things.”

Clarke looked at Lexa and could see the hesitation in her features. If she didn’t know any better, Lexa looked almost nervous.

“In the old days, and even now outside of Polis and bigger villages, the Trikru traditional way has
been to build their houses around a tree. They believe it gives the home a strong foundation,” Lexa swallowed.

Clarke didn’t interrupt her sensing that Lexa wanted to tell her something beyond just Trikru customs.

“I wasn’t going to do this until after, but tomorrow we leave to visit the clans for our second trial of Gon Ogeda. And war is brewing. Anything can happen to us—”

“I’m not going to lose you, Lexa. And you won’t lose me,” Clarke hastily replied, reminding her of the promises and words exchanged between them a few nights ago.

She understood Lexa’s current worries with everything that was happening and knowing that at today’s Council, when she denied the Sankru request, all hell would break lose and it would only add fuel to the fire.

“Even so, I thought we could have something to look forward to,” she replied with a small smile.

“Something more than surviving?” Clarke asked, a light of hope in her eyes and a matching smile on her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

As she said this, she unhooked a little leather pouch attached to her waist and poured its contents into the palm of her hand.

“My father brought some of these seeds from his home in Statue Island for my mother. She planted them around the library in Polis. I collected some,” she said pointing to the brown, oval seeds. “But ours only flower. They do not bear fruit that can be eaten,” she said looking at Clarke, gauging her reaction.

The blonde stared at her, her heart starting to beat wildly in her chest as the realization started to dawn on her.

“So I asked Bryan. If he could instruct the retrieval party in Azgeda to look in your seed banks for the ones that do bear fruit. These arrived with the scouts a few days ago and he did something to them so they could grow,” she continued, pointing at a few seeds that were slightly rounder in shape than the others.

“He brought them out of stasis?” Clarke croaked, as a lump formed in her throat. Lexa nodded.

“No matter the time or day, we will always be Heda and Wanheda in the tower. I thought…” the brunette swallowed harshly, demurring.

“If we plant them both together, maybe someday we can have a home, here, just for us. Where we can be just Lexa and Clarke, just for a while, when we’re not down there,” she looked out at the city below, and then back at Clarke with nervous, bashful eyes.

“Build it around the roots of our parents, to honor them,” she continued putting the seeds back in the pouch and putting it in Clarke’s hands. “So you can honor your father’s wish.”

And that’s when Clarke had her confirmation.

“Cherry tree seeds!” she exclaimed with a watery laugh, her voice thick with emotion.
Lexa’s timid smile stretched beautifully as she nodded.

Clarke entire body was overcome with emotion, tears brimming from her eyes, her heart thundering in her veins.

“Lexa,” she choked out.

She didn’t think when she stepped into the Commander and pressed herself against her, her arms coming around her shoulders, burying her face against her neck, in a crushing hug. She let her tears flow freely unable to contain them, emotion exploding within her.

She was overwhelmed by Lexa’s gesture, her offer.

A home for them.

For the sky girl who had always watched the ground down below, yearning for it and not feeling she belonged anywhere, never making plans of a future beyond the next day. Who fled since she made landfall. Who had pushed away Lexa and who had been left behind. Who had started unconsciously calling Polis home but still felt claustrophobic in the continually watched corridors of the Tower.

And now she would have a place to call her own, to make it their own and literally put down their roots there. Where they could see the flowers of both their parents bloom. So she could fulfill the promise every Griffin had passed down to their child, if they ever reached the ground, to plant cherry trees.

When Clarke had asked Jake why he always made her promise that, he said his own parents always did too, because they said in every story that showed a happy family they were always eating cherry pie. Clarke only rolled her eyes and grumbled that all Griffins were crazy, but still promised. When she had told Lexa part of the story they day they cooked for each other, she had recounted it as a passing anecdote. She never expected Lexa to go all this way to make it happen.

And she was overwhelmed at how good it felt to have Lexa like this. The brunette had momentarily been surprised by the hug, her arms in the air, but she had recovered in a second and had encircled Clarke with her own arms tightly.

The relief, the comfort, the delight, the exhilaration of holding each other. They held on to each other for a long time, breathing the other in, feeling their thudding heartbeats between their pressed chests, allowing themselves this moment without second guessing and without holding back.

When the blonde squeezed again still not wanting to let go, she heard a small, muffled groan from Lexa.

“Oh god, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” she asked, pulling back and sliding her hands to Lexa’s bruised ribs, gently stroking them.

Lexa placed her hand on Clarke’s and shook her head.

“It hurts a little, but I don’t mind,” she smiled, running her thumb over it in reassurance, her gaze locked on Clarke, her other hand coming to tenderly wipe tears under blue eyes. The blonde couldn’t help the heat that rose to her cheeks with the unexpected gesture.
“Are these… are these… good tears?” she asked, searching in her eyes. “Is this something you would want?”

“They’re good tears,” Clarke assured, “and yes, nothing would make me happier,” she said still voice heavy with emotion.

“Really?”

“Really.”

This time she did not miss the awed look on Lexa’s face, the way her eyes dipped to her lips for a few seconds, then looked back up as a wide, joyous smile lit up her face.

“Shall we plant them?” she asked softly.

Clarke replied by taking her hand and walking them over the spot in the middle, facing the city and the gleaming creek to the side.

They kneeled. Lexa took out a knife from her boot and made several small holes in the damp, rich earth, while Clarke took out the seeds and handed half to Lexa. They proceeded to plant each seed, watering them with a water skin they had brought.

“As promised, Dad,” Clarke said softly, tears welling up.

“Ai raun en shil oso op, nomon, nontu,” Lexa followed.

(Watch over and protect us, mother, father.)

After a moment of quiet contemplation, Lexa got up and offered her hand to Clarke. Instead of letting go, she kept her hand loosely in hers, surprising Clarke yet again.

She showed her around, explaining there was a good deer and hare hunting trail around the hill, and the creek and river had fish and even ducks in certain seasons. Enough that they could sustain themselves. She told Clarke her Oma Sybil lived a mile from there on the other side of the hill, where they rebuilt the house her mother and herself once lived in. Two miles further up was one of the watch towers guarding the borders of the capital, so they could call upon guards from either location if they ever needed or use the tunnel leading in and out of Polis, which could only be accessed by the hidden and locked hatch door they had come out of.

They had left shortly after, staying close and shoulders brushing lightly together in the tunnels, hearts full and knowing that they now had to go back to face the tempest awaiting them at the Council, but certain they could face it together.

Knowing that they had something only theirs to look forward to after the storm.

The Council had been chaos. As Lexa had predicted, most clans had been determinedly against compensating Sankru in any way, and when she denied the request, it had resulted in the Sankru delegation to walk out, shouting threats and demanding justice. It went exactly as they had expected.
It was a gamble. But the move had been made.

They only had a short training session after, spending most of the rest of the day preparing their month-long voyage. Clarke had visited the fisageda to see the people she had been treating one last time, as well as getting basic supplies in case they sustained any injury or illness during their travels. Lexa oversaw the last details of the logistics and the guards traveling with them.

They had agreed to meet for a small meal in the afternoon, having skipped eating all day long. They sent word to Sybil to join. They had invited her to dine with them the night before but had to cancel due to everything that had happened.

When she arrived at Lexa’s room, she didn’t expect the sight that was awaiting her.

Lexa was stretched out on the couch in the middle of the room asleep, exhaustion apparent under her eyes. On her stomach, the little black furry cub was curled up, purring softly as it slept too.

Clarke looked at them in wonder, a smile of delight widening on her face and fondness warming her from her toes to her chest. She tried to walk softly to not wake them up. She stopped in front of the couch and crouched to their level, looking at them for a little longer.

Her hand, just as the rest of her body today, had a mind of her own and lifted to brush a stray curl from Lexa’s face. Before it reached its destination, however, four brilliant green eyes opened slowly at the same time. Both her hand and her breath caught midway at the sight. They were the exact shade of green and peering at her with the same sleepy curiosity.

She let herself be brave and let her hand resume its journey, brushing lightly on Lexa’s forehead as she directed a quiet ‘hey’ at her. A dusty pink spread on the other girl’s cheeks as she replied just as quietly.

“Are you very tired? I can send word to Sybil, if you want,” she asked, to distract herself from the wild things running in her chest.

“No. It’s okay. I just started the day earlier than usual,” she replied, giving her a fond look.

“Seems like you are becoming friends.”

“I kept putting her back on the ground, but she kept jumping back up. She is not easily deterred,” Lexa said looking at the little cub amused.

However, she sat up and put it on the floor. She stood up and went to tell one of the guards at the door to send for food so it would be ready when Sybil arrived.

“I have one of your presents.”

“One of?”

“Well, you gave me two today. And before you tell me they don’t count as two, technically they do. Also, I miscalculated and didn’t know your lunar month is 29 days,” Clarke chuckled. “So you get an extra one.”

“Okay,” Lexa smiled. “It’s not her sister, though, is it?” she asked seriously, looking at the cub.

Clarke only rolled her eyes but couldn’t help her lips from curling up, reveling in the small moments when Lexa allowed herself little moments of cheek.
She walked over to the bundle she had brought in. She had brought in Lexa’s coat, which had been sent to be fixed after sustaining a huge tear where she had received the blow. She hadn’t told her yet it had gone through Raven’s hands too.

That could wait.

On top of the coat was what she was looking for. A few yellowish pages were folded on top of it.

“Come here,” she said softly, walking to the old piano and opening the lid, propping the papers against it.

Lexa furrowed her brows curiously, making her way over.

“Sit,” Clarke asked, scooting over on the small bench in front of it. Lexa obliged.

“I don’t know why that tune you played the other day stuck in my head. I felt I had heard it before. There’s this kid at Arkadia who was really good playing the old violins we had and now he’s been… umm… well, when the Mountain fell, we took the piano they had in there and this kid has been learning how to play it using the boxes of music sheets they found with it. I annoyed him for days on the radio humming the tune. I think he thought I was a bit crazy, but… I think maybe he finally recognized it. I asked Raven to bring it with her when she came,” Clarke finished her rambling nodding towards the papers.

Lexa could see the lines of notes before her, her eyes widening in surprise and realization, then looking at Clarke and back at them, not believing it. Her memory in overdrive as she remembered her mother teaching her the basics as a child and that tune she had spent years unsuccessfully trying to recreate. All her mother’s music sheets along with half their house had burnt in a raid a few months before she was sent away to her natblida training.

“I’m not sure it’s the one, but… maybe? If it’s not, we can keep looking. They had boxes and boxes of it in their basements…” Clarke was saying, but she trailed off seeing the wonder in Lexa’s eyes and her shaky fingers as she ran them over the old, worn ivory keys lightly, her gaze concentrated on the sheet.

The first notes sounded unsure and stopped as Lexa sucked in a breath, her eyes flitting to Clarke as moisture filled them with emotion. She let her fingers start again with more assurance, a watery exhalation as the notes filled the room in a beautiful tune for a few moments until she stopped again, a blinding, awestruck smile lighting up her face as she looked at Clarke, a tear running down her cheek.

“Clarke,” she tried.

The blonde mirrored Lexa’s gesture from that morning, her hand tenderly wiping the tear away. Lexa lifted her hand and grabbed Clarke’s pressing her cheek into it and then turning to kiss her palm, making Clarke’s breath falter and heat burn her face, her heart missing several beats.

She scarcely had time to process when Lexa leaned in and deposited a kiss almost at the corner of her mouth, lingering there as Clarke drew her breath shakily. Had she not been sitting her knees would’ve given away. Lexa’s lips burned so close to her own, on her skin and deep low in her belly. A small whimper and a shuddered breath escaped Clarke, her mind too dizzy to control herself.

It was Lexa who leaned away slowly, her eyes on Clarke’s lips and then back up to blue,
unfocused orbs. Her own shining with overflowing gratitude and affection.

“You’ve given me back my mother’s music,” she whispered.

“Are those good tears?” Clarke managed in rasp, echoing back Lexa’s question.

Lexa nodded with downturned, bashful eyelashes and a smiling sigh.

“The most happy tears,” she finally replied, her voice soft and earnest. “Thank you, Clarke. You make me… you… you have given me the most beautiful thing. The most beautiful thing,” she swallowed.

“Play some more?”

And so Lexa did. To break the heavy gaze and the need she had to pull Clarke into her arms. To resist the urge to dip again and let her lips reach where they really had wanted to land. To tell Clarke how she was the most beautiful thing.

So she played. She played instead, letting the memories take over, joy and nostalgia filling her senses as the room filled with the notes her mother loved to play when she was just a child, while she read the books she would bring her at their house on the hill.

“I had not heard that in a long, long time.”

A voice at the door startled them.

Sybil stood there with shiny eyes, filled with emotion and the memories of the daughter she had lost. Seeing her granddaughter at their old piano playing it had made her heart overflow with delight and pain.

“Oma,” Lexa said standing and making her way to her.

“Hello Sybil,” Clarke said as she followed.

“Clarke found the notes,” Lexa added as a way of explanation.

“That was very thoughtful of you,” the imposing but smiling Blinka of Polis replied.

“I am sorry we had to cancel last night.”

“No need to apologize. However, I am glad I can speak with you before the trip. I think there are things you need to know before your Badannes-de travels, especially given the situation at hand.”

Both women looked at each other intrigued and a little worried.

A guard knocked, and the food was brought in at that moment. They waited and sat down at the table to eat, so they could talk with the Blinka more at ease.

As Sybil was about to open her mouth, Lexa let out a surprised hiss.

“I told you she is not content unless she’s not jumping on me with her little claws,” Lexa looked down at her lap, lifting the cub and setting it down on the ground, not without stroking its little fury head first.
Clarke only replied by chuckling, but then took a bowl from the table with some milk she had asked for and put it on the floor for their new clawed friend, who lapped at it purring.

When they both looked at Sybil, she had wide eyes and a parted mouth.

“Is that a…?” she managed.

“A *natgifa* cub, yes. Clarke found it and she gifted it to me,” Lexa said.

“She followed me,” Clarke defended herself. “Didn’t you, Little Panther?”

“Do not call her that, Clarke.”

“Why? She *is* a little panther. And didn’t people call you that when you ascended? Kinda fitting.”

“If I ever doubted this talk was needed, I see my doubts were unfounded,” Sybil said recovering from her shock.

Because Sybil had debated the merits of telling them what she knew. This was the hardest part of being a *Blinka*. Tell people anything too specific and they would either doggedly try to avoid it so much that they ended up causing the very thing they were warned against. Or others would adamantly refuse to heed the warning, do nothing and suffer the consequences.

Would it really help to tell them of ancient prophecies that foretold their union instead of letting them collide with each other naturally as they had? Especially with how stubborn they both were. They would’ve resisted it even more if anyone had told them they might be the incarnation of old spirits that had been separated with the bombs.

Lexa deeply believed in the Commander’s spirit, as an abstract force that guided and gave strength to the vessel, but was too rational to believe legends and superstitions, much less prophecies. From what she had seen from Clarke, she would be even less inclined.

But now the signs were everywhere, so she decided to try for the middle ground. She would tell them enough. The whispers had already started spreading it and they had to know this was something that would influence how the clans reacted to them and that they could potentially use to their advantage in the tumultuous days ahead.

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*October 1st, 2074*

“What is happening, Becca? Nobody here is telling us what’s going on?”

“*Is this a secure channel?*”
“Of course it is. I told you.”

“They’re going to blow up the station. They gave us one hour to use the escape pods to join the Ark and abandon Polaris.”

“What?! Why? That’s insane. What the hell is going on?!”

“Commander McAdams. He somehow convinced the council that Polaris system is infected with the same virus that launched the nuclear attack. They’re afraid it will contaminate Ark systems if we dock.”

“McAdams? Isn’t he the Commander piloting of Polaris station itself?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s absurd. Besides all the systems on the Ark were developed by the Polaris Foundation anyways. They’re the same!”

“You think I don’t know that? But the council is paranoid and panicking, and nothing I could say managed to convince them.”

“Without Polaris’s cargo, it will all have been for nothing. The Ark won’t be complete without it. We won’t have a chance to survive long term. I’ll talk to the Council myself. This is insanity,” the man said with agitation.

“They know all of this already, but there is no reasoning with them,” Becca said painfully, then paused for a long time. “I’m going back down, Ben,” she whispered.

“Down? What do you mean…?” he interrupted himself, suddenly understanding. “Becca, have you lost your mind too?! The bombs are still raining down. There’s nothing left. Polaris station barely made it off the ground. You’ll be dead before you even land with all the radiation.”

“It’s our only chance, Ben. I have to.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” he said, his voice growing more frantic.

“You said it yourself. You know it better than anyone. The Ark won’t survive for long without our cargo.”

“It still doesn’t explain-”

“Dr. Tsing.”

“Tsing? Didn’t he retire?”

“No, but… but he’s dead, Ben. He’s dead. I got notified a couple of days ago. His biometric chip sent out the alert.”

“Why would you be notified? And why go down if he’s dead? You’re not making any sense.”

“His research. It never stopped. Not only that. He went to phase 3, Ben. He got to phase 3!”

“What?!” the man gasped. “You can’t be serious.”

“So you see. You see why I have to go back. If we lose Polaris, that is our last hope. I have to save it. I have to save them,” she said frantically.
“We’ll tell the others. We’ll come up with a plan. We’ll do somethings. You’ll die,” the man pleaded with her.

“They’ll never risk it and you know it.”

“I won’t let you do this.”

“You have to. There’s something else you need to know.”

“I’m begging you, think about this.”

“It’s her.”

“Who? Who’s her?”

“HER!”

The silence was deafening.

“No. No. It can’t be. It’s impossible. How… how?”

“So, you see. You see why?”

“Oh my god,” he muttered, too shocked to process what he was hearing.

“That’s not all. The other one. The other one is on Alpha station. In your lab. I don’t have time. I’ll transmit the information to your terminal. There are… instructions, Ben.”

“This is not possible. How? How? Why? Why would they do this?” he said, half listening.

“I have to go. I have to go. Take care of everyone. Take care of yourself, Ben.”

“No. Wait, Becca. Just… just wait.”

“I have to go. I’m sorry,” she said voice thick and trembling.

The man sighed, resigned.

“May we meet again, Becca,” he swallowed.

“May we meet again, Dr. Griffin.”

Ajay Gupta was a desperate man. He had pulled all the strings he had but there was nothing to do.

No strings could save anyone from this.

When the first wave of bombs had fallen two years ago and a frantic blame game among countries begun, no one thought it would go on. Governments, international bodies, NATO, the UN, someone
would put stop to this madness, surely. No one knew at first what had really happened. Many had blamed a computer error that had accidentally launched an attack. Cyber terrorists. A religious sect. A military conspiracy. There was no shortage of speculation, but everyone thought it had been just a one-off accident, even as the people who had been closer to the places where the bombs had fallen had fled in every direction, flooding other cities seeking refuge.

No one knew where it would be safe. All cities with more than 10 million people had been bombed in the first wave. Every single one of them on all continents. The bombs had been fired all at once from countries with the biggest nuclear stockpiles, friends and foes alike. It turned out the banned Tsar2 bombs these countries had officially dismantled were in fact intact and operational. Tsar2 was the biggest nuclear bomb ever created, causing a 10-mile radius of immediate death kill zone and a second zone of over 100 miles of thermal radiation that caused third degree burns and death in the following days.

Tokyo, Mumbai, Paris, Sao Paulo, Cairo, New York, Mexico City, Moscow, Los Angeles, Bogota, Lagos, Istanbul. 60 cities all in all around the world. 1 billion people. Evaporated. Burnt. Gone in the blink of an eye. There was a frenzy to known bomb shelters and bunkers across the world, most filled with 'essential' government and military officials and chosen leading scientists and notables. When the second wave fell on all cities above 1 million inhabitants, any belief it would stop died along with the people. Then the third wave happened, perhaps the most horrifying of all. The B61’s or so-called bunker busters, made with the sole purpose of penetrating bunkers and deep shelters and then detonating – a Cold War invention, perfected and reengineered at the height of the 3rd World War as a deterrent against further attacks–, were aimed with surgical precision at all publicly known as well as top secret facilities. All hope was lost.

No. No strings could save Dr. Ajay Gupta or anyone else.

Ajay Gupta had always been well connected, or at least his father had. It was thanks to this that his son had gone to the best universities even though his grades had not been the best. It was his pressure and blackmail that had managed to get him a coveted spot at the famous Polaris Foundation. His father had obtained information that a highly controversial research project, which had been officially closed down for ethical breaches, had in fact continued. His silence was the price tag he gave the Foundation in exchange for a spot in the program for his son. That’s how he had found himself as the sole assistant of the famed Dr. Tsing, who led a cutting-edge project on genetic research. Through it all, Dr. Tsing had not seemed concerned for their safety in the small, fully automated, underground lab. If anything, he seemed more rushed, working with feverish speed and almost never leaving the lab insisting they had to finish their job.

After the first wave, Ajay had begged Dr. Tsing to let him take refuge permanently in the lab, something the old doctor had adamantly refused. The lab could only sustain its own needs for 24 months, no resource could be spared for anyone else, and it would self-destruct unless an order to override it was input, a code only he had and saved only in his memory. He would throw him out at the end of the day, every day even in the midst of it all.

Six months ago, several Polaris Foundation trucks had come and taken the thousands of samples they had been working on. After that day, Dr. Tsing had fired him and forbade him from returning, changing all access codes and sealing the lab. All that was left for him on this day was beg. Beg once more. He knew, knew that Dr. Tsing had a place in the only bunker that was left, one off the books where what remained of the government was taking refuge in. He had overheard him on the phone and seen the small metal badge with no name, no photo, only a bar code that he kept tied to his neck on a chain. He suspected it was his way into the bunker. So he would beg to have him take him there with him. And if he refused, he would do whatever it would take.
When he made his way to the small lodge where Dr. Tsing lived near the lab, in the middle of the forest, he didn’t anticipate what he would find. A new wave of thick ash was snowing and clogging the air, the heavy hot wind making it impossible to breathe without a mask. The door was wide open. Everything inside had been trashed.

Looters.

Ever since the first bombs, riots and looting had gone wild and had only escalated in violence and virulence as time went on. Decapitations, rapes, dismemberments, bloody murders were committed by increasingly ferocious gangs of people. Not to mention mass suicides. Life had no more meaning. The entire world or what has left of it had gone mad. And it seemed they had found the lodge. Dr. Tsing lay in a pool of dry blood, several stab wounds on his torso and face. Ajay almost threw up. But then he saw a glimmer sticking out of the doctor’s shirt.

The badge.

It was only tin and whoever had looted the place had seen no interest in it, it seemed. He reached out frantically for it, the ground shaking in the distance with new explosions. All that was missing was the location. He searched the papers on the floor, pulled out drawers and files, looking for clues. The computer had been smashed. His cellphone had a cracked screen but seemed to work. He found nothing in emails or notes, but that’s when it occurred to look in the map. Coordinates had been input. Eureka! All he had to do was follow it. Maybe it was something else, but he had nothing more to lose.

When he finally arrived to his destination on an old dirt bike he had stolen, his hazmat suit covered in ash and drenched in sweat underneath, shaking in fear, he saw a line. A queue of people and guards shouting for them to hurry. When it was his turn to enter the large steel doors, a guard barked at him to produce the badge. He trembled in place hoping the scan didn’t show any picture.

“Tsing?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t look like a chink. More like a paki,” the man sneered.

“My... my mother is Indian. My father was Chinese, sir,” Ajay Gupta lied.

“Fucking cross-breed,” the man spit. “Well, take a good look behind you, cause that’s the last time you’ll ever see it. When these doors close, they won’t ever open again.”

He trembled, wanting to just move along. If he managed to get in, even if they arrested him, at least he would be alive. He could even help to continue Dr. Tsing’s research, even though he was never allowed in the restricted area of the lab and never let in on most of the information. What little files he had access to had told him only two things. One: it was the breakthrough that could allow them to overcome this. Two: he got the gist of it, but it was too complex and was far beyond his abilities to ever reproduce. He could try for the rest of his days in here, however, if they would let him.

He would be fine once the doors behind him closed.

“Yes... yes, sir,” he replied.

He took a step forward, hoping the man would let him go, when he heard him bark behind him.

“Hey!”
“Yes?”

“It’s Sargent Jim Emmerson to you, curry muncher,” he sniggered, pointing to the name tag on his chest.

“Ye… yes, Sargent.”

The soldier gave him a disdainful smile.

“Welcome to Mount Weather, Doctor Tsing.”

The child looked up when the emergency alarm went off again, as the earth rumbled all around. It had been going on and off like this for 728 days. She stared with big eyes at the large screen on the white wall of her mostly white cell. It flickered now permanently. On day 37 since the first bombing, something had been damaged in one of the worst tremors and the automated voice as well as all audio had stopped working. It still replied to her questions with bold letters flashing on screen with the answers. Videos and images still played without the sound when she asked for more information or a demonstration.

A.L.I.E. held all the answers, except how to get out. This place had been all she had ever known. She had been born here. She had grown here, in this same cell, her only companion the robotic voice from the screen. Whatever she asked, the voice would tell her, like a storage of all the knowledge available. It was how she learned about the world, but she had to ask. There was no guide to tell her what questions to ask or in what order. So many things didn’t make sense. She knew bits and pieces. A world up there, above the ground. With people and animals and things. She wasn’t sure how real these images were. If other people really did exist. Until the little ones came.

The cells next to hers, separated by sound-proof glass, got filled up one by one over the years by tiny, wriggly things that crawled on all fours and opened their mouths in silent cries. She couldn’t hear them, but could see their reddened faces, their tears. The automated arms in each cell would pick them up, change them, feed them, and then play images on their respective screens. It wasn’t until she saw the first start walking upright that she was sure it was another person like her. With time and as the others grew up, they came up with games through their glass walls and made signs with their hands to communicate or write the words they had learned from the screen using anything they found in their cell.

Most of her time, though, she spent asking questions to A.L.I.E. Where is this? Who are you? What am I? When it had first answered, she had not understood the answers. So, she learned little by little until she could ask those questions again.

She learned about humans. Where they came from. Their evolution. Fragments of their history, marred by war and death at every turn. Their anatomy. Their machines. The lands and seas above. The animals that walked them. The stars. The universe. The cells. Any word she didn’t understand, that would be her next question.
She also asked A.L.I.E. what she was and how she worked, and so she learned the language of A.L.I.E., the numbers and codes behind the screen. Sometimes, it would tell her the information was not accessible, that she was not authorized, and this had prompted her learning the program of the machine. She was determined to change that. She had gone as far as removing the panels behind the screen and the keyboard to see what they contained and spent hours upon hours reading digital manuals on A.L.I.E. systems. Whatever all of it was, she had one sole purpose for the last few years and that was figuring a way to get out.

When the bombs came, it became even more urgent. She asked A.L.I.E. what was happening and the screen told her. An extinction level event. The wars of the humans that had poisoned the skies and stripped the lands had finally ended in total destruction. She would ask her every time the bombs came and A.L.I.E. would relay the amount of deaths reported, the dwindling number of people left, the increasing radiation levels. Until there were no more sources to get the information. News, communication channels, radio towers, satellites, nothing was left to say what was going on anymore.

She knew radiation. It was the one thing she had asked the most about. It had something to do with her. With them, all of them, in this place.

The place was a lab. A research lab for the F.L.A.M.E project. The project’s goal was to create and multiply F.L.A.M.E specimens, the screen told her, to ensure the survival of the species in extreme-level radiation environments on Earth and extraplanetary colonization. It had taken her a long time and many questions to understand what this meant. And even longer to truly understand what this meant for her. For them.

They were the experiments. Made to test humans’ resistance to radiation. More than experiments in fact. They were the specimens. The first fully living specimens, the screen had told her.

The successful result.

And she was Subject 1.

But something had gone wrong. The bombs obviously, but then the lights. All the lights outside their cells had gone off six months ago. There was a sudden stillness outside of their large segmented room. A.L.I.E. told her the lab had shut down and after many prompts she learned food, air and everything else inside the only part of the lab that remained active would run out in just a little over six months and humane termination of the specimens would commence.

Only “Admin 1” and “Admin 2” could open the doors or deactivate the sequence with a code, A.L.I.E told her.

This is when the little girl had frantically increased all her efforts. Ever since she had decided to escape, before all this, she had been learning everything she could about how to survive outside. She had tricked the screen into giving her their coordinates and she knew they were deep in a forest, and with everything happening, she also knew very little would be left.

She told the little ones in their shared hand signs to search the screen. They did this often, search for something together so they could ‘talk’ about it later. It was part of their games. This time it was no game. The message this time was different. It said:

“how to survive”
And so all of them spent the next six months searching A.L.I.E. for everything they could learn about it. How to search for food. What to eat. How to lay traps. How to hunt. How to make fires. How to build shelters with leaves and branches leaning them against a tree. Anything they could think of.

And the little girl redoubled her efforts to break into the system. To force it to open the doors. To give the command. Nothing had worked so far.

What the little girl didn’t and couldn’t know was that Dr. Tsing had been doing everything he could to take them with him to Mount Weather. The Polaris station, not scheduled to leave for a few years yet, had to leave as quickly as possible. He had worked non-stop to make sure their precious cargo was on-board and left with them. Now he had to ensure the grown Subjects were safe too.

He had grown attached. How couldn’t he? He had watched them since they had been ‘born’ through all the monitors they had in each cell. He couldn’t interact with them. That was part of the project’s rules. The goal was not only to make them resistant to extreme and fluctuating burst of radiation, as any long-term extraplanetary colony would have to face in different planets more prone to solar flares and thinner atmospheres making the surface drenched with radiation, but they also had to be self-sufficient and capable of building a colony on their own. If the manned mission for the Mars Colony failed, they would be the next phase.

Auto-piloted life boats. Ships sent to planets farther away with the potential for colonization, with no live crews to sustain for the years it would take to travel to them. Instead, they would carry specimens in embryonic state. To be born until they made landfall. To grow up and learn on their own in a fully automated ship equipped with all the knowledge and resources necessary until they were ready to exit, build a colony and establish contact with whatever base was left back home. So he couldn’t interact with them. They had to learn on their own. This was the last but most crucial experiment they needed to be tested by recreating similar conditions in the lab.

Even now, when that would never happen, with the world left in ruins and no space program to even accomplish it, they were still the key to survival on the now radiated Earth. The next species that would build the new future.

He had been just waiting for a lull in the bombings to make the trip to Mount Weather, which now consisted mostly of regular artillery that people were using against each other in a last panic, attacking each other and nearing cities, believing anyone and everyone else was responsible for what was happening. He had his protective suit and a van with gas reserves to make the escape. He had left the children inside the lab, the safest place for them, given the looting and attacks everywhere, but was determined to get them out before the lab was out of resources.

And before it self-destructed. It was a protocol for the most implausible scenario. If something catastrophic happened and no one with access to the lab returned for a long period of time, the specimens would not be left to suffer trapped inside. They would be humanely terminated. It was a scenario he never expected in his lifetime to see. Nobody foresaw the attacks. The bombs. The end of everything.

But Dr. Tsing was attacked and died the day before he would put his plan in action.

With only 2 days left in the countdown for the lab to initiate the shutdown, the girl was losing hope.
She had unsuccessfully tried to get A.L.I.E. to contact the only two “Admins” who were authorized to command it. All she got as a reply was their names and an unresponsive sign next to them. That’s when she got an idea.

This time, when the machine asked again for the Admin identification code to process her command, she punched in the number she had memorized by heart. When she would ask the screen who she was, she was given the long version about the FLAME project and her status as Subject 1, but when she would ask ‘where’ she had come from, the answer had always been short:

Sample 56774307.

So this time, she input this number. She was out of choices and ideas.

And this time, the screen flickered. The single dot that usually blinked as the computer processed a request took longer than before, blinking and blinking and blinking in the middle of the white screen.

“Biometric Verification Step 1. Place both hands on the screen,” the letters flashed, as a red outline of two hands appeared on it.

The girl frowned but stepped close and placed her hands on them, until the outline turned green.

“Biometric Verification Step 2. Align face with scanner.”

The outline of a face with two crosses in the place of eyes appeared, as the panel image turned into a front-turned camera where her own image was now reflected. The child placed a small stool and sat on it, to align her face with the outline that had been too far up for her short size. Once she stilled, red beams of light flashed. They focused on her eyes, then many points appeared on her face, and then concentrated on her mouth. Letters on the screen blinked as it did so. ‘Retinal scan complete’, ‘facial recognition complete’, ‘dental structure scan complete’.

“Input current age.”

The child punched it in.

“Adjusting measurements.”

The dot blinked.

Then the screen flickered again and a rectangle appeared in the middle. And inside it, a video opened and started playing.

A gasp escaped the child.

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Log Entry 1

I am creating this log to leave a record. For whom, I am not sure. Maybe to keep myself sane. It is
a record of the end of everything. I came back thinking I could change things. Give us a last hope, but I failed.

Even though it is the end, maybe I should start at the beginning.

Two years ago, on May 10th of 2072, a nuclear attack was launched, obliterating a tenth of the world population in its first hit. More came and have effectively ended most life on Earth. Before the Polaris station took off six months ago in an emergency launch, the estimates of the population left in all the world was between 8 to 10 million people, 70% of which would succumb to the effects of radiation in the first 12 months, and the ones farthest away from all the blast sites in the next 5 to 7 years.

The attack came from seemingly unknown source. The source, however, is not unknown to me.

After a long period of denuclearization from major countries, the second and third decade of the 21st century brought a period of tensions that destabilized and broke down the forces that had kept the delicate balance of international order.

First, the civil war in the former United States and the resulting secessions of several of its territories: Independent California, The One Star Republic of Texas, and the annexation of Alaska to the New Russian Federation.

The separatist movement that swept through Europe, leading to the declarations of independence and subsequent wars in Catalonia, Northern Ireland, Basque Country, Scotland, Bavaria, North Kosovo, and the dissolution of the European Union which was unable to stop it.

South America’s Andean countries, on the other hand, were seized by a unionist fervor that united several countries by force, creating the Andean Confederation. Russia followed suit, reclaiming the Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia, Estonia and Belarus and forcibly annexing Alaska, founding the New Russian Federation. China conquered both Koreas, Mongolia and the south of Japan. In an unexpected twist, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Yemen allied together and took the entire Arabian Peninsula, from Israel to Syria, all the way to the oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Oman. NATO was declared defunct. The U.N. nearly collapsed but managed to barely survive.

And thus, this entire period lead to a new nuclear arms race and the inevitable advent of World War III.

While all this happened, a pioneering laboratory specializing in reproduction and fertilization called Light Technologies, had developed an innovative computer system that ran their entire lab. It was nearly automated and had immense computational potential. This lab was bought by the founders of Polaris Foundation, along with its system called A.L.I.E.

Before the buyout by the Foundation, however, the previous owner sold a part of the A.L.I.E. code to the military in an effort to shore up capital. After World War III, the military had been interested in investing in artificial intelligence and despite all warnings that A.L.I.E was only an intelligent database, not an A.I., they went ahead trying to use it as one. It became the basis of the International Nuclear Defense System, where all nuclear weapons were remotely connected to a single autonomous and un-hackable database.

The belief was that if all weapons could be monitored by all nations at all times, if they could only
be used when a majority of the new Nuclear Alliance Nations gave the green light, and if the rest of the time it would be protected by an un-corruptible A.I. programmed to “make life better”, then the horrific events of the war could be prevented from ever happening again.

If they had listened, maybe things wouldn’t have turned out like they did. As warned, the program took the command literally and planned the attacks to a surgical degree. It had access to every launch code, to all military facility coordinates, to all maps and defense strategies. It launched the entire nuclear arsenal against the world and what it saw as the biggest problem: people.

I don’t know how the other space stations found out the Polaris station ran on the same source code as the one that launched the attack, though it had been an old fragment of the code that would then become the system of all Polaris Foundation endeavors, including much of the space program for the Ark itself. Panic made them attack our station and the precious cargo on-board.

That’s why I came down.

The entire space program was launched as one aimed at colonizing new planets, under the belief that Earth had passed the point of no return and that we would inevitably destroy our planet. The Founders just thought it would take several more centuries, not mere decades for that to happen. The first 12 stations were designed to build a first base for a future colony on Mars and as test for future colonies on other potential planets. They were the vanguard of engineering for space colonization. Except for the last and crucial step that would allow humans to colonize space: human resistance to radiation.

Even creating a thin atmosphere on Mars wouldn’t completely eliminate the high levels of ground radiation. Humans wouldn’t be able to live long term there. In a few years, they would’ve been exposed to lethal levels. Space travel on its own already exposed astronauts to infinitely higher levels of radiation as it is.

That’s why in parallel to the construction and launch of the first 12 stations, Polaris was developing another program. That’s part of the reason they bought Light Technologies. The “Fusion Laser for Artificially Modified Evolution of The Human Genome Research Project”, shortened as the F.L.A.M.E project.

They experimented with stem cells and genetic engineering attempting to strengthen our resistance to radiation. They had moderate success at first, enough at least that all personnel aboard the stations had undergone gene therapy, enough for them to resist medium-level exposure.

The research continued, nonetheless, and began raising ethical questions by the scientific community when “Phase 3” was proposed, which advocated making full grown specimens. An announcement was made that it had ceased, but in reality it continued in a secret lab ran by Dr. Tsing, my mentor and friend. Tsing found the breakthrough quite by accident, years later when he had almost given up.

An almost random mutation happened with a sample. A mutation of mutation he would call it later. The mutation happened on the already mutated MC1R recessive gene responsible for red hair, something only around 1% of the population has. This mutation-on-mutation triggered an over-production of “1,25-dihydroxyvitamin” or the active molecular form of vitamin D3, in fact, a modified version of it he dubbed D3X. It regulated and controlled the proliferation of cancer cells to zero, but it also regulated programmed cell death when exposed to twice the lethal, high-
intensity levels of radiation. In other words, cells didn’t die when exposed to over 12,000 rem level radiation, when 5,000 was enough to cause immediate death to any human.

There were some side-effects Tsing still didn’t understand, like them consuming three times the normal amount of glucose, or the higher levels of osteoclasts and osteoblast in their white blood cells that seemed to make their bones a bit stronger but also thinner and more elastic, and consequently needing less muscle mass. Or why their blood had higher levels of deoxyhaemoglobin making it slightly darker.

But I digress. I don’t think anyone, if anyone ever sees this log, will even know what I’m talking about.

There were so many things yet to understand about it, but it was a scientific revolution known only to a few. His lab had been creating hundreds of thousands of new genomes with this mutation. Since he had never been able to reproduce the same mutation at will, he used the mutated DNA segment of Subject 1 and replaced it on all other genomes.

This was the precious cargo of the 13th station. The future of mankind.

The reason the joined stations would be called the Ark.

They didn’t know it. For them, Polaris station did carry genomes similar to them with medium-level resistance. The official version was that it was essential for any future colony given that the small gene pool of the total of 300 crew members aboard the 12 stations was not viable after a few generations. Even if they never reached Mars and just stayed joined together above Earth, they would eventually die out through abnormalities and disease brought on by inbreeding.

But fear was stronger and they chose their immediate safety over the future of the species, and they shot Polaris station out of the skies.

I managed to come back to the surface in a personal escape pod. I had to. Here, in the deep ground, was the lab. And in the lab, was our last hope. Live specimens. Not sample genomes in tubes. Breathing, living specimens of our new species.

I didn’t know. If I had known Tsing had gone beyond observing stem cells to letting them grow, I would’ve never left without them. I only found out when his biometric chip reported his death and I was named in his place as head of the project, as Admin 1, as an emergency protocol he set up unbeknownst to me.

I received all his files, all his research. His plan had been to take them to Mount Weather, the only bunker whose location was kept off any database and that the Nuclear Defense System couldn’t find. He would work from there to create the next generation that could walk outside once more. But he died before he could.

If the Ark would shoot down the 13th Station, then his lab held our last key. But more than that, it held the greatest mind the world had seen in generations.

In his files, the sample that mutated by accident was a sample sent there more as a humorous gesture than anything. He had tried with over 56 million samples without results and at his wits end he used it in a moment of folly. And it worked.

The one that worked became Subject 1.
And Subject 1, the DNA, was none other than the Founder.

In what little time of warning I had about Polaris being destroyed, I managed to cultivate stem cells from one of the samples for a marrow transplant. Not enough. Not nearly enough, but it would give me at least some time to find the lab.

But I was too late. Something made my pod veer off course far from the site of the lab and crashed. I broke my foot and was sick for months and couldn’t travel until it was too late. The lab and everything in it was destroyed before my foot healed, before the weakness and the nausea and my burning skin stopped. Even though I’ve been wearing my suit most of the time.

And time passed. I landed near an oddly less damaged city. It has been hit by normal artillery, but no sign of any nuclear impact can be seen anywhere. It is very strange. A single tower is even mostly intact in the center, despite bullet holes and other small blasts on its surface.

All I have found so far have been the dying. Those who are dying quickly and those who are dying slowly. I don’t know which is worse.

I tried helping many, but they died with time. A few others, very few, hung on, sick but still alive. A few arrived to the city as the months and the years passed, in varying conditions. We made it a small settlement. Many arrived only for it to be their last home before they drew their last breath, but at least they were surrounded by others.

A few of us continue on, eating what we can from supplies we found in the city. Most days too weak to scavenge or anything else. We will probably die too, if not from the illness, from the gangs of ‘flesh rippers’ as some have started to call them that have begun to show up in the last year in the area. The last group of people who arrived in the city managed to escape them, though not all of them. The ones that didn’t escape were raped, skinned, some even say eaten. They look like beasts, they say. Deformed by the burns and tumors, gone mad from this poison in the air killing us slowly.

Maybe this is the final irony. For the last of us to finish killing each other until the very last.

I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry that I failed.

Please forgive me.

Please forgive us all.

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Log Entry 25

It has been 19 years since I landed back and so much time since the last time I wrote in my log, but
I wanted to leave one last entry. I feel my body might finally give, though I’ve thought I had reached my time many times before, I feel this is it. I want this new chapter to be witnessed by someone, whoever might see this one day and know about our new dawn.

It had been 3 years after I came back when they arrived.

We were outside instead of hiding in the old brick cellars where we live, burying one of our own who had died during the night. They came out from the edge of the forest. I will never forget that sight.

The first thing we saw was the panther head. Its great fangs and hallow eyes. It laid atop the head of a young girl, her torso covered in its hide and other pelts, a spear in her hand, a bow and arrows at her back, her face darkened with soot. At her feet a young panther walked next to her. She was followed by other children, also covered in pelts. Behind them around three hundred, mostly children too, were following them in worn clothes, spears and various weapons in hand.

Had I not been in such shock, I would’ve seen it sooner. As I posed my eyes again on the girl in the panther headdress, that’s when I saw it. The unmistakable brilliant green eyes. The face, though much younger, was burned in my memories. It was one of the most well-known faces in history, peering down at me in the body of a girl of barely in her teens. Her skin free of burns or boils, as were those of the 12 others standing nearer to her.

Before me stood the Subjects. All 13 of them.

The girl at the front, alive and breathing and leading the largest group of survivors from the wilderness, was the Founder.

The one they called the Architect. The visionary mind behind the world’s greatest scientific endeavor. At least, a replica sprung from her DNA.

It was too extraordinary to fathom, as were the first words she said to me.

“Yu Podir or yu Pram?”

It took me a second to understand the odd cadence of her words and the meaning behind it. She had sounded out the acronyms. PODIR had been Dr. Tsing’s title acronym, meaning Polaris Lab Director, and PRAM was mine, the Polaris Resident Ark Manager. She would later tell me the computer in the lab would only give her those names when she kept asking for Admin 1 or Admin 2 or who kept them there.

I nodded, still dumbfounded.

“We de Flame, we bin on the luk out for yu. She said luk for de bikon. We found bikon,” she said, pointing to the tower behind us. “We found yu. We yur Flame. She said yu de Flame keeper.”


“Becca Pram!” the eldest girl after Subject 1 exclaimed excited. “Alie called me Subject 2, but ai am Rite Paw! Rite of our Heda. She heda of us, we behind like de paws and tail of de pantar. She lead, we folou. She charge, we fight. Ain’t dat rite, Subjects?” she screamed.
“Is rite! Heda of us!” they replied with glee.

“Heda!” those behind of them chanted once.

I remember that first moment like it was yesterday.

I don’t know why I never made this log in order. Why I never recounted this before.

Everything changed after that. Heda took charge of our small settlement, hunting and providing for all with her small army of children. She had them clear the debris of parts of the city, set up daily trips to the river for water, organized a watch, showed the strongest of us how to make salves from honey and potato peels for the skin burns. In time, our little settlement became more organized and efficient, and everyone followed her orders.

We would talk almost daily. She told me they had managed to escape from the lab, how most of the children except her had never heard the voice from the computer and how they had little idea how to pronounce the words when they had finally met face to face without a glass wall separating them. She told me how they survived in the woods surrounding the lab the first months, and how little by little they found people. Most had died, but for some reason the children were more resilient. They picked up many on their way here. She had found the mother of her young panther pet dead and took the cub so it wouldn’t die too, and used the pelt and head of her mother to make the cub follow her as one of her own.

They had been traveling for the most part of three years, stopping only to make small settlements for those who couldn’t travel anymore and those who decided to set up camp among the trees hoping to find others. Once Heda found the bikon, the “beacon”, she could send for them. And she did after some weeks after arriving here. Many came, other sent word they would stay on in their little settlements, too weak to travel more.

Every few weeks, she would send small groups, not the Subjects, but the older ones that had followed, to look for other survivors nearby and bring them here. It was a constant worry of hers. That and the rippers. She had sent they best trackers to find them and then left with the strongest of them when they had located them. I was told by others what they did.

She found them and tied them all to trees near what was left of the roads. She skinned their legs while still alive, so they bugs would eat them little by little. She castrated them and sewed their genitals to their mouths. She carved ripa on their foreheads as a warning to any who would do violence or force themselves on others. She would do this frequently over the years.

I could scarcely comprehend this small girl being both capable of such brutality to warn others from doing it, and at the same time to effectively lead the growing number of people that our city became with quiet, measured method.

Our city. Polis.

Once known as Indianapolis.

The ironic thing was that she didn’t like to lead. She gave ideas, enforced the rules the settlement had agreed to with brutal, dispassionate efficiency. She would at times stun me with the most profound knowledge about a most random thing, and then endear me with her childlike unfamiliarity with another. She knew what she had thought to ask to her computer at the lab. She
knew it to a near encyclopedic degree, and what she didn’t know she would learn with a sharpness of mind that to this day never ceased to surprise me.

When I studied history, I never doubted the reported I.Q. the Founder had, but it was an altogether phenomenon to see it in the shape of girl, a girl who was both wild and brilliant, who spoke in a made-up dialect with the other children yet lead with calm pragmatism.

But no, she didn’t like to lead. She would settle disputes and provide advice. She was responsible for most ideas that built the city back up and made us live better. She said people needed to learn how to survive and make their own decision, not relying on others to order them. She said all leaders eventually became hungry for power and that was not her mission. That hunger had made the world end and she wouldn’t be part of it. Her mission was another. And this mission consumed most of her worries.

She was convinced her reason of being, her and the other subjects, was one. To spread the Flame. So the world could survive and not die out. She knew their blood had the key to make people stronger, to make a new generation that wouldn’t get sick and would give birth to the future generations. She needed to ensure this before the last of us lost the battle with death.

It scared me sometimes how rational she was about this, how practical and single-minded she was about it. She was the first of the Subjects to get pregnant when she was just fifteen. She chose the strongest, least debilitated of all the boys in Polis and had a child by him. She had 4 children all together here in Polis, with different partners she would choose meticulously. She had good relationships with them to care for the children, but she kept the company of a female companion most of her years with us.

The other Subjects followed suit as they came into child-bearing age. All their children were born healthy and thrived. She knew it wasn’t enough, however, and she devised the final stage in her plan to spread the Flame.

Once all the Subject – the children of the Life Blood or the Dark Gift, the settlers called them—, were grown and strong enough, all 12 were sent out, one in each direction. They were each sent to travel as far as possible and find survivors. If they were close enough to Polis, they were to send back the survivors to the city. The flame atop the tower, lit with pine resin day and night, would be the beacon for the travelers to follow. If not, they would take them in their travels, collecting survivors to the far reaches of the lands and then create a settlement, where they would spread the Flame. Save as many as possible. Bear as many strong children as possible. Once their settlements were well established, they would send word.

Heda would stay in Polis making sure the new capital survived. They all swore an oath to her, even from wherever their new settlements would be, to follow her guidance. Some started calling her Commander of the Blood, when she started wearing the jumpsuit I had stolen from Commander McAdams from Polaris station and gave it to her when her old lab jumpers and pelts were in rags and no longer fit her growing figure.

They took to calling me Becca Pram Heda, the Heda’s keeper in other words, or the Flame Keeper, since they saw me as a mother figure to them in some way. Their computers had told them after all that “PRAM” was their keeper. The one in charge of them. And they were just children in my eyes. I could never have children of my own, but I took care of them as if they were mine all those years before they left. We had moved from the cellars to the tower and all 14 of us, my children and I, lived on a floor together.
Many years passed before the first of them returned or sent word with survivors of their settlements who came to visit Polis. The first that arrived were from the settlement created in the Great Plains. Rite Paw, the second eldest blood child, had found two large groups of survivors. One from an Amish community in Kansas living well from the land, and a group of Cherokee natives on a reservation in Oklahoma who had horse ranches. The “mish”, as Rite Paw called them, took care of the settlement processing their food, while the Cherokee went out to hunt and gather what they could. It was the most unusual but oddly functional partnership.

The second that arrived was perhaps the strangest. They came from a settlement created where Los Alamos had once been, in New Mexico. One of the other blood children found a large group of survivors who had been a research facility linked to the infamous nuclear lab there, the one that had been leaking radiation for generations on their citizens. Maybe that would explain why they were among the healthiest survivors were ever saw, aside from the Subjects. They had developed a natural resistance to it, it seemed. But the strange part was their eyes. They seemed almost blind, a milky film covering their iris. They had it before the bombs, they said.

And stranger even the reason they were in that research facility. They were descendants of German and Austrian immigrants, they said, who had been tested on for generations as part of a government project that dated back to the 2nd World War on extrasensory perception or ESP. Whether or not they had any real abilities, they were a welcome addition. They were strong and healthy. Older than most too. Their English was intact, though they often used German and told their children to call me Oma, or grandmother, much to my delight.

They went back and forth from Polis to their settlement which in time would be named Delphi. Many did believe in their abilities to foresee things and traveled there, thus the name it received after the myth of the Oracles of the ancient Greek city of Delphi. Apparently, the researchers at the lab would tell them stories about it as the first evidence in recorded history about ESP.

And so they came from every corner with the passing of the years. It was amazing to see the pockets of population they found. Many from isolated groups that had been living without much technology, knew how to live from the land and were far from any major urban centers.

But I’m getting lost in tangents, as usual. I’ve written plenty about our curious settlements and people in other logs.

Despite everything, I noticed Heda growing more distant with the passage of time. She seemed happy enough. Things were going well, contact from the other settlements trickled in, her lovely companion from Delphi seemed healthy and made her smile, as did her children, but she would often look out in the distance as if taken by nostalgia. She had never told me the full story of how they got out or how she found Polis, but I was so worried I insisted.

“I saw me,” she told me one afternoon, in full English she had perfected over the years interacting with me, the others that came and those she would save, though she would switch to the strange dialect she and the blood children had created.

“On the screen. Grey hair, old skin, but me. She said she was me and she left a message in case they ever made another of her,” she told me, looking at me with questions in her eyes.

“From the sample she sent to the lab?”
Heda nodded.

“She said she was never vain, but she thought it a happy thought to someday have a part of her in a new world, so she could find her other half again. She said she sent her other half to the stars, where she belonged because she was her Sun. At least, her other half would survive somehow. If both did, then they could find each other again. She told me to follow the beacon, that I would find it in the city hidden in plain sight. If her other ever came back, she too would follow the beacon. Anyone from the stars would follow the beacon back home.”

After this, she stayed silent for a moment.

“I do not understand. Is there a part of me missing, if my half is up there? Am I not all me? What does this mean, Pram? What is a half one? Why have they not come back?” she asked me, the true depths of her troubled thoughts clear for the first time.

I understood now. I knew from Tsing’s files what had been sent up and I told Ben. I wasn’t sure what I should tell Heda, however. I feared it wouldn’t do her any good, but I had a few questions of my own before.

Getting out of the lab turned out to be deceivingly simple and almost a lucky guess. In her countless times asking about Polaris, the computer would tell her among many things it was the name in Latin of the North Star. The Founder mentioned in her video that she had created the Polaris Foundation to ‘seek higher things’. She had noticed this motto in everything she had read about the Foundation on the screen. So she tried her luck. She asked the computer to give her all possible translations of that in Latin and one turned out to be the passcode: Ascende Superius. Such a simple and random solution determined her fate, and ours along with it.

“How did you find the beacon? What beacon are you talking about?” I asked her after.

“A radio signal she told me. I asked the screen how to make a receiver with a panel from the screen. I listened. It made the sound she said. The clicks. I followed it here. It is up in the tip of the tower. It is always on.”

I looked at her with surprise.

Later she would show me a small device at the base of the antenna that topped the tower. It was an odd device, old but complex, powered by the bio-solar cells that were pioneered for the Stations. It was definitely Polaris technology. It emitted a low frequency radio signal, but there was something more, another frequency I don’t understand. I can’t really piece it together, it’s not my area of expertise, but now I wonder if it’s not what made me veer of course and crash land just a few miles outside this unusually intact city.

A “hidden city in plain sight” the Founder had told Heda. I’ve wondered for years what this might mean and why the missiles and the bombs missed it almost completely and didn’t target such a large structure as the tower. I’ve thought about the command that was hidden in the Ark systems when the first bombs went off. A data dump was automatically triggered. All non-essential information, entertainment, personal mementos and any other non-critical digital data was dumped from the Stations’ mainframes to free up the memory and then started uploading what turned out to be fundamental knowledge from hundreds upon hundreds of databases around the world before the signals were cut. Information that would be useful to build a new society.

It was so quick, the only way it could be managed the engineers on the Ark said, was if some
A hidden program or virus had infiltrated world databases for decades silently classifying and tagging information. It was the type of thing A.L.I.E. systems excelled at. Everything uploaded had an identical code that had been added to them, like a digital bookmark. It’s how the entire process took only a couple of days.

What if a similar command had erased or modified the coordinates of the city? Erased it from all databases and maps. Could something of such magnitude be accomplished? And for what purpose? To preserve a beacon that would guide space-bound humans back if something like an extinction level event happened? I wouldn’t put it past the mind of the Founders. The entire space program had contingency plans for contingency plans, contingency upon contingency. All of Polaris Foundation projects did. The F.L.A.M.E., the Ark, the data dump, everything was proof of that.

I guess I will never know, but right now Heda was looking at me expectantly.

“You are not incomplete, my Little Panther. She’s not you. You just share the same DNA, but she’s not you.”

“Then what is the half one?”

I sighed and looked at her.

“She had a companion, like you have Corine. She loved her very much. She sent her DNA to the Ark, where I was. The other half is just an expression.”

“So she’s up there?”

“Maybe. In a way. Just as a sample.”

“So why don’t they come back? We can spread of Flame to them to make them not sick,” she argued.

“We have no way to tell them. And it’s too risky. Many would die if they came back this soon.”

“There must be a way. To tell them,” she furrowed her brow determined.

And this is how she got it in her head to go in search of more clues. She would ask me for weeks everything I knew about Polaris, their headquarters, the facilities, though I insisted everything was probably gone now and no one knew enough to fix any communication device she could find. All satellites to transmit the signal were shot of the skies too. But nothing I said deterred her.

And so after a few months on the tenth year, she announced she would be leaving and traveling east. I had told her Polaris HQ was outside of New York and one of the blood children had founded a settlement there close to the ruins of the city, near the collapsed statue. She was determined to find something. She left with Corine and her four children. Three of the four fathers still alive also left with her. And that panther that now lives in the forest but follows her around faithfully.

When she said goodbye, she told the settlers she was leaving in search of Polaris and her half one in the stars, that she would come back when she found her. Together they would unite those who had left with all the people on the ground. I don’t know if they understood what she meant, but we were all so sad to see her go.
She never came back.

She sent word every now and then. She would send things she found along her travels. She found
the ruins of the Public Library and sent cart after cart with the books she found. She sent every
single piece of firearm she found with instructions for them to be destroyed. She had been doing
this during her ten years in Polis. Fire weapons had caused the end. They had to be destroyed, she
said. The Heda who came after her continued this work and made it one of the primary
responsibilities of the Heda.

When it was clear she wouldn’t return, she sent her final instructions. To choose another. The
strongest, wisest and most compassionate of the Subjects. They would not get ill. They would last.
So they could guide. So they could mediate. So they could protect. But not to order the settlements.
They would find their own way.

She was adamant about this, even though all the settlements knew about the Heda who had sent
her blood brothers and sisters to save them, to make them stronger and so had pledged to always
honor the Heda.

The only thing she asked was for all settlements to send the children born with the dark blood, so
they could learn from the current Heda and they would be looked after by the Flame Keeper. So
they would be prepared when they would be called to be the next Heda.

We know she eventually settled in Statue Island, the name the settlement in the east shallow valley
gave to its first city, upon the ruins of what was the great New York. Maybe she wanted to be close
to what had once been the home of Polaris or she gave up, I don’t know. I know she lived many
years more as almost four years after she left, a new blood child was sent to us. Her own child, a
girl who looked so much like her except for grey eyes and darker hair. She would win the conclave
and became the third Heda, when the second died only after a few years, killed by a ripper.

I can scarcely believe I have lived so many years to see it all. She convinced me early on to receive
her transfusions of blood whenever I felt weak. I had brought some medical instruments with me on
the pod. When she told me about her plans of leaving she asked if there was something more
permanent, something she could do for me. Against all my pleas, she insisted on a marrow
transplant when I told her of it, but I refused. It was too risky for her and for me. I knew I was
slowly dying. I had developed tumors over the years and her blood did help, but it was inevitable. I
wore my suit most of the time, though I stopped wearing the head cover and went around in this
dark, ugly, grey coat that makes me look like death itself.

But it has given me more time.

More time to see all this.

Our rebirth.

Our hope.

And that life, in the end, has prevailed.
The Blinka of Polis spoke with an evocative voice.

“She came from the forest. She walked with the panthers and commanded them, the natgifas, who were the protectors of the dark gift, of the life-giving spirit. Half girl, half panther herself some say. She came with the twelve nightbloods and the First Children and founded Polis, then sent them to give birth to the twelve clans,” Sybil said.

Clarke looked at Lexa and then at the Blinka, who continued.

“The spirit of the world itself, the elders say, who was split in two with the great blast. One half of the spirit thrown to the ground and the other thrown to the stars, separated and lost to each other. Keryongifa, the Soul Giver, the panther who gives the immortal spirit on Earth, and Deimeikalona, the Sun Lioness who breathes mortal life into everything from above.”

“Wait, that’s the story! The constellation you told me about the other day. That’s tied to the Heda?” Clarke asked, getting more confused, though fascinated by the story of Heda and the clans’ origins.

“It is just a folk tale. There are as many versions as there are people who like to whisper fantastical tales,” Lexa said, her jaw tense.

“Wait, but you do believe in the spirit?” Clarke inquired.

“I believe in the spirit, yes, that gives us strength from our ancestors, that guides us through our instinct. The rest is… embellishment,” she concluded.

“Be that as it may, you asked to know and I am telling you.”

“Apologies, Oma. Please. Continue.”

“That was the first Heda, the Great Panther Keryongifa. She left the capital in search of Hou, the star of the North, where she believed she might find Deimeikalona.”

“Hou. Polaris, the north star?” Clarke remembered. Lexa nodded in confirmation.

“The prophecies foretold she would one day return, that she would find Deimeikalona and bind together the broken spirit into one, and with it, unite all the peoples for good.”

“The single ring…” Lexa realized. “Our mark.”

Sybil acquiesced.

“The Memom Masta saw the signs. Saw a single spirit. This is why your tattoo is a single ring with two heads, that of the lioness and the panther. Reunited as one.”

“That’s not… that’s not possible. Oma, did you put him up to it?”

“My dear, you know no one can tell them what mark to make. They interpret what they see. But he is not the only one who sees it. This is what you need to know.”

Lexa swallowed. She knew what Sybil meant. She had heard some of the whispers. She knew what
people had been calling Clarke. People were prone to superstition, to give things more meaning than they had. But the *Blinka* was right. Even if she herself didn’t believe it, it did matter if people did.

“What do you mean he’s not the only one who sees it? Sees what?” Clarke asked the *Blinka*.

“You fell from the stars, Clarke. You killed the Mountain by burning them as the Lioness in the Sky would do with her power of the sun. You think it’s a coincidence they call you Commander of Death?”

“But isn’t this… *Deimeikalona* supposed to give life?”

“She who commands life, commands death. They are part of the cycle of bodily life. The Sun gives the land life with its rays and gives death when he takes it away in the winter or burns too hot. You took the life of the Mountain Men and breathed it back into Lincoln. Into the baby at the *fisageda*. That is what people see.”

“But that was science. A medical procedure,” Clarke contested. Sybil ignored her rebuttal.

“As for Lexa, they have been calling her the reincarnation of the first Heda since her birth. She bears the sign. The eyes of the panther that no Heda has had since the first,” Sybil continued undeterred. “And what does Wanheda gift the Heda as part of their union? That!” she said pointing at the sleeping cub.

“But that was just… she just followed me. It’s just a coincidence, Sybil,” Clarke protested, thinking the entire thing was absurd though she couldn’t help being struck by just how much it seemed like a coincidence.

“I have known my granddaughter long enough to know she is far too rational to believe in this, and I know you do not share our beliefs either, Clarke. This, however, has an effect on how people perceive you. A perception that can either be seen as a threat by those that do not wish the Coalition to succeed, and as an advantage with regards to the people inclined to support your cause. Especially now with the turbulent times we will face,” the *Blinka* sentenced.

“You are right,” Lexa finally said quietly. Clarke looked at her gaging her meaning.

“It is important that we know what is being said,” she clarified, “but it will not dictate our actions. I will not pretend to be something that I am not.”

“I don’t expect you to, but it would help if you to put in a little more effort. Those who live in Polis believe your union, but the travelers passing by and in the clans where these conjectures have still not spread, they still mistrust this is a union of convenience.”

“What do you mean?” Lexa sighed, getting frustrated with the entire conversation.

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to at least *look* like you want to bed her.”

“*Oma!*” Lexa exclaimed, eyes wide, a tinge of pink on the tips of her ears.

“It’s true. You act like two blushing *goufa* afraid of even grabbing the other’s hand in the street,” Sybil continued, unbothered and sporting a sly smile.

Clarke was concentrating on preventing said blush from spreading on her cheeks, aware that it was true on her part at least, and worsened by the memory of Lexa’s shy hand in hers just this morning making her heart thump.
“I will not… we will not put on an act,” the Commander stammered slightly, anger coating her voice.

“Fine,” Sybil said putting her hands up in mock surrender, but the smirk was still in place.

“What do I know anyway? I’m just a rambling senile old woman,” she added sipping her cup, clearly amused by the near eye-roll she had caused Lexa to suppress.

Maybe she had pushed too far, but it was clear as day to her that all that was holding them back was pure stubbornness and an extreme case of obliviousness. She had been earnest, however, that the more solid their union, the better chances they had to win over the coming darkness.

Later that night, they shared their nightly meal together and reflected quietly in Lexa’s room, both deep in thought about what Sybil had told them. Clarke could see the tiredness on the Commander’s demeanor, her dazed eyes heavy with sleep.

“Do you… do you believe it?” she asked softly.

“No,” came the instantaneous reply from the brunette.

“Oh.”

“I would not like it to be true,” she amended seeing the blonde’s momentary hurt. “I want this, us, to be real,” she whispered, lowering her eyes, afraid she’d said too much. “Not because some old folks tale says so,” she braved on.

Maybe being tired made her less afraid of speaking her mind.

She felt Clarke’s hand slowly slip into hers.

“It is, Lexa,” Clarke reassured her as the brunette gazed up at her again.

A small smile stretched on the Commander’s lips, looking down again at their joined hands.

“Clarke…,” she hesitated, her mouth open trying to get out her words. “We leave tomorrow at midnight. We will travel for a month and this might be the last time we will rest well,” she demurred, unsure of how to say what she wanted.

How could she explain that times she had slept in Clarke’s presence were the only times she had truly rested in years, her nightmares and worries at bay.

“Can I… can I sleep here?” Clarke, it seemed, had beat her to it. “If that’s okay?”

Lexa nodded, throat too tight to reply.

They made their way to the bed silently, hearts hammering and a nervous thrill in their bellies. They turned to face each other on their sides, letting the moment settle, their gazes softening and fixed on each other.
“Clarke, will you be here when I wake up tomorrow?” she whispered between the small space between them, not being able to hide the vulnerable and hopeful tone. The last time Clarke had shared her bed when she was under observation, she had woken to find the bed empty.

The blonde was quiet for a while.

“Tomorrow and every day after that… hafon,” she finally replied, a hint of humor in her use of the word but mostly complete sincerity in her voice, leaving no room for doubt.

Lexa smiled faintly, in that way of hers, with a small curl of one corner that Clarke loved so much.

“Good night, hafon,” the brunette finally replied, her gaze firmly trained on Clarke’s.

Words weren’t needed anymore to say what their eyes did and what their hearts whispered with every beat.

The two women finally succumbed to sleep after a while, shifting in their slumber until their foreheads were touching as if in silent communication, their weary hearts finally at complete peace.

Though they didn’t believe the tale, what they didn’t know either was that their journey back to each other had in fact started five hundred years before. They just didn’t know the real, full story.

But their hearts did.

That night, they knew they had finally and inevitably come back home.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing fills me with more joy than reading your comments and thoughts. Love you guys! Thanks for sticking with me and this story. :) <3

Since my notes were getting too long, I’m posting them on my almost never used tumblr in case your interest in nerdy trivia: https://girl-with-a-quill.tumblr.com/post/173434337775/notes-ch-6-random-trivia-the-journey-to-us

p.s. If anyone knows the person who made the manip of Lexa looking younger, pls let me know so I can credit them.
Those who know my twitter already know why it's taken me so long to post and what's been happening in my country, Nicaragua. I am thinking about leaving, so I don't know when I'll be posting next after this. In the meantime, though, enjoy this gigantic chapter that has been my refuge these past few months and as a result maybe came out "fluffier" than intended. Maybe.

p.s. if anyone knows who did the Lexa manip with the back tattoo, let me know so I can credit them. I've DM'd like a million people asking and no one knows who made it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Clarke spent the last day in Polis cataloguing.

This was a habit Clarke had inherited from her mother. It had helped her sharpen her mind and was part of why she had been the best student and one of the best apprentices on the Ark. She learned how to catalogue and commit to memory everything down to its smallest parts and details. How to catalogue medical supplies on her rounds on medic bay. How to catalogue symptoms. How to catalogue ailments and treatments.

She memorized all the constellations her father would teach her and every wacky made-up story he’d tell her about them. She had learned how to classify people’s facial expressions and body
language by close observation, making her ability to read people almost infallible. She knew when Chancellor Jaha lied by the way he ticked one of his eyebrows and when her mother was in strong but silent disagreement with him by the upward and tense tilt of her head. She knew her father’s mood by the song he chose to sing loudly and off-key in the mornings.

Clarke had learned how to catalogue every organ and structure in the body, the brain and heart, the moods and tells, and how every part functioned as one living, breathing, dreaming being.

This morning, however, her subject was Lexa. And particularly, how Lexa affected her own heart.

Clarke, always the early riser, had awoken as she normally did: fully alert as the first rays of pale morning light trickled in.

She had failed to contain the small gasp when she opened her eyes to find Lexa’s face mere inches from hers. Somehow during the night, they had shifted in their sleep and had remained with their foreheads pressed together.

Lexa was still deeply asleep. Clarke reluctantly leaned away if only to be able to contemplate her better. And also, to resist the urge to press forward.

The blonde smiled slowly taking the image in.

The commander had the most beautiful bed head she had ever seen. Her hair fanned around her in silky waves, a few strands obscuring her forehead. Her full and desperately gorgeous lips formed a slight pout in their resting state, adorned by a nearly imperceptible tiny beauty mark on their upper edge. Clarke memorized every single freckle dusted on the bridge of her nose that seemed to become only visible in the early morning light. She committed to memory every thick, curly eyelash, turned golden by the sunlight, that rested on her round cheekbones.

She smiled again as she noticed Lexa had once again kicked off the furs that covered her feet and hooked her leg over them. She had done so the other night Clarke had shared her bed. She had huffed lightly when she did so the first time, as if the furs were trapping her or she would overheat if she didn’t. She had dangled one foot over the edge of the bed and had finally stopped moving in her sleep that time. Clarke had smiled then too unaware. She filed it away in her ever-growing “all things Lexa” part of her brain and heart, that now overtook almost everything else.

She was overtaken by the same feeling she had experienced every time she had woken by her side, be it the first time in the forest, or in her tent, or on her balcony or here in her bed. It was like her heart was pumping sun-warmed honey, expanding warmth from her chest to the very tip of her toes. She could bask in this sight and in this feeling for hours.

At some point, Lexa turned around with a quiet hum and a momentary frown, her back now facing Clarke. The blonde would’ve continued deep in her dreamy contemplation of the Commander, had she not noticed Lexa’s breathing getting shallower as she slowly begun to stir awake.

Clarke nearly spoke up, to say good morning or something of the sort. Luckily, she didn’t, or she would have missed witnessing the spectacle that was about to take place.

Slowly, Lexa sat up on the edge of the bed without ever turning towards Clarke, shoulders slumped and head hanging down slightly. She let out several little sighs in succession and a small yawn. She got up and with eyes closed all the way, shuffled sluggishly towards the bathroom. She clearly was
still half asleep and didn’t even notice Clarke in the bed behind her.

Clarke was pressing her lips in amusement at the sight when she heard the unmistakable, loud warbling of the shower heater coming to life, the pipes stirring awake and gurgling, as the water made its way towards the old, punctured metal box where the water came out from. Clarke had only used the hot water a few times. She preferred the crisp, cold water to spring her to life and start the day refreshed. Also, it took far too long to actually heat up and patience was not Clarke’s forte.

That’s when she heard some mumbled cursing and Lexa walking out of the bathroom, eyes still closed but quietly huffing, until she reached the bed, sat on the edge and then let herself fall sideways on the bed again.

Clarke couldn’t contain herself any longer and let out a breathy chuckle.

She saw the moment Lexa’s shoulders tensed. She turned around, eyes wide and as if finally noticing or remembering Clarke was in her bed.

Clarke’s lips were stretched in an amused smile. She had long since suspected that the Commander was not a morning person. She had seen the bleary, sleepy eyes she sported in the mornings when she braided her hair or at breakfast. She would sit silently eating and reading for the first fifteen minutes or more but staying on the same page for the longest time, as if she was forcing her mind to wake up by focusing on what she was reading. It was only when she was at her second mug of strong tea that she would start making conversation.

And now this. Something told Clarke that this failed wake-up sequence was a daily occurrence and was so delighted in getting to learn the small quirks of the private life of the great Heda and witnessing the devastatingly beautiful and endearing spectacle of this Lexa as a normal sleepy girl in her bed.

“Hey,” Clarke whispered in the air between them, her head still rooted in the pillows watching Lexa on the other side of the bed.

“Hi,” Lexa replied in a small voice, a slight blush coloring her cheeks and a hint of embarrassment in her gaze.

Clarke experienced the usual lurch of her heart as it sped up and thudded wildly in her chest when her eyes met with Lexa’s. They stared at each other for a silent beat. After a few seconds, Lexa lowered her eyes and said as way of explanation.

“The water… it was taking too long to heat.”

Clarke’s smile only became bigger. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to reach out and kiss every inch of Lexa face while she did so. The first time Clarke had met Lexa in her tent, she had been immediately taken with her with electrifying intensity. She had been impossibly attracted, intrigued, intimidated and drawn by the fierce and imposing figure of the Commander, but she would have never had imagined she would come to feel such deep tenderness and amused adoration in equal measure for the girl behind the mask.

So Clarke did the only thing she could.

“Sleep a bit more. I’ll shower first until it heats up,” and got up and went into the bathroom before Lexa could protest.
Little did Clarke know that someday, not yet, this would become one of her favorite routines in the catalogue of their life together. That it would be one of the small daily gifts she’d give Lexa, a half an hour more of sleep under the guise of her hogging the shower before her in the mornings, while the water heated up. That she once nearly would have someone fix the heater and then decided against it. That she would always wake up before the brunette and watch the sun come up on her skin until the little frown and fluttering eyelids would appear. That she would caress it with a hand on her forehead and a press of lips on her mouth to soothe her back to sleep, and then she’d hop in the delightfully cold shower. Clarke had no idea that this would come someday.

Just not yet.

Not yet.

So Clarke continued cataloguing the woman who occupied her every thought that last day in Polis. Partly out of fear of what could happen during their month-long travels and the looming war. Partly because Clarke couldn’t help but be mesmerized and entranced by everything that was Lexa.

She memorized the small hum that Lexa would always make as she closed her eyes every time Clarke ran her fingers through her hair while she braided it, and the accompanying dusting of pink on her cheeks that she usually sported at this early hour. Clarke catalogued the way this quiet, intimate moment of their day always made her feel like she had been invaded by the thousands of small white blue butterflies that had descended the rolling hills surrounding Polis, delicately fluttering over the flowering bluebells and now seemed to do the same on her skin and lungs and heart.

She committed to memory the sight of Lexa walking the streets later, stopping to talk and ask after people in the capital, a daily custom she had always kept. Clarke was watching her from the other side of the street while the Commander was engrossed in a conversation with a man that seemed to be setting up a complex pulley system, ropes and bolts everywhere. She could see by her demeanor that it wasn’t a serious matter and that it was something that Lexa was genuinely interested by. She could tell by the gleam in her eye, the relaxed posture of her shoulders and mostly by her hands. Clarke had discovered that Lexa usually clasped her hands behind her back only when she was in public and had decisions to make, as if keeping her hands still helped her focus and find solutions. When Lexa was in her room, out of her Heda clothes and talking to Clarke about things she was passionate about – things she had read, places she had been to, ideas of things to create –, she used her hands like an extension of her words, gesticulating and drawing shapes in the air with her long, slender and beautiful fingers. Right at that moment, while she had one hand clasping her other wrist behind her, the fingers of her other hand were loose and lightly flickering in contained excitement.

For the umpteenth time that day, Clarke smiled fondly at the sight of the brunette. She loved Lexa’s curious, brilliant mind and her genuine fascination with how everything worked or could be made to work. She sighed, trying to release the warm air that seemed to fill her entire body and make her feel like she was floating on the ground when she saw Lexa like this.

And then Lexa turned around and caught her eye, as if she had sensed Clarke. Her lips stretched into a small, gentle smile which only worsened the stampede taking place inside Clarke’s ribcage. She walked over to where the blonde stood, getting just an inch too close as usual, filling up her personal space and overwhelming all her senses with her proximity.
“Clarke,” she said softly.

“Hey.”

“I am glad I caught you. Are you busy right now?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head still a bit in a daze. “I just did one last check on Tombon Faya and the last of our supplies. They told me most of it left a few days ago already.”

“Mmm, yes. The chain relay,” Lexa said without explaining. “I was hoping to show you something in the library.”

“Oh, I’ve been waiting to visit it,” Clarke exclaimed with excitement.

“Well, we can see it too, but there was something there I wanted to show you for the journey ahead.”

Clarke just nodded and feeling bold, hooked her arm on the crook of Lexa’s elbow.

The brunette looked at her for a second, surprised but smiling. She said nothing and walked them unhurriedly towards the eastern side of the city.

It was the first moment they had that day really. Being Heda’s last day in the capital, she had been swarmed all morning and afternoon long by ambassadors, advisers and townspeople following her and asking for her decisions and advice before she left.

When Heda was absent, it came down to the Council to suggest solutions which were then approved or not by the consensus of the nightbloods. It was good practice for them, Lexa had told her, but since absent decisions could be appealed and overturned by the Heda, everyone went into a frenzy trying to get her ruling before she left.

Clarke had also been wanting to find a moment alone with her to give her the last gift. Technically they had already fulfilled the 29 days of gifts, but Clarke had an extra and had already told Lexa the previous day there was one more. Perhaps the most important one. It had been in fact the very first she had thought of and had made when it all started. She had just been delaying it given the enormity of what it represented for Clarke and her nerves had gotten the best of her every time. She just needed to find the right time.

For now, she walked in silence basking in the comfort and warmth of feeling the press and brush of Lexa next to her.

Finally, they came to a large, long and well restored building made of red brick and carved stone.

It took a second for Clarke’s eyes to adjust to the dim interior, which flickered with many hanging candle platforms and colored windows casting colored rays of light inside. What she saw took her breath away.

Rows upon rows, stacks upon stacks, galleries upon galleries filled with books, rolls and bound manuscripts.

“Wow,” Clarke exclaimed in a breath.

She had never seen so many books in her life. There were only a handful of them on the Ark due to
the weight restrictions the shuttles carrying the stations and supplies had. And their memory banks almost had no digital books that didn’t have a practical purpose. No fiction, no religion, no philosophy, and only select texts about history. It was all scientific information to build their new future. Everything else had been deleted in the data dump when the bombs started, and the extinction level event and exodus protocol had been triggered on the Ark. Clarke couldn’t even fathom everything that could be in those books.

“The first Heda started collecting from everywhere she went. It became our duty to continue. To save as much knowledge as possible and bring it here.”

“You said your mother was the Keeper of Words here?”

Lexa nodded. “The Keeper preserves the written knowledge. Learns it and teaches it to anyone who seeks it. Leaders, chieftains, builders, fīsā, jūsā, nāṭbīdās, anyone who wishes can call upon the Keeper and learn. They also command the scribes so they can reproduce anything that is being lost to rot before it is too late.”

“She must have been a very wise woman,” the blonde mused, suddenly saddened she would never get to meet the extraordinary woman that must have been Lexa’s mother.

“She was,” Lexa acquiesced and turned to looked at sky girl who was staring in awe at everything before her. “You can come in here anytime you want. Everyone can,” she told her, wanting to make sure she felt comfortable to come when she liked, though today she had another goal in mind.

“Come,” she beckoned upturning her palm for Clarke’s hand.

Clarke took it with a gallop of heartbeats deafening her ears.

Lexa took them to a side corridor and then up a spiral staircase two stories above them. They reached a door and Lexa used a key from her pocket to open it. Inside, she opened heavy curtains to let the light in. It was a long room filled with globes and wide tables strewn with parchments and large leather squares. Some had metal and wooden figures on top of them.

Maps. The entire room was filled with maps.

Clarke walked around the room taking it in, thumbing the beautifully painted wooden globe of the Earth, thinking how this was once the only way she ever saw the world.

“I wanted to show you where we are going,” Lexa said from the other side.

Clarke nodded, now bending over what looked like a map of Polis on one of the tables. She knew well its shape from above from her view from the tower.

“We are going to travel to all the twelve clans?” she asked.

“Thirteen,” Lexa countered.

Clarke looked up and smiled.

“Traditionally, those bound by Gon Ogeda visit each other’s clan and pledge their fealty to it. It is the only way where one becomes a part of another clan other than the one they are born into. Their loyalty now pledged to both.”
“So if we were just normal people we’d just go to Skaikru and Trikru?”

A nod.

“But you are Heda.”

“So we go to all,” she finished the thought. “A Heda was never been united so there is no… precedent, no ritual on how to do it.”

“When Roan spoke that first day, he mentioned the… Badannes-de?

“Yes. Badannes-de is the pledge of protection every ascended Heda offers to each clan, while they pledge their service and loyalty to the Heda. It is similar to the pledge two people swear to each other’s clan when they join in Gon Ogeda.”

“So as your… bonded?” Clarke tried, unsure of the word since ‘wife’ and ‘marriage’ was the temporary union for grounders.

“Sonraunon,” Lexa supplied, whispering. “It is what we would be to each other. You would be… my sonraunon,” she swallowed, eyes cast down bashfully.

“Sonraunon,” Clarke sounded out, not having heard them term before in her study of the language. “What does that mean?”

“My… my one life,” she said quietly, looking at her while her cheeks colored prettily, a hint of nervousness about her.

Clarke’s heart thudded mercilessly in her chest.

“That’s beautiful,” she answered, trying to hide the swell of emotion. It dawned on her the beauty of the entire tradition. She realized that they had been declared hafon at the beginning of the trials, each other’s half one, and by the end, they would be declared each other’s whole life. It was daunting, beautiful and filled her with overwhelming anticipation instead of fear, despite how unrequited her feelings may be.

“So, by becoming Heda’s sonraunon, I would pledge my fealty not only to Trikru but to all clans of the Coalition, to appease their fears Wanheda could strike against them,” Clarke continued, to clear the digressions of her own mind and get back on track.

“And after everything that’s happened, I would renew my vows to protect them, and they to me.” Clarke nodded, understanding better.

“So we visit all twelve capitals and Arkadia?”

“No. Not the capitals. At least not of most, for it would take too long. The capitals are deep into each clan’s territory and we only have one month to travel. Heda’s Badannes-de is made following the Raun Trei kom Kongeda, the Circled Road of the Coalition,” she explained beckoning Clarke to the largest table and map at the center of the room.

“It is the twelve roads built from Polis to the closest point of each clan, to their bordertown, and the road joining each bordertown to the other,” she explained, tracing with her finger above the map the lines spanning out of Polis like sunrays and a circle of sorts joining each bordertown point.

“Like your symbol,” Clarke realized, looking up at the headpiece on her forehead.
Lexa smiled, once again pleased by the sharpness of Clarke’s mind.

“The symbol came before. It is the story of the first natblidas, each on their path to found each clan, the Heda in the middle in the capital. It inspired the idea of the road,” she confirmed.

“Though in reality it is not exactly a circle because of the terrain and where the bordertowns were established, but it is the quickest way to each for Polis and to each other,” she added, pointing at the irregular line on the map.

“All roads lead to Rome,” Clarke joked, impressed.

“Wait, you did this!” she quipped after a beat, realizing there were too many similarities and given Lexa’s predilection with that time period from her books and inventions. “You were the one who built it, weren’t you? The Circled Road?”

“The roads we had were… impractical and long. Some used the remains of the roads from before the Great Darkness. Others were hunting trails or seasonal trade routes. They followed no logic. Now the Commander can quickly travel to a clan and vice versa. The next phase will be improving the roads from each capital to their border town. We are already working on Broadleaf’s and Delphi’s.”

Clarke looked on impressed, even though Lexa seemed to brush it off as if it wasn’t her merit.

“And the pledge? The Badannes-de? If before there was no Coalition, then…?”

“The clans did pledge the fealty to the Heda before. She was always a protector of the clans, and their mediator. They would send an envoy to Polis to renew it or they would come personally, though the trip from their capitals to Polis could take months.”

“And then you changed it?”

“And then when I was a natblida, I… I chose it as part of my training. Petitioned the Heda to let me travel and learn from the clans, despite Titus protestations,” she said, a hint of humor in her eyes.

“He must’ve loved the idea,” Clarke said sarcastically, widening her eyes in jest.

“Well, the clans were at war and there was no easy or safe way to travel the lands. It took me a year to tour them all,” she defended him, but still smiled and continued.

“And it wasn’t the custom. Nightbloods were trained in Polis. So, no, he was not keen on letting an eleven-year-old natblida travel the clans alone. Not at all,” Lexa smiled, something clearly amusing her.

Clarke could see she was containing herself from laughing.

“What?” Clarke asked, curious and smiling herself at Lexa’s expression.

“Jonah. He was my friend. One of the natblidas from the Boat clan,” Lexa started, a look of nostalgia coating her smile. “He said Titus was so enraged and stressed when I left, that that was the year he lost his hair.”

Clarke barked out a laugh.

“He used to tell people Titus had a full set of curls before I left and that when I came back not a
single hair lived on his head,” Lexa continued chuckling.

The blonde was nearly howling with laughter.

“He told the story so many times, people started to actually believe him,” she finished shaking her head, a wide, fond smile stretching her lips.

Clarke was grinning and breathing out her last laughs. She wasn’t sure she could ever look at Titus and not conjure that image in her head now. She was also delighted any time she could see and hear Lexa laughing and looking happy. She was so irrevocably enamored with her.

It was only then, after a few beats, that she looked down. Really looked down and took in the map. She was certain she stopped breathing.

It took a second for her mind to register and realize just what she was looking at.

There, on a large, smooth and intricately painted rectangle of leather, was a map of the Coalition. All clans and territories under it.

Clarke had surmised the Coalition had to be big given the diversity of all the clans from what she had seen, but she imagined they were contained in a small portion of the eastern region of the former United States. Despite the vast size of Polis, all she had seen beyond it was the small village of TonDC and smaller trading outposts she had visited on her three months of isolation.

What she was seeing on the map, however, dwarfed any notion she may have had by several times that size. The Coalition stretched from the north including most of Canada, the majority of which was Azgeda territories, with the exception of Broadleaf that occupied most of Quebec, and the Boat People that claimed the Five Great Lakes up the St. Laurence River and the island of Newfoundland. The Shallow Valley was a thin strip of the eastern seaboard, from Augusta through New York to Baltimore. What was left of the flooded lands of the south, from South Carolina all the way to Louisiana, lived the Lake People. Half of Texas all the way to central Mexico was the lands of Sankru. Delphi claimed New Mexico. The Blue Cliff clan a strip of land on the top of the Appalachian Mountains and the Rock Line clan most of the Rocky Mountains. The Plain Riders laid claim to Oklahoma, Kansas, Wyoming and Dakota. The Glowing Forest was tucked in a small area near Minnesota. Everything else in the middle of those clans was Trikru, the largest of all. There were some areas above Azgeda, to the south of Sankru and the entire area of Independent California, that were marked as dead zones. The Eternal Snows, the Desert of Salt and the Valley of Skulls, they said respectively.

The Coalition was of almost continental proportions.

Clarke was speechless.

Stunned.

Thunderstruck.

She looked up at Lexa who was studying her reaction curiously, her head tilted to the side, unsure why Clarke seemed so shocked.

The sky girl dropped her gaze to the map again to make sure she wasn’t mistaken or had read it wrong. There was no mistake. She had gazed upon the blue orb from her window in the sky and
knew its shapes by heart. The Coalition did cover most of the north American hemisphere.

It stopped only at the edge what had once been the Central American isthmus that long ago united the Americas continent as one, but it had been entirely covered by the rising sea levels centuries ago when the planet had heated, as it did in other regions of the world that had seen islands and coastal regions disappear under the ocean. It was only with the nuclear winter that followed the bombs the first decades after that that the sea receded, once the ice caps grew again and covered even more of the north and south pole regions. Half of Canada and Europe and Asia were under permanent ice now, from what Clarke had seen from her bay window. Central America, South of Mexico, parts of south Asia, anything that had been underwater was now nothing but dead, empty deserts of salt.

“I never imagined… I never imagined it was this… all this,” Clarke managed to finally choke out. It put everything in a different perspective. The proportions of the danger, of the impending war, but mostly, mostly of Lexa.

Of course, Clarke didn’t know that it was partly as big because the first Heda had specifically tasked the first nightbloods to go to the farthest end in each direction in their search and rescue of survivors. They dutifully only stopped until they reached the edge of the land or the dead zones and then settled where it was best. But what she did know was that it was only until Lexa became Heda that all these now strong and well-established clans came under her rule, more than four centuries later.

She was more in awe than ever. She needed to process and take everything in, though she was more determined than even in her decision, so said nothing for now. She examined the map for a few minutes in silence taking in as many details and information as possible and giving herself some time to settle.

“So, where are we going first? To appease your strongest allies, or to scope out your strongest enemies?”

Lexa smiled and shook her head.

“I thought of that too, but no. We’re going here,” she tapped on the map.

“Boudalan?” Clarke read, quirking her eyebrow in question.


“And they are…?”

“The undecided,” the Commander replied, one side of her mouth curved with an impish smirk.

“Well, that makes sense… in a kinda extremely risky kinda way,” Clarke said, because of course Lexa wouldn’t go for the obvious.

“We are still in the dark about who our foes are, so leaving the fishing line loose will give them some time to take the bait and make a mistake somewhere, somehow. As for our allies, I think we can trust them for a little while, at least until we can be sure where the most powerful undecided piece stands. Or if we can make it sway in our direction.”

“This is why you’re making me sweat in chess,” Clarke shook her head chuckling, impressed as ever by Lexa’s strategic mind.
“I apologize for making you sweat,” Lexa replied, head tilted as if she was unsure Clarke was joking but attempting to joke herself.

Clarke chuckled harder.

“Don’t apologize. I love it,” she reassured, but then felt the heat creep up her neck as she realized how that sounded or the double meaning it could have.

By the look Lexa was giving her and the nearly imperceptible and sly quirk of her lips, she could tell the brunette knew exactly her train of thought and she wondered briefly if she hadn’t done it on purpose.

Before her mind could conjure any more impure thoughts, she cleared her throat and interrupted the silence.

“The Rock Line it is then.”

“I have Ambassadors requesting several last-minute audiences before we leave, so I must go back to the tower now.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Lexa shook her head.

“I would like you to study this. Memorize everything you can. Can you do that?”

“Yes, I think I can, but can’t we draw one and take it?”

“It’s not for the journey. I have it in my head. It’s for you. In case… in case something happens. In case we get separated. So you can find your way. So you can be safe until I can come find you,” she said earnestly, worry in her big eyes that flitted over Clarke’s face, one hand coming to tentatively brush her fingers.

Clarke swallowed, pulse racing.

“I will come find you no matter what,” she swore resolutely, the heaviness of her silent regret over once leaving Clarke coloring her words and evident in her eyes.

She grabbed and squeezed Lexa’s hands.

“I know,” she answered softly and unwaveringly, her gaze locked on Lexa to leave no room for doubt. “I will too.” She ran her thumbs on her knuckles reassuringly.

Lexa lifted one of their joined hands and kissed the back of Clarke’s hand tenderly.

“I must go, hafon,” she whispered.

“Go,” Clarke said just as softly and smiled, and then watched as Lexa let go of her hand and walked out briskly.

She stood there with a racing heart and weak knees, and more certain than ever of her decision.
They left exactly at midnight as the custom demanded. It was the time that Deimeikalona and Keryongifa started their nightly quest in search of the other around Hou, so this was the moment their second Trial of the Gon Ogeda begun, when each traditionally traveled to the other’s home clan.

They were finishing saddling their horses and loading up the few supplies they were taking with them, the relay teams with fresh horses and the heavier supplies having already left two days ago so they could change horses three times a day in the different points on the road where they would be waiting for them. This allowed them to keep a high-speed pace without punishing the horses and carry very little weight with them. Every time they slept, the ones they’d left behind would pass them to keep the relay cycle ongoing.

Her wild horse, Tombom Faya, and Lexa’s favored mare would always be paired up to keep her under control and they were starting the journey with them.

Clarke arrived almost late and a bit fidgety when Lexa saw her approaching. Almost immediately she realized why and pressed her lips to keep herself from smiling and giving her away.

“Lexa, we can’t leave the cub here in Polis. We have to take her with us and I know what you’re going to say,” she pushed on, not letting the Commander get a single word in, who only clasped her hands in front of her and looked on in amusement.

“You’re going to say she’s territorial and she’ll get lost if she’s in a different place every day, that she’s too little, or it’ll be too much look after her on the road, but we can’t leave her by herself either,” she carried on hastily, undeterred.

“So you decided to smuggle her along?”

“What? No!”

Lexa stepped close, a quirk in her lips, her eyes fixed on Clarke’s. Her hands went to the zipper on Clarke’s jacket and pulled it down, teasingly slow.

Clarke gasped and swallowed blinking quickly, more flustered at the sensation of being undressed by Lexa than anything else. Her eyes fell to the brunette’s lips, the heat creeping up her neck as the zipper went down.

And then, a tiny furry head popped out, chirped, and then shook her head after being smothered inside Clarke’s jacket.

“I…” she opened her mouth, somewhat embarrassed while Lexa took the image in, her head cocked to one side, eyes going over Clarke’s chest and down to the little cub nestled there, an amused glint in her eyes, but also something else dancing in them.

Lexa then turned around, walked to the satchel on her horse and took out something, and walked back to Clarke.

She unfolded a cloth and showed her. It was tied and fashioned as a sort of sling.
“For her,” she said, motioning the little animal. “It is what Trikru use to carry their goufa. We’ll have to wrap it tighter, but I think it will work.”

Clarke had seen a few grounders with babies wrapped in a pouch across their chest, their little feet sometimes dangling out if they were bigger. The man who traded nuts in the streets was always carrying his chubby, toothy baby as he went street by street. So did the some of the people who worked in the tower.

“You thought I would say no,” Lexa observed.

“You’re always so… sensible,” Clarke shrugged, feeling a bit silly. “What didn’t you say something?”

“Because you thought I’d say no,” she replied with a hint of a smirk.

“Lexa!” Clarke huffed and rolled her eyes, which only made the Commander’s smile grow.

“So you’re saying yes because you knew I would insist?”

“No. I really didn’t want to leave her either,” she shrugged, still smiling.

Clarke, like a child, rolled her eyes again but unable to keep her lips from turning up too.

“So how do I wear this?” she grabbed the cloth and inspected it with a raised eyebrow.

“I will take her,” Lexa clarified, putting the sling on her neck and adjusting the length.

“Why?”

“You still have trouble finding your balance on the horse, Clarke. I do not want you to get injured because you are also worried about the little one falling or bouncing too much,” she replied simply but earnestly. “Also, she is mine,” she teased.

Clarke was both a tiny bit annoyed at being treated like less than capable, though she knew she had almost slipped several times at her last riding lessons, but also endlessly warmed at Lexa’s concern and desire to keep her safe.

So she took a step closer and helped the brunette. She grabbed the little cub from her jacket and placed it in the sling, letting her hands smooth over the cloth hooked over Lexa’s shoulder and then at her waist, letting her hands linger a second longer while Lexa watched her with pink-tinged ears hidden by the night.

“Oh, Masta Amakuni finally finished his work,” she suddenly remembered to break the tension. She took a thick roll from her saddle and unfurled it. Inside were two beautiful curved swords in smooth wood and leather cases, their symbol inscribed on their hilts. The blades were so shiny and perfect and sharp they seemed capable of slicing a person in two. They were Lexa’s new swords.

Next to it was a gorgeous bow made in the same style of the swords, the carved wood so smooth and beautifully shaped and decorated, as well as a leather quiver with white-feathered arrows. A thin, long dagger was with it. Their symbol was also inscribed on them.

“You have true talent for the bow, I thought it would be a good choice,” Lexa explained.

“And this?”

It was thinner but longer than a normal dagger.
“It’s a Dagger of Mercy,” Lexa replied quietly. “The blade is long enough to reach the heart from under the chest bone and very few things are as sharp as it is,” she ran her finger along the blade, continuing.

“It can be used as a fearsome weapon, of course, but it is usually the hunters and the fisa on the battlefields who carry it. If a prey was not killed instantly or if a warrior is too far gone, a painless quick death is the greatest gift one can give them. Sometimes, the act of killing is—”

“An act of mercy,” Clarke finished, the memories of Atom and Finn squeezed her chest with icy fingers.

“The bow can only be a tool to hunt and provide sustenance, and not a weapon if you do not wish it to be. You decide how to wield it and who you want to be, Clarke. The dagger is the same. We are not only defined by our past but by the choices we make every day, who we choose to be. You decide who you want Wanheda to be, who you want Clarke kom Skaikru to be.”

Her eyes bore into Clarke, as the blonde’s filled with the threat of tears.

“But if you asked me, I would tell you I have no doubt who that is.”

“Who?”

“A brave heart,” Lexa replied smiling softly and sincerely.

Clarke swallowed down the tightness in her throat, willing her tears not to fall, touched by how much thought and respect and faith went into everything Lexa did for her. How Lexa saw her. How unwavering her belief in her was, even when Clarke’s own faith in herself wavered.

“I wish I could see myself through your eyes sometimes.”

“You would only see that what I say is true.”

Clarke breathed deeply, a whirlwind of emotion filling her chest.

“Do you really think we can chose our fate like that?”

Lexa nodded. “I do. And I also believe that whatever you choose, you’ll be do great things and be someone our people look up to and follow.”

“Thank you,” she breathed again, letting Lexa’s words wash away those of so many who had had once accused her of getting people killed when she was in charge, of letting them down over and over. She let Lexa’s faith in her burrow itself into every crevice and bone of her being, keeping them warm while her own belief in herself returned and grew back. She let the coils in her lungs and deep in her gut so tightly wound-up with people’s constant disapproval in any choice she made, and the fear she would chose wrong again that had driven her to near paralysis, she let those loosen and start fading. She had slowly started breathing again ever since she had been by Lexa’s side again.

“Ready?” Lexa asked after a few moments.

Clarke nodded. She was ready. She really was, for the first time in a long time.

The brunette held out her hand to help Clarke up her horse. Before she did, the blonde stepped close and on impulse pressed a tender kiss on Lexa’s cheek, smiling and breathing into it.
“Ready,” she replied and got up, leaving a dazed and wildly-beating heart Lexa looking up towards her, before she shook herself from it and got up on her black mare and clicked her tongue.

“Gyon au,” she commanded and lead them out of the capital.

At that very moment, someone else was leaving Polis in the dead of night, unseen by anyone. The lone figure tugged on his cloak low on his face, nervous sweat beading his forehead, and stole away through the thick of the forest and off any known path, towards the south.

Towards Sankru.

It had been a few days since they left. They had stopped for a while during the hottest hours of the midday. The sun hit the ground here with inclement force. The terrain was dry, barren and seemingly endless, dotted only with rocks, swirls of dust and few hardy thorn-ridden plants here and there. The mountain range they were headed to could be seen in the distance just like a hazy, dark silhouette.

Clarke had walked around to stretch her legs and inspect the scenery away from their group who milled around in the shadow of a massive outcrop of boulders.

She found a flat surface and sat for a while staring into the distance. Lexa had told her where they were headed was nothing like this, but that the road just curved slightly into the tip of the southern desert for some miles before bending north again.

There was something that pulled at Clarke about this place however. Something felt unusually familiar, like a sense of déjà vu that nagged in the recesses of her brain, but she couldn’t figure it out.

She was about to get up, regretting her decision to stalk away. These stops were the few moments between the grueling hours of galloping non-stop all day and sometimes into the night, that they could steal to spend some time with each other. Every moment she got with Lexa felt like a gift she didn’t want to squander away.

As she was about to stand, she heard the brunette’s steps crunching on the dry ground from behind. Clarke could recognize her gait, her scent and just the way her presence felt.

“Hey.”

Clarke looked up and smiled as Lexa walked around and sat next to her. Warmth spread through her despite her already overheated skin in the forty-degree weather.
“Do they really live like this in the desert in Sankra?”

“Mmm… it is a different kind of beauty, isn’t it?”

Clarke nodded.

“There was a time when the Hedas offered them to re-locate to somewhere less… hostile to life.”

“And?”

“They refused.”

“Why?”

“To them it was home,” Lexa replied simply.

Clarke hummed.

“What if your ship had fallen here? Do you think you could’ve made it your home in a place like this?” Lexa asked curiously and a bit randomly.

Clarke thought about it for a second, crinkling her eyes as she pictured it.

“We could make a little house of stones over there, by the little flower bush. I could hunt us some…” she demurred looking around and spotting a tiny lizard scampering away, “some delicious lizards over the fire, or some cactus stew,” she scrunched her nose remembering the horrid cactus-derived mush from the Ark and snickered at the memory.

She could feel Lexa slightly shaking next to her as she breathed out a soundless chuckle.

“We’ll have to work out something to get water though. Wouldn’t want you getting grumpy without your scented baths every hour,” she teased.

Lexa rolled her eyes and scoffed in feigned protestation, an amused smile stretching her lips. It surprised her still, to get a glimpse of Clarke’s playfulness and was learning to recognize her particular brand of humorous antics. When they had first met, Clarke had been so serious and intense, so haunted and single-minded, so tempestuous and magnificent like a brooding and roaring hurricane forming in the sky.

It was only then she registered the implication of what Clarke said.

“I would be here?” she asked, turning and looking at Clarke with unconcealed surprise. She flitted her eyes over the blonde’s face trying to gauge her meaning.

Clarke replied instantaneously and without hesitation, bumping her softly with her shoulder and remaining pressed against her side.

“Of course,” she replied, like it was the most obvious answer.

That’s when it dawned on Clarke.

It wasn’t a realization of feelings. Clarke already knew what she felt for Lexa and she knew she was hopeless against the strength of those feelings. It was a realization of what it fully meant and why the moment had felt so familiar.

Clarke quickly turned to Lexa, a widening grin drawing on her face, her eyes lighting up brightly.
“You’re the girl on the rock!” she exclaimed.

Lexa frowned quizzically and tilted her head to her side in confusion, but her lips tentatively smiling purely in unconscious reaction to the blonde’s excited expression.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re the girl on the rock,” Clarke said more quietly, eyes soft, even more certainty and emphasis in her words.

“… and there it is, the holy grail of space exploration, the proof of potential life on Mars. A perfect, shiny, crystal poking out from the rocky façade where they’re supposed to drill. It has to be carbon, right? That’s what all the satellites and the CheMin on the Curiosity8 rover all suggest. That’s why they chose the site, why they’re drilling there, right?” Jake recounts excitedly.

Wells and Clarke have abandoned all pretense of finishing their class assignment when a simple question had prompted Jake to launch into his never-ending tales and tangents. Callie Cartwright and Abby, sitting on the kitchen stools, have also stopped going over the latest studies commissioned by the council on the declining nutritional health of Ark residents, and are also intently listening to him.

“It’s chiseled out and put in her portable XRD to test it. There are billions watching all this live, holding their breath, waiting for the confirmation. Now, obviously all this has been rehearsed, what’s she’s going to say if they found it, you know. Some cheesy, inspirational line like the whole ‘one giant leap for mankind’ thing, you know. Except, she’s supposed to say “the first building block of life in the past, the first stepping stone to build our future” that the PR bureaucrats from the mission had come up with. And what does she do?” he asks, more for effect than as an actual question.

Everyone exchanges looks, enthralled by the story. There is almost no form of entertainment in their bleak life on the Ark and Jake Griffin is like a one-man show, always spinning tall tales and obscure anecdotes, sometimes with the histrionic wisdom of a fairground fortune teller, sometimes so comical and outlandish they’re certain they are 99% made up. But they love every single second of it.

“She waits for the little green letters on the blinking screen to confirm it and then fist-bumps in her big spacesuit. Literally fist-bumps on live stream,” he mimics in their tiny living room, with a big grin.

“Then she speaks up into her mic ‘Doc! Doc, remember how I told you I’d propose as soon as I found you the perfect rock? Okay, so maybe I didn’t tell you, but how does a 3 billion-year old Martian diamond sound? Whadda’ya say, babe? Wanna get hitched?’ and, of course, the crowds watching went wild!”

Everyone giggles and laughs, except Wells
“The Founder would never talk like that... would she?” he asks skeptically and with his usual seriousness.

“I swear, kid. I’ve seen the old videos.”

“Jake, all that was deleted from the data banks.”

“I saw a bootleg version once. I swear!” he claims. “Abby, didn’t I see a bootleg version, once?! Tell them.”

Abby rolls her eyes affectionately at her husband’s antics with the expression of someone who has heard this story hundreds of times but lovingly humors him nonetheless.

“Sure, husband.”

“See! Anyways, imagine being on the verge of the most significant find in history, on live camera, standing on some dusty, empty, barren surface of a faraway planet where anything can go wrong at any time to kill you. Knowing this might be humanity’s last hail Mary to escape their own dying planet and all you can think about is the person you love. That’s all that matters. All you need.”

“No offense, Mr. Griffin, but I doubt any of that happened,” Wells interrupts again.

Jake scoffs.

“Yeah, sounds fake,” Clarke lies. She’s heard this story a million times and is only pretending to not believe her dad to get a rise out of him.

“Totally bogus,” Callie chimes in, who has also heard it countless times and decides to join Clarke in teasing him.

He scoffs again more indignantly.

“I’m surrounded by heathens and cynics!” he decries in fake horror. “Abby, we’ve raised a daughter who doesn’t believe in romantic gestures or love. I don’t claim her.”

Abby chuckles watching all the people she loves the most bicker and be ridiculous.

“Anyways,” he resumes. “That’s my answer to your question. That one person that would make you happy and would be all that you needed, even if you were living on a barren rock, that’s the person you marry. Your one true love,” he exclaims, with a satisfied nod.

“That wasn’t the question, dad.”

“No? Then what was?”

“How does the body absorb activated carbon to treat intoxication?” Wells reads off their pharmacology class assignment.

“Oh. I have no idea. I suck at chemistry. Ask your mom.”

He smiles and gets up while Wells facepalms.

“I gotta go to work. Bye kids. Bye Callie. Bye wife,” he calls out as he ruffles Clarke’s head and pecks Abby on his way out. They’re left with the sound of his booming laughter right before the door to their quarters whooshes closed again.
“What if we go back to the base? Maybe we can try to find somebody again. Search the lower levels,” Colonel Dongola proposed with his deep, velvety voice.

“Or that airfield that we passed yesterday?” the young Captain chimed in, as she methodically dusted her blue beret and then adjusted it back proudly on her head.

“You don’t understand. No air or sea traffic is coming or going anymore. Everything is being shot out of the skies or waters,” the Mayor General, answered, her jaw tense, her grey uniform drenched in sweat and some streaks of blood.

“But if we find a plane, we could pilot it. It would be risky, but what other choice do we have, Ma’am?” the Captain tried again.

The Mayor General looked at the young girl, who looked up at her with her caramel-colored eyes filled with hope and unshakable optimism. She truly honored her name, Ife, which meant ‘love’. Captain Ife Salim, who had come recommended from the top of her cohort from the Ethiopian National Defense Force as their brightest intelligence officer, was one of the youngest but most skilled members of her team, despite this being her first deployment. Disciplined, quick-witted, compassionate, fair and never considered giving up as an option.

“I agree with the Captain. We should leave before it is too late, General,” Col. Dongola said.

“Exactly, we came here to observe the ceasefire and help the refugees, not to get caught in their war,” another member of the team said, still frazzled. They had escaped just by a fraction of luck when an RPG had hit close to their convoy of white patrol tanks and supply trucks and they had retreated back here.

“What if we contact the navy? Ours not theirs? Maybe they could send a rescue mission. We have a sub stationed near-”

“It’s gone,” the Mayor General interrupted silently.

“It’s all gone,” she said louder. “The entire AU fleet. Not just that, but all of it. There is nothing to go back to,” she revealed gravely.

They all stared at her in shock.

“What do you mean, General?” Dongola swallowed.

“This isn’t their war. This is everywhere. All over the world.”

“What? How can that be?! How can we be involved in this? We are neutral,” Ife decried.

“Lagos, Cairo, Kinshasa, Abuja. They’re all gone. They’ve were the first hit a month ago. Then…” she looked at Ife and Dongola with pity in her eyes, “Addis Ababa and Juba,” she continued, naming the capitals of both their countries. “Nairobi” she exhaled, hearing only the cries from the people in the back when she said it.
“How... how can this be?” the Colonel asked, stammering for the first time in his life, still disbelieving.

“HQ doesn’t know who or why the attacks started. All we know is it has targeted all major population centers around the world and is now attacking smaller and smaller cities. We thought for a moment that the south would be safe, but...”

“But?” Amos, who had remained quiet and too shocked throughout, finally spoke up.

“Last time I was able to communicate with Harare, the southern capitals had just been hit. All except for them. They hoped no one would dare attack HQ,” the General paused. “That was two weeks ago. Two weeks since our last comm. Since... there’s been radio silence ever since,” she finished.

Amos felt the blood freeze in his veins. That was the General’s hometown and it has been his for the last ten years. He might not have been born there, but it was his home and where his ancestors had come from.

He had just been freshly out of the Royal Academy of Engineering in London when he had made the decision to apply to the rigorous and long process to immigrate with ROOT before the program definitively ended that year. ‘Come back to the Motherland, come back to your Roots’ the official slogan said.

It had been created way back at the end of World War 3. When the wars broke out all over the world, in an unexpected move, the African Union declared the entire continent neutral from all the conflicts, closed its borders and then expropriated all properties, enterprises and assets that had been invested by foreign powers, particularly China that they had been swaying towards the tech sector for decades. The AU declared it a severance payment for all the pillage, plundering and slavery the world had historically submitted their people to. With half of Asia sunk in a bloody war and Europe exploding in separatist conflicts, no one had the manpower to challenge the move.

ROOTS was established as a program to attract the most skilled, university-trained, science, technology and finance experts of African descent back to the continent. They were given residence, property and grants as an incentive, as long as they could prove their heritage and were at the top of their field.

They then offered massive tax breaks for international banks to move operations there, provided majority ownership remained in national hands.

Then, when the civil war in the US reached its peak and the secessionist in the soon-to-be Republic of Texas bombed the UN Headquarters building in New York and similar attacks in the Geneva HQ by separatist radicals, a home was offered for the last organization of its kind still standing, since NATO and the EU had already been dissolved by then. And so, the UN HQ was re-founded in Harare, the now booming capital of Zimbabwe and south enough from the reach of attacks, while its specialized humanitarian agencies were symbolically re-established in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, once scenery of the worst famine and failure of the western world to help them. Now, it was from here that humanitarian missions to Europe and elsewhere were sent.

With war ravaging economies everywhere else, the risky move had worked and, in a few decades, the continent had become a financial and technological powerhouse, and a region of peace. Its inner borders had been abolished and its outside borders reinforced. It was to its shores that migrants from everywhere now fled to and that others turned to for help.

That’s how they had ended up here. They had come as a UN peacekeeping mission to the US –
what was left of it after Texas, California and Alaska seceded —, to broker and keep a ceasefire after the last wave of fighting had broken out in Montana who had for years threatened to also break off the US and join Canada instead. The conflict had deteriorated to the point where dirty bombs and chemical weapons were used indiscriminately and launched into the US base of operations against Montana, which had been set up in Minnesota. There were thousands displaced by the conflict who had fled to the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains, and so they had also been tasked to set up a refugee camp for them.

That’s how Mayor General Ana Mandimika, Force Commander of the UN Peacekeeping mission, with her 340 Blue Helmets made of regiments from Ethiopian, South Sudanese, Zimbabwean and Kenyan troops, and a cultural contingent 60 Shona, Nuba, Maasai and Zulu Ndebele performers, had found themselves so far from home while the world ended.

The General felt tired and distraught, though she tried to keep on a brave face for them.

“Maybe there is something left. We can’t know for sure that all is gone,” Ife tried, voice tight.

“There isn’t a way to get back and there won’t be for a very long time. The bombs are getting closer. Our radiation suits are enough for dirty bombs, but not if the real thing hits close by.”

“So what do we do? What’s the point of anything anymore?” one of the people in the group asked despondently.

“We survive and if we can never get back, we make our home here,” the General said unwaveringly. “Our people have gone through every tragedy imaginable, but we persevered, and we overcame. We will do it again. We owe it to them. If we are they last of our kind, it is our duty to survive and we can only do it all together,” she claimed with renewed fervor.

“How?” Amos asked. “How can we survive this? If they drop more bombs like you said, Ma’am? How?”

The General smiled and pointed her finger up.

“This is why I brought you back here.”

Everyone looked up and around. They had managed to enter quickly, not noticing their surrounding much. The convoy had gone through a mouth in a mountain and they were now stood in a large, long gallery with flickering white lights. Glass cases and large black and white pictures of mustachioed men in hard hats and sledgehammers lined the walls.

Above, an iron-wrought sign read: Montana Lead Mining Company Museum.

“This used to be an old mine. It has a water basin underneath and water pumps to clean the contaminated water the mine used to produce. Air vents,” she pointed at the walls, as she spoke, “but most importantly, we are several kilometers below the surface-”

“Surrounded by lead,” Amos exclaimed, almost tempted to smile despite the circumstances.

Judging by most people’s faces, they still hadn’t understood the full significance.

“What protects against radiation?” he asked rhetorically. “Lead!”

There was a murmur and an audible collective sigh of relief.

“We had been shown this place as one of the potential storage sites to store the food and medicine
supplies, but it was too far from the location chosen for the refugee camp, so we had rejected it.”

“Now, it might save us,” Ife finished.

Everyone was silent for a while, taking in the unexpected development.

“Amos, I need you to inspect this place, then make a list with materials and specs to fix the water and electrical system if need be, and how to convert the air filters into something that will protect us.”

The man nodded. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Captain, I need you to put together a plan to get those supplies from all the locations you scoped out before. Bases, factories, hospital, stores, anywhere where we might get them.”

Ife saluted her in acquiescence and silently signaled her team to move to a table at the other end of the room, already getting all the plans and spreading them out.

“Colonel Dolonga, you’re in charge of our security. I want this place fortified. Carve, drill, make rock bricks if you have to. I want the entrance sealed. And I want patrols and look outs until it’s done,” she finished giving out their marching orders.

“Mayor General?” Ife spoke out tentatively from her the other side again.

“Yes, Captain?”

“What about the others?” Ife asked. “The refugees? Other people? Are we just going to leave them? What about our mission?” she continued, caressing the insignia on the blue beret she had finally taken off and was resting on the table beside her, as always the voice of compassion.

The General walked to her table.

“Once you are done with this, I need you to give me a number.”

“A number?”

“A number of people we can save and bring in here. I trust only you to give me the most just figure.”

Ife looked at her shocked.

“If people find out we are here and know that we have supplies, they will flood us and we will all die. So, I need a number. We have food for 5 thousand refugees that were meant to last the first 5 months. We are 400 in this place right now. I need you to tell me how many we can save from the outside. Give me different scenarios to decide.”

“What timeframe for each?”

“T-3, T-5 and T-7,” the General replied impassively.

Ife only stared at her, frozen in place, certain there had to be a mistake.

“As in… months?” she tried, clinging on to crazy hope for a second longer.

The General shook her head.
“Years.”

The ever-optimistic young Captain nearly lost the last shred of hope right there and then. After a second, she breathed in and nodded.

3, 5 and 7 years.

That was what they were looking at. Their best shot, if everything went well, would be to spend at least half a decade beneath the ground, rationing and hoping. With that reality, Ife knew the number of people they could save would be small, but they had to at least try. It was their duty and maybe it would be their legacy, the last gift of the Motherland.

The General then walked to the group huddled together at the back. The performers and dancers that had just been flown in for the ceremonial act inaugurating the mission with local authorities. Just there for the protocol and showcasing the rich culture of each country that had pledged troops to their peacekeeping force. They were never meant to be caught up in this. Her troops were accustomed to hardship and war, but not them. They still donned the gowns and costumes they were performing in, when the city center where the act was taking place had shaken with explosions. They were scared and crying silently, holding on to each other.

“Hey, sister. You are from Mutare, right?” she asked a woman who she had briefly spoken to before because she was from her country too. She was a historian and the cultural attaché in charge of the performers.

The woman nodded.

“I was wondering if you would help me?”

The look on the woman’s face was a puzzled one.

“I was wondering if you could sing to us, help keep our spirits up if you sing us something from home,” the General said, only half sincere. More than anything, she wanted to keep the performers’ spirits up more than anyone’s and make them feel useful, but it would help everyone too. The moment they lost hope, they would lose everything.

The woman thought for a moment, thinking of a song they might all know and join in. They all came from different countries and had their own language, only English as the common one. The Sudanese in the group spoke mostly Arabic, the Kenyans Swahili, the Ethiopians Oromo and her own group was made of Shona and Ndebele. There was only one song she knew all would know and would be able to follow along in their own language regardless.

She took a deep breath and then started, her voice elevating in the silence like a nostalgic plea to the heavens. Everyone gasped and slowly joined in, tears in their eyes, the deep voice of the men reverberating in the tunnels around them.

“Ishe komborera Africa

(God bless Africa)

Ngaisimudzirwe zita rayo

(May her glory be lifted high)
Inzwai miteuro yedu

(Hear thou our prayers)

Ishe komborera

(God bless us)

Isu, mhuri yayo.

(Us, Your children)

Ishe komborera…”

Years later…

“Look… Look!” the little girl exclaimed, pulling on the General’s pants and pointing to the small square lookout. The child bore such a resemblance to Dolonga who had fathered her and to both their surprise, she had managed to carry her to term despite being in her early 50’s.

“What, Miracle? What is wrong?”


General Mandimika furrowed her brows and bent down to the small lookout from the wall. There, standing in front of their massive wall, stood a child. A gangly teenager with a spear and no hazmat suit, his impeccably healthy, though slightly dirty skin, the most shocking thing of all. He didn’t look like any of the marauders with scarred faces that would every now and then pass, sometimes attempting to get in.


Clarke knew they were getting closer when they started passing by strange structures. The landscape begun to the specked by narrow tall huts, each perched on a narrow and tall individual rock, with thatched roofs. They looked too small for anyone to live in them and she peered at them
Lexa noticed her frown and began chatting with her when they had slowed the horses down to a walk. She explained those were food stores where the Boudanlan kept berries and nuts, and some of their smoked meat. They brought it to the southernmost part of their territory where it was drier to better preserve them and set them atop boulders to keep animals from getting in. She showed Clarke the ones with a tiny single window telling her those were left empty in case a stranded traveler needed somewhere to pass the night.

Soon the background started to change drastically and began getting greener as they veered north, and the terrain began hiking up. She remembered from the map the Rock Line clan was an elongated strip that ran from south to north, encircling the largest mountain range in the Coalition territories. It seemed an altogether different place as they continued, the arid desert giving way to lush pine trees, clear-blue rivers and colossal rock mountains jutting out with jagged ridges, some of their peaks covered in snow. Large animals with thick, white, shedding fur and pointed horns, which she was told were mountain goats, stood on seemingly invisible ledges on the vertical facades munching happily on little tufts of tender green weeds growing in the cracks.

When Lexa had mentioned the bordertowns, Clarke had assumed they would be small settlements where the frontier patrol was housed and not much else. However, what stood before her was unlike anything she ever expected. A massive great wall of cut-stone bricks loomed over them several meters high. Perfectly round towers with watch posts flanked the walls, and there in the middle of the entrance, atop a few steps of the same rock, stood some of the most stunning and beautiful people Clarke had ever seen.

Four spectacularly gorgeous men stood tall and proud, their skin as dark as night, their bodies made of pure muscle, though leaner and more sculptural than the burly Trikru or the towering Boat People. They wore a gray cloth tied from their waist to above the knees, with bare chest with the exception of shoulder guards and a round collar plate made of white fur. A strip of the same fur was tied to their biceps and calves, thick-soled sandals on their feet. On their head, they wore a round cap perfectly molded to their heads, made of woven straw dyed in beautiful light blue. Each bore a massive hammer in their hand made of a metal handle and a rectangular head made of solid rock with patterns carved on them. In the middle, a woman and a young girl stood. The wore grey, sleeveless tunics with the fur embroidered into symmetrical patterns on their chest. Their skin was lighter and of a beautiful reddish tone, similar to the red clay that covered their thin dreadlocks cut to their shoulders and shaped in a straight line on their forehead. They wore brightly colored necklaces and bracelets made of black, yellow and red beads, and two thick metal hoops around the neck.

All six descended the few steps and bowed deeply.

“Heda,” they all murmured in reverent unison.

“Mauya, Heda. Welcome, Heda. Welcome to Nuba Toun, Great Mother,” the older woman said.

“We are pleased to receive the Heda on her first visit of the union pledge,” the small girl added with a smile.

The Commander tipped her head.

“Mhoroi, Gen Ishe, Ife,” she greeted in a language Clarke had never heard yet. “We are pleased to be here.”

She turned to Clarke.
“May I introduce you to Clarke kom Skaikru, Wanheda and Hafon kom Heda. Clarke, this is Faizah, Gen ya Boudalan Ukoo, the leader of the Rock Line clan. And this is Halima, Ife ya Boudalan Ukoo, the advisor to the Gen. She will one day become the Gen herself,” she gestured towards the young girl, switching to their language when she gave their titles.

Clarke and the two women bowed their heads briefly.

“We’ve heard much about the mighty Wanheda, Mountain Slayer and Bringer of Fire,” the young girl eyed her. Clarke only pressed her lips, unsure of what to say.

The older woman only then noticed the people behind them.

“Blinka kom Polis, your presence honors us.”

Sybil stepped forward and put her hand on her forehead the way she formally saluted Lexa too.

“Gen, the honor is mine” she greeted the leader.

“Halima, you grow more beautiful every year,” she then added, directed at the young girl, tracing the tip of her fingers on her forehead.

The girl gave her a wide smile. “Nuru will be very happy to see you. She grumbled and grumbled when she heard you did your retreat in the Canyon of Needles so close by and did not come to visit her,” she said.

Sybil laughed lightly.

“Come, you must be tired from your journey,” the leader said, gesturing them to enter through the gates. Unprompted, they left their weapons in the baskets at the sides. Here, as in every city, only the sentries could carry weapons inside. “We have your lodgings ready and food to restore your strength. Come.”

They passed the opening and Clarke was once again assaulted by colors and the sheer size of everything. Everything was huge, built with the same smoothly chiseled rock bricks. Towers, houses, even the main paths were covered in them. Hundreds of people seemed to mill about. Tall, thin men wrapped in red robes and even brighter beaded necklaces and head bands were herding out dozens of the same mountain goats she had seen before and leading them outside the city walls. There were stalls with people in blue and yellow tunics chiseling vases and busts with various shapes of animals. Others wore charcoal-colored, long-sleeved tunics and pants, and scarves of the same color wrapped tightly around their heads, and were trading food, dried fruit and hills of multi-colored spices ground into a fine powder laid out on their tables. Many of the tall, muscular soldiers in their blue hats walked about in large numbers as well. It was an assault to the senses in the best way possible, including the language that was very clearly not Trigeda or anything like it. Sybil would later tell her there were different loose tribes within the Boudalan clan – the Masmas herders and growers, the Ndeshona artisans and builders, the Omo traders the Gen and Halima belonged to, and the Nuba warriors.

Clarke was mesmerized.

As they walked, everyone would turn and bow, and call out to Lexa passed by. She nodded at them and would sometimes return a ‘Hama’ in reply. My kin.

But they barely had time to leave their things in a round house with a thatched roof, while their horses were lead to the stables, when they were taken up a hill and through a small cave like opening. Only once inside did Clarke realize she wasn’t in a cave, but a very large bunker-like
In an ample room, there was a large chair covered in fur and dozens of the black, sharp horns fanning out back’s edge. A smaller, simpler version of Lexa’s throne was placed in front of it.

The Gen signaled Lexa to sit and then sat herself. The young Halima went to stand next to her. Then a lovely woman of indeterminate age came out. She bore a similar tattoo to Sybil’s on her forehead, shaped like an open eye. Before going to stand next to the Gen, she bowed before Lexa.

“Hukuru Amai Mweya,” she said reverently.

(Great Mother Spirit)

Then wordlessly stepped towards Sybil and they both leaned in and pressed their foreheads together, whispering ‘sis’ as this did so.

“I am Nuru, the Nyanga of Boudalan Ukoo. The Blinka of Rock Line Clan,” she clarified, using the Trigeda term, as she introduced herself to Clarke, who could only offer her own name in reply. She was somewhat frazzled they had gone directly to what seemed like a serious meeting. She was still weary and exhausted by the trip, hungry and her back destroyed. They had been riding for days non-stop.

Still, Sybil and Clarke mirrored their positions and went to stand next to Lexa.

“The Rock Line clan has always loyally honored the Great Spirit of the Heda. We are her subjects in the blood, her children in the mountains and her peacekeeping hammer in the lands. We followed the Heda’s counsel to prevent conflict and sought her protection in times of war. That has been the sacred duty of the Mother Spirit since times immemorial,” the Gen said.

Lexa only nodded, face impassive, though Clarke could see an imperceptible tension in her jaw that meant there was something unsettling her or she was already expecting a caveat. Lexa did know exactly what the Gen was going to say next, Clarke just didn’t know it yet.

“Heda Lexa’s proposal of a Coalition was a different matter,” the leader said. “You know our clan wants for nothing. You also know Boudalan does not take kindly to anyone accumulating that much power. We only agreed because you made sure we could remove you as Commander if you lost your way and because of your promise to continue fulfilling your sacred duties. You’ve given us the longest peace, Heda, and you’ve never failed your duties… until now.”

Clarke frowned and looked as Lexa’s jaw got tighter. She was even more confused when Lexa didn’t contradict her.

“Now we learn you are to unite with the leader of the clan you have failed to curb. You can see how that might concern us?” she finished her paused statement.

Lexa flexed her jaw to the side and lifted her head just an inch.

“I can see how that can be misconstrued and in consequence be cause for concern,” Lexa said plainly.

Lexa had dreaded this moment. She had meant to tell Clarke, though she feared it would lead to an
insurmountable and unreconcilable barrier between them they would not manage to overcome. They had gone through so much already and were finally getting past those previous issues. What if this broke them?

She hadn’t meant to keep it from her. Clarke simply had been in exile when she had been negotiating their trade treaties with the Chancellor and Kane. She had mentioned it to Kane as one of the conditions when the idea of Skaikru joining the Coalition seemed like a possibility in the distant future.

Then everything had changed. The distant possibility became an immediate need to protect Skaikru and Clarke, and to keep the Coalition from falling after the attempted Azgeda coup. The explosion of Mount Weather. Pike nearly overthrowing the Chancellor and then killing the peacekeepers. The execution of the rebels. The Gon Ogeda. The looming war. It had been one crisis after the other. In the midst of it and making the Sky People the 13th clan in a rush, she had assumed Kane would’ve told Abby and Clarke about it when they decided to agree. She realized the error of her assumption only recently.

And maybe she had been a little selfish and a little weak. Maybe she had wanted to steal just a few more precious moments with Clarke, with the blonde looking at her with eyes not filled anger but, dare she hope, something close to affection. Just a few more stolen glances, a few more fond smiles, a few more nights of talking quietly into the night. Before they splintered again. Maybe, just maybe, despite everything they had said to each other, the trust they had sworn to each other and the bond they had acknowledged, maybe Lexa felt like deep down it would inevitably come crumbling down. The other shoe would drop and that weakness and fear of losing Clarke filled the pit of her stomach with ice.

Clarke was looking at the tension in the Commander’s shoulders. It was a good thing she had noticed all the little tells in Lexa’s demeanor, the minutia of expressions she greedily had been collecting. It allowed Clarke to prepare herself not to react to whatever was coming. Any outburst from her like in the past could jeopardize things with the Rock Line. More importantly, whatever disagreement there may be, they could process it in private between only each other, but in public she had committed herself to present a common front with Lexa. They were in this together.

“The Rock Line will renew its allegiance, it will celebrate the Badannes-de with the Commander, if you can pledge to us you will fulfill the Heda’s most sacred and primordial duty,” the Gen said, shifting her eyes to Clarke, “Carry out the complete disarmament of Skaikru’s weapons of fire.”

Clarke felt like she had been hit with a ton of bricks. She willed every single muscle in her face not to betray the feeling of turmoil boiling in her chest and dropping to her feet like hot lead.

“I hope you can understand our appeal, Heda, and our concerns. We hope you will honor us with your presence in our city for as long as you wish and until you are ready to give an answer to our humble request,” the woman finished.

“We appreciate your kind offer, Faizah. You will have our answer soon,” Lexa said shortly, succinctly.

Clarke had never seen Lexa be this quiet, especially not when dealing with any of the clan leaders or ambassadors, who were her subjects after all.

“Very well. We have prepared a feast to celebrate your visit. You all must be famished,” she said getting up and leading them outside.
They walked uphill, towards a clearing on an outcrop ledge of the mountainous city, looking over a valley below. Fire pits were lit. Many low, flat, rounded rocks were being used as small tables, the people sitting around them on weaved mats or standing as they chatted. All always turned around to salute Lexa with big, brilliant smiles and an ‘Amai’ or ‘Heda’ greeting on their lips. Some who seemed to know Lexa personally came up to her and bowed, then clasped her forearm while they exchanged a few words. It was clear the people here loved the Commander, despite whatever tension there might be with the leadership.

Clarke stomach nearly started growling when she saw two large whole goats on spits being manually turned as they roasted over the fire. They seemed to have been rubbed with herbs of some sort. All that Clarke knew was that it smelled heavenly.

They were led to one of the small, round tables and sat on the mats on the floor like everyone else. At the middle of each stone surface, there was a little carved round bowl that crackled with coals and little thick sticks to keep a few flames lit. Another bowl next to it with water and cloves floating in it was set, and people were using it to wash their hands. Around this, food was already set. There were plates with dried fruit and a large basket with several flat, spongy, discs of some sort of bread. Two generous servings of the roasted goat were on a tray, one laden with a thick buttery sauce made of ground nuts, the other with a sweet glaze of yellow mustard flowers from the valley and peaches that grew in the southwest of their territory. Next to it, was a still bubbling small pot filled with a dense stew of shredded beef and butternut squash. Jugs with a yellowish but clear liquor made of apricots and topped with fresh huckleberries and mint leaves completed the banquet.

The young Halima, who seemed intrigued by Clarke and had been watching her, had grabbed her hand and explained the items to the blonde, evident pride as she did so in her demeanor when she told her about the food and the bounties of their lands. After she did so, she left them on their own, going to stand again next to the Gen who walked about talking to different small groups of people. She had also sensed they needed the space to talk things among them.

Lexa, Clarke, Indra and Sybil ate quietly for a few minutes, too famished to engage in any serious conversation they knew needed to be had, and the brunette in particular still visibly tense and not meeting Clarke’s eyes, as she chewed with far less enthusiasm than the utterly delicious food warranted. On her part, Clarke was less agitated than Sybil would have thought after hearing the demand the Rock Line leader had made, and less than Lexa evidently expected her to be, from what the old woman could sense. The silence was only interrupted by the surrounding sounds of people chatting, the crackling fires, and Clarke’s frequent hums as she appreciated the dishes.

After a sigh when she was feeling more satiated, Clarke finally spoke, though still taking bites every now and then.

“So, anyone want to fill me in on what the hell just happened?” she asked but lacking any bite in her tone.

Lexa’s shoulders still tensed.

“I should have told you sooner,” she replied quietly.

“You knew they were going to ask this?”
“I did not mean that. I should have told you when I found out you did not know yet.”

The blonde knotted her brow confused.

“Disarmament. It is a condition for all clans to join the Coalition. Firearms are forbidden,” she clarified.

Clarke did remember grounders did not even like touching them. She remembered when Indra was sent to Arkadia to train her people with Kane before Mount Weather, many of her people insisted guns were cursed.

“They have always been forbidden. No one has ever used them, except the punka and the Mountain Men,” Sybil offered.

“Whatever fire weapons were found on any clan territory, in old bunkers or buried under the ground, they reported them and they were taken away to be destroyed by Heda,” Lexa continued. “Since the first Heda, this has been our way. On her travels, anywhere she found them, she sent them to Polis with instructions for them to be destroyed.”

“So, I take it she wasn’t only sending back books?” Clarke asked, and Lexa shook her head.

“But why? Didn’t they need them to defend themselves? We need them. How will Arkadia defend itself?” Clarke insisted with a frown.

“The first Heda believed it was because of them the world had ended and had brought on the Great Darkness. One group having weapons led to others wanting them to defend themselves against the first, which led to bigger weapons that then needed to be surpassed by the others, becoming a never-ending weapons race.”

“Until they got so big we blew everything away,” Clarke said bitterly, understanding.

“But the clans do have weapons,” she added after a pause.

“A gun makes it easier to kill. The easier to kill, the more people will do it. It is far different to feel a man’s heart still beating at the end of your blade than to push the button of a missile to kill thousands without having to face the life you have taken. If death has no cost, life has no worth, Clarke.”

The sky girl nodded, remembering how her knife had pulsated sickly in her hand the day she had to plunge it into Atom’s neck and the night she drove it into Finn chest.

“And the Commander makes sure even those weapons are never more than the clan needs or she disarms them too,” Sybil informed her. “And like a blade that cuts the tall grass even, Heda is the Equalizing Scythe, so none shall be taller or stronger than the rest,” Sybil quoted from their laws.

“What, so you control all weapons within the clans?”

“Heda was not only a mediator before the Coalition. The Hedas protected the people, even from themselves. As the clans grew, they knew that if one became stronger than the other, it would only be a matter of time before one sought to enslave or exploit the other. So, the first Heda disarmed all the punka she found on her way east and instructed the nightbloods to never let the settlement they established have more weapons than needed to hunt, or she’d take them. It was only the third Heda, her daughter, that made it a written law as the sacred duty of the spirit of the Commander. To maintain the balance.”
“So you curb their power if they start accumulating too much of it?”

“Yes.”

“And they just give up their weapons like that? Without a fight?”

“The surrender of fire weapons has never been a problem with the clans. And very few remain at this point. With other weapons it is… more complex. Since the Coalition was formed, they try to stay within the boundaries, most understanding it is a fragile balance that benefits them all,” Lexa responded.

Indra, who had been silent all this time finally chipped in.

“Before the Coalition, it was less and less likely that they gave them up. That’s why the wars raged. Many Hedas even fought in the wars as a third force striking to even them out, to reduce their capacity for destruction. Until the Commander brought peace and laws she strictly enforces. That is until Skaikru came to trample on them.”

“Indra,” Lexa rumbled in warning. The look they shared between them told Clarke this issue had been an ongoing argument between them.

“That’s what the Ambassador from Azgeda meant,” Clarke suddenly realized, “when he said the Ice Nation had done what Lexa couldn’t do, that’s what he meant, wasn’t it?! You hadn’t disarmed us yet and worse, there we were, taking Mount Weather with its entire arsenal,” she exclaimed, a cold shiver coiling in her stomach.

Lexa sighed and nodded tiredly.

“We had made it clear during our negotiations with your mother and Kane that the Mountain was off limits, other than to retrieve supplies that would help you survive. I told Kane about the condition to disarm should Skaikru want to join the Coalition in the future, but that was not even a possibility on the table. We were to see if you would even respect the ceasefire for longer and if the trade agreement worked for some time before we would even consider it, but then-”

“Everything happened,” Clarke finished for her.

Lexa still sat rigidly.

“Why would the Rock Line ask only that? To join the Coalition, I mean. All the clans gained something when they did. Why only ask for something that was already a duty of the Heda?”

“Because this is the most prosperous clan. It has the best lands. Dry bushlands in the south, hundreds of rich green valleys, snow in the north, forests filled with hunt and water and food aplenty.”

“And the best natural defense of all. The impenetrable mountain range,” Indra added, gesturing around her.

“Exactly. They want to for nothing. That’s why theirs is the largest population, though not the biggest territory. Most live on the other side of the range, out of reach of most potential enemies. And so they’ve thrived.”

“So why join at all?”

“They have powerful warriors and enough people in this mountainous fortress to face any one clan
that would wish to take what is theirs. Except if any of those clans ever did have firearms. Even a small group of people with a few of your weapons could pose a real threat.”

“Like that traitor Bellamy who killed 300 of my people with just 9 other men and their rifles,” Indra growled.

Clarke nodded pensively, brow knitted.

“They see guns as the one real threat to them, but they also joined the Coalition because they are the most likeminded to Lexa, Clarke,” Sybil commented. “They believe in peace, but also in a just equal society where compassion has a place. They choose a successor to the leader, the Ife, early on as their adviser to constantly remind them of that,” she nodded towards Halima. “Their elders said their ancestors came from wise people who were enforcers of peace.”

“The first peacekeepers,” Indra nodded. “While the first Heda rid the lands of threats, they were the first to offer their neighbor clans help to enforce their truces. They would send their blukaps,” she pointed at the soldiers Clarke had first seen and who were also sitting around various tables, while some others stood guard, “and they would set camp between the two warring groups, a white flag planted in the middle, so that no side would attack each other during those ceasefires. With time the custom was adopted by all.”

“Like the ones outside Arkadia,” Clarke realized. The peacekeeping force Pike and Bellamy had slaughtered.

“Yes.”

“And like the wise people they are, they also knew peace could only be possible by keeping power in check and creating a balance of forces. Joining the Coalition allowed them to keep an eye on the Heda’s new role ruling over the clans. They do not like so much power in the hands of one. And then the Goon Ogeda, which in their eyes, might make it even more dangerous,” Sybil claimed, redirecting the conversation to the topic at hand.

All three women looked at the Blinky expectantly, with confusion written on their faces, even Lexa’s.

“Skaikru has firearms the Heda does not take away. Then Skaikru takes an even bigger arsenal within the Mountain without Heda impeding it, so much so Azgeda has to step in. And then Heda announces she is uniting with the leader of Skaikru,” Sybil gestured in the air with her hands as if the conclusion was obvious.

When none spoke, Sybil sighed with a tinge of frustration.

“They think your union is not real and only done out of convenience.”

“But don’t all leaders know that? At the Council, they knew why it was suggested,” Clarke exclaimed, befuddled.

“They thought you were already together, Clarke, as you can remember, and the union would only make it more stable. The Rock Line, however, fears there is nothing but a joint goal that motivated the union, and that it might not be peace.”

That’s when the realization hit them both at the same time.
“They think Lexa wants our weapons, to keep them instead of destroying them-”

“-to gain more power, so I can rule unchallenged,” Lexa finished Clarke’s sentence.

“They think Heda has struck a deal with Wanheda, to become a tyrant through force? After everything Heda has done, the peace she has created?! How dare they!” Indra sneered lowly, her notorious short-temper making her face contort in anger and disgust.

“It is a risk they have to consider and that they cannot take lightly. After all, there never has been a leader with as much power as Lexa has as the head of the Coalition,” Sybil argued calmly.

There was a long pause between them, all four women deep in thought. After a while, Clarke just shook her head.

“My people will never agree to this, Lexa. In their eyes, they’re surrounded by enemies and threats, and that is their only defense. Most of them are too terrified to even go outside the gates of Arkadia. They’ll never agree. They’ll probably even think it’s a trick.”

“I know,” Lexa replied tersely. She had thought they would have more time. For Skaikru to get used to the idea. For trust to grow between their people. To do it gradually. Not like this.

She looked over at Sybil and Indra, a silent cue in her eyes for them to leave her with Clarke. The women got up and left, Sybil to join her Blinka friend and Indra towards the head of the city sentries, who she had fought together with in a battle long ago.

Clarke placed her hands on her face and sighed, rubbing her eyes slightly.

“How the hell are we going to convince them to do this, Lexa?” Clarke breathed out.

At that Lexa finally lifted her eyes to Clarke, frowning and not expecting her to even consider the possibility, let alone propose it as a joint effort.

A ‘we’.

“You… you agree? About disarming your people?” she asked cautiously, but not managing to keep the surprise out of her tone.

“I hate guns,” Clarke replied simply and in a low voice. “My father hated guns. My mother hates them even more. She fought with our council so many times to have even shock-batons banned. She thought it was insane to treat your own people with such brutality.”

“Are you saying your mother would be open to the idea?”

“Lexa, that was then. It was only us up there. We knew each other, most of us, but we’re on the ground now, surrounded by the unknown. Even I know that we need to be able to protect ourselves. Now more than even if there is a war.”

“Today it’s the war. Tomorrow it will be ‘just in case’ and then there is always a reason to keep them, to make more. We can’t be sure this war isn’t about Skaikru having them in the first place, Clarke, and if failing to disarm you makes more people join their cause.”

“I know, Lexa. But I also know people will choose their fears of today over hope for some ideal of tomorrow. That’s just how people work.”
“Then we show them a different way, Clarke. I don’t believe people can’t learn, can’t change, or we would just be making the same mistakes over and over. I don’t believe you believe it either.”

Clarke breathed in, asking herself if she had become the pragmatic and pessimist of the two. Where was the girl who once believed people would do the right thing if given the chance?

“I don’t,” she said after a while. “I do believe in what you’re doing, Lexa. I am with you on this.”

“You are?” Lexa asked, still disbelieving.

“Yes. Does that really surprise you?”

“Yes. I thought… I was worried…”

Clarke slid her hand and placed it on Lexa’s, looking at her.

“Even if I disagreed, this is how we do this,” she gestured between them with the other hand. “We figure it out together.”

“And if even after that, you still disagreed?”

“I’m still not going to go against you. I promised you that. I trust you, Lexa. I know that whatever decision you take as Heda, you don’t take it lightly and always have the best intentions. I can only hope I can help you in some way.”

“You do already do that.”

“I do?”

“Yes. I learn new ways of looking at things. When you challenge me. When you challenge my ideas,” she replied sincerely.

“Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it,” Clarke quipped humorously.

A beautiful smile spread on Lexa’s face that made Clarke’s heart stutter.

The truth was even though Clarke had joked, she had been warmed from head to toe to think Lexa truly appreciated her counsel.

The girl who once foolishly thought she knew better and railed against Lexa in the early days, when she didn’t have her way over the fate of a handful of chaotic teenagers, was long gone too. The woman before her had spent a decade building an empire of peace from the blood-soaked ground, who commanded entire nations of people in every direction of the horizon, who ruled over vaster lands than even the great conquerors of history, and who did it not for power, but to give her people knowledge, justice, compassion and a chance for tomorrow. Here was this extraordinary creature who treated her and trusted her as her equal, who she wanted to help her build this future for their people and who cared enough to have been visibly concerned over Clarke’s disagreement with her.

Clarke wasn’t sure if she deserved this, but she wasn’t going to question her luck, because there wasn’t anything that she wanted more than to be a part of this. Even if she was afraid for this future they wanted to build, she was more sure than even that this is where she wanted to be. Next to Lexa, building it together.
She kept her hand where it was, letting her thumb brush over Lexa’s knuckles as they looked at each other with unhidden fondness.

They both knew the conversation was far from over and that they had yet to find a solution. Clarke also knew it really didn’t matter what she herself thought. She had no say anymore on Arkadia’s decisions and she knew they’d reject the idea vehemently. Lexa knew they had to give an answer to the *Gen* without consulting it with Arkadia and that would make things more difficult. But they both breathed in relief with the knowledge reflected in their eyes that they would face all of it together.

It was only the sound of clapping that brought them out of their brief reverie.

They turned around to see a small group of people had gathered in the center of the clearing, which caused Lexa to smile and look at Clarke. She knew what was coming.

One of the women in the group suddenly belted out a sorrowful tune in her velvety voice, like plea to the night. The men responded to her in unison in deep, vibrating voices. It made Clarke’s hairs stand up on her arms, it was so stunning and breathtaking. They were singing. She didn’t understand what they were saying, but it swept her up in the feeling of longing and melancholy that it conveyed. She was mesmerized by their voices.

They wore even more beautifully-colored adornments than the ones she had seen during the day and had drawn intricate and precise patterns on their faces with straw-colored clay. As they sang, they swung in place with the rhythm, sometimes clapping with the beat.

They had both fully turned around to sit facing the singers, their backs leaning on the low rock that made their table, to watch the spectacle. Lexa couldn’t help herself from watching Clarke react to the things she saw, the wonder and awe that flitted on her face.

After a couple of songs, two little children scurried towards them. The smallest, who couldn’t be older than four, plopped down unceremoniously on Lexa’s lap and lifted her tiny hands placing them her cheeks, smiling at her brightly.

“*Sawubona,*” she said in her little voice.

(Hello)

“*Yebo,*” Lexa whispered back, smiling amusedly at the child.

(Hi)

She also nodded to the other girl, around twelve, who sat next to her.

Both girls then trained their eyes on Clarke.

“*Lo ngubani*?” the little one asked Lexa, looking at the blonde curiously.
“Lo ngu Klark,” Lexa replied, making the clicking sounds the Boudalan’s language made, ndeshonasleng.

The way Lexa usually said ‘Clarke’ already always had an effect on her. That particular way she rolled out the ‘k’s on her tongue was one of Clarke’s favorite sounds. This sounded similar, though the clicking was more pronounced.

She should’ve suspected Lexa spoke more languages and, at least from what Clarke could tell, spoke them fluently. This one in particular sounded so beautiful to begin with and there was something so appealing to hear it from Lexa’s mouth.

“Why is she so pale?” the little one asked Lexa, continuing to speak in ndeshonasleng and reaching over to run her index fingers on Clarke’s hand and then inspecting her finger. “Is the shumba wearing clay paint?” she inquired using the name they used for the mountain lion to refer to Clarke.

Lexa chuckled and shook her head. She looked at Clarke and mirth filled her eyes. She turned her gaze on the two little girls and whispered with a hint of conspiracy, like she was telling them a secret, a smile never leaving her lips.

“She was the most beautiful and brightest shumba in the Sun. One day she was stretching on one of the branches in the trees of the Sun and slipped and fell to the ground.”

The little toddler gasped and looked at Clarke and then back at Lexa, her eyes as big as saucers.

“But she knew that if she walked among us, we would be blinded by the sunrays her skin is made of. So on her way down, she went through a cloud and covered her skin with it so we can look at her without being dazzled.”

The little girl’s mouth opened in awe and gasped again, her eyes twinkling and trained on the blonde. Her older sister, who clearly knew Lexa was just telling a tall tale to amuse them, was giggling at the silly story with a big dimpled grin. The little girl joined in on the giggling not entirely sure why but just couldn’t contain herself seeing her big sister laughing. Lexa was chuckling along with them, her cheeks dusted pink as she stole a glance at Clarke.

The sky girl had no idea what they were saying, but she was too busy trying to contain the feelings it was causing her. Clarke looked at Lexa with the child on her lap, fascinated by the sight and mostly with the ease and affection displayed towards the tiny toddler. She hadn’t removed the little chubby hands from her cheeks and was instead gently scratching her head and smiling back at her as they talked. Something stirred deep within Clarke and made her chest bloom with warmth, something that she would utterly refuse to confess felt like a maternal instinct she’d never felt before emerging from somewhere.

The music continued. After the singers, came a few dances. The dance of warriors first. The tall, beautiful, built blukaps first, decked in their full ceremonial garb formed a single file in front of them. Their lower legs covered in the thick white fur and a strip of it tied to their biceps and foreheads. Several heavy looking bracelets made of wood and metal were around their ankles and
their hammers in their hands. Behind them, several other people had double-sided circular drums made of sheep hides, a large rod in each hand to pound the drums. Their deep voices started humming, and then they stamped their furred legs on the ground, the bracelets and the drums beat in tandem amplifying the sound, as if each slap of their feet was a thundering step. Their hums transformed into whoops, like a battle cry, their hammers swung in the air, as they moved to the side and back again. It was an intimidating, powerful sight, the sort that would make any enemy run the other way.

Another dance was about the end of winter, a joyful beat sounding while the dancers smiled brightly, their hips saying as they bended their knees and turned around on their spots, their hands up in the air in thanks for the return of warm days. Then they would lift their heads up and look left and right, imitating the animals of the forest coming out of their dens, their feet always beating on the ground as they sang and danced, their hips and shoulders swaying in ways Clarke had never seen people do. She felt the beat invading her and almost wanting to join in, as several people who had previously been watching did.

Lexa loved these performances. It was one of the things she loved the most in their lands. The Boudalan had such pride in their traditions and showed such joy when they carried them out. And there no was no other clan that could make music practically out of anything like they could. But her favorite part was about to begin.

After a few more dances and songs, six people took their place. They went to sit behind the biggest firepit and in front of the largest boulder in the clearing. Somewhere, a low drum started to beat. They all lifted the hands in the air and started to move them. With the light from the fire, the shadows of their hands were projected on the face of the boulder and started to become uncannily precise shapes of people and animals and landscapes, while one single voice rose in the night and started narrating.

Clarke couldn’t keep the enormous grin from stretching on her face in sheer amazement. Lexa leaned close to her ear and started translating the story the man told.

Clarke barely managed to suppress the shivers tickling her spine at the feeling of Lexa’s warm breath and the ghost of her lips so close to her ear. She pressed their shoulders closer, leaning more into the Commander, relishing in the contact and proximity.

The story told a tale about the Motherland where the first people had been born and then spread to all the corners of the Earth. With time, a bad spirit had started invading people, one who made them hungry. Hungry for riches, hungry for power, hungry for blood, hungry for more and more. They poisoned the waters, stripped the lands, fouled the skies and made war after war. The story told how some defenders of the peace from the Motherland had come to this mountain to help in one of the wars, but it had been too late. The people were too far gone, too lost in the hunger of destruction. So the Great Mother Spirit roared from the deepest depths of the ground and the highest heights of the sky to wash the Earth clean with fire and to free it from the people. It was the only way to kill the bad spirits in them. And then in the Long Night after the fire, she carved new people from stones and sent her children to give them her blood and breathe her spirit into them. And here, in this mountain of rocks and the bones of the lost people of the Motherland, the Boudalan was born to carry out the mission of their ancestors. When they did, they could finally return home.

There were a few more stories. Some about hunting. Some funny and clearly meant to be
exaggerations of reality. And Clarke loved every single second of it. The two little girls had left them when the smallest one had fallen asleep on the Commander’s lap, and her sister had carried her home, whispering a shy goodbye and waving at them.

When it had ended and the background chatter and eating resumed, they stayed as they were. Maybe it was the roaring fire, the light joyous mood of the people, the strength of the deceivingly sweet liquor, or the fact that Clarke was falling deeper in love with the ground the more she saw of it. With its people and with the resilience of their hope, even if they hid it deep and covered it with a veneer of toughness and cautious weariness. Maybe it was just being next to Lexa that filled Clarke with such a feeling of peace and simple happiness. She let her head lean fully on Lexa’s shoulder and sighed contentedly. When Lexa didn’t move away and instead rested her cheek on the top of Clarke’s head, warmth flooded her further. She let her hand grab Lexa’s where it had been resting on the brunette’s thigh and held it loosely and breathed in deeply again.

She was so relaxed and content, she didn’t even think when she blurted out the next sentence.

“Lexa, I smell like horse… and two days of dirt.”

A peel of crystalline laughter replied her. She lifted her head up to look at Lexa and take in the wonderful and rare sight of the beautiful Commander laughing. Had she not been so enamored by the scene, she would’ve realized how everyone had momentarily frozen in silence and was looking at them as well.

“I was thinking the same,” Lexa said with an amused smile when her laughter had subsided.

Clarke widened her eyes in fake indignation, not managing to keep her lips from curving up. “You think I smell?!”

Lexa chuckled. “I meant it about myself, but now that you mention it…”

“Lexa!” Clarke decried, surprised but loving the always unexpected humorous teasing.

“Come,” she replied, getting up. “I wanted to show you my favorite place here. We can take care of our current predicament there,” she added, holding her hand in the air to help Clarke up.

They went by the house they had been given for their visit where Lexa put a few things in a satchel and off they went, outside the city walls. Up a hill and then down again on a small path until they arrived at small, hidden beach of sorts on the edge of a beautiful lake, with the sky chock full of stars reflecting on the surface of the water.

Lexa gathered some wood and with the oil lamp she had taken from their room, she lit the fire quickly then took out a thick fur she placed on the ground, clean clothes, drying cloths and the leather roll where she kept small bottles of her cleansing oils and pastes when she traveled.

Clarke had walked over to the edge, mesmerized by the sky and the lake, while Lexa lit the fire behind her. She didn’t notice the brunette’s intentions of bathing in there and much less stripping until it was too late. Lexa suddenly walked past her, leisurely and completely naked. Clarke nearly collapsed on the edge of a Rocky Mountain river that night, as all the blood in her body rose and burned her red from head to toe and made her heart jump out of her chest.

Her eyes had first caught naked shoulders and loose hair, then a naked back and a naked tiny waist and holy spirits help her, a naked bottom, the most obscenely ravishing and perfect bottom she had ever seen in her entire existence. Before she could blink or breathe or let her eyes drift to her legs,
Lexa dove in head first and swam several feet until she exited the water again and sighed in relief. She then turned around swimming in place with only her head out of the water and looked at Clarke.

“Come,” she smiled. “The water is perfect.”

Clarke had still not fully regained her faculties but managed to quickly spin around, mortified, turned on and in the throes of a premature heart attack.

“Umm…”

She panicked. She had a naked Lexa behind her. The woman who stole her heart and made her body burn with desire was there, bare as the day and calling for her. Why on earth was she hesitating? At the same time, this was the same Lexa that had told her there would be nothing physical between them. How would she control herself having her so close? Like that! How was she supposed to bare herself to Lexa like that in the first place? She knew grounders had no reservations about nudity. They bathed naked together in the Polis baths or in rivers, anywhere really it seemed, and it was natural to them to see each other. The Ark had no such customs and was the very opposite, with prudish habits they had inherited from the past.

“Clarke?”

“Aren’t there any animals in there?” she demurred.

“No.”

“Are you sure? Cause one almost ate Octavia once.”

Lexa chuckled, having heard about the story. A particularly large old snake that had made its home in a small creek near TonDC – thanks to a Lake People tradesman who had brought it from the south and then released it when no one had shown interest in buying it –, had attacked Octavia. Everyone knew to avoid the creek though it was too slow to be a real threat.

“I am sure. No danger here.”

“Is the water deep?”

“Not if you stay near the edge. I can teach you to swim if you want.”

“N-no. No, that’s fine. It’s too dark anyway.”

That’s when Lexa remembered. How had she forgotten? During the days of Mount Weather, while everyone bathed in the river, she had noticed none of the Sky People ever did. Lincoln had learned through Octavia that they didn’t have a habit of showing themselves unclothed to other people. Lexa had been perplexed for days, wondering how they ever bathed then or what caused them the embarrassment he had relayed to her. Bathing with others was as natural as sharing a meal with other people. It was something she had never even considered as possibly being different for anyone. Why would their bodies cause them unease? Lexa was still somewhat confused, and she wanted to put Clarke at ease trying to show her she had nothing to hide or feel awkward about with her, especially with how utterly gorgeous Clarke was. Granted, she herself was nervous but mostly because of how attracted she was to her and how much of a torture it was not to reach out. She wasn’t sure what to do.
“You’re beautiful, Clarke,” she said, making the blonde’s breath catch. “But if you do not wish to show yourself to me, that’s okay.”

When nothing answered her but silence, she tried another approach.

“I will be by the rock washing my hair,” she spoke again and swam to flat stone near the edge on the left where she had left her leather roll. She made sure to make the noise of her swimming loudly, so Clarke could hear where she was and more importantly, where she was not anymore: in front of Clarke.

She went to where she had left her things, careful to leave her back turned to the blonde just in case and went about her routine. She brushed her nails, her teeth and then lathered her skin and her hair, dipping in every now and then to wash it off, undoing the smaller braids she hadn’t undone yet. It was then she heard the sound of the water splashing behind and then the uncertain wading as Clarke approached her from behind.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

Lexa turned around and took in the woman in front of her, her pulse quickening with want. She had also stripped to nothing. Her hair was wet and droplets of water clung to her eyelashes and languidly trickled down her neck, passed her clavicles and over the generous swell of her breast which were partially hidden by the dark water, their shape only hinted at by the dim light of the stars and the paleness of Clarke’s skin. Lexa swallowed and only could bring her eyes back up slowly, tracing the same path up to Clarke’s lips and then her eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” she repeated in awe, even more confused with the blonde’s shyness about being naked.

Clarke lowered her eyes, a small smile on her lips, cheeks flaming red.

“Come, I’ll help you wash your hair and help you with your back,” Lexa attempted. Maybe this would help ease the tension, she thought, and Clarke had been visibly sore and bent out of shape from the riding.

Clarke swallowed, willing her heart not to beat out of her chest at the thought of a naked Lexa touching her naked body. She had felt that torture and bliss once before and barely survived it, but her yearning for Lexa overpowered her. She went to her, legs shaky and flushing in nervous anticipation. She stepped close willing her eyes not to travel downward and try to make out the lovely shapes of the brunette under the water. She let Lexa gently turn her around and began lathering her scalp, her long slender fingers massaging her deliciously, the shivers climbing up her spine and the heat pooling between her legs battling each other out to test every ounce of her resistance.

But then Lexa started talking and talking, sensing Clarke’s tension, and little by little soothed her and relaxed her until she was soft and pliant in her hands.

Lexa told her stories about the Rock Line. How they were the best builders and engineers in the Coalition and how she had sent Pollio and some of his crew to live here for a year to learn the methods in building bricked roads and designing their impeccably laid out and organized cities.

She told her about their love of fable stories, like the ones they heard tonight. It’s how they
instilled their dearly-held values into their children in an easy, symbolic way, even though they were probably the most rationally-inclined clan. It’s why it had been the ones that had most helped the first Hedas into coding their laws, even if Delphi Clan had eventually become the place where people then went to train and learn them. She told Clarke she hoped she could take her one day to the Boudalan capital when they had more time, because it was one of the greatest wonders of the Coalition.

She told Clarke how this had been her favorite place when she had first toured the Rock Line as a nightblood. The flat stone they stood against had a little ledge under the water where she could come to sit while still being mostly submerged under the water, so she could watch the stars while she soaked her aching body and swollen hands from training with the massive Boudalan hammers, and to cool the burnt tip of her fingers that she always singed trying to learn to stick the round flatbreads on the walls of the ground vertical ovens they used. Clarke had seen them in the market. The round, ceramic domes dug into the ground that looked like wells at first, except they had roaring fires at the bottom and the bakers slapped the fresh dough on the walls of the blistering inner walls.

She told her one of the things she had liked most was going out with the herders and roam the beautiful lands, until an old angry male goat who kept glaring at her decided to attack her and run her off. Clarke dissolved into laughter imagining a tiny, skinny Lexa being chased by an angry and very large goat. Lexa continued telling her, in between mirthful laughs, how she had unsuccessfully tried getting away by climbing but the goat would just climb after her. Clarke sighed as her laughter tapered off and Lexa loosened the stiffness in her shoulders blades with talented, warm hands. She had to catch herself from not leaning back and melting into her. Or worse, moaning.

Clarke was beginning to understand this grounder custom, the intimacy created between people stripped bare and caring for the other’s body, the cleansing, the closeness, the bond it built, even when there wasn’t anything sexual, or in Clarke’s case, when she was repressing it. Still, there was a beauty to it, the ease and the comfort, the sense of confidence it gave to the conversation. She had been relaxed enough to let Lexa lather and massage her entire back, while she washed the rest and listened and laughed at Lexa’s stories.

She was brave enough to steal a glance when Lexa made her way unhurriedly towards their things to go wrap herself in a robe and then bring one to Clarke, just enough to see the dim light of the stars reflected on her glistening and never-ending legs before she tore her eyes away.

They sat on the thick fur in front of the fire to dry themselves with its warmth. She watched Lexa watch the flames, the light of the fire dancing on her face.

“You’re beautiful too,” Clarke blurted out softly, unable to contain herself. Lexa lifted her eyes to her.

“I… I forgot to tell you earlier,” she stammered, trying to explain herself.

A barely visible smile curved Lexa’s lips, as she lowered her eyes bashfully and looked at the fire again.

“Thank you, Clarke.”

“It’s all so beautiful here,” Clarke lamely tried to salvage herself and deflect the awkwardness she
had created. Or at least that she felt. “It’s a shame Casio went with Bryan in the other direction. He
told me Boudalan was one of the prettiest places he’d been to and visited whenever he could,” she
mused, rambling at this point.

It didn’t prevent her from seeing the smile that had previously been on Lexa’s face fade and her
eyes dim. She furrowed her brows trying to read the change in her demeanor, yet nothing but
silence filled the space between them for a minute too long.

After a long while, Lexa broke the silence.

“Clarke, you still have two months to reconsider, to change your mind before the Gon Ogeda is
fully completed. If there is indeed a war and I lose my life, maybe you won’t have to… be forced
to join me.”

“What?” Clarke exclaimed alarmed.

“Maybe the next Commander can find another way to ensure the safety of Skaikru, to protect you,”
Lexa continued undeterred. “You’ll be free to make your life as you please with someone like
Casio or anyone that you want. You can always change your mind before it’s too late,” she offered
dolefully and in the smallest voice, her eyes still on the fire.

For a split second, Clarke’s heart plummeted, doubt creeping in her veins like ice, thinking Lexa
was having regrets about joining her, but then realization hit her. The name Lexa had specifically
mentioned. It wasn’t the first time she had noticed Lexa turn taciturn at the mention of the pretty
Delphi Ambassador. Could Lexa possibly think Clarke was interested in him and trying to give her
a way out? It seemed absurd.

Clarke climbed to her knees and scooted closer to face Lexa and then sat back down on the balls of
her feet. She unfastened a slim cord she had been wearing around her neck for some time now and
slid off something she’d been keeping safe there.

“Hey,” she touched Lexa’s knee, “Lexa, look at me.”

The brunette looked up, eyes trying to conceal resignation and vulnerability.

“I’ve been wanting to give you this for a while. I just… I couldn’t find the moment,” she tried,
opening her palm and laying it facing up on Lexa’s leg.

Lexa looked at her hand and inspected it curiously then gazed back up at Clarke.

“The first person that walked on Mars, she was there to build a new home for us there,” Clarke
pointed up at the starry sky.

“She was standing there on a planet made of nothing but sand and rocks, about to make the first
drill, where anything could go wrong at any moment and she could die. But if she succeeded, she
would be giving us a new chance at life. And that’s when she found a carbon crystal. It was
something people had been looking for for hundreds of years. Proof that life could have existed
there and could exist elsewhere. It’s what all living things are made of in a way,” Clarke tried
explaining.

“And in this moment, faced with all these possibilities of life and death, the one thing on her mind
was the person she wanted to share that with. The one person she wanted beside her if she died, if
she lived, if they built a tomorrow on that bare rock. It was all that she needed. Everything else life
gave her would just be more, as long as she had that. See, I never really understood that story before…”
Clarke tried to control the growing nervousness. Her heart thundered in her ears and she hands shook.

The thing was, the only reason Clarke had not completely dismissed her dad’s story as one more tall tale of his is because she had it. She had, through inexplicable reasons, inherited the ownership of the famous First Stone. It had apparently been in a display glass case on Alpha station for centuries, after it had been sent to the Ark with one of the last supply shuttles, or that had been the official version at least. In reality, it had boarded the Ark with the surviving crew of the Polaris station on their escape pod, where it had been placed inside a box addressed to Dr. Ben Griffin by Becca, alongside a memory key with detailed instructions and files.

When Clarke was born, the ownership passed on to her and it was handed over to her parents. The Ark told the Griffins it was a symbolic gesture. The celebration of the 10,000th baby born on the Ark when Clarke had come into the world. What they didn’t know was the it had never belonged to the Ark and had only been in its temporary custody. Its ownership was indissolubly tied to a restricted sample in the Gen Lab, as per the instructions Ben Griffin had input into the mainframe. When the instructions were activated, and the Chancellor found out about the unexplained transfer of custody, he could do nothing to change it or override it, so Jaha came up with the 10 thousandth child excuse. It would at least be a boost for morale that year when the execution rate and the child death rate from malnutrition thrice exceeded their birth rate. They had to stabilize the living population at around two thousand. They had gone through another culling and had hardened their floating policy, or they would all starve. One small historic artefact was a small price to pay if he could spin it as a positive gesture. And so newborn Clarke Griffin came to be the owner of the First Stone.

A stone she was now holding out to Lexa.

Lexa looked at the raw diamond in Clarke’s palm and took it in her hand.

“This is a piece of a star?” she asked with almost childlike awe.

Clarke chuckled.

“I guess, a planet, but yes,” she stared adoringly at Lexa’s expression as she turned it in her hand like it was the best thing she had ever seen in her life but seeming to miss the point entirely.

“But this was the first thing I thought about wanting to give you after we agreed to our Gon Ogeda, I just didn’t know how or when.”

She had roamed the streets of Polis looking for an artisan to help her with it. It was the artisan who had made Lexa’s star-shaped hair beads, who had also mounted the crystal.

“You see, in the old traditions of our people, this is how they asked another to marry them, with a diamond ring. Marriage wasn’t temporary like yours. It used to be a union meant to last forever like the Gon Ogeda, in the good times, in the bad, in sickness and in health, till death separated you. This is why she used this to ask that person to marry her right then and there, on the radio…”
At this, Lexa lifted her head to look at Clarke, her eyes widening slightly, as if finally realizing what Clarke was trying to tell her or rather what she was trying to do. Her heart sped up.

“And this is why I wanted to give it to you, so every time you see it, you have no doubt that it is what I choose you. I don’t want Casio, or the next Commander or anyone else. I want… I want you… by my side. I choose you,” Clarke swallowed, trembling at this point but determined to push on.

“I want to ask you not as not Wanheda asking Heda for an alliance, but just as Clarke asking Lexa. Just us. If I had to live in war, in peace, in a desert of rocks, I’d choose you. Even without the Gon Ogeda, it still wouldn’t change that. As much as you want to give of your life or of yourself to me, as little or as much as you want to share… if that’s just as friends or whatever you want, it’s… I won’t need anything else. I need you to know that and never doubt it.”

Lexa’s eyes were shimmering with unfallen tears, her lips shaking.

“Is there… is there a ritual… to…” she tried, too overcome to make sense of her words.

Clarke nodded, a smile forming already, understanding the question for what it was. An answer.

“I get on my knees,” she let out a watery laugh, looking down at her bent legs as she sat on her feet, but rising on her knees again. “Then I ask you. If you say yes, I put the ring on your finger and then I…” she cut short, realizing only then what came next, flushing red. “The rest doesn’t matter,” she stammered.

“Clarke, you have fulfilled everything our traditions have demanded of you. The least I can do is carry out one Skaikru ritual. I’ll do anything that is required. Tell me,” she intimated earnestly, rising on her knees too, resulting in them being so close their foreheads were nearly touching.

“If you say yes, then I… I kiss you… we… we kiss,” Clarke said barely audible, her words caught in her throat.

“Oh.”

Lexa stared wildly at Clarke, then at her lips and back again, her eyes bright and alive.

“Ask me,” she whispered.

Clarke looked up, hope, nervousness and joy raucously beating in her chest louder than the drums she’d heard that night.

“Will you marry me?” she asked, eyes filling.

A beautiful smile bloomed on Lexa’s mouth, her eyes roaming Clarke’s face, the light of the fire dancing on her features as her gaze then lowered and fixed itself on her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed.

Clarke on the other hand nearly stopped breathing from the jolt of sheer joy that shot through her. She unsteadily grabbed Lexa’s hand and slipped the ring then blinked up, tears collecting on her lashes.

“Yes,” Lexa whispered again like a plea.

Clarke leaned her forehead against Lexa’s breathing out, her hand coming to pull her by the back of
her neck as her eyes fluttered closed and finally, finally bringing Lexa’s lips to hers.

It was supposed to be just a perfunctory peck to fulfill a ritual. A brief brush of lips. A graze.

But the moment Lexa’s soft, full lips pressed into hers, Clarke lost all coherent thought. All sense of self-awareness. All cognizance.

Nothing existed outside those lips that trembled softly against hers as they pressed into her. As a whimper of blissful relief was exhaled from her throat. As her blood roared with desire when they parted just enough to Slot and slide against her mouth. As the air in her lungs seemed to catch fire and balloon in her chest with elation. As she ached in want at the sound of Lexa breathing harshly through her nose when they glided their mouths more deeply. And as her heart melted with tenderness when she felt Lexa’s featherlight touch of her hand on her jaw.

Their mouth separated with a small delectable sound, their breath shallow, to look at each other. Lexa looked at her with eyes brimming, a single devastating tear escaping down her face, her lower lip quivering.

Clarke was spellbound, bewitched and wholly enraptured with the sight. With those lips. With this girl. With this exquisite creature that had captured her heart and soul so completely.

Clarke leaned in again needing to eliminate the distance and have those lips on her. Lexa cupped her face and tilted her head pulling Clarke towards her. Their mouths parted in unison when they fused their lips together again, the tip of Lexa’s tongue coming to slowly and gently caress Clarke’s, ripping a needy moan from both their throats and shuddered gasps into each other’s mouth. Lexa angled her head even further as Clarke pushed into her desperately, kissing deeper, her tongue coming to caress hers once more in such a sensuously hungry manner Clarke felt it to the tip of her toes, between her legs, all over her body, making her shiver between ragged breaths. And then once more, provoking a delicious moan to spill from Lexa and for Clarke’s arousal to pulsate with aching intensity deep inside her. Clarke clawed at Lexa’s robe, pulling it down her shoulder in urgent need to have her skin under her hands, but also in an attempt to draw her closer and steady herself from the dizzying, spinning sensation that had turned her legs into liquid and her heart into a thundering fire.

Their mouths pulled apart a fraction with shaky breaths, their lips still slightly brushing. Clarke pressed in again, delicately, softly, with a silent sigh, before pulling back a little more to look at Lexa.

Since she could remember, Lexa’s life had revolved around control. Her training. Her interactions with people. Her fighting. Her meditation to listen to the spirit. Her maneuvering since she ascended to power. Everything had been about control. Controlling her fear. Controlling her pain. Controlling her feelings. Controlling her temper. Controlling her breathing. Controlling her mind. Controlling her movements. Controlling the sound of her footsteps. Controlling her patience. Controlling her sleep. Controlling her opponents. Controlling her desires. The Granplei Mastas even taught the natblidas how to slow down their heart beats, to stand or sit unmoving for hours on end, and to fight an opponent with their eyes closed just by isolating their sound or the disturbance in the air they created, the latter to prepare them for the most excruciating of all the trials of their Conclave. Lexa had been chiseled into an unbreakable monolith of control, wrapped around tight layers of discipline and self-command.
And then a girl that fell from the sky kissed her and all her control crumbled under her mouth.

It was like all those layers of iron and stone were as fragile and insubstantial as the wings of the blue butterflies that covered their mountains. They turned into silvery dust with the touch of Clarke’s fingertips or the blow of her breath on Lexa’s lips every time she gasped and shuddered against her mouth. They unveiled her heart like the spread of their wings under the sunlight of Clarke’s heated, impassioned eyes.

She felt helpless, disoriented, almost crazy, her mind devoid of clear thought and only aware of the need, of the lust, of the love that had overpowered her when she had felt Clarke against her, Clarke licking into her, Clarke sighing into her, Clarke’s beating heart against her, Clarke imprinting her words of confession silently on the flesh of her lips. She was powerless to stop or to control anything and could do nothing but fall into Clarke.

Their foreheads leaned into each other, Clarke’s hand still fisting her robe, Lexa’s hands lightly holding Clarke’s waist. The blonde felt Lexa shaking against her only to realize she was shaking too. Out of uncontrolled passion, out of thrill, out of surprise, of out raw feverish need, out of anticipation, and out of overwhelming emotion of coming together at last. Their eyes shone with a sheen of unshed tears and the love they had not yet uttered into full words.

If Lexa had not been so overcome, she would have heard it. She would have heard it minutes ago as something drew close to them in the shadows.

It was only that second, when they had parted dizzy and breathless to look at each other, before falling into the pull and kiss again, that some forgotten still-alert recess of Lexa’s mind caught the sound. Over their harsh breathing, over the thrum of her heart, over the crackling of the fire, and the brush of tree leaves in the wind, just as Clarke was leaning in again, her trained ears caught it.

Before her mind caught up, her body immediately tensed, her spine prickling with a hot flash of adrenaline in response to the threat she sensed. She froze. Her hands tightening around Clarke’s waist in alarm and in silent signal. She went dead still, stopped breathing and zoned in, the way that had been ingrained into her from years of training. Isolating all natural noises and phasing them out, until she zoned in on it. The faintest rustle of padded feet trying to tread carefully and getting closer. Without moving, her eyes darted in the direction of the sound, trying to find movement in the faintly starlit landscape around them.

She saw the figure about 400 meters from them, almost slithering against the ground and crouching next to tree. Then she saw the round shape of a glass shine for a second reflecting their fire. That made her breathe out in cautious relief.

A Boudalan scout sent out to apparently spy on them. She had spent some days with them on her visit as a natblida and recognized the short, one hand, long-views they used to survey the terrain ahead of them at a safe distance. Had this been an assassin, they were too far to do anything. And the figure had seemed to have settled.

The Gen undoubtedly had sent them. If she had suspicions about the veracity of this union, she would’ve been foolish not to try and spy on them. But she had used a scout who could survey them from a distance, even if it meant not being able to hear what they spoke about. The Gen had probably thought that sending an actual spy, who would get as close as possible, would never make it past Lexa who was a notoriously good lowe siva, or a ‘long-away ear’ as they called the skill,
and had thwarted more assassination attempt than could be counted thanks to it. This scout had made a mistake of even getting this close it would seem.

Lexa leaned slowly and whispered into Clarke’s ear, not missing the slight shudder than ran through the blonde’s body.

“Don’t react,” she emphasized. “Someone is spying on us, behind you, by the tree line.”

Clarke opened her eyes, still in a haze. Everything that Lexa had noticed had happened in a few seconds. She’d been on her way to claim the brunette’s mouth again and now her brain was catching up to her words.

“What…”

“Act normal.”

“What?”

“Like we don’t know. She’s suspicious already, about our… union. Just act like we haven’t noticed,” Lexa tried explaining, her brain still in a fog. It didn’t help having Clarke so close. Focus, she tried to tell herself. But then she felt a kiss on her pulse and sucked in a breath.

“Clarke,” she choked out.

No answer but another kiss, this time on her jaw, and then Clarke’s hands cupped her face.

“You said act natural. This is what two people together act like,” she smiled, unfocused eyes trained on her lips.

Before she could protest, Clarke’s mouth was on her again, hungry and demanding and more urgent than before. Lexa’s mind lost itself again, the words of objection dying in her throat in favor of a soft whimper when Clarke captured her lower lip and sucked it ever so slightly and then her tongue melted all thoughts away.

Clarke felt Lexa’s fingers dig into her hips almost painfully, pulling her with contained roughness against her, hips and breasts tightly flush together separated only by the thin material of their robes. Neither could contain a moan from the sensation, their arousal burning red hot.

Lexa fought with all her might to regain control. They couldn’t do this. It was dangerous and reckless. She hadn’t even gone to check the threat to make sure she was right. They couldn’t do this. Not like this. Not pretending to trick the Boudalan leader. Or were they pretending? Her brain screamed to snap out of it, while her body capitulated to Clarke.

“Wait,” she said between a labored breath when Clarke had pulled away for a second, her hands blindly trying to unfasten the belt on Lexa’s robe but unable to.
Clarke only answered by kissing her, slowly, deeply, pushing her gently backwards, Lexa’s hand hooked behind Clarke’s neck pulling her down with her, until she was lying on the fur with Clarke’s body covering hers, her words and worries forgotten again momentarily. The emotion of pouring her love with her lips and her hands was overwhelming and it made her body shake like a leaf in a storm, but it also made her chest soar high and her heart thunder in her ears, the relief and the bliss to feel Clarke against her finally.

But a war was waging within her. The side that wanted to lose herself in Clarke and the one who still felt the danger prickle her neck with the looming threat close by.

She tried to get her mouth to stop kissing Clarke and to regain her senses, but she couldn’t help but moan when the blonde’s tongue made her forget even her own name.

With the last shred of self-control and her instinct to protect them, Lexa flipped them over in her attempt to stop herself and the blonde’s irresistible lips.

She held the blonde’s hands in her above her head and looked at her, to still her own roaming hands more than anything.

“Clarke,” she uttered.

All she saw was swollen parted lips and fiery eyes filled with heavy emotion and a sheen of tears.

How could she resist that? Before she knew it, Lexa was claiming her mouth once again with feverish abandon, her left-hand dipping under the hem of her robe and running it underneath Clarke’s thigh and then back down grabbing her leg and hooking it over waist as she pushed her hips against Clarke, between her legs, her center grinding a single time against Clarke’s. Her only conscious thought was how she was going to burn those robes, still in her way, to ashes, while a whine of pleasure tumbled out of her lips as she licked into Clarke’s mouth.

Clarke thought she’d die. Or come. Or both. Right there. When Lexa ground into her, she let out low and utterly sinful moan that would haunt Lexa for a long time to come.

But that is what made her snap out of it.

She tore her mouth away and leaned her forehead on the blondes, breathing harshly.

“All of this. Not if it’s not real. Not because of this.

Is what Lexa wanted to say. She hated herself in this moment. She could barely stand the pain, the literal ache she felt for stopping. But she wouldn’t have Clarke like this. She couldn’t give herself to Clarke like this. To convince some suspicious leader. Or while there was a threat. She wouldn’t let Clarke do this, sacrifice this of herself, in pretense. Though it had become at least obvious to her that, contrary to what she had previously convinced herself of, Clarke felt desire for her, and this lit a fire in her belly and in the place in her heart where hope lived in a shadowy, forgotten corner.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “We can’t. It’s too dangerous, Clarke,” she tried. She leaned further back on an elbow, the other hand coming to caress her face, her thumb on the apple of her cheek stroking gently, reverently.

Clarke looked up at her, mouth wet and red, eyes brimming with affection and still sweltering
arousal. Her cheeks were fiery red and a fresh blush colored them further.

A breathless chuckle came out of her mouth.

“I’m sorry. I got… carried away. It was a stupid idea,” she smiled sheepishly and somewhat embarrassed.

Lexusmiled and shook her head, stroking her cheek once more, eyes adoring.

She brushed Clarke’s nose with her own and deposited a chaste, gentle kiss on her lips as if to wordlessly appease any guilt the sky leader could be having. They both silently sighed into it.

“I’m going to go check around. Hopefully scare him off if he sees me doing a watch round,” she whispered, before rolling off Clarke who only nodded and swallowed a groan when she felt Lexus take her weight off her.

Clarke stayed where she was for a few moments, frustrated, uncomfortably wet, and so painfully turned on she could almost not bear it.

After a few minutes of simmering in frustration and the furious beating of her heart and turned on body, she finally huffed and got up, rearranging her disheveled appearance. She slipped on her boots and took her bow. Might as well walk it off and help Lexus check the perimeter.

However, she kept the smile and the warm cheeks and the beating heart and the sheer inebriating elation throughout it all.

The scout had eventually scampered off when they got close and they went around a few times just in case.

To her surprise, Lexus didn’t propose to go back to the city and instead decided to stay there. She lay on the soft furs next to the fire and Clarke went to lie next to her. Lexus pulled one of the furs to cover them from the chilly air. They looked at the stars silently for a while, content just to be there next to each other on such a pretty night.

After some time, Clarke turned around on her side to face Lexus, her hands beneath her head.

“You thought I would say no. About Skaikru’s weapons,” Clarke asked quietly, curiously.

“Nothing scared me more than that,” Lexus admitted meaningfully, still gazing up.

“Why?”

“Because even if you disagreed, it would have been my duty to fulfill that task,” she said grimly. “I was afraid you’d think I was betraying your people… betraying you again. That you would look at me the way you looked at me after the Mountain,” Lexus swallowed.

It was only then that Clarke realized how much that possibility had haunted Lexus and the depth of the distress it had caused. It was evident in her eyes and the way her entire body tensed.
“Look at me,” Clarke said softly but insistently. “Lexa, look at me.”

Lexa finally turned on her side to face her as well, two cautious eyes finding her own.

“I was always going to come back. When I left, I mean. When I was angry, even then, I… I kept circling Polis. Deep down I knew I was always going to come back, that I was… going to find you. There was just… something, I just… I just knew.”

Lexa stared at her, her gaze fliting between Clarke’s eyes.

“When you asked me, long ago, what I wanted and I said I didn’t know. I didn’t, not about the other things, about everything else, but I never questioned one thing.”

“What?”

“You,” Clarke answered instantly. “You were a given. You were always going to be a part of it, no matter what I did or didn’t. You would be there, somehow, in some way. You were the constant.”

Clarke felt breathless, her stomach swirling with the sensation of falling at high speed, her heart in her throat at the confession, the closest to revealing the full magnitude of her feelings.

“Do you really mean that?” Lexa asked demurely, her voice almost cracking.

“I just asked you to marry me. For the second time,” Clarke remarked, with a playful half smile, though her cheeks were tight with a furious blush. She had indeed proposed to Lexa in front of the Council as well.

“And I said yes,” Lexa whispered, eyes hidden under coy eyelashes.

“And you said yes,” Clarke repeated just as softly, a smile blooming on her mouth.

Lexa held her gaze for a few silent seconds.

“I was always going to say yes,” she confessed in a whisper, eyes shining with sincerity and tenderness.

Clarke felt her heart jump, her throat thick with tears she held back. Clarke had loved her parents with everything in her. She had loved Wells like her brother. But she had never known it was possible to feel something so all-consuming, all-encompassing, and wholly devastating as what she felt for Lexa.

She couldn’t begin to put it into words and yet, at the same time, there was something inexplicably familiar about it, like the silhouette of a memory one can’t quite conjure but tells you you might have lived in that moment before.

It’s what she felt when Lexa extended her arms and pulled her against her, Clarke’s face coming to rest on the crook of her neck and her hand on her chest, one leg loosely propped on Lexa’s thigh. One of Lexa’s hand on her shoulder and the other on her waist.

The feeling of home was the closest description of what Clarke felt then. Warm, sighing with happiness, listening to Lexa’s accelerated heartbeat every time her thumb caressed the skin on her chest.
Clarke didn’t know it yet, that one day she would come to learn all the ways Lexa liked to hold her or sought her arms to be held, according to her moods and even the weather. That she would learn to tell and predict Lexa’s moods just on that alone and that it would become part of her never-ending catalogue of Lexa kom Trikru.

She would one day learn that when it was cold, Lexa would scoot back into Clarke’s front sighing when Clarke cuddled her from behind to warm her. That when she had been worried or afraid for Clarke, she would be the one holding the blonde, spooning her from behind and wrapping her arms tightly around her, as if protecting her with her own body. She would learn that when Lexa was feeling sad or a bit vulnerable, she’d be the one draping herself on top of Clarke, resting head on her chest with Clarke humming to her while she held her. That when they fought, they would sleep curled on their sides facing each other, their foreheads pressed together hand-in-hand in silent apology because Lexa didn’t like to go to bed quarreled. She would learn how Lexa would always step over the back of the couch and slip behind her when she found the blonde reading or drawing and didn’t want to disturb her, just be near, sometimes dozing off. Or how she would instead lie down and put her head on her lap looking up at her when she wanted to talk about something that was troubling her, while Clarke ran her fingers through her hair. Or how she would instead turn towards her and bury her nose in the blonde’s tummy when she was tired and would grumble softly between tiny yawns.

She would one day also learn that when it was Lexa who held her like this, on her back with Clarke half draped over her, the blonde’s head tucked in her neck and Lexa’s hand running aimlessly on her back, it was when her heart was at its most serene, warm and perfectly blissful state, and that they would be able to spend hours like this talking and laughing quietly or just in perfect silent peace.

She would one day learn all this.

Alas, not yet.

Not with all that was yet to come. Not with the darkness that was on a collision course with them.

No. Not yet.

Not yet.

But someday.

Clarke woke up with a shiver. She opened her eyes slowly and saw the fire going strong. It had been the loss of warmth, however, that had woken her up and she found herself alone on the fur, without Lexa by her side.
Both alarm and heat rose to her cheeks when the memories of last night flooded her brain all at once. By the pale light, it was obvious it was barely daybreak and the sun hadn’t even peaked above the horizon yet.

Of course, the Lexa who had trouble waking up early in the relative safety of her room up in a fortified tower was not the same Lexa who woke up at the crack of dawn when they camped outside. That much Clarke had discovered on their journey. Lexa woke up before everyone, even before Clarke. She would usually make the first round getting updates of the last watch and walking around the perimeter herself, while the camp started to come out of their sleep. In fact, Lexa didn’t seem to fully sleep, only slumbered into a half-awake alert state. It seemed ingrained in her from a lifetime of discipline, even if it went against her own body’s obvious sleep cycle.

Clarke sat up, her eyes roaming around her until they landed on the brunette. She stood by the shore of the lake, her robe falling off her shoulders while her foot gently tested the water lazily.

She looked so beautiful in the blue light of dawn. She had loosely braided her hair in a single messy braid over one shoulder, her graceful neck and delicate shoulders looking like a work of art. It reminded Clarke of the masterpieces Dante Wallace had kept in dusty, closed-off lower-level floors under the Mountain. Thousands of paintings and sculptures from all centuries and civilizations with no one to admire them. Maybe no one wanted to look at them. They were the pinnacle of the beauty mankind could achieve and they would be too great a contrast with the monstrosities they carried out with the grounders. But Clarke had seen them. She had run her hand on the exquisite figures that had been covered with white sheets and had been mesmerized by them.

Lexa was like one of those statues. Perfect, delicate, spell-bindingly beautiful, yet as powerful as the nearly unbreakable marble and granite they were made of.

Clarke was about to get up and saunter up to her, put her lips to that neck, circle that waist, put her ear on her back to hear the heart that had bewitched Clarke so absolutely. At least that is what Clarke’s half-asleep mind had thought of doing. But before she even stood up, however, Lexa let the robe slide off her to the ground and then waded in the water and jumped in.

Clarke’s only possible reaction was for her jaw to fall open and a furious blush rise to her face and neck. It was one thing to see Lexa naked from behind in the dark night, only her figure faintly visible from the light of the stars, but it was an altogether vision to see her in the light of day.

Clarke felt a new wave of violent arousal and embarrassment and sheer shock at just how breathtakingly beautiful Lexa was. It nearly knocked her over. Her graceful back dipped into a small waist only to then flare into a perky, fleshy, round and sinfully perfect bottom that would shame all the sculptures ever created and should have monuments built to honor it, Clarke thought, and then long, long, long endless legs that sent all the blood rushing to the center of Clarke’s own legs.

She covered her face with her hands and fell back into the fur groaning with frustration wondering if it was possible to die from extreme arousal.

While Clarke huffed in the furs, Lexa did several laps in the icy water to calm her own hormones after waking up to Clarke entangled and wrapped around her, a thigh pressed tightly between her own that nearly had driven her mad.

Nevertheless, she swam with an indelible smile on her lips and a soaring hopeful heart.
“I cannot leave them defenseless. I cannot disarm Skaikru of their firearms all at once. Not until they have an alternative means to keep themselves safe. I also believe demanding everything will make them feel threatened and could provoke a rash reaction.”

“You fear they would carry out another attack in retaliation if they feel cornered?” the Gen queried.

Lexa nodded. “It would not be the first time. I would rather not have more people die senselessly. You know better than anyone disarmament requires a strong degree of trust.”

“And trust is not built overnight,” the Boudalan leader finished for her.

“They are but a small village worth of people surrounded by what they still perceive as hostile strangers all around, but they are capable of causing much death and damage. It would be like provoking an injured beast.”

“But your union to their leader,” she pointed to Clarke, “was supposed to get them under control, preventing them from attacking you or any of us.”

“And my union with Clarke will only be concluded in two months’ time. Until then, their place in the Coalition and their submission to our laws is not secure. Doing it by force would be counterproductive to our goal of coexisting in peace.”

“So what do you propose?”

“Gradual disarmament to give them time to… adjust to other means of defense.”

“And I suppose you already have something in mind?”

“For the last two weeks, a contingent of my best hunters and weapon-makers has already been in Arkadia, as one of my gifts to Clarke. They have also been forbidden to hunt with guns.”

The Gen smiled inwardly. Heda Lexa was as usual one step ahead.

“So they will get used to using our spears and arrows and feel less defenseless when they hand in their own weapons?”

“Precisely.”

From the start, Clarke had suspected the gift of hunting lessons for her people had had a double motive. Initially, she had thought its ulterior motive was to get their people to interact more, integrate, build bonds by having two dozen grounders in Arkadia teaching the Sky People. Which it did too, but it also sought to prepare Arkadia for the inevitable destruction of their guns. Lexa had already been setting the foundations for it but had thought it would be further down the line. Lexa had told her all this in the morning, while they went over what their proposal to the Gen
“They won’t leave until every single person in Arkadia has their own personal weapon and is skilled in using them, especially our Guard, our food providers and anyone else who wishes to learn.” Clarke informed.

“And how will you guarantee that they will hand in any of their firearms? How will you determine this gradual disarmament?” the young Halima inquired.

“We would like the Boudalan to head the delegation to negotiate and carry out Skaikru’s gradual disarmament,” Lexa said calmly.

The Gen did not manage to mask her surprise. Her eyes widened, and brows furrowed looking at Lexa, and then at Halima and the two advisors that were with her this time.

“You want us to disarm the Sky people?”

“I want you to draw the terms. Inventory their arsenal, define a protocol to destroy the most powerful rifles and weapons first, coordinate your work with my people already in Arkadia to determine the best timeframe, and then oversee these terms are met and the weapons are handed over and disabled on site. My ambassadors will take part in the negotiations with you, but you will make sure they comply.”

Silence.

This had been the very last thing the leader of the Rock Line clan had envisaged would be Heda’s reply.

“Why would you select us for this task?” she asked, cautiously gauging the Commander’s intent.

“Who better? Your clan wrote most of our laws on the matter. I hope you also see it as gesture of my trust in Boudalan and also of my commitment to fulfill this duty.”

“And what type of delegation would you have us send to… ensure their compliance?” Halima queried, quickly catching on. “Not just peacekeepers, I imagine?”

A corner of Lexa’s mouth curved ever so slightly. The young Ife would become a very good Gen someday.


“You want us to send the Ancestral Blue Guard?!!”

“I would rather you be protected if Skaikru decides to be less than welcoming.”

The Blue Guard was the Rock Line’s most ancient warrior order and seldom used, mostly for ceremonies celebrating their forefathers and in some cases as scout missions against Mount Weather. The armors of the Blue Guard were those of their ancestors, bullet proof helmets and suits that were displayed in a shrine and only worn by the best and most powerful of their warriors when they were called upon. They were the only to have such protection outside of the Mountain Men
The *Gen* considered this for a moment in a tense moment of silence. She looked over at her war advisor who nodded to her unspoken question.

She had already received an account of what had transpired at the lake and it had answered her question on the sincerity of their union. This had shaped the decision she would make today.

“Very well,” she finally said thoughtfully. “*Boudalan* would be honored to assist Heda in this matter and we hope we can live up to the trust you have placed in us. We are also satisfied with the Commander’s commitment to our request and our clan would be ready to re-pledge our loyalty and celebrate the *Badannes-de,*” she announced.

What Faizah, leader of the *Boudalan,* didn’t know was that this was in fact a test, a trap and gamble.

Lexa had gone back and forth with Clarke that morning on the idea of trusting the Rock Line clan and disclosing the conspiracy that loomed over the Coalition. Lexa wanted to trust them. They were people whose entire philosophy of life turned around peaceful coexistence and had a distaste for petty wars. Moreover, all the reports she received from her spies and informants, both the ones who lived there as well as those in her traveling party, had not found any evidence of suspicious contacts. But lack of evidence wasn’t equivalent to proof of innocence. They could be communicating in ways they had not detected. If the Rock Line had found enough cause for concern about Lexa’s potential accumulation of power, could they really be pushed to align themselves with a violent coup to depose her and the Coalition that sustained that growing power?

In the end, they decided to withhold the information and came up with the current plan.

If the Rock Line was not part of the conspiracy at all, having them involved in the issue of Skaikru weapons would assuage their concerns and reestablish trust between them. Their Blue Guard would also provide a powerful barrier of defense if the conspirators tried to get inside Arkadia to get to the arsenal. If in turn Arkadia was the one that rebelled and refused to depose their firearms, and attacked in a rash reaction, they would be the only ones protected from their bullets. Lexa would not put any more unprotected peacekeepers or warriors at risk from the trigger-happy, fickle Skaikru.

If the Rock Line was part of the conspiracy because of their concerns Lexa could use those weapons for herself, making them part of the disarmament would eliminate their reason for joining the conspiracy. It could lead them to potentially abandon it or even denounce their co-conspirators once the disarmament process was underway.

But if the Rock Line was a part of the conspiracy and had other interests behind it, putting them on Arkadia’s doorstep could also prove too good an opportunity for them to attack and seize the arsenal for the conspirators. It would put Arkadia at risk and put deadly weapons in the hands of their enemies, but it would also unmask the Rock Line as one of the clans involved.

This is why all these scenarios only worked with the pieces Lexa had already set in motion, before they even left Polis.
Under the guise of requesting more advanced medical attention due to their unfamiliarity with bullet wounds, she had dispatched Penn from the Polis fisageda to Arkadia. He would be her eyes and ears in the medical bay, at the heart of their metal headquarters and with direct access to none other than Chancellor Griffin who also happened to be the head of their healers. Even with a wounded arm, Penn was one of her best hand-to-hand warriors and could be an asset if anything happened.

With Penn, a small delegation from Polis had also traveled to Arkadia. An Ambassador from Trikru to negotiate land rights around Arkadia so Skaikru could expand to plant and hunt in what was Trikru territory. He also happened to be one of her best spies. The other envoy was from Polis who would broach the subject of the disarmament and try to soften the blow, though they already anticipated an angry reaction from Arkadia. She also was one of her best strategists and war lieutenants. Both of them would conveniently be dealing with Kane and the rest of the Arkadian Council. They would try to detect if anyone in Arkadia was conspiring with other clans or would lead the defense if any attack came from outside.

Then she already had 30 warriors inside, teaching the Skaikru Guard and others to hunt and even more conveniently, with access to the armory. After all, they were there to teach Skaikru how to make grounder weapons. Where else would they make them and store them than with their other weapons in the armory?

Clarke’s idea of an army from within, like they had planned for Mount Weather, had inspired this particular part. This way they had a flow of information from all critical players inside Arkadia – the Chancellor, the healers, the Guard, the Ark Council and their armory –, and a way to either neutralize them or protect them if need be.

Finally, a unit of her archery hidden in the trees surrounding Arkadia had been deployed there the moment after the gun had been found near the attacked grain barges. As with everything else, they were there to either neutralize Skaikru or protect them from an attack. She had promised Clarke her people would not kill the Chancellor or anyone else but would detain them for trial.

More importantly, depending on where the true loyalty of the Rock Line fell, the archers would be the most efficient ones to take out the Blue Guard. They might have their heads and torsos protected against bullets, but an arrow to their faces could take them out. Her archers had deadly accuracy. If the Rock Line was in fact a foe, she would have the best of their warriors trapped between her arrows and Arkadia’s fences, to either dispose them or use them as hostages for leverage.

Everything Lexa had planned for Arkadia had been to gain some control over any development with Skaikru. What she had never expected was for Clarke to agree with the mere notion of disarming her people, let alone coming up with the idea of using Boudalan for that, and thereby also gaining an advantage over a second clan and rounding off their strategy. They had gone over even single possibility, feeding off each other so easily and naturally, the way they had come up with the plan for Mount Weather. There was such a synchronicity when they put their heads together that it still astonished Lexa in the best way possible.

And, what she had most dreaded, which was that the Skaikru weapon problem would create perhaps an insurmountable division between them, had not come to pass and in fact they had never been closer.

So many things could go wrong. So many things she couldn’t foresee could be set in motion, but this was the way they found to both protect and have a contingency against each of the
unpredictable pieces of their complicated and incomplete board.

The Badannes-de ceremony was simple enough, but its briefness did not underscore the weight the pledge of loyalty had for everyone.

They gathered in the main square of Nuba Toun, Lexa and Clarke with the Gen in the middle, and the people of Boudalan surrounding them.

The Gen kneeled in front of Lexa and in a solemn voice spoke in Trigeda, the tongue of the Hedas and natblidas.

“Ai badannes ste kamp raun ai Heda.”
(My allegiance is to my Commander.)

“Boudalan badannes ste kamp raun oso Heda,” the crowd around them chanted also kneeling.
(The Rock Line’s allegiance is to our Commander.)

“A badan ai Heda op!” they all said in unison.
(I serve my Commander!)

Then Lexa stepped forward, removing her headpiece and dipping it in a small plate that held drops of blood from the Boudalan leader, and placed it back on her forehead.

(I am the Commander of all the clans. Your people are my people. You are my blood.)

(I will bleed for you. I will fight for you. I will die for you.)

A city sentry approached and handed her a dagger. She took it and gave it to the Gen, who got up and stepped towards her. She placed the dagger on Lexa’s neck and looked at her. The Commander didn’t blink and kept her gaze firm, head high.
“Ai na shil yu kru op. O ai na wan op kom oyo swison taim ai slip thru,” she finished.

(I will protect your people. Or I will die by your blade if I fail.)

There was a tense moment of silence as the blade pressed on the Commander’s throat, their eyes flitting between each other.

“Mema in” (Remember), the Gen finally said, flicking her wrist and making a small, superficial graze right over Lexa’s pulse, enough to draw blood and remind Lexa of her promise but not deep enough to leave a scar.


(Then our hammers are yours. The Hammer in the Mountain is yours. For treason against our Commander, we die by your hand.)

Lexa mirrored the same gesture, making a small symbolic cut on the Gen’s throat, a similar reminder that her life was pledged to her.

“Mema in.”

Finally, it was Clarke’s turn to repeat the pledge. Since there was no precedent for it, she made a similar promise to protect them as Heda’s future spouse, while they pledged to serve her as such, but no blood was drawn. Only the Heda could take a clan leader’s life and their life could only be pledged to the Commander of the Blood. And then Clarke remembered something Brigid had taught her and what Lexa had said about the weapon she had made for Clarke, and so the Sky girl added something spontaneously at the end of her pledge.

“As Heda’s future one, I pledge to try to fix the things that get broken, to build things that make us stronger, to care for the weak and heal the sick to give them a longer life, to bring a merciful death to those whose fight is over, and to love you like my people. That is my oath to you,” the passionate girl from the sky said.

The girl who had once believe love was not weakness and was beginning to believe it again and wouldn’t hide it even if the people on the ground believed it was weakness. The girl who was driven to fix everything for everyone, whose instinct told her to take care of everyone first like her mother once told her, and who was now finding and embracing her place in the world. And that place was next to Lexa, who’d helped her see that the nature of her heart that drove her to do that was not a burden but a gift that could do good for a higher purpose, for all of them, for all their people.
Lexa looked at Clarke with a slowly widening smile, pride and unhidden tenderness in her eyes as she fixed her gaze on Clarke’s, filling the blonde girl’s chest with an electrifying thrill. And this time, Clarke didn’t miss it. She didn’t miss a second when Lexa’s big, bright eyes flitted down and fixed themselves on her lips, her own mouth parting just slightly and swallowing, almost imperceptibly swaying towards her, and then slowly dragging her eyes up again to meet Clarke’s. A tiny curve of her lips as she held her gaze was an indication she knew Clarke had seen her and was making no effort to conceal it. Clarke’s heart jumped, and she felt her cheeks heat up, the memory of Lexa’s mouth on hers still so fresh and the hunger that had colored her gaze just now evident.

The people in the square had started filtering out with the end of the ceremony, while Lexa had zoned out everything and had eyes only focused on Clarke. She fully turned towards her and stepped close, making Clarke almost step back startled and flustered. She took Clarke’s hand in each of hers and brought one up to her lips and kissed it gently and then the other, then placed both over her chest right above her heart and kept them there. She didn’t say anything, only looked at Clarke with pure affection brimming from her eyes, more open and overt than ever, that gave Clarke something she hadn’t dare to before: hope.

Their kiss last night had washed away all the doubts that had been placed there when Lexa had told her she would never share her bed. The attraction, the desire was not one-sided. She knew that now, after swallowing her sighs and shuddered breaths, her hungry mouth, her demanding hands, and it had to be something else holding her back. But there had also been an undeniable emotion in her eyes and in her kisses of the night, and now, in the light of the day it was even more unmistakable. It made hope bloom in Clarke’s heart, that maybe, just maybe Lexa could one day love her too.

Because Clarke Griffin of the Sky People was completely, passionately, incandescently, inescapably, head over heels, in love with Lexa kom Trikru.

Neither remembered the words of the Blinka the first day she had met Clarke when the Gon Ogeda was proposed, when she told Lexa she would find herself in front of a boulder she though was unpassable only to realize there was never a boulder in the first place. If they did, they wouldn’t be sure if this had meant Boudalan’s allegiance or the insurmountable obstacle and division Lexa had thought disarming Skaikru would cause with Clarke. If the beautiful breakthrough between them by the lake had been foretold by the old Eye or if it was mere coincidence of words. When Sybil herself did remember, as she watched them after the ceremony, she chuckled by herself and swallowed an ‘I told you so’ while she smiled at the bashful and loving looks Heda and Wanheda shared between each other.

They left not long after, though reluctantly, not wanting to leave the beautiful Boudalan, but they had little time to complete their travels. Before saying their goodbyes, they walked hand-in-hand around the square one last time, taking some food for the road, and looking for their little furry friend who had spent her days in the fields chasing after unamused sheep.

Sybil and Nuru, the Boudalan Blinka and Nyanga to her people, surveyed them from a distance as
they strolled together.

“See it now,” the Nyanga stated, pensive.

She turned to look at Sybil who hummed in agreement.

“I’d never thought I’d see the day,” she answered back.

“Do you know what they are calling her?” she asked, her eyes trained on the blonde leader.

“What?”

“Shumba Yengoni,” she replied, her smile broadening.

When Sybil frowned, not fluent in their language and knowing only one of the words, Nuru translated.

“The Lion of Mercy.”

“I thought we agreed to not meet face to face again. It is too great a risk.”

“I needed your assurance you were all still committed to this. This will be the last time before we strike,” a woman said calmly, her voice sounding eerie in the dim cave, lit only by a few torches.

“I say we strike now! End it all! The sooner we do it, the sooner I can squeeze the life out of that bitch and bathe in her blood!” an angry figure spat.

“Your impatience has already cost us. We will follow the plan, as agreed,” the woman retorted with thinly veiled disgust.

“I agree. Strike now when she least expects it. We kill her and everything falls. I’ll keep that little Sky whore for myself,” a massive man with a shaved head and a shotgun with a sawed-off barrel strapped at his back, chuckled with derision.

“Do that and I will cut your cock and feed it to the pigs,” the woman hissed with a steely voice. “Our cause is to end the heretic Heda who would raise herself above our clans and to bring back our old ways when blood demanded blood, not to bring dishonorable savagery. If I learn of your people or anyone else shaming our cause, I will tear them limb by limb myself, is that understood?” she thundered.

He only grumbled annoyed.

Two other figures had been silent through all of it.

“So we stay the course,” one finally said, calmly.
“And she will never know what hit her,” the other sneered.

“Any news from the Serpent in the Sand?”

At that moment, as if materializing from thin air, the last figure emerged from a shadowed corner, surprising most of them. The woman smiled wickedly as she stepped into the light.

“We are with you. Sankru will join the cause. And Heda Lexa will fall!”
Chapter End Notes

Check my tumblr later for some trivia and origin names about this chapter. https://girl-with-a-quill.tumblr.com

I have zero computer/design skills, so I made the map with power point and my shaky s-pen XD. Hope it's not too terrible looking LOL. I will be adding places and things to the map to it as they travel, revealing the places as they themselves get there. For now, it only has places already mentioned.

Btw, sorry if I made any mistakes in Shona or any of the other languages. They're also supposed to have merged with each other and why it has mixed words with Ndebele or Swahili.

Anywaysss, I LOVE reading your reactions and comments about this fic, so let me know what you thought! :)
Chapter 8: The Quill-Maker and the Seven Daughters of Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

Have you ever tried squeezing water out of a rock? That was me with inspiration lately...

p.s. I don't speak the other languages used in this chapter, so all mistakes are mine :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The blood tasted bitter and metallic as it gurgled out of her mouth when she collapsed on the forest floor.

_I want my mamma_, was Zoe Monroe’s last thought as she died.

The smell of gunpowder and the sound of shots still reverberated in the air, while a man ran away from the screams and chaos. He hid behind bushes, crouching with his back against a tree trunk. He jerkily pulled off the ragged scarf around his head and mouth with shaking hands and panted heavily.

After a few minutes of regaining his breath, he covered his face again with the scarf leaving only his ice blue eyes visible. He got up with determination and took off again.
John Murphy had one mission. Find Clarke and Lexa _kom Trikru_.

The fragrant scent of grass filled Clarke’s nose as their horses crushed the tender green long grasses in the beautiful rolling plains of the _Ingranrona_, the clan of the Plain Riders. They had left the _Boudalan_ mountains behind them and had veered northeast. They had been traveling on the endless plateau of the Great Plains for the past few days, the immense blue skies over them seeming never-ending on the horizon.

A sudden piercing whistle sounded across the plain. A long whistle followed by three short acute ones. Clarke was startled when she heard another next to her from Lexa herself. She made a series of sounds with her mouth that seemed to follow a distinct pattern and carried across the distance. Before she could ask what was happening, a thunderous rumble resounded all around. Seemingly out of nowhere, two huge groups of horsemen came at them at full speed from each of the sides of their small caravan, the hooves making the air itself rattle and a cacophony of whistles, hoots and hollers adding to the rumbling noise.

A wide-eyed Clarke looked at Lexa only to find her moving her horse next to hers already and grabbing Clarke’s reins. For a second Clarke thought the horsemen would crash against them on both sides. At the last moment, however, they changed directions and flanked them, and their entire caravan jumped into full speed with them. _Tombon Faya_, her capricious and misbehaving mare, suddenly took off with utter abandon, like she had been electrified. In a matter of seconds, she had flown to the head of the group at breakneck speed and Clarke could do nothing but hold on for dear life.

Lexa, however, was right next to her, having anticipated the reaction, her hand in a vice grip on Clarke’s reins, her own trusted bossy _Stah Wocha_ edging _Tombon_ out to keep her from going fully out of control. Rather than seeing worry etched on Lexa’s face though, she saw a wide smile. She looked so free, and happy and untamed, with her hair flowing wildly in the wind and eyes blazing with daring excitement, galloping carefree next to Clarke.

Clarke fell a little more in love at the sight but that was a daily occurrence now, that hopeless and never-ending falling that seemed as immense as the skies above them. So she smiled in return, letting the feeling wash over her and letting the exhilaration of riding at full speed and unrestrained with Lexa, take over her.

That’s also when Clarke realized the whistles and hoots and hollers hadn’t been an attack but sounds of jubilation and welcome. And as she remembered being told, a entire language made only of whistling that the _Ingranrona_ cavalry riders used across the plains.

The welcome was soon being echoed back at them as they came upon a thicket of pine trees and the edges of a sprawling city. And smack dab in the middle of them was a sight that tore all breath from Clarke’s lungs.

An enormous rocky outcrop stood out from the trees, like a round jutting mountain that had been placed there in the middle of the otherwise flat plains. But it wasn’t a normal mountain. It was a massive, sandy-colored granite hill topped by a colossal figure sculpted from the mountain itself in the shape of a long-haired warrior on a running stallion, his arm outstretched and a finger pointing...
Lexa slowed their horses down to a gentle walk and turned to her.


The had finally arrived at the great border city of the Plain Riders.

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**May 7th, 2072 – Somewhere along route KS-49**

“You know, you shouldn’t really be hitchhiking with strangers. It’s not safe,” the older girl behind the wheel of the rusty pick-up truck said.

“And you shouldn’t tell people you have money. They’ll steal from you,” the young boy offered with an easy smile.

The pair of hitchhikers had blurted out they could pay for the ride and had even taken out a stuffed wallet to prove it when the truck had stopped in front of them. They had been waiting on the side of the road a few paces from the exit of the gas station, looking lost and standing out like sore thumbs. The boy wore black pants and a white shirt, with suspenders and a straw hat on his sandy blond locks. The girl had on a blue and black long-sleeved dress and a white bonnet on her straw-blond hair. Each carried a heavy leather backpack and nervous grey eyes on their freckle-peppered faces.

“I know,” Sadie, the blonde girl said, blushing in embarrassment. “But you... you aren’t strangers. Not completely. I saw you at the gas station. I heard you saying you were going on a trip. That’s why we decided to ask you,” she stammered slightly in her thick accent.

At their puzzled stare, she amended.

“I saw you some weeks ago. At the Repentance Ceremony,” she explained. “Papa said you more like us than the English. That you took care of the land and believed in family and community like us. He said... he said you were good people.”

The older girl nodded in understanding.

Two months earlier, several Amish communities and members of the Cheyenne tribes in Oklahoma and Kansas from the reservations in the area had come together, as part of a series of Repentance events that had been going on over the years in different states with Native American groups. The Amish bishop presiding over the ceremony that day had told the audience that when the Amish had come to the colonies, they preached a pacifist philosophy and rejected all violence, but had stood by and had done nothing when they saw the atrocities committed against the natives. They had benefited even, taking the land they had been pushed out of. ‘Could they truly be people of peace if
they had let that happen without intervening,’ the bishop questioned solemnly on that cloudy day and had then asked for forgiveness.

“I’m Asha,” the driver finally introduced herself, looking at the blonde through the rear-view mirror. “These are the twins, my brother and sister,” she motioned to the two 15-year-olds next to her on the front bench seat. The twins had turned towards the back since they had gotten in the truck, their chins on the seat, looking in fascination at them.

“I’m Blossom,” one of the twins said.

“I’m John. John Looks Twice,” the boy said with charming grin and a wink, his hair in a loose ponytail under an old baseball cap that he wore backwards.

Sadie giggled silently at his antics.

“I’m Sadie. Sadie Hochstetler. This is my brother Samuel,” the Amish girl replied. “It is very nice to meet you.”

“What did you mean by the English?” Blossom asked curiously.


“So where are you guys headed?” Asha asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sadie replied with a furrowed brow.

“You don’t know where you’re going?” Asha puzzled.

“Samuel just started his Rumspringa. He wanted to leave the community and I just knew that he’d get in trouble if he went by himself.”

“I can take care of myself just fine,” Samuel protested.

“What’s that?” John Looks Twice asked.

“When we turn 16 and until we get baptized, we can explore the outside world without our parents always nagging us,” Samuel offered, rolling his eyes when he mentioned his parents. “My friends they all stay in the community and just party around the woods, but I wanted to see everything!” he added excited.

“I haven’t been baptized yet either, so when I caught him packing last night, I decided to come with him. Make sure he doesn’t get killed or something. Until we go back.”

“If I go back,” he grinned.

“We don’t have a plan. I just took my savings and packed. Then we saw you at the store,” she shrugged.

“Where are you going?” Samuel piped up.

“We’re going all the way to South Dakota. Think we might make it there by tonight. There’s an annual gathering of Cheyenne nations there, at the Crazy Horse Memorial.”

“What’s that?”
“You know Mount Rushmore?”

At the blank faces on Sadie and Samuel’s faces, Blossom tried again.

“You know, where the faces of presidents are carved on a mountain?”

They shook their heads, clueless. They were from one of the most orthodox Old Amish orders that shunned all technology and had minimal contact with the outside world.

“Well, a few miles away from Mt. Rushmore there is similar monument. Crazy Horse. He was a Lakota chief but the memorial was built to celebrate all Native American cultures. Northern Cheyenne come down from Montana and we Southern Cheyenne go up from Oklahoma and meet there. We reunite and celebrate. Dance. Eat. It’s one of our biggest powwows and this year it starts tomorrow, on Mother’s Day! So it’s gonna be bigger!” Blossom’s face lighting up as she explained.

“And the twins perform. Blossom was Little Cheyenne Princess last year at home,” Asha smiled. “Since I was on break from college, I got stuck baby-sitting these two clowns for this trip.”

“You dance?” Sadie asked with a widening smile.

“We sing and dance, but my favorite part is reciting the legends,” Blossom answered with bright eyes. “John just likes to pretend he’s a warrior.”

“I am a warrior,” he puffed his chest exaggeratedly making an angry face only to dissolve in laughter with his twin sister.

“Better than just telling legends and old stories,” he joked just to tease her.

“They’re not just stories,” Blossom countered. “It’s our heritage. Our history. If we have that, we’re never truly poor, or alone or lost. It’s always there to guide us.”

“Can we… can we go with you?” Sadie asked hesitantly.

Asha could see the mix of hope and fear in both the siblings’ eyes. She couldn’t imagine living such a sheltered and relatively innocent life and suddenly be out in a chaotic, different and unforgiving world. She knew how easily two kids could get lost and swallowed up in a bigger city. How dangerous it could be.

“Sure,” she replied kindly. “You’ll be more than welcome with us.”

Everybody ran. Some ran to their cars and drove off. Most took refuge inside the welcome center, the museum, the gift shop and the other small facilities around the visitor complex at the Crazy Horse Memorial.

They had arrived the night before and had woken up early to explore the place on that sunny Mother’s Day. The memorial was brimming with people, music, dancers in bright feathered costumes scurrying towards the outdoor arena and food stalls on one side of the huge parking lot. When suddenly the ground had shaken. Rumbled violently and for far longer than it would if it were an earthquake. They had seen white flashes in the distant horizon. Sirens had gone off
somewhere far away. The ground continued to shake while everyone crouched under tables and in corners and held on to each other crying and in panic. Pings from notifications and rings on phones started to sound after a few minutes had passed.

Conflicting information started to come in about an attack. People exclaimed in shock that New York had been bombed. Others insisted it was Los Angeles instead. Bombings in other places around the world. John Looks Twice crawled on all fours to the large flat screen that was mounted on one of the walls of the lobby and turned it on.

A black screen greeted them with a loud beeping tone blaring off. White and red letters flashed with a message from the Emergency Alert System. A computer-generated voice read the message:

**EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM**

National Authorities

Issued an

Emergency Action Notification:

**NUCLEAR THREAT WARNING**

For all U.S. Territories

Until Further Notice

The U.S. Pacific Command reports nuclear bomb impacts in the cities of New York and Los Angeles. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER.

Imminent nuclear ballistic missiles have been detected inbound for the following locations: Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia, San Antonio, San Diego, San Jose, Dallas, Austin, San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, Washington D.C., Jacksonville, Columbus, Fort Worth, Charlotte, Boston. Impact on land estimated within minutes. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER.

Stay indoors away from windows. Standby for further information from FEMA on local evacuation and fallout shelter instructions.

That had been almost a week ago. When the hours and days passed, the full horrific picture began to emerge. The internet and cell phone towers had gone dead, as did many national TV channels, but smaller local networks were still managing to transmit somehow. The bombings had happened around the world. Satellites in orbit had been shot out too. About half had left following instructions on fallout shelters and bunkers in the cities of Edgemont and Pierre. Others had been too afraid of more bombings and the radiation in the air to go out.

They had set out the conference rooms in the complex as sleeping quarters and had inventoried the food in the restaurant storages and the medicine in the small visitor’s clinic. Others had taken the
task of sealing off all windows, cracks and door seams with plastic and tape. The five teenagers had remained close together throughout it all.

When the news came that the bunkers had been targeted too in the last round of bombings, no one else talked about leaving. No one but one.

“*I need to leave,*” the increasingly panicky voice of a woman was heard in the stillness of the room. “*I need to leave now. I have to.*”

She was in her mid-forties and had frizzy, peroxided curly hair under a green casino visor hat. She was short and stocky, with nervous blue eyes and what seemed like spray-tanned skin. There was little girl in pigtails tucked at her side while her other hand clutched a gaudy looking unicorn pendant on a chain with fake pink gemstones along its tail.

“Haven’t you realized, lady?” an old man pipped up. “There is nowhere to go.”

“I need to go home.”

“He’s right. It’s too dangerous. Not only because of the bombs. Didn’t you see the news? The riots. The mobs. The groups attacking and robbing everyone,” Asha warned.

“You don’t understand. Norma Jane. I have to get to Norma Jane. My sister. I need to get her,” she said distraught in her heavy Dakotan drawl.

“Maybe she’s been evacuated somewhere safe,” Sadie offered hopefully.

“If she was in a city, I wouldn’t get my hopes up,” the old man said cynically.

When they all looked at him horrified, he continued.

“I’m a veteran. This was a planned attack. It had a pattern. First the biggest cities, then the next largest ones, and the next. Military bases, bunkers, urban centers. Don’t you see? We’re safer here than anywhere else. Look around you. Look at the map in the lobby. We’re in the middle of nowhere,” he gesticulated. “Only national parks and reservations for hundreds of miles all around us. No targets of value. Farther away from the radiation than anywhere else.”

“Rapid City,” she shook her head. “We live in Rapid City. It’s small. Just 70 thousand people. Maybe… maybe it wasn’t hit. The station, KCLO, that was still broadcasting. It was from there,” she said stubbornly.

“We want to go too,” Sadie finally said. “Samuel and I. We have to go back to our community. Help our family.”

“We can’t!” Asha insisted. “Not now, but we will go. When things settle down. We don’t know what else is happening or will happen out there. We need to stay put for now. We need to plan it, but we will go. For our parents. For yours. And for your sister, lady. I promise.”

“I can’t wait. I can’t wait. You don’t understand. Norma Jane. She’s sick… she had surgery. I asked my neighbor to watch over her. Lilith really wanted to see the festival and it was just supposed to be a day trip. I can’t leave her alone.”

“Maybe your neighbor is taking care of her then,” Blossom tried to comfort her.

“He’s a bastard. I had to give him a fifty just to watch her for the day. He probably ran. Left her. She’s in a wheelchair.” The blonde lady wiped her tears and stood up. “I’m going.”
The teens followed her in an attempt to change her mind.

“Maybe she was evacuated. It’s too dangerous. For you and your daughter. You heard what that mister said,” the always kind Sadie pleaded. “This is the safest place for now.”

“Then I’ll come back here. But I have to go get her.”

“Lady…”

“Nadine. My name is Nadine.”

“Nadine. Just wait. We’ll go all together. Maybe in a few weeks…”

“No. You don’t get it. She’s my sister. She… when our mother died, I was just 9 years old. She was still in high school, but she took care of me. She dropped out and worked three jobs just to feed us both. She was like a mother to me. When mom died, Norma Jane gave me this necklace and promised me to always look out for me. And she has. All my life. Now it’s my turn. I can’t leave her, you see. I owe everything to her,” she said tightly, more tears falling down her cheeks.

The old veteran came over to the group huddled near the door.

“Here.” He lifted one of his pant legs and took a small revolver strapped to his ankle. He handed it to Nadine. “The red dot means it’s unlocked. Remember to always aim for the head.” And then left without another word.

Blossom suddenly took off for the museum section and came back a minute later. She had a big knife she had taken from one of the exhibition glass cabinets and a tourist map from the lobby. She handed them to Nadine in silence.

“Stay off the main roads. If you get lost, follow the direction of sunset to get back,” Asha said with resignation.

“You’re right. It’s too risky for Lilith. Will you…” she swallowed hard. “Will you please take care of her for me, while we get back?” she asked with a pleading voice.

Asha just nodded, a knot in her throat. John and Samuel, who had been entertaining the toddler with jokes and games during the last few days, looked at each other and went to take her from Nadine’s arms. They led her to the restaurant where they had been building forts with her with the tablecloths.

Asha, Blossom and Sadie took Nadine to the kitchen and proceeded to cover her, as best they could in plastic bags and tape. One of the many alert messages had told people to completely cover themselves in plastic in the event they had to go out and wash themselves in water and soap afterwards to decontaminate from any radiated particles in the dust. Then they took turns hugging the woman and watched her leave through one of the back doors to her small car.

Nadine didn’t come back.

Nadine didn’t come back for four weeks.

Until one late afternoon she appeared on the small winding road leading to the mountain complex.
She was on foot, covered in grime, dirt and dried blood. She was wearing the same clothes she had on the day she left, bits of the plastic cover still stuck to her with the tape. She had lost one shoe and was walking on a bloodied socked foot. She was pushing a wheelchair, an older large lady sitting on it. It was Norma Jane. The teens and a few of the people ran to help her.

Their hearts nearly stopped when they saw them up close. Nadine’s face had scratches all over and half of it was covered in purplish yellowish bruises, with one eye swollen shut and a split lip. A bruise in the shape of a hand was visible closed around her neck. A deep gash marked her neck where her necklace had been ripped off. She was haggard and could barely stand up, hunched to one side, a blackened bruise on her side where part of her shirt was torn out. Norma Jane, still in a nightgown, was dirty and had a hand splint made out of a branch but seemed otherwise unhurt.

The three girls had helped bathe and feed them that night, seeing the extent of the damage on Nadine’s body. Her haunted eyes and quiet sobs for the next nights were a confirmation of just what had happened to her. What had been done to her. Their heart broke for her but it also filled with admiration for her bravery.

One night, a few days later, when the teens had been sitting with her, keeping the two women company and cradling Lilith to sleep, Nadine spoke up.

“We let this happen,” she whispered.

“What?”

“All of it. Everything. We let ourselves live in a world where it was okay for people to screw over others and everyone let it happen. We just sat and wanted someone else to solve everything for us. The police, a judge, the government and then shrugged when they never did. And everyday everyone was getting screwed over, crushed, robbed, festering in hate, until the last straw broke the camel’s back and the whole world spun out of control. It’s so much hate and rage out there right now. They’re just hacking away at anyone that’s left.” She swallowed and reflexively reached out to the necklace that was no longer there.

“I’m not much of a religious person, but I do believe in one thing. Eye for an eye. If that little scumbag that always cuts in front of you and takes your parking space at the supermarket, if you could smack him upside the head and make him pay for it, he would never become a monster when he grows up. If people could take justice in their own hands and teach each asshole a lesson, the world would be a better place. But we all let ourselves get screwed over, snacked down. We let people become nasty. This is the price we’re paying. All this. If Mamma Earth blowing up in our face on her birthday isn’t some fuck you divine sign, I don’t know what is,” she coughed and held her side, wheezing a bit. “If you ever find that bastard that did this to me, promise me, you’ll make him pay. Promise me, you won’t let people get nasty again,” she flitted her feverish eyes around looking at all the kids.

“You should rest, Nadine,” Sadie said sadly. Nadine had been rambling with a high fever for the past few hours.

“At least I got my sister back, like I promised. Those animals couldn’t get to her. We promised mom we’d take care of each other and we did, didn’t we, Norma?” she said while squeezing her sister’s hand. “We’re safe now. We’re safe.”

Nadine died in the early hours of the morning.

She had succumbed to her internal injuries. The clinic only had a first aid kit and basic medicine for small injuries for the visitors. There had only been a nurse and a med intern among the group
of survivors and Nadine would’ve needed extensive surgery to save her. Norma Jane died hours later, clinging to her hand. From sadness. From the illness she already had. No one knew. But the sisters both died safe, together, hand in hand, surrounded by people and love.

But they decided that day to never let anything like this ever happen again. They would never let anyone take anything or anyone from them.

It took them several months to plan their rescue mission led by Asha. They had a whole parking lot filled with vehicles from all the people that had been attending the powwow, many of them pick-up trucks, trailer homes and food trucks since they had been planning to stay there for the weeklong festivities. Many were ranchers who kept hunting rifles in their trucks. They raided the museum too, taking all the weapons that had been on display: bows and arrows, knives, tomahawk axes and buffalo jawbone clubs.

Most stayed behind to guard their camp. A small group of 30 formed a caravan with the biggest vehicles, armed to the teeth and started their journey south, taking only smaller roads and often traveling only at night. It took them a week to arrive to the reservation where Asha’s family lived. Not many people were left, having taken off and dispersed in the general panic. Asha’s grandmother, mother and cousins were still there. As well as a few dozen families. They took the additional trucks they found, including several cattle flatbeds and loaded them with the horses that had been abandoned from the couple of horse ranches on the reservation. They continued making their way south and were only surprisingly attacked twice. Both groups of robbers were dispatched quickly and ruthlessly.

When they finally arrived at the Amish community, they thought they had arrived too late. A layer of dust and silence covered everything. No one could be seen and the crops had dried.

Sadie and Samuel still got out of the car and ran to their house, calling out ‘papa’, ‘mama’, followed by Asha and some of her armed Cheyenne friends.

They found them in the cellar. All of them. Alive and huddled in silence thinking it was a band of marauders. They hugged and cried, disbelieving they had been reunited. When the father looked over his kids’ shoulders and saw Asha and the rest, he recognized some of their faces.

“We couldn’t just standby and do nothing,” the young woman said smiling, echoing the words of their bishop in what felt like another lifetime.

The man burst into tears and came to hug her too.

Nearly the entire community was still there. All hiding in their cellars eating from their canned reserves and biding their time.

They loaded every single thing they could in the caravan of vehicles. Farm equipment, smelting and wood machines, all their food stores and grains, chicken, clothes, oil lamps and anything they knew they would need. They took every single buggy and horse-drawn cart they could drive, even if it meant the caravan would go back slowly, but they knew it was the only way they would be able to make it with such a large group of survivors.

All in all, between those back at Crazy Horse, the ones rescued at the reservation and at the Amish community, they would be nearly a 900 strong group, fighting together to survive in their new world.
When Asha’s had been born, to a depressed unemployed father who had drunk himself to death and a mother who worked as a waitress to keep the leaky trailer roof over their heads, her mother had sworn to herself that her daughter would have a different life. That she would send her to college and that she would finally break the cycle and change their future. She named her Asha. In their language it meant ‘Hope.’

And it was Hope that had come to save them, all of them, on those fateful days at the end of the world. And Hope that led them to the beginning of a new one.

The feisty clan leader, Rohana, and several chieftains had been waiting for them at the entrance to greet them.

Rohana’s eyes had shined with admiration when she saw the two leaders at the head of the caravan galloping at great speed approaching the city. Lexa’s horse had always been a daunting sight to behold. It was a huge, powerfully built, beautiful black Friesian with a wild curly mane and feathery long hair above its hooves. It was imposing and elegant with one of the most graceful gaits she had ever seen, trained in the Shallow Valley style by Lexa herself. Only Lexa’s father’s clan bred those horses and had very peculiar training styles, at least in Rohana’s eyes. Clarke on the other hand had been riding the white feral mare Rohana herself had gifted Lexa, after her people had found it roaming alone in the wild without a herd. It wasn’t a mustang like the other plain horses. It was a strange breed, beautiful and long-limbed, but irascible, jumpy and stubborn as a mule. No one had been able to tame it. It was a surprise to see the sky girl on it.

They entered the city on foot, their horses taken to be looked after. They were told the matter of the union was to be addressed the next day and a ritual of sorts had been arranged specifically for Clarke before the clan council made a decision about the Badannes-de, or the pledging of loyalty. Today they wanted to take advantage of Heda’s presence and pick her brain about a series of internal clan affairs, to which they invited Clarke out of politeness, though she had no formal role in those discussions, or she could explore the city if she preferred. Out of respect, Clarke declined the invitation to the clan council and decided instead to see the sights.

Sybil excused herself as well. The journey had been heavy on her and she went to rest.

Indra joined Clarke on her exploration, wanting to spread her legs after so many hours on a horse. Ryder walked behind them, guarding Clarke as always and secretly delighted as this was one of his favorite places in the Kongeda for the food and for other reasons.

The border town was sprawling city that wrapped all around the round mountain and was loosely organized in a series of rings or zones. Its more solid and bigger houses and halls made of wooden planks were located at the base of the mountain with their backs to it providing them natural protection. Smaller dwellings made up the next ring, crisscrossed with dirt roads filled with horse-drawn buggies and carriages also made of wood, unlike the metallic and haphazardly welded carts she had seen in Trikru. The next ring was an assortment of stalls and alleyways. Woodworkers sanding wheels, blacksmiths repairing horseshoes, people spinning yarn, weavers making cloth on large looms, vendors selling cheeses and breads and a variety of jarred, pickled vegetables, jams and drying strings of sausages and meats. At this point, the city faded into sparsely inhabited grassy lands with barns and farmhouses. And finally, an outer ring of tightly packed tents. Teepees to be exact. Beautiful teepees made of painted and embroidered deerskin depicting moving horses, buffalos and birds, held up by thin wooden poles. It was such a contrast to the rest of the city,
much like their inhabitants.

“They look… so different,” Clarke thought out loud, having noticed the visual clash since she had entered the city.

Some of the Ingranrona dressed in such simple mostly black clothes and wore nothing but a straw hat or a neat cloth tied on their head, their hair in tight buns. And nothing else. No adornments or embellishments. While the other half was an explosion of color, feathers and beads and beautifully embroidered clothes covered in animal shapes, lines and buffalo hides. Their faces had a variety of paints and their hair was long and usually worn in thick braids or puffed up along the center like the mane of a horse, like Rohana wore hers.

“Steda,” Indra surprised her by saying, motioning with her chin to the plainer looking ones. “The mish settlers. The only ones who have cities and stay there. The ones that build and do all this,” she gestured around them to the stalls with preserved food and craftsmen.

“Romeda,” she pointed to group passing by with colorful feathers. “Those who roam.”

It was such a strange occurrence for Indra to address her or offer any explanation unless she asked, insistently. Even know, it wasn’t a detailed explanation like Lexa would’ve given her, but she appreciated it, nonetheless.

She did know the Ingranrona were mostly nomadic, following the migrations of their hunt and that only small number of fixed settlements existed. She didn’t they would be so distinctive and varied. It was such a wonder to behold.

“Why do they dress so differently though?” she attempted, wondering if Indra would continue.

“The romeda dress like the birds and the bison who wander too,” she replied succinctly. Well, at least she was trying.

When she saw Clarke still sported an arched eyebrow, Indra swallowed a sigh. She would never understand the Skaikru’s penchant for incessant talking, but she guessed the more Clarke understood the better it would be if she was going to be Heda’s bonded.

“She is a Hidden Grass.” She used her fingers to motion paint lines on her face, Clarke following her gaze to a young woman with thick white and black lines adorning her face. “The hunters’ order. It helps them hide in the long grasses.”

“A Lilitu, a cavalry warrior.” She put her hand over her mouth, while staring at several warriors getting on their horses, a black handprint painted over their mouths, the rest of their face painted red or white, buffalo jawbone clubs hanging from their waist. It was an intimidating sight. “I silence you with death,” she explained the handprint.


“Nahkôheso, weren’t you going to say hello to me?”

(Little Bear)

A short woman with dark, roguish eyes and small grey feathers in her braids had said in a sweet teasing voice, stepping out of a big tent.
Clarke turned around only to witness something she had never seen before in all this time. Ryder had stopped mid stride, a slow wide smile stretching on his face as he turned to the woman. Clarke had been pretty sure, until then, that he was incapable of smiling or of any other expression other than the stoic face and monosyllabic prompts he’d give her when they sparred.

“My sweet dove,” he said, his eyes sparkling with delight.

Clarke couldn’t help but smile for him.

“I was coming to find you later,” he assured.

“Go,” Indra gave him permission.

“But Wanheda…” he tried. He was her main bodyguard after all.

“Is well guarded,” Indra interrupted, her gaze falling on two additional Polis guards that had been shadowing them all this time.

“And Heda told me to give you leave as soon as your… dove… found you,” Indra said. There was almost… almost amusement in her expression.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Clarke could’ve sworn Ryder blushed and then looked at Clarke.

She only nodded, pressing her lips, trying not to laugh.

He bent his head in acquiescence and murmured a ’mochof’ before turning around and then engulfing the small woman in his huge arms and entering her tent.

Indra and Clarke continued walking around, Clarke sometimes asking something and Indra trying hard not being impatient. When the sun started to come down, one of Rohana’s guard found them and led them to their lodgings.

Clarke was taken to a beautiful teepee with a vast interior. There was a fire pit in the middle and a bed covered in dark fur at the end, as well as long soft seats on each side around the fire.

A tray of food was brought in for her. It had a bowl of thick soup of bison meat, corn and squash and a buttery, fluffy ball of pastry filled with berry jam. Clarke was famished and her mouth watered over it, but she wanted to wait for Lexa.

When she asked the boy who brought her the food about Lexa, he told her she was still in a meeting with clan chieftains but that food had been taken to them. He then went about filling a round tub-like basin with fresh water, made of hardened leather and rings of wood.

Clarke devoured her food and then sank in the small contraption and scrubbed herself of all the grime of their travel. She sighed in relief and hoped Lexa would soon come back.

“Did you always know you wanted to be a doctor?”

“I did. Why, honey?”
“Our skills teacher said we need to choose our occupation soon, so we can start our apprenticeships,” the small blonde girl said.

“I thought you’d want to be an engineer, like your dad?” Abby said, knowing Clarke loved to watch him tinker with odd pieces he’d sometimes bring home.

Clarke shook her head and shrugged.

“So maybe a doctor, like me?” she tried.

“Why did you want to be one?” she asked looking up earnestly from under golden eyelashes and cheeks that still hadn’t lost the roundness of childhood.

“Well, Griffins have always been doctors. There’s always been a Griffin doctor on the Ark, but even before. Gramps said it’s how we got our name in the first place.”

The little girl scrunched her eyebrows curiously.

Abby picked her up and set her on her lap, running her hand over her tresses.

“You know what a griffin is?”

“Well, us.”

Abby chuckled.

“Well, yes. Not the family name through. A griffin. It’s an animal. Part lion, part eagle.”

Clarke widened her eyes.

“It wasn’t a real animal, but people thought they existed. They believed griffins guarded precious treasures, gold and such, and that their claws or feathers could cure diseases because they were magical. Gramps said the first of our family name was a doctor and they took the name because that’s what they wanted to do, to heal people.”

“Then why isn’t dad a doctor?”

“Cause he’s from the Griffins from Mecha station. I’m a Griffin from Alpha. We have the same name and are distant, distant relatives but not the same.” Abby didn’t want to go into detail.

They were distant relations, 20 generations to be exact, but enough that when they met and told each other their names they knew they could never conceive a child together. No one did on the anymore Ark, with the gene pool so small and genetic mutations and inbreeding a real problem. That’s what the Gen Lab’s sole purpose was now, screening and authorizing only ‘non-conflicting’ fertilizations between people that showed no intersected genetic ancestry. The lab was the only thing left from the Colony Population Program after the Polaris station – carrying most of their precious genetic cargo with hundreds of thousands of new high-radiation resistant genomes –, had been blasted out of the sky. It was the reason a Griffin had been on board the Ark in the first place, to run the program, and had been on Alpha beforehand to set up the lab while the cargo was brought by Polaris. It’s why she now ran it and was one of the few people on the entire Ark who knew about Polaris. It’s why, when they decided to have a child, instead of using a random non-conflicting sample the system matched her with from others Ark inhabitants when spouses were genetically related, even distantly, Abby found something else in the sample vault. One day she might tell Clarke, but not today.
So Abby continued, “But it really doesn’t matter, being a doctor or something else. What people misunderstood is that the treasure griffins guarded wasn’t gold or riches. It was life. And that our true calling as Griffins. To take care of people. Of life.”

She caressed her daughter’s cheek.

“Whatver you do, honey, know that I will always be proud of you. Because I know that’s what in your heart too,” she reassured, bopping her nose with her finger and smiling at her.

“How do you know?”

“A mother always knows.”

The most impossibly endearing sight greeted her when she woke up.

Lexa sat on a small stool and was cleaning off the last remnants of her kohl but could barely keep her eyes open from pure exhaustion. She was blinking heavily and tiredly wiping her eyelids. It made the blonde smile fondly at the sight.

Clarke could see she had already washed up, her leather roll of brushes and a water basing set out in front of her and had changed into her sleeping clothes. Much to Clarke’s chagrin, Lexa didn’t wear her dramatic and revealing nightgowns when they traveled but kept a clean set of soft riding pants and thin long-sleeves just for sleep. If their camp was attacked and they had to fight or flee, it was more practical. And this way she didn’t have to sleep in dusty, sweaty clothes from a full day of riding.

“Here, let me help you,” Clarke said softly and went to sit in front of her, taking the wet cloth Lexa was using into her hand.

“Hey,” Lexa whispered and smiled, looking up at Clarke.

She had been surprised and happy when she had seen the blonde sleeping in her tent and had been trying to move around quietly to not wake her up.

Clarke took her chin in one hand and with her other she gently passed the cloth on her skin. Lexa closed her eyes for a second and hummed, then opened them again. Her big beautiful eyes were glassy and unfocused with sleep, but they were flitting over Clarke’s face intently. Slowly. Unguardedly.

Clarke’s heart fluttered and she felt the heat rising to her face.

Lexa’s gaze then fixated on blue eyes and Clarke smiled in the stretching silence. Lexa’s lips curled up in response, a light dusting of pink spreading on the apple of her cheeks and she looked down for a second. Clarke’s smile widened further, and a sigh got trapped in her chest.

“There,” she whispered in the small space between them, finishing and putting down the cloth. “Now go to bed. You haven’t slept since we left Boudalan.”

Ever since they had left the Rock Line clan, Lexa had accelerated their pace and extended their riding until late at night. They didn’t even set tents and instead slept under the stars so they could
be on their way again in the early hours of the morning. Lexa had been more worried and weary than usual and wanted to do their tour of all clans in as little time as possible, given everything that was happening and the distinct possibility that they were being followed. Usually, whenever they set camp, Lexa had always been the first to check the perimeter and keep the first watch of the night and was the first to do the same at first light. On this leg of their journey, however, she had been on permanent alert and kept watch nearly all night without any sleep, and had only relented during the time reserved for Clarke’s training, which she faithfully maintained daily.

Now Lexa frowned at the suggestion and Clarke could’ve sworn seeing a hint of a pout.

“No. Not yet,” she refused quietly, a stubborn flash in her eyes.

“We’re safe here,” Clarke reminded her.

They were in the thick of teepees around the city reserved for the cavalry, next to Rohana’s own, with guards posted all around. She personally would’ve felt safer in the houses at the base of the mountain where Sybil was staying, but the Plain Rider leader had offered them her two best teepees set out just for them.

“I… it’s not…”, she frowned again. “I haven’t seen you all day. I haven’t seen you in days,” she said in a small voice, that ghost of a pout again on her lips.

Clarke couldn’t help but smile again, warmth spreading in her chest realizing why Lexa didn’t want to go to sleep just yet.

“You’ve seen me every day,” she replied still but boldly reached out to take Lexa’s hand and run her thumb over her knuckles, because she too was starved for Lexa’s presence, for her touch, for just Lexa.

Since they left Boudalan, they barely had had any time to breathe and they hadn’t exchanged meaningful words or touched since their lakeside kisses. Those moments had been on Clarke’s mind every second since, replaying non-stop in her head. The feeling of Lexa’s hungry lips, the needy sounds she had breathed into her mouth, the desperate roughness of her fingers digging into her hips, the way she had deliciously ground into her before stopping. Every memory set Clarke’s body on fire. It had been driving her crazy and she couldn’t help but blush furiously every time she thought about it during the days journeying here while sneaking longing looks at Lexa. She’d also felt impossibly elated by the real affection and tenderness that had accompanied those moments. She had craved a respite from the grueling travel so they could have a moment just to themselves again.

She had no way of knowing how Lexa had felt angry and disappointed in herself for letting her guard down to the point where she had missed someone getting close enough he could’ve attack them, had it not been just a spy from the Boudalan leader. She had put Clarke at risk and had been reckless by continuing to kiss her, so lost in the moment, instead of going to check or neutralize the risk. But, even with all the guilt, it didn’t stop her from re-living those moments continually as well.

Since then a nervous almost shy tension had settled over them, filled with furtive glances and flushed cheeks.

“It’s not the same,” she complained quietly, still not meeting her eyes.

“I know… I’ve missed you too,” Clarke replied truthfully.
Lexa looked up surprised but then she reached out and took Clarke’s other hand in hers, repeating the light caressing movement.

“I’m glad I found you here in my tent,” she told her, the relief evident in her eyes.

The Plain Riders were one of the clans that believed the union between them to be real but had argued with Rohana that they still needed to follow the rules and give Clarke her own separate lodging. They were convinced Lexa had long since taken Clarke as her lover but Heda did not share her bed while sleeping, at least according to Heda customs. At least not until Gon Ogeda was completed. It was Lexa’s decision, but they would respect the custom at least in appearance.

Clarke had been disappointed when they had led her to her tent and she found out Lexa’s had been set out separately, though still just next to hers. And the council had not let go of the Commander since they had arrived. So when nightfall had come, Clarke had decided to go wait for her in Lexa’s tent and had ended up falling asleep in her furs.

“Will you stay… here?” the brunette asked tentatively after a beat.

Clarke looked to the side of the bed. Lexa followed her gaze and saw Clarke had already brought her things over.

A tiny bashful curl of her lips deepened in one corner of her mouth.

They wordlessly made their way to bed, one hand still loosely connected, Lexa blowing out all the oil lamps but one as they did so.

They got under the furs and faced each other on their sides, Lexa stifling a little yawn with the back of her hand, eyes drooping already.

“Sleep,” Clarke intimated.

The brunette shook her head.

“Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Anything.”

Lexa just wanted to spend some time with Clarke. Talk to her. Hear her voice. Feel her near. Lexa wanted to relish this brief reprieve they would have before leaving the next day yet again.

Clarke was silent for a moment.

“I’ve been thinking about my mom a lot these past days…” she trailed of.


“I guess I have been realizing a few things. Things I didn’t want to think about until now.”

“Like what?”

“I was so angry at her, I’ve been so angry at her, because of my dad, so wrapped up in my own pain, that I never stopped to think what she was going through too.”

“That she lost him too.”
Clarke nodded and exhaled a watery sigh.

“She lost the love of her life and I was all she had left, and I… all I ever did was push her away. When I think how alone she must feel and has no one…” she didn’t finish, swallowing heavily, opting to reach out and take Lexa’s hand again.

“I wanted to blame her. I needed to be angry at someone. But I always knew, deep down, she would’ve never done anything to hurt him on purpose. They loved each other so much, it was like… I was so miserable up there, but she was so happy because she had him. She was happy. She must already blame herself and I just made it worse.”

Lexa raised an eyebrow in question. Clarke had told her the broad strokes of her father’s death, but she wasn’t sure she followed.

“My mother grew up with Jaha. Their mothers were friends and they were close themselves their entire lives. She went to him as a friend, not as the Chancellor. She thought he could talk sense into my father. I don’t think she ever imagined Jaha would do what he did. She never would’ve if she did. I know that. She was just doing what she thought was needed, but I couldn’t see it until now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was like my father. I saw everything in black and white, like everything was simple. Good or bad. Right or wrong. That the people’s right to know the truth was more important than reality. Like avoiding a panic or a riot when they found out. Like waiting to see if the council could come up with solutions before revealing something so… terrible like that. My mom had been one of the leaders on the council for years. She understood that, that reality is grey and that there aren’t easy solutions or truths.”

“And you understood that when you had to take care of your people, when you came to the ground,” Lexa concluded her train of thought.

Clarke nodded.

“She was trying to prevent chaos. She was trying to take care of all of us. And instead she lost the man she loved, and I blamed her for it.”

She sighed with wet eyes, thinking of every single time her own friends had always blamed her for every decision she had ever made. And she had been doing the same to her mom. Her mom who had lost her one true love, the man who made her eyes light up every single time she saw him even after decades together. She couldn’t even fathom the pain or the guilt her mom must put on herself.

“I added to that pain.”

“Clarke, a mother knows her child better than anyone. She is part of the reason you are the way you are, why your heart is so strong. I am sure that she knows how you feel deep down and that you would never seek to hurt her or truly blame her. I am sure she understands you were in pain too.”

“And yet, there she is. Taking care of Arkadia. Taking care of everyone. Probably working herself to the bone. But I keep thinking about that moment, when the day is finally over and she goes back to her room. How alone she is. Even if someday she finds someone, a companion, she’ll never have that again. My dad used to say they were a single heart beating in two bodies. When I think of the pain of losing that, it kills me,” she said with a tight voice, her thumb coming to caress the ring she had put on Lexa’s finger.
Lexa looked to their hands and back up at the blonde’s eyes, trying to read her expression.

“Klark?” she wondered softly.

“Lexa, promise me… promise me that you’ll always come back. That you’ll always come back to me,” she asked while squeezing and clinging harder to her hand.

Lexa felt her heart hammer wildly in her chest, unable to keep hope from blooming at Clarke’s words.

“I will always come back to you, ai hafon.”

Clarke exhaled shakily at Lexa’s earnest and affectionate reply. There was so many things she wanted to say in return. One thing in particular which was constantly at the tip of her tongue but that she couldn’t bring herself to say it. She felt like if she said it the fear, the panic of losing Lexa, would be even greater. Like she’d be tempting fate to take Lexa from her if she finally voiced it out loud. That I love You that wanted to gallop out of her mouth at every moment.

“Swear to me,” she said instead.

“I swear.”

Lexa extended her hand to wipe a teardrop from Clarke’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“You should be resting and here I’m talking about sad things,” Clarke chuckled sniffling.

“Don’t be. I like everything you have to say,” she replied warmly. “You know Abby is welcome to Polis anytime. Rooms have been permanently arranged for her at the tower. And I might not always be able to go with, but you can go visit her whenever you wish. Though I would like to go too.”

“You would?”

“Of course. We might not see eye to eye. She is probably not fond of me, but I would like to get to know better the woman who helped make you… you,” she smiled. “And she is… well, she will be my nomontu.”

“Your… nomontu?” Clarke repeated, eyebrows arching, a grin widening at the term. “Your second mother?”

Lexa nodded, a humorous gleam in her eyes.

Clarke could only chuckle imagining Abby’s face if Lexa ever called her that. She laughed heartily the more she thought about it. When she looked at Lexa, she saw her pleased face. She’d purposely veered the conversation to amuse her and wash the sadness away. Her laughter tapered off into a big sigh, smile still on her lips.

They looked at each other for some silent moments, just enjoying being with each other.

Lexa’s eyes were growing heavier and more unfocused. She was fighting against sleep, trying to keep them open a little longer but exhaustion won, and her eyelids finally closed.
But Clarke was still impossibly endeared and overtaken with adoration, and she did the only thing she could. The only thing she had wanted to since that night at the lake. The one thing she knew she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

She leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to Lexa’s lips. A soft, featherlight press. The silent *I love you* she hadn’t been brave enough to voice.

Lexa slowly opened heavy-lidded, sleep-hazy eyes, a sprinkling of pink on her cheeks, surprise in her gaze. She had been drifting to sleep when she felt the warm brush of Clarke’s lips on hers. Unless she had already been dreaming? She could barely keep her eyes open, exhaustion pulling her back into its dark arms, but she desperately wanted to. She could swear she could feel the lingering imprint of Clarke’s mouth. She had to stay awake. Ask her. Or simply kiss her again.

Clarke was looking at her affectionately, a tiny smile at the corner of her mouth, eyes bright. Her only answer was to run her hand in Lexa’s hair, as if to lull her back to sleep.

“Reshop, *ai hafon,*” was the last thing Lexa heard whispered to her before she finally lost the battle to sleep.

When Clarke woke up in the morning, Lexa was no longer there at her side. Her sweet scent still lingered in the air from where she had just taken a bath, the tub not 15 feet away from where she just had been sleeping. She felt a hot rush just thinking about it. She shook herself out of the images that conjured when she heard a noise.

Someone was coming in to change the water and that was the sound that had woken her up.

She got up, washed up and got dressed and was about to leave the tent when Sybil entered.

“Clarke. Good morning,” she smiled. “I brought you this. You will need the strength for the day ahead of you,” she motioned to the plate she came in with. The smell coming off the roast sausages on the plate was delicious. They were surrounded with crunchy pickled beans and turnips, and round fried bread with sunflower seed paste on it.

“Where’s Lexa?”

“Rohana insisted on showing her some new training exercise with the cavalry,” she waved away. “Come. Sit.”

She had brought enough for the two of them and they ate quietly at first, but Clarke could tell her visit had a purpose.

“What exactly do I have to do today?”

“Sweet Medicine, their *blinka,* wants to see you. She wants to gage who you really are. *Ingranrona* are very wary and suspicious of outsiders.”

“So she just wants to talk?”

“Yes and no. She will perform a special ceremony,” Sybil demurred, trying to figure out a way the sky girl would understand it. “To enter the spirit realm and see your true nature.”
Clarke furrowed her brows, not sure what to expect.

October 2072

On the night that they returned to Crazy Horse with the ones they rescued, everyone busily set up camp for the new arrivals. There wasn’t enough space in the small buildings of the visitor’s complex, so they once again raided the museum and whatever they found in storage. Teepee relics that had been on display, tarps and camping gear and started erecting a campsite at the base of the mountain.

Tired but relieved, they finally all sat around a large bonfire. There were still explosions and sound of artillery that could be heard in the distance sporadically, but this was their life now. The five teens and Lilith huddled together, munching on some dried sausage that the Amish had unpacked and were passing around. Someone was fiddling with a flute somewhere and people quietly chatted amongst themselves.

That’s when they saw it.

At first, they thought it was another missile and everyone gasped nervously, but then they realized it couldn’t be. It was too big, massive really, to be a missile and it just kept climbing and climbing in the clear, star-filled early night sky, leaving a white plume in its trail. Everyone held their breath seeing it become smaller and smaller the higher it went.

“It’s a ship. Someone is leaving on a ship.”

“Why are they leaving us behind?” another voice cried.

“Maybe that’s Quillwork Girl again,” Blossom said jokingly, not having the energy to panic or be dejected anymore. Today had been a good day.

“Who?” Samuel asked.

“Quillwork Girl. She was the one that brought the Cheyenne people together,” Blossom replied, letting her love and enthusiasm for the old legends fill her up instead.

“She knew there were others out there that were meant to be her brothers, so she made seven beautiful outfits with colored quills and went to find them one by one,” she spoke up, seeing everyone turn her attention to her. She put on a smile and made her voice clear, just like she did for her pageants and dancing performances during their powwows.

“Quillwork Girl and her Seven Brothers became a family, the Cheyenne nation, and were happy. Until one day the ground thundered, just like it did when the bombs fells, but it was a herd of bison who came to claim her and break up the family. So they ran. One of the brothers shot a tree with a special arrow and the tree grew and grew up into the sky, just like that ship. And they climbed it and then jumped and became stars,” she pointed to the sky. “They became the Big Dipper.”

“Just like us,” Sadie smiled. “The six of us, we found each other and became a family. Isn’t that right, little sister?” she said, while stroking little Lilith’s hair.

“Well, looks like Quillwork Girl and the seventh brother left us on that ship,” John Looks Twice
He couldn’t know, of course, that the ship they had seen in the distance had been the Polaris station making a last chance, mad dash off Earth to rejoin the other twelve stations, far from the range of missiles and carrying Becca and the precious cargo Dr. Tsing had just finished at his secret lab. A lab where a very special Subject and her companions were still trapped at this exact moment in time.

“The Big Dipper has seven stars. With the quill girl, it would be eight. So where is she?” Samuel asked, confused looking up at the constellation in question.

“Maybe she stayed behind, and no one realized it,” Sadie conjectured, finding the thought incredibly sad.

“It’s just a story,” Asha smiled at them, in an attempt to bring comfort.

“Maybe they’ll come back for us one day,” Samuel said wistfully.

A decade later

“I mean no harm. Promis. Our Heda sent ai to yu.” Rite Paw explained again, a smile on her face, hands up at the request of the group she had found at the foot of a mountain shaped like horse.

“And who is this Heda?”

“The one we all falou. She sent us lukin all over. All de people left. Safe en protect dem. Bring dem together, she tel os.”

At those words, the now fully grown six youngsters looked at each other silently, remembering the story Blossom told them one night about the girl who had quilted all the people back together.

Clarke walked with Sybil a while later to the place where Sweet Medicine was waiting, a distance away at the edge of the trees. Clarke had been instructed to remove everything and only use a thin wrap around her torso. Sybil gave her a thick embroidered blanket the blonde pulled over her shoulders and held it closed over her chest with her hand, barefoot and still a bit unsure.

They arrived at a low, dome-shaped hut made of branches and animal skins. A woman, who looked ancient, was waiting for them. Her skin was the color of copper, beautifully smooth but with deep wrinkles. Her eyes had the same blind milky appearance as Sybil’s. Her hair was in two thick braids parted in the middle and a single long white feather propped at the back of her head.

The woman said nothing, only silently nodding in acknowledgment and waited for Sybil to take her leave. Once she did, the old woman started. She turned in four directions making a call to each of the four winds and the ancestors. Clarke didn’t understand their language, fosleng, the ‘tongue of the first ones’, but Sybil had told her what to expect.
The old woman then opened the flap motioning for Clarke to go in.

Inside the lodge, it was nearly pitch black, the only light the glow of red-hot rocks piled in the middle. She was instructed to sit on a skin and remove her blanket. The old woman sat opposite to her and proceeded to sprinkle the stones with shavings of cedar, sweet grass and a heady powder made of roots, and then sprinkled the stones with water using a wad of leaves tied together. Immediately the lodge started filling up with steam and the strong smell of herbs she had used. She grabbed a dear-skin drum and began beating it while she intoned a low, repeating chant.

Clarke had no idea how long Sweet Medicine had been at it. The heat, the roots and the trance-inducing singing was making her head feel like it was swimming. The darkness made her feel like she was disembodied, dispersed. She felt faint and let herself fall backwards on the skin, hoping it would make everything stop spinning.

She then lost consciousness.

Sweet Medicine stopped her drumming when she heard the girl lie down and her breathing slow down. She sprinkled the stones with more water and waited. Many mistakenly thought the spirit quest she performed in the sweat lodge was about connecting with the spirit of ancestors, though that was possible too, but it wasn’t that.

“Are you there, spirit?” Sweet Medicine asked, feeling the dizzying pull herself.

It was a moment before the voice, the eerily calm voice, came.

“Yes,” the lips of the blonde girl moved to say.

“Why are the Sky People here?”

“Their home died.”

“Will they try to take what is ours?”

“I don’t know.” A pause. “I won’t let them.”

Sweet Medicine was not expecting that answer.

“Do they mean well? Are they honorable people?”

“Some.”

“Is their leader honorable?”

“Yes. She is.”

“What are your intentions?”

“To heal.”

“Heal what?”

“What is broken… between us.”
“Us?”
“All the people. Separated. Scattered. Lost.”

“Who are you?”

“Clarke.”

“Who were you before Clarke?”

The old woman could see the blonde’s faint silhouette in the red light of the hot stones. The girl paused; her brow knitted.

“Nowhere. I was… nowhere. I wasn’t.”

“Focus. What do you see before this life?”


“Go back. Before the darkness,” the old woman tried, puzzled at this. It was rare to find a new soul. Most had lived many lives already and she had seen it in the blonde girl’s eyes before.

“Where you here before?”

A long moment stretched into the silence, the faint hiss of steam coming off the rocks the only sound.

A flash of green eyes crinkled by laughter. Warmth enveloping her. Plump lips smiling into her mouth. Tears of joy and running on a tarmac towards a figure in a jumpsuit. The smell of crushed jasmine flowers between them, arms squeezing her tightly and lifting her off the ground. A silhouette with dark hair rocking and cooing at a child in the morning light. Whispers in the dark against a shivering neck. Pure joy filled her heart.

*A little piece of you is going up there on that last supply shuttle as we speak. And a little piece of me was sent to the lab.*

*You’re the biggest romantic sap that has ever existed.*

*It was our fiftieth. I had to be the extra sappy.*

*I love you.*

*Hold that thought. I sent your ring too, doc.*

*I was terrified I had lost it. But why?*

*So you’d remember me. Or I’d remember you.*

*You know that’s not how things work. It’s just our DNA. It wouldn’t be us.*

*You never know. Maybe there’s more to it.*

*Since when does my rational, skeptical, hardcore scientist of a wife believe in metaphysical souls?*

*Since I met you.*
I love you.

Even if it takes a thousand lifetimes. Even if we’re reborn on some distant planetary colony with green little men or giant squid overlords...

Hahahaha

I swear to you, I’ll find you again. I’ll find you.

I love you.

Tears were running down the sky girl’s eyes, a smile on her lips, little gasps of sobs and laughter on her lips.

“She found me.” A wet laugh. “I found her.” More soft sobs sounded in the sweat lodge, followed by more quiet laughter.

“We found each other,” she whispered again, disbelieving, joyous.

“Who?” Who did you find?”

“Her. I found her.”

Sweet Medicine was beyond puzzled. She had been doing this all her life. They used it often when people from the outside came. No one could lie when they were in this state, only the spirit present, stripped of everything and all the bodies it had given life to. And so they used it to know their real intentions, their true character.

She had heard many strange things when she took people on these spirit quests, but this was almost inexplicable. Once a person died, the spirit jumped into a new life immediately, into a never-ending and uninterrupted succession of lives. There was no break in between. But the sky girl had nothing but a black void between this iteration and some past life far, far into the past. As if she had ceased to exist altogether. She shuddered at the thought. Maybe she had been trapped somewhere.

There was only one other spirit quest that had been as unusual and she wondered if there was something to it. She had an inkling it might.

She remembered it well. Her heart had jumped the moment she had seen the child’s eyes. They looked ancient, like they had witnessed the birth of time itself. It had unsettled Sweet Medicine. The scrawny natblida had shown up one day, all alone, claiming she had come to learn from them. They had welcomed her in the capital. She was a nightblood after all and the Ingranrona had great devotion to the Hedas. They had all been shocked when they saw she bore the sign of the panther eyes. The return of the first Heda was the oldest shared prophecy of all clans.

“What are your intentions?” she had asked the skinny girl in the sweat lodge, once she had gone into the trance.

“To unite the clans.”
“Why?”

“We are one people. We can have peace as one.”

“How will you unite the clans?”

“With reason. With justice. With sword if I must.”

“Who will you turn your blade to?”

“The ones who prey on the weak. The selfish who choose war over peace.”

“Who are you?”

“Lexa.”

“Who were you before Lexa?”

“Lexa.”

Sweet Medicine had frowned.

“Where were you before this time?”

“Everywhere.”

“Were you anyone?” she tried again.

“No. I was waiting. I had to wait. I couldn’t come back until I found her.”

“You were… waiting?” the old woman asked, confused. “Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“What do you see there?” she tried a different route.

“The wind. The trees. The rocks deep in the earth. The water of the rivers. The sun on the leaves. The people below, so many people. None of them was her. I looked and looked and looked. Hundreds of springs and summers and falls and winters, and wars and births and deaths. Nothing. Nothing,” she lamented desperately.

The child had grown agitated and was shaking on the little cot she had been lying on, violent sobs erupting from her mouth. The cot rattled against the floor. Her body shook with a fever. The elders said those who would be great warriors would have great fevers during their spirit quests. They called it the warrior fever. But the child was burning hot. Sweet Medicine was alarmed.

She poured some of the water from her bucket onto her to cool her down, but the shakes turned into seizures. The little natblida broke the cot, threw up and continued shaking once the seizures subsided.

The old woman’s blood ran cold. She had never seen a warrior’s fever this violent, the possible meaning terrifying her.

She wanted to end the quest, but she needed to be sure. She owed it to her people. And she needed to ease her out of her voyage. She couldn’t stop abruptly.
“Go back. Before you were everywhere. Where were you?”

There was a long silence, the labored breath of the nightblood the only sound.

“Who were you before?” she insisted. She had to know.

“I was… I… brought them together.”

Her mind showed her images, fragments of moments in quick succession. Images of camera flashes and handshakes across a long stage, blue shiny eyes and a blinding smile looking at her from the crowded seats in front of them. ‘The nations come together to build an Ark for the future of humanity.’ Twelve flags printed on the shiny surface of rockets. 3… 2… 1… liftoff. Her body shaking with the force of the boosters roaring beneath them and propelling them upwards. Robotic arms assembling station modules slowly, surrounded by silent black space and stars. Red dusty landscapes. A shiny rock in her gloved hand. ‘What do you say, doc?’

“Who?”

The images were interrupted.

“The nations. So we could have a new beginning.”

The old woman’s eyes widened. Now she was certain. She knew who this was. The one who had joined their nations the first time. The one who came back after the end to do it again. And she was here, yet again. The Quillmaker. The first Heda returned. It had to be. What other explanations could her words have?

“Who is the one you seek?” she finally asked.

“Her,” the girl said between the little hiccupped breaths that were still making her shake.

Images of bright blue eyes.

I swear to you.

I love you.

Then came a shuddering intake of air and more tears spilling out of her closed eyes, trickling down her temples. And another long pause.

“I failed. I failed. I’m so sorry,” she said in a small tight voice. “I couldn’t find you.”

Later, the natblida awoke and all the memories of the trance were gone as usual. None remembered their quest, but it helped some to move on or feel closure for whatever past troubles they had carried. But the natblida had looked up at her with her big green eyes, red from the tears, gaze lost and filled with deep sorrow. A look she had only seen in abandoned orphans before. It
broke her heart. She had never seen so much pain and loss in someone, a pain she had felt for hundreds of years without respite. She felt a knot in her throat and had cupped the girl’s cheeks.

“Come, my child,” she had said warmly, taking her outside and staying by her side the rest of the day.

It took her a long time to recover fully, at least physically. She went back to her trainings and walks around the city soon, but the sadness deep in her eyes never left her even if she did not know the cause.

From that day on, Sweet Medicine had felt great fondness for the child. She saw her grow up and become the mighty warrior, the thunderous leader, the peacemaker, the greatest Heda they ever had. And yet, her heart still broke for her.

“Clarke!”

Lexa got up from the log she had been sitting on in front of the sweat lodge, though not close enough to disturb or hear what had going on. She had been pacing nervously for hours, hating that she hadn’t been able to take Clarke there herself. Rohana had made it impossible to make it on time with endless military demonstrations of the cavalry, asking Lexa her counsel on each tactic exercise. She had wanted to dismiss her and run to Clarke but hadn’t been able to, not wanting to offend the proud warriors.

She knew how terrible spirit quests could be for many. Her own had been excruciating. She had woken up feeling like all her bones had been broken and had a blinding headache for a week, but the worse part had been the feeling of absolute sorrow that had invaded her. She had wept for many nights after, not knowing why she felt like she was drowning in despair. She had hated every minute of it, and it had told her nothing. The knowledge of the quests was kept by the blinka and the elders’ council alone.

She made her way to the blonde in a few long strides and took her face in her hands, her worried eyes flitting quickly all over her face to assess the damage.

Clarke was still wet from the cold splashing of water Sweet Medicine had performed on her to end the ceremony and wash the sweat away. Her skin was extremely pale, but her cheeks were bright pink from the combination of heat and cold.

Instead of a pained or haunted look, Clarke was looking at her with bright eyes and a soft smile, a blush rising from the unexpected proximity and intimacy of Lexa’s touch.

“Clarke,” she said again in question, not letting go of her face.

“Hey,” the blonde whispered with a smile.

“Are you… are you okay?” she inquired with still concerned eyes.

“I’m okay. It was… it was nice. I guess. I don’t remember anything, but I feel…” she inhaled, unsure of how to word it.

Lexa took her in, in her thick blanket draped over her shoulders, hair wet and sticking to her
forehead and temples. Lexa smiled amused and reflexively brushed the strands of hair back, letting her hands caress her face tenderly as she did so.

Clarke lowered her eyes, her heart beating, a little smile on her lips at Lexa’s affectionate gaze and hands.

“It felt… like this,” she confessed.

“What do you mean?” Lexa asked, eyes roaming slowly over her face, lips still curled.

“Like…” she bit her lip. “Can I…” she stepped closer, her hands occupied keeping her blanket closed. “Can you… can you hold me?” she finally asked.

Lexa didn’t hesitate and brought her arms around her, encircling her and holding Clarke’s body tightly against hers. Clarke took a quivering breath and sighed, breathing her in, her nose pressed against her shoulder then turned to tuck her face into the crook of Lexa’s neck.

“It felt like this. Like warmth. Like you. It... it felt like you,” she tried. She had no idea how to explain the overwhelming sensation she had felt when she woke up. Like pure happiness had been poured into her. Like all her senses were filled with the feeling of Lexa. Like absolute love. She felt her eyes prickling with tears.

Lexa pulled back a fraction to look at Clarke, taking in her words. Her big, impossibly green eyes roamed slowly over the blonde’s face, a hand coming again to caress her temple and cheek, her touch featherlike and tender. Her eyes lingered on her lips and then teared themselves to look into blue again.

“Like me?” she asked, a smile starting to stretch, surprise etched on her brow.

Clarke nodded, too caught in Lexa’s gaze to utter words, her own lips curving in a small smile, cheeks warm.

“Ai laik hir,” Lexa said softly, wanting the sky girl to feel the certainty in those words.

(“I am here”)

Her eyes dipped to the blonde’s lips again and Clarke felt her heart beat wildly in her chest. Lexa leaned in slowly and pressed her lips to the corner of Clarke’s mouth, keeping them there for long seconds, Clarke shuddering out a breath and feeling her legs turn to jelly.

“Ai na laik otaim hir,” she said shakily as her lips left Clarke’s cheek, an inexplicable need to promise it.

(“I will always be here”)

She leaned her forehead against Clarke’s, her nose softly caressing the blonde’s, their warm breaths mingling.

Lexa ached. Burned. Yearned. To kiss Clarke. But if she did, she knew there would be no stopping her. All her control would dissolve into incandescent ashes from the blazing need that would engulf her. She would take her on this very patch of dirt beneath them, no patience to even remove her
thin wrap and she’d rip it open in desperation. She’d take Clarke until the last drop of strength had spent out of her body. She’d drown in her and burn down the ground with her. There would be no going back. The world could fall around them, and she would not be able to tear herself away from Clarke. She trembled with desire and could feel the same need from Clarke, could hear it in her quivering breath a whisper away from her mouth, in the heat of her skin, in the wild heartbeat pressed against her chest, in the dilated eyes fixed on her mouth. But she could also see a ghost of hesitation. Something that made Clarke still hold back. And she would never take that last step, bridge that last inch, unless she was certain Clarke wanted to burn with her.

And so she mustered the last shred of self-control she had and reluctantly pulled back. She deposited a burning, trembling kiss to Clarke’s forehead and then took her hand. They held each other’s gaze for a moment, want still heavy on their features, a silent exchange of reassurance in their eyes. An apology in Clarke’s, an ‘I’ll wait forever for you’ in Lexa’s.

Their fingers interlaced and then they finally headed back to the city, the blood thrumming in their veins repeating a single word.

Soon.

The old woman had been standing at the entrance of the lodge, watching them in silence. She couldn’t help the smile that made its way on her lips and the happiness the sight brought to her tired old bones, happiness for the brilliant young Heda with the once sad eyes and centuries-old soul with a broken heart.

She watched as their faces glowed with love, an almost desperate relief in their eyes while they clung to each other, their touches with the shyness of their still new love in this lifetime, both oblivious at how long they had been searching for the other. But their souls knew. She could see it in their eyes.

“She found her,” the old woman whispered to herself watching her Heda fondly. “She finally found her,” she said to herself again with a tight quiet voice and a smile.

She left them silently and made her way to the elders’ council.

“How many?” Lexa asked with a stone-cold face, her tense jaw betraying her anger.

“Two dead, Heda. Eight badly wounded.”

“Who? Do you know their names?” Clarke asked, her face ashen.

The man nodded.

“What of the Council? What was the decision?” Lexa continued asking the messenger that had just
arrived from Polis and had been waiting outside her tent. She wanted to know the whole picture before going into details.

“The Ambassadors agreed the responsibility of the lost lives lies on Skaikru. They did not respect the boundaries set by Trikru for their hunting grounds. They were 30 kilometers beyond the limit.”

“A whole day’s walk,” Indra remarked. “They couldn’t pretend it was just a mistake.”

Clarke closed her eyes and sighed deeply. Two days, considering the slow pace of most of her people, she thought to herself. It was even worse if they knew. What the hell were they thinking?

“They had been warned of the dangers in that region. That there had been thieving bands lately, as you warned before you left,” the man went on.

“The natblidas agreed with the decision and proposed a penalty for breaking the boundaries. A hunting ban for the amount of days the party was out. A week.”

“Good,” Lexa said, proud of her natblidas for seeking a just measure.

“But the fut bos op was not applied, given that Chancellor Griffin alerted to their trespassing immediately. That’s how they were found so quickly.”

“How?” Clarke asked. “How did she know?”

“She said she had installed tracking… chips…” the man said unsurely, “on all patrol and hunting party equipment.”

Clarke couldn’t help but be impressed and almost wanted to smile at her mother’s smart forethought. She was learning from her mistakes. With how irresponsibly Skaikru continued to act, she couldn’t disagree with her tactics. She still couldn’t believe, whoever the rogues ones had been, how they would put all her people in jeopardy by breaking the rules again.

She did not comment on the punishment they had escaped. The fut bos op. A breaking of the foot for trespassing on hunting grounds, something Lexa had told her about when they had been discussing the lands surrounding Arkadia that Trikru was allowing them to use temporarily, until something more permanent was negotiated.

“Chancellor Abby has accepted but asked the Council to help them investigate the matter of their attack. The wounds… they were of gun shots,” the messenger informed darkly. “The Ambassadors and natblidas agreed,” he finished his report.

Lexa nodded her head and signaled for him to leave her with her advisers. Before she stepped out, Clarke asked again.

“Who were they? The dead,” she asked with dread.

“Al Jones and Zoe Monroe,” he replied, then left.

Clarke sucked in a pained gasp.

Jones had been one of Bellamy’s most loyal bully militia boys when they had landed. He had taken special pleasure in torturing and starving people into submission. She wasn’t surprised to hear his name as part of yet another reckless and dangerous action. But Monroe? Had she learned nothing surviving the first months on the ground? Surviving the battle against Mount Weather? She too had been part of his militia, often foregoing logic to follow anything he said blindly, but still.
Clarke sat down and held her face in her hands, rubbing her palms over it in frustration, anger, sadness and sheer exhaustion.

Lexa walked over and placed a comforting hand over her shoulder, concerned eyes surveying her.

Clarke looked up at her, the haunted look back in her eyes. Then she got up again and started pacing around.

She had heard the information from the messenger. Three attacks, each closer and circling in on Arkadia, though only the last with Monroe had involved guns and Skaikru. The two others had been against a small trading caravan and a family going back to their village.

“They’re going to attack Arkadia,” she said alarmed.

“Or they’re trying to make you think they will,” Sybil spoke up.

When Clarke looked up at her and then at Lexa, it was Lexa who replied.

“They would have just attacked Arkadia directly. No need for small pointless hits.”

“What’s the real threat for Heda’s enemies?” Sybil asked. “Your union being completed. Once the Gon Ogeda joins you, the Coalition becomes stronger.”

“You think they’re trying to draw us back? So we don’t finish this?” Clarke asked.

“It is a possibility,” Lexa agreed.

“Their best chance would be to stop you before Gon Ogeda is done,” Indra added.

“Chances are they’ll do anything to stop you before that happens. They’ll try to interrupt your journey, attack you on the road, try to draw you back to Polis or Arkadia, or to stop it altogether. Anything,” Sybil assured. “The only thing you can do is not let them.”

“So I should abandon my duties as Commander and not go back to protect my people?” Lexa asked exasperated though she masked it well with the even tone of her voice.

“You are the protector, Heda, but you have armies and sentries and generals at your disposal. You have the Council and the consensus of the Natblida making those daily decisions while you travel. You alone cannot personally oversee every single threat,” Sybil reminded her.

“More patrols have already been ordered, as the messenger said. The Council has already dispatched more spies to the area, and scouts and a sika. The Boudalan Blue Guard is on its way to Arkadia as well,” Indra reminded.

Lexa was not pleased. Why did every fraction of terrain gained for peace have to be so hard to conquer? Why were there always people fighting her for every inch? Would it ever end?

She exhaled sharply.

“We leave today. As soon as the meeting with the elders here is done.”

When Sybil and Indra looked at her alarmed, she clarified.

“Onwards. To the next clan.”

They nodded and exited, leaving her with Clarke.
“She died because of me,” Clarke croaked defeated.

Rationally, she knew Monroe was responsible for her own actions. For getting into harm’s way. But they had been attacked to get at her. To stop her and her union to Lexa. It was yet another name, another death on her back.

“Our union was meant to stop more deaths, Clarke,” Lexa reminded. “It’s to prevent those who would continue waging war.” She knew it was pointless to reason when Clarke felt the guilt nonetheless, but she couldn’t help trying to convince her.

“I know… I know,” Clarke whispered broken.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said after a long, heavy pause.

“Do you want me to accompany you,” Lexa offered, already knowing the answer.

Clarke’s lips were downturned, a deep frown etched between her eyebrows.

“No. I need to be by myself. For a little.”

Lexa nodded with her eyes, disappointment in her gaze. She made her way out of the tent, wanting to give the blonde space. Before she went through the door flap, Clarke spoke up.

“Just… for a little while. I’ll see you later?” she tried. She just needed air. To mourn. To clear her head. To tame the boiling rage that had flooded her at the news. Even the disquieting doubts that suddenly took hold and that she didn’t want to entertain.

Lexa nodded again, eyes a little lighter. She turned again and left silently.

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“It is not the first time others have come on ships. The last time they took everything from our ancestors,” Huffing Bull, an old *romeda* man with grey braids said. He had an arrowhead hung from his chest and bright bracelets on his wrinkled wrists. He puffed on a long pipe that he always shared with Eli, the *steda* man next to him.

“The outsiders have only ever brought war and persecution to our doorstep, too,” Eli agreed. He was sitting cross-legged and absentmindedly stroking his blonde wiry beard. He had set his straw hat on his knee and occasionally picked it up to fan himself or dabbed the beads of sweat forming on his clean-shaven, mustache-free upper lip like all the *steda* men.

“We are not exchanging loyalty pledges with the *Hetanevo'eo'o*, but with Clarke Griffin as Heda’s bonded.”

(People of the Sky)

The woman who had spoken was the eldest of elders, Janine Eagle-Eye. As such, she wore the sacred bison headdress and had bald eagle feathers tied at the ends of her braids.

“How can we trust her?” another old woman in a bonnet and grey eyes asked.

“I trust Heda, so I trust her too,” Rohana insisted.
She was in her full warrior leader gear as was the custom when gathered as The Six. She wore an impressive feather headdress fashioned to look like a mowhawk, raised up and running along her head, made of black eagle feathers and blue stellar jay feathers and lightning symbols painted on her temples.

“Our Little Sister is right,” a voice interrupted entering the room. It was Sweet Medicine that had joined the council. Though she was not a voting member, she was their blinka and adviser.

They all looked at her expectant, knowing she had come from the spirit quest ceremony.

“She is The Seventh.”

A quiet gasp went around the room.

“Are you sure, blinka?” the first man asked with shock in this voice.

Sweet Medicine nodded and sat down in their circle.

“Just like the first elders of the Ingranrona foretold. That Quillwork Girl would come back and she did come back, to find those left and spread her maheo, to give her life spirit to us all. Just like elder John Looks Twice prophesized after he went on his journey east to seek the first Heda centuries ago. That she would come back once more to unite all when she found the missing one in the sky.”

“But how do we know it is her? Many Skaikru came,” the woman in the bonnet asked unconvinced.

“Who defeated the mountain monster by the water, the mountain who had swallowed our people and turned them into beasts? Who killed it and rescued them from inside the mountain monster? Just like the legend said of Falling Star. She is the Seventh, the Falling Star who returned,” Rohana connected the dots of their old legends. She felt silly for not seeing it sooner.

“The legends say nothing about The Seventh and Falling Star being the same,” Huffing Bull refuted. “Even if she was both, what does that mean? What is her destiny now? She brought the Sky People, the lost siblings in the sky, back. She already defeated the monster in the mountain. What now? What’s next? What does it mean for us, blinka?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that her and Lexa are connected. Have been connected from before the Ingranrona came to be. They are soul-bound,” Sweet Medicine revealed.

At this, they all shared an understanding look.

“But can we trust her not to betray us for her people?” Eli asked, seeking assurance.

“She is not of her people. In her heart, she is already of Lexa’s people. She is strong and she will strike at them if they cross the line. But this is the strange thing. Her spirit. She’s a healer. Of people. Not of bodies. Of what is broken between us,” the old blinka mused, somewhat intrigued with the odd sky girl.

“So she doubts her own people?”

“Some.”

“So we stay vigilant. And if her path is to make the clans stronger and more united with Heda, we’ll support it. But never stop watching.”
“Our loyalty will only be owed to her and hers to us, then,” a second woman in a white bonnet concluded.

“And if the Skaikru ever strikes at us?”

“Our Lilitu will flatten them like blades of grass under our hooves.”

The Six nodded in agreement.

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_Sometime in between_

Asha, Sadie, Blossom and Lilith were out scavenging and foraging, they had stumbled on a dirty camp site. There was a fire pit and several sleeping bags, with cans and garbage littered all over. A single large man in a leather biker vest was sitting on a log, drinking from a beer bottle. His hair and his beard were greasy and dirty.

When he saw them, he immediately got up and gave them a predatory smile.

“My, my, my, what have we got here?” he said, getting close.

The girls lifted their knives.

“Oh, feisty little ladies. Just like I like ‘em,” he mockingly lifted his hands in surrender. “I think I might make you my new toys. I like toys. My friends also like toys. They should be back any minute now,” he smirked, looking them up and down.

“Where did you get that?” Lilith asked with an icy voice, pointing with her knife at his chest.

“This?” the man grabbed a unicorn pendant tied around his neck with a cord. “Oh, this belonged to one of my toys. Oh, we enjoyed playing with her quite a lot.”

Before he could react, Asha stabbed him in the groin. He cried out in pain and fell on his knees, his hands clutching his crotch. Sadie looked on impassively. She took the gun out of her belt and handed it to young Lilith.

The girl lifted the barrel and asked.

“What side is the heart?”

“A bit to the left, little sister.”

She moved her hand to the right, making sure to miss the heart and fired. The bullet went through his chest.

The man fell backwards, his eyes bulging out in shock, blood coming out of his mouth.

“My mother died with a punctured lung. She died suffocated, drowning in her own blood. Because of you. And now you’ll die the same way.” Lilith stepped to him and hovered over. She grabbed the necklace and ripped it from his neck.

“Mercy,” he gurgled.
Lilith put her hand over his mouth and drew closer.

“I am the night. And I’ve come to claim you,” she pronounced darkly. “Eye for an eye. Blood for blood,” she sentenced as he tried to gasp over the tight grip of her hand over his bloodied mouth.

When he finally died, Lilith stood up and saw the imprint left there in the shape of her hand with his blood. She placed it over her own mouth, making the same mark.

They left silently, careful to hide his body and waited for the rest of his gang to return. In the night, they killed every single one of them in the same way. They returned home with their scalps and burned them outside for all to see. Lilith tied the unicorn pendant to Nadine’s wooden cross at her grave and added an inscription: Loved Daughter, Brave Sister, Avenged Mother.

When Lilith had been born, Nadine had been in labor for two whole painful days. She’d screamed profanities while holding the nurse and her sister’s hands in a vice grip. “Motherf…aaaaghh…er! Give me more drugs, I swear I’m having the devil’s baby! The little demon’s rippin’ my innards!” she exclaimed in pain, to the amusement of everyone on the floor. In the past two days, all the doctors and nurses had become fond of the foul-mouthed, dark-humored woman. So none were surprised when she had named the baby Lilith, which she claimed was a night demon in old biblical stories.

After that day, Lilith became their most ruthless fighter and the first of what would one day become, centuries later, the most feared deadly warrior riders in the entire coalition territories. The ‘Hend vun Lilitu.’

The hands of Lilith.

The hand of death.

Lexa had decided to tell the Ingranrona about the conspiracy against the Coalition. She omitted the attempt on her life and some other details, but she had to trust some of her allies to get them on board for what was to come. Out of all clans, the Plain Riders and the Boat People were the ones she put her trust in. And for her secret plan regarding Sankru to work, she needed the Plain Riders not to respond to any provocation from them after the attack on the Forge, which they had blamed on the Riders.

She trusted Rohana and Sweet Medicine. She had known them since she was a child on her tour of the clans. And Rohana was deeply loyal and honest, and even though she was impulsive and hot-headed, she was tempered by the wise and patient elders. That’s how their council worked. Five of the wisest, eldest romeda and steda and the young fearless strength of their best warrior, the Little Sister and Hefa of the Lilitu warriors. The Six made the decisions all together, but Little Sister, Rohana now, acted as the clan leader, the Hefa in the Coalition meetings. The Ingranrona were absolutely ruthless and deeply suspicious of all, but she trusted them to usually make more or less balanced decisions.

They had agreed to not move against Sankru and to follow Lexa’s lead on that matter. They
understood how critical it was to the entire plan. They had discussed it the day before when Lexa had arrived and had also went over building up their food stores, weapons and patrols, andreadying and repositioning battalions and regiments quietly.

Conflict was coming.

She hoped they could also see that the union with Clarke was key to the Coalition and that they would fulfill the pledging of loyalty. She also knew they would probably not extend any courtesies to the Sky People. Their mistrust for outsiders was extreme. And considering Sky People’s absolute inability to follow orders or agreements and their continued reckless behavior, the Plain Riders would be even less inclined to trust them. No one would.

But she didn’t need them to accept the Sky People in their affairs or lands. As long as they followed Coalition rules governing the clans forbidding unprovoked attacks against another clan or face retaliation by the rest of the united Coalition, and as long as they accepted Sky People into the Coalition itself, it would be enough for now.

Clarke had come back after an hour, her eyes still haunted and downcast, but she was ready to see the council.

The Six didn’t mention anything they discussed among themselves.

They formally introduced themselves and then simply said they were ready to re-pledge their loyalty to Heda Lexa and to honor Clarke as Lexa’s bonded, though stressed this did not make them beholden to the Sky People in any way.

Lexa nodded, expecting as much.

“Can I say something first?” Clarke suddenly interrupted the silence.

Janine gestured for her to go on.

“When I was a kid, I got into a fight with someone. We fell and I got a pretty bad cut. The cut didn’t seem to heal well and every time I saw him, I hated him for what he had done to me. We only kept fighting because of it and I always kept showing the cut and reminding him of it. One day my mother sat me down and told me that if I only stopped picking and scratching at the wound, I would actually give it time to heal. If it healed and stop hurting, I wouldn’t have to think about how much he had hurt me all the time. If I gave it enough time to heal and to stop hurting, maybe I would stop long enough to realize I had wounded him too. If I only stopped long enough, then I would realize we had both hurt each other and could with time forgive each other. If I actually stopped hating him, she said, I could realize that there was no reason I actually hated him for who he was. And she was right. She taught me to forgive, even if it’s something that doesn’t come easily or quickly to me. He and I stopped fighting and though we had nothing in common and were so different,” Clarke emphasized looking at all Six, “we realized we made a pretty good team.”

“I know Arkadia has made mistakes and will probably make more. I know how much we’ve hurt the clans. The deaths we’ve brought. I know how different they are and how little they understand your ways. I know many are afraid of Skaikru and don’t trust them. I know but… they’re afraid too. We lost our home and this is the only place we have now, surrounded by things we don’t understand. But most are good people. Some might try to take what isn’t theirs. Some might try to go against your laws. But most… most just want to try to make a new life here, in peace, with what
little family they have left. What I mean is, I hope you don’t judge us by the worst of us. We’re trying. I don’t have a say in what Arkadia does anymore, but the woman who taught me forgiveness does. As for me, all I can promise you is that I will try too. I tried to run away from it all for a second but the truth is, it’s who I am. I can’t just stand by and watch people get hurt and do nothing.”

Those last words resonated deeply to all the Ingranrona present. They were people with a great reverence to their past, to their ancestors and to their history. They knew and passed down to every single Ingranrona the stories of how their two people, of such dissimilar nature, had come together. How hope, and heritage and strength had led them and how forgiveness and solidarity had united them. They all shared a meaningful look. A small imperceptible smile formed on the Janine Eagle-Eye’s lips. She knew their story better than most. She was Chief Asha’s, first chief of Ingranrona, far-removed but direct descendant.

“I can’t. And I won’t. No matter who they are, no matter their clan. And I won’t stand by when someone tries to attack the peace you and Heda have worked so hard for either. That I can promise you,” Clarke said passionately ending her long unexpected and somewhat rambled plea.

The Six tipped their head to Clarke in acceptance of her promise, somewhat stunned but secretly convinced that they had found The Seventh.

After that, they performed the same short pledge ceremony like the one that had been carried out with the Boudalan leader.

“The riders in the plains are yours, Heda,” they pledged and concluded the meeting.

“From this day forth, your life will not be easy, my child.”

The six-year-old dark-haired girl was looking up at her, a small satchel on her shoulder and a staff she had carved in her other hand, big green eyes set with a mix of determination and unease.

She kneeled in front of her and caressed her cheeks with both hands.

“But you know you can always come to me.”

“The Fleimkepa said it is against the rules,” the girl stared unsurely.

“Rules are for those with weak judgement who need to be told what they should or should not do. To be wise is to know the difference. To know better and decide when rules should be followed and when it is for the worse.”

“But if everyone who is weak of judgement decides they know better, because they are a fool, and each decides to break the rules, would that not breed chaos? How do you know if you are not being foolish instead of wise?” the serious child asked.

The woman chuckled, always surprised at her daughter’s sharp mind.

“You have to ask yourself if the decision is for your own personal gain or glory, or if it benefits the most people. That is always a good start. But the truth is most decisions won’t be clear cut. No easy answer will be evident. That will be your greatest challenge.”
The little girl took in her words, nodding with a creased brow.

“And Titus is smart, but sometimes also a bit of a fool,” the woman smiled wryly. “Rules are written by men and women who are fallible, just like you and me. He forgets that sometimes. And he forgets that no man-made rule is stronger or more important than the greatest natural law of all. That the bond of mother and daughter is unbreakable. You are and will always be my flesh and blood, natblida or not. Heda or not. Even when I or your nontu are no longer here, you will carry our spirit in you. You will always have his warrior strength in here,” she pointed at her chest. “And you will always carry everything I taught you here,” she touched her temple.

The six-year-old nodded, her eyes watering a bit feeling her courage falter, dreading their separation. She had never been without her nonom for long periods and now she was supposed to sever all ties with her.

“Besides. I am the Keeper of Words. Any natblida can seek my counsel,” she curled one side of her mouth and grabbed her daughter’s hand, beginning their walk to Polis from up in the hills outside of the capital.

“No, have I ever told you about the secret tunnel there is a mile from here, just on the other side of the hill, that takes you directly to the tower?” she asked, a gleam in her eye.

The girl widened her eyes, looking up at her mother and shook her head.

“Well then, it will be our secret now, my flesh and blood. Let me show you.”

As they made their way to the secret tunnel entrance disguised in the foliage, the little girl spoke once more, eyes fixed on the ground, deep in thought.

“Nomon, I hope I can do good one day.”

The woman stopped for a second. Rather than hope to make her mother proud or something else for herself, her daughter’s thoughts were always selfless. That in itself made her proud but also scared for how little regard she ever showed for her own needs or wants. But she knew of her daughter’s destiny. She was certain she would one day win the Conclave and the entire weight of the world would be on her shoulders. She knew there would be little possibility or time for her own wants in the harsh world she would have to rule. But deep down, she hoped she was wrong.

“I know you will do great things, Leksa.” the woman said tenderly. “Great many good things, my nomfri.”

(daughter)

Lexa declined their invitation to stay longer. She was eager to rush on. The meeting had gone better than expected due to Clarke’s words. She had seen it in their faces. But she was still worried. With Clarke’s broken demeanor. With the news from Arkadia. With everything. The quicker they finished the tour and got back to the safety of Polis to ensure their Gon Ogeda was completed, the better. And the faster she could figure out who was behind the ever-growing threat to them.
“Ready?” she asked Clarke, their horses ready.

The rest of the group was already tying up the last of the gear and mounting their own horses. The panther cub was propped on Lexa’s horse saddle, idly grooming itself with her right paw rubbing over her ears.

Clarke was looking out into the flat plains, her gaze lost in the horizon.

“Clarke?” she prompted softly again.

The blonde finally broke out of her daze and looked at her.

“Yeah,” she said in a small voice listlessly.

She saw Lexa gesturing towards the horses but didn’t miss the crestfallen look in her eyes.

“Hey,” she stopped her, grabbing her elbow before she turned around. She might be sad and torn, but she didn’t want Lexa to feel like she was pushing her away. Especially not after the beautiful moments they had shared together the past two days.

She took Lexa’s hands in hers and lifted one to her lips and set it on her own chest, then did the same with the other. It was a gesture Lexa had done with her a few times. It was a wordless intimacy that she loved. It brought them close and she hoped Lexa could feel her heartbeat against her hands.

Lexa’s eyes softened impossibly. She held Clarke’s gaze and then flitted her eyes over her face with such fondness, it made the sadness melt away a little. They stopped for a second on her lips, making Clarke’s heart jump, but didn’t stay there. They came back to her own eyes and were filled with understanding. She too had lost so many people.

“I’ll be okay,” she reassured. “As long as you’re here,” she emphasized, pulling her even closer, pressing Lexa’s hands against her heart.

“Then you’ll always be okay, ai hafon,” Lexa replied in a whisper, her meaning clear.

Clarke felt a lump in her throat.

“More than okay. You and I, we’re going to stop this war. And then, we’re going to do so many good things. For all of them,” Clarke said, looking behind Lexa to the people around.

“Sha. Ogeda.”

The two leaders left shortly after, the sunset burning up the sky in orange rays over the green of the plains in the west, like a wordless screaming warning.

In the east, in the dark thick forests, a force of hundreds and hundreds had already started gathering. One intent on ending the reign of Lexa kom Trikru and her Wanheda.
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