In the Shallows

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8523373.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: F/F
Fandom: The 100 (TV)
Relationship: Clarke Griffin/Lexa
Character: Clarke Griffin, Lexa (The 100), Raven Reyes, Anya (The 100), Lincoln (The 100), Original Characters, Gustus (The 100)
Additional Tags: Role Reversal, Alternate Universe - Role Reversal, Commander!Clarke, arkguard!lexa, Universe Alteration, grounder!clarke, SkaiKru!Lexa
Stats: Published: 2016-11-11 Updated: 2018-04-29 Chapters: 10/? Words: 106591

In the Shallows

by blindwire

Summary

Raised for war and forged in fire, Clarke has vowed to be a leader for her people, to protect them and to make sacrifices so that they do not have to. This is what it means to be Commander and the spirit has chosen her for a reason.

Or

Role reversal au

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Lexa will be the first to admit that this is not, in fact, how she expected her day to go.

Her cheek smashes into the metallic wall of the Mecha Station corridor and she grunts in pain. She tastes copper and knows her lip has split. Before she can even regain breath, her assailant is off of her, running away quickly.

To where? she thinks, pushing off the wall and giving chase through the space station. Her heavy guard boots pound against the metal, the sound echoing back to her and reverberating off the hard surfaces.

At the sound of running feet, people begin poking heads out of doorways to observe the commotion. Their eyes are wide with a mixture of first shock, then curiosity, and finally excitement as the two race past.

Lexa can’t say she blames them. The Ark does its best to remain excitement and drama-free most days. It’s a luxury they can’t afford and the penalties for disrupting the stable balance are harsh enough to keep most from rocking the boat. If a foot chase occurred right outside her door she’d probably be gaping too.

When they begin filtering out of their rooms at the commotion, necks craning to watch the criminal round a corner, however, she has to intervene.

“Make room!” she shouts, startling them into action. They listen, thankfully, pressing themselves to the walls hastily at her tone. If her voice alone hadn’t worked she’d sure the triangular emblem on her jacket would have. Some people might have a bad opinion of the guards, but they’re not foolish enough not to listen to one giving a direct order.

Sectors A, B, and C fly by under their feet. They blur together as the two of them skid around corners and through gateways, drawing more and more of an audience as they approach the center of the station where Mecha connects to the main junction. Her heart pounds adrenaline through her with each step and her eyes never lift off the back of his form.

He’s fast, she’ll give him that.

But she’s faster.

She skids around the corner, hand pushing off the wall to redirect her momentum. He glances over
his shoulder and there’s fear in his eyes at her sudden proximity.

“She can’t hear you, let’s just...”

“Under the authority of the Guard and Ark Council I order you to cease and desist!” she shouts, the words breathless leaving her mouth.

Of course he doesn’t listen. They never do.

She releases a quick breath of frustration as they fly through Sectors D, E, and F. They’ll be at the main junction next and if he gets inside it’s going to be a mess and a half following him through the crowd.

Her training kicks through her in a flow of movements. The hand grasping him holds tight as they collide harshly with the ground, fingers unrelenting where they grip the fabric. He quickly tries to scramble up but she’s already pulling again, twisting him beneath her, a knee pressing in his back as she wrenches his arms behind him.

She struggles at first, trying to toss her, but the sound of the handcuffs sliding home seems to sap any remaining hope of struggling free. His forehead drops to the floor in surrender.

“Michael Gladwell, under the authority of the Guard and the Ark Council you are under arrest for theft.” She hauls him up and is quickly joined by a few other guards that skid to a stop nearby, radio dispatch having alerted them to her location, she waves them off when they come forward to help.

They’re both breathing heavily as she leads him away. The onlookers stare on as they pass by, eyes grave. There are a few whispers here and there, but mostly they’re silent. They know he will find no leniency from those who decide his fate.

When she brings him to Prison Station she swallows hard as the charges are read over again. The law is clear. Regardless of severity, crimes committed by those over the age of eighteen are punishable by death.

Her fingers unconsciously clench tighter in their grip around his upper arm when they come forward to take him. Whatever her opinion on the law is, however, she has no power in that moment to challenge it. Those who dare to do so are not met with kindness.

After a moment of hesitation, her fingers release their hold and they lead him away. The Prison Station doors slide shut with a bang of finality. The image of fear and panic on his face before the doors cut him off from view stay with her for some time.

That night, when Lexa lays back on her small cot she rolls to face the small portal of a window cut into the wall. The earthlight shines up at her - bright and blue and glowing. Her eyes trail slowly over the curves and crevices of land she can spot through the cloud-cover.

After a while she closes her eyes and wills sleep to come.
Steam curls and twists as it escapes the surface of the water, thin tendrils grasping towards the ceiling above her reclined body. Closing her eyes, Clarke slides down until her head slips beneath the surface. Water rushes into her ears as bubbles scatter up from the tangles in her hair to tickle her scalp.

She stays a moment longer than necessary, enjoying what she knows will be a rare moment of uninterrupted peace in her day. When her lungs eventually begin to protest, she resurfaces. Practiced hands quickly descend upon her again to begin rubbing oils and soaps that smell of lavender and honeysuckle into the tangles of her hair.

Leaning her head back, she wipes dripping water from her face, keeping her eyes closed. “And what of the Ice Nation ambassador?”

She can feel the hesitation that spreads across the room at the question. It’s a nearly tangible unease. The older women do a better job at smoothing over it, only a fraction of hesitation in their movements. The newer ones stop altogether, hands frozen holding onto the ornate pitchers of fresh water.

Clarke doesn’t open her eyes to address the silence, just waits for the answer she has already guessed. The most tenure of her maidens continues working, rinsing the suds clean from her hair. It is she who speaks.

“Gone, Commander. Before light even broke this morning.”

Clarke doesn’t respond, just sighs and opens her eyes. She traces the crevices between the tiles of her private bath, the grit smooth and even against the pads of her fingers. The bath is large, larger than she needs - a relic from people no longer around to enjoy its splendor.

She looks at her hands below the surface. Jagged scars mark her arms, gifts of both war and years preparing for it. She flexes her fingers and watches the thin fork of lightning across her knuckles stretch.

“Perhaps...they will return—”

“No,” she cuts off the words before they can continue, fingers stilling. “Their queen has made her decision.”

Without preamble, she grips the sides of the bath and stands. Each of her maidens scramble at her movement - one reaching for a robe that she holds out and open for Clarke, who slips her arms through.

Water dripping onto the floor, the Commander walks out of the room to prepare for her day.

‘If it is more battle she wants, then who am I to deny her.’
“Hey. Hey, Ark to guard dog.”

Lexa startles and looks up from her book to find Raven at her table. Without invitation, the girl sits down to straddle the bench on the opposite side.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t if you responded to me calling your name the first thousand times. Christ, what are you reading that’s got you so lost in space?”

Lexa lifts her book and Raven makes a face as soon as she reads the title. Tucking one of her knees up, she takes a large bite from the apple in her hand and says with a full mouth, “Why are you reading about ancient geography?”

Lexa shrugs and sets the book aside. “I like it. It can tell you a lot about history on the ground.”

Raven still makes a face, but then seems to not feel up to teasing. “Whatever, your free time.” Rubbing an unbitten spot of apple against the breast of her coveralls, she continues to munch in silence for a moment.

Lexa continues eating her soup and contemplates the girl sitting across from her. She’s not an idiot, she knows it’s not “cool” to sit with the guards, even if they’re off duty and practically your own age. There are a dozen other tables Raven could have chosen to sit at, but she chose Lexa’s. Raven picks at the stem of her apple and doesn’t look at her. Lexa just waits.

“So, funny story, you know that project I’m working on?” Raven starts abruptly, the timer on her patience and subtlety seemingly having expired. The mechanic is trying to hide three-too-many cups of coffee jitters and is drumming her fingers on the table as her eyes seek Lexa’s out. She’s excited, something has her riled up.

Lexa takes her times chewing the bite of potato in her spoonful of potato and cheese soup.

She swallows her bite. “Mhmmm.”

“Well, turns out - funny story really, that I don’t have access to the components locker that has the processor I need. Would you believe that?” She scoffs and flicks the apple stem she finally managed to work off somewhere.

“That is funny,” Lexa deadpans and spins her spoon through the remainders in her bowl.

“So I got to thinking, and I realized, you know who does have access? My good friend and local Ark guard, Lexa!”

“You don’t say.” Lexa finds a bit of what she thinks is leek in her soup and fishes it out.

“Yep. So, I was thinking, you know, if you’re not busy later, maybe we could take a stroll through Sector-H? In and out. Two minutes tops.”

“You know there are forms for that, right? Just see the department head and they can authorize access.”

Raven makes a motion with her head and hands that tells Lexa she’s already heard this today. “Yes, but. They won’t authorize it until Monday. And I’m already a week behind schedule. Whereas you, my badge-wearing, master-key-holding friend, could stroll in there at any time.”
Lexa chews some more. “Remind me again about this project of yours?”

Raven jumps on the fact that Lexa hasn’t outright said ‘no’ yet and turns from straddling the bench to sit fully at the table.

“It’s a rover. Well sort of. It’s not really going to go anywhere. It’s just a bot that’s going to collect samples from the ground and relay data back up here. Soil samples, air samples. And if I miss and hit the ocean instead, I guess water samples.”

From what Lexa remembers, Raven failed to mention most of this the last time she’d rambled about her project. Lexa distinctly just remembers something about launching an old non-operational satellite shuttle into the earth “to see if she could do it”. What she’s talking about now actually sounds...interesting. And practical. Which isn’t necessarily a characteristic she would attribute to the eccentric mechanic.

Lexa pushes her book farther aside and leans forward. “How far along are you in the project?”

“Pretty far. Hoping to be operational in a few weeks.” She rubs at the back of her neck. “It’s a bit of an off-books gig, so it’s been slow going and on my own time, and I’ve hit a few snags with the bot.” There’s a twist to her mouth that disappears as she perks up again suddenly. “The shuttle is good to go though! Set and ready as soon as I configure the non-rover to it. They won’t give me authority to launch it until there’s a legitimate reason to.” She then continues on with a string of technical sounding sentences that leave Lexa far behind as she describes some of the finer details.

There’s a wildness to Raven’s eyes that Lexa knows won’t be tempered by authority or rules. She’ll get her hands on that part tonight - with Lexa’s help or not. She thinks about where Raven’s next stop is likely to be, who the next person is that she’d approach and it’s unlikely to be someone with legal access and more likely to be someone that will just make their own.

She checks her watch and realizes she doesn’t have anything better to do. “Sector-H, you said?”

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The paint is thick and black as charcoal as she rubs it between her fingers. With slow, practiced movements, Clarke traces it across the curves of her face, fingers dipping into the crevices beneath her brows before slipping under the swell of her eyes. From there they crawl over her cheekbones tracing out a pattern she’s followed countless times. Over and over she returns to the small clay pot until the pads of her fingers scrape the bottom.

When she’s finished, the markings lay stark against her skin, crying shadows cast over pale cheeks. The blue from her eyes is sharp in contrast - staring back from the cracked mirror that reflects her image at odd angles.

The top and crown of her head are left unbraided today. Instead pulled back in one piece in order to remain out of her eyes, leaving the rest to cascade around her shoulders. The few braids she does have originate from just below her left ear. They are tight and neat - meant to remain in tact for the duration of her journey.

Taking a moment to check her work once more, she releases a breath and turns away.

Her guards stand at attention when she thrusts open the doors to her quarters. Hands steady on their upright spears, they follow silently in her wake.
Her hall is abandoned - or rather, seems to empty before her as she makes her way through it. She passes by tapestries, emblazoned with the signs of the commander and the Capital, their intricacy and brightness drawing her eye every time. Between them, the windows cut into the stone reveal the city spilled out far below them.

Stone meets the pliant sole of her boots as she turns down hall after hall until she reaches the center of the tower. She opts for the stairs instead of the lift today and her guards follow dutifully without comment.

The farther she descends, the more people appear. The morning is already rife with activity.

There are many of them. Servants, guards, advisors, healers, and others, all clamoring and rushing places. So many people. Her people. People she is responsible for.

“Commander,” she is greeted over and over again. They bow their heads and rush out of her way, pressing themselves to the walls to make room. She nod at them but they don’t see with their eyes trained on the ground. Floor after floor of steps she spirals down, straps of her boots jangling.

She’s anxious this morning. Anxious to be moving. She can feel the energy trickling through her bones like water seeking cracks in a dam: demanding release. She steps faster but makes sure to school her face of any trace of it before she reaches the bottom.

The courtyard is full of busy movement when she strides out, people flowing every this way and that. A few of the nightbloods race by - off to lessons, she assumes, judging by the unhappy set of their mouths. They skitter to a stop upon seeing her, uttering a quick greeting and hasty bow before racing on again. She has no time for them today. Likely won’t for some time.

Her armoury is her destination, and her guards diligently post outside the door when she comes upon it. Her eyes lock on the person in the corner that has obviously been waiting for her for some time and she pauses in the doorway. The servants weave in and out of the space between. They’re forced to flow around her awkwardly until she makes the commitment to fully enter.

The room is large, bursting with row upon row of battle axes, swords, and other things meant for warfare, but still he manages to take up the entire corner he glowers in. Large and imposing, Gustus pushes off the wall and strides towards her, an angry pull to his face as he approaches. Besides her initial pause at seeing him, she doesn’t pay him any mind. She knows why he’s here.

She grabs for her shoulder guard from amongst the pile of armour assembled for her, clips it on with the assistance of one of her servants. The red-orange sash of her title flows over her front in a cascade of fabric.

Gustus’ arms are crossed and, though she doesn’t face him, she imagines his mouth is pulling down at the corners in the same way he used to look at her when she was a child.

“You should remain in Polis.”

The words are presented with as much respect as possible. There are only a few that could even speak them without fear of reprimand. To give an order to the Commander (even hidden under the guise of a suggestion), has not typically been well met.

She tightens the buckle across her shoulder. Turning to the servant at her elbow she says, “Bring my horse and ensure my group is ready to leave. Two of my archers should be among them.”

“Yes, Commander.” The servant bows and quickly slips away to do as she bids.
She pulls on her gloves next, fingers naked to the air, and accepts the sword that’s held out to her. It slides into its space at her waist with familiarity. She turns to Gustus. “The Ice Nation has made its decision. The time for attempts at negotiation has passed and my people can no longer sit and wait for diplomacy while their villages are burned to the ground. I cannot always command from behind the walls of Polis.”

His jaw clenches and he seems to chew on the next words out of his mouth before they’re spoken. “The ice queen wants your head on a pike,” he reminds her bluntly. “And she is willing to pay a high price to get it.”

She shrugs as she adjusts the set of her armour, settling it more firmly into place. He’s telling her nothing she doesn’t already know. “My presence is needed out there. If I lose the bordering clans to her, there will be war. My hold on them is weak at best and Nia can be...convincing.” Her mouth twists in distaste.

Another servant approaches with her quiver which she accepts and strings across her back with practiced ease. Her eyes take count of the blue and white feathered arrows resting in it as she does so. She accepts her bow next, fingers wrapping securely around the smooth and worn wood. Her thumb smooths over the carved mark of the commander stamped into its center as she tests the resistance of the string with one of her fingers. At her nod, the servant disappears once more.

“So what is your plan? To ride out with a handful of warriors and-- and do what exactly? This is hardly an army you’re leaving with!”

She turns to look at him, leveling her gaze. The tattoos across his cheeks seem to pull tight in his displeasure of the unfolding of circumstances. “Enough. I cannot sit here and wait. I need to remind those with tenuous alliances that they have a Commander already, and it is not the ice queen!”

There is a momentary lull in the noise in the room at the raising of her voice - that same sense of plunging a space into tension. It takes a breath before it passes movement resumes fully once again.

Gustus purses his lips as her words roll over him. He’s been fighting her more often than not lately. He’s worried about the bandits and the Ice Nation spies, and the warriors that don’t respect the borders. All of which seem to appear more and more often with each passing day. He’s also known her most of her life, helped train her as well, so after a moment of searching her eyes for chink in her resolve, he capitulates with an unhappy nod.

They exit the armory into the daylight. He has to crouch below the door to follow but doesn’t let her slip away.

“Ten warriors isn’t many,” he stubbornly observes with an unsatisfied grunt. His eyes trail dubiously over her company of grounders who are in the process of strapping on armour and loading bags onto the saddles of their horses.

A servant, no older than twelve years she would guess, stumbles up to her with her horse. Its black coat shines in the light of late morning as it tosses its head - as eager to be moving as she is it would seem. She settles it with a hand on its side.

She can feel the gaze of the boy holding him and redirects her attention to meet it. His brown eyes widen under her stare, more white than iris. Thin wrist wobbling, he offers the reins in a fist that’s clenched tight around the leather.

She attempts a smile to put him at ease, but when she reaches forward he drops the reins and backs away hastily. A short bow is all she receives before he’s slipped away again. She purses her lips,
mulling over the moment before putting it aside and turning to address Gustus once more.

“No. Taking a battalion would spread rumours that I intend to march on the Ice Nation. A handful of warriors in my forest will hardly alarm anyone. Besides, I will be meeting Anya’s camp, and I can add to my party then if I choose.”

He ignores this later fact. “Will they not just think you foolish, traveling with so few to guard you?”

“Of course they will,” she scoffs, checking over her horse again and ensuring her packs are in place, already tired of the conversation. “Let them. If they choose not to remember the last time they underestimated me, it will be their undoing, not mine.”

He lingers as she tightens the strings on one of the packs and places her bow into its carefully constructed hold on the side. She can feel his displeased and worried energy pressing in on her and it does nothing to stem the flow of anxiousness she already harbours. “Thank you, Gustus. You may leave.”

She hears him sigh, resigned but not surprised. “Yes, Commander. May your journey be safe. Travel well.” His footsteps retreat and she turns away from her horse to face her group.

Most are ready to move out, some already sitting in the saddles of their horses, awaiting her command. The rest stand in a group - quickly pulling on spare bits of leather armour and weapons. Her eyes immediately narrow in on one warrior in particular who is taking a moment to place a few more blue-feathered arrows into her quiver.

“Avery.”

The girl in question looks up, fingers stalling on their task. Her hair is loose at points, dirty blonde locks sticking up from where they’ve obviously been hastily braided back. When she sees who it is that addresses her, she abandons what she was doing and stands at attention.

“Yes, Commander?”

Under Clarke’s attention, she tucks a lock of hair behind one ear, a hint of a smile tugging at one corner of her lips. It doesn’t take long to shift to a different expression. The same coy look she’d brandished when the door to Clarke’s private quarters had been opened to her late the prior evening.

Clarke blinks back, impassive. “You will remain here and continue instructing the new group of archers.”

The smile falls from her face. Disbelief replaces it and her response comes forth in undignified sputters. “But -- I-- I simply assumed --” A raised eyebrow on behalf of Clarke is enough to stop the flow of words. Avery’s mouth snaps shut and, though her eyes show a litany of unspoken words, she nods once stiffly. “Yes. Of course, Commander.” She undoes the buckle of her quiver and begins removing her packs from her horse, lips stiff and pulled down in displeasure.

Turning away, Clarke’s eyes trail over the rest of her group, satisfied that most of them are set to head out. Nodding to herself, she places her foot in the stirrup and heaves herself up into the saddle in one fluid movement. Her horse stamps his feet restlessly as she settles, feeling her mood.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees Avery all but shove her pack off to another archer standing by. The replacement scrambles to attach his own belongings to the free horse, not wanting to keep the group and, more importantly, the commander, waiting.

When he’s heaved himself up, with far less grace than those around him, Clarke clicks her tongue.
Her horse springs into motion underneath her at the command, pressing forward out of the courtyard gates. A thunder of hoofbeats follow behind her through the streets of Polis as her party sets out.

The people in the road part for her, flowing to the sides like a breaking wave.

Reverence, fear, awe. They all reflect back at her from their faces. She blocks it out.

The whispers however. Those manage to puncture through to her no matter how hard she tries not to hear them. They follow her through the streets and out of the gates of Polis. A single word, over and over:

“Wanheda.”

“B-13, B-14, B-15, a-ha! B-16! Got it!” Raven snags the chunk of metal off the shelf and holds it up to the ceiling like a prize-winning trophy.

Lexa yawns from where she leans against the doorway of the room and checks her watch. She wonders, not for the first time, why she agreed to do this. But Raven’s excitement is contagious, and Lexa finds herself oddly excited as well, even if she has no idea what the part does or how it works. No, she doesn’t really know why she agreed to help, but she shifts on her feet and wonders if it’s so bad if maybe she did it just for the company.

The room is one of the larger ones in the sector, probably the largest storage Lexa has seen yet. It’s row upon row of metal cabinets and shelves holding all sorts of contraptions and thingamabobs that glint in the overhead lights. Lexa probably couldn’t name more than a handful of them. Raven, on the other hand, seems very knowledgeable about what lines the shelves and her eyes roam over the compartments hungrily.

“Nuh-uh, don’t even think about it,” Lexa warns, reading her mind. “You got your component, now let’s go.”

Raven smartly decides not to push her luck and nods, pocketing the mysterious device she came for and passing Lexa out of the room. Lexa initiates the locking mechanism with her keycard and the door slides shut behind them.

“If I find out you blew something up with that thing, Reyes…”

“Oh, it’s not my fault if things blow up when I’m involved, that could happen to anyone.” Her hands are tossed up in the air with the words, a gesture of someone who has the finger of blame pointed in their direction more often than not.

Lexa sends her a brief look of disbelief as they walk, hands tucked into her off-duty jacket.

They walk in silence for a few beats, Raven’s mind likely already whirring away thinking about her part and her bot. Lexa thinking about nothing in particular.

The sector is busy for this hour. The two of them are forced to meander around those heading home, shoulders brushing passerbys in the narrow halls. Curfew isn’t far off and it seems to put a bit of speed in everyone’s step as they head home.
When they pass through Gateway 4 they encounter a familiar head of red hair. Christine, a cadet that was in initial training with Lexa, stops with a smile.

“Hey, Lexa! Are you off tonight?”

Lexa smiles back politely. “Yeah, I had my shift this afternoon.”

She expects Raven to say her goodbyes and keep walking, especially with curfew hovering, but she lingers instead.

“Cool cool,” Christine comments, nodding and rocking back on her heels with her hands digging into the pockets of her guard jacket. “Late shift is such a drag sometimes.”

Raven is looking between them now, eyes flicking back and forth and there’s an amused smile growing on her face. There are a few beats of silence which quickly swell with awkward tension that Raven does nothing to try and help her out of.

When it’s clear Lexa isn’t going to say anything else, Christine clears her throat and says, “Well, I guess I better get going.” She gestures over her shoulder with her thumb and gives a light laugh.

Lexa nods and Christine sends one last glance and a smile, slightly less bright now, between the two of them before heading on her way. When she rounds the corner, Raven pushes off from the wall she’d been leaning on with lips that twist in amusement.

“Redheads not your thing?”

Lexa purses her lips and continues walking, saying nothing.

“Ooooh, gotcha,” Raven says in understanding, skipping slightly to keep up with Lexa’s longer strides. “You’ve already been there, done that, and now you’ve got a stage five clinger, huh?”

“I’m not talking about this with you.”

Raven just grins.

Before long they get to the fork in the road where the Mecha Station residents go right and Lexa’s own accommodation, with the other guards, is to the left.

“Well thanks again for lending a hand, I owe you one.” Raven says. She’s rubbing at the back of her neck as if she is unaccustomed to having to ask for favours and even less accustomed to having to thank someone for them.

“I’ll come to collect someday,” Lexa tells her, but it’s with a smile. It wasn’t anything exciting, but she’s had more boring evenings than in Raven’s company.

Raven turns to head down the North wing but turns around only a few steps away, walking backwards. “You should swing by my workstation sometime, check out the non-rover. He’s not too pretty right now, but I’m sure you’d like him regardless.”

Lexa nods, surprised by the offer. “Yeah, okay, sure.”

Raven salutes her with two fingers and turns around again. “See you around, guard dog.”

Lexa watches her walk away and feels a sting of sadness for the mechanic suddenly. She wonders, not for the first time, if Raven submerges herself so deeply into her projects just to escape thinking about Finn.
He was caught in an unauthorized spacewalk and locked up in Prison Station - it was all anyone seemed to want to talk about for some time last year. He’d been younger, sparing him from being floated, but you don’t waste three months worth of oxygen supply and then just get to walk away.

Raven should hate Lexa, just for wearing the uniform. But she doesn’t. She wonders if it’s because she believes that Lexa can somehow find a way to help him. Believes she can change the system, make it something different. Something better.

It’s a staggering thought.

It’s late now, her watch telling her curfew is only a few minutes away, so she only passes the stragglers who don’t waste time on pleasantries as they quickly make their way home. The fluorescent lights, bright and intrusive, guide her as she passes by metal door after metal door with airbrush-stenciled lettering once she gets to the residence wing.

It’s times like this when she wonders what it must have been like to walk home in the old days. Before there were floatings and the Ark. Before the war and the bombs. When people just...lived.

She’s seen pictures of streetlamps and their soft light. Can imagine fallen leaves rustling in gutters. Raindrops pricking your face as the sun chases the horizon home. It all seems impossibly unreal to her.

Sighing, she finds her door in the hall and walks into her room. It’s not big: a bed, a small kitchen, a bathroom with a shower that she can’t move around much in. But it’s home and it’s hers.

Tossing her bag onto the small table she hangs up her jacket and lays down on the bed. Tired eyes meander over the scattering of maps pinned over each other so tightly they’re practically wallpaper. Her eyes walk down ancient roads and looking over the names of places that now belong to history.

When she sleeps she dreams of a better world.

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Clarke does not set an easy pace. It is long, hard riding and by the time the sun has begun to lay itself tangent to the mountains in the distance, they have put a good amount of space between themselves and Polis.

Clarke pulls her horse up and feels the other riders do the same around her.

“We’ll stop here for tonight,” she tells them, nodding at the good tree cover and fairly even ground. “We’ll reach the camp by tomorrow afternoon.”

They immediately begin sliding off their mounts and building camp at her words. Their movements are efficient, smooth in the way that only repetition brings. Clarke slides off of her own horse and runs a hand down his neck, patting it gently. He huffs and blows air out of his nostrils at her until she rummages an apple out of her pack for him.

She hears footsteps behind her and knows it’s Lincoln before he speaks. She strings the reins loosely over her horse before turning to face him.

From the pack hanging from his shoulder he removes a roll of bound parchment. “The maps you requested.”
She takes them from him with a nod, fingers releasing the string to unfurl them. The parchment is soft between her fingers - years of use making it pliant. There’s just enough light left in the day that if she holds it up she can make out its faded markings.

Her eyes flit over the detailed markings of the forests, the solid, carefully plotted lines of the roads, and the large river that runs through it all. It cuts swaths through the details, bending and flowing down from the mountains in the northwest, splitting and branching before spilling out into a delta.

There has to be something. Something she’s missing.

Lincoln doesn’t ask what she’s looking for and she doesn’t tell him.

She’s not looking for long, however, before she hears cursing somewhere over her shoulder. It’s a particularly colorful string of words and she sees Lincoln’s eyes widen briefly where they look past her. She follows and turns to see one of her warriors, the boy that had replaced Avery, struggling to detach his quiver from where it has caught on the edge of his saddle.

Without turning away she slowly rolls up the parchment again, tucking it into her own bag. “Thank you, Lincoln. You may go.”

Folding her hands behind her back she walks over, pausing just a few steps away. The boy is one of her archers, the three dots of black paint at the edge of his eye marking him as such. He doesn’t look older than sixteen, and though that is not much younger than many of her warriors, there is still a feeling of youth that so obviously clings to him.

It takes him a moment to notice her there. When he does, he straightens abruptly and half the arrows fall from his fumbling grasp. Her eyes track them as they hit the ground, bouncing off at odd angles. He curses again, but it’s quieter and decidedly less creative than the first time.

“You are Avery’s replacement.” It isn’t a question, but she pauses to allow him to confirm anyways.

He can’t seem to decide whether to collect the fallen arrows or address her question first. He intelligently decides on the latter.

“Yes, Commander.”

“And your name?”

“Tahvo. From Broadleaf.”

She nods and sees his eyes nervously search hers, trying to decipher what her attention means.

“And how long have you been with the archers?”

“Four years.”

She nods but doesn’t reveal anything.

“Do you believe you are prepared to be here?”

“Yes, of course.” His words come readily, determined, eager, even. He stands a bit straighter without realizing.

Her eyes trail down to the pile of fallen arrows, his own follow sheepishly.

“Then I suggest you start proving it.”
Lexa’s breaths puff out as she pulls herself up, arm muscles quivering as she touches her chin to the bar over and over again.

It is just teetering on 6am and only a few other guards have chosen to join her in the equipment room. She sees Christine start up one of the ancient looking treadmills in the corner but doesn’t meet her eye. She releases a breath when the girl doesn’t come over to talk to her, telling herself that she’s not avoiding her, she’s just busy.

Her arms strain and tremble as she works to keep going, counting reps under her breath.

The guard requires a strict training regime. Fluctuations in the artificial gravitational pull on the Ark can do a number on muscle mass and Lexa is not about to let herself slack off. Twice more she touches the skin below her lips to the bar before releasing her grip and dropping to her feet, shaking the muscles out in her arms.

“Guardswoman, Woods.”

Wiping sweat from her brow she turns at the address. “Sergeant, Miller,” she greets her superior, getting control of her breathing.

He is fully uniformed already, one hand resting comfortably on the heavy belt around his waist. It’s early in the day yet, too early for the morning shift, and it takes her a moment to puzzle it out. Then she remembers: Remembrance Day. The holiday on the Ark meant to commemorate those that have fallen or made sacrifices for the good of the Ark. In the end, at least for those in charge of keeping order and discipline on the satellite station, it mostly means extra guard duty and an earlier start to the day for those in charge. For a moment she feels a thrill at the prospect that he might be here to tell her she is part of the group assigned to monitor the festivities.

He hold a clipboard in one hand and brings it up from where it had previously been resting against his hip. He scans the paperwork until he finds her name. “Sergeant Scott wants your assistance for one of the training measures with the newer recruits. And then you’ll be covering route 4 in Mecha Station this afternoon again.”

Disappointment floods through her. Some of it must show on her face because he sets the clipboard aside again. “You’re doing good work there. Yesterday’s arrest aside, I know it’s not the most exciting, but everyone has to start somewhere. Keep it up and I’ll personally put in word for you to be placed somewhere else. Maybe in Go-Sci. We could use a level head like yours there.”

She flounders for words for a moment, the compliments throwing her off guard. After a moment she manages a “Yes, sir.”

He nods and moves on, taking his clipboard to inform the others in the vicinity of their duties for the day.

A new skip in her step (she even manages a smile at Christine when she passes by), she heads to the locker room.

Lexa looks herself over in the full length mirror on the wall.
She straightens her jacket, fingers running over the triangular insignia and the single bar above it marking her rank. There are a few errant hairs escaping from her braid and she smooths them down.

Returning to her locker, she clips on her belt and follows it up with her baton, flashlight, radio, and everything else she is required to carry while on duty. The gun she always clips on last - a privilege given only to those who surpass Cadet level. Her fingers slide over it, ensuring the safety is on.

She wonders when the weight of it will feel familiar as the rest of her gear. Wonders if that’s something she actually wants.

Her day progresses quickly after that. She swings by the training facilities to assist Sergeant Scott. There she has the misfortune of being used as a test dummy for proper takedown and restraint to an audience of wide-eyed recruits. Her good mood is quickly doused as her back hits the training mat over and over. By the time she escapes, her wrists are chafing from being put in and taken out of handcuffs so many times.

The day when other cadets get promoted and relieve her of her position as the newest guard cannot come soon enough. She dreams about when the senior guards will finally find another person to pawn their unwanted tasks on.

Her break arrives swiftly after. (She supposes one advantage of being used as a training dummy means she isn’t constantly looking at her watch.)

Usually her break consists of wedging herself into a deserted corner or an unoccupied hall somewhere to get lost in her book. She knows there’s one stuffed into the bottom of the bag hanging over her shoulder. It’s old and dog eared, the pages yellowed and soft - a relic of a time when novels were still printed. Just as she’s starts digging through the contents of her bag for it, a different idea crosses her mind. Letting it fall to her side again, Lexa turns her feet in the direction of Mecha Station. Her watch tells her she’s got about twenty minutes before she needs to begin her rounds. Plenty of time.

“Knock, knock,” she says, knuckles rapping on the frame of the door to the mechanic’s workroom.

Raven pushes the mask up from her face, shutting off the flame she’d been using to solder two pieces of something together. Grime and grease appears in patches on her arms and all over the overalls that are rolled up around her waist. She pushes back from the worktable with a surprised smile.

“Hey, you came by! Not gonna lie, I didn’t think you would.”

Lexa nods but hesitates in the doorway, “Are you busy? Should I come back another time?”

“No, no, you’re good!” She says, setting the torch aside fully and working her gloves off of each hand.

Lexa steps farther into the room; there’s a lot of things going on but the large hunk of metal resting on the worktable does the best job at drawing her eye. There’s wires of all colours and widths pouring out of it in waves. Circuit boards and panels cover its sides in a manner that gives the impression that the person who put them there was more concerned with speed rather than aesthetics. If she’s being truthful, she wouldn’t be surprised if it spontaneously burst into flames.

She gestures at it. “Is this the…,” she trails off and Raven fills in the blank.

“Yep, this is my rover,” she says, smiling and placing a hand on it like a proud parent. “He’s looking a bit like a bunch of junk metal pieced together with duct tape, but by the time I get him running he’ll be the prettiest bot on the Ark.”
Lexa leans closer, eyes trailing over her work, impressed despite the chaos. Raven continues then by going over in detail what she’s already completed on it, pointing to everything in turn. She’s clearly excited at having someone to ramble to and Lexa does her best to be a captive audience.

“I’m working on his alpha particle spectrometer right now,” she says and Lexa nods like she knows what that means. “I’ve already finished the solar arrays and attached them to the equipment deck. Now it’s really a matter of making it all work together. That’s the tricky part.” She pauses. Worries her lip. “If it gets down there and falls apart, it’s done.”

Her fingers smooth over some of the wires hanging out. This project clearly means a lot to her. It’s been something for her to focus on. To get her mind off of things. Without it...

“It’ll get down there in one piece,” Lexa assures her with a nod.

Raven eyes her for a moment, trying to see if she’s just telling her what she wants to hear. Whatever she sees on her face must read as sincere though because Raven smiles. That worry is still there, pinching between her eyebrows, but Lexa can tell she appreciates the gesture of confidence.

She stands up from her stool and rounds the table to place a few tools back on the hooks hanging from the wall across and to grab another. She doesn’t even read the labels stamped above them, her fingers just automatically finding what she needs.

“I’d be moving faster if Tesla Station wasn’t fucking with the power grid today and I didn’t have to keep rebooting my entire system,” she rolls her eyes as she crosses over to the computer on the wall, punching a button to engage the keyboard which slides out to meet her. She clicks away at it and things begin flowing over the screen. It looks like a mess of code that Lexa doesn’t spend much time trying to decipher over her shoulder.

Raven quickly seems to forget that she’s there, her eyes flicking over the flowing lines, obviously seeing something Lexa can’t. By the time she shakes herself out of it and turns, she finds Lexa fiddling curiously but cautiously with something that had looked like a radio when she’d picked it up from the table. As she holds it at closer inspection now, she’s not so sure.

“You wanna see the shuttle? Or is your punctuality meter already blaring at you to start heading back to work?” Raven teases.

Lexa glares at her and sets the piece back carefully. She’s itching to check her watch, but she ignores the impulse and says, “I’m sure I’ve got time.”

Raven grins and beckons her to follow as she steps away from the computer. They exit the workroom and Raven leads her around a few corners.

The wing is deserted - a combination of it being both the weekend and a holiday. Only those who have to be and those obsessed with their work are out and about, everyone else likely off enjoying the festivities.

They’re taught conservation from cradle to grave (in a manner of speaking. The idea of graves - spaces specifically made for the dead - was left behind on the earth), so holidays are the few opportunities a year when those on the Ark are allowed to consume more than their carefully rationed portion. Most take part for that reason as well as the more lenient curfew policies that occur.

“You didn’t want to go join the party?” Lexa asks out of curiosity as she follows.

Raven shrugs. “I might drop by later. But, to be honest, listening to Go-Sci give us a history lesson about how we persevered through a famine over fifty years ago doesn’t really get my motor
“running.” Raven slides her card in the reader outside one of the doors which slide open for her.

“You?”

Lexa shrugs as well. “I don’t get off work for a while, so I’d probably miss most of the speeches anyways.”

“Figures that that’s the part your nerd brain would be excited about.”

They step into a small room. The walls are white and metal, large numbers carefully stenciled onto one side informing her which bay she’s in. Besides the computer system - a twin of the one in the mechanic’s workroom - there is a double airlock at the end. The two layers seal off what she assumes is the shuttle beyond it, the inner door clearly meant to be closed when the shuttle releases to preserve the oxygen supply.

Raven heads straight for the computer, typing away and flipping switches in the wall that intermittently light up and flicker as she moves. She works in silence, but there is a finality to her movements as she hits three more keys before twisting and engaging a red lever on her right.

The first airlocked door makes a few clanking sounds in response - a locking mechanism disengaging, before a green light blinks and it releases fully. Through it, Lexa can see the second door doing the same. As they slowly press open, gears clinking as they swing on their large hinges, Raven throws an arm out with a “ta-da!”

Lexa adjusts the bag hanging across her torso and steps farther into the room curiously, peeking around the edge of the first door and into what lays beyond the second.

“It was originally a harvest shuttle. Short term trips out from the Ark to out-of-use satellites.” Raven leans against the open door as she talks, hands moving with her words.

Lexa’s eyes are wide with curiosity as she looks into the docked shuttle, eyes taking in everything from the controls to the large window in the front. The cosmos spin on through it and the Earth peeks out of one corner. Lexa has looked through her fair share of windows on the Ark, but she has to admit that this is probably the best view she’s had yet.

“See that section there?” Raven points to a large side that looks like it could slide open. “It’s a micro loading bay. They were supposed to take this thing out and collect materials from all the shit that’s just floating out there. In the end the trips just got too costly, so they shut the program down.”

“And now you get to play with the scraps,” Lexa observes. The interior of the shuttle has obviously been modified. Picked apart and put back together in a new way that only an engineer could imagine. Looking in front of the control deck shows that there likely used to be some sort of command chair that has been removed to make space for Raven’s bot.

“You can go in, you know,” Raven tells her, noticing how Lexa was hovering on the edge of the doors. Still, Lexa hesitates.

“This thing is fully automated now. Self-guiding,” Raven continues, looking on proudly.

“Impressive,” Lexa tells her, because it’s true.

Raven shrugs, but the slight upturning at the corner of her mouth tells Lexa that she is pleased with the compliment.

“It’s the configuration of the bot that’s gonna be the real tricky part. First I have to--,”
Whatever she planned on continuing that sentence with is cut off when the power abruptly shuts down. They’re plunged into darkness for a moment as the fluorescents are snuffed out. It takes a moment, but then the backup generator kicks in and the emergency lights blink on one by one, glowing a gentle blue.

“Son of a bitch! Again?!” Raven yells at the ceiling, pushing off from the wall. “If those idiots in Tesla don’t get the power back up in five I’m heading over there and dealing with it myself.”

Lexa’s not religious, but she sends a silent prayer for Tesla Station to any cosmic deity that might be listening.

“Actually, you know what? Float this. I’m going to divert our power. I can siphon off of medical’s solar generators until Tesla gets its shit together.” Her brow is creased in concentration as she begins clicking away at the computer on the wall again.

Lexa doesn’t get worried until Raven slams the keyboard in frustration and pulls a wrench from the pocket of her pants. “I’m going to have to open up the wall.” Without a backwards glance she strides out of the room, the doors sliding shut just behind her.

Lexa is left among the blinking controls and the haze of the emergency lights.

The trees loom above them, casting cool shadows from the afternoon sun, a brief respite from its glare.

Summer is almost over and Clarke knows the colder seasons aren’t long in coming. Already she can feel cool winds chasing in at night to whisk away any heat the day may have brought. The leaves know it too and are beginning to glint gold as they twirl to the base of the forest floor.

Clarke and her group plod along, their mounts kicking up dirt along the path that brings them closer and closer to where her camp of warriors is located. It takes them hours to reach it, and by the time they encounter the first set of outlying scouts, Clarke has been itching to be out of the saddle for some time.

A horn announces her approach, a singular long note. This is followed by a flurry of movement from the grounders within the camp, who gaze on with deference and part to allow her horse through to the center. Clarke nods at those who address her and slips down from her horse when she reaches her destination. Her reins are handed off to a warrior that comes forward.

She makes a note to personally check on her horse later. It is one aspect of being Commander she dislikes to delegate, firmly believing a warrior should be in charge of their own mount.

The flap on the largest tent opens and a face she’d recognize anywhere steps out.

“I was starting to get worried that you’d lost your way. I was about to ride out and make sure you hadn’t accidentally walked over the side of a cliff.” Anya stands a few steps away, arms crossed as she considers Clarke.

“Can’t say you’d be the first one I’d ask to save me if I had,” Clarke retorts, eyebrow raised.

Anya scratches as the back of her head and gives a short laugh. “Can’t fault you there, I’d just leave
you to climb your way back up.”

And then they’re grinning and Clarke realizes how much she’s missed her old instructor, prickly temperament and all.

Anya steps aside and gestures for Clarke to follow. “I’m assuming by your hasty departure from the capital that we have much to discuss.”

Clarke nods reluctantly and follows her into the tent, thoughts on the map in her bag and the ice nation warriors that trickle closer and closer to her borders.

Lexa spends a few minutes just awkwardly standing in the dark room waiting for Raven to come back.

The computer screen set into the wall faded dark a minute ago, along with the blinking switches set next to it, and Lexa took that to mean that Raven was successful in opening the wall. She figures, as a guard, it’s better that she doesn’t see whatever Raven is up to, so she patiently waits where she is, shifting from foot to foot.

When the lights still haven’t come on after a few minutes, she pulls her flashlight from her waist and clicks it on. There’s nothing more exciting within the room so she settles for just training it on the ground. It’s sharp, focused light doesn’t help much for overall illumination and she considers switching it off again.

The doors to the shuttle gape open where Raven left them. The interior beyond is dark - out of reach of the emergency lights. The only illumination comes from the stars and earthlight shining through the window.

Lexa fiddles with the button on the bottom of her flashlight. Her eyes glance back at the main door, checking to see if Raven is about to make an appearance again. No sign of her.

Her watch tells her that she’s still got a few minutes before she should head out. She wastes one of them debating the pros and cons.

She gazes into the shuttle again. Raven did tell her she could go in...

And when’s the next time she’ll get a view like that? Her fingers click the flashlight off and on again - a nervous habit. She steps forwards towards the dark.

Bringing her flashlight up, she carefully navigates through the raised doorway, taking care to step up and over the bottom. She does the same with the next until she’s in the shuttle.

She’s amazed at how small it is. Surprising, given that it was meant to bring resources back from satellites. Still, she can’t say she’s been in many shuttles to have much to compare it to.

She shines the beam of her flashlight over the interior briefly. There’s a seat folded into the wall, its straps and belts hanging listlessly over it, the metal clasps reflecting under her light. Next to it is an arrangement of containers. Lexa reads the stenciled words: Oxygen, Masks, Launch Entry Suits. She doubts these will remain once Raven gets her bot in here. No reason to add the extra weight.
Besides that, the walls are filled with buttons and screens - so many there’s hardly a lick of space that isn’t covered. They all sit dark and still as she shines her light on them.

Pointing her flashlight to the floor, Lexa steps forward towards what she came in for.

The front window of the shuttle bends outward, its curved frame allowing her a wide view of the Earth and the macrocosm that encases it. She’s quickly enthralled with the vastness that gapes back at her, her mouth dropping open without realization. There are storms swirling on the surface of the planet; she can see their curved shape spiraling over the oceans and along the coasts. *Hurricanes* - her mind provides the word from her earth studies classes. For a moment she’s glad there’s no one down there. Those storms would be something vicious to hunker down through.

She’s not sure how long she spends staring. The orbit of the Ark is geostationary, always giving her the same view of the world, but the sight looks almost new to her now.

In reluctance, Lexa checks her watch. She has about two minutes to be on the other side of the station. She’s never been late in her life and she’s not about to start now.

Just as she’s pulling away from the front control deck (she hadn’t even noticed that she’d been leaning on it) the lights shudder on. Three panels on the ceiling of the shuttle click on to fully illuminate the small space. Buttons and switches follow, fluttering and blinking to life with polychromatic activity.

She mentally congratulates Raven while also reminding herself not to ask exactly what she had done to successfully siphon energy off of another station - for both legal reasons and doubts that she’d be able to follow the explanation anyway. She clicks off her flashlight and returns it to the loop on her belt.

It’s the sound of the airlock closing behind her that gets her attention.

But it’s the shudder of the lock engaging that makes her stomach plummet into freefall.

With two strides she’s at the door, tugging uselessly at the large lever that doesn’t budge at her insistence. “Oh come on,” she grits out, muscles straining as she levels all her weight on it.

She peers through the tiny hole of a window on the door, hands cupped around her eyes as she seeks any movement on the other side. If this is Raven playing a trick on her, she’s never helping the mechanic again.

There’s no one there.

“*Pressure disengagement in 10...9...8...*,” a pleasant computerized voice informs her from a speaker in the ceiling.

What? She turns towards the main screen set into the control deck. Code, lots of it, scrolls and scrolls down. It’s flowing so fast her eyes can barely catch on a glimpse of a word before it’s gone.

The computer successfully completes its countdown and the sound of air being mechanically released reaches her ears at a high volume. She doesn’t know what it means but she assumes it’s probably not good.

She turns back to the door. Tries the lever again. Grunts with the effort. She might as well be trying to pull the whole Ark apart with all the headway she’s making.

She’s sweating now, her guard jacket feeling tight around the collar. She searches for an off button.
A cancel button. Any sort of big, glaring button that will make the voice in the ceiling stop talking and will let her out.

The voice from the speaker comes again:

“Fuel at sufficient levels. Engaging main propulsion engine.” A beat. A sound like a heavy weight dropping into a hollow space. “Engaging orbital system engine.” Again, the same sound.

Then there’s a roar. It starts low but grows louder and louder as the seconds pass. It sounds like the torch Raven had been using to solder her bot together only bigger. Much bigger.

She begins pounding on the door, fist quickly smarting against the unrelenting metal. Any noise she makes is lost beneath the rumble.

Lexa can strangely only think one thing as the computer so kindly informs her that she is sixty seconds to launch:

‘I’m going to be late for work.’

With her face scrubbed clean of dirt and paint, Clarke exits her tent, letting the flaps close behind her.

She waves a hand at the guard that stands at attention outside. She doesn’t need him to follow her here - not within her own camp.

She heads for the small lake beside the encampment, needing some distance from all the maps and reports and orders she had just spent hours rifling through with Anya and other advisors. By the time five minutes had passed she had wanted to rub the heels of her hands into her eyes. She feels the exhaustion of her journey pulling at each one of her joints.

Approaching the shore she goes only to the point where her boots begin pressing into the soft sand. Part of her aches to just keep going, to just let the water cascade over her head until she can block it all out. But she doesn’t, she stops and stands at its edge and just breathes.

‘In. Out,’ she thinks, pulling air into her lungs with slow, practiced movements.

The information gained from her meeting swirls in her mind. Anya’s finger, pointing to the locations where her scouts have informed her of ice nation troops. So many. Gathering on the fringes. Closer and closer.

There’s so much potential for war it makes her breathless.

Knowing that she is out of sight of her warriors, she sinks to the ground, sitting down at the lip of the water. Her fingers absentmindedly dig into the sand beside her.

She has seen a lot of war. Even more than is to be expected since her ascension to the throne as Commander. Seen it up close in all its rage and glory. Has made blood-soaked decisions in the midst of it that will carry with her like battle scars until the end of her days - permanent and unchangeable. She has no desire to put her people through it unnecessarily.

Her fingers search beneath the collar of her shirt and pull out the the small piece of metal that sits on a string around her neck. Her thumb smooths over the curve of it and she feels herself calm.
She doesn’t know how long she sits there, watching the surface of the water ripple and shine as the sunlight bounces off it, but eventually she hears footsteps approaching from behind.

“Thought I’d find you out here. You always go straight for some sort of water source when you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“Helps me think,” she responds without turning around.

Anya comes and takes a seat beside her, plopping down to the ground with little decorum.

They’re quiet for some time. Clarke is staring into the space above the water as her mind rifles through information. Anya doesn’t disturb her.

The water laps at the edge of her boots but she doesn’t pull them back, too lost in thought.

Anya doesn’t stay long, just lingers long enough to let Clarke know that she doesn’t necessarily have to be alone in her decisions.

But she does.

She is Atlas and her people are the weight she holds between the crux of her shoulders. It is by her will and hers alone that they will descend into war.

Anya turns back once more before she leaves.

“We’ll all fight for you, you know.”

Clarke doesn’t look at her, brings the necklace to trace against her bottom lip.

“I know.”

It is at this point that Lexa begins hitting any and all buttons she can reach. Figures there really isn’t much to lose. The word “automated” rises unhelpfully to mind as the countdown begins and she looks helplessly at the code flowing across the main screen.

“59...58...57”

She snaps her baton out from her belt and connects it to the computer without hesitation.

“56...55...54…”

Whatever it’s made of is meant to handle rough treatment. With all her might she swings and swings again - she barely manages a scratch. Her fingers jump to the gun on her belt but the thought of puncturing a hole in the shuttle has her leaving it where it is.

She resumes her efforts of searching for a terminal button. Pressing anything and everything again. Her blood is pounding in her ears and nothing changes.

“53...52...51…”

“Come on!” she shouts at it. Panic grips her throat tightly, making the words come out strangled.
She returns to the door, tries the lever again and again. If she pulls any harder she’s sure the skin on her hand will split.

“50...49...48...”

Gasping, she pounds on the door. She’s yelling, can feel the words ripping from her throat. The engine noise swallows them whole.

“47...46...45...”

She continues to bang on the door, grasping onto the thinnest shred of hope with her eyes pressed to the window.

“Raven!” she yells frantically, over and over.

Bang. Bang. Bang, the bottom of her fist meets the door desperately.

“44...43...42...”

The mechanic has keyed onto the fact that something is wrong now, her gaze snapping this way and that.

She doesn’t notice Lexa for another moment and Lexa doesn’t think she’s ever seen blood drain from someone’s face so quickly when she does.

She can’t imagine her own face looks much different.

“41...40...39...”

She can’t hear what she says but she can see her name in the way Raven’s lips move.

Back to the computer, the mechanic races. Lexa waits with a mouth that’s gone bone-dry, her face pressed against the small window.

“38...37...36...”

Her heart is beating hard against her ribcage and she’s half afraid she’s going to have a heart attack before the countdown even finishes.

“35...34...33...”

The seconds tick tick tick away.

“32...31...30...”

Lexa doesn’t breathe through any of them.

“29...28...27...”

Raven races back into view and Lexa’s eyes latch onto her. It doesn’t take much to read the expression on her face and what it means.

“26...25...24...”
She stumbles back a step from the door. Disbelief first. She’s shaking her head. Because no, this is not happening.

“23...22...21...”

Panic descends swiftly on the back of realization that this is, in fact, very much happening.

Raven has returned to the computer. But the expression on her face had been enough to communicate everything. It is a last ditch effort now.

When she returns again her expression is one of horror and helplessness. She’s failed. There’s not enough time.

“20...19...18...”

Lexa swallows. Her breathing is shallow now, her sight going blurry at the edges as she grinds her hands into her temples. For a moment she thinks she’s going to pass out.

She comes back to herself to see Raven clearly mouthing something desperately to her over and over again.

“17...16...15...”

Her eyes frantically watch again and again until she gets it: Suit! She has to get into the suit!

She’s moving without thinking now, disaster training snapping her into action. Though she has no training for this particular disaster. She pulls out the space suit, practically jumping into it. Her fingers are shaking as she slides her arms in quickly. Even shakier as she tries to pull the helmet over her head.

“14...13...12...”

She hears it click into place and races back to the window. Raven’s head is bowed, but snaps up when she returns.

“11...10...09...”

She’s making a motion of buckling in and Lexa nods quickly in understanding. Raven puts her hand on the window and her expression is broken. She doesn’t need to repeat the words she says now. Lexa understands them easily:

“I’m sorry.”

Lexa gives her a shaky smile in response, but there’s probably too much panic in her eyes to be convincing.

“08..07...06...”

She can’t wait any longer.

Pulling the seat out she sits and snaps the buckles across her chest, tugging on them to make sure they’re fastened. They’re her best hope.

Her breath is coming in shuddering gasps, she can hear it within the hollow space of her helmet. She tries to pull air into her lungs in a steadier manner and can’t.
She’s shaking.

As a guard, Lexa has been put through all sorts of situational training. It was meant to expose her fears so that they could be addressed and dealt with. She did well. She held no fear of heights or confined spaces. She jumped into confrontations without hesitation.

That seemingly lack of fear is what had propelled her career among the guard. In the wake of a perfect takedown, she felt like nothing could touch her. That she held no fears.

“02…01…”

She was wrong.

Fear like she has never felt before grips her now.

“...00…

…

…

*Initiating launch.*

She closes her eyes.

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It’s that time of day when sun has passed its zenith and begins its descent towards the horizon. Clarke has to get back to her tent soon. There are more reports to read and messengers to confer with. Still, she takes another moment.

The sky is a miraculous blue. Deep and yawning with no cloud cover to obstruct or alter its shade.

Or maybe not...

She squints as something catches her eye.

It’s a streak of movement - a pinprick of white that her eyes pass over before snapping back to. It grows larger and her eyes widen.

She stands.

It starts small but quickly grows larger as she watches. A white swathe of cloud that cuts down to the horizon. And now she can *hear* it. A rumbling, roaring sound.

She’s thrown back into memories of the mountain. Of their weapons that reigned fire from the sky. The force of their explosions upon impact.

But that’s impossible. The mountain is gone.
She had ensured it.

The roaring gets louder and louder and she watches gobsmacked as the object descends. Closer and closer until…

The ground shakes beneath the soles of her feet when it collides. The water before her ripples violently.

She can see the plume of dust and smoke that thunders upward from the site of impact. Hears a resounding *boom* that she can feel in her sternum.

She holds her breath, waiting for an explosion, a familiar wave of fire that she’d come to expect when such things appear. Her hand automatically comes to rest on the hilt of her sword - a natural reaction in the face of threat. She tenses, waiting.

It doesn’t come.

Hurried footsteps behind her - Anya returning. She can hear shouts from her camp.

“What was that?” Anya’s breathless. Likely thinking the same thing - the mountain has somehow returned.

Clarke doesn’t tear her eyes away from the tower of smoke that unfurls into the sky, shaking her head. Because she has no idea.

Her fingers grip the handle of her weapon tightly. “Let’s go find out.”
When Lexa was six she got sent home early from school for getting in a fight with a boy in her class. She had shoved him for bullying another student. She remembers her little hands curling and pushing at his chest with all her might - which wasn’t much for someone of her size. But she had fought because in that moment she thought that it was the right thing to do. Lexa hadn’t even known the girl, just knew that the things the boy had been saying to her were mean and not right and that someone had to do something.

She remembers sitting in the head administrator’s office after, small feet dangling high above the ground where she sat in the chair, waiting for her mother to come pick her up. She had been terrified that she was going to get in trouble, twisting her sweater in her hands as her eyes watched the door. But her mother wasn’t mad.

“I’m not in trouble?” she asks as she’s led home through the station, row after row of residential wings pass by, the numbers above the doors counting out as they walk. Her hand is held gently in her mother’s own, but she’s too worried to pull much comfort from it.

Her mother stops in the middle of the sector corridor and releases a sigh. Others passing by are forced to weave around them. Lexa’s old enough to know that her mother probably had to leave work early to come get her and feels a stab of guilt.

She crouches to meet Lexa’s eye. “No, honey,” she says, chewing on her lip and clearly debating her next words. She has the same sharp cheeks to match the sharp eyes that her daughter will inherit. Her hair is lighter though, Lexa takes after her father in that aspect. “I wish you had used your words, or told your teacher, because you shouldn’t shove people.” She brushes hair back from Lexa’s eyes delicately, pads of her fingers skimming her temple. “But no, you were trying to protect someone, you’re not in trouble.”

Lexa knows she should probably leave it at that, satisfied that she isn’t going to be punished. Instead she thinks about how disappointed her dad is going to be when he gets home. Tears quickly gather in her eyes as she panics, her chest feels tight.

“But I got in a fight and daddy said -” she hiccups as she becomes overwhelmed, “daddy said that I’m not supposed to fight with people.” Tears begin escaping without her permission, bubbling over her cheeks.

Her mother quickly cooes gentle words and shushes her. Her hands softly coming to either side of Lexa’s cheeks, brushing away the fat tears. Her eyes, the same deep shade of green as Lexa’s own, search hers. Lexa, to this day, still doesn’t know what she was looking for.
“I’m sorry,” six-year-old Lexa whispers, wide-eyed and lip wobbling. 

*Her mother sighs, but then she smiles shaking her head slightly, it’s gentle and she’s still holding Lexa’s cheeks so softly.* 

“Oh Lexa, there is so much good in you. So much fight. Don’t ever lose that.” 

*She doesn’t say anything else and once the tears dry on Lexa’s cheeks, she takes her hand again and they head home.* 

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Lexa opens her eyes, blinking away the strange memory. It sits for a moment, like the last remnants of fog, and then dissipates as reality comes into focus. It slides into her consciousness suddenly and abrasively and she gasps in air.

She’s alive.

Or at least she’s pretty sure she is. Because death shouldn’t be so *loud.*

Her ears are ringing viciously and the control deck is emitting some sort of an alarm that wails intermittently and demands attention. She wants to tell it to shut it, but can’t seem to pick her head up just yet to do so.

Her head is lolling forward and it takes some focused effort to lift it. The helmet is clunky and cracked on one side, spiderweb fractures across the line of sight of her left eye. It’s still mostly in one piece and she can hear her breaths reverberating back at her against the interior. It probably saved her life more than once in the descent.

Blinking red lights illuminate the dark interior of the crashed shuttle in flashes. The main window is dark, some sort of metal paneling having unfolded around it - to protect it from atmospheric entry forces if she had to guess. She can see some dents on the interior of the bay door that tell the tale of her rough landing. Probably a good thing she can’t remember most of it.

Still, parts of the experience return to her in pieces as her mind gets reacquainted with consciousness.

Bright light, a constant roaring sound, a teeth-clashing impact, the feeling of her stomach swooping into her mouth.

It’s not something she’d like to experience twice.

Judging by the amount of blurry vision she’s got she likely lost consciousness on impact. How long has she been out? Minutes? Hours? The thought rises and then she quickly sends it on its way - it doesn’t matter now.

She turns her head and her vision swims as a result. She’s forced to close her mouth to prevent the contents of her stomach from reaching air.

‘*What does matter now?*’ she ponders, blinking. It’s a strange question, not one she thought she’d be asking herself when she woke up that morning, but it demands answer regardless.

Her life. She supposes that matters. She should probably start doing something to preserve it.

The blinking light continues to flash in rounds and rounds like a lighthouse, the red hue making the shadows of the ship sit crimson. She tips her head back and thinks about what she should do.
She is on the ground. And she is completely and utterly alone. After living her entire life crammed into close contact with thousands of other people, the idea has her swallowing against a throat gone tight.

She hangs there for a few moments while she grapples with the concept, the clasps of her seat digging into her suit and keeping her upright. She breathes in once, twice, just thinking. It would almost be easy to give up, do nothing. To hang there and let whatever events unfold.

The alarm on the control deck rings and rings and then cuts out abruptly, dying in a final, soft wail. The silence that follows fills the hollow left behind.

Oh who is she kidding, she’s never taken the easy way out of anything.

She takes a few breaths, tries to focus on something to steady her vision.

Her fingers fumble for the release of her belt.

Clarke’s steps press softly into the dirt as she inches forward, boots automatically navigating a path between the twigs and dried leaves. The forest is hushed, holding its breath in anticipation. A blanket of quiet and smoke hangs in the air, smothering and deep. The animals feel it too; she hasn’t heard a single bird call in the last hundred steps.

They’re close. The large column of smoke is now practically right before them, unraveling into the sky in plumes. It has diminished to a fraction of what it originally was, telling her that a forest fire is, thankfully, unlikely. Still, the air reeks of smoke and fire and destruction she feels her eyes sting from the exposure.

She holds two fingers up above her shoulder and flicks them to the right. A couple of her warriors slip away to encircle the crash site from the other side without a word or sound.

Anya remains by her right elbow - Clarke thinks it would likely take an entire army to remove her from that position. Her past mentor’s sword is already drawn and Clarke wonders if an entire army is what she expects they will find waiting for them. Clarke doesn’t need to look to know her fingers are clenching and unclenching in their grip with impatience or worry. Maybe both.

Clarke, for her part, only holds her bow in her hand. Her fingers grip it comfortably, steadily. She’s calm even as she feels that same anxious thrumming filtering through her too. Yet there’s a kind of thrill underneath it all, one she’s unlikely to ever be able to temper. The unknown is one of the most dangerous, if not the most dangerous, enemy she’s faced as Commander. And whatever lies inside that clearing most definitely falls within that category. And she’s about to find out what it is.

They continue like that, slowly approaching the area where the trees thin out until they stop altogether. A clearing lies beyond, pockets of boulders and overturned trees, all encasing whatever crashed to the ground. She approaches the edge of the treeline and the others follow, the shadows of the tall pines obstructing their presence from anything beyond. They all stop.

The smoke has cleared enough for them all to get a good look at the object nestled into the ground in front of them.

Clarke stares and stares, not understanding. The longer she looks the more the unease within her
unravels.

It’s metal - a compartment of some sort. Larger than the missiles in the past but, as her eyes trail over the deep and long gouge scraped into the Earth in its wake and the trees felled and crushed by its landing, still destructive in its own way. The technology is almost, without a doubt, that of the mountain. Or at least very very similar. Eerily similar. She feels those around her grow more tense as they one by one recognize this fact as well.

She is about to signal the beginning of their approach when the metal contraption releases a short and sharp bang - like someone striking hollow metal. She starts and those around her crouch, weapons ready, tense and waiting.

The noise comes again and again, and before she can decipher its meaning, a panel on one side of the mysterious contraption comes flying off. It bounces off a nearby rock before tumbling to a standstill a few feet away.

Clarke’s arrow is notched in her bow before anyone can draw breath, string pulled back and awaiting release. Because movement like that can only mean one thing.

They wait, tense, and then…

A hand appears. It fumbles and grips for the edge of the opening - fingers clenching and flexing around the doorway. And then the body that belongs to it steps out.

She can feel shock and then bewilderment roll through her companions in two distinct waves.

The first thing Clarke notices is that the girl is bleeding. There’s a gash above her eyebrow that she doesn’t seem to notice as she steps forward. A head of brown hair, spilling out of its tie frames a face that holds a blinking and dazed expression.

She’s wearing a uniform of some sort, but it’s different from any of the ones Clarke has ever seen on any of the mountain men - darker with a different insignia. The weapon on her belt, however, is hauntingly familiar. The girl thankfully makes no motion for it as she stumbles forward from the wreckage and out into the open.

It is the lack of mask or suit, above all, that makes Clarke’s eyes widen. She hears a few of her warriors draw breath quickly as they realize the same things she does. Can practically feel them tightening their grips on their weapons.

“Hold,” Clarke orders quietly and feels her warriors still.

“Commander,” Anya grits out. She’s asking what they’re waiting for. Why Clarke has not given the signal to attack or even let her own arrow fly. Why this girl, that is like a ghost of the mountain, is still breathing.

Anya is right. Clarke should end all of this before it has a chance to begin. Whether it is the mountain or not, that weapon on her belt is enough to indicate a swift end is better taken whilst they have the opportunity.

The back of her middle finger moves to press against her lips as her arms flex and she holds steady tension in the bowstring. The blue and white feathers brush her cheek delicately. She lets out a slow, even breath and takes aim.

She knows she won’t miss. Not from this distance.
A crow cries in the distance and it’s the only noise for what feels like miles.

And then the girl, with red dripping down the side of her face, just...stops. She stops and tilts her head back and looks up.

Clarke’s brow pulls in puzzlement as she watches, bowstring still pressed to her lips, feathers still brushing her cheek.

The expression Clarke sees on her face is awe. It’s pure and simple and so unexpected.

“Commander,” Anya says again - it’s a warning, a plea. She’s staring at Clarke now, taking in her action - or lack thereof, with obvious concern.

Clarke’s mind races, she feels the muscle on the back of her hand twitch. The fingers on her string hesitate, a few breaths pass, and then:

She lets it go slack.

“Clarke.” Anya uses her name in a hushed whisper now, trying to break through whatever delusion she believes she’s has fallen under.

Clarke doesn’t look at or address her. Her eyes stay trained on the girl that continues to stare into the sky, unknowing of how closely she just brushed by death.

She has already made her decision.

“Take her.”

The world is bright.

Lexa’s head is tipped back, neck straining, eyes wide at a sky that stares back with intention. Her breath catches at the vertigo and the depth of blue that swoops down on her. She breathes in until her lungs are bursting with the life of it. The sun shines on her face and the warmth of it fills her with something indescribable.

She’s read books, seen old videos.

She had no idea.

She’s suddenly aware that her head is pounding, it accompanies the ringing in her ears and makes the space in her skull feel crowded. Bringing a hand to her temple, she pulls it away red. She stares at her fingers in sticky confusion. Probably not good. Also probably explains why her vision is going blurry and black at the fringes.

She knows she has to move. Has to find water. Has to try and remember every single damn thing from her Earth Studies course if she even wants a shot at staying alive. Trickling thoughts about slim chances and odds are pushed to the back burners of her mind while she tries to focus.

She takes a shaky step forward away from the shuttle.

It all happens incredibly quickly. Later on she’ll probably even be impressed at the efficiency.
Her face connects to the dirt as her legs are cut out from underneath her. Her hands aren’t quick enough to break her fall and the breath leaves her lungs in a rush.

She grunts and coughs in the dirt, inhaling some by accident. Did she trip over something? She lifts her cheek from the ground to check, vision swimming now with the extra jarring to her probably already concussed brain. She stares in confusion at the rope-like object wrapped tightly around her knees.

Her brain is moving slow, like her thoughts are trying to wade through honey to connect - sluggish and finding resistance with each step as they strain towards one another. She blinks hard. Because this means something. Something important. There are alarm bells going off in her head but her mind just can’t quite grasp why.

The unmistakable sound of footsteps approaching has her swimming vision trailing up from the dirt. Numerous sets of boots come into her line of sight and Lexa’s eyes slowly follow them up and up and up.

Then she’s gaping, can feel it in the way her jaw sags open.

Because, oh. There’s people. There are people on the ground.

No more than a handful, and their expressions aren’t friendly, but still, people. They are approaching rather quickly and with an array of very intimidating-looking weapons, but Lexa is too shocked to feel afraid.

Her vision sways alarmingly and she’s forced to put her head on the dirt.

Perhaps she’s hallucinating. She hopes she’s not dying. That would be unfortunate. I mean, she already survived the landing (she really has to compliment Raven on that entry someday), it would really be a shame to die at this point.

They reach her. One of them pulls her arms behind her back roughly while another holds a menacing-looking spear to her neck, the point just bordering on uncomfortable in the way it presses to her skin. The same man yells something then that sounds garbled to Lexa’s ears. He has an interesting tattoo curved along the underside of his chin and over his cheek but soon it takes too much effort for Lexa to concentrate on it so she gives up trying.

The black at the edges of her vision spreads towards the center and she knows she’s probably about to pass out.

The last thing she sees before her eyes shut is a girl. She stands out from the others though Lexa can’t name why. She blinks slowly at her from the ground, eyelids drooping more and more with each breath. The girl stands with arms crossed as others step forward toward Lexa. But it’s the way she’s looking at her...

She doesn’t breathe for a moment as those blue eyes stare at her, probably would have been pinned to the spot by them if she wasn’t already being captured.

The girl turns away to say something to one of the others but the words reach Lexa muffled and smudged, as if she’s hearing them from underwater.

Darkness swoops in, sure and unrelenting this time.
“This is, by far, your worst idea,” Anya tells her in a hushed but angry voice, shoving a stray branch from a nearby tree out of her face. Clarke knows she’s probably been silently seething and chewing on the words ever since Clarke gave the order to capture the girl alive. It is only now, when they are offered a slight break of privacy, that she voices her concerns.

“I’ve probably had worse,” Clarke murmurs absentmindedly, watching as a couple of her warriors carry the unconscious girl away.

Her brow pulls together.

‘Where did she come from?’

Clarke’s head tips back to look at the trees surging into the sky above their heads. The last vestiges of smoke can be seen filtering between their highest branches. Her camp of warriors will not be the only ones that saw this, not by a long shot. Another problem she will need to deal with in time, she’s sure.

She needs more information. She needs to figure out what’s happening. She needs this to not be happening when she has a war to be thinking about.

She takes in and lets out a breath with the sway of the branches.

If this girl is a survivor of the mountain…

She puts a hand to her forehead, wants to put her hands on her knees until she can catch her breath because the very thought has taken it from her. Because it’s not. It’s not possible. There were no survivors. A decision made and carried out by her own hand. A decision that still has her picking at blood beneath her nails that has long since been washed away.

But maybe she’s something new altogether. Not of the mountain. ‘But where did she come from?’ Clarke needs to know and needs to know now. Information is vital at this point.

“I know that face. You’re going to do something. And I’m not going to like it,” Anya says, grumbling out the words as she leans against the large pine and watches Clarke turn things over in her head.

Clarke watches the warriors disappear between the trees, the girl’s arms hanging limply to the sides.

“You’re going to hate it.”

Lexa wonders how many times she’ll have to wake up confused.

Her eyes seem intent on staying closed and it takes a couple slow, hard blinks before she can get them to fully open.

It takes her a few more to figure out that the thing she’s staring at is the trunk of a tree. She’s been placed at the base of it and her perspective allows her to trace the crevices in the cracked and aged bark up and up and up. High into its branches, the last of the day’s light flickers through and makes the leaves rustle green and gold and copper. The wind twists through in intermittent streams and the
colours flutter and thrive in response.

She’s on the ground.

And she’s alive.

The thrill and relief pushes other things from her mind for a moment and she just revels in the miraculousness of it all again. Laughter starts in her chest and quickly bubbles up and out of her and it sounds delirious even to her own ears. Because she should be dead and she’s not. And for some reason that thought is hilarious. She should get her head checked.

Speaking of. She hisses at the throb of pain coming from her forehead as she brings her bound hands up. Her fingers still.

There’s a bandage. Someone had stitched her up while she was passed out. And her hands are bound at the wrists - a rope knotted tightly and efficient enough to make wiggle room non-existent.

It then comes rushing back to her with a cold clarity. The crash. Stumbling out of the shuttle. Being captured by people with swords and spears and tattoos on their faces. ‘People!’ her mind shouts at her as the realization of what it means grips her again, both good and bad repercussions.

She sits up, bound hands jumping to her belt but her fingers find an empty holster. Empty everything. She’s been stripped of it all. Even her flashlight is gone.

Her eyes immediately sweep over the area, and for a moment she thinks she’s alone. But a flash of blonde hair has her snapping her eyes back to a spot directly in her line of sight. She scrambles back slightly on instinct at the surprise, boots pushing into the dried leaves.

It’s the girl. The same girl.

She’s sitting cross-legged on a large felled tree, forearms resting comfortably on her knees. Just...quietly watching.

Lexa stills cautiously, brings her hands in front of her to rest in her lap. The girl’s eyes follow the movement.

Her clothes are different from before - softer. She’s wearing a dark, long sleeved tunic-like shirt over pants that are tucked into tall boots. Her hair is the same though - blonde locks partially pulled back into a small knot. Lexa’s eyes trace over the braids in the loose parts that flow over her shoulders. Even from here Lexa can see the blue of her eyes and Lexa has to admit, overall, it is not an unattractive face.

Her presence doesn’t do much for Lexa’s confusion and worry, however, if anything it increases it. She needs to figure out where she is. She assumes she’s stumbled into some sort of...something- or crashed, rather. She had no idea what kind or what purpose the group of people that had found her have. Or who leads it. Or anything really. She’s pretty much in the dark here. The fact that she’s still alive is a good start though. She licks her lip absentmindedly while trying to puzzle it out, feels the cut she got yesterday during the arrest. ‘Was that just yesterday?’ It could have easily been lifetimes ago.

Lexa clears her throat and the girl’s eyes snap back to meet hers.

“You’re the one that was there when I...when I passed out,” she starts quietly, cautiously. Her voice sounds foreign and harsh in the soft moss-covered landscape.
The girl gives no reaction to convey she understood anything Lexa just said.

‘Do they not speak English anymore? Did that language die with the bombs? How did these people survive?’

She’s about to try again, something simpler, slower, when the girl speaks.

“You’re the one that fell out of the sky.”

The words are accented, a slight clipping on the consonants that tells Lexa it’s not the language that predominantly leaves her mouth. But it’s definitely still English.

She blinks, clears her throat again. Astonishment keeps swooping in to seize it up just when she thinks she’s come to terms with everything. Come to terms with the fact that the ground, which everyone believed was uninhabited, is most definitely not. It keeps coming back to hit her in waves.

“I...yeah, I guess I am,” she replies shakily, flashes of the launch, the descent, the crash rising to her mind unbidden. She thinks about Raven suddenly and feels a punch to her gut, remembers the look on her face right before Lexa launched. She doesn’t know if Lexa is even alive. Has no way of knowing if her shuttle made it to the ground in one piece. For all she knows it might have been completely torn apart during atmospheric entry.

These thoughts usher in others, they drop and settle into her one by one - anchors in a swirling mind.


She sobers more and more with each new thing she realizes she’s lost.

Those claustrophobic metallic walls may not have been much, but they were what she knew and the thought that she’ll never see them again or any of the people inside of them again...

There’s silence except for a few chirping birds in the distance as the girl’s eyes continue to search her curiously, unknowingly watching as Lexa works to hold herself together. The girl’s head is tilted slightly and there’s a slight crease between her eyebrows almost like she does know. It offers a small amount of comfort to Lexa strangely enough.

She shakes herself out of it and has no choice but to push the thoughts to the back corners of her mind. They won’t help her right now.

Her gaze trails up over the overarching trees and she breathes in the unfamiliar but invigorating forest air as she thinks. She is definitely out of her element here. No point in sugar-coating it. Her mind has been working double-time grappling with her reality since she woke up. This is what she knows:

One: the ground is inhabited, so it’s obviously survivable. She hasn’t felt any adverse effects since landing. So unless it’s a slow onset of radiation poisoning, she assumes she’s capable of surviving here, too.

Two: she’s clearly landed in someone’s territory, judging by how quickly she was apprehended. How big that territory is, and who governs over it, is yet to be determined.

Three: she has no idea where she is, only a small inkling of how to go about finding water, and an even fuzzier idea of what plants are edible and which ones will make her wish the crash had killed her. And even if she did know, her hands are still bound and she doesn’t have any of her stuff.
Lastly, and most importantly: no one from the station is coming to help her.

She has no choice, she has to get help from these people. Maybe she can beg some provisions off of them until she figure out how to keep herself alive. Either way, it starts with getting this girl, who has likely been assigned the boring task of watching her, on her side.

She clears her throat.

“What’s your name?” Lexa calls over, because it seems like the polite thing to ask and a good place to start.

When her question is met with silence, Lexa decides to try a different approach.

“Mine is Lexa.” She holds her hands up, one palm open in offering - a difficult task with the way the rope seems determined to restrict movement. She hopes she looks approachable and unthreatening. She doesn’t have her weapons, which probably helps.

She stares at Lexa’s hand across the distance between them for a long pause and Lexa worries her lip and waits. And then, slowly, the girl unfolds her legs and slips down from her position on the tree trunk, boots crunching softly in the leaves as she crosses the distance between.

Her movements are hesitant but not un-curious. She’s clearly intrigued by Lexa judging by the mix of expressions on her face as she comes closer. Lexa would probably be curious too of anyone that spontaneously fell from the sky.

Lexa holds her breath in her throat, pulse thrumming wildly, staring up at her as she approaches. She can feel her mouth fall slightly open under the intensity of the girl’s stare. From this close she can see a small silver scar running jagged through the corner of one of her eyebrows. She’s not sure if it’s intentional or not but it feels like deja vu. Lexa hopes she doesn’t pass out again this time.

There are small ornaments woven into the braids hanging over her shoulders, under inspection they look like cogs and their silver tint reflects the fading sunlight. Lexa’s gaze trails to take in the sliver of tattoo visible beneath her collar, the black ink twisting and running just out of sight.

She doesn’t rise from her spot on the ground, not wanting to spook the girl, just continues to hold her hand out.

A calloused palm gently meets her own, gripping lightly.

“Clarke.”

Lexa smiles, feels her split lip pull.

“It’s nice to meet you, Clarke.”

Clarke smiles back tentatively down at her, but her eyes are still wary. She drops her hand from Lexa’s and steps back, clearly not wanting to stay too close.

“I’m not -- I’m not going to hurt you,” Lexa tells her, drops her bound hands back into her lap. If Lexa was paying closer attention she’d see the miniscule twitch in the girl’s lips at the words, but she’s staring at her bound hands with a frown and misses it. “I don’t...that’s not why I’m here. I didn’t even mean to get here.” She’s rambling but it seems to be putting the other girl at ease rather than alarm her.

After a moment of just standing a few steps away, the girl - Clarke, slowly takes a seat, crossing her
legs to be at Lexa’s eye-level. She still keeps a good amount of space between them, but it’s progress
and Lexa feels truly hopeful for the first time since she woke up.

This girl is obviously taken care of. She doesn’t look like someone that’s fending for herself and
living in the wild. And the quality of her clothes mean that there’s probably more civilization on the
ground than Lexa originally thought. It’s an incredible thought. A whole society! And they had no
idea. Lexa thinks about how she has no way of communicating back to the Ark and wonders if
they’ll ever know.

“So,” Lexa starts, clearing her throat, trying to keep the communication going. “If you don’t mind me
asking. What exactly am I being held for?” She makes a small gesture with her bound wrists to make
sure what she’s asking about is clear. She adds a smile to her words, tries to use an easy-going
undercurrent to her tone even as she feels her heart beating in her chest with worry.

Clarke chews on her words for a moment before saying, “The Commander is interested in finding
out more about you.”

Commander? The pile of questions continues to grow and grow. But it doesn’t take a genius to
guess that this “Commander” is the one that will be deciding her fate. Commander. Leader. Probably
one in the same. Probably the leader of whatever she’s crashed into.

“What about me, specifically?” she asks, tentatively.

“Whether you’re a threat.” She says it simply, with a half shrug from her shoulder as if the answer
and the outcome, should Lexa turn out to be one, doesn’t hold much concern in her mind.

“A threat?” She’s sure her eyes are incredulous and she holds her bound hands up with a laugh.
“You can’t be serious. I landed here by accident, surely your Commander can’t take that as some sort
of attack.”

The girl shrugs again and Lexa begins getting very very worried. What kind of society jumps to the
conclusion that everything unknown must be first treated as a threat? She swallows and doesn’t ask
what it will mean should she be judged guilty. Remembers the spear that had been positioned at her
neck when she’d been captured.

The girl is looking at her with curiosity as Lexa runs all of this over in her mind. Then, after a
moment, Clarke seems to remember something and begins rummaging at her waist.

“Here,” she says, holding out a waterskin of some sort. Lexa shakes herself out of her thoughts as
she suddenly realizes how parched she is. Still, she hesitates.

Clarke seems to understand her hesitation and smiles before pulling it back to take a swig from it
first. After she’s swallowed she holds it out again with a raised eyebrow and Lexa accepts it with
hesitant fingers, cradling the container between her palms as best she can.

“Thanks.”

Clarke nods.

‘If I’m being judged, why are they helping me?’ She wants to bring a hand to the bandage on her
forehead.

Questions on questions on questions pile and build and conjoin and spread each moment she
breathes in the forest air.
She sips, slowly at first, and then with an urgency that has her wondering when the last time she had anything to drink was. When she’s almost drained it she hands it back. She has to stretch and work to keep herself upright to be able to place it in Clarke’s outstretched hand.

“Could you tell me where I am?”

A raised eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

Lexa shakes her head. “I have a vague guess. The ark was geosynchronous in its orbit, and judging by the time it took to make it to the ground probably means I didn’t venture too off course. And I’m not a botanist but I can make a guess about what kind of trees these are and where they grow. So I’m assuming somewhere in the old north atlantic area.” She’s rambling again as her eyes trail over the pines and the dried needle-like and other leaves that she sits on top of.

The more she had spoken, the deeper the confused crease between the other girl’s eyes had grown. After a measured pause, she answers, “You are in Trikru territory.”

That tells Lexa...nothing. Except maybe that the old geographical borders and names did not survive the end of the world.

“I don’t know what that is,” she admits. She’s decided to err on the side of honesty with this one. Though she’s still trying to figure out if her ignorance will be beneficial. “Maybe you can tell me more about it?”

Suspicion then, comes into Clarke’s eyes for a moment before it’s cleared away faster than Lexa can establish that she really saw it in the first place. Clarke’s eyes are searching hers as if Lexa is one of those puzzles where you stare at a page of dots until the image appears. Lexa shifts under the scrutiny.

“Where did you come from?” Clarke asks bluntly, ignoring Lexa’s words altogether.

A spark of frustration rises in Lexa then, it cuts through the fatigue and exhaustion enough to give her some backbone. Here she is, hands tied, stripped of all her belongings, injured, far from home, accused of god knows what, and this girl has obviously been put here to watch her because they think she might be dangerous. For the first time in her life she realizes how not fun it is to be treated like a criminal.

“Is that something else your Commander wants to know?” Lexa asks back, eyes narrowed slightly, picking up a few dried pine needles and twisting them between her fingers. “Maybe your Commander should just come and ask the questions himself.”

There’s a slight uptick to the corner of Clarke’s mouth, she’s clearly amused by Lexa’s grumpy disposition. She looks comfortable sitting there with her legs crossed, boots resting in the undergrowth and muddled leaves - soft and at-home in a way that tells Lexa she was born and raised in the presence of looming trees and crawling moss. She doesn’t look impatient with Lexa’s outburst, just waits.

And then Lexa lets out a sigh, dropping the pine needles back to the forest floor. She meets Clarke’s eye, there’s a deep curiosity in the other girl’s expression as well. She’s smiling more fully now too. Lexa feels something tug within her and feels herself smile back. She shouldn’t let her frustrations out on this girl, she didn’t do anything.

Lexa brings her legs under her to sit more comfortably. “Okay, fine, you want the story? It’s a good one.”
Clarke nods and settles in by tucking her legs up and resting her chin on them, eyes intent on Lexa’s face.

So Lexa tells her. Figures there’s no reason not to. It’s hardly a believable story but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.

She describes the Ark and the stations. About their technology and the shuttle. About getting trapped and accidentally descending to Earth. About Raven and her crazy contraptions, and how she’s probably worried about her. The more she speaks the more she wonders if anything she’s saying is making any sort of sense.

The entire time the words leave her mouth the girl’s eyes widen and narrow alternatively as she takes in details. Still, she doesn’t say a word. She doesn’t say much, Lexa notices. She’s not sure if it’s because she’s intimidated by Lexa, or maybe she’s just shy. Either way, Lexa fills in the gaps of silence with more rambling and details. She can tell Clarke is intrigued by her words and Lexa finds herself enjoying the part of storyteller. The sun shifts lower and lower in the sky the longer she talks and she knows they’re not far off from night. She’s running out of time to make her case.

She sits up fully, the sudden movement making Clarke lean back.

“I’m not going to hurt you, I swear it. I just…,” and Lexa lets out a breath, mind grappling with the idea of figuring out how she’s going to survive if she doesn’t get help. She needs to convince this girl at the very least. “Listen, I just need some help. It was an accident and I’m sorry if the shuttle caused damage or - or…” She tilts her head back for a moment, takes a breath. “I’m not here to hurt anyone. I’m just...lost.”

She sees some pity in the expression that gazes back at her and feels hope.

“So, do you think your Commander will help me? Tell him I don’t mean any harm.”

Clarke is staring at her, blinks twice. Lexa blinks back, her eyes pleading, breath held.

“Anya,” Clarke says abruptly and loudly. Far louder and sharper than the soft tone she’d been speaking to Lexa with.

‘Anya? What’s an Anya?’ Lexa thinks in confusion, brow creased.

She gets her answer by the sudden appearance of a person stepping out from between the trees. This one has black paint outlining her eyes and Lexa flinches at her appearance - she hadn’t even seen her standing there.

“Heda?” the one Lexa assumes is Anya, says.

“ Ai’m odon.” This language, whatever it is, falls easily and smoothly from Clarke’s tongue.

Lexa just stares in confusion, looking back and forth between the two of them, neither of them look at her.

“En?” Anya says, her raised eyebrow giving indication that it’s a question.

“Taim em's spichen, em's krei os.”
Other people, no - warriors, judging by the weapons hanging from their sides, the paint across their eyelids, and the armour on their bodies, begin stepping into the clearing and Lexa is suddenly dragged to her feet by the crux of her elbow.

“Wait - wait I don’t…” because she doesn’t understand what’s happening. She thought she was getting somewhere with the girl. “Where is your Commander? Let me speak to him.” The plea sounds desperate, even to her own ears.

They ignore her.

A warrior steps forward towards Clarke, he’s probably twice her size easy, but he bows his head and offers her a sword which she accepts and slides into a place at her waist. This is followed by a handful of deadly looking daggers that one by one are strapped to her outer thigh.

“So chit nau? frag em op?” Anya is still addressing Clarke but she gestures to Lexa with a tilt of her head, and Lexa is still so confused.

Clarke looks up at Lexa then, seems to sense her apprehension and shock. Those eyes that had just moments ago been showing so much caution and hesitance are now ice. It’s like Lexa is looking at a different person.

“No.” She sheathes her knife and there’s tug on one side of her lips. “Em miya kom isir.”

This is some sort of signal to the warriors gripping Lexa’s arms because they begin leading her away.

“Woah woah, wait. Hold on,” Lexa struggles, feet pushing into the dirt against forward progress, but the grip on her arms is ironclad.

Lexa looks over her shoulder as best she can, neck straining, but Clarke has already turned away.

“So what are you going to do with her?”

Clarke purses her lips as she looks over the map laid out across the large table. It’s just the two of them in there now, she had dismissed the advisors and generals for the evening. Everyone was too jarred by the events of the afternoon to focus too clearly. Plus, a majority of them didn’t understand or agree with her decision to allow the sky girl to live and it was clouding their thoughts.

“I haven’t decided yet.” She rests one hand on the dagger at her belt while she thinks over what’s in front of her instead.

The Plains Riders and the Desert Clan had pledged their loyalty, and they were far enough from the border she wasn’t worried. Blue Cliff was her main concern. Their pledge was tentative, and the Ice Nation had been encroaching on their land lately. If she didn’t ride out to offer assistance soon they
would likely try to strike a deal with Nia to stop the attacks. The same, however, was true for Rock Line and Shallow Valley and Clarke, unfortunately, did not possess the ability to be in so many places at once. So many options, so many paths, so many choices that could be wrong. Choices that could have her fragile coalition fracturing and crumbling while she grasps at the pieces. She needs to make a decision.

Anya flops down onto Clarke’s bed, arms splayed and sinking into the heavy furs.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t just let us kill her. It would be so much easier.” She lets out a breath of air and closes her eyes. “Even if she’s not from the mountain, that doesn’t mean she isn’t dangerous.”

Clarke doesn’t turn to address her. Instead her finger traces the route between the camp and the southern Ice Nation border, passing over Blue Cliff, then Rock Line, and, finally, Shallow Valley.

“I didn’t kill her because she might still be useful,” she murmurs absentmindedly.

“How? How can she possibly be useful? She may not be from the mountain but she’s a fumbling idiot.”

That gets Anya’s attention. She sits up and stares at Clarke. Clarke can feel her eyes like a physical press against the side of her head.

“You think there’s more of them coming?”

Clarke shrugs.

“Either way it can’t hurt to keep her around. She’s obviously unfamiliar with the ground. We can always get rid of her later.”

This, if nothing else, seems to subdue Anya’s worries and she only grumbles a few more times before she leaves. When the tent flap has fallen closed behind her, Clarke slouches against the table, forearms supporting her weight.

What a mess.

The candlelight flickers and casts a warm glow along the table, making the shadows of the pieces on the board bend and sway. She has far more pressing issues to worry about than a girl from the sky.

She was intriguing, Clarke will give her that. Naive though, and too trusting. Clearly not from the ground.

Clarke looks to the pile of things sitting on the war table next to the map. It’s an odd assortment of objects they took off the girl, half of which are foreign to Clarke. Her eyes settle on the gun. It’s been almost a year since she’s seen one but it still make a chill go through her. She’s had too many pointed at her and the scar on her right thigh will never let her forget the pain they are capable of bringing.

The light flickers against the other strange objects, making them look soft and altogether less dangerous than they probably are. Clarke almost can’t believe the story she was told that afternoon. It is too miraculous. But part of her, the part that knows that chance and fate are strange creatures, can’t let it go.
She exits her tent then, the ends of her coat sweeping behind her as the flaps drop closed to keep the warmth inside. The guard stationed outside straightens at her appearance. They've all been more on edge since the mysterious object crashed down from the sky, and even moreso since Clarke brought the sky girl into camp.

She lets her gaze wander over the tents and the small circles of fire and the groups of people huddled around them. Her eyes eventually find the sky girl. She sits, hands unbound, but at the feet of a couple guards, just staring into the fire in front of her. Clarke thinks they probably only put her there so they could enjoy the fire as well. She looks so unlike the rest of the camp she sticks out even in the darkness.

Clarke notices how none of the other warriors will sit near her. There is a large gap between her and the next closest person despite the chill and the fact that seats so close to the fire are highly sought after. She supposes the girl looks too much like the mountain and there is still too much fear ingrained into her warriors to feel comfortable turning their backs or venturing near. She can’t blame them, the mountain stole so much from them that some of these warriors will likely never let that fear go. Not completely.

The girl doesn’t seem to care that no one will sit next to her. In fact, judging by the upset twist to her mouth she seems to prefer it that way.

‘Lexa,’ Clarke rolls the name over in her mouth.

Almost as if she can hear her thoughts the girl looks up from the fire, there’s an appraising way she’s looking over the groups of people now. Clarke knows what it looks like when someone is looking for an exit, a way to escape.

Clarke had stood there when they had initially brought her into the camp. She got to see firsthand the shock on the girl’s face as she took it all in. Clarke presumes that if you’ve never seen a war camp before it could be a fairly impressive sight. Between the horses and the warriors and the row upon row of tents, it’s all fairly imposing.

Lexa had kicked and shoved the entire way back, making it much more difficult than when she had been unconscious. Clarke can’t exactly blame her. But it’s not like she can just let her go. If they did and she stumbled across some stray Ice Nation spies or soldiers and they didn’t kill her on sight, they’d try to get the location of this camp out of her. Clarke can’t risk that.

She must feel Clarke’s stare because she squints across the darkness through the flames until her eyes find her. When she recognizes who it is she glares.

Clarke lets out a huff of laughter under her breath.

Again, can’t say she blames her for her animosity.

“Can I assist you with anything, Commander?” her guard asks tentatively, probably wondering why Clarke is lingering.

“No, that’s alright. I just came out to check on our guest.”

She can hear the smile in her guard’s voice. “She’s not very happy with being one. Though I don’t think she’s aware that most prisoners are not treated as nicely as she has been.”

Lexa may be a prisoner, but she is also under Clarke’s protection until a full decision has been made as to her fate. Until that time comes, anyone that harms her has Clarke’s wrath to deal with. Even the fact that she no longer has her hands bound and is allowed to rest near the fire is a gift she is
probably taking for granted.

“Well we’re going to drop her at Tondisi tomorrow. Maybe she’ll enjoy Indra’s hospitality more.” Clarke says, not giving any indication that the idea had just come to her mind. She needs the girl out of the way, Clarke can’t let her own intrigue get in the way of more important things.

Her guard releases a laugh that he tries to cover up with a cough.

Clarke’s lips twitch. “Goodnight, Aren.”

“Rest well, Commander.”

She takes one last look at the girl before she lets the flaps of her tent close.

One thing that Lexa has yet to figure out is why this girl.

It’s morning and Lexa is sitting uncomfortably in the back of a supply cart that makes a jumbled journey down the pocked path. The Commander’s horse leads the group as they walk in the direction of the rising sun.

It is a thought that has been plaguing her since she was forced into the camp the evening prior. She wants to know, what is it exactly, about this girl that has everyone jumping to do her bidding.

Clarke is obviously neither the oldest nor the largest: some of these warriors tower over others with shoulders that look about as wide as Lexa is tall, and others are old enough to have grey running through their beards. And yet every single one of them follows this girl with bright blonde hair who can’t be much older than Lexa herself with a vigor that takes long strides past devotion. She had seen more than one drop to a knee in her presence and press their foreheads low without a command.

‘Is she royalty of some sort? Authority gained hereditarily?’ It would explain how they bow to her and follow every word she says, and the way her clothes appear to be finer than that of others. Also explains the posture she holds in the saddle of her horse as she leads their group now - back straight, head held high and steady as if an invisible crown rests atop it.

Lexa has an excellent view of her highness from her position sitting atop the cart in the middle of the group, which plods along at a steady pace. She can admit to herself that her bitter attitude probably isn’t doing anything to help her situation, but the self-pity feels good so she allows herself to wallow in it for a small while longer.

The sun is still early in its ascension for the day and just now begins to crest the trees overhead. Sunrises, she’s learned, are very different on the ground than they were on the Ark. She’s been watching its progression through the morning and the way the sky had arced between colours before settling on a vibrant blue had had her turning her face upwards more often than not. The sun is warm now and she feels the heat bringing some life to her stiff joints. She flexes her fingers, trying to get some blood flowing.

They had set out early and Lexa had had no warning before a warrior, Anya, the same one Clarke had beckoned after her initial discussion with Lexa, had come and shaken her awake roughly, saying something in their language that Lexa had taken to imply lingering in her bedroll would be unwise.
The sleeping spot had been appointed to her the night prior and she had gotten the impression she would be under constant guard. She had been too exhausted to put up much of a fight and had crawled inside the lumpy but warm bedroll without much complaint. Sleep came faster than she thought it would, and she told herself that she would begin planning her course of action in the morning.

But after being rudely shaken awake, she had still been a bit too disoriented and out of her element to do much other than listen, and the next thing she knew she was being led over to a supply cart and instructed to climb aboard. She probably would have refused out of spite except judging by the way the warrior had made every gesture with her knife, it didn't seem that it was optional.

“You know, you could ask nicely,” she had grumbled, pulling herself up, mind still working to clear the fog of sleep. Her guard jacket felt stiff and dirty as she wrapped it around herself and she wished she could wash it.

She figured her mumbling hadn't been understood until she heard a snort followed by “That was nicely.”

Lexa had then been left to sit there and watch as a group of warriors assembled for some sort of journey that she assumed she was to partake in. They milled about and loaded packs onto the backs of their horses and tied things here and there. None of them approached her and she thought about the moment the night before when one of them had.

She had been sitting on the upturned stump of a log by the fire, contemplating the whole situation and still trying to gain a grip on the reality of it all. About losing her home, about there being people, about Clarke - or the Commander, rather, and it all just swirled in an endless mess at the forefront of her mind while she rubbed at her chafed wrists. It was while she had been doing this contemplating that one of the warriors had actually sidled up to her. This was after their Commander had disappeared into her tent again and everyone, especially Lexa, was breathing a little easier.

“Are you from the mountain?” the gravely voice had asked.

She had squinted at him in confusion. She hadn’t actually expected him to talk to her and she blinks at him. He had a scruffy beard with multiple streaks of grey running through it and some small braids hanging below his ears, his eyes had been intent on her face. His accent was thick and it forced her to pick through the words for a moment. “What? No. What does that even mean?”

“How did you arrive here?” he had asked then, gesturing outward with his hand. She had looked up at him then more fully. The exhausting events of the day had been dragging at her for a while and it took some effort to hear and understand his words. It was at that point that she had noticed the others sitting close enough to hear were waiting for her response as well.

“I didn’t arrive.” She had snorted, thinking about the way she had kicked and protested the people carrying her into camp, something about the awful situation seeming funny when placed under that word. It made it sound more like a dignified procession rather than the dragging it was. “Your Commander brought me here.”

Something about her words had started a few murmurs on the opposite side of the fire. The man had then nodded to himself as if she’d confirmed a suspicion and had edged away again.

No one had come near her again after that. Lexa hadn’t minded, she had appreciated the space and used the fire to warm her hands, a new experience for her that she decided to marvel at more at a later date when she wasn’t so tired. She spent the rest of the evening idly thinking about how the hell she was going to get herself out of this.
When the queen, princess, girl-in-charge, Commander, whatever, had made an appearance the next morning as Lexa waited on the cart for whatever the day would hold in store for her, Lexa began taking mental stock of the full situation.

She hadn't noticed up until that point how relaxed the camp had been. But as soon as the flaps on the largest tent fell closed and the Commander stepped out, it was like putting an electrical charge into the ground. Everyone except Lexa had stood at attention, straightening and awaiting orders or jumping to complete ones that needed doing without being asked. Lexa had watched the change roll over those in the surrounding area, reluctantly impressed.

The Commander herself, however, was a whole other level of impressive on her own.

Decked in dark clothes and reflective armour, quiver on her back packed to the brim, the Commander had strode past, cloak billowing like a cape, and pulled herself into her saddle like she had been born there.

And now, sitting astride her horse with its coat as black as night as she leads them down the path, the aura she gives off continues to be that of intimidation. There really isn't another word for it. Lexa searches but sees no sign of the innocent girl she met upon waking up in the forest.

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‘Okay, so she’s the leader of this band of warriors. Maybe she’s a warlord. Or the equivalent to a warlord. A hierarchical warlord? Is there even such a thing?’

She wonders how many others there are. The amount of weapons around her tells her that it is definitely not peaceful times she’s stumbled into. And enemies have leaders. She wonders who they’re preparing to fight or if this is normal.

But why this girl?

One of the warriors on horseback had been riding his mount next to Lexa’s cart for most of the journey. He looks young, the parts of his hair that are unbraided fall into his eyes and his skin is less marked by scars than some of the others. He’s definitely younger than her, but he hadn’t been the only youthful-looking warrior in the camp, telling her more and more about what kind of people she’s amongst. His hands are steady on his reins and he looks very serious about his job as prisoner-watcher.

He has no tattoos, like some of the other warriors. Instead, the only decoration she can spot is the paint around his eye - three black dots near the temple. She has seen this same marking on the faces of some of the other warriors but she hasn’t been able to puzzle out its meaning just yet.

“Hey,” she tries, not letting her voice carry beyond them.

“Hey, what are the dots for. The ones right here.” She brings her bound hands up (they had tied her up again right before leaving for wherever they were taking her) and taps at her right temple with the
pad of her index finger.

At first she doesn't think he's going to answer her, but then she realizes that he's just trying to figure out how to say it in English.

“I am one of the Commander’s archers.”

And she notes that he does in fact have a quiver full to the brim with arrows strapped to his back. Their blue feathers look intricate and carefully made. She wonders if he made them himself. She also wonders if he notices the way his chest puffed out slightly with pride when he said the words.

“Oh, so you must be important,” she comments, rolling slightly to sit more comfortably on the back of the shaky cart as it bustles down the road. A few of the other warriors nearby glance back, but they must decide the conversation is not worth their interest because they do not comment.

He hesitates at that. “No, I would not say that.”

“But it has to be a fairly competitive position. Or does anyone get to be one of the Commander’s archers?”

“No. Of course not,” he says, the expression on his face informing her that this would be a preposterous notion.

She had noticed the way specific probing questions tend to get shut down during her initial discussion with Clarke, so she changes the topic.

“What is your name? You look very young to be part of the Commander’s party.”

He smiles slightly but doesn't accept the compliment. “It is an honor to guard the Commander at my age.”

So they're a specialized guard of some sort then. Why archers though? Too many questions.

“And I am Tahvo,” he says, turning his head to give her a genuinely friendly smile that she returns. It’s the first friendly expression that has been directed her way and she grasps onto it.

“Lexa,” she supplies, steadying herself when one of the cart’s wheels meets a dip in the road. “Oh, I am aware. The Commander told us of your name. Lexa of the sky.”

He’s grinning now, it’s boyish and suits him. “Oh, I am aware. The Commander told us of your name. Lexa of the sky.”

Lexa piques an eyebrow at the information and title, her eyes glancing over to the black horse riding towards the front of the group. “Your Commander she’s...intense,” she treads carefully.

He nods in agreement. “Heda is a great leader.”

Heda. A word she had heard uttered about every two seconds whenever Clarke stepped foot in the vicinity. Doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together about what it refers to. “So how did she become heda? Was her father or mother Commander before her?”

He laughs. “No, of course not. She was chosen by the spirit.”

Okay, not the answer she was expecting. Intriguing, though.

“Tahvo!” his name is called from somewhere towards the front of the group and he looks momentarily chastised. She wonders if they’re under orders not to talk to her. He offers her an
apologetic smile anyway and kicks his heels into his mount to catch up with whatever warrior had addressed him, leaving Lexa to herself once again.

He doesn’t return anytime soon and Lexa is left contemplating the knots tying her wrists together, trying to figure out a way to undo them while also intermittently considered the Commander, not sure which one to be the more challenging puzzle.

The Commander, for her part, ignores Lexa for the entire trip. Her eyes never stray from the path ahead of them and every time Lexa looks her way she seems to be deep in thought.

It is hours that they plod along, going at a slow pace for the sake of the cart, and Lexa spends it laying back and planning. She doesn’t make much headway, but the very act of imagining scenarios in which she makes a successful escape keeps her spirits up.

They stop for a rest when the sun is at its apex and has long chased away the morning’s chill. Lexa squints up at it and wishes there was a way for her to remove her jacket as she sits up.

She feels eyes on her as the cart pulls to a stop and looks around to find the Commander looking at her from across the group of warriors while she talks to the one beside her. They’re moving towards her and Lexa feels herself tense as she wonders what for. Soon their words reach her and, while she can’t understand a lick of it, the light tone of it at least has her relaxing her tense shoulders slightly.

But it’s when she’s a few yards away that the Commander stops suddenly, standing with words frozen on the edge of her lips. She’s staring at Lexa but at the same time she’s so obviously not looking at her that it makes Lexa freeze up again in apprehension.

Her eyes search Clarke’s face, and then the other warrior’s, trying to figure it out. She opens her mouth to ask what’s wrong, when a flurry of movements make the words catch in her throat.

Because one moment Clarke is standing there, paused and alert, and the next her bow is armed, pointed up into the trees above their heads, and an arrow is sliding free with swift efficiency. It’s a blur, a rapid whistling sound and then a thwack, and Lexa can barely follow any of it with her eyes.

Before she even has time to draw a breath of surprise, the body has already fallen to the forest floor, catching and cracking branches in its descent. She stares in gaping shock at the blue and white arrow sticking out of its chest.

And then all hell breaks loose.

The warriors in the party are shouting something, there’s so much noise and disorder, and Lexa doesn’t know where to look.

The sound of weapons sliding free rings in the air as more attackers drop on them from different trees with yells that makes fear crawl across Lexa’s skin and adrenaline pump through her. Clarke’s warriors are already armed and facing the oncoming attack before Lexa can fully process the situation.

She realizes she’s a sitting duck and quickly jumps off the cart to crouch next to it, heart working double-time in her chest as her mind races to figure out what’s going on.

They’re being attacked - that’s what’s going on. And she doesn’t have a single one of her damn weapons and her hands are tied!

Lexa had never been much one for swearing when she was on the Ark but the words come easy to her now.
“Shit. Shitshitshit.” She flinches at the sound of splintering wood as an attacker’s sword catches the edge of the cart before he’s forced away. She takes a knee while she looks around for something, anything to cut her hands free as her heart races away in her chest.

She peeks around the edge of her makeshift shelter, breaths coming quick. The attackers closest to their group have already met similar fates as the first, but some are putting up final fights and two more suddenly appear from between the trees. They’re approaching on the side where Lexa and Clarke are. The Commander, for her part, just continues to grip her bow and watches them carefully. Lexa can’t help but think of how small she looks in comparison.

Red cloth covers the lower half of the their faces and bright scars creep up from beneath the fabric. They hold daggers and deadly looking swords with curved blades longer than Lexa’s arm in clenched grips as they stare Clarke down. The weapons look comfortable in their hands and Lexa swallows as she watches with wide eyes.

At once they charge at Clarke and Lexa wants to shout a cry of warning. Seeing the girl that had smiled and shared her waterskin with Lexa the day before instead of a fierce leader.

Lexa discovers very quickly that her worry is unnecessary.

Clarke doesn’t step back and allow her guard to protect her. Nor does she reach for more arrows. Instead she drops her bow and slides free a long blade that glints as sharp as the teeth in her smile as she waits for them to reach her.

In the end it’s all over incredibly quickly.

Clarke steps and bends out of the way of their flurried swipes with smooth, unhurried movements as they hack through air, much too-late and slow to realize that all they have done is expose their weak spots for her advantage. Her blade moves like an extension of her arm and Lexa watches with both awe and horror as first one then the other attacker drops, dead before they even reach the ground.

The Commander looks down at them for a beat, no expression on her face. “Pad emo daun,” she says to her closest warrior, gesturing with her head at the bodies. He steps forward to do what she bids while others go out to search the trees for more attackers. None of them react like this is anything out of the ordinary and Lexa, for the first time, becomes very, very afraid of whatever it is that she has stumbled into.

The Commander appears completely unperturbed as she walks past Lexa then, absentmindedly accepting a cloth to wipe the blood from her blade before returning it to its scabbard.

Lexa, peeling her fingers from the edge of the cart which she hadn’t even realized she had been gripping, stares with wide eyes as she goes by.

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**Trigedasleng Translations:**

(You guys are going to have to bear with me on these for the story. I'm gonna have to take some liberties more than once)
“Ai'm odon.” - I’m finished

“En?” - And?

“Taim em's spichen, em's krei os.” - If she’s a liar, she’s very good.

“So chit nau? frag em op?” - So what now? Kill her?

“Em miya kom isir.” - She comes with us.

“Pad emo daun.” - Search them.
Chapter 3

The afternoon sun is warm and sluggish as it cuts between the swathes of clouds and lays itself firmly against their backs. There will not be too many days left like this before ones full of frost sweep in and make it difficult to feel her fingers, so Clarke tries not to think too much about how she’s sweltering under her shoulder guard or the way the long run of crimson fabric feels heavy resting over her leg.

The gates of their destination rise into sight and she slows her horse to a gentle walk as they approach.

Tondisi looms large and resilient as ever in front of them - a fortress of a city nestled among the trees. The metal plating and other objects, all stacked and bent and twisted to make up its wall, shine in the glare of the sunlight and she resists the urge to shade her eyes. Clarke can hear shouting from within as the scouts relay her approach and she doesn’t have to wait long before the gates are yawning open to allow them to pass.

“Heda!” they shout in greeting, over and over. She raises her head and keeps her gaze forward. “Wanheda!” a few cry instead and she breathes in through her nose as she presses her horse forward. Those on the lookout posts stare and raise their weapons in salute as she goes by.

They meander to the center of the main clearing and she doesn’t hesitate to swing her leg over to slide from her mount. She pats his side gently, murmuring soft words into his twitching ear, before handing the reins off to a waiting servant. The gates let out a long whine as they swing closed behind them, clanking as the bolt is lowered.

Clarke casts her gaze over her group and notices the sky girl, sitting cross-legged on the back of the cart, looking around with eyes that grow wider with each new thing she takes in. She’s got smudges of dirt from the road across her face and clothing, but otherwise looks no worse for wear after their run-in with the bandits. Actually, she’d handled herself better than Clarke would have expected for someone so new to the ground.

Clarke turns then to take in the crowd that has come to see them. Some stand huddled in groups on the fringes and others lean out the windows of the buildings overhead. This she had come to expect in all of the villages or cities she comes to and she has gotten used to their stares and eager or judging expressions. People want to see the face of the person that they know could make their loved ones take up arms and march off to distant lands at a moment’s notice. The face of the person that could be the reason those loved ones never come home.

Many of the eyes, however, are looking with unbridled curiosity at the girl sitting in the cart. They nudge each other and crane their necks over their neighbors and there is no pretense of subtlety. There’s whispering as well, but she only catches a few of the words here and there. Clarke knows the gossip about the sky girl will soon be spread throughout the large village faster than fire through a dry field.

“Pleasure to see you, Commander.”

Clarke turns with a genuine smile. “Hello, Indra.”

The chief of Tondisi stands with an approving look over Clarke’s company, pleased to see that they
look to be mostly in one piece. Indra looks about as happy as Clarke thinks she’s capable of, which is to say that she’s not frowning. She notices a new scar runs through her short-cropped hair on the crown of her head and Clarke reminds herself to ask about the frequency of bandits recently.

“You are looking well. It has been too long since you visited Tondisi.” They grip forearms in greeting, Indra’s shake firm. “I hear you have brought an additional guest,” she says just loud enough for Clarke to hear. Her eyes flick over Clarke’s shoulder.

“I will tell you more about it. But perhaps when we are away from prying ears.” Clarke’s head tilts in a gesture over to the crowd that grows larger with each moment.

Indra nods, noticing the audience’s higher than average curiosity. “Of course. Take some time to refresh from your journey and we will discuss things later.”

Clarke thanks her and Indra begins delegating duties to nearby servants to help Clarke’s warriors settle in. It was one of the qualities that Clarke truly appreciated in Indra: she is not one for idle chitchat.

“What do you want to do with her?” Anya asks, sidling up to Clarke.

“What?” Clarke asks, distracted. She turns and sees Anya looking at Lexa.

The sky girl has clambered down from the cart and is now mostly just milling about near some of the horses, looking at them with curiosity while the warriors unpack the supplies. A large brown chestnut-coloured one in particular seems to have caught her eye and Clarke watches as she cautiously reaches her hands out towards its head. She proceeds to carefully scratch the space between its eyes with her fingertips and then breaks out in a grin.

“She’s like a child,” Anya says with narrowly veiled displeasure, watching as well.

Clarke expels a huff of laughter. She does not need to inquire after her old mentor’s opinion regarding the sky girl. Anya has always been excellent at making her feelings clear.

“She won’t be our problem much longer,” Clarke informs her. Lexa is now scratching the horse behind the ear and gets rewarded with a light nudge from the brown gelding’s nose as it tries to lip at her jacket. “I’ve decided to leave her here in Tondisi. She’ll join one of the apprentices or servants and they’ll help her acclimate to living on the ground. She’ll be out of the way but still under the eye of someone I trust.”

“Indra will not thank you for that,” Anya muses, crossing her arms. But her tone suggests that she doesn’t disagree with the plan.

Clarke tilts her head toward her, already thinking of other things. “How long can the war camp manage without you there?”

Anya is sure when she gives her answer, keeping up with Clarke’s switch in topic easily. “It will hold for as long as you need it to. Your generals will keep it steady until you call for your warriors. Some of them may be idiots, but they know enough not to attract your displeasure.” She almost sounds proud.

“Good. I want you to come with me to Shallow Valley.”

She has Anya’s full attention now. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m leaving in the morning.”
Anya looks up then, as if Clarke is testing every ounce of patience she has and the sky holds answers as to why. Then she shakes her head and returns her gaze to Clarke.

“I thought, when you were my second, that I got all the recklessness and stupid ideas out of you.” Her tone is such that Clarke knows that, if she were still her second, she would have earned a harsh tap across the back of the head for her idea.

Clarke grins. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

Anya lets out a huff of exasperation.

“If you do not wish to accompany me, I will have –”

“Of course I’m coming with you,” Anya cuts her off. “Knowing you, you’ll likely run across the border and challenge Nia unless I’m there to stop you.” She rolls her eyes and only gets away with it because no one is nearby to see.

Clarke hears the words for what they really are: she’s coming along because she’s worried. They were attacked along the road by bandits. Bandits that they both know were paid by the Ice Nation to cause harm and disruption in her territory. She doubts the bandits knew that it was the Commander they were attacking, but their presence alone that far from the border is worrying. Worrying enough that Clarke realizes she is out of time and she needs to ride out to the bordering clans now to ensure their alliance. The problem, of course, is that the closer to the border she ventures, the more likely they are to run into those that will try to cleave her head from her shoulders to deliver to the ice queen to gain favour.

And Clarke is fairly partial to keeping her head where it is.

She can’t bring her army to protect her either. It would start war prematurely in all likelihood. The Ice Nation would rally its own in response and then all the clans would begin scrambling to decide which leader will be more likely to stand queen atop the pile of ashes that war will leave behind.

Moving an entire army is too slow as well. She needs to ride quickly to secure her coalition, days spent on the road for the sake of carts and supplies could cost lives in the end.

Of course, if she arrives at Shallow Valley, and she is unsuccessful in her endeavor...

She shakes her head free from the thought. She will have to construct a bridge for that river when she meets it.

Anya had fallen into silence and now continues to observe the bustle of the afternoon. Horses are led by in the direction of the stables and packs are carted off to sleeping quarters for the evening. Clarke sees her own bags make their way into the large structure just past the meeting hall.

Lexa is still petting one of the horses that has not been taken away yet and is clearly struggling to accomplish the feat with her hands tied. The horse nudges her forward affectionately and she stumbles, fingers quickly grasping its mane to keep herself upright.

“Cut her free before she injures herself.”

“Are you sure?”

Clarke doesn’t answer, she’s already walked away.
“If you try anything,” the knife makes two tugs against the rope before slicing through, setting
Lexa’s hands blissfully free, “I will personally cut each one of your fingers off.”

Lexa eyes the dagger that looks very comfortable in Anya’s hand and believes her.

She rubs at the red skin of her wrists, relieved but confused. “Why are you letting me go?”

“Ask the Commander,” Anya mutters. “She seems to think you’re smart enough not to try something
stupid. But, like I said, try anything,” then she waves the dagger in her hand and Lexa’s eyes follow
as the sun glints off its edge.

“Got it,” Lexa says, wondering what she did to draw this warrior’s ire in particular.

“Lincoln,” Anya calls over to a large warrior with a shaved head, Lexa recognizes him as one of the
ones that traveled with them from the camp. “You’re in charge of her. Indra will likely come and
assign her somewhere later.”

Lincoln nods in acceptance of the order and waits for her to walk away before approaching Lexa.

“Don’t take it personal with Anya, she’s prickly with everyone,” he says by way of introduction.
The way he says the words speaks of a history between the two and Lexa files the information away.

“Noted,” she says, still slightly bitter about constantly being carted around and passed off at a
moment’s notice.

“Come on, if the Commander has given orders for you to be settled in, then I’m guessing there’s
some spare clothes and other things we can get for you.”

“Am I ever going to get any of my things back?” she asks immediately, thinking of her bag and
everything else that was taken off of her. She doesn’t have a particular need for any of it at the
moment, but they are the last things she has from the Ark and she wants to hold onto them as best
she can.

He gives her an apologetic look. “I wouldn’t expect to see them anytime soon,” he answers and
begins threading his way through the gathered crowd.

“Perfect,” she says to herself, sighing as she quickly moves to catch up with him.

He leads her through the people still milling about and she is not unaware of the whispers that she
hears as she walks by. A quick glance around confirms that she is the subject of the conversations
and very soon she’s hunching her shoulders and wishing her guard jacket had a hood that she could
cast over her face.

“Ignore them, they just like talking about anything that’s new. They’ll settle down eventually.”
Lincoln tells her over his shoulder as he leads her between some small buildings and tents. He seems
to be trying to find the less crowded route and she’s thankful for it.

Being the subject of everyone’s attention, however, only distracts her from the city-like village for a
moment and soon she’s gaping as they make their way farther inside. Lexa marvels at everything
they pass, craning her neck over people’s shoulders and looking down each of the winding pathways
they meander by.
The buildings seem to be constructed of old metal sheeting, fences, and large blocks of concrete that have rebar haphazardly sticking out at odd ends. Old, wind-worn flags and strips of fabric hang from the roofs and stretch overhead in criss-cross patterns to connect the buildings in links of colour.

She tilts her head back to see old, faded graffiti sprayed across the spare spaces in shapes that were probably once legible. All of the colors are muddled and scraped, and a majority of it rests beneath a layer of vibrant moss that crawls and wedges itself into nooks and crannies everywhere she looks.

It’s incredible - a contained chaos. She can’t turn her eyes away.

“This place is amazing,” she voices her awe, turning to look up at what appears to be an old weathervane. Someone had outfitted it with broken pieces of coloured glass and it reflects an array of blues and greens and yellows as it turns slowly with the wind.

Lincoln grins, looking back at her expression. “This is nothing, you should see the capital.”

“The capital?” she asks, returning her attention to him.

“Polis. It’s the largest city in the Commander’s territory. It’s where she stays during times of peace.”

Lexa ponders the new information, trying to imagine a city bigger than the one she weaves through and can’t. But it’s the other bit of information that has her slowing her walk.

“Just how big is her...territory?” Lexa had been piecing it together more and more, but riding into this small city and seeing the reaction of those inside should have driven it home. That she was more correct in her original assumption that the title of Commander here is closer to her definition of a queen than a war general. And Lexa is smack in the middle of her queendom.

He smiles then and it’s almost pitying. “Very big. You could ride a horse for many days in one direction and still be standing on ground that she commands.”

Lexa’s feet immediately stop short, halting in the mud and the dirt.

“Claimed?! What does that even mean?”

She feels a sensation rising within her akin to outrage mixed with a heavy dose of disbelief. The implications are enough to have her fuming with indignation.

“Not in explicit words, no,” he quickly assures her, stopping as well. And there’s that pitying smile again. “But she did not kill you. To many that will mean the same thing.”

Every time Lexa thinks she’s beginning to get a grasp on the mechanics of the social values she’s blindly stumbling through, her feet seem to get knocked out from under to leave her metaphorically sprawling.

Lincoln begins walking again and, after a moment of attempting to rein in her disbelief, she follows.

“She does not rule over all of it. Past the desert clans is an area that is thought to be uninhabitable. There is also the Ice Nation to the north. Their queen rules the snow plains and the shadow cliffs and
She steels herself and then asks the question she’d been hesitating to:

“What’s she going to do with me?”

He seems like one of the first people that will give her a straight answer. He stops before the doorway to a building, one hand on the face of it as he looks at her - seems to be searching her face to see what kind of answer she’s looking for. He sighs when he realizes she doesn’t want to be lied to.

“Truly, I don’t know. I don’t think she knows yet either, not completely. This is not exactly a common occurrence she has to handle. You are the first to fall from the sky into her land.” He smiles slightly at that. “She is likely worried that you are like those from the mountain and is waiting to make a decision.”

There’s that place again. The mountain.

“What does that mean?” she asks slowly, searching his face. She is getting tired of having so many questions. “A decision regarding where to put me?” He just looks at her, clearly refraining from saying something. Then it clicks slowly and she swallows, forcing the next words out. “She’s deciding whether or not to kill me.”

She knows she’s right even before he slowly nods once.

She must not be very good at keeping the distress from her face. “Just...keep your head down. Don’t cause trouble and don’t make noise. You do not want the Commander to take further notice of you. It is your best hope, I believe.”

She swallows through a tight throat but nods to indicate she heard the advice.

“Come, it’s best not to think about it,” he says and pushes the door open, beckoning her to follow.

She does, but it’s with a gut that twists with worry.

Clarke exits the stables in smooth strides, adjusting the sleeves of her coat as she goes.

She had already finished her meetings for the afternoon with the residing generals, Indra, and other advisors that take residence in Tondisi. Their supplies were looking stable for the coming change of the season and it is unlikely they will require the assistance of other clans to make it through the roughest part of the year.

Indra is a strong and capable leader - something Clarke had learned to value during her years as Commander. She has had struggles with clan leaders in the past and she will have more in the future, but she doubts they will arise from this city.

People hurry about as she walks by, flanked by a small guard, between the buildings and the tents. They scurry out of her way and bow as she passes, but they do not try and stop her or engage her in
She likes Tondisi. She always forgets how much until she’s within its walls and passing among its people. She loves Polis - the city will always be her home - but there’s a simplicity to the paths she meanders through now that she admires and appreciates. The capital has much more ritual celebration whenever she enters. Here it is very different. Trikru is, and always has been, a clan of warriors and people of the forest. They respect and show due diligence toward her, but it is with less flare and altogether more in support of her military prowess than for just her title itself.

She makes it a requirement anytime she visits a major clan city to set aside time to hear public grievances and requests or to settle any disputes the clan leader has been unable to. This had been conducted immediately after her meeting with Indra that afternoon, and had gone on longer than she would have liked. Still, they deserved her attention and she had given it. By the end, between the journey and the meetings, she was aching for a respite.

She had gone to the stables afterward first, to check after her horse and ensure he was well enough for the journey in the morning, and now she goes to the one other place she knows can clear her head.

“Wait here,” she tells her guards at the entrance. They post up outside and she continues through.

The area set aside for fighting and weapons practice sits out of the way and fitted into a clearing between the trees towards the south side of the city. It is a flat, circular space, set clear from stones, and surrounded by pieces of fencing and wooden posts to create a makeshift arena. Beside it is a long path of dirt with sacks of sand and hay at one end. Someone has stitched ringed patterns into the rough cloths that are pinned to the sacks for targets. They are full of punctures from use, and she sees scrapes from blades marking the posts along the sides of the arena. Altogether the whole area looks well-used and broken in.

Clarke immediately feels at home.

She is not alone, she quickly finds. A warrior stands in the archery range and fires off arrows in rapid succession. She realizes it’s the young warrior from her group, one of her archers.

She quietly approaches and leans against the post to watch.

His movements are even, firing off arrow after arrow that sink into the target at the end. A steady pace that she could likely count out if she was so inclined. Three arrows find the small circle in the upper right corner, then the upper left, then the center. In smooth succession he releases them and they find their marks cleanly.

“Hit the bottom left target.”

It is a credit to his training that he doesn’t startle. Even moreso that he doesn’t miss the shot he was already halfway through the process of completing when she spoke.

She moves to stand beside him, observing his stance and the grip in his bow. He glances at her out of the corner of his eye and swallows hard. He doesn’t ask her to repeat the order, just adjusts his stance, pulls the bowstring back, and releases.

They both watch it hit its mark.

“Again.”

He does. His second arrow slices off one of the feathers of the first.
“Again,” she says.

He does.

“Again.”

His arrow wedges right beside its brothers in the target.

She repeats the order again and again, each time leaving less pause between until she’s ordering the next before he’s even released the one before it.

The faster he releases, the more shaky his aim becomes and she catches him flinching as he releases the final two and they land outside the circle altogether.

“Enough,” she finally says.

He’s breathing more heavily now as they stand and look at the result. A dozen arrows total. Ten within the small ring. Six of which are practically right on top of one another, clustered around its center.

“Tahvo, wasn’t it?” she asks, turning away from the target to face him.

“Yes, Commander.”

She steps forward and pulls her bow from where it rests over her back. “When you are rushed for time,” she starts, selecting a few arrows from the bin of practice ones and placing them into the quiver strapped to her leg, “you must fire your shot by feel, not by thought. Overthinking about your aim and your grip and the wind will cost you.”

She takes a deep breath. Thoughts about clan supplies, boundaries, war, and diplomacy slip away.

Her fingers move, agile and sure, snagging an arrow, knocking it in the string, and releasing it.

Knock, release, thwack. Knock, release, thwack. Again and again and again, until her quiver is empty and the bottom right corner of the target is full of arrows that are vibrating from impact.

She turns to him again, “Understand?”

He’s staring with wide eyes but nods eagerly.

She nods and goes back to replenish her quiver while he goes to pull his arrows from the target.

She takes up the twin target beside his and soon gets lost in the rhythm of releasing each shot. The pull and flow working to calm her mind. Tahvo hesitates, but, after a moment, he resumes his own practice in the space beside her and the air is filled with the sound of arrows hitting their intended target and the string of their bows meeting the armguards on their inner-wrists.

It does not take long for word to travel that the Commander is in the practice arena. They quickly gain a small audience that lingers on the edges and sits on the pillars to watch. Small children poke their heads between the legs of those standing and look on with wide eyes. They’re all talking but trying to stay out of her notice and Clarke finds herself taking an extra breath to tune it out.

At one point the wind begins to fight her, tangling its fingers through her loose hair and trying to tug her aim off-course. She grits her teeth against it and keeps her arm steady. She alters her objective, makes it more difficult, and begins aiming for the targets that are farther and farther away, eyes narrowing on a sliver of a circle and letting out a small smile of satisfaction when her arrow meets it.
When the sky has just begun to take on a pink hue, a guard pushes her way forward through the watching crowd. She nudges the oglers out of the way until she comes to stand a few paces out. There she waits patiently for Clarke’s attention, one hand on her spear.

Clarke finishes off her last shot and then turns to give it.

The guard bobs her head in a short bow, revealing a tattoo in the shaved side of her head. “Commander, Indra has requested your presence immediately,” she speaks, then, after a beat seems to reconsider her words and adds, “At your earliest convenience, of course.”

Clarke piques an eyebrow but doesn’t comment. Moving in no rush, she removes the remaining arrows from her quiver and places them back in the bin before silently nodding for the waiting guard to lead on.

The entrance to her room is flanked by two guards when she approaches, keeping all others out. She proceeds through to find Anya standing near an older man that drops to his knees upon spotting Clarke, head bowed to the floor.

“Rise,” she orders, going to her throne and sitting. He does, shaking slightly at the knees.

Indra stands to Clarke’s left and stares down at the man with a cool expression. “Tell her what you told me.”

Clarke watches his throat bob in a swallow as his eyes meet hers and then nervously flit away to a space just beside her head. “There is a rumour that has spread these past few days,” he starts, stuttering slightly, then words seem to fail him altogether.

“Go on,” she prompts, trying to find patience as she pulls her dagger out of its sheath to fiddle with.

“It is about you, Commander,” he warns, eyes following the blade.

Clarke figured, otherwise they would not have inconvenienced her. He hesitates again before continuing, licking his lips, looking anywhere but at Clarke.

“There is a rumour… that Wanheda brought the sky girl to the ground with her power. The same power she used to bring down the mountain,” he states, eyes on Clarke’s dagger as he speaks. “They say she -- rather you, Commander, they say say you were unsatisfied bringing the mountain to its knees and now… and now you aim to bring the sky down as well. Piece by piece.”

Clarke sits very still upon her throne where she leans back, the edge of her dagger rests idle, point down in the wood of the armrest. Then, after a moment, she speaks:

“Do you believe them?”

He swallows. The way he still can’t look her in the eye is answer enough.

“Who started such claims?” she asks calmly, spinning the knife idly.

“The sky girl herself confirmed it,” he tells her eagerly, relieved to be able to refocus the attention away from himself.

Clarke feels surprise stir behind her closed-off expression, the only outward indication of it being the way her fingers still on her dagger. She can feel Anya and Indra looking at her, trying to gauge her reaction. She gives away nothing.
“You may leave,” she tells him after a moment. He doesn’t linger and all but rushes out of the room, clearly relieved at being released.

Already her mind is working away. Cogs whirring, turning, and clicking.

He’s not even completely out of the room before she turns to one of her guards. “Find her. Bring her here.” The ‘now’ is implied and his strides are long as he goes, not having to ask who it is she seeks.

It is only a few minutes that they wait within the room. Clarke looks up to the high windows that allow the remnants of the day’s light to seep through. They have a blue tint that makes the interior of the room appear cool.

The doors eventually reopen and Clarke sits up in her seat as Lexa is brought inside at the prompting of a guard.

She’s understandably confused, looking left and right at first, but the sight of Clarke on her throne has her stopping short and she has to be nudged forward. Clearly the guard did not inform her who she was being brought along to meet.

Her face flickers through a range of expressions quickly: surprise, worry, curiosity, and then she smooths it out to feigned indifference.

Clarke’s eyes trail down her form to notice with a sense of satisfaction that she can’t put any reason to that the girl is in Trikru clothing now. It is a mix and match of garments and there is a sheath on her right thigh to complete it that thankfully, Clarke notes, sits empty. Accidentally giving her a weapon is a mistake that someone would have paid for dearly.

She seems comfortable enough, but there is still something about her that, even in their clothing, speaks of other. A non-belonging to the environment around her.

The bandage on her forehead looks new as well, someone likely having changed it when they gave her new clothes. Her hair is sitting back in a simple tie, and Clarke wonders if she refused someone’s offer to braid it or if none of the servants offered in the first place.

Clarke shakes herself out of her thoughts and focuses.

“There is a rumour that has spread through my camp and now here and possibly farther,” Clarke begins, drawing the girl’s eyes. This one is unafraid of her gaze and meets it steadily. “They tell me that you are the one that started it.”

She says nothing at first, just looks around in bewilderment at those waiting for her answer. She meets Indra’s eye, glances at Anya. When no one offers more explanation, she opens her mouth, “I don’t know what --”

“You spoke to my warriors. What did you tell them?” Clarke cuts her off, patience for the matter already spent.

“I didn’t tell them anything. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She’s angry, green eyes flaring under the accusation and stands resolute as Clarke stares her down. Clarke turns away, opens her mouth to say something to Anya, but is stopped when Lexa speaks again. “Unless…” Lexa trails off, she’s gazing at the ground as she recalls a memory, brow furrowed.

“Speak,” Clarke orders, eyes narrowed.

“There was one warrior. He was the only one that spoke to me in your camp. He asked me how I got
“And what did you tell him?” Clarke asks carefully, waiting with baited breath for the answer.

There’s a crease between her eyebrows now. She answers slowly, “I told him you brought me.”

“Those were your exact words?” Clarke asks, some of her urgency slipping into her tone before she can rein it in. The idea that this has all been caused by a small moment of miscommunication has her anger flaring.

Lexa wracks her brain. “Yes.”

Silence. Clarke closes her eyes. Takes in and releases a breath through her nose.

“Leave.”

“Wait, no, what does this have to do with me?” Lexa steps forward - a mistake. Indra’s spear is at her throat in an instant.

“The Commander gave you an order.”

Lexa’s hands are held up defensively as she takes a step back. A guard comes and pulls her by the arm until the doors are falling closed behind them both.

The second she’s gone, Anya is spinning to face Clarke. “Do you see why I wanted to kill her the instant we saw her?”

Clarke spins the dagger hilt in her fingertips, staring in the direction her guard and the sky girl just left without seeing it. Finally, she says, “There would have been rumours of some sort whether we’d kept her alive or not, you know that.”

“Perhaps, but they would not have been of this magnitude.” She’s angry, pacing on her side of the tent because she’s piecing together what this means. She was there the last time rumours like this happened.

“How does this change things?” Indra asks. She sees the rumours as just rumours, she does not yet see the big picture or the implications.

The rumours that had swept through like a storm after Clarke brought down the mountain were now so well established they were closer to mythologue - lore repeated so many times it now survives as living legend. The feat itself was so unbelievable most had attributed it to the mystic, being ignorant of the true events. They assumed Clarke had struck a deal with demons to have her way and that her soul was permanently blackened when she strode out of the mountain with death in her wake.

Wanheda.

She had hated the title immediately - still hates it. She had tried to tell the true events but none would hear it and the rumour spread faster than she could speak. In the end she had no choice but to accept it, to recognize that there are some things even the Commander cannot control.

She is one of the few that knows what happened under the mountain - the truth. And what she did cannot be blamed on black magic or the mystic. It was a human decision that was made and she will forever bear the weight of its consequences. Thus is the responsibility of the Commander. In the end her life, or what happens to it during its time, does not matter. She is a tool forged for one purpose
and she will serve it until her final breath.

Anya opens her mouth to answer Indra’s question, but Clarke beats her to it.

“It changes things because now the value on my head has doubled. Kill me and not only do you claim the power of Wanheda, but absorb the power to bring down the sky and stake claim to that which I have already supposedly harnessed.” She speaks the words evenly, about her death as if they discuss the weather. She ponders and then continues in the silence that follows her words, “they must believe the sky girl to be some sort of weapon. Why else conjure her presence?”

“This is insane,” Anya tells her, turning from her pacing.

“Yes,” she agrees truthfully.

Her mind continues to tick tick tick away. She stares into the space in front of her without seeing it. Instead she sees the map from the war room in her mind’s eye. The clans that doubt her capability.

The knife in her hand turns and turns and turns.

Then Indra asks what people are always asking her, unknowing how often the question is self-inflicted as well.

“What are you going to do?”

---

Lexa holds her fingers up to the crackling fire. It’s warm and comforting and mesmerizing and she watches as it spits and sputters, flaring up into a night sky that yawns with stars.

Fire, on the Ark, was something you only saw in the worst situations. Given that they lived in the glorified version of a sealed oxygen canister, it was kept far away. Accidents had the potential for catastrophe and no one liked to tempt fate.

Here on the ground, Lexa was beginning to realize that it was the opposite. Fire is the place where people gather, circle around after a long day, huddle together. It’s where food is made and shared and Lexa is surprised by how much she loves it.

This village is different than the camp she had first been introduced to. It’s larger, built to last in a way the tents had not. And there are children here. They run around between the buildings and stalls, and now between the fires and Lexa can’t help but smile as she watches them.

This is also very different from the Ark. The one child per family rule was strictly enforced and led to parents having one hand on their child’s shoulder for much of their upbringing, never letting them venture too near to danger. Here they run free, nearly stumbling into fire, and playing with sticks that they heft as if they are swords for battle. The place is rife with life and Lexa thinks perhaps there would be worse places to be forced to stay.

She assumes that is why she was brought here. To be dropped off and placed out of the way. She doubts she’ll be given enough trust to wander, but it will be nice, she thinks, to not always be looking over her shoulder for the Commander.

‘Or dragged into her throne room to answer cryptic questions,’ she thinks with a bewildered shake
of the head.

Overall, it seems like a good place to keep her head down for the time being. She stretches her arms out in the jacket they had given her earlier. It’s lighter than hers, but has a lining on the inside that protects from the chill. It’s black in colour, with tough material over either shoulder and a zipper that crosses from her right hip to her left collar. It took a bit for her to figure out the straps that clip across the chest, but the fit was surprisingly comfortable.

The long-sleeved shirt she wears is of a soft fabric and has holes to slip her thumbs through, allowing it to rest over the backs of her hands and palms. She was also given a loose piece of stretchable fabric which turned out to be a scarf of sorts that hangs loosely around the neck but can also be pulled up to sit just over her nose if the weather takes a downward dip. Everything feels carefully stitched and cared for and she wonders whom they used to belong to.

In the end they had given her a full pack with even more clothing and that was when Lexa began to realize that perhaps she was meant to stay.

A handful of children running to sit on the logs and seats around the fire next to Lexa, gets her attention. They don’t shy away from her like the adults do and one, a girl that’s probably not much older than five, takes the seat directly next to her and gives her a shy but toothy smile. Lexa can’t help but smile back.

“Komfoni, tel osir us a sontaim!” Lexa hears one of the younger ones shout and she glances up.

It is at this point that Lexa realizes that they did not rush over for her, but for the ancient-looking woman that sits on the opposite side of the fire.

She is, by far, the oldest person on the ground that Lexa has seen yet. Her hair is almost all white, sitting in its braids, and deep wrinkles line the edges of her eyes. Trinkets hang from bracelets on her wrists and are sown through her hair and she smiles at all of them as they speak to her excitedly. All the children are focused intently on her and, besides the initial interest, now ignore Lexa almost completely.

“Tel osir won hashta Heda!”

This is followed up by numerous small voices echoing whatever the suggestion is enthusiastically. Lexa recognizes one of the words and immediately looks around for the person it belongs to, breathing a sigh of relief when the Commander is nowhere to be seen.

The old woman releases a light laugh and nods, relenting to something. “Sha, ku, ait. Ai tel op hashta Heda. Jon taim yu sit ste.” She then glances up at Lexa who is watching the exchange curiously. “In English, perhaps, so that our guest can follow as well.”

All the eyes turn to look at Lexa who shuffles under the scrutiny, not quite sure what she’s about to be a part of. She had chosen the seat at random when she had been nudged in the direction by the guards upon returning from the Commander’s audience room and had been sitting there since.

“You want a story, hmmm? Let me think…,” the old woman begins, leaning back, head tipped
towards the stars as she watches the smoke trail off from the fire. “Ahh, yes I know.” She smiles, then pauses for dramatic effect before letting her eyes sweep over her audience. “The conclave.”

A buzz of excitement ripples over those around the fire and some of the smaller kids bounce in their seats. They’re obviously familiar with the story, but clearly don’t mind a repeat.

“The conclave. The gathering of natblidas after the fall of our previous Commander.”

There are at least two words in there that Lexa doesn’t understand, but the topic has her sitting forward in her seat already. She listens closely.

“Eight initiates, all brought to the capital from a very young age and trained together. Their blood marking their birthright. Learning how to fight, how to be leaders, how to be heda. Our Commander, of course, was among them. When the previous Commander fell in the battle of the White Ridge, the conclave was called and the assembly was formed in Polis immediately. It had been sudden and unexpected, many of the natblidas were young. Very young.” Her face takes on a look of dismay with her words.

“The trial, of course between the natblidas, was as it always was, as it always had been.” She pauses here, looks over the small faces looking back at her. “Trial by combat: a tournament to the death.”

Lexa feels her blood run cold. The old storyteller takes in her expression and nods solemnly.

“The Commander’s spirit, of course, chooses which of the young warriors will ascend as Commander. Our current Commander went first, paired up against a boy from the Lake people. Spears were their weapons of choice and it was a long battle, both fighting valiantly, both knowing that to lose is to be their end, and to win is to be one step closer to being Heda. They circled one another in the arena, exhausted. Those that were there say that the Commander only suffered a cut to her arm, right here.” She points then, to her right bicep. “But the boy was suffering, blood weeping so vigorously into his palm he could not keep ahold of his weapon.” She says all this with practiced emphasis, easily painting the awful picture until Lexa can imagine the blood dripping into the ground from a young boy, his face begging for his life. She wants to turn away, block out the end of the story. She’s seen firsthand what the Commander is capable of with a weapon in her hand. Doesn’t want to hear how effective she was in cutting down a child to claim glory.

The storyteller continues, oblivious of Lexa’s discomport. “The Commander had him, her spear at his throat. He had offered it, knowing that the spirit had not chosen him, sinking to his knees.”

Lexa stares into the fire, a mixture of apprehension and anger swirling inside her.

“But she refused.”

This old storyteller is staring straight at Lexa when she looks up in surprise.

It is almost as if she knew exactly where Lexa’s thoughts had been. The woman grins at the shock that must be so clear on her face. It is probably not very often that she has an audience that does not already know some version of the story she tells and she is clearly enjoying it. She then looks into each of the faces of the children who blink enraptured at the story, grinning.

“Instead she threw her weapon aside, turned to face the assembly, and said ‘no’. It was brave, and dangerous. Dangerous to her own life. We are fond of our traditions, and she had just refused over a hundred years of them in one moment.” She pauses, considerate, as if seeing the memory in her mind’s eye. There is a sort of pride radiating from her as well even as she tries to contain it.

“What happened?” Lexa asks, prompting the continuation of the story, now just as enrapt as the
A wry smile comes upon the old woman’s face now. “She convinced them. Legend has it that she was held under guard for days while they debated and the tournament was stalled. She argued that just because the spirit may choose someone, that does not mean we must condemn those it does not. A fight to first blood, was her suggestion. Let the one who is able to draw the blood of their opponent first be the one to proceed. The spirit will choose them in the same way as if the blow were to be fatal. We are in dire times, she had argued, and to put those who are capable of being great generals and leaders and warriors to death is a mistake they should not look to make lightly.”

“And they listened?” Lexa breathes, incredulous.

“Eventually, yes.” That same proud smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “And in the end the spirit chose her. In the days that followed she won each of the battles and most of the natblidas live to this day because of her courage.”

Lexa sits back then, dumbfounded at the surplus of new information. It doesn’t fit with the carefully constructed model of the Commander that she had slowly been piecing together.

“It is not easy to fight for what you believe is right,” the woman continues. “It is a difficult and dangerous journey oftentimes. She made many enemies that day.”

There’s a lull as the story concludes that is filled with the snapping of the wood settling into the fire. It is not long before the children are fidgeting impatiently and speaking up once again, clearly wanting more stories.

“Won hashta Maun-de neson?”

The woman chuckles at the eager expressions shining back at her. “It is getting late, little ones. If I don’t send you off now you’ll be wanting the one about the Commander in the storm, or hear a tale about the Commander and her beloved, or that one about the blood raiders.”

Lexa finds herself immediately intrigued and barely stops herself from joining them in their pleads for more stories. They bounce in their seats, even more eager than before. “Please!” they beg, over and over, intermixed with the word “beja” which Lexa takes to mean the same thing.

“Hosh, strikona.” Then, continuing in English, “Your parents will be wondering where you are. Perhaps tomorrow. Now, off you go.”

They grumble and drag their feet, but Lexa sees more than one yawning behind their palm or rubbing at an eye as they meander away from the fire.

Lexa sits for a bit and immediately misses the children’s company and their liveliness. It is quiet and the twigs snap and pop under the heat of the flame. The old storyteller seems to be enjoying it and closes her eyes as it heats her skin.

“So the Commander has a beloved?” Lexa asks eventually, her curiosity getting the better of her.

The woman’s pleasant smile becomes subdued then as she slowly opens her eyes again.

“She did.”

“Oh.” Lexa doesn’t know what else to say and fiddles with the sleeve of her jacket.

The old storyteller becomes considerate. “He was… he was very kind. I think he made her kind as
“What happened to him?” she can’t stop the question before it’s slipped past.

The fire continues to crackle and snap, occasionally shooting off small, glowing pieces that fade as quickly as they rise into the night.

“He died.”

Lexa is once more at a loss of what to say and opens her mouth twice before deciding to let the inquiry drop.

She stays until the fire grows small and its flickers become intermittent.

Later, when she’s pulling her cover more firmly around her shoulder in her bedroll, she wonders what kind of person it would take to make the Commander kind.

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The morning pokes its head in bright and early through the high windows of the large building Lexa and other warriors sleep in. She squints one eye against its glare and turns her head away while she works towards full consciousness.

They hadn’t left a guard to watch her for escape attempts, there was no need. She is surrounded by pallet upon pallet of sleeping warriors, all laid out in rows in the large hall. If she had so much as tried to get up in search of a bathroom she would have woken up half the room by stumbling and stepping on them.

She stretches in her bedroll and wonders what kind of bed the Commander gets to sleep in. It is unlikely, Lexa thinks, that she has to share her sleeping quarters with snoring warriors. She imagines it’s probably a lavish room, befitting of her title and filled with a nice bed that’s likely as ostentatious as her throne had been. It’s probably constructed from more antlers and spears or even the swords of her fallen enemies, Lexa would not be surprised by the latter.

She stares at the ceiling and wonders why she is thinking so much about the Commander’s bed. She rubs at her eyes and puts the thoughts down to still being half asleep and slowly sits up to blink around.

A few of the warriors are getting up now, rising with the breaking light. They roll up their bedrolls tightly and place them in a stack by the door as they exit. She wonders if she is supposed to do the same. No one had told her where she was supposed to go yet, or where she was supposedly going to be settled within the village. She wonders if she’ll get a nicer bed wherever it is that she does get put. She rubs at her back and thinks about how she never thought she’d miss her mattress from the Ark as much as she does now.

She’s just about to get up and start following the flow of people leaving when someone steps into her line of view.

“Are you still in charge of me?” she asks not unkindly upon seeing who it is.

He smiles back, his bedroll tucked under his arm. “For now at least. And better me than Anya. She’d likely let you go without food.”

Lexa has decided she likes Lincoln. He’s one of the few from the ground she’s met that doesn’t send her strange looks or ones of fear. And he’s honest. Given the flood of questions Lexa has been
struggling to handle, he has been surprisingly forthcoming with information.

Her stomach releases a loud growl at his mention of food and she doesn’t hesitate to get up and try to roll her own bed up. She fails miserably and Lincoln takes pity on her and does it for her quickly, clearly wanting to hurry on to breakfast rather than turn this moment into a teaching one.

The sun might have risen, but it has not yet gotten to work long enough to eliminate the chill from the air and Lexa tucks her hands deeply into the pockets of her coat as they step outside.

She assumes the large building they head for to be a mess hall, and the line already leads out the door where they take their place at the end of it. Lexa cranes her neck around the side and is happy to see that it seems to be moving rather quickly just as her stomach releases another grumble.

There isn’t much talking, most of the warriors in line still appear to be trying to wake up as they shuffle to keep warm and Lexa wonders if coffee is a luxury unique to the Ark now. Some of these people look like they could use a cup or five. But their disagreement with the morning keeps them from having the energy to pay her much attention so she’s thankful for it even as she mourns the fact that she probably will never have another cup of coffee in her life.

When they eventually make it inside, she looks around and realizes that she was correct in her assumption that it is a cafeteria of sorts. Rows of tables with benches line the room, half-filled with men and women who hunch over their bowls and shift the weapons on their belts to sit more comfortably.

She breathes deeply when the sweet smell of whatever the breakfast is reaches her. It could be twigs and she’d probably still eat it. But as she’s finally handed a bowl and a spoonful is ladled inside, she is pleased to find it to be some sort of porridge. A handful of dried berries and nuts are quickly thrown on top and it is probably the happiest she has been since she arrived on the ground.

Lincoln leads her over to one of the emptier tables and she slides onto the bench, not caring about the looks thrown her way from those already sitting.

“Oh, hold on. I forgot to grab some spoons.” Lincoln says, dropping his bowl and returning to the line.

Lexa groans and watches steam rise from her bowl and resists the temptation to just start eating it with her hands - manners and decorum be damned.

Lincoln returns just as she’s considered the pros and cons of tipping the contents of the bowl straight into her mouth. He hands over a utensil that looks like it was once a spoon but has seen enough use that it is bent out of shape and is mostly flat. But it will do the job so she doesn’t complain.

She is just about to dig in, blowing on the first spoonful to cool it down, when she feels a hand on her shoulder.

“The Commander wishes to see you.”

She wants to put her forehead on the table.

Instead her stomach growls and she grips her spoonful tighter and says, “I’m eating breakfast.”

The table goes very quiet. Everyone is staring at her and then the guard, waiting to see what will happen. Even Lincoln is silent for a moment - likely in shock at her obvious show of disrespect - before he gently reaches over and takes the spoon from her hand and places it back in her bowl.
“Go now,” he tells her, his voice quiet, a warning.

She grumbles but the look in his eye and the way his eyes flick over to the guard tells her it would be unwise to refuse twice and she’s walking on thin ice as is.

She pushes back from the table, eyeing her still-steaming bowl of food with a frown and debates asking if she can bring it with her. She figures she can eat while she gets yelled at and asked more strange questions, but she’s pulled away with a hand on her upper arm before she gets the chance.

She tries once or twice to tug free, insisting she doesn’t need to be handled, but the guard is refusing to hear her.

All too soon they are approaching what she had come to recognize as Clarke’s audience room after being dragged to it yesterday. Today she is more prepared for the sight of the Commander, but only slightly.

The guard bows quickly upon entering, shoves Lexa forward, and then leaves so fast Lexa wonders if he had left his own bowl of food waiting.

She catches herself before she can trip and raises her gaze to glare at the girl on the throne that prevented her from eating her breakfast.

“Do you always just drag people everywhere? Or do some people actually get to walk around of their own free will?” The words are bitter leaving her mouth and she knows it is mostly her empty stomach talking.

Any, from the Commander’s right, growls something ferocious in their language and takes a step towards her. “You will show the Commander respect or I will make you.”

She releases a sigh, trying to rein in her frustration and remember what Lincoln had told her about keeping her head down and holds her hands up placatingly until Anya steps back. She realizes it wouldn’t do well to get stabbed so soon after waking up.

“Why am I here?” she asks, turning her gaze to the Commander.

Clarke has not looked away from her since she entered the room. Her piercing blue eyes stare, and it’s a look Lexa imagines is effective in getting people to reveal their secrets and open their souls. She certainly feels searched by it.

No matter how hard Lexa looks at her, now knowing a bit more of her story, she cannot find a girl capable of showing leniency, restraint, and mercy in the gaze directed her way. There is no kindness in it at all.

Clarke is wearing her warpaint again, the black pattern carefully dripping over her cheekbones. She is also wearing the same armour and sash that Lexa had come to realize was part of her ensemble as Commander. That, along with the circular, cog-like embellishment that sits between her eyes, are clearly the two items used to announce her title to anyone that sees her.

She looks…capable. Of both destruction and advancement. Like a self-contained storm in which she stands in the center and decides which way the wind will howl.

Lexa has been looking too long and Clarke has noticed, judging by the way the corner of her mouth twitches. She doesn’t linger on it, however, and rests her hand on the arm of her chair as she speaks.

“I have a proposition for you.” The words are released smoothly, as if she’d considered how to start
the sentence many times before deciding on this.

Lexa’s eyebrow arches toward her hairline.

“I’m listening,” she responds after a moment when Clarke doesn’t continue. She should probably be refusing already, trying to back out of the room, disassociate herself from anything to do with the Commander. But her intrigue has her feet rooted.

Because if there is one thing she knows about the Commander that has stayed constant within the model in her mind it is this: She doesn’t make offers.

She makes demands.

“There are rumours, a story now, rather, that has spread and we believe it will spread far and quickly. It is about you,” she starts and Lexa’s eyebrow is reaching even higher, “and me.”

Lexa glances over to Anya who appears to be biting back words from where she stands. But she doesn’t contradict anything Clarke has said and Lexa is further intrigued against her better judgment.

“What’s the story?” she asks, returning her gaze to Clarke. She had gotten a taste of their stories last night, and if a rumour has already morphed into one that is being told around campfires then it is likely to be interesting.

Clarke doesn’t waste time beating around the bush. “They believe that it was I that conjured you here. To the ground. That I used my power to influence the sky, and bring you down to use, most likely, as a weapon of some sort.”

Both eyebrows are nearing her hairline now as she looks at the Commander incredulously. She had gathered that there was an element of the mystic interwoven into their history and way of life, but she was unaware that it ran so deep. She had believed the idea of the Commander’s spirit to be more symbolic than anything when it had been described to her. Now she realizes that they believe it to be much more than that.

“They believe I’m a weapon?” Lexa asks, disbelief clear in her tone. She is unsure if she should be flattered or not.

Clarke shrugs, but she’s watching Lexa’s reaction carefully.

“And they believe you brought me here?” Lexa asks, thinking about power outages and Raven’s mess of code and how she would probably be affronted at someone else getting the credit for launching and landing her shuttle.

Clarke nods once.

“So, what, you want me to promise not to unknowingly encourage any more rumours? Keep my mouth shut about the whole thing?” She asks, eyes glancing between the two of them.

Her words are met with silence and she glances between them again, waiting for someone to speak. They’re hesitating in telling her something and it lingers in the room like a presence waiting to be acknowledged.

It clicks in pieces, then all at once.

She’s been too slow in thinking, she realizes then. And her first instinct to back out of the room as quickly as possible was correct and she should have listened to it.
“You don’t want me to deny it…” she starts, searching Clarke’s face as she stares back and waits for Lexa to get the words out. “You want me to support it.”

Clarke nods slowly, watching her carefully.

The laugh bursts out of her before she can clamp her teeth around the reaction. It does the satisfying job of making Clarke’s eyes widen momentarily, a crack in the facade. “You can’t be serious!”

Anya, apparently, has had enough of Lexa’s tone and strides forward, a fist gripping the front of her jacket quickly. Her face is very close to Lexa’s and the words she speaks next don’t need to be translated for Lexa to know they are probably a threat.

“Ai will eno em op, en osir can hogeda go ona kom sonraun!”

“Em pleni, Anya.” Clarke responds calmly, tone reveals her waning patience even as she does not move from her throne.

After a moment, Anya reluctantly releases her grip and steps back.

“Bants osir.”

Whatever Clarke just said seems to surprise Anya, who whirls to face her Commander. The expression she’s met with however, has her clenching her teeth, offering a begrudging nod of her head, and striding out of the room without a backwards glance.

At the sound of the door closing, Lexa abruptly realizes that is is now just the two of them in the room.

Yesterday, when she had been dragged inside, the place had had at least a few guards standing at attention as well as the Commander’s attendants. Today, they are all gone and Lexa suddenly realizes the covert nature of the conversation she is having.

Clarke stares at her with her fingers interlocked under her chin, elbows on her throne, contemplating.

Lexa swallows and is unsure if she liked the room better with Anya in it.

“You’re serious,” Lexa says, sobering at the look she’s being given.

“I am.”

The response seems restrained in a way, as if the situation has the Commander backed into a corner and is fighting with what weapons she has left.

“What happens if I say no?” Lexa asks, crossing her arms. She believes she already knows the answer to the question.

Clarke shrugs, shoulders coming up only slightly. “It would be better for you if you did not.”

Lexa nods, eyes looking away to take in the throne room as she thinks. Now that she’s more grounded in the consequences she feels herself sobering more.

“What would this involve, exactly?”

Clarke leans back, satisfied that Lexa seems to finally be taking the matter seriously. “You would travel with me, beside me. It would involve allowing people to see you. That would be enough, I believe. People are very good about filling in gaps in stories with more incredulous claims than
anything I could hope to orchestrate.”

And Lexa realizes then why she is being given the courtesy of being asked as opposed to ordered. Clarke *needs* her. Or at least needs her cooperation.

If the Commander does not deny claims that she has the power to bring down the sky and Lexa were to make a statement to the contrary and imply that Clarke holds no such power, then it would undermine the entire thing. The Commander would appear weak, unable to control her own weapon.

But if Lexa plays along…

The entire thing is an elaborate power-play and for a moment she just stands there and marvels at the intricacy of it. It’s brilliant, in an extremely conniving way.

She looks around the room again to buy herself time to think, takes in the table of maps to the side, the high arched windows that allow the morning to filter inside, lighting up the dust that sits in the air. There is not much ornamentation to the room, the most elaborate thing being the throne and Lexa wonders if it is done that way on purpose to draw one’s eye.

“It will be dangerous, won’t it?” she asks, eventually.

“Very.”

“But I don’t have actually have choice,” Lexa supplies for her.

“No.”

Lexa nods, almost to herself. She sees that she is not being given an opportunity to accept an offer outright, she is being given an opportunity to complete an offer under her own free will.

It has been made clear, though not said explicitly, that if she outright refuses to go and makes her refusal known to others, she will likely soon be led outside the walls of the village and a blade will find her throat or back. So in that respect, she does not have a choice, no. She will go with the Commander or she will die.

She can almost appreciate the simplicity and black and white of the situation and the ease in which she can make her decision on that matter. She had decided to live when she first woke up in that shuttle, and she was going to try her best to follow through on that decision.

The proposition is offered, therefore, purely to make the Commander’s life easier. If Lexa goes with her and then causes trouble or refuses to cooperate, Lexa can easily assume life for her will be made very difficult - if it will be allowed to exist at all.

She’s being given slack in the rope that has been tied around her ankle since she crashed to the ground - some of her freedom back in exchange for cooperation.

Clarke is still staring at her, waiting for her decision, and Lexa, realizing she has something the Commander wants, thrills in the sliver of power she’s been handed.

“I’ll do it.” She speaks clearly. Clarke nods, satisfied, and leans back in her chair. “On a few conditions.”

There’s a mix of emotions that flash through Clarke’s eyes then. First indignation, as she is clearly used to just getting what she wants outright. It then smooths to a more considerate expression - one
that suggests she’s actually mildly impressed and curious.

“Go on,” she says calmly, reclined in her chair with one leg crossed over the other, hand raised in a gesture for Lexa to continue.

Lexa licks her dry lips as she thinks. She knows that she will not have an opportunity to bargain again later. Whatever she leaves the room with will be all she gets.

“I want my stuff back. My jacket, my bag, everything in it,” she starts.

“Done.” The Commander agrees quickly, eyes narrowed. “What else?”

“You said this was going to be dangerous. I don’t want to be sitting there open to attack like last time. I want my weapons back. My baton,” she starts, Clarke hesitates then nods once, Lexa can already tell she is testing the boundaries of her leeway, “and my gun.”

The response is immediate and adamant:

“No.”

Lexa spends only a breath of a moment debating whether it’s worth it to fight her on it. But Clarke’s cold expression delivers the message that she will not be moved and Lexa decides not to pick a battle she will be unlikely to win.

She was never a fan of her gun anyways.

Though so far she has gained very little, Lexa can tell she’s quickly working through what remains of the Commander’s patience and generosity.

Lexa decides to go for the big demand, knowing that this is the only time she will be able to make it. As soon as she steps out of the room she is at the Commander’s mercy.

“When it’s all over, this charade that you’re trying to pull, I get to choose where I want to go and what I do.”

Clarke gives her a very steady look for many moments, blue eyes staring her down as she considers. Lexa swallows but refuses to be cowed and stares back. The moments tick by.

“Very well. When it is over you may go where you wish and I will not stop you.”

Lexa breathes a quiet sigh of relief and feels some of the tension leave her body. But the Commander then rises from her throne and Lexa looks up at her and it quickly rushes back in.

“However, allow me make something very clear.” She steps down from her dais to stand directly before Lexa who swallows at the steel lining her tone. “If you do not uphold your end of the bargain, or undermine it in any way,” she searches Lexa’s eyes, the words quietly and calmly spoken, making them all the more threatening, “I will ensure that you live to regret it.”

Lexa doesn’t answer and instead holds out her hand. Clarke looks at in surprise for a moment before she slowly reaches her own out as well.

It’s like they’re back in the forest and are being introduced again anew.

Clarke is looking at her as if she’s perhaps really seeing her for the first time and Lexa finally feels some small measure of control.
“It’s a deal,” she says, as their palms meet.

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**Trigedasleng Translations:**

“Tel osir won hashta Heda!” - Tell us one about heda!

“Sha, ku, ait. Ai tel op hashta Heda. Jon taim yu sit ste.” - Yes, fine, okay. I will tell one about Heda. Only if you sit still.

“Won hashta Maun-de, neson?” - One about the mountain next?

“Hosh, strikona,” - Hush, little ones

“Ai will eno em op en osir can hogeda go ona kom sonraun.” - I will end her now and we can all go on with our lives.

“Em pleni, Anya.” - Enough, Anya.

“Bants osir.” - Leave us.
“Can you ride?”

The morning feels busy and spurred to action as saddles are adjusted and bags are packed with efficient haste.

Lexa pulls her guard jacket on over her new shirt and shakes her arms out to check that it’s still in one piece. She smiles in satisfaction when she finds it to still be the same as when they took it from her, only cleaner. A close inspection at the crevices between the armoured pads reveal the dedication of whomever it was given to.

Lexa briefly wonders if she does her own warpaint. Or if there are servants that do the intricate pattern for her. Judging by her typically-shuttered expressions, Lexa can’t imagine Clarke being the type to let anyone get close enough to fulfill such an intimate task.

Lexa shrugs, “I’ll figure it out.”

Clarke nods, though she seems to be withholding some doubts.

She hesitates then - slightly, but enough for Lexa to pick up on it - before looking to a guard standing nearby that reacts to some unspoken cue and reaches forward to hand her something. The Commander takes it and Lexa looks up from inspecting the stitching on her sleeve to notice that it’s her guard-issued bag.

Clarke drums her fingers against the worn, sturdy material and Lexa watches her deliberate - can almost see their deal playing over again in her mind. Then she nods, resigned, and hands it over. Lexa tries not to seem too eager as she takes it.

A wave of something bordering on homesickness washes over her unexpectedly as her fingers trace over the insignia stamped on the outside. The triangular emblem is smooth beneath her fingertips and she counts the ring of stars around it, all twelve of them. One for each of the Ark stations.

“Are you satisfied?” There’s no malice in the words, she realizes Clarke is genuinely asking her.

“Yes, yeah. Ummm, thanks,” she responds, the words coming across awkward and stilted as she pulls the bag across her shoulder to hang comfortably at her side.

Clarke nods, eyes trailing over to something else briefly before returning to Lexa. If Lexa were paying closer attention she’d see the minuscule traces of worry lining the creases of the Commander’s eyes and the way she seems to be minutely fidgeting from foot to foot in an attempt to control her impatience. But Lexa doesn’t see it, she’s too ecstatic about having her things back.
She immediately digs her hand inside the bag, snagging items and pulling them out and examining each in turn. Her belt comes first, though they only took that when they took her jacket, but she missed it for the brief period of time regardless. The thick piece of material clips in place around her waist and she likes the familiar way it hugs her hips.

Her flashlight is pulled out next, she clicks it on and off twice to make sure it’s still working. It had a full charge when she crashed from the Ark, so she’s looking at at least a few months of use before it just becomes a hunk of metal.

Zip-ties, a small utility-knife, handcuffs, radio - they all slip into their respective spaces at her waist.

She supposes eventually she’ll dump at least the radio, no need to carry the extra weight. But for now she clips it to her side and runs through her routine of checking to make sure the system is running. It’s pointless, but she enjoys the familiarity of her fingers twisting the knobs and flipping the switches until it crackles to life. Pure static, of course. She turns it off.

Everything makes her feel more like herself and she releases a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding since she opened her eyes on the ground to find it all gone. Before she knows it she’s starting to rework her hair into its guard regulation-acceptable ponytail, fingers combing through any knots she finds.

She belatedly becomes aware that she still has Clarke’s attention, the other girl watching her closely as she handled each thing. Lexa wonders if she knows what most of them are or if she doesn’t want to appear ignorant by asking. Thinks maybe she can figure it out by the way Lexa handles them.

Lexa takes some pleasure in not explaining as she pulls hair back into her tie, enjoys the small amount of edge she feels after when she clips her baton to her belt and fingers trace over the switch on the side.

Her holster is the only thing that sits empty, allowing for a mismatch of weight on her belt that she’ll have to readjust later. Her baton might be the only weapon she’s got, but she feels immensely better for having it. If her brief time on the ground has taught her anything it’s that danger will, without a doubt, find her and she better have something handy to swing at it when it arrives.

She digs around in the bottom of the bag for whatever else is still in there, fingers pushing aside scraps of paper, a couple ballpoint pens, to find the last of the heavier objects. Her hand stills when she realizes what it is.

The rough paperback novel sits dog-eared and worn in her hand as she pulls it out and looks at it. It’s the one she had meant to read on her break, days prior that feel like they’ve stretched to years now.

The Commander picks up on her hesitation quickly. She’s frighteningly perceptive sometimes and Lexa would do well to remember that. “Is everything in order?”

Lexa knows Clarke’s only asking because if she doesn’t hold up her side of the bargain then Lexa has no reason to hold up her own.

She thumbs the cover delicately - a habitual action. This book was her dad’s, one of his favorites. “Yeah,” she says, looking up. “It’s fine.”

And Clarke is looking at her curiously then, seems to see the sadness and loss that sits just behind Lexa’s eyes even if she doesn’t understand what prompted it. It’s an odd expression to receive from someone who’s face is decorated in a display of warpaint that likely frequents nightmares. Lexa shoves the book back in the bag, hears the papers inside crinkle and bend.
Clarke nods and doesn’t push. “Everything should be just as you left it. It was in my custody until now.”

Lexa nods again because she doesn’t know what else to do.

Clarke nods back and now they’ve both nodded enough, she thinks, so Lexa just stands there and drums her fingers on the strap that hangs across her chest. The silence grows and expands until they both seem to become over-interested in the hustle and bustle happening around them. The Commander clears her throat, face impassive once more. “We’ll be leaving shortly, make sure you have everything you need.”

“Right.”

The Commander turns away then, to yell orders or stare menacingly at someone, Lexa is sure. Lexa stops her though suddenly, with words that surprise them both:

“Thank you.”

Clarke turns back to look at her, clearly confused.

“Thank you...for looking after my stuff.” Lexa lifts the bag slightly in gesture to drive the point home and understanding dawns in Clarke’s eyes.

“Oh of course.” She tilts her head towards Lexa, as if the notion that she would not have taken care with someone else’s possessions is foreign and she’s all the more confused by Lexa’s gratitude. “I am glad you are satisfied.”

When she turns around, Lexa’s fingers cling to the strap hanging over her shoulder a little tighter and she takes a deep breath, puffs it out again. The bag sits comfortably against her side and it feels good. It feels like home.

Clarke’s impatience sits as tense knots in the muscles of her back and she turns her neck one way and then the other, trying to smooth it out.

It doesn’t work.

It’s not that she’s nervous. The Commander doesn’t get nervous. Clarke doesn’t get nervous. It’s just that there are so many things spinning and crashing together at once and if this ploy of hers doesn’t work then they’re all in for the fight of their lives when they get to Shallow Valley.

She doesn’t want this war that creeps closer and closer every day. She’s never wanted any of them. She may be trained to push her feet through the sludge and grit of a battlefield; to roar forward with bared teeth even when the strength has been siphoned from every single one of her muscles, but that doesn’t mean she asks for it.

She’s even been trained to enjoy it, to revel in it, to feel thrill in the successful triumph over an opponent. To accept the hum of battle in her bones and hear the ringing of a freed weapon as if it’s music.

But her people, and their well being, have always meant far more.
They’re always at the forefront of her mind in some way or another and in every single one of her decisions. She’s done horrible, nightmarish things, in attempts to secure peace, and knows she will have to do more. But, at the end of the day, she knows that the hand she rules with, though it may be blood-covered, is guided by a desire for a stronger coalition and prosperity for those within it.

She wonders what Nia believes. Whether her brutish acts of violence stem purely from a desire to see destruction, or if they are out of fear. Fear of Clarke, she’s sure in part. Fear that those in the Ice Nation may see the bounty that slowly grows on the other side of the border and turn on their queen.

Clarke doesn’t doubt the Ice Nation leader will do anything to keep her claws in her subjects and dominion over her land. She’s learned it is usually the most desperate opponents that are the most dangerous.

She looks on at her meager gathering of carefully selected warriors. This is all she will have when she ventures out and nears the border. They are all she will have at her back should she need to turn and make a break for her life - for all their lives.

Clarke just hopes her wits are enough to bring all of them back in one piece.

A sudden commotion has Clarke looking up at the entrance to the village.

The gates are swinging open quickly and a horse breaks through the crack that’s created, dust pluming in its wake. The mount is sweating and Clarke feels something in her stomach sink. No one pushes their horse that hard for no reason.

She strides forward towards the rider. “Report,” she orders, the voice of the Commander carrying across the clearing, making those around her stall and look on. It is only when the rider comes to a full stop, horse snorting, and they slide from the saddle that Clarke realizes who it is.

“Avery.” Her tone comes out more surprised than she’d like.

“Commander,” she offer a brief bow, wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her arm. She’s dressed for riding and her clothing is covered in dirt from the journey.

“What?” Clarke asks, skipping pleasantries.

“Ah, no, Commander. Well, the ambassador for the Lake People sends his regards as he was unable to wish you a good journey before your departure last week…”

“Why are you here?” Clarke cuts to it, already losing interest and angry for having thought that something was wrong.

There is a faltering in the other girl’s expression at the curtness of Clarke’s tone; a mental stumbling that flashes across the other girl’s face before she can control it.

“I fulfilled the orders you left me with at Polis and I merely…well I…,” she clears her throat, seems to realize that her stammering is doing nothing for her and Clarke’s patience is fading fast. Avery tucks a lock of dirty blonde hair behind her ear - a nervous habit, a tell Clarke has seen countless times over. She straightens, “I am one of you best archers. I took the initiative in assuming that I could be of use to you in your mission here, whatever that may be. A report came in that you were in Tondisi and I wished to catch up with you before your departure.”

She’s still trying to gain control over her breathing, and begins fidgeting with her riding gloves when Clarke says nothing, just lets the words hang in the air.
The horse stamps a foot in place, it looks weary and in desperate need of a good rest.

Clarke sighs without letting anyone hear it. She supposes in the end she’s better off with more archers at her back. Skilled archers at that. She’s seen Avery knock a bird from the air with her eyes closed.

But there was a reason she had left her behind in Polis.

More than one person nearby is watching on out of curiosity and pretending not to listen in, Clarke can see them taking their time with their tasks. Anya’s sour expression is among them. She doesn’t pretend to not be listening and stands with arms crossed. She is not going to be happy with Clarke.

“Get yourself a fresh horse.”

Clarke turns before she can see what she knows will be a beaming expression radiating out of the other girl.

“When do we leave?” Avery calls after her.

Clarke doesn’t look back. “Now.”

The word spurs those around her to action once again and Clarke heads to collect her final things.

The sky girl has been watching all of it unfold. She looks more out of place than ever now in her returned jacket. Clarke sees what she always sees in her: curiosity. An unhealthy amount of it.

That, in combination with her propensity to trust people, is going to cause her trouble, and, by connection, trouble for Clarke.

It’s a mess waiting to happen.

Clarke grabs her bag. Clears her throat before allowing it to ring loud over the area. “Let’s move out!”

Riding a horse, Lexa discovers very quickly, is not quite as easy as everyone else on the ground makes it look.

“I thought you told the Commander you could ride?” Tahvo asks her, sitting comfortably on his own horse as he rides beside her, making it all look deceptively natural. He’s watching her with concern, as if waiting for her to slide from the side of the beast and land face-first into the mud below.

Her horse begins veering off course again and she frowns. A hasty tug on the reins only gains her a toss of the head and she wonders if pleading with the horse will get her anywhere.

“I believe my words were,” she grunts out when leg nearly gets caught in some of the taller plants lining the side of the road. “That I’d figure it out.”

Lexa leans and her foot nudges the side of the smokey-grey female and she smiles in triumph when it once more begins to follow the others in the group.

The horse had eyed Lexa dubiously earlier that morning when she had been forced to figured out
how to clamber onto it.

Watching warrior after warrior swing onto their mounts easily had only helped so much as far as
demonstration went, and eventually she realized she was just going to have to stop trying to picture it
and actually try heaving herself up.

It had been simple in concept. It was the execution that had proved to be the difficult part - realized in
the numerous ways she discovered one could get their leg caught in a stirrup.

The others, however, seemed to have figured out that she was determined to do it on her own and
didn’t try to help after the first time she waved them off.

In the end, it was seeing the Commander stride past and swing herself up onto her horse with ease
that had given Lexa the determination she needed. She was not about to let the Commander watch
her fall into the dirt. With gritted teeth and one hand firmly on the saddle, she had hauled herself up
in one clumsy and mildly painful move with her newfound conviction, punching the air at her
triumph.

She swears that when she had looked up after, there had been a twinge of amusement at the corner of
the Commander’s mouth, but it was gone before she could be sure.

A warrior, one of the dozen or so in their group, slows his horse to match hers now.

“The Commander is looking for you,” he grunts, obviously not too keen on being used as a
messenger.

Lexa sighs. She supposes she’s going to have to get used to being called upon. Still, she waits a bit
after the warrior returns to his previous group until Tahvo is shifting in his saddle.

“Shouldn’t you go see the Commander?” he eventually asks, trying to keep the worry out of his
voice and failing miserably. She looks over at him at how innocent he sounds - how concerned he is,
concern for her most likely. His dark brown hair sticks up at odd ends and she has the sudden odd
urge to ask where his parents are. If they’re worried about him. Or if they’re proud that he wears
those three painted dots next to his eye and follows the orders of a woman that attracts danger
everywhere she seems to go.

“She can wait a moment,” Lexa replies offhandedly, returning her gaze forward as she shifts the
collapsed baton on her hip so it sits more comfortably. She wonders if she can get one of those
special compartments some of the warriors have for their bows, so that it can snap to the side of the
saddle when she rides. She bets Raven would love to take a look at those; figure out how they allow
for quick release but still hold the weapons secure.

She can see Tahvo struggling not to say something and when she glances at him again he spits it out,
“You should not keep the Commander waiting.”

She stares at him, notes the heavy seriousness in his words.

“Why?” she asks, just to see what he says.

He seems surprised by the question, light blue eyes widening before narrowing in confusion. “She is
the Commander.”

As if that is all the answer she should need. Lexa has to marvel a bit at the loyalty Clarke has
gathered. It is not just prowess in battle that encourages the fierce determination that lines this kid’s
face. It’s something more, something that Clarke has clearly earned through some action or another.
It’s the same look Lexa has seen on Lincoln’s face and every other warrior she’s been near. She wants to find out what it was that put it there. What consistently brings out a pride that radiates out from them when the Commander merely levels a nod in their direction.

She supposes there’s only one way she’s going to find out.

“Very well, I will go honor your Commander with my presence.”

She can see Tahvo’s lips twitching even under his obvious relief when she kicks her heels lightly into the sides of her horse experimentally and is happily surprised when it listens and strides forward faster.

She tries to remember the horse’s name as it picks its way through the riders, meandering on a path of its own choosing towards the front. Maybe if she starts calling it by it will like her better.

“Clinron? Clinroana?” She tries, searching her memory for the way the person that had handed her the reins had allowed the word to roll off their tongue. “Clinnoan?” This all gets her nowhere and she mostly just feels embarrassed at the way some of warriors stare at her as she goes by so she quickly gives up.

Lexa takes in the group that makes up their party curiously as she meanders through them. For the most part they look like hardened warriors - grizzled and scarred, heavy weapons dangling from their sides. There are a few interspersed among the group though, that Lexa now knows are Clarke’s private skilled group. They’re generally smaller in stature, less imposing, average in a way that doesn’t draw your eye. No heavy armour sits on their shoulders, but instead lightweight leather pads that cover their clothing over shirts the colour of the trees and earth. Their boots look soft and worn and Lexa has no doubt that they are quiet when they walk. And, of course, each has the three dots on their temple.

She doubts the archers are just there for protection. She’s seen the way Tahvo’s eyes flick up into the trees and can guess there’s a lot more to these nimble warriors than she’ll be informed of.

She counts four of them among the group: Tahvo, two more older warriors - a dark haired woman that seemed to always be put-off by something and a quieter man that Lexa can’t get a read on because he always has a cowl pulled over his face - and, of course, the last addition to their group, the warrior that had ridden into TonDC that morning. Currently, she rides at the Commander’s heels and Lexa looks her way curiously before letting her gaze slide over to Anya, who rides next to her.

For the first time since they’d been introduced, the older, prickly warrior is not aiming a scowl at Lexa. Instead her displeasure seems to be towards the archer who seems intent on staying at Clarke’s heels. Lexa’s lips twitch as she stores the information away that there might actually be someone else that Anya dislikes more than she dislikes Lexa.

She clears her throat to alert them to her presence and immediately has two scowls aimed her way.

“You requested my presence?” She speaks directly to Clarke and ignores the way the others look at her.

Clarke glances back at her and nods. “You’re to ride up here when we get closer to the villages.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

Anya’s eyes are narrowed as Lexa pulls her horse closer to the Commander.

Clarke, if she hears the small amount of bite lining Lexa’s words, ignores it and keeps her gaze
forward on the path. “Yes. Take this.” And she pulls a length of cloth from her saddlebag and hands it over unceremoniously.

“Heda,” she hears Anya immediately say in a tone that is as close to admonishing as Lexa has heard anyone use with the Commander, making Lexa once again wonder at their relationship. The other archer too, stares with wide eyes, stunned into silence.

Lexa doesn’t understand why until she reaches out and carefully takes the fabric from Clarke’s outstretched hand. It’s the exact same type of cloth, colour and all, that hangs as the Commander’s sash. There’s a pin clipped to it with an emblem stamped into the center - the same cog the Commander wears between her brows.

Understanding floods through her. “You want me to wear this.”

It’s not a question, but Clarke nods once anyways, still keeping her gaze forward. Lexa has noticed she does that a lot, always seeming to have one part of her mind on what’s in front of her and another concentrating on something else entirely. It makes the effect when you do have her full attention all the more heart-stuttering.

Lexa wonders where that other part of the Commander’s mind is now.

She doesn’t need to ask why she needs wear it, as far as questions she could ask the Commander go, it’s one of the few she already knows the answer to.

Lexa hesitates for a moment, but then quickly remembers that she was the one that agreed to the deal, and resigns herself.

She looks down at herself and deliberates how to wear it, awkwardly holding the fabric in one hand and the reins in the other. Eventually she settles for draping it in a loose circle that sits over her shoulders and pins it together above her collarbone like a shawl. It’s surprisingly not as heavy as she expected.

But the fabric does the job she knows Clarke wants it to by immediately making it clear to others to whom Lexa supposedly reports. She adjusts the pin slightly, putting aside her feelings of having someone essentially putting their claim on her for the moment, reminding herself again that she agreed to this and in the end it’ll be worth it.

She wonders if the sight of the Commander’s seal will offer her protection or will instead just make for a nice target. When she looks up she finds the archer glaring at her with disdain and she has a guess at the answer.

Her lips twitch slightly at the strength of the unprompted hostility and it doesn’t go unnoticed, causing the archer to clench her jaw.

Lexa probably shouldn’t keep aggravating people who can kill her easily, but she’s also trying to find some humour in the overall situation. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” she says. “I’m Lexa, the Commander’s…” she turns to Clarke mid-sentence, “what am I calling myself exactly?”

“Just Lexa will be fine,” Clarke responds without turning to look back. Her tone suggests she already regrets everything about this.

“Right. I’m just Lexa,” she holds out her hand and the other girl levels a look at her that could freeze ponds in Summer and turns away. Lexa lets her hand drop, shrugging off the cold-shouldered response.
Anya, of all people, seems to also be getting some amusement out of the situation. “Oh don’t mind Avery. She’s just a bit tired because she’s been traveling so much the last few days. She rushed day and night to deliver very important information to the Commander. Isn’t that right?” The last words are directed at the girl riding alongside Lexa whose expression grows even cloudier if possible.

“Yes, of course.” She then seems to swallow her pride through grit teeth and turns to Lexa. “My apologies. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to discuss details with some of the others.” She looks at Clarke then, as if waiting to see if she’ll say anything, ask her to stay. When she receives no kind of acknowledgement, she sighs and turns her horse towards some of the others. Lexa almost feels bad for the warrior. Almost.

When she turns her attention forward once more she finds Anya conversing with the Commander in a low, hushed tone. Lexa should tell her not to bother, she can’t understand a word of their language anyways. She watches the way the older warrior’s brow creases and imagines the conversation likely has something to do with the piece of fabric now hanging across Lexa’s shoulders.

For a few moments she tries storing some of the words she hears away for later consideration, but they’re spoken too fast so she gives up. She wonders if Tahvo would be willing to teach her their language.

“Sky girl!” She looks up abruptly to find Anya glaring at her, probably from having to call her name multiple times. Lexa figured it wouldn’t be long before she drew the warrior’s ire again now that Avery was no longer present to attract it.

Lexa just raises an eyebrow in response.

“Can you fight?”

Lexa hesitates, then she raises and drops one shoulder in a half shrug. “Not really.”

The Commander looks at her then, briefly, but there’s a lot in the glance. Lexa swallows, feels the lie sitting in the air.

She can’t say she’s ever used a sword, or a bow and arrow like the one strapped to the side of the Commander’s saddle, but she does know how to fight. The training program for the guard on the Ark is intense and thorough. Guns were last-resort weapons due to the dangers of their usage inside the space station, so they were primarily trained in hand-to-hand combat. Take-down procedures are so locked into her muscle memory she doubts she’ll ever be able to shake them. She knows how to subdue opponents much larger and much faster than herself, how to approach them, take their legs out from under them, lock them in cuffs before they’re fully aware of the situation. Containment was key on the Ark - there is no room for error when error can quickly escalate to catastrophe in such a carefully suspended environment.

This all rolls through her mind quickly, but she keeps her mouth shut, turning her face towards the trees to keep them from reading it on her face. She had willingly placed herself at the Commander’s mercy in a bargain for her own eventual freedom. She has no idea what that will bring in the meantime, so she will keep as many secrets - as many advantages - to herself, as she can.

“Well, for your sake, I hope it is better than you can ride a horse,” Anya grunts out before veering away from the Commander to report something to one of the other riders towards the middle of the group.

“I thought I was doing pretty well,” Lexa says to herself with a frown down at the reins in her hand. The grey horse plods on disinterestedly and Lexa narrows her eyes in determination. “Clinrina?
Clingrona?” she tries again quietly to remember, frustration building when she gets nowhere.

“Klinrona.”

Lexa looks up quickly, unaware that the Commander had been paying any attention to her, but Clarke doesn’t add anything else and keeps her eyes forward.

“Oh,” is Lexa’s brilliant response, looking from the back of the Commander’s head to the horse underneath her. “Klinrona,” she tries it out for herself, slowly and then with more feeling at the end. The word had rolled off Clarke’s tongue easily, a sharp start that pooled out to something softer and Lexa tries her best to mimic it. She’s rewarded with an ear twitch that tells her she’s right this time and she smiles broadly.

“What does it --” she looks up and is startled to find ice blue eyes looking back at her. She swallows as Clarke blinks slowly and waits.

Lexa notices there’s just one braid in her hair today, the origin of it stemming from behind her right ear, where it hangs loosely down to her shoulder. The light catches on a small cog twisted into the locks. The simplicity of the arrangement should make her appear casual, but the haunting design on her cheekbones, the one that looks as if it’s painted from liquid shadows, doesn’t allow the Commander to look anything but imperial.

She clears her throat, tries again, “It’s beautiful. What does it mean?”

The horses plod forward continuously, following the path and leading the group behind them, hoofbeats filling the air steadily. Above her the forest cover arches high, the green leaves twisting through the sunlight and rustling loudly in the wind. But Lexa still has no trouble hearing Clarke when she gives the quiet answer.

“It means river.”

Clarke looks at her for a beat longer, expression indiscernible, before she once more turns her gaze forward and Lexa is released.

They ride far, putting more and more distance between themselves and Tondisi until Clarke is satisfied and they end up surprising a small village when they ride up to it to spend the night. The inhabitants are wide-eyed as Clarke’s large horse breaks through the trees, flanked on either side by her warriors.

They are still within Trikru territory, so seeing the Commander pass through and use the roads is not unheard of. But to have the Commander approach with the intention to stay has the small village quickly scrambling, rushing about to offer up a big tent to Clarke and building up a large fire for her warriors to crowd around. Clarke nods her thanks while she smiles through gritted teeth and wishes they had just camped among the trees. But one of the horses had picked up a stone in its hoof during the day and she had no choice. They had caught the problem early, but she would feel better having the resources of the village to make sure it would be alright for the horse to continue on in the morning or if it was too bruised to continue. She does not have the advantage of waiting for a more extensive injury to heal. If the horse is unwell by morning, the rider will have to find an alternative mount or be left behind.
The sky girl - Lexa (she supposes she should use her name), stands to the side of those making camp just inside the perimeter of the village, and rubs at her elbow. She had taken a rather spectacular fall getting down from Klinrona and her arm had caught the brunt of it. Clarke shakes her head and wonders what she’s getting herself into.

“Ai ste gon homplei,” Anya tells her, brushing past and taking a few of the warriors with her that stretch their arms out from the long day of traveling. Clarke nods distractedly, her eyes looking over each member of her party, quietly observing their actions, looking for weaknesses to address while she still has a chance. She finds none. They were all hand selected for a reason. Their endurance or skill was her substitution for numbers and she was going to rely on that heavily.

“Lid in Avery kom yu.” She speaks as the thought occurs to her, spotting the archer out of the corner of her eye.

They disappear between the trees quickly and Clarke knows it won’t take very long for them to come back with something, especially if Anya is leading.

She had still been working on adding patience to her list of skills and the hunt had gone horribly as a result.

She had spotted a stag and when her first arrow had gone wide, spooking the animal, she had raced after it to try and get another shot off. Her failure to stop and assess where she was running was the source of her failure. She had ended up falling into a deep, camouflaged pit meant to trap a boar, very nearly snapping her ankle. Anya had peered over the edge and told her that perhaps spending a day in there might serve as a good lesson in not running blindly after her quarry.

It had been early days into their relationship and Clarke had been furious. She had, without knowing it, become accustomed to some of the finer things offered to her in the tower in Polis. Servants had treated her and the other nightbloods with high respect, as if each of them were already Heda because, someday, one of them would be. So she had gaped indignantly when her instructor had smirked and walked away without a backward glance, leaving her to try and scramble up the muddy sides of the pit for the better part of the day. Clarke might have actually been able to scramble her way out of it if it hadn’t also been heavily raining.

By the time Anya had come back early the next morning sometime, Clarke had been covered in mud and soaked to the bone, only feeling hatred for the face that looked over the side and cheekily asked if she was ready to come out yet.

She remembers wiping sludge from her eyes and very nearly saying no just out of spite. But she had been smart enough to know, even then, that Anya was only trying to teach her something that would probably save her life someday.

Needless to say, she never fell into a boar trap again after that.

A drop of rain suddenly lands on her cheek and she looks up, huffs out a small laugh, thinking the sky must have heard her thoughts and has a sense of humour.
The clouds are moving quickly, hurried along by a strong wind that makes the trees bend and sway and shake. The air smells like rain already, tangled with the fading light, and sitting on the horizon like a promise.

A few more drops land on her forehead, dripping down around the edge of her eye before running down through the paint on her cheeks.

The other warriors become aware of it as well and an extra burst of speed lines their movements as they quickly assemble cover until only one person stands amidst the flurry - stock still, face upturned at the thundering sky, looking much like the first time Clarke saw her.

The sky girl’s eyes are open, blinking rapidly at the raindrops that catch in her eyelashes. One of her hands is held out, palm up, and Clarke realizes that she is watching someone experience rain for the first time.

The water is soaking into Clarke’s clothing now, telling her that she should probably go find cover before she ends up having to wring out her coat for the rest of the night. Instead she watches, head tilting slightly at the enjoyment that seems to bubble out of the other girl even as she’s forced to wipe the water out of her eyes.

To Clarke the rain is primarily a nuisance. It clogs the roads and makes traveling rough and uncomfortable. She doesn’t have to ask to know that the sky girl immediately loves it.

In the end they’re spared, and the downpour doesn’t last long, a few minutes at most. The strong wind pushes the clouds on their way quickly, leaving everything glistening and wet. When it’s over, the sky girl, Lexa, Clarke’s mind prods her, stares around with a smile that has a twist of wonder to it. Enamored, is the word that comes to mind if Clarke had to describe the look on her face.

Clarke has the sudden inexplicable desire to ask what she’s thinking.

Clarke is good at reading people, understanding them, pulling things from them, using them even, but this one is...different. She’s not sure yet what she’s going to do about it.

This girl is not one of her people. Clarke doesn’t owe her anything. In all likelihood she’s probably more of a threat or a liability than anything. But this doesn’t negate the fact that Clarke needs her and that their hands are tied together in this thing whether either of them likes it or not.

Lexa has raindrops sticking to her face when Clarke approaches and small tendrils of her hair are sticking to her forehead. She turns in surprise and wipes some of the water away with the heel of her palm but there’s still that wonder sitting just beneath the surface.

“We need to discuss some details about your role when we get to Shallow Valley.”

“Now?”

Clarke thinks about the reports she needs to go over that Avery brought, the planning for their route, and everything else she needs to do even though her bones are aching for a good rest, and shakes her head. “Settle in first. We’ll discuss things later.”

Lexa lifts two fingers to her forehead and pulls them away in a mocking salute, “As you wish, Commander,” forcing Clarke to walk away before she does something she’ll regret, reciting lessons of patience and understanding.

She wonders, as she walks away, what imbalance of karma one of her past lives created that is prompting the universe to try to seek equilibrium now.
Lexa finds herself sitting in front of the large, crackling fire between Lincoln and Tahvo, holding some sort of meat on a long stick and watching as fat drips and sizzles into the flames.

It’s nearly dark now, barely enough light to see by and Lexa adjusts the sash hanging over her shoulders and pulls her jacket a little tighter. It hadn’t rained again, but she still suspects that her clothing will not be completely dry for a while.

She cradles her elbow slightly as she turns the stick in her hand, hoping someone will tell her when the food actually becomes edible.

“So what’s the deal between the Commander and Anya?” she asks, trying to get a conversation going.

“Deal?” Lincoln asks, stretching his legs out. Lexa resists the temptation to do the same but she knows her leg muscles will hate her for it after all the riding today.

“Yeah, they seem...close.” She frowns at the word, it doesn’t fit quite right but it’s the closest she can think of for the relationship that she’s picked up on.

“The Commander was Anya’s second,” he explains. Then, at her obvious confusion, “she trained her.”

It explains a lot suddenly. No wonder she can get away with talking to the Commander the way she does.

“She’s very protective of the Commander.”

Lincoln smiles suddenly, seems to be remembering something funny. “They used to hate each other.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow, interest piqued. Even Tahvo is looking over at Lincoln now, clearly new to the information as well.

“Why?” She asks, bringing the end of the stick close to her face and poking at the meat. Her stomach growls but Lincoln just shakes his head and gestures for her to put it back in the fire.

“Their temperaments are very similar. And the Commander wasn’t quite so...stoic back then. They used to infuriate one another.” He looks over his shoulder and speaks quietly even though he has not said anything Lexa thinks would cause him trouble.

Lexa tries to imagine a younger version of the Commander. She wonders if she was anything like the person she was pretending to be when Lexa first woke up on the forest floor and met her.

Lexa lets her gaze wander to the tent she can see on the other side of the village, the one Clarke had disappeared into hours ago and hasn’t emerged from yet - even when a handful of warriors had returned from hunting and started preparing food.

Some of the villagers are hanging around the other fires, making their own meals. She’s noticed their lifestyle is different than what she saw in TonDC. They look less like warriors and seem to be more inclined to a life of gathering food from the forest or maybe farming. Though she’d seen weapons
hanging from their belts or across their backs, they keep a wide berth from the Commander’s group. The warriors don’t seem to mind - or they don’t seem surprised. She wonders if it’s just the Commander’s presence that causes this effect or if this group has a reputation as well.

She looks around and tries to put all their faces to memory, figuring it might be useful later when they get to wherever it is that they’re going.

The night settles more firmly around them and Lexa sits, turning the food on the stick in front of her and warming herself with the fire.

She wonders if anyone on the Ark misses her. If her absence is noted or just smoothed over. If the vacancy was just filled, patched up like a small hole in a wall and painted over again, allowing life to move on with no indication that there was once something missing.

She realizes she misses Raven’s snark and brilliancy, wishes she could tell her about what she’s seen, tell her about how she’s more than a little bit afraid of how quickly her life appears to be veering towards danger that will put her in over her head. She smiles as she imagines Raven would just tell her to suck it up.

Her life is on a very different path now than anything she could have fathomed. It’s probably about time that she starts to try and get used to it.

Clarke hears the flaps on the tent gently push open and is unsurprised by who it is.

Avery slides into the room, stretching her arms above her head.

“I thought you would join the rest of us for the meal. I snagged two hares, well -- Anya helped. A bit.” A pause follows this as she thinks something over with amusement. “You know, I don’t think she likes me.”

She steps farther into the room as she speaks, looking around the large tent that was assembled for Clarke. A mass of candles sit on the table that had been borrowed from someone in the village, which work to illuminate everything softly.

“I’m sorry to hear that my presence was missed,” Clarke responds absentmindedly, words trailing off, eyes on the map on the table. She wonders if it’s still early enough in the year to take the path through the mountains. It will save them a few days in all likelihood and they can stay farther from the border and other towns outside the Shallow Valley capital.

“You should eat something.” Her voice is closer now, she leans her hip against the side of the table next to Clarke and watches her work. She’s careful to keep the worry out of her tone, or anything bordering on an order.

“The village chief’s wife was kind enough to bring me a meal in here while I looked over the maps,” Clarke murmurs, eyes tracing over the path she thinks they’ll use, its dashed line barely visible in the low light. What if they don’t get there soon enough? What if Nia’s representatives have already visited the clan and offered them promises and deals that were impossible to turn down? What if Clarke is rushing them all into a bloodbath?

She doesn’t realize her hand has curled into a tight fist against the top of the table until she feels a
hand settle softly atop it.

“You work too hard.”

The words pull Clarke back into the room, back into herself, and she works to make herself feel present again. Each finger uncurls slowly as she releases a breath, feels the hard surface of the table beneath her palm once more.

The hand resting atop hers trails from Clarke’s fingertips, over her wrist, and up her arm. The pads of Avery’s fingers slowly follow an indirect route until they smooth up the skin of Clarke’s neck and come to rest gently under her chin, tilting her head up from the maps and reports.

She’s close enough now that Clarke can see the rain still sitting on her cheeks, and when her mouth meets Clarke’s slowly, she can taste it too. Her lips are soft, coaxing, slanting over Clarke’s in a way that speaks of familiarity; her fingers slightly chilled where they press lightly to Clarke’s jaw. There’s hesitancy to her movements though, as if Clarke is something wild she’s afraid of scaring off, but she knows she just needs to be patient. She’s right, and after an immeasurable amount of time, Clarke gives in to it.

She knows that this means something else to the other girl. Something more. Clarke can read it in the way she always smiles into the kiss when Clarke doesn’t stop her fingers from making quick work of the clasps holding her coat together. She peels it from her shoulders smoothly and moves closer, kiss sliding to Clarke’s jaw and then her neck.

She comes to Clarke each time because she feels something for her. And each time Clarke lets her because sometimes she just wants to feel something at all.

Lexa pulls the cover of her bedroll up over her nose, seeking warmth inside the small tent she’d been tossed earlier that day.

She had unrolled it, hands fiddling with the complicated ties for so long that one of the warriors had come over and offered to help her. She had waved him off, determined to figure it out. Something about being in charge of her own things again was giving her the desire to start figuring things out in this new life of hers. She liked being self-reliant. Even if it meant that part of her tent was leaning dangerously on one side, forcing her to sleepily eye it for a while, waiting to see if it would bring the whole thing crashing down on her head.

But it had stayed up, even with the wind that seemed intent on tugging at it, and she had crawled into her bedroll with relief, sighing as her sore muscles thanked her for the reprieve.

Just as she’s closing her eyes she remembers that Clarke had asked her to talk earlier and they never had.

She turns on her side beneath the cover with a mental shrug, guessing that since she wasn’t called upon it could wait until morning.
The next day rises bright and early and Lexa is awoken by the commotion of people shuffling about and taking down their tents.

She emerges from her own rubbing the sleep from her eyes and blinks at the way the morning dew shines and glitters off the moss and plants. She shivers, ducks back inside for that damn sash she’s supposed to wear - glad that it might actually have one benefit as she pulls it on and instantly feels warmer.

She doesn’t see the Commander amidst any of the warriors that walk to and fro carrying loaded packs or crouched before small fires, poking them into life to provide some warmth before they head out. They all seem perfectly content to wait, maybe even enjoy a warm meal, but she can tell that if the Commander suddenly appeared they would be ready to leave in moments.

Lexa supposes she should go find her, actually have that discussion they were supposed to have yesterday. Maybe knowing some of the finer details about what she’s expected to do, what her exact role will be, will make her feel better about the whole thing. Or at the very least make her feel like she has some control over it. She knows not to get too disillusioned by that notion, but it still might make everything easier if she can lie to herself a bit.

There is also the fact that she supposes the whole process will be easier if she tries to find some common ground with Clarke. Lexa is still unhappy with being treated as a criminal, then a threat, and now just something to control, and she assumes she’ll be unhappy about that for a long while. But that won’t change her situation and she’s rational enough to know she should probably try to get over it.

And besides, she thinks, as she makes her way across the camp and closer into the village, Clarke hadn’t been completely awful to her on the road yesterday.

She may be a power-hungry leader with a mild god-complex, but Lexa supposes she had expected to be treated much worse so far. Maybe extending a small olive branch will make her life slightly easier while she fulfills this ridiculous role of being “the Commander’s weapon”.

She makes a face as her legs and backside protest against her with every step she takes and wonders how anyone can associate her with being something dangerous. She’s fairly certain a child could give her a good run for her money right now if she was forced to spar.

It’s still early so there’s only a few villagers milling about, tending fires, shaking out blankets. A few of them look up as she passes, eyes zeroing in on the pin attached to the shawl on her shoulders before quickly looking away. Lexa pushes the unease rolling in her stomach down as far as it will go.

She reaches the Commander’s tent and hesitates.

It’s much larger than the one Lexa slept in, and she can already tell is made of much finer material that has some sort of coating to prevent the rain from leaking inside. However, despite all this, there is nowhere for her to knock or indicate her presence.

She clears her throat loudly. “Ummm. Commander?”

She tries to say the word without it coming out as sarcastic, but it’s going to take some more practice.

Shuffling comes from inside the tent but no one calls out to her and she awkwardly shifts from foot to foot while she waits. She watches a few birds take flight from a nearby tree, their bodies swooping
as their wings find air currents.

Nothing happens for so long that she looks around, wondering if there’s someone that can instruct her of the correct protocol. She clears her throat again, louder this time, and is about to call out again when the flap on the tent opens and its

Not the Commander.

It’s the archer. The one that hates her. Avery.

“Oh, sorry,” Lexa steps back, out of her way. “I didn’t realize she was in a meeting with someone.”

The other girl levels a look at her for a slow moment before brushing past without a word. Rude.

And then Lexa is standing there again. She faces the tent and opens her mouth to say something, but she doesn’t get the chance before Clarke’s voice reaches her from inside.

“Enter.”

‘Finally,’ she thinks as she pushes the flap aside and strides through.

She doesn’t know what she’s expecting when she enters. But she supposes she had expected to find the Commander dressed.

Or wearing clothes at all.

It’s not that Lexa sees anything before she stops short and quickly turns around, face burning spectacularly. The Commander had been facing away from her, sitting on her bed and pulling a shirt over her head. But the garment hadn’t dropped over the large amount of exposed skin fast enough for Lexa to miss the intricate tattoo rising up the length of her spine.

Lexa is now staring at the entrance to the tent and thinks about how the Commander hadn’t been in here alone.

Oh.

Oh.

Well that’s an interesting development.

She clears her throat. “Should I come back later?” The words come out in a higher pitch than she would like.

“No.”

Lexa shuffles from foot to foot, face still turned away.

“You can turn around.” Lexa can hear some amusement lining the words but when she hesitantly turns back she only finds the Commander’s usual impassive display.

She’s wearing clothing now - Lexa is thankful to note. It’s loose and informal, probably the clothes she sleeps in. A pair of soft pants that hang low on her hips and a sleeveless shirt that exposes the muscle of her arms. There’s a necklace hanging from her neck on a thin cord, but Lexa doesn’t get a good look before Clarke drops it to hang underneath her shirt.

Lexa takes it all in quickly, eyes moving first to the black ink that curls around Clarke’s collarbone.
It’s a large swirl surrounded by intricate jagged shapes that intertwine and radiate outwards. It gives the appearance of a sun blazing above her heart and flaring up into the base of her neck.

Another tattoo, three lines circling the middle of her right forearm. They’re thin and even, perfectly spaced from each other as they wrap around. Lexa wonders if they mean anything.

There are scars as well. A lot of them. Small white lines, some jagged or curved, mark the planes of her skin, telling stories of injuries long-healed. There’s a rather large one on her right bicep and Lexa is thrown back into a story about a conclave. A bloody fight. *The Commander only suffered a cut to her arm, right here.*

This is easily the most unguarded she’s ever seen the Commander but it’s Lexa that feels caught off guard and she rubs at the back of her neck and looks away.

“You wanted to talk about my role in this thing,” she starts, and it sounds awkward even to her own ears.

Clarke begins ruffling through a bag of things, likely getting her armour and clothing for the day and Lexa wonders if she’s even listening until she speaks.

“Yes. And we can discuss it more on the road as well. There are things you should know about the clan we are riding into. Actually, I should probably tell you more about each of the clans.”

She seems slightly preoccupied out of the corner of Lexa’s eye as she places garments on the bed. Lexa wonders if the Commander is ever actually forced to use a bedroll like the rest of them, or if that is reserved for those of much lower stature. Suddenly she stops going through her things and moves closer toward Lexa.

“What I would like to discuss right now, however, is something different. Specifically…” and her voice trails off, forcing Lexa to turn to look at her.

She isn’t expecting the swing of Clarke’s fist as it comes for her face and her surprised body reacts automatically.

Before she’s fully conscious of what she’s done, Clarke’s blow has been redirected past her head and Lexa is gripping her wrist firmly. Her other hand is already moving to subdue before she realizes that Clarke isn’t doing anything else to attack her.

And then Clarke is grinning. A knowing kind of smile, even as Lexa’s iron grip on her wrist doesn’t relent. The words she says next are low, face pressed close to Lexa’s dangerously.

“What I want to know,” she starts, and she’s near enough for Lexa to see the scar that runs through her eyebrow, sitting above eyes that are sharp and observant. “Is why you lied about being able to fight.”

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**Trigedasleng Translations**

“I’m going for a hunt” - *Ai ste gon homplei,*

“Bring Avery with you.” - *Lid in Avery kom yu.*
Chapter End Notes

I'm considering switching to a different kind of update pattern where the chapters will be shorter but I'll update more frequently. I think it will work a little better.
It’s the small upturn at the corner of the Commander’s mouth that snaps Lexa back into herself. Her fingers let go of Clarke’s wrist like it’s hot metal she should have known better than to touch.

She steps back quickly. Clarke only steps closer.

This near, Lexa can make out each of the individual bends and twists in the braids hanging over her shoulder, the walk of the jagged scar on her arm, can clearly see the expression on her face - like she’s cornered prey that she almost wish had posed more of a challenge.

“If you think you can continue to keep the truth from me, you are sorely mistaken.”

Lexa swallows.

There’s a voice in her head that yells danger danger danger in a monotonous and alarmed tone, but there is another that implores that she leans closer towards the body pressing in on her, to rise to its challenge. That thought alone is enough to force her to stumble farther back out of Clarke’s space into clearer air.

“How?” she asks, one hand still slightly raised in case Clarke decides to take another swing at her suddenly.

But Clarke is already four steps away, digging through a bag for something, half a mind on another thing entirely. Still, she answers, “I’ve been surrounded by warriors my entire life. I can recognize their mannerisms anywhere.”

“I’m not a warrior,” Lexa is quick to cut in.

Clarke raises and drops a hand like she could contest the statement but knows it won’t get her far. “But you do know how to fight.”

Lexa doesn’t deny it, there’d be no point now. There’s a few moments of quiet as Clarke continues to gather her things and pack them together.

“What were you then, to your people?” Clarke asks suddenly, pausing in her movements to look up at her. She tightens the straps on one of her bags before resting her fingers over the fabric, fiddling with it absentmindedly.

Lexa doesn’t expect the way the past tense usage makes her feel like her body is sinking. She blinks and rubs a hand over her face. It takes her a moment to respond.

“I was a guard.”

Clarke nods, “And what did you guard?”

And it’s true, the Ark guards may be a lot of things, and not all of them are good, but she wears that insignia because she believes that at the end of the day she makes life on the Ark that much safer.

‘Made,’ her mind corrects.
Clarke becomes considerate. “Is that not so different from a warrior?”

Lexa pauses, considering, then acquiesces with a small shake of the head, “I suppose not.”

Clarke gives a short grin. “Perhaps you’ll find a place here yet.”

Lexa isn’t sure how she can feel both relief and trepidation at the same time from those words.

“And, now that we can all stop pretending that you don’t know how to fight, perhaps you can train a bit. It will help you, maybe. And me.”

Lexa feels her brows pull together. She had expected to have to hand her weapons back over, or have her hands bound again after having been caught lying. Clarke’s reactions continue to surprise her.

“Help me how?”

She watches as Clarke goes back and forth across the tent, packing things and rolling up maps, speaking as she goes.

“There is still some small part of your mind that believes you are going back or being rescued by your people. No, don’t deny it, it’s written all over your face. And in the way you grip to that bag.”

Lexa swallows and narrowly avoids glancing down at the bag resting over her shoulder which her fingers grasp the strap of. Clarke tosses something in the direction of her pile of things and steps closer, bringing her full attention back to Lexa once more. She pauses a moment to make sure that Lexa is listening and Lexa knows that whatever she is about to say is going to be blunt and probably unkind.

She’s not wrong.

“From how you described them, it is easy enough to surmise that your people are not coming for you. And you are not returning to them. That connection is severed clear and clean and the sooner you realize that, the sooner you will begin to acclimate to your new role here. To hope for anything else would be a foolish waste of time.”

Lexa has taken harsh truths before. Her parents. Her life on the Ark. But there is something about the cold and blunt confrontation of the thing that’s been nestled in the lower half of her mind that has her mouth going dry. She runs her tongue across the roof of her mouth and it tastes like panic. She didn’t think she’d been holding onto hope, but she realizes now that she had. It was small, flickering faintly beneath the bewilderment, determination to just survive, and everything else, but it was definitely there. To hear the reality of how that hope is a lie, spelled out for her from someone else’s lips, leaves her feeling cold and hollowed out. Clarke watches her for a moment before turning away again.

“Can I leave?” she asks suddenly through a tight throat. They haven’t even talked about any of the plans, or details of their journey like they were supposed to.

The Commander nods after a moment, eyes reading the expression on Lexa’s face.

She doesn’t wait for Clarke to change her mind or say something else. She pushes the flaps of the tent open and steps into the morning, breathing the clear air and letting it settle her spinning thoughts.

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Lexa avoids Clarke for the next couple days as they travel. She rides Klinrona near enough to still be
in the Commander’s vicinity, but far enough that she doesn’t have to engage in any conversation.

She spends most of her time talking with Lincoln or Tahvo about the clans and their culture, or about their language - Trigedasleng. They try to teach her a few words here and there and it’s difficult but at the same time it’s good, it gives her something to think about that isn’t the person riding at the front of their party or the harsh truth of her situation. She tries to fit the words of another language inside her mouth and can pretend for that moment that there isn’t this hollowness in her chest whenever she thinks about home.

They seem to garner that it’s a sensitive topic and though she can sense their curiosity, they don’t ask her questions about the Ark often and she’s immensely thankful.

She’s also getting more used to sleeping on the thin bedroll she’d been given, even though the ground is anything but soft beneath. It helps when, if the night is clear, she can sleep without her tent and look up at a sky that has more stars than darkness and think about how she’s never had a view so wide.

The scenery changes with each day. They pass through dense forest for most of the journey, but on the second day the land begins opening up into gorges and valleys that make her audibly gasp the first time they clear the trees and she sees it. The colours are vibrant and she realizes the world is changing seasons before her eyes.

Some of the trees are so many different colours and she thinks back to her lessons that described autumn and the changing of time and she’s enthralled with each and every shade of colour she sees twirling down through the air, forming a collage on the ground.

There were no seasons on the Ark. They had artificially programmed days and nights. Mathematical formulas that decided when the lights should shift their glow to half light and then to full dark until it was just the soft hum of the emergency lights that lit their way.

It’s not all beautiful, however. She sees more than a few animals that have her stumbling back in horror at their mutations. They also pass through the remnants of cities that were destroyed by the heavy hand of war, leaving only fragments of what may have once stood as tall structures. They mostly seem ominous to her, like half-buried skeletons of things that were once full of vibrant life. She gives them a wide berth.

After the third day in the saddle even the hardened warriors seem a bit anxious to be doing anything else and Lexa is glad she is not alone in that feeling. Clarke, seemingly aware of everything that happens around her, stops them when the sun is much higher above the horizon than their usual stopping point.

“We’ll camp here. We’re not far out and we could all use a day to rest and make last minute preparations before we get there. Hopefully we won’t need it but it will be better to be ready. Osla, you’re on scout, report back at sundown for someone else to rotate in.”

One of the archers, the one with the hood pulled low over his face more often than not, nods and directs his horse off between the trees.

The Commander climbs down from her horse and, though she’s gotten infinitely better, Lexa still feels that small sting of jealousy as she shifts and slides less than gracefully down from hers, tips of her toes searching for the ground. She hasn’t fallen in the last couple days and she’s taken it as a personal victory even if she still probably looks ridiculous compared to the others in the group.

She walks slightly bow-legged and finds a fallen log that’s covered in crawling moss and sits.
stretches out her legs with a happy sigh of relief, turning her body this way to relieve the stiffness of her muscles.

Anya had already taken a few of the warriors to go and hunt and the rest were setting up a small camp, leaving Lexa to herself while Clarke and Avery discuss something nearby in Trigedasleng.

She glances over at the sound, sees the way Avery stands a bit closer than others would. She has to wonder what that relationship is like.

Does Clarke know that everyone knows how the archer feels about her Commander? Clarke seems altogether too good at reading people to be oblivious to the way the other girl looks at her. Does she not care? That seems more likely to Lexa.

Anya ignores them and tilts her head back into the sunlight filtering down through the branches. No one is watching her, she could probably walk away and it would take a while before they noticed she was gone. How far could she get? A mile? Two? What would they do if she tried? Given that there are five skilled archers including the Commander in this group, she has a guess.

The idea had crossed her mind more than once on their journey over the last few days. Each time she’d seen an opening to lead her horse in a different direction, however, she was struck with the damning evidence that she would be less than useless out on her own. She’d be lost in a moment and likely starve to death or run into a mutant bear sooner rather than later knowing her luck. But still, she keeps the idea of escape stored away in the back corner of her mind, never quite disregarding the notion completely.

She doesn’t realize the small sound of amusement was audible to those near her until she feels eyes on her and looks up.

“Something amusing?” Avery asks, one hand on her hip, fingers resting over the handle of her dagger. Lexa thinks that if she weren’t standing next to the Commander, she would probably look more formidable. But next to Clarke she’s almost humorous.

“Yes,” Lexa answers with a wry smile, but says nothing more.

Avery rolls her eyes and both Lexa and Clarke watch as she walks off, snagging a couple more daggers from her bag and a tool that Lexa would guess was meant to sharpen them. She goes to the other end of the makeshift camp until she’s found a secluded spot where she begins the rhythmic motion of honing her blades.

“You’ll train with Anya.”

Lexa looks up at Clarke with a start. It’s the first words they’ve spoken to each other in days.

“Pardon?”

“Anya will instruct you in some of our proper fighting techniques. She is the best instructor in the group.”

Lexa pauses for a few moments while her mouth tries to decide which words to spit out. “Remind me again why you think I need to be taught to fight like you? I thought we’ve already come to the
conclusion that I can fight.”

Clarke then does something unexpected and comes to sit beside Lexa, leaving some distance between them.

Lexa looks over at her. She’s not wearing her usual sash or other royal outerwear that reflects her status. Her face is also free from paint and if Lexa hadn’t known better she would have easily mistaken her for any one of the warriors. She briefly looks down at the sash hanging loosely across her own shoulders and wonders if there are times when she can take it off. Clarke hadn’t said she had to wear it all the time, but she hadn’t said the opposite either.

“Most of our villages teach their children to fight from the time they can stand. Life in the clans is challenging and it shapes us and teaches us to keep one hand on our swords for our entire lives. You may know how to fight but you have not lived like we have. You are soft.” Lexa opens her mouth to interrupt with indignation but Clarke cuts her off with a firm look. “You can deny it all you wish, but there is a large difference between learning to fight because you can and learning to fight because you have to.”

Lexa doesn’t say anything for a few moments, eventually looking away when the eyes staring at her are too much. She realizes she’s not going to get away from this conversation this time.

“I still don’t understand why that means I have to learn. You’ve already pointed out that I’m not one of your people. You owe me nothing. Why go through the effort?”

She hears more than sees the sigh Clarke lets out, like Lexa is missing the obvious. She’s leaning forward with her elbows resting on her knees, one hand scraping at something on the back of one of her gloves. Lexa notices that they’re covered with some sort of loose metal running across her knuckles and down to her wrist, like thin chainmail. She flexes her own hand wondering if they’re as heavy like Lexa suspects the rest of the Commander’s armour is.

“As of now you’re going to be at my side for the foreseeable future, in meetings, audiences,... “

“Until I’m no longer useful, yeah, I know.”

If Clarke is upset about being interrupted it’s only evident in the small pause she takes. She doesn’t deny Lexa’s words though.

“I think it might benefit you,” she says eventually. “You are a fighter. Fighters need to train.” Lexa glances up at her because her tone almost sounds…kind? But then she continues speaking. “And as of this moment you are more of a liability to me than the great weapon you’re supposed to be and perhaps learning our weapons will help pass you off as something... better.”

‘Ah, there it is.’ Lexa tries to keep her insulted feelings from her voice. “You seem very certain that we’re going to run into trouble.”

She’s learning to accept the fact that it’s probably better for Clarke to be bluntly honest with her than to have her lie. Though she could very well be lying too. Lexa already knows firsthand how good she is at that.

Clarke lifts and drops one shoulder, the braids hanging over them shifting with the action. She says nothing else but the look on her face when Lexa glances over says that she is almost sure that there will be trouble. That there is always trouble.

“You don’t think your merry band of warriors here will be enough?” She tries to leverage some lightness into the words, looking for some sort of comfort that they’re not about to ride out to their
clarke stands then, adjusting one of her thigh holsters as she does. “i would rather avoid finding out.”

and with that she leaves and lexa feels no better than when she sat down.

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lexa spends the time the warriors use to build their camp whittling away at a short, thick piece of bark she found on the ground. she’s using the utility knife from her guard kit. it wasn’t something she used often on the ark but it still feels comfortable in her hand and very different from the knives she’d seen the warriors use on the ground.

she’s trying to whittle a deer and it’s going about as bad as she expected it would. it looks more like a clump with vaguely leg-shaped things sticking out of it and she grimaces as she looks it over. a shadow falls on her work suddenly and she looks up, opens her mouth to say something and gets interrupted.

“get your knife.”

anya looks less than happy, but lexa doesn’t think she’s ever seen her friendly either.

she clears the surprise from her throat. “right now?”

anya turns around and walks away.

apparently, yes. right now.

she scrambles up and tries to ignore the looks that follow her from those around the camp that had watched the exchange. she swallows and wonders what she’s in for.

she follows anya around the edge of the camp. the older warrior is still in her riding clothes from earlier, face free from paint like clarke’s. her expression had been fierce and fear-inducing when she’d looked down at lexa and lexa has no need to wonder why this woman seems to be second-in-command.

she consistently surprised by how fast her life changes now. how she’s gone from having her hands tied, to having her weapons taken, to now being instructed on how to use weapons in so short of time. it leaves her mind reeling. she supposes that sort of adaptability is common here, where situations have to change to meet demands as needed. she has no doubt that she is still not trusted by them, but they seem less afraid that she’ll attack them all in their sleep with each passing day.

she follows anya until they’ve moved out of the range of the camp, into a clearing where there are fewer trees and one side is a wall of rock, the land slanting violently upwards. when they stop she pulls the utility knife from her belt and waits for whatever is about to happen.

anya stares at her.

“i told you to grab your knife.”

“this is my knife.”

anya looks at her for a moment, seems to realize that she’s serious, then raises her head to the sky and says something in trigedasleng lexa would bet her salary on the ark contained more than a few
swear words. She steps forward and before Lexa can react she’s plucked the knife from her fingers and holds it up an inch from her face.

“**This**. Is not a knife.” And with that she turns and throws it somewhere over her shoulder.

Lexa lets out an involuntary cry as she watches her knife spin handle over blade and disappear between the trees.

“Hey!” She yells, moving to immediately run after it. Her progress is stopped by a hand snagging in the crook of her elbow and shoving her back to where she was.

“That would be less than useless to you in a fight. This,” and she pulls something from her waist and holds it up in front of Lexa’s nose so she has to go cross-eyed to see it, “is a knife.”

Well yes, Lexa can certainly see that. The blade is about the length of her palm and looks sharp enough to puncture metal.

Anya’s hand loosens until the blade falls, point towards the ground until she’s holding the handle with just two fingers.

“Take it.”

Lexa hesitates. She wonders if this is a test. It’s crossed her mind more than once as she followed Anya out of the edge of the camp whether she was walking to her death. Perhaps Anya is giving her the knife so when she kills Lexa she can claim it was in self-defense to the Commander.

It’s no secret that Anya dislikes her and distrusts her immensely. But from what Lexa can tell that’s probably less to do with her personally and likely more to do with being an outsider. As long as Lexa potentially has other loyalties, she is no friend of Anya’s. Lexa has no misconceptions that if she were to try to harm any of their warriors, Anya would not hesitate to stop her. She’s not even sure the Commander would be able to prevent her from doing so.

Lexa doesn’t blame Anya for her distrust. But she also doesn’t particularly like being at its receiving end.

Very slowly and carefully she takes the blade in her hand.

They watch each other carefully for a moment, distrust on both sides. Anya’s jaw is clenched like she’s fighting all her instincts.

“The clan we are going to, Shallow Valley, is known best for two things. Their music,” Anya starts, stepping away, “and their skill in throwing daggers. If you are lucky, you will only experience the first.”

“What’s the best way to protect against the second?” Lexa asks, testing the weight of the knife in her hand.

“To not let them throw it in the first place.” She says this like it’s obvious. “Have you ever thrown a dagger before?”

“No.” It wasn’t exactly part of her training as it wasn’t exactly a common need to be throwing sharp objects around on the Ark.

The weapon in her hand is heavier than she expected. It has a double-edged blade and she turns it over in her hand to look at it. There are some engravings on the handle, a bear by the looks of it, but
it has antlers like a stag. She doesn’t have long to puzzle over it however, as Anya starts speaking. Her tone suggests that the instructions will not be repeated so Lexa pays attention.

“Watch.” Anya instructs, taking another blade from her waist that Lexa hadn’t spotted. She wonders how many others are hidden and then realizes she doesn’t really want to find out.

Anya steps a few paces away, holds up the knife for Lexa to see, over-exaggerates the way she goes to grip it between her thumb and middle finger, waits for Lexa to nod before moving to stand with one foot slightly forward. She sets her eyes on a tree ten or so paces away and then, before Lexa can quite follow the whole action, her arm pulls back and the blade is slicing through the air and sinking into its target with thrilling accuracy.

Lexa gulps.

“You try.”

Lexa nods, but first she pulls the heavy shawl from over her shoulder and tosses it to the ground, followed by her jacket. She doesn’t miss the way Anya eyes the red fabric with distaste but she doesn’t know if it’s from Lexa’s apparent lack of respect for the garment or the fact that she even has it at all that’s drawn her displeasure.

The air is still warm even though the sun is on its downward journey towards the horizon and Lexa takes the opportunity to stretch out her arms before she approaches the spot Anya had just vacated.

She pulls the knife out, tries to copy the exact way Anya had gripped it and pulls it back behind her ear. She feels her heart thud in her chest as she pulls back a bit farther and releases, eyes set firmly on her target.

She misses.

Her knife sinks in the air much too quickly and when it hits it ends up sticking shallowly out of the base of the tree, teetering slowly from the impact and looking like it might fall at any moment. Still she feels a small thrill that she was able to hit anything at all.

They both stare at it for a beat.

Anya lets out a grunt. “That was weak.”

But Lexa can tell that she was clearly expecting much worse.

“Again.”

---

Clarke scratches the space behind her horse’s ear affectionately as she brushes him down. The motion is rhythmic and calming and she finds herself feeling less tense with each passage of her hand. He snuffs at her and pokes his nose at her coat in obvious search of some sort of snack.

“I have nothing for you, Trikova. If I keep giving you treats you will get fat and slow and then I will have to get a new horse,” she tells him quietly, letting out a huff of laughter at the way his ear flick back and forth and doesn’t give up his search.

He has been her faithful companion for years. Even since before she ascended as Commander. She
remembers when she first got him even though it feels like a lifetime ago, like someone else’s memory. She was smaller, filled with an energy that fatigued her instructors on a daily basis. They thought her untameable and continuously determined to do things her own way.

They had been slow to introduce the nightbloods to riding, given that many of them were so young in her group, only taking them out for short rides and never letting her ride as fast as she would have liked. She hadn’t appreciated that and had snuck into the stables on more than one occasion to see her horse, each time getting more and more daring until one day she decided to just take the horse out for a ride herself.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She’s halfway leaning over the stall, fingers stilled over the latch to open it when the voice stops her. She startles and her foot slips, causing her to scramble find purchase with her fingers in the rough wood.

She turns her head to glare at the person that spoke, not appreciating being startled.

It’s a boy, about her age, dark-hair and tanned skin, holding something in his hands that she can’t get a good look at. He’s watching her quietly, doesn’t seem surprised to find her there.

“This is my horse,” she replies, emboldened now that she knows it is not one of her instructors and angry for having gotten surprised by someone that looks so unimposing.

He must not realize who she is or the colour of the blood flows through her veins, because his voice is even when he replies, “Not yet. That horse belongs to the Commander.”

And oh boy, now she’s angry. She jumps down from the stall to face him. Who does he think he is?

“Do you know who I am?” she asks, striding towards him, fists clenching. She hadn’t yet gotten a hold of reining in her emotions and was still at that stage in her life where she believed almost everything could be settled with a show of strength.

“You are Clarke kom Trikru, nightblood, the one of bitter and short temper, potential but not assured successor to the Commander,” he replies calmly.

Her mouth drops open in indignation as she stops short. Her mouth opens and closes and nothing comes out. No one ever speaks to her this way - they wouldn’t dare. The black blood flowing through her demands respect and obedience. She has never -

“Who are you?!” she eventually sputters out.

He smiles then. It’s an attractive smile, a part of her mind admits. He doesn’t answer her question.

“You should come back in the evening. The stablemaster eats his meal around sunset and you’re much less likely to get caught then.”

She narrows her eyes. He doesn’t seem put-off by her sour expression and just waves goodbye as he leaves.

When he’s gone she clambers up onto the stall door again but hesitates with her finger on the latch.

“Perhaps he’s right,” she tells Trikova reluctantly, reaching a hand towards his nose, feeling his breath puff against her fingertips. “But I hope I don’t see him again anyways.”
She presses her forehead to Trikova’s side and closes her eyes, letting the memory wash over her like a wave beating at a shore. It’s a familiar kind of ache now, a wound in her chest that will never quite heal and still stings when she pokes at it.

She hears footsteps approaching and opens her eyes.

“What do you let the sky girl train with weapons?”

She sighs and takes a moment before turning to face the person that approaches. “That’s not of your concern.”

Clarke turns to find Avery standing with arms crossed, the tattoos on her forearms standing out against her skin. Clarke’s inability to keep her at arm’s length at all times is showing its effects now. The girl obviously grows more emboldened each day, believes that she is entitled to things that she is not.

“She could be dangerous. What do we really know about her?” Avery continues, ignorant of Clarke’s dwindling patience.

Clarke rubs at the space between her eyes. She’s tired. So tired.

“We are here to protect you. We do not need to be on guard within our own group as well as fighting outside forces. And for another—”

“Enough.”

Her voice is chilled and immediately effective in stopping the flow of words from the other girl’s mouth. When Clarke drops her hand back to her side and looks up, Avery appears effectively chastened.

“This matter is not of your concern. You are not one of my advisors. You are one of my warriors. I expect you to remember that. If you continue to speak as if I am your second I will not hesitate to send you back to Polis.”

Some of the blood drains from Avery’s face. What Clarke is suggesting would be the largest shame a warrior can endure. To be outcast by the Commander herself would bring mass amounts of dishonor upon her.

Avery swallows, gathers herself, and nods though Clarke can see the hurt underneath. “Of course, Commander. I apologize. It will not happen again.”

Clarke nods but isn’t sure if she believes her.

She wonders briefly if she is being cruel by allowing this girl to share her bed and nothing more. She had made it clear what their arrangement was. Had not made promises she knew she’d never keep. Avery knows that there is no future there.

*To be the Commander is to be alone.*

As a young nightblood she had thought that lesson to be ridiculous. Had laughed in the face of the first instructor that had claimed as much. Because who could handle all that responsibility on their own? The Commander surely must rely on many people to face the struggles that their duty challenges them with.

Life would be the one to force that lesson on her later, in the cruel and effective way that only real
consequences can teach, leaving her gasping with the realization that her instructors been right all along.

Sometimes the memories she’s buried puncture through without her bidding. Like glass shattering over her consciousness: sharp and clear and leaving a violent sting in their wake.

The feeling of someone’s fingers tangling in hers, pulling her along out of the tower for an afternoon where they escape everything. The sound of light laughter even though what caused it has been lost to time. Her voice, breathless, afraid, “You’ll come with me, right?” . His immediate “Of course.”

Clarke doesn’t realize she’s heading out of the camp until she’s long past everyone and can no longer hear their murmured conversations. She’s tense and breathing deeply in through her nose as she pushes it all back down down down.

“Now this is more my style,” Lexa says with smile, holding out the staff in her hand that Anya had just handed to her.

They’d thrown knives for a considerable amount of time, with Anya only rolling her eyes every thirty seconds and fixing Lexa’s throw with harsh pulls and shoves to her elbow or wrist and calling her a word she’s pretty sure doesn’t translate nicely. At one point she’d even smacked Lexa across the back of the head for not listening and said something about how she is a waste of her time (in English, so that she could be sure she could be understood).

She got better as they went but Lexa had had to hand back the throwing dagger once they’d moved on, and it now sits once more in the sheath at Anya’s side.

So they aren’t trusting her completely, it would seem. Or at least not yet.

She didn’t realize how good it would feel to be moving and training again. She’d fallen out of her workout regime for obvious reasons and this is the first time her body had been put to work like it had been on the Ark. Her muscles are beginning to stretch in the best way and she actually finds herself smiling once or twice during the lesson despite Anya’s temperament and propensity to not exactly be an encouraging instructor.

Clarke was right, she realizes with a huff of disbelief, this does help.

Not that she’ll ever tell her that.

The staff immediately feels more comfortable in her hand than the knife had, and her fingers loosen and grip it experimentally. This is something she actually trained with as a guard cadet, so it feels right at home as she spins it experimentally. It’s a good tool, well balanced and obviously very carefully crafted, she can tell a lot of effort went into making it.

She feels a thrill about working with this one; thinks she might even be able to put up a good fight against Anya. Part of it also might have to do with the possibility of potentially getting some payback for that smack across the back of the head earlier.

The sound of boots crunching on leaves makes her look up and she blinks in surprise. Clarke approaches the clearing, coming to stand nearby and observing them both.
“Shopta em dison?” she asks, glancing to Anya. Lexa doesn’t have to stretch her imagination to guess that they’re talking about her.

Anya makes a non-committal sound. “Em ste foto throu swis. Ba em get klin don granplei.” Clarke nods at the words, as if they’re what she expected to hear. Anya cracks a smile at the Commander then, “Don yu kom breik ai?” It’s said a quirk of the eyebrow like she’s joking about something.

Lexa just continues to stand there and try not to glower at being talked about.

The Commander’s tone is much more serious than Anya’s had been when she turns her gaze to Lexa and simply answers, “Sha.”

Whatever she’s said seems to surprise Anya because she hesitates for a moment before suddenly stepping back from Lexa to look at Clarke with fully raised eyebrows. Then, without a word, she places the staff into Clarke’s outstretched hand.

‘Uh oh.’

With one hand Clarke pulls her coat off and tosses it aside next to where Lexa’s shawl is. She’s in a loose shirt underneath which she rolls to her elbows, revealing the three thin tattooed bands around her forearm.

“Anya tells me you’re not very good at throwing knives,” Clarke says in English, stepping forward slowly, considering Lexa with a tilt of the head.

At her words Lexa levels a look at Anya who raises an eyebrow as if daring her to deny it. Lexa doesn’t look away when she says, “Perhaps I just need a better instructor.”

Clarke grins as if she was hoping that Lexa would say that. “Perhaps.”

She’s spinning the staff slowly as she speaks. It looks comfortable in her hand and Lexa watches her movements carefully and more than a bit warily.

“Or maybe you’re not a fighter after all and I was wrong in my prior assessment,” Clarke continues. Out of the corner of her eye Lexa sees Anya step back and lean against a nearby tree to watch, Lexa doesn’t look away from Clarke to confirm, however.

She’s smart enough to know when she’s being baited but she still can’t seem to help the feeling of indignation that burns within her suddenly.

“You don’t think I can hold my own in a fight?”

There’s a twist of a smile to Clarke’s lips before she gestures Lexa forward with her fingers, the staff held in her other hand.

“Prove me wrong.”

Lexa swallows and adjusts her grip on her staff, fingers loosening and regripping, thinking back to seeing Clarke with a sword in her hand, cutting down bandits like it was child’s play.

‘What have I gotten myself into?’

Lexa takes a deep breath and springs forward.
Anya always berated Clarke for allowing her curiosity to get the better of her. Apparently the lessons she received as a second didn’t set in as well as her teacher would have hoped.

Clarke brings her staff up at the last moment, stopping the downward arc of Lexa’s swing with a loud ‘Clack!’ There is a decent amount of force behind the blow but it’s clear by the slower speed of the swing that Lexa is merely testing the waters.

After the contact Lexa quickly jumps back, turning her staff as if expecting a counter-strike. She pauses when none comes. Clarke raises an eyebrow, having barely moved.

“Is that it?”

She can see Lexa’s jaw clench.

She springs forward again, a similar move, aimed down towards Clarke’s center and immediately follows it up with a jab to Clarke’s side that both get blocked cleanly. Clarke can sense the other girl’s confusion when she doesn’t fight back and merely continues to block and redirect the swings past her body.

She gives an exaggerated yawn and nearly grins because she’s sure Anya is rolling her eyes from where she stands.

It happens twice more, Lexa lunging in, clearly pulling her swings and Clarke merely blocking them, not bothering to go on the offensive. For one of the instances, Clarke leaves herself a little more open, just to see what happens. Lexa sees it and hesitates - for a fraction of a second but still there - and Clarke is furiously intrigued, tucking the small bit of information away for later.

If she were in Lexa’s position, she would probably not hesitate to attack her. Clarke is, after all, the reason she’s been dragged here and there, little to no freedom, no chance to make her own decisions, stripping her of her previous identity to be molded to Clarke’s use. If Clarke were in her situation she’d be furious - jumping at the chance to tear down the one that placed her there.

But she’s not. She’s skittish about actually hitting Clarke and it shows in her movements. It’s curious and wholly unexpected and likely a deeply ingrained reaction from her life off the ground.

‘Well we can’t have that.’

Clarke steps back before Lexa can lunge forward again.

“I’ll tell you what,” she starts, leaning on her staff calmly. “If you can land a hit on me, I’ll let you keep that staff.”

She already has a hand up to shush Anya before she can open her mouth to protest from where she stands, not taking her eyes off Lexa. Out of the corner of her eye she sees her second-in-command toss her hands up in the air and leave with a shake of her head. As if perhaps by not actually seeing Clarke doing the stupid thing first-hand she can believe it’s not really happening.

Lexa’s looking at Clarke with suspicion, but she’s obviously very tempted by the presented idea.

“One hit?”

Clarke nods, confirming. “Just one.”
“And I get to keep this?” She holds the staff up a bit, failing to keep the pleasure of the idea off her face.

Clarke nods again.

Lexa’s fingers loosen and grip her staff as she thinks, then nods once. “Okay,” she agrees and springs forward before the words are fully out of her mouth.

This hit is faster than before, blurring through the air towards Clarke’s left shoulder as Lexa obviously hopes to catch her off-guard. Clarke is forced to step to the side while bringing her staff up and she feels the vibration all the way through her fingertips when they connect.

She smiles.

“Finally.”

And now she moves. Before Lexa can back away Clarke is twisting and bringing her own staff in a cut towards the other girl’s left side, forcing her to jump back, curving her body narrowly out of its reach quickly as it cuts through the air.

Lexa’s eyes narrow in determination as she readies herself again, breath coming slightly faster.

She sees Lexa’s arms flex as she tightens her grip and jumps forward once more, raining a burst of strikes down on Clarke that force her to move quickly to deflect them all. The air is filled with the sound of their continuous contact, sharp snaps that reverberate and ring in her ears.

Left, right, left, up, they move faster and faster. Clarke lands a hit to Lexa’s arm and she hisses before redoubling her efforts with a fast strike that Clarke barely avoids, watching the staff pass inches in front of her nose. Lexa presses forward and Clarke matches her strike for strike, stepping back and turning when necessary, alternating between pressing forward and taking the opportunity to observe how Lexa moves.

It progresses faster and faster and Clarke feels her blood begin to race under her skin, heartbeat pounding with a little more effort as they go on. Now that she’s invited the opportunity, Lexa is doing her best to actually land a hit and Clarke is thrilling in it. It is rare nowadays, for her to find someone else besides Anya that will try to spar evenly with her.

Lexa isn’t half bad - something Clarke immediately notices and feels in the way she moves. She’s clearly done this a lot and Clarke is once again wondering about what her life was like before it crashed into Clarke’s.

She can feel some of her hair slipping free from her braids as she’s forced to move faster, bending and twisting and curving away. Lexa is learning as much as Clarke is with each exchange, and Clarke finds it harder and harder to land hits. She can hear Lexa’s breath become more laboured as they continue moving, neither one relenting. Every time Clarke’s staff connects with part of Lexa’s body, the other girl merely grits through the pain and keeps advancing. Clarke admires her determination.

Her feet plant into the ground beneath her, holding her ground as their staffs lock for a moment, forcing a test of strength, and Clarke feels good as her arms strain against the force pressing down on her. The contact breaks abruptly as their staffs slide apart before either can force the other to relent and they’re back to exchanging quick lunges and strikes.

They’d moved across the clearing as they fought and Clarke glances over her shoulder briefly to find she’s been backed up close to a wide tree. Thinking quickly, she ducks and Lexa’s swing passes
overhead, making contact with the trunk behind her and putting her off balance. Before she can recover Clarke uses her staff to sweep her feet out from under her.

She hears the breath leave Lexa’s lungs in a whoosh of surprise as she falls. She doesn’t go down without a fight however and and mid-fall she somehow manages to twist and hook her arm around the back of Clarke’s knee in a surprising move, pulling her body off balance as well. Clarke has to make the fast choice between allowing her head to slam back into the tree or allow herself to be dragged down.

She makes contact with the dirt hard, hearing the leaves crunch beneath her body and the breath rush out of her lungs. Lexa is already moving, her staff having gotten knocked out of her hands in her fall. She lunges up after it but Clarke swipes her feet out and knocks her down again before she can get up.

There’s a brief pause as Clarke reads Lexa’s intention and then they’re grappling for Clarke’s staff, both gripping it tightly as Lexa’s body hovers above hers, the weapon between their bodies as they once again get locked in a test of strength. With a burst of energy Clarke shoves her off before rolling them, pinning the staff to Lexa’s throat and placing one of her knees to Lexa’s abdomen, pinning her in place and breathing heavily with the effort it took to get her there. They stop.

Someone is laughing. It’s a bubbly kind of sound that rings out in soft contrast to the violence of their actions.

She startles when she realizes it’s her. She’s the one laughing.

Lexa’s eyes widen beneath her, her chest rising and falling rapidly as a puzzled expression comes across her face, hair fanned around her where it’s gotten loose from its tie. She looks beyond confused. Becomes even moreso when Clarke relieves the pressure against her and rolls to the side, coming to lie on the ground beside her, catching her breath. Her laughs are still bubbling up out of her lungs but they grow quieter each moment until she’s just grinning and feeling her pulse run wild in her throat.

Lexa is rubbing at the elbow Clarke had hit earlier, still obviously confused and tense as if she expects Clarke to start a string of attacks again.

“Here,” Clarke says after a moment of catching her breath, holding out her staff out to the girl beside her. A pause of bewildered hesitation passes before Lexa takes it from her gently.

Clarke sits up, marvelling at how light she feels.

“I don’t understand.” Lexa looks between the staff in her hand and Clarke, still sitting on the ground as Clarke stands and brushes dirt from her clothes and pulls a few leaves from her hair.

“Keep it. You’re fairly decent with it,” Clarke says, tilting her head up to take in the time of day. “I think it will serve you better than that other thing you carry.”

Clarke walks away then and passes Anya on her way out who sends Clarke a curious look as walks by, letting her know that she has more than a few questions.

From behind her she hears Lexa speak to Anya in a confused tone. “But I didn’t land a hit on her.”

Clarke stretches her arms above her head as she walks. She’s nearly out of earshot when she hears Anya’s snort of laughter and her response.

“You were never going to.”
Trigedaslang Translations:

“Shopta em dison?” - How is she doing?

“Em ste foto throu swis. Ba em get klin don granplei.” - She is bad at throwing knives. But she definitely has training.

“Don yu kom breik ai?” - Have you come to release me?

“Sha.” - Yes
They wake early.

They wake early. Very early. When Lexa wipes a hand down her face to try and scrub away at the layer of sleep and looks up the sun hasn’t even started to rise. Instead the sky is a smoky shade of indigo, indicative of a morning that’s thinking about breaking but hasn’t yet fully committed to the process.

“To avoid a large audience,” is the grumbled reply she gets from Anya when she asks. The older warrior looks similarly disgruntled at the early hour and Lexa knows better than to try and ask another question. Anyone looking to bother Anya this early is just looking to find pain.

She doesn’t get the chance to do much more than pack her stuff before they’re loaded up on their horses and picking their way through the forest on a path that’s more of a barely-there hunting trail than anything that would appear marked on a map. This isn’t the first time they’ve wandered down these kinds of trails and Lexa has the distinct impression that the choice is deliberate.

For a while there’s barely enough light to go by until the air begins to brighten and she can hear birds chirping awake high in the green branches swaying over their heads. The sun crests somewhere beyond the trees over their shoulders and she breathes it in.

Lexa lets out a yawn and rubs at her elbow with a wince, Clarke hadn’t exactly hesitated in exploiting her weak spots when they’d sparred. She’s covered with bruises, the dawning morning finally giving her good light to see all them by. Clarke also hadn’t pulled her hits yesterday and the purple hue to Lexa’s arms and legs is prime evidence of this fact. She seems to be racking up injuries the longer she’s on the ground.

She puts a hand to her forehead and feels the raised edge of the mostly healed gash from her initial shuttle landing.

Whoever had bandaged her up had done a good job but she wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up with a scar anyways.

How long ago was that now? The incident feels like a day that belongs to another lifetime. To someone else. The time between then and now feels blurred and hazy, stretched to a thin layer that seems not altogether there at all.

She’s learning more and more about the ground every day but she still feels like she’s fumbling and having to learn as she goes more than she’d like. Just the other day she had a handful of berries knocked out of her hand by Tahvo when she had gathered them thinking they were the same as the ones they’d been eating recently. They weren’t. They were poisonous. Lexa hasn’t tried helping with the food gathering since.

Twigs snap beneath the hooves of her horse as they navigate the cluttered trail. Though they’re obviously trying to enter the city with as much surreptition as possible, no one had told her that she
had to stay quiet. She shakes her head from her thoughts.

“So,” she starts - to Lincoln because he’s riding beside her in the group. “Let me see if I’ve got all this straight.” She doesn’t miss the way that Avery, who had been riding behind them since they left, suddenly decides to press forward and join a different group out of earshot. Lexa doesn’t have to see her face to know she’s rolling her eyes.

Lincoln matches his horse to hers and patiently waits for her to continue. He is one of the few in the group who doesn’t seem to mind their early journey. She wonders if anything ruffles his feathers or if he has simply been this level of measured and unbothered for his entire life. She tries to imagine him as a small child, just as serious as he is now, and can actually picture it.

She ducks her head under a low-hanging branch but still manages to get a few leaves stuck in her hair. She picks them out while she talks. “So the city we’re going to is the capital of Shallow Valley, one of the clans in the Commander’s coalition. And there are ten -- no, wait, eleven clans that she controls.”

She waits for Lincoln to nod before she goes on.

“And the ice people --”

“Azgedakru,” he corrects in a voice rough with morning.

“Right. Them. They’re outside of the coalition and are trying to turn this clan against her?”

“They would turn all clans against one another if given the chance.”

She can hear the anger under his tone, it speaks of years of turmoil and she wonders how many friends he’s lost to this Azgedakru.

“What’s stopping them?”

He lets out a huff of a laugh that tells her the answer should seem obvious.

“The Commander.”

That pride that she’s noticed, the one that flares up in the voices and expressions of the Commander’s closest warriors, is there again now in his words. “As long as she holds the coalition together, we are stronger and they are forced to remain in their mountains.”

“They don’t want to join the coalition?”

She hadn’t noticed Clarke sidling up to them until her familiar voice comes from Lexa’s left and she barely resists startling.

“Theyir queen is not particularly amenable to sharing anything. Especially power,” Clarke says, her voice is measured and calm as usual.

Clarke, like Lincoln, is one of the few in their group that looks completely unaffected by their early morning - back straight sitting in her saddle. Lexa has gotten infinitely better at riding and her body aches a bit less every day but she is still fully conscious of the fact that next to Clarke she will probably always look awkward.

Clarke’s hair is braided differently today. Rather than the small, thin braids that hang loose from behind her ears, today she has a majority of it partitioned back into an intricate pattern. It’s beautiful
in its complexity. She imagines Clarke’s fingers nimbly weaving the blonde strands in and around each other with ease that only repetition and practice brings.

Interesting, that hands that are so capable of stringing a bow and releasing a shot that Lexa is sure could pin a bird mid-flight could also make something so… pretty.

Lexa’s eyes linger a bit before she tears them away and returns her gaze forward.

“So the main objective here is to what… ensure that this clan is still on your side?” Lexa asks her. Clarke’s head dips once in a nod as she ducks beneath a passing branch smoothly.

“How?”

There’s just the barest hint of a grin on Clarke’s lips when she says, “I can be very convincing.”

The sun is just coming above the horizon when they break through the edge of the forest. When she blinks away the bright light, Lexa can’t stop the gasp that erupts from her mouth.

The world appears cracked open before them and they stand at the lip of its chasm. They’re looking down upon a valley that stretches into the distance until it’s just a haze that she blinks her eyes against.

The valley is enclosed on one side by stone crags that rise into a sky that’s painted a riot of pink and blue and gold from the early sun at their backs. Opposite, to the north, the ground climbs steadily before meeting rolling hills that give way to snow-capped mountains in the distance. The early morning haze makes the peaks reflect gold in the sunrise and it’s blinding.

Tahvo, coming up next to her, at least looks as impressed as she is by the sight and his young eyes are wide where he sits on his own horse, leaning up in his saddle. Lexa lets her gaze look beyond him to take in Clarke’s expression. But the Commander isn’t looking at the valley. Her gaze is firmly fixated on the mountains to the north and there’s a tight set to her jaw.

“Let’s go,” she says before they’ve even really paused for a moment. She tears her gaze away and begins leading her horse down to a main road that snakes outwards below them, leading a path into the center of the valley.

If Lexa squints she can just make out the general shapes of buildings caught amidst the fog that sits low and guesses that’s where they’re headed.

They reach the valley floor in no time at all and begin passing by orchards and other plots of farmland as they head in towards the city that Lexa can now just begin to spot beneath the lifting fog.

“When will they know we’re here?” she asks, craning her neck to see if she can spot anyone working in the fields as they pass. The leaves look dry, the ground underneath already starting to become littered with them. She sees no one between the rows and attributes it to the time of morning.

“They will have spotted us coming down from the hills.”

Almost as if her words are a signal, Lexa can hear the unmistakable sound of a horn of some sort
from somewhere in the cluster of buildings they’re quickly coming upon.

Clarke turns to Lexa, her tone measured, “Once we’re inside the city walls, if you value your life, you will stay close. Do you understand?”

Lexa nods even though she’s still not sure she does even after all these days to prepare.

“That symbol will offer you some protection,” she points to the pin holding Lexa’s shawl together. “But only to an extent. There are people here who do not understand where you came from, they only understand that you are different, and things that are different are threats better eliminated than allowed the opportunity to strike.”

Lexa has the distinct feeling that Clarke has thought about going that particular path at some time or another with regard to how she wants to deal with her.

Her gaze is forward and Lexa takes in the steady set of her eyes and the black paint that drips over her cheekbones, almost touching the corner of the lips that just yesterday she had seen laughing. She’s not laughing now.

“Don’t make friends and don’t wander off. Got it.” Lexa swallows, just now noticing how their party begins to cluster a bit tighter as they get closer to the city.

They continue along, horses kicking up dirt as the sun presses at their shoulders, but Lexa isn’t sure if that’s the only source of the sweat that’s begun to gather at the nape of her neck.

She can hear sounds from within the city walls as they approach. The Shallow Valley capital looks to be about the same size as TonDC, but the structures hold an altogether different feel. Where the other city was nestled within the woods and built from scraps of metal and concrete, this city is built from the same stone that makes up the surrounding cliffside. The outer wall is built from massive rocks stacked inelegantly with a large iron gate in its center that has already swung open to allow them entry.

Clarke leads her horse forward first and Lexa watches as the guards of the city bow low as they pass, one knee in the dirt. Lexa gets that same feeling every time she sees it happen. A sharp reminder of whose company she keeps.

“And one last thing,” Anya says just loud enough for Lexa to hear, having come up out of nowhere. “If you go back on the deal you’ve made with her, or do anything to compromise it, I will drive the knife into you myself.”

Lexa blinks and takes a deep breath as Anya continues on in the Commander’s wake. She spurs Klinrona forward, realizing she has no choice but to follow or get left outside the gates.

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Despite their early entrance, the streets of the city still have small groups of people watching with gaping mouths as Clarke and the rest of them pass by.

It’s a bit disconcerting.

Lexa can feel their stares. Eyes like fingers on the back of her neck as she rides behind the
Commander. She turns her head to meet them but can never seem to find their precise source.

There’s whispers as well. They speak in trigedasleng, so she can’t understand what’s being conversed, but the way their eyes flick back and forth between her and Clarke is hint enough. She looks up towards the tall buildings and there are people poking their heads out of their windows before ducking back inside quickly. She frowns. It’s an interesting reception compared to the one in TonDC.

She hears one word whispered among the others and thinks nothing of it until she hears it again and again.

‘Wanheda,’ she tries the word out in her head, puzzling over the first part of it.

They can’t seem to decide whether to stare at Clarke or her first. When she finally manages to meet their gaze, they turn their eyes away quickly and make motions with their hands like they’re warding off evil. She feels something unpleasant turn in her stomach.

The Commander’s weapon. Torn down from the sky itself.

If that makes her something to be feared, then what must they think of the person that supposedly brought her here? Her gaze swings to Clarke before she can stop it.

Head held high, gaze forward, seemingly impervious to the rest of the world.

She leads them through the strange city and Lexa follows.

Clarke hasn’t been sitting on the throne long before the tall doors at the end of the hall reopen and the man she’s been waiting to see strides in. The smile on his face is wide and friendly and his demeanor gives off a cheerful exuberance, a stark contrast to the man following close behind him.

She watches the first carefully, eyes searching him. His gaze momentarily slides away from her to look at the handful of warriors she brought inside with her. When they find Lexa there is a slight widening of his eyes that tells her much before he returns his focus to Clarke.

He approaches the dais and his smile stretches.

“It has been too long, Commander,” he says, sinking to one knee and bowing his head, his comrade doing the same without a word.

The leader of Shallow Valley rises, his red robes flowing around him, the gilded sheaths of his daggers sitting on either side of his waist. His boyish smile is still stretched across his face threatening to split it in two and he looks the same as he did when they were young.

Clarke feels her own lips forming into a small smile of their own, a habit gained in childhood. “I agree. I believe it was the Spring festival in Polis last year that we last saw one another.”

“That was quite a party that Polis threw. From what I can remember of it, anyways.” His laugh is loud and it feels like they’re much younger, snickering from their beds in the nightblood quarters of the tower, thinking themselves rebellious for speaking after curfew. He is perhaps only a year or two
her senior, but that hadn’t mattered among the nightbloods.

“It’s good to see you, Narrok.” Her smile is genuine as she looks at him. Her gaze slides to his brother whom she is less familiar with, “And you as well, Andere.”

Andere’s robes are distinctly less vibrant than his older brother’s, looking all the more dull for standing next to him. He wears minimal jewelry as well, only a small red gem in his right ear. His blades are the same as his brother’s however, as they are for all Shallow Valley warriors that are of age.

He speaks for the first time now, obviously tiresome of the reunion in front of him. “We weren’t expecting you.”

His brother sends him a look of exasperation that Andere ignores. She can practically feel Anya bristling at her side, she’s sure Avery would be as well if Clarke hadn’t left her with the other warriors.

She doesn’t answer the non-question, just sits back on the throne that is hers whether she is here to sit in it or not and throws one leg over the other. She gives him a slow, even smile before turning her gaze back to Narrok. “The city looks to be in good form. You have done admirable work here since you took over from your father.”

“Thank you, Commander. It has been a good harvest this year. We expect next year should be the same.”

She nods as she hears the words, finger absentmindedly tracing the patterns in the wood of the throne. It is different than the one she uses in Polis, this one made from twisted, gnarled wood interlaid with small stones of different colours.

“Word reached me in Polis of a few skirmishes near the mountains this last season,” she starts. “However, when I prepared to send reinforcements, your ambassador relayed a message from you insisting that assistance from the other clans was not necessary.”

He waves a hand at her, “Bandits, Heda. Nothing to concern the capital with. We handled the issue with little difficulty.”

She nods, “That is good to hear. Some of our finest warriors come from Shallow Valley, I expect their prowess to be no different on their own turf.”

“You flatter us, Heda,” he says with a bow of his head, but he seems enormously pleased by the compliment regardless.

“How long do you plan to stay in Shallow Valley?” Andere asks, earning another look from Narrok.

She shrugs, “Not long. We are making stops to many of the clans before the cold settles in and traveling becomes too difficult.”

“Of course, of course,” Narrok says quickly, cutting his brother off from other questions. “Well you must stay at least a few days. If I remember anything about our time together it was your affinity for a certain drink that we make here and they are making a fresh batch to align with the harvest celebration.” His grin is happy and she once again doesn’t see the leader of one of her clans, but the gangly teenager that she had sparred with, whose legs once were a bit too long for his body. It feels like a lifetime ago and the nostalgia that abruptly settles within her is concerning.

She pushes it aside and allows herself a small smile, “Perhaps we will have to.”
His own smile is wide in response and he gives her a bow. “Were there other matters you wished to discuss?”

“Not at this time.”

He claps his hands together, “Then I will see you at this evening’s meal. I will be away from the city this afternoon, there is a dispute between two farmers in an outer village that I must settle. It’s a rather humorous situation involving some escaped cattle, perhaps I will regale you with the tale when I return.”

She feels her lips twitch because it sounds like the very type of thing he would get himself in the middle of when they were nightbloods. “I look forward to it.”

He smiles once more and nods before turning for the door, his brother following close behind him with a look towards Clarke that she reads as obvious mistrust before it’s wiped away and replaced with calm indifference.

When the guards on the outside of the doors pull them closed, Clarke pushes herself up from the throne and then stands.

“Well, he’s as chatty as I remember,” Anya grumbles, staring at the closed door. “I’m glad he was not my second, I would have cut out his tongue by the second day.”

Clarke huffs a laugh, “He was always the best at using daggers among us, I think you two would have gotten along well, actually.”

Clarke meets Lexa’s eye for the first time, though she felt the other girl’s gaze throughout the entire meeting. She looks strange standing there, half in the attire of Clarke’s people, half in her own. Her belt still holds that odd weapon she had bargained with Clarke for and in her other hand is the staff.

It is as if she has one foot on the ground and another caught in the sky, undecided yet which way she wishes to settle and looking ridiculous for her indecision.

“Come on,” Clarke says in English, “we have a long day ahead of us.”

Lexa learns very quickly that being in the Commander’s company means standing in on a lot of discussions that she can’t understand.

Clarke walks through the winding streets of the city and takes her time reacquainting herself with its roads as well as its inhabitants.

Lexa immediately notices a vast array of reactions to Clarke’s presence. There are the small few that rush forward and talk animatedly, unfettered and unrestrained in their admiration. Some venture closer with more hesitation and it takes a while for them to gain any sort of ease. Most, however, back away altogether, ducking into alleyways or behind doors until they pass.

At first Lexa thinks that Clarke doesn’t notice this latter reaction. But that thought is quickly discarded because Lexa knows that Clarke notices everything and sure enough, when Lexa looks away from a mother pulling her child in a different direction she sees the barest flash of something across the Commander’s face and a pursing of her lips.
Still, despite this, the love Clarke has for these people is obvious. She’s attentive with those who approach her and listens carefully to whatever it is they have to say to her. She’s good at this. Which, after seeing her heft a sword like she was born with it in her hand, is slightly surprising.

There are one or two that, after they speak for a few moments, leave with smiles from ear to ear and a calmness on their face. As if the Commander’s presence has brought them a reassurance of peace that has been missing. They clearly feel strongly about her and consider her a blessing and Lexa wonders whether it is because they disregard the rumours surrounding her abilities or because they believe them.

What must it be like, to love a god?

Dangerous, she would assume.

And that is so clearly what Clarke is to these people. Something to be feared or loved or some point on the scale between, the weight shifting in either direction as their lives are affected by her actions.

Lexa still had not gotten the full story of “the mountain”, but she’s gotten enough information to piece together that whatever Clarke did shook the ground enough that the title of miraculous is tied to her for good.

And now Lexa is linked into that as well.

Not that she has a choice, or ever really had one.

She has no doubt her refusal to comply with Clarke’s ploy would have made her life on the ground rather short. She hopes she’ll never have the opportunity to wonder if that would have been the better choice.

But Lexa looks around at the brightly colored stones that make up the city’s buildings and the way flags flutter where they’re strung between, the way people seem to be living and thriving as much as they were in TonDC and she can’t help but feel that there is nothing to worry about.

She doesn’t realize she’s been absentmindedly twirling the staff in her hand while Clarke talks with a man selling leather goods nearby until Anya abruptly reaches out and grasps it, stopping its movement. She doesn’t say anything, but the look on her face is enough to communicate.

“You know,” Lexa starts, pulling her staff out of Anya’s grip. “I still think the two of us will be really good friends someday.”

Anya levels a look at her that reminds Lexa of the look the cadets on the Ark had when they were assigned the 2 AM shift. Her displeasure with Lexa’s company suddenly reminds Lexa of something.

“Hey, where’s Avery? I figured she be sticking close to the Commander.” Lexa cranes her neck and counts a handful of warriors from their group but Avery is nowhere to be found among them.

“Not of your concern,” Anya grumbles out.

Lexa decides to let that topic of conversation drop after realizing that she doesn’t really mind that Avery isn’t around. She could do with one less person glaring at her.

She tilts her head up at the sky and takes in the fact that it’s probably just past noon. The sun feels warmer here than in the forest and she pulls at the shawl around her shoulders wishing it was a lighter material.
She misses Lincoln and Tahvo. They’d been sent to deal with replenishing supplies and other tasks that Lexa bets would be infinitely more exciting than joining Clarke on her stroll through the city.

By now most of the people who want to speak to the Commander have done so and the rest seem to be anxiously waiting for their group to leave. The feeling hangs in the air and Clarke does not appear ignorant of it.

“Come, we should be moving on,” she says to no one in particular.

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After the markets they go to the training area where Clarke observes some of the rising Shallow Valley warriors practicing.

They are of all ages and genders, sparring in groups or throwing knives at targets. When they spot Clarke it’s like a current ripples through the ground that has them straightening their spines and swallowing hard. Lexa can’t tell if they’d rather have Clarke pass them by without a glance or if they want some sort of recognition they can puff their chests out about later.

There are banners hung from the ceiling - long strips of red fabric with a gold design painted across it. It’s a circle with three winding arrows running through it from the bottom and Lexa recalls seeing it now and again etched into the stones throughout the city. A clan insignia, maybe?

“It almost looks like your back tattoo,” she says absentmindedly to Clarke.

Clarke’s eyes flick up the banners briefly. “Arrows are a common symbol among my people.”

Lexa nearly misses the way Anya looks slowly between them, eyes clearly holding some question. Clarke ignores her or doesn’t notice and immediately goes to strike up a conversation with some of the older instructors and students. Of course, they speak in Trigedasleng so Lexa heads off to the side and leans against the wall to wait out the conversations, her staff leaning against the wall beside her.

She looks over the room with curiosity, particularly focusing on those practicing throwing their daggers. Anya had mentioned that this clan was particularly skilled at handling the weapon and Lexa can’t help but agree as she watches them. Their movements are smooth as they bend and release their throws from different angles and Lexa tries not to feel jealous.

Maybe she can convince Anya to help her keep training with them, though the other warrior hadn’t been too keen after seeing Lexa’s lack of skill with it. Lexa leans her head back against the wall behind her and lets out a sigh. She feels tired from their early morning and journey and hopes that wherever they get to sleep tonight will be nicer than the cold ground she had been growing used to.

A few of the students catch her attention out of the corner of her eye and distract her from her thoughts. A few of them are nudging each other and when she turns her head to meet their eye they look away and immediately confirm that she was their area of interest.

“They are wondering why your staff is uncarved.”

She turns her head to find a familiar face. It’s one of the men from this morning that had come to greet Clarke, the one with the less flamboyant robes and the unhappy disposition. He’s about her
age, perhaps a few years older. There’s a scar over the bridge of his nose and his hair is brushed back
cleanly, both making him appear older than her estimation has him at.

“Pardon?” she asks.

He gestures to the staff at her side, “Your staff. It’s a typical tool from Delphi clan. Young warriors
receive blank ones when they come of age and each year they earn a new carving to mark their
progress.” Lexa looks between him and the staff with interest.

“May I?” He gestures at the weapon again and Lexa hesitates for a moment before shrugging and
handing it over.

“It’s an interesting choice,” he says, hands smoothing over the weapon and testing its balance, “Most
would prefer a blade.”

Lexa watches him carefully. “I’m not like most, I suppose.”

He almost smiles. “No, I suppose you’re not.”

Lexa is suddenly struck with the uncomfortable feeling of someone knowing much more about you
than you do about them. The imbalance puts her on edge.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Andere. My brother leads this clan,” he says, holding the staff out to her with a slight bow.

“In the Commander’s absence, of course,” she replies, taking it from him.

“Of course,” he assures, straightening.

“It’s a good weapon,” he continues, bringing the original conversation back, “I am not surprised the
Commander gave it to you.”

“Why’s that?” her curiosity speaks before she can hold it back, missing for a moment, why he would
know that it was Clarke that gave it to her.

“It is a versatile tool. It becomes what you make of it.”

Well that's... unnecessarily cryptic.

“... I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

She feels eyes on her again and she’s sure it’s Clarke. She doesn’t look up to meet her gaze.

“It was nice speaking with you, Lexa of the Sky. I hope we get another chance to speak again soon,
the tale of your journey must be... extraordinary.”

She nods even though the encounter has made her uneasy. His eyes glance down once to the pin
holding her sash together before meeting her eyes, nodding, and walking away.

“What did he want?” Anya asks, sidling up to her and eyeing Andere’s back with distaste. Lexa
wonders if there’s anyone that Anya doesn’t dislike on sight.

“Nothing. He was just asking about my staff.”

Anya lets out a non-committal sound, like she doesn’t believe Lexa but doesn’t care enough just yet
to press her for more information.

“I never cared for him.”

Lexa turns to look at her. “Do you care about anyone?”

Anyā doesn’t even pause to consider. “No.”

Lexa raises an eyebrow and says nothing, but she sees the way Anya’s eyes flick over to Clarke every now and again, clearly keeping tabs on her, and Lexa thinks that she’s lying.

Clarke unlatches the knives from her waist and places them on the small table in her room. Her shoulder guard comes next and she lets out a sigh of relief and rolls her shoulder to release the tension she’s been holding. Her hands reach back and pull her shirt over her head, immediately wrinkling her nose and tossing it in a pile to be washed.

She pads around the room until she finds a steaming bowl of water and fresh cloths that likely appeared not moments before she got here. Dipping it in the water she begins the rhythmic task of wiping away at the paint and dirt and sweat on her face until the water is brown and murky. For a moment she entertains the idea of asking one of the servants to fill the bath in the corner of the room before putting it off for later.

There is a light tap on her door.

“Enter.”

Anyā slips inside and shuts it behind her.

“What news?” Clarke asks.

“Nothing yet. Avery should be back in a few hours at the most,” Anyā replies, watching as Clarke searches for a fresh shirt to pull on. “Is there a reason you didn’t send one of the others?”

“She is the fastest.”

“I forget sometimes how familiar you are with her.”

Clarke reads something in her tone and remembers how much Anyā dislikes Avery.

Anyā is quiet as Clarke walks around the room, gathering what she needs. There’s the sense of words building in the air between them for a few moments until Anyā opens her mouth and releases them.

“What are you planning to do with her?”

Clarke looks up from rummaging in her bag with a small laugh. “Avery? I didn’t think you’d be interested in those details.”

Anyā levels a look at her. “Not Avery. Your sky-girl. What is your plan for her?”
The possessive nature of her phrasing doesn't pass Clarke's notice.

“If I didn’t know better I’d think you were concerned about her,” Clarke replies with a grin, adjusting the sheath on her outer thigh.

Anya scoffs. “You are stoking the fire by bringing her here. You are putting yourself in more danger than you already are in, this close to the border.”

“I am always in danger. There is no peace for the Commander. You know this.”

Anya crosses her arms and can’t seem to come up with anything she wishes to say to that.

“They will come after me here just as they would come after me in Polis. The only difference is that should fate decide to put me in such a disadvantage as to be caught by those who wish to turn me or my head over to Nia, their journey to the Ice Nation will be shorter.”

She can see the displeasure pull at the corners of Anya’s mouth with each one of her words.

“In the meantime the people of Shallow Valley need to see the sky-girl by my side. Let them form their own conclusions about what her presence means and if it makes them second-guess approaching Narrok with pleas to join Azgeda to stop the raids from the ice nation bandits then it will be worth it in the end.”

“And if it gets you killed in the meantime?”

Clarke grins again, “Then that is what my spirit decides. But I have a feeling you will do an admirable job at interfering on my behalf.”

“And what will happen to the girl when all of this is through?”

Clarke lifts one shoulder and drops it. “My focus is on her immediate use. After that…” Another shrug. “In the meantime I can’t have her wandering off.”

“No wonder you let her speak to you the way that she does. I’ve seen you separate people from their limbs for half of the rudeness she has offered you.”

Clarke is placing her blade in the sheath at her side and says, “I’m sure there will still be plenty of time for you to instruct her of our ways. I know how much you enjoyed instructing her in throwing daggers.”

Anya scowls. “She is terrible.”

“She’s new. Even you know that you can’t expect everyone to master a weapon the first time they wield it,” Clarke says.

“You were much better.”

“Was that a compliment?” Clarke looks up with a grin

“No.”

Clarke chuckles. “She is much better at using a staff, it is true. She has a lot of potential.”

“I still can’t believe you not only let her keep her weapons but gave her another.”

Clarke checks her body for all her blades before checking for the necklace beneath her shirt, making
Lexa watches as Clarke walks between the rows of dried plants, running her fingers over the dried leaves that crumble beneath her fingers and drift to the ground. The wind tugs at her hair and her loose clothing now that she has removed her shoulder guard.

For all the rush they took to get to this clan, they don’t seem to be in any particular rush now that they’re here. It’s odd to say the least, and not what Lexa had been expecting. Clarke seems to be at her leisure, taking in the city and talking to its inhabitants and Lexa doesn’t get it. She had seemed antsy on the road, impatient and urging them on whenever they’d so much as stopped for a break. Now, she seems to be taking her time wandering between the rows of plants, looking them over.

Lexa yawns and stretches her arms above her head and then to the sides, twisting her neck this way and that until she feels some of the tension stretch and release. She had been shown a room earlier and so no longer had to carry her bag. She had been reluctant to leave it behind but the servants that had shown her the room had assured her, quite strongly, that no one would dare touch her things.

Lexa isn’t necessarily used to being waited on but she assumes that those within the Commander’s company receive similar treatment. Still, the two servants who had flitted in and out of the small room had seemed tense and uneasy, not lingering in her presence besides doing a quick perusal of the room, asking if she needed anything, and then ducking out.

Lexa hadn’t exactly had many belongings to unpack. She had the small case of clothes from TonDC and her guard bag. She had placed both on the floor and then the second they had left she had cast herself onto the small bed in the corner, releasing a sigh she could feel all throughout her body.

She had noticed, with a start, that it was perhaps the first moment to herself she had been granted since she had come to the ground. Almost at every moment someone had been assigned to watch her. True, her surveillance had grown lighter and lighter as the days had gone on, but there had always been someone.

The room was very different than what she had experienced in TonDC. There it had mostly been large halls meant to house mass amounts of warriors who could come and go easily. Shallow Valley seems less inclined towards military preparedness and more towards an agricultural life as well as mining and stonework. Not that their warriors look soft for it, rather, they just seem less like the type where their training involves a lot of time spent living in the woods off the wild.

Her room had a small washbasin that had been unfortunately empty at the time, and merely a few handfuls of cloths and some water that when she put her nose to the steam smelled like lemon and some unidentifiable spice that makes Lexa’s nose twitch.

It hadn’t lasted long of course. A knock on her door had arrived a few minutes later and soon, after...
snagging her staff from where it had been resting against the wall by the door, she was back to
Clarke’s side. Now they just wander some fields and Lexa has to wonder what’s the point.

The wind tangles its fingers through the loose strands of her hair, sending them across her face to
catch in her eyelashes and mouth. She’s halfway through the motion of taking the tie out and putting
her hair back up again, carefully gathering each one of the loose strands, when the elastic band
suddenly snaps.

It lies in her hand and she frowns. It was the last one she had. She feels silly for the pang of loss
she’s suddenly hit with. She sticks it in her pocket.

Anya has disappeared somewhere to find them some food and now it’s just Clarke and Lexa and a
handful of warriors that stay at a distance and seem just as bored as Lexa does even though they do a
much better job of hiding it. They’re in the small mess of gardens towards the back of the city but are
still within the walls. The area is much smaller than the plots they’d passed outside the gates and
seem to be more of a community thing than for their main agricultural production, though most of the
plants are past bloom and are readying themselves for autumn.

The wind is quickly making a mess of Lexa’s hair and she knows it will be one tangled knot unless
she does something with it quickly. With a bit of frustration she twists it and places it over her
shoulder but gets nowhere. She even tries tucking it into the back of her jacket but it just gets pulled
back out again. Eventually she gives up and partitions it into three pieces and tries to work it into
some sort of braid. She turns the strands around one another but her movements are awkward and
her fingers feel stiff and she loses a few pieces here and there and chunks of it are far too loose by the
time she’s done. After starting over and trying twice more she manages to get into something
resembling a braid and hopes that it will stay together.

She tucks a loose strand behind her ear and looks up to see Clarke watching her with a curious
expression.

“What?” she asks, and wishes it didn’t sound so defensive. She’s sure now that it must look awful.
She pats at the braid hanging over her shoulder self-consciously and tries to see if there are any loose
parts she can tuck in.

Clarke shakes her head and looks away. “Nothing.”

Besides the wind rustling the leaves, there isn’t much sound between the dried rows of plants. Lexa
lets out a tired huff, wishing she could return to the bed she had just been acquainted with before
leaning on her staff and closing her eyes for a moment. The sun feels warm against her face. It’s
peaceful, soothing even. Perhaps there are things on the ground she does actually find enjoyable.

She nearly jumps out of her skin when she hears screams.

Her staff is in her hand in a moment, held in front of her as her head swivels to face the unknown
threat.

The noise comes again and she realizes it’s not screams, but yells - very high-pitched and excited
yells. She looks down to find the source of the noise and is almost overrun by a small group of
children eagerly running towards Clarke.

They’re dressed in smaller versions of the bright red full-body robes that Lexa had seen among the
city’s inhabitants and nearly trip on the ends as they crowd around Clarke. Lexa looks around for
some sort of adult that should be watching them and for a while sees no one until she spots a few
older women hovering at the gates of the garden. Their gazes are fixed on Clarke, hesitant and
unsure. They don’t approach.

She turns back to find the Commander’s face split into the first genuine smile Lexa has seen all day as she bends to one knee to greet them, ignoring the way the dirt immediately dusts the front of her pants.

“Heya, strikon,” Clarke says to them.

There’s about eight or so in total and they crowd around her excitedly, the eldest likely no older than five, and all saying “Heda!” repeatedly and excitedly, bouncing on the balls of their feet. Some reach for the braids hanging from her hair and speak quickly in rapid-fire trigedasleng. They’re so unrestrained in their affection it’s startling. Clarke gives each of them her attention and Lexa just stands there and blinks, staff hanging listlessly by her side.

One, a girl that comes up only to the commander’s crouched shoulder, whispers something and this causes the rest to giggle. Clarke grins in response and says something in return. She seems familiar with them, or, at the very least, doesn’t seem surprised by their presence.

One of them tugs on the sleeve of Clarke’s shirt and points at Lexa, causing the rest to turn and look as well. His eyes are narrowed suspiciously and Lexa looks around to make sure that she is the one they are looking at. But there’s no one else around so she just stands there awkwardly, unsure what to do.

Clarke says something she can’t understand in a hushed tone to the little faces around her. They look back and forth between Clarke and her then, wide-eyed, but still suspicious. Clarke nods and then suddenly two of them are rushing over to Lexa and staring up at her, clearly waiting for something.

They quickly reach out with curious fingers, feeling the material of her jacket, tracing the reinforced padding. They seem to come to the agreement that she isn’t much of a threat rather quickly and soon she’s got a few gap toothed smiles. She feels her own lips pull in response.

“From Skaikru?” One of them - a boy with bright hazel eyes and hair that cropped close to his head asks, pointing to the triangular insignia of the Ark guard on her arm. Lexa isn’t sure if she should be surprised that they understand some English.

She nods. “Yeah. It was part of my uniform.” When that word garners obvious confusion she points their robes. “Kind of like those, I guess.”

“Do you miss it?” Another one asks, a girl with long braids twisted back into a bun at the nape of her neck. She’s shorter than the other and, sitting on the ground, Lexa is eye-level with her.

Lexa’s smile fades slightly. “Very much.”

She looks at the kids who are still curiously poking at her jacket. One of them points at her belt. “What’s that?”
Lexa looks down to where the finger is pointing. She leans back and retrieves the flashlight from its holster.

“It’s a light.” They all crowd a bit closer, rising on tiptoes to see around each other, watching with intent eyes. She pretends not to notice when Clarke steps a bit closer as well. “See?” Her finger finds the button on the bottom and the flashlight comes to life with bright, artificial light.

She is suddenly surrounded by very wide eyes and hands that reach out insistently to touch the foreign object. Lexa hands it over to one of them and they immediately become fascinated with clicking it on and off, excitedly.

She lets out a laugh and looks up at Clarke. “Have they not seen electricity before?”

Clarke shakes her head. “They’re too young. Those that are older and fought the mountain are more familiar with their technology.”

Lexa looks between Clarke and the group of children who are passing around their new toy, only looking back to Clarke when she continues speaking.

“Where did they come from?” Lexa asks.

“They are orphans from the surrounding villages.”

“Oh.” She doesn’t know what else to say to that.

“Some of them likely lost their parents in that war,” Clarke says, watching them. Her tone has a significant weight to it that almost sounds like disappointment.

She doesn’t know what makes her say what she does next.

“From what I hear, many more would have lost their parents if you hadn’t been Commander.”

Clarke’s eyes flash up to her then. The blue is striking.

“The wind blows, rustling the dried leaves at their feet. The air feels charged with something, like a coming storm even though the sky looks startlingly clear. Lexa is struck with a thought. She voices it quietly.

“Is that why so many of them are afraid of me? Because I look like whoever was in that mountain?”

“Yes,” Clarke says after a long pause.

“And that fear is what makes me useful to you.” It’s not a question. Clarke answers anyways.

“Yes.”

Lexa looks up at Clarke, sees the way the sunlight kisses her skin and makes her hair gold. Her face is free of paint and there are clouds of dirt on the front of her pants from where she kneeled. In this moment she doesn’t look capable of toppling civilizations. She looks like something much softer. Something more capable of preserving life than seizing it.

“They must have been some enemy,” Lexa murmurs eventually.

“They were,” Clarke agrees, not looking away. “But they are no more.”

“And that’s why they fear you.” Not a question.
A steady blink. “Yes.”

As if it is as simple as that. As if this whole tangle of an arrangement and running around pretending to be something greater than human, greater than mortal, can be leveled down to a yes or no question.

The wind pulls Lexa’s hair loose from her braid and she can hear the group of children laughing about something a few rows over now. The sound feels more distant than it is.

So much time passes she’s almost confused when Clarke speaks again. Lexa’s rising to her feet to go try and find where the young Shallow Valley children went with her flashlight. When she pushes up, using her staff as leverage, she’s surprised to find Clarke suddenly standing closer than before. She nearly stumbles back.

“And you?”

The words are soft. So quiet they’re almost smothered by the wind. Lexa swallows, Clarke’s gaze somehow making her feet feel stuck. Stationary. Stagnant. Pinned.

“And me what?”

“Are you afraid of me?”

Lexa isn’t sure where her gaze is supposed to fall. Clarke is standing close enough to be too close but Lexa can’t seem to figure out how to step back. She’s searching her face and so many things pass over her expression so quickly Lexa can’t latch onto any of them before they’re gone.

“No.”

The wind continues to blow. Pushing, pulling, moving.

She doesn’t know if she’s lying.

Clarke’s answer is soft, unassuming. Just stating fact.

“You should be.”

The meal that evening is extravagant compared to the dried meat and berries Lexa had mostly gotten used to on the journey. She sits at the long table next to Lincoln who is kind enough to translate some of the things being said and she learns much. She nods along to his words as she goes through a soup course and grabs at the baskets of bread that line the table without trying to come across as greedy. It is light and airy and totally different from the dense rolls that she had tried before.

She doesn’t need the translator to notice that there is some deep shared history between Clarke and the leader of Shallow Valley. Lincoln leans over and explains in hushed whispers how he was one of the nightbloods. One of the children selected to train to be Commander.

So that would mean…

He was one of the ones spared when Clarke refused to kill the other Commanders in training.

He is alive and breathing and leading his clan because Clarke stepped forward and said no all those
It suddenly explains his exuberance at Clarke’s presence. From what she’s learned of their culture in any of the clans, a life-debt would not be something to shrug off lightly. She looks over at him and the way he leans closer to Clarke, the familiarity of the motion, and wonders why she didn’t notice it before. He is expressive with his hands, the jeweled fingers accentuating all the words that leave his mouth in Trigedasleng as he speaks to Clarke. He is ecstatic at her presence.

She wonders what his thoughts on the rumours surrounding her must be. She imagines that growing up with the advantage of being in Clarke’s presence would likely mark him down on the side that believes her to be extraordinary, but not necessarily otherworldly.

Lincoln laughs about something suddenly, a barely-there rumbling sound that catches her attention. He’s still listening in on the conversation at the head of the table and when Lexa gives him a curious look he tells her, “He is telling a story of when the Commander got stuck clinging to the outside of the tower in Polis.”

“Why was she on the outside of the tower?” she asks, keeping her voice similarly low.

“She claims it was an accident and that she fell when some of the window reinforcement gave way. He claims that it was because she was attempting to sneak out without being caught by the guards.”

Narrok has taken notice of their murmurings and has quickly picked up on the purpose of them. Lexa looks up in surprise when he continues his story in English.

“Of course, the Commander would most definitely not sneak out of the tower. That is beneath her. And she definitely wouldn’t do it to visit someone that lived within the inner ring of the city. And she would most definitely not overestimate her climbing capabilities and get stuck.” He’s grinning ear to ear now and gladly accepts the refill to his glass of wine.

Clarke hides her minuscule smile behind the glass she brings to her lips. So now there are two people that Lexa knows of that can get away with teasing the Commander. Anya, her mentor. And this man, her childhood friend. She supposes you don’t grow up training to win wars without leaning on those around you.

Lexa tries to imagine a younger Clarke, hanging by the tips of her fingers to the outer wall of some sort of tower, hair wild in the wind as she climbs her way down like some reversed fairy tale of the old days.

Clarke clears her throat. “I would not have gotten caught if Titus had not come back to his rooms early and seen me through his window.”

This leads to a riot of laughter from Narrok and Lexa imagines that whoever this Titus is must not have let Clarke off easy.

Clarke turns away the servant that offers her a cup filled with wine, continuing to sip at the glass of water she started with.

Lexa can hardly imagine the stoic and serious Commander doing something as silly as sneaking out to visit a lover.

She continues to eat her meal and listen. She waits apprehensively for the time when questions may be inevitably turned on her. Strangely, but not without a small amount of relief, they never come.

She does, however, get very curious looks. Mostly from the Shallow Valley leader who opens his
Avery appears somewhere halfway through the meal. Silently bowing to Clarke before sliding out a chair and helping herself to the meal in front of her. There is a small scrape along her left cheek and Lexa wonders who she's been picking fights with. Clarke curiously doesn’t so much as look her way again throughout the remainder of the meal, however.

“We have a handful of warriors who have expressed interest in traveling to Polis to train as one of your archers. I know a demonstration from you would do wonders for them,” Narrok says to Clarke as he sits back in his seat. He is speaking in English still and the fact that it is likely completely for her benefit makes Lexa slightly uncomfortable.

“Perhaps tomorrow I will visit them,” Clarke says.

Narrok tips his head in her direction with a pleased smile.

Lexa thinks she actually wouldn't mind seeing that and some of it must show on her face because Lincoln says, “The Commander and her bow is a sight to behold. There will be a large gathering so you should go early to make sure you can get a good view.”

She glances over at him and there is the barest hint of a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. She’s pretty sure she’s being laughed at. She narrows her eyes at him but can’t think of a way to defend herself because she does want to go.

The meal continues in a comfortable fashion. At some point servants bring out a thin pastry that flakes when Lexa takes a bite out of it but floods her mouth with a sweet tasting syrup. It's a bit too much for her so she only gets through a few bites.

She finds herself very full very soon, the rich food sitting uncomfortably in a stomach that had gotten used to basic provisions on their journey and soon she finds herself nearly falling asleep at the table.

By the time she is allowed to meander back to her own room (escorted, of course, by one of Clarke’s warriors) she’s too tired to wonder why no one had asked her questions at the meal. Why neither the leader of Shallow Valley nor his brother seemed to be willing to speak to her while Clarke could be listening.

Lexa kicks off her shoes, pulls the shawl from around her shoulders, then her belt, then jacket, leaving it all in a trail from the door until she collapses face first onto the bed. The blanket is scratchy but she doesn’t care. She presses her face into it and lets out a tired sigh.

The last thought she has before she falls asleep is that the last time she slept on a bed was on the Ark. One not unlike this one. Perhaps a little harder though. With maps of the old world hung above her head and starlight streaming in from the window.

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It’s the same dream. Every time.

Clarke stands in the middle of the arena, staring defiantly at the panel of elders who wish her to kill
her friends. To seize glory by the throat and take the flame of the Commander as her own. It’s what she’s been trained for. It’s what she was born for.

In the dream she stands there, spear in her hands, feet braced and protective of the person on the ground behind her, and she refuses to take his life.

That part is more memory than dream.

But then the scene changes. The eyes of the elders become dark and hollow and their smiles twist and she feels horror rise in her throat like bile.

They point long fingers to the space behind her, telling her to look, telling her that she’s too late.

She tries to resist every time. To keep her eyes forward.

Every time she fails.

She turns and the arena is no longer what it was before. Her friend, the boy from the Lake clan who she refused to kill, is dead. And he’s not alone. More of the nightbloods appear. There is no life in any of their eyes, all sporting different wounds that weep vigorously and now her spear drip drip drips crimson onto the ground. She did this. She stands before them as blood runs across the ground in rivers. She stumbles back, losing her footing. Her hands are now covered in blood, she’s soaked in it.

Every time she blinks and reopens her eyes more of them appear, dead except for how they stand before her.

Those of her people that she has failed to protect. Her warriors that have died fighting for her. Then the bodies of the mountain. Small children, eyes lifeless. She tries to back away but she’s trapped. She’s always trapped.

He always appears last.

She knows it’s coming and feels her muscles lock, frozen with fear and anguish.

He’s there, smiling. Standing over her like he’s about to make some joke about how the Commander shouldn’t be so clumsy before reaching down to help her up.

But he doesn’t.

His smile fades as he looks down at his chest. The wound there gapes and she knows what’s coming as his knees sink to the ground.

“No!” she shouts, trying to scramble to her feet, boots slipping in the blood. She can’t reach him.

He looks up at her. There is so much pity in his eyes.

It’s the same look he’s given her since they were younger. When she hated him for that pity. For that sadness. And she hated him because she loved him. He looked at her as if he always knew how their story would end.

She can’t look away.

Blood runs from the corner of his mouth as he speaks.

“Wanheda.”
Clarke gasps awake.

There is sweat beading across her forehead and she can feel it gathering on her spine and the back of her neck making her hair stick.

She pushes Avery’s arm off from over her torso and sits up. Her heart is frantic in her chest - beating away in a rush. She runs a hand through her hair, pushing her fingers through the loose strands as she pulls air in and out of her lungs.

She knows she won’t be getting any more sleep so she rises, pulls on a shirt and slips into her pants. Her boots are laced quickly, she puts a knife in her sheath, and then she’s heading out the door.

The warriors standing guard just outside straighten at the sight of her but they’ve gone through this enough times to not be surprised to see her.

They follow silently as she begins to walk down the quiet hall.

She walks for a long time, aimless. She breathes in the night air, feels the smallest bite of it that indicates the seasons are indeed changing.

The city is asleep, settled and quiet. It is just her and the guards amidst the lit torches that leave moving shadows on the stone pathways that wind between the buildings.

She walks and walks until she realizes that it’s not going to settle the feeling within her and decides to return to her room.

It’s as she’s rounding the corner that she hears the scuffle and a shout that gets muffled before it’s fully released.

She turns the corner to find that Osla, one of her archers, apparently having volunteered herself for the night watch, has a man pinned to the wall at the base of the building, holding a knife to his throat. She is surrounded by both Clarke’s personal guards and a few from the city who must have come running at the commotion.

The man is not dressed in the typical red-robed attire of a Shallow Valley warrior but darker clothing, something more suited for blending into the night. From the wavering torchlight they’ve dragged him into she can see that his entire backside is covered with dirt from the ground. He must have fallen hard.

Clarke clears her throat as she approaches, causing Osla to look up at her, her face a measured stare.

“Found him scaling the wall, hoping to get to you through your window, most likely.” She still has his face pressed into the stone, and his jaw is tight as he grinds his teeth. He says nothing. “Found this on him.” She gestures with her head and another guard is stepping forward holding a long thin blade that could likely be concealed at the man’s side beneath his clothes.

Clarke takes it, considerate.

Osla turns the man to face her.

He is perhaps ten years her senior. His face shows signs of a life spent fighting for every single thing he has. A desperation fueled by hunger. He is angry. His nostrils flare at the sight of her.

“Tell me. How much is she promising nowadays?” she asks, voice calm and measured, as if an assassin had not been caught hanging just outside her window.
She’s impressed he made it so far without being apprehended. She’s looking down at the blade. It’s a fine weapon, crafted to the point where she’s sure if she were to test its point she would not find it blunted in the slightest.

When he does not answer Osla pulls back on his arm abruptly and Clarke hears something snap. His face contorts in pain, but the hand the archer had quickly put over his mouth prevents any sound from escaping far.

He’s breathing heavily, his forehead beading with sweat when she eventually removes her hand again.

“Twenty thousand,” he answers in a gasp.

She nods her head, considering the number. “Twenty thousand gold pieces is enough to last a man many lifetimes over.”

“He had this in his pocket as well,” Osla cuts in as a guard steps forward once more.

Clarke holds out her free hand and accepts the object. She holds it up to the light. It’s a thin string with delicate shapes made from dried straw hanging from it at intervals.

The torchlight reflects in the man’s eyes and there is true fear in them now as the item sways from her fingers.

“Whoever sold this to you was mistaken. They likely promised the charm would protect you from me, or perhaps that it would immobilize me in some way. I imagine you paid a small fortune for it.” His eyes - more white than iris - don’t leave her hand.

He swallows and she watches a bead of sweat run down the side of his face.

She crushes the charm in her fist.

When she slides the blade between his ribs she feels nothing.

“If the ice queen wants the power of Wanheda.”

Blood covers her hand and for a moment she sees someone else in his eyes as the light fades from them.

She feels nothing nothing nothing.

A lie.

“She will have to come take it herself.”

Chapter End Notes
All your kudos and comments are so appreciated and I have the best time reading through them! Thank you! <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hi hello, long time no update.  

Apologies for the delay in getting this one to you guys, hopefully there are still at least a few of you out there reading this thing. Anyways, enjoy!

The morning slips in quietly, taking its time in the form of a thin sliver of light creeping in from the cracked window of Lexa’s room. The air grows brighter as the time passes, illuminating everything in a gentle glow and tugging her from the depths of sleep. The birds outside chatter and flurry, looking for food in the uncrowded streets as the air hangs in a sense of calm and mellow light.

Lexa blinks against the morning, her mind pulling itself awake inch by inch. For a moment, while still caught in the haze of sleep, she forgets where she is.

She expects to swing her legs out of bed where her feet will meet the metal flooring of her room on the Ark, toes finding the cold divots and grooves as usual. No alarm woke her. She probably has the later shift today. Maybe if she hurries she can still get one of the non-glitchy treadmills in the workout room.

Her eyes blink and the light in the room makes the colours come into true focus and she remembers. She lets out a slow breath. Gathers herself piece by piece.

The sounds are the most different, she thinks, when she feels the knowledge of where she is curl into her and settle.

The Ark had a consistent hum. When you thought to listen for it, you could always hear the electrical grid working away, keeping them all alive and spinning out among the stars. There was also the sound of people walking, their shoes leaving distinct clangs every time they met metal - hollow yet resilient.

The walls were a maze that wrapped around each other in convoluted patterns and only allowed for circuitous routes that went on and on and on. In her life science course they had learned of places in the old world with rooms that housed fish in massive tanks. The creatures would swim round and round and round the halls would go.

The ground is different. It has give. Absorbing in the sounds of people’s feet and voices in its dirt and grit that clouds and unsettles and resettles as people mix among it. Or the rain dripping down from leaf to leaf, sliding sideways into puddles that soak into rich soil tangled with roots. Every direction extends and there are times when she reaches her arms out and can’t believe there are no walls to meet the tips of her fingers.

Lexa rises and shoves the quilt from on top of her. At some point in the night she must have made
some half-hearted effort to remove the rest of her clothes because she only has one sock and her pants on. When she stands she has to step over the pile of discarded clothes on the floor and is thankful she at least managed to remove her boots before falling asleep.

Rummaging around in her bag she pulls out a clean shirt and pants. They’re both from the collection she had been given in TonDC and she almost hates how she’s quickly growing more comfortable in their soft material than in the clothing she came down in. She hops around, slipping her feet into her boots quickly, double checking she has everything before grabbing her staff and cracking open the door.

There’s a guard, of course. He blinks back at her when she peeks her head out.

She recognizes him as one of Clarke’s, not one from the city. He’s got a tattoo that starts above his right ear and comes to curl just underneath his eye on the same side and she supposes it is intended to look menacing but he lets out a large yawn that undercuts the effect. He’s built a bit like Lincoln and she has to look up to meet his eye.

“Umm, hi,” she says, unsure what the protocol is. “Is uh the Commander giving her archery demonstration?”

He nods once.

“Are you supposed to bring me to her?”

Another nod.

“Do I get breakfast first?”

He shrugs.

She decides she likes him. She closes the door behind her and says, “Well I figure we still have time to grab something. Otherwise she probably wouldn’t have let me sleep as long as she did.”

She begins walking down the hall, head looking this way and that in the light of morning. The building feels old in a way that’s different than others she’s been in. The walls are made of the same material she’s seen everywhere in the city - thick blocks of light-coloured stone that are smooth to her fingers when she trails the tips of them across it. There are windows cut into the wall at intermittent points that let in the early morning light that sits in pools on the floor.

After she stops a passing servant and asks where she might find some food, she makes her way down the tight winding staircase at the end, hearing her shadow follow at a measured pace close behind.

She had been thinking a lot the night before. About a lot of different things. Mostly she had been thinking about her role in this new world of hers. She has fulfilled her part of the bargain well by her standards. Or, she assumes she has because she doubts poor behaviour wouldn’t have been pointed out to her with the help of strong language and a weapon or two.

She had accompanied Clarke, pretended to be her “weapon” or whatever, let people see her and whisper and point and spread their rumors with only minor complaint on her end. She had done a fairly admirable job so far if she were to say so herself. In fact, Lexa believes she’s done such a great job that perhaps Clarke would be willing to let her give up the role.

If there’s one thing Lexa hates it’s being useless. And trailing in Clarke’s company, shoved this way and that, told to go here and there and say nothing has started to make her feel less than that. The
staff in her hand was a small consolation, but perhaps only when it was given to her that she truly realized how much she had missed actually having something to do or a skill to learn.

When she had been on the Ark she was always working or helping or training. It was her nature to keep moving forward, to keep advancing, to be the best she could be. She wanted - no, she needed to get back into that level of activity or she’d probably do something stupid just to get some excitement in her life.

She had come to accept at some point over the days traveling between the hole in the ground they had pulled her out of and her current location that her life would never be the same as it had been. That was a given. A proven fact. It weighed heavily within her but she decided it was a weight she would have to accept. She still felt it and probably always would, but she was realistic if nothing else and practicality would win in the end for her.

So she had decided to carve a new life out for herself. The staff had given her the idea if she’s being honest, so, in a way, Clarke had really suggested it without knowing.

She decided she would travel to this Polis, the capital city that everyone seems to always be mentioning, and train as a guard there. It’s a known role in her life and it would give her a purpose and it would be something she’s good at.

Clarke had agreed to let her go where she wanted when she fulfilled her end of the bargain. And they’ve started to come to some sort of… understanding recently, hadn’t they? She’d even venture to say they were becoming friendly even. Lexa doesn’t believe she comes across as a threat anymore. She has no way of contacting her people or anyone she knows. And it’s not like they tell her anything on this journey anyways so it’s not like she can go giving away secrets to people she meets.

Lexa can’t really see any problems with her plan. She thinks it’s perfect.

She’d noticed caravans leaving from the central market yesterday, she can just hitch a ride with one of them as far as they’ll take her and figure out the rest as she goes. It’s foolproof.

She nods to herself as she walks, deciding she’ll bring it up with Clarke when she sees her.

She finds the small kitchen and when the cooks bustling in and around spot her and her red sash they freeze up. She expects it but she still can’t say she likes it.

When they hear her modest request for a piece of bread or whatever is leftover they don’t even listen and instead move quickly and efficiently until soon she has a cloth filled with pieces of still-steaming pasties that makes her mouth water.

“Oh, um, thank you. I really don’t need this much. I can…” she trails off when she sees a look on one of their faces and it clicks. Right. It is necessary from their point of view. She wears the sign of the Commander and they probably wouldn’t dare give anyone wearing that anything less than more than what they asked for.

She drops anything else she was thinking of saying with a sigh and turns to her silent companion, her hoard of pastries held securely in her arms with her staff squished between them and her body.

“Alright, lead on.”

They make their way back through the winding passageways of the building until they emerge into a courtyard that is filled with sunlight. It seems to be a common theme in the city. Opening up passageways to light. She supposes not being under the tree cover they would have different values in their own culture. She likes it. In a way it reminds her of the ark and their relationship to starlight.
She doesn’t understand why the streets are more empty than they had appeared yesterday until her
guard leads her toward the back of the city and she can see the crowd of people they’re heading for.

Young and old, there is a massive amount of people crowded around an outside practice area next to
the building Lexa has visited yesterday. A few people on the fringes recognize her, or at least
recognize the emblem in her shawl, and she doesn’t have to push or shove her way through. She
ducks her head as a few of them whisper and her guard stands a bit closer to ward them off.

Lexa spots Tahvo in the crowd and sidles up next to him with more than a small bit of relief. He
smiles when she approaches and there’s an excited gleam in his eye he’s trying not to show.

She raises an eyebrow. “You seem excited.”

“The Commander rarely gives demonstrations. You are lucky. She is almost finished I think.”

Lexa says nothing, just leans her staff against the wall of the practice arena at her back and unwraps
her breakfast. She sees Tahvo eyeing her, his nose sniffing the air, and she wordlessly hands a few
pastries over to him before turning and offering one to her unnamed guard as well. To her surprise he
takes it.

She bites into the small roll of bread and is delighted to find it filled with some sort of sweet jam. She
has no idea what the fruit is, she doesn’t think she’s tasted anything like it.

She has to rise on her tiptoes a bit to see over the crowd. When she does she can see a long, open
area of packed dirt on the other side of which are some gardens and the city wall. She can spot the
very tips of the mountains to the north over it. She turns her focus closer to find the person everyone
is there to see.

Clarke is dressed for the warm weather in a loose shirt that leaves her arms exposed and hangs over
her pants at a slanted angle. She wears bracers on both forearms and her hair is back in a singular
braid to keep it from her eyes. No paint today, but she does have the familiar cog-like emblem sitting
between her eyes. Her bow is held loosely in her left hand, the string pulled tight across it as she
stretches her arms over her head and then behind her, loosening her muscles.

“So what’s the point of this? Does she just --”

“Shhh,” Tahvo shushes her, eyes intently focused on the woman that is so clearly his hero.

Lexa raises an eyebrow but doesn’t speak again. In fact, she realizes now that most people have
stopped talking and are focused on Clarke.

Clarke, for her part, doesn’t seem to have taken any notice of any of them. It’s like she’s in her own
space and none of them exist in this moment to distract her. There is a sheath of arrows at her left
side, hooked around the outside of her thigh. She pulls one out now with measured movements that
transition smoothly to line it across her bow.

Lexa looks to see what her target is and sees nothing. She opens her mouth to ask Tahvo when there
is a sound like a mechanism being released and something in the distance is launched into the air - a
dark smudge that turns head over end quickly.

Clarke’s movements are fast and smooth. In one motion she finds her target, pulls back the string,
and releases her shot. The arrow slices through the air with a whistle and Lexa watches it completely
annihilate the object in the distance, causing it to disintegrate in mid-air into a cloud of debris.

Lexa doesn’t realize she’s released a whistle of appreciation until Tahvo just nods his head in
agreement and says, “There is a reason we are called the Commander’s archers.”

“I figured all Commanders before her had their own archers.”

He shakes his head. “We were formed only after she became Commander. Another way of bringing together the people from different clans. We come from all over her land and travel across it frequently.”

“Is that why you became one?” She asks

He shrugs. “There are many reasons. I wanted to serve the Commander.”

“Why?”

He pauses for the barest of moments before answering. “My brother was killed by the mountain. She was able to prevent that from happening to anyone else.” He says it so simply and his expression is even when she glances at him with a frown.

There is a cheer from the crowd as Clarke successfully takes down another target and reclaims Lexa’s attention.

She’s a flow of movement. It almost looks as if she isn’t even thinking about it. Lexa would almost think she’s bored if it weren’t for the fact that she can see the slightest upward tick of Clarke’s mouth. She’s having fun, she just doesn’t want anyone to know it. Lexa lets out a huff of a laugh.

She releases a few more shots, each one like the last, and then the demonstration appears to be done. The crowd begins to disperse, exchanging words in their language which reach Lexa’s ears and bounce off for lack of understanding.

“Those are the potentials,” Tahvo explains without her asking, noticing her stare. “They will likely travel to Polis in the Spring and, if they are chosen, will begin their training.”

“To become like you?”

“Possibly. There are many roles of the archers. The initiates from Shallow Valley usually become those among her personal guard due to their affinity for close ranged weapons as well as a bow.”

“That must be a great honor.”

“Yes.”

“Is that what you are?”

“Me?” She’s surprised him, somehow. “No. We all guard the Commander but my role is different. I was chosen for agility, much like Avery.”

“Agility for what? Delivering messages?”

“Sometimes,” he says, accompanied with a slight rise and fall of his shoulders.

She hears what he's not saying. Those recruited for their speed might be for delivering the
commanders messages across clan borders, but they are also likely for carrying messages back from other locations and traveling quickly. They’re her eyes around the clans. If Lexa were to guess she’d say that all the archers are likely part of the same network in some way, feeding the Commander information. The more she considers it, the more reluctantly impressed she becomes.

“Were the archers her idea?” she asks, unable to help herself.

“Yes. She formed the initiative because she needed warriors who could deliver messages between her groups of fighters when we were fighting the mountain. She needed people who were fast enough or quiet enough to not be caught.”

“Were you there?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “No. I was still in the middle of training. If that war had continued I would be there now.”

She wonders if she hears some amount of unhappiness in his tone. Perhaps he feels as if he were cheated of a great glory.

They both watch between the waning crowd as Clarke dismisses the group of young warriors with a tilt of her head. They bow low and head on their way without lingering.

Tahvo and Clarke’s personal group of warriors are the only ones that remain around the near vicinity when the crowd eventually disperses to return to their regular duties. Tahvo goes to talk to one of the men in the group, leaving Lexa to lean against the wall on her own, one leg tucked back against it. She absentmindedly twirls the staff in her hand slowly, pretending that she isn’t watching Clarke. Clarke sees her looking anyways of course and meets her eye as she stops walking to pause next to her.

A few wisps of hair have come loose from Clarke’s braid, curling around the sides of her face around her chin. She doesn’t look at all phased by all the shooting she just did. Lexa doubts she even broke a sweat. There are, however, dark circles beneath her eyes that were not there the day before. It’s truly the only sign of any fatigue she’s ever seen on the Commander and Lexa is fairly positive that if anyone were to dare to point it out they’d lose an appendage.

“Did you enjoy the demonstration?”

Lexa looks around as if thinking over her answer and shrugs. “It was okay.”

But she’s grinning when she returns her gaze to meet Clarke’s, betraying her words. There’s a small smile on the other girl’s face that Lexa’s eyes linger on - soft in a way that she wouldn’t ordinarily expect. It’s pretty.

What.

No.

Clarke is... something. But not pretty. Definitely not pretty. She can’t be pretty.

Nope.

Lexa’s face must be going on quite a journey of expressions because Clarke’s smile falters to a slight look of confusion.

“I… uh…,” is the brilliance that tumbles from Lexa’s mouth. She clears her throat as if real words
might have just gotten caught somewhere on their way and they might tumble out at any moment.

“Heda!” a guard calls out as he approaches, saving Lexa’s life. “The Shallow Valley leader wishes to borrow a moment of your time.”

Clarke nods in his direction, smile gone from her face, the cool expression of the Commander having slipped back into place when Lexa wasn’t looking.

Her gaze is neutral as she dips her head in Lexa’s direction and departs.

Clarke stretches out her fingers and then her wrists, shaking them loose from the strain of shooting. A few Shallow Valley clanspeople glance at her, failing to hide their curiosity or awe, but still giving her a respectable berth despite their expressions. She sees it all but doesn’t forget that not all look on with fondness. The dead assassin from the night before is a strong testament to that.

Narrok pushes his way through the crowd to meet her halfway, a wide smile on his face as usual, as he begins walking with her. She points her feet towards the gardens to put them farther out of earshot of the crowds, the group of guards follow at a respectable distance.

“That was outstanding. Thank you for providing a demonstration. The initiates have taken your words to heart I am sure.”

Clarke dips her head. “I am happy to have provided some level of motivation.”

“Oh more than that to be sure. They will not be able to stop talking about it until they make their travels to Polis in the Spring. And even then I am sure they will feel honored that they received such close contact.”

“I wish them luck in the choosings,” she says, and leaves it at that. Heda does not show favoritism.

His red robes are fluttering lightly in the late morning breeze, the same red as usual. She knows them to be lighter than the gear that the woods clan uses, a tactic to not succumb to the heat of the sun. In Winter they don robes of heavier material, but nothing like the heavy furs of their northern neighbors or even those in Polis.

His face shows signs of days out in harsh sunlight. She imagines he must be outside for a considerable amount of time to attend to all his people in the fields and villages nowadays. The knives on his belt glint and she wonders if he misses using them in the same capacity as when they were nightbloods. He had been trained, same as her, to wield them and she has no doubt that that skill has remained. They drilled the motions of each individual weapon into them until they would be unable to forget if they wished to.

She looks at him, at the way he turns his face to smile at his people as they pass by.

“Where is your brother?” she asks, looking over his shoulder where Andere always seems to be lurking.

He makes a dismissive motion with his hand. “He is around somewhere, likely in his study. He believes that the accounts are too important to leave be for even a short reprieve to see the Commander demonstrate her miraculous capability.”
She pauses for a moment as his words settle in the air. She watches the Shallow Valley initiates beginning their training for the day in the distance. Their instructor is already bellowing, face red and demanding and they are soon springing to action. She clasps her hands loosely behind her back as she stares on.

“You speak in a matter of someone that wants something,” she says eventually, her voice even.

“Can I not merely compliment my Commander?” he asks, but he’s grinning, realizing he’s been caught.

“You were never subtle when we were young and things have not changed,” she comments, turning her head to look at him.

He’s chuckling now as he runs a hand through his hair, glancing up and away with a shake of the head. “And you were always the best at reading those around you.”

She merely waits for him to speak what he really wants to say. It doesn’t take long.

“We had an excellent harvest this season, it’s true. However, one of our trade points was destroyed by fire last month and the reconstruction is taking longer than anticipated. Traders are avoiding the area. We are missing some key supplies that will make the Winter much more bearable. If we could...”

“I’ll send a convoy once I return to Polis. You will have what you need to get through the cold season and come Spring I will expect you to reestablish the trade route.”

She’s surprised him. He was clearly expecting more of a fight on the matter.

“Thank you,” he hesitates before finishing with, “Clarke.”

She puts a hand on his shoulder and he seems relieved. She wonders how long he had been deliberating on how best to approach the topic. Whether he had been prepared to send messengers to Polis to deliver his plea.

He’s looking at her face, as if he’s remembering something only he can see, a cross between amusement and nostalgia.

Perhaps it’s because it is only the two of them standing there that he says, “You haven’t changed at all.”

She blinks back at him slowly, wondering what he sees. “What makes you believe so?”

That same easy grin slips onto his face again. It’s an attractive smile that will only grow more so as he ages and his face grows into the sharp cheekbones he’s been given. “Do you remember that time they sent us all out on our own the first time? They were watching from the trees but we were too new into our training to know.”

She nods, the corner of her mouth uplifting. He spots it and is already letting a slight chuckle release from his lips as he continues.

“They wanted to see how we’d react as a group. Whether we would bicker and starve from our own stubborn behaviour or whether we would actually cooperate and survive until we could find our way back.”

She can see it now. It had been Spring at the time, the rivers swollen and rushing with snowmelt. She
remembers the large fish, their scales glowing as they wound their way through the currents. The forest had been bright and green and new, a reflection of the nightbloods stumbling through it.

“Argus had insisted on leading since he was the oldest and had promptly led us into a field of snare plants that we ended up picking out of our clothes for days. They had left us in the worst possible place, and I’m still not convinced that they weren’t driving all the game away from the shadows. And then by the third day of living off miniscule pickings of food and bickering left and right amongst ourselves you decided that was it.”

Clarke finds herself already smiling slightly at what she knows comes next.

“You decided you had had enough and that you were going to lead us out of there. I still don’t know completely how you did it. I think part of it had to do with when you patched up Tara’s leg after she cut it on a log. You refused to leave her behind and all at once everyone just decided that you were the one they were going to put their trust in that day.”

“I recall a bit more yelling and arguing than what you’ve described,” she says, remembering being so young and so full of belief that she knew what she was doing. She wished she had some of that now.

“Maybe so, but that doesn’t change the fact that they all moved over to your side after.”

“I thought I might be able to help. Who would I be if I did not try?” she looks up at him, at the easy smile on his face. She feels small again. Like the world is larger and greater than she could imagine and she has yet to grasp hold of the idea that it may very soon come to sit on her shoulders.

“Like I said, you have not changed.” With that he bows low and goes the way he came, leaving her caught up in memories and things she doesn’t think of anymore.

He’s wrong, of course. She is not the same girl that led the group of nightbloods to safety that day. She has done far too much in the chasm of time between then and now to scarcely recognize herself.

Anya appears at her elbow before she gets far. She has audiences to hold soon and she realizes from the look on Anya’s face that she will be a few minutes late.

Her voice is low, barely loud enough for Clarke to hear. “Avery says she has found something.”

“Go,” Clarke responds, releasing her.

Anya hesitates, the barest of pauses.

Clarke turns her face towards her old mentor, her tone sharp, leaving no room for argument. “I will be fine. Go.”

Anya considers for a moment before acquiescing with a sharp nod and disappearing once again.

For Lexa the next two days go much like the one before except even less exciting, if that is at all possible.

She’s forced to trail behind Clarke and her group of guards as she goes from meeting to meeting yet must remain outside the doors while the Commander holds audience after audience. It is less than thrilling.
The longer she stands, back to the wall, arms crossed and scowling at the ground, the more the idea of leaving worms its way into her mind. She needs more than what she’s been given. Small instances of sparring do not settle the desire to be moving that she has had for most of her life and that led her to join the guard in the first place.

“How long do you think this one is going to be?” she asks one of the warriors in front of the door.

He shrugs.

She sighs and slides to the the ground with the wall at her back, knees rising in front of her. Her belt is pressing into her side uncomfortably and she shifts it. For lack of anything better to do she pulls out of baton and unsnaps it, the sound reverberating in the quiet hallway.

She runs her hand over it, checking for faults though she knows there can’t possibly be any since she hasn’t gotten a chance to use it.

She looks up at the sound of hurried footsteps. It’s the clan leader’s brother, Andrew, walking briskly down the hall, robes fluttering with each step. There is a firm, worried expression messing between his brows that smooths to feigned indifference when he spots her sitting there.

He offers her a short bow in greeting that looks odd since she is on the ground. He doesn’t look particularly happy to see her and looks about ready to rush off again when she asks, “Busy day?”

“Very,” he grinds out between clenched teeth.

She nods, turning the baton in her hand idly.

Curious. Every time she has seen the man up to that point he had seemed cool and collected, disinterested to say the least. He looks flustered now.

“If you’re hoping to meet with her she’s a bit busy as well,” she says, gesturing at the closed door behind her with her thumb.

His eyes flick over to the door and the guards momentarily and something about it unsettles him.

“I… no, I am not meeting with the Commander.” Wherever his mind went in that moment it returns from quickly. He blinks and the impassive expression is back once more as he turns to face her. “It was good to see you as always, Lexa of the Sky. Send my regards to the Commander should I not get the opportunity to see her today.”

She nods, watching him closely as he dips his head quickly and turns to go at a slightly less brisk pace then when he entered.

The hallway returns to quiet after that. Some distant sound of the market filtering in through the high windows but otherwise all is still. She yawns.

When the doors open abruptly she springs to her feet, covering the fact that she was startled by the noise. Anya slips through, closes them again behind her and begins walking down the hall.

“Hey!” Lexa calls after her, jogging to catch up, collapsing her baton and placing it back at her belt.

“What?” Anya replies without looking at her, already scowling.

“Can I come with you?”

She must be desperate for relief from the boredom if she’s asking to tag along with the person that
likes to threaten her life every other moment.

“You do not even know where I am going.”

“Can’t be less boring than this. Can I come?” she asks again. They’ve reached the end of the hall. There isn’t even a pause of consideration. “No.”

Lexa grinds her teeth and slows her feet, falling behind and watching the older warrior disappear around the corner.

It continues like that for the remainder of the day. Clarke goes from meeting to meeting and Lexa becomes very familiar with the hallways of each building. She tries wandering a few times but every time some guard or other firmly suggests she not.

Occasionally she’ll see people from the city passing through. They don’t linger long enough for her to strike up any conversation, the likely side effect of the Commander’s presence behind the closed doors.

With her back to another wall she tips her head back, closes her eyes and tries to imagine what Polis will be like.

The day skips forward quickly, not taking the time to drag its feet. It’s a rush of meetings and audiences and other things that all demand Clarke’s attention. It’s loud and persistent and the second silence slips inside for a moment, Clarke finds herself taking a breath of thanks.

She is just about to eat for the first time that day - a bowl of hearty soup delivered by a servant to her throne room, when there’s a clearing throat. Ignoring the growling protests of her stomach she looks up to see Anya standing on the fringes of the room. There’s a downward tilt of her lips and a tense set to her posture.

Not good.

“How bad?” Clarke asks, putting her food aside on the large table, already forgotten.

Anya doesn’t even answer but her frown deepens and Clarke feels her stomach sink.

That bad.
Lexa jumps to her feet as they ricochet off the walls with the force.

“Clarke! Er-- Commander!” she tries shouting after the girl who is already many steps away, red sash flowing from her shoulder in her obvious haste.

Clarke is deep in a hushed conversation with the person walking beside her at a brisk pace and she pays Lexa no mind. She disappears behind a corner, guards close on her heels. Something is happening though Lexa couldn’t begin to guess what.

She tries to follow, hoping to snag just a small moment of Clarke’s time, but is stopped by a firm hand on her shoulder. Lexa watches another opportunity to voice her request slip away and shoves the guard’s hand from her shoulder with a grumble.

Clarke lifts her face to the trees that bend and sway with the wind of the valley. Some are bright and luminous, leaves shaking colour at the sky. Others, such as the one Clarke stands directly under, sits still, its charred remains having no more life left to display.

She returns her gaze downward, to the layer of ash that clouds as she walks atop it.

She doesn’t have more than a few minutes before she will need to leave. They’re already pushing their time there. She shouldn’t even be here. Not this close to the border. Not with what this means.

“How long do you think?” she asks no one in particular, watching the ash and dust catch the afternoon light from their intrusion.

“Not more than a week or two would be my guess,” grumbles one of her guards from somewhere over her left shoulder after no one else fills the empty space left by her question.

She nods without looking at him, concurring.

The charred remains of the small village sit black and hollow in the afternoon, the shadows pooling deeper for the bright light. She can hear birds chirping high overhead in the few trees that are left mostly untouched. The rest sit like the village: splintered and gaping, the flames having eaten them whole.

It is too nice of a day for such destruction.

“Why didn’t we hear about this sooner?” Anya voices the question that everyone is thinking, a sharp edge to her voice. “There are strict orders to report on anything near the border.”

Clarke closes her eyes and breathes. It’s all smoke and death. “Because someone didn’t want us to.”

“Word would have reached us eventually. Traders passing through, travelers, someone would have seen and reported to the city.”

“Their main trade station was destroyed by a fire,” Clarke informs her, recalling the discussion with Narrok. “Traders would know that and not come through this way. And we are too close to the border for travelers. No, I think it would have taken a while for us to find out what happened here if we had not looked for ourselves.”

Her guards continue to poke about the destroyed village, the remaining wood groaning and
splintering and snapping beneath their feet. Clarke doesn’t look; she knows there is no life to be found.

“What now?” Anya asks, coming up beside her with a hand resting on the hilt of her dagger as if already showing where her mind is at.

“No we go back, before anyone realizes we left.” She turns and begins heading back towards the horses that are waiting where they left them. “And we figure out what has been going on.”

“And then?”

Clarke pulls the hood back over her head. It is a nondescript piece of fabric, nothing like the thick red cloak she usually wears as Commander.

“We find who did this.”

The next time Lexa sees Clarke, it is much later in the day.

After being left behind to be guarded and babysat Lexa had taken the very adult approach and opted to sit in her room all day. It had been the combination of the setting sun through her window and the growling coming from her stomach that eventually forced her out.

Now she sits in the opulent dining hall, alone at one of the long benches lining the banquet table, ignoring the fact that, even here, there is a guard that follows her. Lexa is helping herself to some of the food that has been laid out on the table for those who did not arrive in time for dinner, picking at a plate of dried fruits that she is not sure she could identify even in their natural state. The door creaks open and she pauses in surprise with a berry halfway to her mouth.

Clarke looks as surprised as Lexa is. It is rather late, she obviously wasn’t expecting anyone, let alone Lexa. The expression is smoothed over quickly, eyebrows dropping to their usual level as she continues into the room. Two guards post up at the door behind, stiff as boards with their hands on their spears.

Clarke accepts a mug of something from a servant that all but appears from thin air and comes to sit at Lexa’s table.

The first thing Lexa notices is that she looks tired. The circles under her eyes standing out more prominently now than they had that morning, and if Lexa wasn’t sure that the Commander was running on little sleep, it is all but confirmed now.

That being said, there is still a bit of discontent at being treated the way she has been recently, so Lexa doesn’t feel as bad as she perhaps should. Besides, it makes Clarke look… human for once. It’s oddly refreshing.

“How are you enjoying Shallow Valley?” Clarke asks once she has settled on the bench on her own side, ignoring the large chair that has been set at the head of the table for her benefit. She is dressed now in almost none of her Commander regalia. The only ornaments left to dictate her title are the cog emblems twisted into the braids of her hair and the well-crafted blades at her side.

Lexa isn’t expecting the smalltalk and it takes her a moment to respond.
“It’s… different than I was expecting,” she answers carefully, though she can’t say she had any particular expectations in mind before arriving.

Clarke nods as if she understands and begins filling her plate with odds and ends from the table. Lexa watches her make her choices, notices what things she stays away from and what she adds seconds of. Dried berries appear to be a favorite.

“They are an interesting people,” Clarke continues, surprising Lexa, who assumed they would fall into a stilted silence. “They are very independent as a clan. Besides the desert people they are the least likely to ask for help.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Lexa asks, fiddling with the food on her plate more than eating it. She is intrigued even though a part of her still wants to play the role of the petulant child and give Clarke the silent treatment.

Clarke shrugs, rising and dropping one shoulder. “Perhaps in some cases. But too much independence and one begins to forget that they are part of something bigger.”

“Part of the coalition,” Lexa supplies, spinning her glass on the table absentmindedly, watching it catch the candlelight.

Clarke’s eyes find hers quickly and the expression on her face is interesting, it is almost as if, for a moment while she was speaking, she had forgotten that it was Lexa to whom she was talking. Lexa blinks and the expression is gone.

“Yes,” she answers eventually.

"Your coalition. And, technically, your clan,” Lexa supplies again, watching her carefully.

“Technically.”

They fall into silence.

Lexa’s eye catches the scar that runs through the other girl’s right eyebrow, following the thin white mark. Her gaze trails and picks up the similar array of markings that cover the other girl’s hands and wrists and arms as she eats. She is a canvas of violence. But in the candlelight she looks soft.

Lexa looks at her own hands, flexes her fingers out where they rest on the table. Even though being a guard on the Ark hadn’t exactly left her soft and unmarked, her own hands look smooth and clear in comparison to the girl’s sitting across from her.

She spends the next few minutes of silence figuring out how she’s going to broach the topic of going to Polis.

She could just spit it out. State the facts in a reasonable manner. She reminds herself that she’s not asking for anything unreasonable. Or perhaps she should bring it up with subtlety. Work it into the conversation slowly.

Her mouth opens to ask something non-obvious about the Polis weather when the door creaks open. The noise harsh in the low light.

“Heda,” Avery greets with a bow that is short in her haste. If she is surprised to find them both sitting there she does a good job of hiding it. “There is something you should perhaps see.”

If Lexa didn’t know any better she would say that Clarke sighs upon hearing the words and a look of
worry crosses her face.

She is already rising from the table when Lexa gains her voice back. “Actually, if you have a moment -- I was really hoping we could discuss --” But she can already tell that the moment has passed and her voice trails off as Clarke heads for the door, not one for dawdling on things like goodbyes.

Her feet are nearly silent as she walks and Lexa notices for the first time that the Commander is barefoot.

“You should get some rest.”

She doesn’t know what makes her say it. But there is Lexa's voice, cast out into the quiet space between them.

She knows Clarke hears her because there is the slightest of pauses in her steps towards the door. But then she is continuing on and Lexa is left among the wavering candles.

Clarke sleeps very little.

She dozes fitfully, dreams dipping into dark places that are no lighter than when she sees them in her memories.

She rises long before the sun as a result, dressing without thought, pulling on clothes and making her way out of her room. Her guard follows silently and she catches him yawning a few times in the early hour.

Clarke passes through the short tower of a building her rooms are in, climbing up the tightly wound staircase until she pushes through the final door. Cool air greets her face and she immediately feels like the world is no longer trying to push in at her all at once.

Without much preamble she goes and sits at the edge of the rooftop, tucking her legs under her and resting her hands on her knees. The light wind pulls and tangles its fingers in her hair and clothes and she breathes in the city beneath her.

The sky is showing the barest hints of growing lighter, as if the morning is deciding whether or not it wants to arrive and is merely flirting with the idea for now. It is one of her favorite times of day. The resolute stillness is usually an immediately balm to her restless mind. But not today.

Her energy is that of a kicked hive - buzzing and irritated. She cannot still it despite her best efforts.

She closes her eyes.

“How do I always know that I’ll find you up here?” he laughs, carefully pulling himself onto the roof of the Commander’s tower, body bending around the large stones meant to block him from doing such a thing.

He comes around the rubble and predominantly-unrestored area and drops himself into the spot beside her at the edge with little care for safety. He’s warm and it had taken Clarke until that moment to realize how cold she’d gotten sitting up there so long.
“Titus is going to kill you when he eventually finds out that this is where you sneak off to,” she can hear the smile in his voice. Ordinarily that would be enough to get her own lips twitching as they are so accustomed to doing in his presence. Instead she says what has been playing on an endless loop in her mind for days. Afraid that if she does not say the words now she may never do it at all.

“I’m going to declare war tomorrow.”

He stills, no longer laughing.

She’s not sure if it’s minutes or days or years that they sit there before he speaks. There is only the howling wind and the setting sun that feels more illusion than reality.

Eventually she can’t take it anymore and she looks at his face. It is a riot of carefully controlled emotions that she picks out one by one. This could be the last time she sees him, she realizes. The knowledge sits sharp in her chest. She could march off to the mountain in the morning and disappear into it like so many of her people, never to be seen again.

In the end he doesn’t say anything.

Instead he wraps an arm around her and just watches the setting sun lights up the hazy sky. She rests her head on his shoulder and breathes. For just a moment everything is okay.

By the time the sun begins to crest over the horizon Clarke has long given up on finding any semblance of calm.

Her guards follow her to the throne room where she pours over reports she bids they bring her. Slowly the day comes to life around her, the candles extinguished now that the glow of sunlight has replaced it. The door opens at one point and a servant delivers breakfast which she promptly ignores. She knows she should eat but she is too busy pacing to perform the task.

Clarke has patience, it was a lesson she lacked as a child and was therefore drilled into her more times than she would care to remember. The lessons were not always kind, but they were effective in teaching her the results wrought from those who are wise enough to wait. However, this wait is making her remember times when those lessons had not settled so deep.

But wait she must. She cannot act until she has more information.

She paces and the sun marks a path across the floor where it streams in from the high windows.

Eventually she gets the prize for her patience and immediately wishes she hadn't.

Clarke’s fingers are gripping the arms of the throne, tense and white-knuckled as she absorbs the information.

“You’re sure?” She asks, though the question is pointless and they both know it. If Anya wasn’t sure she would have never brought it to Clarke.

She nods anyways. The stone in Clarke’s stomach sinks further.

“And she is sure it was him?”

Another nod.

Clarke sits back on her throne and puts a hand to her head in a rare show of exhaustion for the Commander. She is… so tired. Always.
Every time she thinks she is two steps ahead she finds herself four steps behind.

“How is he now?” It comes out half-growl.

“In his study. He returned there the moment he returned from the village. We have Osla watching him.”

Well that was at least one thing that Clarke could be sure was well-handled. He wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without her knowing.

Clarke pushes to her feet and approaches the table where the map is laid out for her to see. Her eyes go from the large city of their current location, past the river that splits and spreads to the north, following outwards to the villages in the fringes. Her fingers trail over each of them and the large X’s now crossing them out.

“You couldn’t have known,” comes the voice of her old mentor. It’s the same even tone she used to level at Clarke when she was giving important lessons. It is far too late for lessons.

“I should have,” she responds, one hand still splayed out over the map, fingers stiff.

“You are not omniscient, despite what some of those fools out there believe.”

“I should have come earlier,” Clarke says, not listening. “I could have prevented this.”

She can feel her jaw clench as she pushes away from the table and begins pacing. She missed it. She is supposed to know everything that is happening in each of her clans and she has focused too much on preventing her enemy from entering her territory to notice that it was already here, merely hiding.

There’s a few moments where Anya doesn’t interrupt her thoughts or her pacing.

“Bring him here. Now!” she roars at the guard by the door who bows and scrambles to follow her order as fast as his feet will carry him.

Her hands are flat on the table once more, she hadn’t even heard the sound of her palms meeting it as she peers at the map.

Four villages. Gone.

The process was brilliant in its ingenuity. She could admire that much.

Why would the ice queen march on a clan with an army, loud and destructive, drawing the forces of the entire coalition when she could just take it piece by piece when no one was looking?

She stalks back and forth as she processes the information before settling on her throne to wait, fingers drumming on the arm.

They only have to wait a few minutes before the doors are reopening, the guards knowing better than to waste time knocking.

They drag Andere forward and toss him to his knees before her. His eyes race between the guards who had dragged him there roughly before coming up to meet Clarke’s. He pales at the expression on her face.

She takes a moment to just look at him.

He has dark circles under his eyes and his fingers are stained with ink. His robes look disheveled, as
if he had never gone to sleep the night before and hadn’t bothered to change into a new set of clothes with the new day.

“Leave us,” she tells those who are still in the room. She does not raise her gaze to meet Anya’s surely disapproving gaze and waits until the sets of footsteps recede and the door closes behind them.

Clarke stills the fingers drumming on her chair. The room is deafeningly quiet.

“So tell me, Andere, what was it that prompted the betrayal?” She starts, letting the words roll out across her tongue one by one, puncturing holes in the quiet.

He is quiet, his eyes finding the floor rather than looking at her.

“Was it jealousy?” she ponders. “Did you grow tired of always being in your brother’s shadow despite being the eldest? Did you believe that Queen Nia would let you rule these lands if you agreed to her plan?”

He still says nothing and she feels her anger simmer just beneath the surface.

“Let me see if I’ve been able to understand what has been happening,” she says evenly, uncrossing her legs to sit forward, elbows resting on her knees as she looks down at him below.

“Nia, being the perceptive queen that she is, must have assessed a weakness here. She knew, or her spies told her at the very least, that you were not content with your position and could be made an offer. Or perhaps you even knew she would be looking for such opportunities and sought to contact her yourself.”

She stares at him as she speaks but his gaze remains pinned to the floor even as his lips press together as he listens.

“Shallow Valley is located in a very precarious position, situated at the edge of the coalition and directly facing the mountains and the border to ice nation. It stands as a key position between our two lands and if it were to fall into her hands would provide a strong foothold to move forward from. And if Shallow Valley falls, what is to say the clans between here and Polis would not follow?”

She rises from her throne and begins walking about the room, hands clasped behind her back.

“So you struck a deal somehow. Let her slowly take the clan piece by piece, starting with the outer villages. Meanwhile you intercept any messages that could possibly come through here. I suppose the destroyed trade route was also your doing. Destroy the outer villages, destroy the first line of defense. My eyes and ears cannot be everywhere and you likely assumed I would place most of my warriors at the border crossing in Blue Cliff given that it is closer to Polis and the northern road passing nearer there. Once the first line of defense has been eliminated, and no one is there to raise the alarm, she is able to march straight through to the Shallow Valley capital. There would be insufficient time for Narrok to surmount a force to meet hers and Shallow Valley would fall.”

She is looking down at the map on the table, Andere has not moved the entire time she has spoken.

“I suppose then she would march on Blue Cliff once this clan was secure, knowing there would be no opposing force at her back.” Clarke muses, looking over the map of the clans for a moment longer before she comes back to Andere.

Her voice is even, calm. Inside is a force of anger that settles unsteadily beneath the surface as images of the villages she visited rise again in her mind. She can still smell the ash.
She stands before him.

“And I suppose she promised you a seat at the table. You will be left to rule over whatever remains in this corner of the land once the dust has settled and the coalition and I have been destroyed.”

Silence returns to the room once more as she looks down at him, staring at the crown of his head. He almost looks as if he is bent in prayer.

“You have nothing to say in your defense?” she asks, hears the words come out of her mouth like venom. “Do you have nothing to say after you left your own people to be slaughtered? Families! Children!” her violent words are flung like daggers at him and he flinches at each. “Do you have *nothing* --”

“No.”

The word comes through simply and he releases a large sigh, finally meeting her eye.

He looks tired. Perhaps as tired as she is.

Something unsettles within her as he stares back, his brown eyes deep and mournful. He is resigned to what is happening to him.

Clarke has had to pass judgment on many people during her time as Commander. She knows the expression of a man that has been responsible for taking multiple lives. She knows the face of a person when they realize that they have reached the end of any pardon that might have been granted towards them.

Her eyes search his face deeply and then smooths with her surprise.

She knows what a murderer looks like.

This is not one.

“You did not do this,” she says as she realizes it. He looks away and swallows, all but confirming it.

“Who!?” she demands firmly, brows pinching together, eyes searching him though he refuses to look at her again. Her confusion must be written on her face. How did she get it wrong? They followed him back from one of the villages!

He says nothing.

She steps forward and grabs a fistful of his robes and drags him up to meet her eyes. “You know who actually did this. Who are you protecting?”

It clicks all at once.

Her fingers release his robes like she had been clinging to hot metal.

The shock and rage that rises within her in a surge nearly makes her gasp in its intensity.

Clarke knows who.
Lexa hadn’t meant to slip free of her guard. Really.

She had just started walking and had expected someone to stop her at some point. And, for once, no one did.

She spent her first moments of freedom mostly just wandering the halls, watching the people bustling about in the square. She considered going down and exploring but the sight of a few guards had her dipping into the first hall she saw and walking in the opposite direction. She knows she likely won’t get far before she runs into someone that will lead her back to the area she had originated from.

It is pure coincidence then that she sees Clarke walking on her own. She can’t believe her luck. She looks like she’s in a hurry so Lexa has to half jog to catch up with her, gripping onto her staff tightly.

“Hey, Clarke. Or, Commander, rather. I was wondering if I could ask you something,” she huffs out when she finally catches up.

This is the point where Clarke’s guard would ordinarily step in or stop her or someone would come up with a message that is of vital importance and whisk the Commander away. Lexa is determined to not let that happen this time so she speaks quickly, her legs moving to match the brisk pace of Clarke’s.

“I was wondering. If I could perhaps train as a guard.” She braces for some sort of reaction, but she gets nothing.

“I just don’t feel as if my skills are being utilized to their full potential right now. And I believe I’ve fulfilled my role here rather well and that I can, you know, do more.”

Clarke has still not said anything. Maybe Lexa was making a bigger deal out of this than she needed to.

If Lexa were paying closer attention she would notice the look on the other girl’s face and perhaps choose a more opportune time. But she misses the clench of Clarke’s fists, the tense set of her shoulders. The clench of her jaw.

“So I thought that I could maybe leave. Go to Polis. You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

Something she said seems to finally have broken through the cloud around the Commander’s mind. She doesn’t even slow as she gives her answer.

“No.”

The response is so sharp and distinct it leaves no room for alternate interpretations. Lexa falters, her brow constricting in indignation.

“I can provide more value! I mean, I’m not even doing anything here except sitting around outside your damn meetings. I can be of value, I can do something, I can --”

“I said no.”

“But --”

It is one word too many.

“I said NO!”
Lexa flinches in surprise as Clarke spins on her suddenly, the words released as a roar of fury. They echo in the empty stone corridor, ricocheting off the walls, and scattering a few birds in the courtyard into a flurry of wings.

Clarke’s eyes are ice, she is Commander through and through in this moment, searching Lexa’s face as if challenging her to say something more.

She doesn’t.

When Clarke turns away Lexa doesn’t follow.

Clarke’s fury feels like it is eating her alive.

Fury at herself, mostly.

It boils hot and malevolent within her and she feels foolish and blind.

The door slams against the inner wall when she throws it open. She hears something fall off a shelf from the rattle and doesn’t watch to see whatever it is shatter on the ground.

“Clarke?” Narrok asks in confusion at her violent entrance, rising from his desk. “What are you --”

She doesn’t let him finish. Within three strides she has a fist in the front of his shirt and has thrown his back to the nearest wall. He lets out a started ‘oof’ as his head smacks back against it.

She feels words riling inside of her, fighting for space on her tongue to lash out at him. She holds them in and glares at the face of her fellow nightblood. At her friend.

He no longer asks what she is doing or why. He, like his brother, is silent. There is no semblance of resignation or guilt on his face, just a quiet and firm resolution.

“Why?” she asks eventually. There are feelings of disgust and guilt and anger swirling inside of her but the word comes out soft, almost a gasp, unable to understand.

He does not attempt to remove her grip from his front, he does not fight at all except for the way his brows draw together in sudden anger.

“Do you know what it is like? To have trained to be Heda, to have been put through what nightbloods are put through, and then have it all be for nothing?”

Her mouth opens but no words come forth.

“We were told about the glory of being Heda every day from the first day and they used it to drive us to accomplish everything we ever did. We trained as we did on the belief that that glory would be ours, that our lives only hold meaning if we were Heda. Where does that leave those that are not?”

“You,” she starts and then has to gather herself. “You did this… because you never got to sit on the throne? You let your own people die just so you could grasp more power?!” She feels herself recoil.

He is silent. She sees his throat bob as he swallows but there is no guilt in his eyes. Shock lights through her system as disbelief strikes through her. A feeling akin to anguish is close on its heels and
she is a riot of feelings she does not know how to wrap herself around and contain.

“I saved you!” she yells, shaking him, her fury and disbelief making her thoughts incoherent and wild.

For the first time now, he shows signs of being resigned and his next words feel like a stone dropping into Clarke’s stomach.

“You should not have.”

She lets go of the front of his shirt. There is a commotion behind the closed doors but she ignores it and reins in some of her focus.

“You will die for this,” she tells him. Her mind still reeling to completely grasp how this has happened. How did she let this happen?

He does not move from his spot against the wall. “I should have died a long time ago.”

“You are far too late, Clarke.”

“Who contacted you from the Ice Nation?” she demands, determined to stop this betrayal before it grows.

He turns his head towards the door and smiles as if something he has awaited has finally arrived.

He smiles, but it is not friendly. “Long live the ice queen.”

Her fist is moving before she realizes she’s swinging. It connects with the side of his face firmly and his unconscious body sags to the floor just as the doors burst open on their hinges once again.

Clarke has already drawn the knife at her hip when she spins to face the entrant at the sound. Her arm drops a fraction in surprise.

Two of her guards lay dead at the feet of the girl that stands there now with a victorious twist to her lips that only grows when she sees Clarke. It pulls at the white scars of the ice nation that mark her face, the intricate pattern that Clarke would recognize anywhere.

“Ontari.”
Chapter 8

Ontari looks the same as the last time Clarke saw her.

Her mother had sent her as an emissary during the early days. After the fall of the mountain. At what had felt like the start of it all. When the coalition was brand new and everyone was anxious to test its strength and test hers more. When things were precarious and none of the clans were sure that the coalition was practical or was going to last even the coming season.

The girl with the sneer and the ice nation language rolling off her tongue, quick to insult and turn her nose up at the halls of Polis and its inhabitants. She, perhaps on orders from her queen, had refused to pay Clarke much respect. Azgeda were not, and still are not, part of the coalition and therefore owed her no loyalty and thought disdain was an acceptable substitute. And they were eager to show as much. When Ontari had left with her convoy after declaring that the ice nation had no intention of subjecting themselves to the rule of a leader that was as green as spring, Clarke had guessed the next time she saw the ice nation royalty it would not be on friendly terms.

And now here they are.

Clarke’s fingers grip and regrip her weapon. She takes in the group at the room’s entry. They look at her with hungry eyes.

There are too many.

It is a harrowing thought. A quick and accurate assessment her mind makes from years of battle experience, a muscle memory reaction.


But there is nowhere to run and certainly nowhere to hide.

The soldiers crowd into the room around their leader, bulky frames filling in the space until there are no gaps. Their weapons are drawn, some already red with the fights they won to get to this room. The bright, slightly-curved blades are held by their sides, catching the light from the windows at Clarke’s back as they drip crimson to the floor. The ease with which they hold them is not comforting.

They are all wearing clothing from Shallow Valley, Clarke notices. The loose robe-like material ill-fitting but distinct to this clan. It was likely given to them by the man lying unconscious at her feet. The orange and red colors do nothing, however, to mask the thin white scars carved into the skin of their faces, showing exactly where they came from. She’d recognize those marks anywhere.
Ontari alone has not drawn her weapon. Instead she stands between her soldiers, her ornate sword hanging from her side, still wrapped in its dark blue sheath. She must feel that drawing it would be redundant and not worth the effort at this point. Not with so many at her side.

‘Too many’, Clarke’s mind unhelpfully informs her once again.

The only differences in the other girl over the years is that there are a few more marks on her skin, clearly a face that has aged by only a few years but has seen enough for a lifetime in the time between. If it were not for the situation at hand Clarke would perhaps like to know what exactly her life is like in the ice nation. She cannot imagine Nia to be a queen that is easy to please or one that takes failure kindly.

Clarke skips her gaze from the soldiers to meet her eyes. There is an icy edge to Ontari’s gaze as she sets her eyes on Clarke, her jaw sharp. She seems unfazed in a way while her companions appear eager - a hunting party that knows its prey is cornered.

Ontari’s voice almost sounds bored when she speaks.

“Get her.”

Clarke’s drops into a crouch, feels the wall at her back, heart thudding and mind racing.

Too many. Too many.

She could not have chosen a worse place to get cornered. There is nowhere for her to run, and she does not believe, judging by the guards lying dead in the hall, that help is coming soon.

Her fingers grip and regrip her weapon again, calloused fingers anxious and skipping. She breathes steadily through her nose. The ice nation soldiers approach with measured steps, choosing to come at her from as many sides as possible. They do not rush, they seem to know that approaching her staggered would only be a benefit to her. They know she cannot take all of them at once.

Her eyes flit from one approaching attacker to the other and she adjusts her stance as best she can. It’s… not good. Not for her anyways. She knows her strengths and her capabilities and though they may be higher than average she too has her limits. Even as Heda.

She takes a deep breath.

The violence descends in a rush.

The one on her left lunges forward and she dives beneath his strike, simultaneously bringing up her blade up to counter the downward swing of another. Metal grinds against metal harshly, splitting the air with sharp noise. She relents against the pressure abruptly, dodging the hand of another soldier that reaches out hoping to grip her arm. Her blade comes to meet another in the same moment her elbow connects with a nose and then her fist with a cheek. She is a flurry of wild desperation.

A sliver of a gap opens and she tries to break free, sliding between the space of their arms. A hand on her sash pulls and she hears fabric tear as she’s dragged back. Her sword swings out and he lets go but she is cornered again, the gap closed. She strikes out with everything she has. She is fast. A lesser fighter would have been disarmed and overcome much earlier. She strikes and strikes and blocks and dodges.

It’s not enough. It’s not enough.

Too many.
One of them snags a hand around her wrist and she knows it’s over. Possibly before they do.

Her blade is knocked from her hand, clanging to the ground, and in the split second that follows her back is slammed onto the table in the room. They pile on her, muscles straining against her resistance. She struggles, kicking out at them and tries to twist out of their grips but they are ironclad. Three of them are bleeding from her hand and are not about to give her the opportunity to draw more blood.

“Finally,” comes Ontari’s voice from somewhere nearby. She hadn’t lifted a finger the entire encounter, clearly knowing how it would look in the end, though a bit impatient with how long it took to get there.

Clarke, still struggling, manages to connect one of her boots with the shin of the one holding her shoulder down. He roars something in the ice nation language that she doesn’t catch but can probably guess the meaning of.

She only manages to lift her head the barest amount before she stills at the feeling of something sharp at her throat. The point of a blade at your neck is an unmistakable feeling once it’s happened enough times.

“I think that’s enough of that.”

Clarke breathes heavily, heart rushing in her chest, still wanting to fight. She watches Ontari down the length of her sword. Clarke’s sword, actually. The other girl apparently having claimed it when they’d knocked it from Clarke’s grip. Clarke feels something akin to a growl form in the back of her throat.

One of the ice nation soldiers twists her arm back to keep her in place. She gasps at the shock of pain as the joint protests violently to the movement.

She glares at the girl holding the blade to her throat who simply stares as if she has all the patience in the world. And perhaps she has been patiently waiting for this moment.

Clarke does quickly realize one thing: they are not here to kill her. At least not right this moment. If that were the case she would already be dead. They would not have even taken a moment to exchange any words or pleasantries. She would have a knife sliding between her ribs and they would be gone.

No, they are not going to kill her. Whatever they want is probably worse.

“Now are you going to cooperate and come with us in a dignified manner?” Ontari asks, the white scars on her face moving with her words. Her eyes are soulless.

The blade at Clarke’s throat presses a bit harder in threat. She feels a small trickle of blood run down the side of her neck to the table.

She swallows and nods, feels the blade bite deeper with what they both know is a lie.

Ontari smiles. There is nothing friendly to be found in it.

“I don’t believe that for a second. No, I’m sorry, I think we’re going to have to do this the hard way.”

The pressure is gone from her neck suddenly as Ontari turns away, taking the sword with her.
Clarke only gets to be confused for a moment before something very hard collides with the side of her head and her vision goes black.

Lexa is mad. Or fuming. Or angry. Any word you want to use to describe it. She stalks with fists clenched up and down the halls of the building.

She had gotten over her initial shock at being yelled at and treated like a small child who should be scolded for asking for something. Now she is angry.

Her steps move quickly down the hall in the direction Clarke had disappeared. She is determined to get more of an answer than she got, more than just a “no” and a “because I said so”. She does not accept that she is destined to live this role until The Commander decides she is no longer useful. She can do more than that. She has more value than that. She refuses to let that be her life.

She gets completely turned around in the eastern wing of the complex and ends up circling back twice around to the same spot she had been in before and having to retrace her steps. This place is a maze of stone corridors. The buildings house all the rooms of all the important clan members and Lexa did not bother memorizing a map since she had been led everywhere she had wanted to go.

Despite all the turned around wandering the anger doesn’t waver, it sits beneath her skin and inside the clenched fists of her hands. It feels good, in a way, like she had forgotten for a moment there that she should be angry about this whole thing. About Clarke. About being used. That she should even still be angry that she had the dumb luck to fall from the sky. She should be angry about her whole goddamn life if she thinks about it long enough. But right now she is focusing all of that anger on the present situation.

She tells herself that it’s only anger she feels. Tells herself that there is not some portion of the tumult sitting uncomfortably inside of her that belongs to hurt. Because hurt would imply an expectation of kindness. And that -- well, maybe she might have thought…

It doesn’t matter much now. She was wrong. Obviously.

Perhaps there is no room for “hurt” on the ground and she best get used to it. Hurt is for people with softer lives and hers hasn’t been soft for some time.

In her musings, she had stopped paying attention to where she was heading. If she had, perhaps she would have paid more attention to the fact that things had gotten quiet. Unusually quiet. It may not be a particularly busy part of the building, but there is usually some noise somewhere -- birds fluttering in courtyards, a guard or two. Something. Anything but this level of quiet that her internal dramatic monologue is preventing her from noticing.

She’s so caught in her own head, in fact, that she doesn’t notice the body until she practically trips over it.

Her boots squeak as she skids to an abrupt stop at the very edge of the pool of blood.

Lexa backs up so fast she stumbles until her back hits a wall behind her. She stares with wide eyes.

The Shallow Valley guard lays in a circle of blood large enough for her to immediately know that he will not be getting back up again. His orange and red clothing is soaked in it, drenched from the
middle and seeping out through his robes. His hand lays outstretched towards a dagger that has skidded far outside his reach, as if he had drawn it but has not had even a moment to think of using it.

Extending from that point there is a trail of blood leading down the hall in inconsistent drips, as if whoever did this was in a big enough of a hurry to not bother wiping their blade. The trail leads down the hall before disappearing out of sight around a corner and Lexa is suddenly very intent on not figuring out where it leads.

Her mind is reeling with what she sees. But she’s over her shock enough that she is just about to turn and go back, run in the direction that is not in the one with the blood trail, when she hears footsteps. Multiple sets of footsteps.

Heart suddenly racing double-time, Lexa doesn’t wait to see who it is. Anyone that does that is not someone she wants to meet.

After frantically looking around she ducks into a wedge of an alcove to her right, curling her shoulders in and holding her breath to fit. The stone is pressing in on her and she never thought she’d be so thankful for her experience in small spaces from the Ark.

Her hiding spot is barely out of sight and will only actually hide her if whoever is coming does not turn around or stop as they pass. Better than nothing, she supposes. It is uncomfortable to say the least, the stone jabbing against her spleen and her cheek, her head turned at an odd angle.

The footsteps grows louder. Her pulse thuds in her ears and she stills as best she can.

She can barely see anything given the angle her head is tilted at. Still, she catches glimpses as they pass. Tall, broad shouldered warriors in Shallow Valley robes. They are led by someone of smaller stature, a girl, walking at the front of the pack. She has strange marks on her face that Lexa squints at to see better.

Any momentary relief she feels at the idea that perhaps they are here to help is effectively quashed when they have no reaction to the dead guard on the floor. They pass around him without a second glance. And it’s not like he’s hard to miss.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me,” Lexa whispers under her breath, sound easily muffled by the stone against her cheek.

Clarke’s blonde hair is unmistakable as it trails towards the ground, her body loose and clearly unconscious as she is carried away. Her hands are bound tightly together and her arms hang at what would be an incredibly uncomfortable angle were she awake to notice.

Lexa hears a door open in the direction of the open courtyard that sits a level below them. A stairway, if Lexa had to guess. The footsteps shuffle out and the door closes quickly once more.

She squeezes herself out of her hiding place with a stumble, feeling her lungs expand to take in the air it missed over the last few moments. She quickly runs up to an adjacent window, leaning just to the side to be able to peek out through the narrow gap.

She watches them quickly descend the outer stairs and cross the private courtyard, hurrying across before making a straight line for a small wooden door at the other side. There is no hesitation about
which direction to go. One by one they slip through, taking Clarke with them, until the last one closes the door behind him. They’re there and then they’re gone.

Lexa continues to stare through the window without blinking, wondering if she just imagined the entire situation. Perhaps she’s dreaming. She looks back at the dead guard, unmoved and lying still. The hollow nervousness and fear in her abdomen feels much too real to be a dream. She looks away.

Her mind is a race of thoughts.

Clarke has somehow been taken and whoever that group was must be something formidable and not a group to mess with because Clarke has been taken and Lexa has seen Clarke in action and that doesn’t seem like something that should be possible.

A bird chirps softly in the distance, as if the world is trying adversely to go back to normal even though it’s currently tipped on its side.

It occurs to her in this moment, for just a breath, that she could simply turn around and walk the other way.

She could go back the way she came and pretend that she never saw what she just did. She could let whatever is about to happen happen and take the opportunity to make a break for it. Go wherever she’d like.

She didn’t sign up for this. This is not her problem. This is not her fight.

The bird continues to chirp and Lexa takes a deep breath, practically seeing the possibility roll out before her, waiting to be taken.

It would be easy.

But Lexa has never been one for easy, she supposes.

She all but shakes her head at herself. She can’t believe she’s going to do what she’s about to do.

Lexa doesn’t know what her life is supposed to be like now, so far away from the only home she knew. Her Ark guard life is settled in the past, she has accepted that, but there is one core truth that has not been shaken: if someone needs her help, she doesn’t turn away.

None of that changes just because she is no longer circling the earth in an artificial atmosphere. She doesn’t change.

She’s still mad. But she also knows she will never get the opportunity to vent her anger if she lets Clarke get carted off to what is probably her death by the looks of things.

She steps away from the window.

Taking a moment she heads back to bend and pick up the short discarded dagger off the ground, sliding it into the side of her boot.

“Sorry,” she apologizes to the guard, glancing at his face before looking away. “I have a feeling I might need this more than you right now.”

With a breath of finality she heads for the staircase and begins hurriedly winding her way down after them.

When she gets to the door she hesitates before going through. Stepping back she carves a large ‘X’
Clarke comes to with slow, bleary blinks.

The ground moves in front of her in sways as the earth pitches and rolls, dirt rising and falling close to her face. Her brow furrows in confusion. She blinks and tries not to be sick. There is a pair of boots as well and... oh.

She is being carried.

Why.

It comes back to her in flickers of moments and then, once it begins, the rest of the picture rushes to click into place. She winces, the memory also providing her with the understanding that the monumental force pressing in on the side of her head is pain. Pain from being knocked unconscious and carried long enough that all the blood is rushing to compete for space in her head.

She grinds her teeth against her own stupidity for letting this happen. Anya is going to kill her. Clarke should let her.

If she hadn’t stormed off. If she had just waited, told someone before going to talk to Narrok. But her head had been clouded with his betrayal and she doesn’t even really remember much about anything between figuring out it was him and the moment she had him pinned against the wall. She had been blind in her fury. Blind and stupid.

And now she is paying for her foolishness.

She keeps her body loose and still as her captors continue to walk. They are all quiet, even Ontari, who Clarke attributes the lighter footsteps she hears to over the ringing in her ears. She does not recognize the dark ground that sways beneath her and realizes that they must be following the narrow passages that cut under and between the buildings of the city.

She wonders if Narrok drew them a map. He would know exactly which path and routes would not cross with anyone. Which ones are old and unused. Ones that would be out of sight and out of earshot. Clarke could probably start yelling till her throat was hoarse and it would likely get her nowhere except another hit across the head.

She curses him mentally again. Vows she will get out of this only so that she may personally deliver the punishment that is awaiting him.

Clarke does not alert them to her regained consciousness, decides instead to bide her time until she finds an opportunity to break free. The odds are hindered with her hands bound, she will admit. But they did not bind her ankles, nor did they put a cloth over her head. Two mistakes she will try to make them pay for.

At some point the light brightens and she realizes they have left the shadows of the city. She begins to see leaves and dry grass crunching under the boots of the one that carries her and realizes that they are headed into the orchards to the south. They are likely thinking to cut through the cover of the trees and then wind their way back up towards the river. That is her best guess as to their plan,
anyways. Perhaps they think to take her by boat back to the ice nation. It would be swifter than walking.

The cut of the sun still feels hot against the back of her exposed neck and she estimates that she was not knocked out for long. If they have not already, someone back in the city will soon discover the dead guards and raise the alarm that the Commander is in danger. When they don’t find her body they will correctly assume that she has been taken. Unfortunately, they are likely to search the main road and the wagons leaving the city first. It is what she would do. The cover of people and the noise will keep them searching for a long time even if they shut the gates. They won’t know that she is already outside of the city. And if Narrok wakes up, he will likely know exactly where Clarke is and will point the efforts in the opposite direction, giving Ontari and her soldiers time to slip away.

Worry momentarily slips into the base of her stomach and settles uncomfortably without her permission.

Her options are limited, but even she knows that she will not willingly go to the north alive. The fate that awaits her there if she arrives still breathing is not a kind one.

Soldiers or spies that are captured by the ice nation rarely return. Those that do return do not often do so in one piece. As a warning, perhaps. Or a reminder. And if a simple foot soldier is treated in such a way, Clarke can scarcely imagine what pain and ceremony would be in store for her. Nia will surely want to take her time and make quite the example.

It is not the pain, or even death, that Clarke fears, however. It is what Nia will extract from Clarke’s people when they attempt to get her back. And they will attempt to. She knows what devotion is on her side. Many would die trying to retrieve her or at the very least much would be lost in the bargain for her return. Clarke refuses to be the cause of such loss. Her spirit is heavy and tarnished enough without the added weight of what this would bring.

No, she will not go there alive. She made that decision a long time ago should it ever become necessary.

That’s not to say that first she won’t do everything she can to try and prevent that decision from being acted upon.

She’ll get out of this, she thinks, as the blood rushes through her ears and pounds in her head.

Somehow.

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Lexa follows through the small door and into the dark passageway.

The passageway winds and cuts through the quiet parts of the city, only the sound of ancient dripping pipes and the scurry of some animal or another accompanies Lexa as she walks quickly.

She’s lucky that there are only a few doors that she passes, most of which are locked. She cannot hear the people she is following and has to assume she is still going the right way. Though her feet are quick her muscles are tense as she follows. She holds her staff close to her body in a tight grip, half afraid that she’ll turn a corner and come face to face with them and half afraid she’ll lose them altogether.
The end comes as another door with light bleeding through cracks in the wood and the gap underneath. She pushes against it carefully and then, after using her shoulder to force it the rest of the way open, she’s blinking against the bright light of the afternoon.

The passage has led out to the southern side of the city judging by the sun’s placement. She is at the edge of the wall, staring across the grass that comes to her knees and waves like a sea in the wind. In the distance, row upon row of trees, lined up one after the other, carving a path through the land as it stretches before her. Squinting, she can see figures in the distance, they are more dark smudges than anything distinct but she feels relief that she hasn’t lost them completely.

The grass is dry from the summer and crunches beneath her feet as she jogs through it to reach the rows of trees, picking her feet up to keep from tripping while also staying low to the path that has already been carved by the ones she follows.

They’re clearly hurrying and have put a decent amount of distance between themselves and the city wall. When she reaches the first row of trees Lexa increases the pace to a jog, keeping to their shadows as best she can.

The entire time she runs, careful not to trip over the exposed roots, she wonders what she’s doing. Why she is doing this. Why she is running through the heat, in all likelihood towards something that is going to get her killed.

She vows to reconsider her priorities if she survives this.

With the easier terrain she reduces the distance fairly quickly, her load lighter than theirs. She thanks her dedication on the creaky treadmills on the Ark for her stamina even though she feels sweat collecting at the back of her neck, causing her hair to stick.

It crosses her mind more than once that perhaps she should have gone back and tried to get someone’s attention or help while she was still in the city. A guard. Anya. Hell, even Avery. But if she had made a detour she might have lost them altogether and then no one would know where to go. She would just have to hope that someone would raise the alarm and would be close behind her.

‘Boy do I miss having a working radio’, she thinks as she wipes sweat from her forehead.

At some point, after what feels like a very long time, when any sounds from the city have long since grown quiet and are replaced only by the rustling of leaves and grass she realizes they’ve stopped. She approaches more cautiously, ducking into one of the adjacent rows of trees, using their cover and trying to keep her footsteps as quiet as she can, hoping the wind covers most of them.

She can hear moving water suddenly. The rush of it now loud enough to pick up over everything else. They seem to have reached the end of the orchards. Instead the land is a wide expanse of trees that look more wild and stretch their branches amongst each other in an unorganized tangle. Not quite a forest but decidedly more cover than the exposed land closer to the city. Lexa bets if she were to suddenly climb one of the branches above her head she would be able to see the edge of the dense forest not far in the distance.

She’s close enough now to hear them, even over the sound of the water, and is forced to slow her steps. Her pulse pounds in her chest nervously as she edges closer. Finally coming to crouch behind a cropping of trees with a variety of low-hanging branches that droop to the ground. With her hands on the rough bark to keep her balance she watches.
Clarke barely resists reacting when she is dropped unceremoniously into the dirt. Her shoulder lands hard and she bites back a comment at the rough-handling.

The sound of retreating footsteps crunching through the dry grass and dirt reaches her ears as the one that was carrying her walks away.

She peeks one eye open a crack.

Though she can’t lift her head to see she can hear the rush of water. So she was right. They do plan to go back by boat.

It’s smart on their part. It’s relatively fast this time of year and there is no trail to follow for anyone that might be in pursuit.

It will also be infinitely harder for her to escape once they get her on it.

She closes her eye again at the sound of footsteps.

Two of the soldiers are talking to one another over her, conversing about something that she could probably piece together if she was more fluent in the ice nation language and her head wasn’t pounding. Language lessons were never her favorite part of nightblood training.

From the noise she can estimate where they’re standing. There is one over her right shoulder and another near her boot. Perhaps, since they believe her to be unconscious, she can grab a knife from one of them. She is relatively fast. Perhaps fast enough.

She just needs to wait for him to get a little closer…

“She is awake.”

Ontari’s voice interrupts the conversation cleanly. Clarke probably should have known their leader would be keeping a closer eye on her than the others.

The boots scatter away and Clarke can feel their eyes. So much for the element of surprise. She grinds her teeth in frustration and opens her eyes. There is no point in keeping them shut now.

The sky is bright and blue and harsh, the branches overhead arching and tangling. It would almost be peaceful under different circumstances.

The dirt crunches dryly as she sits up slowly without the use of her hands, the rope cutting into her wrists tightly. The guards are all watching her closely now, standing a bit farther away, on edge with their hands on their weapons.

She ignores them and looks around to get her bearings.

They’re definitely past the orchards now. She turns her head and can see the city as a smudge in the distance. She looks up again to gauge the time of day but is forced to stop when her vision sways. She blinks hard as she looks away. Her head is intent on pounding behind her eyes.

She turns her attention back to Ontari. The girl has walked away and is now rummaging around in her bag for something, paying Clarke no attention. She doesn’t seem particularly concerned that Clarke is awake which can’t mean anything good for Clarke.

Clarke looks around some more and sees the river, or at least part of it. The rest is obscured by a
grouping of trees as it winds around a bend. She can see where the dry grass gives way to something softer and then to the rocks that make up the riverbed.

But there is no vessel that she can find. Whoever is meant to escort them must be running late. Or perhaps their plan ended up getting rushed and now they must wait. It would explain the way the soldiers seem slightly anxious, keeping one hand on their swords as they glance over their shoulders.

“No boat?” Clarke asks, her voice calling out across the space to the other girl. “It’ll be a long swim back to the Ice Nation border.”

Ontari ignores her, just continues to look through her bag for something. The guards glance Clarke’s way, however, as if they are thinking the same thing.

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The guards are absolutely looking at one another now and shift uncomfortably. They, until this moment, had not known this information. Not many do, if Clarke is being honest. Likely just her, a handful of advisors, and the spy who delivered the information to her.

“Shame it didn’t work,” Clarke keeps talking as Ontari stalks towards her, jaw grinding and clearly having enough. “Just think, if it had he would be banished and you perhaps, as a nightblood, would be next in line and --”

Ontari’s fist connects with Clarke’s cheek, knocking her solidly into the ground.

Clarke probably could have seen that coming.

She tastes dirt as her cheek smacks down and has to blink some of it out of her eyes when she reopens them. It takes a moment for her head to stop spinning, shaken once more. She rises back up slowly, working her jaw.

“Shut her up,” Ontari snaps as she walks away. “Cut out her tongue if you have to.”

Clarke blinks slowly, scrunching her eyes. She leans to the side and spits the blood out of her mouth.

If she hadn’t been facing that direction perhaps she wouldn’t have heard it:

The snap of a twig.

It is faint, barely there beneath the rustling of the leaves, but she heard it.

Her eyes scan the trees for the source, a small, desperate feeling in her chest.

She nearly does a double-take when she spots it.

A pair of green eyes blink back at her from a gap between the lower branches of a tree.

---

Lexa knows the second she’s been spotted.

Clarke’s eyes widen just a fraction though the rest of her remains still. A flash of disbelief crosses her face before she can cover it up.

Her eyes immediately run from Lexa’s left to her right as if looking for more people. When they return, Lexa just barely shakes her head once. No, there is no one else.

Clarke looks away to see if they’re watching her before glancing back.

The group is clearly less anxious than when they had been in the city walls, appearing confident that they have not been followed. Still, most of them glance towards the city more than once, eyes scanning across the distance as if they imagine they can hear the shouts and the alarm that has surely been raised within its walls by now.

Lexa watches one of them, perhaps the youngest in the group and around Lexa’s age, rummage around in one of the bags. He has the same thin white marks covering his face in strange patterns. She’s never seen anything like it during her time on the ground.
Clarke’s eyes catch Lexa’s again and then purposefully glance towards the rope around her wrists.

She’s obviously trying to communicate something but Lexa just stares back. She clearly missed the Trikru class on silent communication. She imagines it’s quite different than the ones she learned in guard training.

Clarke notices her lack of misunderstanding and glances back at the group of captors to see if they’ve picked up on anything but they are talking amongst one another, even the leader is turned away, scanning the river. Clarke finds Lexa’s eyes again and then dips her head back to her bound hands more intently.

Oh.

Oh!

Lexa leans down and slides the knife free from her boot. Clarke had looked away after, trying not to focus her attention in Lexa’s direction, but when she glances back Lexa holds the knife up so that it is barely visible.

Clarke gives the barest hint of a nod.

Great.

Now how is Lexa supposed to get it to her?

The leader of the group, the girl who looks positively tiny among the broad-shouldered and much taller men around her, doesn’t look at Clarke again. Whatever Clarke said seems to have bothered her.

One of the guards that has been searching in a bag, pulls a length of cloth and turns back towards Clarke, forcing her to look away from Lexa. The soldier approaches her with heavy footsteps, Clarke eyes him.

When he gets close he abruptly reaches down and drags her roughly to her feet by the rope around her wrists, pulling her close to his face. With the knife held towards her he says something to Clarke in their language. Lexa’s eyes watch the whole exchange nervously, not knowing what’s happening.

Somewhere in the middle of his sentence Clarke’s face clouds with anger or disdain.

Uh oh.

She spits in his face and says something Lexa would bet is not a compliment.

Clearly that was the wrong move. The hand that had been holding the rope around Clarke’s wrists moves to grip around her throat instead as he seethes.

The knife in his hand comes up towards her mouth and Lexa realizes with horror what he’s about to do.

Lexa’s never sworn so much under her breath in her life.

In the guard they train you with rigour and repetition. They lock in ability to react quickly, move and settle a situation before it can escalate into something catastrophic.

The dagger is leaving her hand before she even realizes she’s stepped from behind the tree.
Her arm extends after just as Anya had demonstrated all that time ago. The blade flies with considerable force and not a small amount of prayer. It turns head over end quickly, spinning through the air.

The guard doesn’t see it coming.

The dagger drops more than she had intended and rather than being incapacitating it plunges into the top of his right thigh.

His loud shout of pain startles everyone. Lexa presses her back to the trunk of the tree, heart racing and breathing heavily. Clarke falls back to the ground roughly as he releases his hold on her throat.

The girl, the one Lexa had correctly assumed to be the one in charge, quickly takes in what has happened. She looks from the knife to the general direction Lexa had thrown the knife from, before piecing it together.

“Teik em op! Nau!” she yells, loud and leaving no room for belief that whatever the words meant was intended to be taken as suggestion.

From her spot in the shadows Lexa sees another one of the soldiers (not the one with Lexa’s dagger sticking out of his leg) run over and reach down to Clarke where she had been dropped to the ground, clearly meaning to grab her and haul her up.

It happens quickly. If Lexa had turned away for even a moment she might have missed the whole thing.

Clarke rolls from under his grasp and reaches out. With her hands bound her fingers wrap around the dagger sticking out of the other guard’s leg and rips it free without hesitation. She spins the knife towards her bound wrists, her fingers contorting the angle of the blade until the resistance on the rope snaps through.

In the instant that follows Clarke is moving. With one knee still bent to the ground she spins the dagger back, plunging it into the guard that had just reached for her. She follows the movement up with a quick yet effective strike to the one trying to hold his bleeding leg together.

It is quick work.

Their bodies land in the dirt with heavy thuds one after the other.

Clarke rises over them, face and body sticky with red.

The other remaining soldiers are almost as shell-shocked as Lexa seems to be before they snap out of it. Metal sings as it is pulled free from sheaths and boots skid on dry dirt. Clarke stands, ready but outnumbered, her dagger dripping red into the earth.

The one who had been closest to Clarke advances at a run at her exposed back.

Lexa send out another silent prayer as she decides to help. She runs and leaps over the fallen trunk of a tree, legs pushing to get there before he does. Landing in the center of it all she catches her balance just in time to swing her staff upwards upon her entry, surprising him. With a satisfyingly solid sound it connects with the underside of the soldier’s chin. He stumbles back falling, dazed and incapacitated.

Clarke and her have a half a second to take one another in with quick, anxious glances. Clarke, blood-soaked with a large bruise blooming on her cheek and another near her eye. Lexa, out of
breath and wondering what the hell she’s doing, clutching her staff tightly.

Clarke does not seem to question Lexa’s sudden presence. Or perhaps she has decided to question it later. If there is a later. They are, after all, still outnumbered.

“Step au!” Clarke yells in trigedasleng suddenly, eyes widening over something past Lexa’s shoulder.

It doesn’t take a genius to translate her meaning. Lexa ducks out of the way in time for Clarke to surge up around her. The next soldier swings in with his sword coming down in a broad arc, body twisting with the motion. Clarke steps into the movement, hand rising to wrap around his wrist and force his strike away. Lexa seizes the opportunity to sweep his legs out from under him and his back hits the ground in a cloud of dirt. And then, well -- and then Clarke makes sure he doesn’t get back up again.

Three down, three to go.

“Hey, we actually make a pretty decent - augh!” Lexa stumbles back when Clarke shoves her suddenly. Though she focuses mostly on catching her balance, she still sees the blur of the knife that had been heading for her chest. It spins out to sink into one of the trees behind them instead.

They both turn towards its source and see the girl, the leader, with her hand outstretched from where it had released the blade.

“Nia’s orders are to bring you alive if captured,” she calls out, standing upright and bringing her hand back to her side as she addresses Clarke. One soldier, the one Lexa had momentarily incapacitated that seems to have recovered, stands beside her. Another is off to the side, angling himself around them.

Blades are drawn but they wait to advance.

“But somehow I think she would still accept me home if I just bring her your head instead. Accidents do happen after all.”

Clarke doesn’t answer and instead slowly bends to retrieve a swords from one of the soldiers she’d killed, not breaking eye contact with the girl. She rises again and appraises their opponents with calculating eyes, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. She looks altogether horrific. Blood replacing the space where her warpaint would ordinarily be. Horrific and deadly.

“I take it you two know each other?” Lexa asks, hearing how out of breath she sounds as she grips her staff in tight fingers, eyes watching the soldiers.

“Ontari and I have some history, yes,” Clarke surprises her by answering, but in a volume that is meant to reach the girl -- Ontari, and with her gaze forward.

If Lexa is expecting some sort of diplomatic approach from Clarke it doesn’t look like she’s going to get it. It appears as if the time for words has long passed between the two.

It’s like there’s some unspoken signal and then Clarke and Ontari are rushing at each other. Clarke raising her borrowed sword with a yell to meet the one Ontari brings down in a wide arc. Metal shrieks as their strikes connect.

Lexa takes a deep breath, grips her staff, and rethinks her life choices once more for good measure before charging into the fray.
She supposes the best role she can fill is to help keep the soldiers off of Clarke’s back. She is their main target after all.

Lexa is not trained for this. She is out of her element but the mentality of guard training snaps into her and she moves without much thought. Her training is mostly defensive but is still useful and her staff rounds in a whirl as it knocks the arm of a soldier reaching for Clarke’s back.

It is chaos.

Only one of the guards engages her fully even as she fights them both as best she can. Her staff offers her the advantage of a wider reach and she manages to keep up with the swings for the most part. He underestimates the speed with which she can reach out and she redirects the heavy strikes of his sword before it can reach her.

She can already begin to feel sweat gathering at the base of her spine and the back of her neck. She is struggling, but his attempts to get around her rather than fight her are perhaps what has kept her alive so far.

She is almost afraid to turn around to see whatever is happening behind her. The consistent sound of strikes letting her know that neither Clarke nor Ontari has relented. It is loud and violent. Shaking whatever gentleness had been amongst these trees before they arrived.

When she hears the sound of someone crying out sharply her eyes seek out the sound automatically. She turns just in time to see Clarke clutch for her side. When she pulls her hand away her shirt is wet with blood. In the same moment Ontari connects her fist to Clarke’s jaw, snapping her head back with the force. Clarke recovers quickly and musters the strength to level a strong boot to Ontari’s torso, sending her careening backwards and out of range.

The small moment of distraction to see this nearly causes Lexa to lose an arm. The sight of silver in her periphery pulls a shout of surprise from her mouth and she spins away. Her staff comes up quickly to deflect and the action turns a potentially fatal blow to a graze that still slices through both the outer layer of clothes and the top layer of skin of her shoulder.

She stumbles back on her heels in a mixture of fear and shock, striking out on pure instinct in a messy and uncoordinated swing that is easily countered and sends her falling onto her backside in the dirt. Her breath stops in a short gasp as the soldier towers over. Her wide eyes can’t look away from how the light catches his sword as he raises it above her.

Something cuts the air beside her ear in her whistle and buries itself into his chest point first. His sword drops to the ground and then so does he, a look of surprise frozen on his face.

Lexa, forehead beading with sweat of exertion and fear, whips around with wide eyes. Clarke, now missing her dagger, continues to battle without looking back to see if her throw was true. Her movements are slower from the wound on her side and something black is dripping from her nose and split lip.

There is only one guard left. And now he heads straight for Lexa.

Lexa’s can feel her pulse in her shoulder, the stickiness of the blood making her shirt cling. But she doesn’t feel the pain as much as she’s sure she will.

The adrenaline punching through her pushes her forward and she scrambles to her feet and swings out. The realization of how nearly she just avoided death makes her oddly bolder. She rises onto the offensive from the start. Blocking his swing upward she follows it with an elbow to his face. A move
that was taught to her for defensive reasons but is still effective in causing damage. His nose breaks under the blow and he stumbles back, giving her some breathing room.

All the while the sounds over her shoulder continue to rage as they both fight for their lives.

She chances a quick glance over her shoulder and swallows.

Clarke is… not looking good.

She is gritting her teeth something fierce as she stumbles and sinks to one knee, clenched fist pushing into the ground against whatever pain she is battling against.

“Get up,” Lexa hears herself saying under her breath as she stares without breathing.

Clarke isn’t getting up.

Ontari is rising from where she had gotten knocked down again, her sword gripped by her side, covered in dirt and blood.

Lexa turns back to her own opponent as he comes back with a fury, blood covering the lower half of his face from her strike. The adrenaline forces her to react. She takes advantage of his blind lunge and surges forward. Stepping into his space just as she had seen Clarke do, she uses her staff to knock his blade upwards. Before he can shift she rotates it to whip around against the side his head, connecting with his temple harshly.

He drops to his knees. She’s turning before she confirms he’s not getting up again soon.

Ontari’s focus is intent on Clarke, her eyes wild with something deadly and triumphant. For this reason she doesn’t see Lexa coming. So when Lexa rams into her side with her staff it is hard enough to send her sprawling to the ground in a cloud of dirt.

Lexa, for her part, barely remains on her feet, hopping twice to keep her balance.

And then there she stands, staff in hand, feet braced in front of Clarke.

Ontari rises to her feet from the dirt slowly, nostrils flaring, not taking her eyes off Lexa. It is as if she is seeing her for the first time. Where before she had been a fly not worth her bother, now she is a fly that Ontari is intent on taking care of permanently.

Her movements are frighteningly smooth as she moves her sword from one hand to the other and spins it absentmindedly, eyes still staring at Lexa.

Lexa holds the staff in both her hands, feet braced. Her throat feels dry with fear.

“Move aside, Skyling.”

Lexa runs her tongue over her teeth and glances back at Clarke whose fist is pressed into the ground as she attempts to push herself to her feet.

Ontari’s next words brings her attention back.

“I don’t have to kill you. Nia is surely willing to reward you for your knowledge. Treat you as someone to be honored in a place among the ice nation. You could make it your new home.”

The expression on her face makes Lexa believe that the offer is genuine. At least in this moment.
And for that moment she considers what would happen if she actually said yes. If she stepped aside.

“You know,” Lexa starts, glancing back at Clarke again. “She’s got her faults, but i’m still pretty sure i’m on the right side of this thing.”

“This is your final chance. Move aside or I will carve a path to her through you,” Ontari grinds out, gesturing with her sword. Lexa believes her.

She grips and re-grips the staff in her hands before nodding once, mind made up. No turning back now.

Go big or go home, as the old Earth saying goes. And Lexa doesn’t have a home to go to.

Staring the other girl down she braces herself. “You want her? Come and get her.”

Ontari almost appears to shrug. “Your death.”

Her blade comes down on Lexa so fast she owes it to her natural reflexes that she’s still in one piece.

Her staff meets the strike, stopping it in its tracks and she breathes a quick breath of relief when the wood doesn’t snap under the force. And then she has no choice but to move and move quickly.

Ontari’s blade is heavier than lexa's staff but she still releases a flurry of quick swings that have Lexa jumping back, eyeing the sharp edge of the blade as it splits the air in front of her in a curve of silver.

She just has to keep her back until help arrives.

She hopes help is coming.

It continues like that. Lexa dodging with everything she’s got and letting Ontari’s blade continue to take knicks out of her staff and slice up the air in front of her.

She’s huffing quick breaths before long, adrenaline shooting through her as she tries to keep herself alive. There is no time to even think about being a afraid.

Her boots skid back into the dirt as Ontari presses her blade down onto the top of her staff and Lexa’s arms quickly begin to shake with the strain.

Ontari’s boot connects suddenly with Lexa’s chest and she feels the air punch out of her lungs. She flies backwards into the dirt, rolling. Her wrist smacks the ground and the staff flies from her hand, coming to bounce off the ground and land far out of reach.

Fuck.

Ontari sees something in the distance over Lexa’s shoulder and her expression sours. Lexa chances a quick glance up and sees a plume of dirt in the distance. Someone is coming. And they are coming quick.

Ontari’s feet crunch in the dirt and Lexa focuses her attention forward. She rolls to her feet quickly, her chest aching as she draws in short breaths. Her hand is reaching for her belt before her mind even processes the movement. The baton snaps out in a series of metallic clicks.

Ontari pauses for the barest of moments to look at Lexa’s baton with a raised eyebrow and a huff of amusement.

“Yes this truly all there is to the great Commander’s weapon? A girl with a toy? And here people speak
as if you were delivered to the ground as an act of providence. This is pathetic.”

Lexa is so over the dramatic dialogue.

Lexa casts her arms out, covered in dirt and blood and bruises, “Then why am I still standing?”

Ontari’s jaw clenches.

Lexa’s feet plant in the ground as Ontari’s blade comes down on her in a viciously fast swing.

She adjusts quickly. The baton is too short to use as a block with both hands. But what she’s lost in that she’s easily gained in speed and familiarity.

The baton feels like coming home. The weight of it is comfortable in her hand and her body moves like she’s back in training.

Ontari’s strike is redirected by the baton, angling down and scraping close to Lexa’s knuckles. Lexa’s free hand keeps the motion dynamic and pushes at Ontari’s wrist. She brings the baton back up in a quick snap and it smacks into the space where Ontari’s neck meets her shoulder. Lexa skips back before Ontari can skewer her, keeping light on her feet.

She’s made her angry now.

Ontari comes after her again, faster if that’s even possible. She is very determined now. Where Lexa had previously been a mere nuisance she is clearly now an obstacle Ontari is intent on cutting down.

They engage like that a couple times. Lexa is fast but her skin is quickly stinging with the shallow cuts she is not quick enough to avoid. Ontari is figuring her out and Lexa is breathing heavily. Whoever is coming is not going to get there fast enough, she realizes.

Her arm is bleeding and her hair is sticking to her forehead from the sweat. Her shoulder feels like it is on fire now and her nose is dripping blood down her face from a hit she can’t remember. She must be quite a sight.

Ontari is a fast learner and seems to feed on Lexa’s waning energy. And Lexa is running out of energy to give and options to choose.

In a semi-desperate move Lexa dives in and uses her baton to knock Ontari’s wrist away, keeping her sword back. When her arm moves however, trying to continue the motion into a quick jab, Ontari’s free hand snakes out quick as a whip and grasps the baton in mid-air.

Lexa freezes, stuck.

Ontari smiles, teeth gleaming like a wolf.

She doesn’t know, however, that Lexa has a card up her sleeve. One that she’s been holding onto quietly since Clarke gave her baton back to her. If Clarke had known she probably never would have given it back in the first place. It’s a card she has saved for a desperate situation because she’s not even sure if it will work.

The batons given to the Ark guards have multiple functions:

The baton function, of course.

And the stun function.
She doesn’t even know if it will work. But she’s out of options.

Lexa engages the switch on the handle just as she was trained to.

The metal shudders as the energy surges through it. The electricity crackles for a moment and then snaps out with a sharp ‘zap’.

Lexa has the satisfaction of seeing Ontari’s face go from satisfied to confused to pain. Her knuckles go white as her body stiffens.

After a few moments the baton shudders and the electricity flowing through gives out.

Ontari collapses to the ground solidly and doesn’t move.

Lexa stands over her breathing heavily.

Her knees nearly sink to the ground in relief when she realizes it’s over.

Only when she’s sure Ontari isn’t moving to get up again does she look away. Her eyes find the horizon, seeking the cloud of dirt that is much larger now from whoever is rushing towards them. They’ll be there soon.

She wipes blood from beneath her nose turns around. Clarke is halfway to her feet, alive but struggling. Lexa rushes over.

“Hey, hey easy.” She puts Clarke’s arm around her shoulder and tries to support some of her weight.

The sound of quick footsteps has her looking up, on alert again. Clarke’s head picks up as well, reaching for the sword she had dropped back a few feet.

The soldier, the only one still alive with blood dripping from the nose that Lexa broke, has taken the opportunity of Lexa’s distraction to run over to Ontari. Before either of them can stop them, he hoists her up quickly over his shoulder.

They make eye contact for a moment, both wondering if Lexa is going to try and stop him.

But Clarke is leaning heavily on her side and she’s not sure how much more fight she’s got left in her.

She stares after him and he takes off, making his escape with Ontari over his shoulder. He makes his way towards the river and they disappear between the trees. Soon the sound of the water covers any noise of his footsteps.

Clarke seems to finally realize that she is being helped and tries to distance herself from Lexa.

“I’m fine,” she says, pushing herself away.

Lexa rolls her eyes but lets Clarke stand on her own. She takes the opportunity to snap her baton closed against her palm, the sound loud in the quiet that had resettled around them.

Her nose is still bleeding and she tips her head back. The trees rustle once again above her, wind shaking their branches with resumed vigor almost like they had stopped while the world went to pieces below them.

Giving up on her nose she examines the rest of herself. She prods at her shoulder and hisses at the sting, the torn strip of her shirt soaked red. The pain is predominantly a dull ache now if she doesn’t
touch it. Still, she might need a couple stitches.

Ugh, she hates needles.

A short laugh bursts out of her unexpectedly. The idea of something so simple sounding so unpleasant when multiple people just tried to cleave her in half with swords. She thinks she’s losing her mind.

She turns to Clarke and opens her mouth to say something, a joke, probably not a good one. Instead her eyes widen as she remembers.

“You’re bleeding.” Lexa says, taking in the dark flow from Clarke’s side and her nose and her head. “Or… at least I think you are. Is your blood black?”

Clarke glances down at the wound on her side and places her hand over it, pulling it away as if to confirm that she is in fact bleeding, her fingers coming away black. She doesn’t seem too perturbed by the sight, looking at her hand curiously, and Lexa imagines this must happen more often than not.

“I’m fine,” she says again with a faraway look in her eyes. As if this is normal. Lexa wonders how bad her head injury must be, for surely she must have one to be saying something so ludicrous.

“Christ. Here,” Lexa says, looking around before taking the dagger Clarke grips in her hand before she can protest. The sash hanging around Lexa’s shoulders tears cleanly beneath the sharp edge in a long strip.

Clarke is watching her silently as she works, eyes on her face as it scrunches in determination while tearing the fabric. Lexa feels her gaze distinctly, blue eyes holding an expression Lexa can’t put a name to sitting steadfast beneath the mixture of red and black blood on her face. The intensity of the stare is mildly unsettling and she feels her face heat.

Lexa makes a move for Clarke’s side and then stops, not sure if she’ll be pushed away again. “Uh, here.”

She holds the fabric out and after a moment Clarke takes it without shifting her gaze from Lexa’s face. She presses it to her side with hands cracked with red and black.

Lexa suddenly feels awkward and doesn’t know why, placing a hand on the back of her neck and grimacing when she feels blood matted in her hair.

The sound of hoofbeats grows louder and Lexa turns. There’s four of them at least, and when Lexa shades her eyes against the bright sun she recognizes one of them as Lincoln.

The relief that surges through her at the sight of him is enough to overwhelm.

She turns back to Clarke. “Looks like our ride is -- whoa -- hey!”

Lexa dives forward to catch Clarke just as her eyes roll back and her knees give out from under her. Wrapping arms around her quickly they both sink to the ground in an uncomfortable heap.

She sighs as she waits for help to arrive.

“I’m still mad at you,” she tells Clarke who is practically on top of her and out cold. “Don’t think I haven’t forgotten that.”
A drop, ebony-black, drips into the basin of water. There it spreads like ink, unfurling thin fingers that flow over one another. Others soon join it and the water quickly turns grey.

Clarke’s head is a haze of pressure. She closes her eyes against the light of the shaded window and tries to wrestle her mind into working order.

She doesn’t remember getting back to the city.

At some point she’s aware of servants pulling her garments free. Of their careful hands dipping into the grey water basin with cloths and wiping the black blood from beneath her nose and temple. Clearing it from the knuckles of her hands. At some point a healer enters and Clarke is forced to lie still as the wound on her side is tended. She is forced to drink something at some point. She doesn’t remember what.

Her head throbs but her awareness of the pain is inconsistent and fuzzy.

It is not the first time she has had such an injury, but she is having a hard time remembering when -

She runs a hand over her face and the light in the room has shifted. No. She is in another room. It’s evening.

She wakes up.

The pain in her side registers first. A dull ache like the embers of a fire nestled under her ribs. She runs her fingers over the large bandage wrapped around her torso. Someone did an admiral job. The healer, probably. She doesn’t know. Doesn’t remember.

The blood has been cleaned from under her fingernails. Her hair is slightly wet.

It comes back to her in pieces and flashes of red and black.

Clarke rubs a hand over her face.

“You’re an idiot.”

She smiles beneath her hand. After a moment, however, her lips falter and she sighs. “Yes, it would appear so.”

Anya stands with crossed arms at the foot of Clarke’s bed.

“How long have I been asleep?” Her voice is rough, she runs a distracted finger across the bandage on her rib.

“Just the day. It is some time past midnight now.”

“What did you tell people?” She asks, clearing her throat. She closes her eyes. Just for a moment.

“That the Commander has been meditating.”

Clarke huffs out a laugh at that, amused.

She is not the most spiritual of all the Commanders that have ascended.

Though she would rather be meditating on her spirit than having this conversation. Not when it feels
as if someone has opened her head and poured melted wax inside. And not when she feels the presence of shame and guilt that is hovering closer with each second.

“If that naive skygirl hadn’t gone after you —”

“— Lexa,” Clarke interrupts, then, quieter, “Her name is Lexa.”

She blinks open her eyes once more and watches the way the light of the singular candle plays off the ceiling.

“If the naive Lexa hadn’t gone after you … ,” there’s a sound like a frustrated growl as she can’t, or refuses to, finish the sentence. Clarke worried her.

She doesn’t like the feeling, almost as much as Clarke dislikes the heavy weight of guilt in her abdomen when Anya says quietly “I thought I would be receiving a box with your head in it.”

Clarke swallows.

“I would have handled the situation. I would have gotten out of it.”

She says it to make them both feel better. It might be true, Clarke has gotten herself out of a number of bad situations in the past. But they can’t know that she would’ve gotten out of this one. Or if she would have been forced to do something drastic. Either way they can’t know if she would have made it back.

There is silence in the room for a few moments. She hears the soft footsteps of a guard or a servant on the other side of the door.

“Her blade had poison on it,” Anya tells her, and then, at Clarke’s confused look, “Ontari’s. It is one of the reasons you’ve been disorientated. Or so the healer says.”

Clarke nods. A few things making more sense suddenly as her finger absentmindedly finds the bandage on her side again.

She asks the question then. The one she’s been dreading asking.

“Narrok?”

Anya lets out a breath. The air is heavy with the silence before she breaks it again. There are many things Clarke hears in her words. “Awaiting the Commander’s judgment.”

Clarke is silent. The candle flickers.

She nods. It’s all she feels she is capable of doing.

She doesn’t know how long Anya stands there in the quiet after that. Clarke stares at the splash of candlelight until fatigue begins to pull at her with cajoling fingers, beckoning her to sink deeper into the soft bed beneath her.

She barely registers the sound of the door closing as Anya takes her leave.

When Clarke sleeps she does not dream.
“Hold still.”

Lexa winces against the sting that bites her shoulder.

The healer is a capable, older woman with streaks of grey running through the braids that hang over her shoulder. She has an ironclad grip on Lexa’s upper arm as she applies a paste Lexa can’t identify to her shoulder, smearing it in swathe of sticky green. It’s not a pleasant sight and Lexa makes a face as she turns her face away.

A polished piece of metal hangs on the wall across from her and Lexa turns her gaze towards it to distract herself as the healer continues working.

A girl stares back at Lexa that looks like someone else. She barely recognizes the tired eyes that blink back at her.

She brings her free hand up and feels with light fingers at the bruise that pours across the bridge of her nose into the wells beneath her eyes. It is purple and angry, a barrage of color. Her lip is split as well, swollen and puffy against an angry gash. She resists the urge to run her tongue across the beginnings of a scab.

She breaths deep, watches the chest in the reflection expand and contract, still absorbing the fact that she is alive and still relatively in one piece.

With her shirt sitting pooled in her lap - the only way for the healer to get a good look at her shoulder, her eyes trail over the exposed skin. There are smaller cuts here and there, no longer bleeding and now safely covered under a crowd of bandages across her hands, arms, and one across her thigh. Her hair is clean, no longer matted with blood and dirt and grime and her hands had been scrubbed until the skin turned pink by servants who had seemed unflinchingly familiar with the task.

The healers too had been highly efficient, working in tandem with the servants when Lexa had arrived back in the city. They are clearly a society that is used to the nearly mechanical reaction to injured and beaten company.

And the girl that stares back at her in the mirror does look injured and beaten.

But Lexa doesn’t feel it.

She feels…

She doesn’t quite know what she feels.
What is someone supposed to feel when they come out of something like that alive? When it feels like the entire universe has tipped in your favor. Poured every ounce of luck it has stored up into your hands for one moment.

Because Lexa is alive. She is alive against all odds after staring down death multiple times and it is jarring. It is also awakening.

There is a part of her that is thrumming with it. Like a new vibration has been struck in her bones and she feels it.

She doesn’t know if she should be concerned about that.

She winces again when the healer adjusts the position of her shoulder.

“Hold still,” the woman instructs again sternly with the clipped accent Lexa had come to associate with the Shallow Valley people.

Lexa was right about the stitches. Ten crisscrosses in a tight line across her shoulder had been put in her last night. She turns her face away from the mirror and looks at it. It is is clean work.

The healer had had a steady hand and done an admirable job the night before. Now Lexa is allowing herself to be poked as the work is rechecked and evaluated in the light of morning.

The healer’s room has large windows to afford bright light during the day for her work. Lexa looks out of one now to notice that the sky has taken on that subtle glow right before the sun rises above the horizon. She rubs her free hand across her face. She hadn’t slept a second the night before, too much residual adrenaline trickling through her to close her eyes.

She had barely had the thread put through the open skin in her shoulder before Anya was dragging her aside and demanding an account of what happened. She remembers the other girl’s face pinching more and more with each passing word Lexa had shared. But Lexa had been too tired, too relieved to be safe, to do anything but tell her what happened.

She still hasn’t seen Clarke.

Upon their return to the city, a flurry of healers had descended upon the Commander like their entire lives were dependent on and leading up to that moment. She remembers the intensity of the expressions on their faces as they took one look at the wound on her side and carted her away.

Lexa blinks blearily against the brightening sky out the window before turning back to her shoulder. The healer checks the stitches carefully, making sure there is no sign of infection or any residual bleeding.

Lexa wonders if it will scar.

In her tired state the sight prompts her to be suddenly overcome with a the realization that she is here to stay. On the ground, that is.

It is an odd sort of realization to be having now. But it continues to crash over her like a wave at unexpected moments and the sight of the stitches in her shoulder effectively sweeps her legs out from under her at the reality of it all once more. Something about seeing her shoulder, stitched up and red, has her remembering that this is not temporary. She is on the ground and she is not going anywhere else ever again. She will die here, someday.

She takes a deep breath, lets it out again.
“Where is the Commander?” she finds herself asking into the quiet room.

“Meditating,” the healer responds, focus intent on Lexa’s other wounds. She moves from one to the next, poking and prodding, lifting bandages.

“Is she okay?”

There is the briefest of pauses in her movements. A stutter before moving on.

“She is the Commander.”

As if that is the answer for everything.

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“I already told you what happened,” she tells Anya that evening when she shows up at Lexa’s door.

“I am not here to ask you what happened,” Anya responds, but she doesn’t give any more detail with the door open to the hall.

Lexa sighs and opens her door wider, allowing the other girl to slip through. She goes and sits in one of the chairs that fill the corner, servants had brought some extra pillows in at some point and she takes advantage of the extra comfort.

“Then tell me, why are you here?”

Anya doesn’t sit. She stands with a shoulder against the wall and stares at Lexa.

“You can’t tell them.”

Lexa leans back in her chair and narrows her eyes at the girl on the other side of the room. She is too tired for this.

“Tell who what?”

“You can’t tell anyone what happened.”

There is a pause and the candle on the table snaps faintly.

“Why?” Lexa asks, ignoring the fact that she doesn’t even really know who it is that Anya is referring to. Perhaps everyone.

“Because she is the Commander.”

“Why do I feel like that is the answer to every goddamn question I ask?”

“Because it is true,” Anya answers simply, eyes narrowing. “She is the Commander, they must think she is invincible or else they will begin wondering if there is someone better to take her place. I will ensure that does not happen.”

Lexa lets that hang in the air for a moment as Anya turns to leave, her message effectively delivered. And for some reason Lexa is feeling bold. Perhaps it is the brush with death or the fact that Anya does not look as terrifying as she once did.

“She’s not, you know,” Lexa says, when Anya’s hand opens the door. “I’m not even sure she knows that.”
Anya hesitates for the barest of moments before she’s exiting out the door once more.

There is a day where nothing happens.

Clarke is told to rest. To heal. To just lie still for a while as her body mends.

She hates it.

But there is a significant sting in her side and her head feels like it is too crowded and both are making it difficult to argue. Plus, whenever she attempts to rise from the bed the healers tattle on her to Anya who all but manhandles her back. If she were in a better state she would order them all out.

The light comes and brightens and fades again with the passing of the day. In the periods of time where her everything is clearest she attempts to put order to the thoughts crowding her brain. At some point her fingers come up and find the ridge of stitches in her temple, prodding with gentle fingers. She imagines it was the base of a sword, or perhaps something else. She doesn’t remember.

She’s given medicine to help with the pain. The taste is poor but it stops the crowding in her head a bit and makes everything feel numb for a moment or two. She is also sometimes aware of other people coming into the room as well after. Healers that check on her wound at her side and make sure the poison is not still spreading through her. They talk in hushed whispers and she wishes they would leave but can never bring up the energy to tell them to before she falls asleep.

She dreams of treason and fighting battles she always loses. They are twisted forms of sensations more than anything and when she wakes up they leave her feeling unrested and unsettled.

There are times where she can’t remember much of it and she’s angry. And then there are times where she remembers all of it and she is angrier still.


She is so tired.

The sun begins to set at some point. Her eyes trace its disappearance through the window.

When the thought of what she will have to do once she is healed enough to lift her sword has her turning away from the window and the fading light. She rubs a bandaged hand over her eyes. She doesn’t want to be thinking about it anymore. The pain in her side feels like fire suddenly.

A moment later it is like the healers heard her thoughts and she wonders if perhaps she voiced them aloud. The bitter medicine coats her tongue as soon as they hand it to her. It doesn’t take long. Soon her limbs feel loose and heavy, like she’s sinking into the earth. The thoughts that were just clear in her head smudge like someone pressing fingertips through soft charcoal.

She sighs.

Wait. No. She was going to ask… ask about someone.

She should have tried to remember before the medicine.

Something…
She blinks slowly as sleep begins to tug her down.

Oh.

She thinks she forces the words out before her mouth stops working altogether.

“Is… is she...” she asks on a slurred sigh as she fights against the lethargy for one more moment.

But she’s asleep before she can hear an answer.

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Lexa stands in the afternoon light and watches a crowd of birds shuffle and adjust on the rooftops. There is a commotion in the center of the square that has drawn their interest, likely in the hope that the grouping of people will lead to food.

Lexa had thought she would like birds. And then she discovered that, thanks to radiation-altered genetics, many of them tend to have too many or too few eyes. She had stumbled upon an owl in the forest during their journey that had had her stumbling backwards in fright when its singular bright eye had peered at her intensely. She was a little cautious of them now, to say the least.

The group of people working don’t seem to mind as much, paying little attention to the birds that land around them and putter around by their feet.

“You’re looking better.”

Lincoln’s voice startles her and she jumps. He holds up his hands with a soft smile of apology as he comes to stand near her, resting his shoulder against one of the pillars.

She lets out a breath between her lips, runs her fingers over the bandages on her arms, “Feeling better too, I suppose.”

“That’s good,” he says with a satisfied nod.

They fall into a comfortable silence. Every time she finds herself in Lincoln’s presence she is reminded of why she enjoys it so much. He has a calming effect that is uncommon of warriors.

“How is the Commander?” she asks, turning to face him. She still hadn’t gotten word from anyone.

An interesting expression crosses his face at her words. Whether because he’s surprised she’d ask or surprised she doesn’t know the answer to the question already, she’s not sure.

“She’s okay,” he says slowly, looking at her curiously. “She’s --”

“Meditating,” Lexa lets out a sigh. “Right. Well, she’s been meditating for three days. I think she’s probably maxed out by now.”

His lips twitch in the way that she had come to realize was his way of stifling laughter.

Quiet descends again between them as they both continue watching the group of people.

“What are they doing anyway?” she asks, puzzled.
Lincoln’s expression shifts and becomes subdued. “They are preparing for tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?”

“Narrok’s judgment,” he answers gruffly. “In the Coalition, those found guilty of treason are put to death by a thousand cuts from those they have betrayed.”

Lexa’s mouth falls open in horror as she stares at him with wide eyes. He sees her expression and nods solemnly.

“In Trikru territory it is a fast affair at least. Here, in Shallow Valley, the punishment has more ceremony required of it.”

“That’s barbaric!” she says once her mouth starts working again.

“It is our way,” he tells her with a slight shrug, but there is something on his face that tells her he does agree with her on some level. “Perhaps your people were lucky and did not have to have such harsh measures.”

Her mind quickly flips through all the times she ever handed over people she had arrested on the Ark. How each time she knew, unflinchingly, that she was handing them off to certain death. They would be floated as soon as they were found guilty. Her mouth snaps shut and she looks away.

The workers finish their job, leaving a large pole of wood in the ground in the center of the courtyard. It reminds Lexa of images in her old textbooks that showed the variety of creative ways that people were capable of being horrible to one another in bringing death.

“Who makes the cuts?” she asks, even as her stomach curdles against the very idea.

“The people of Shallow Valley. He betrayed his people first in acting against the Coalition.” There is a strain of anger running beneath his words and she is reminded of how deep loyalty runs in the Commander’s warriors. “If he survives to receive it, the Commander will make the final cut.”

Her head rises quickly look at him.

“Why?”

“Because his betrayal against her was the greatest.”

Something in her stomach clenches. “Can she refuse?”

He looks at her with a measured expression. She looks away.

“Right. Stupid question.”

---

Clarke’s fingertips tap against the arm of the bulky throne.

It’s the third day since she’s returned. Or so they tell her. Her head is feeling the clearest yet and her side aches but she ignores it. The second she was capable of even a sliver more agency she had refused to stay in bed. Her healers did not fight her on it but she could see their displeasure in the set of their mouths.
“I am Commander,” she had told Anya, pulling on a new set of clothing she had ordered brought to her room. “I do not have the luxury to rest.”

She readjusts now on the throne, trying to sit in a way that does not pull at the stitches in her side more than necessary. While she may disagree with her healers on the length of bedrest required, she also does not wish to tear open the wound again.

The throne she sits on now is different from the one she has in Polis. The wood is softer, less gnarled and has been sanded down to a smooth finish that practically shines. She turns away from scrutinizing the pattern in it to focus forward.

“His life cannot be spared,” she tells the man before her who rests on his knees.

“I know.” His shoulders are hunched inward as if gravity is pulling at his spine with tremendous force.

Andere raises his head to look at her and there is pain in his gaze. His eyes are hollow. He looks like he hasn’t eaten in days.

“Why did you request an audience?”

“I --” he starts and then falters. He licks his dry lips and tries again, meeting her gaze before dropping it to the floor once more, “I know what my brother did is not forgivable. I am not here for him.”

Her eyebrow ticks up. “Who are you here for then? Yourself?”

“No!” he says, insistent, meeting her gaze frantically. “I know I... faltered. I… I should have come to you as soon as I uncovered what he had done. I -- I thought that perhaps I could undo his actions. I had no idea -- I know I deserve ramifications for not --”

“What,” she interrupts his rambling firmly, “are you here for?”

He nods quickly in understand of her waning patience. “I am here to ask you, that whomever you choose to replace him as leader of this clan, that they be of Shallow Valley.”

She’s quiet as she waits for whatever else he has to say, fingertips smoothing over the wood of the throne as she considers him.

“I know that you are likely to choose one of your generals, someone you trust, to restore the fractured peace. But I beg of you: do not. Forgive me, but Shallow Valley needs a leader that is familiar with its territory, with its people.”

Her fingers drum on the arm of the throne as she sighs.

Her head hurts. Anya was right. She should have stayed in bed.

“Your concern is noted,” she says eventually with a tone of finality. “The guards will escort you out.”

His mouth hangs open as if to protest or add an additional point to his argument, but something about the look on her face must stop him. He nods and lets the guards help him rise to his feet. They walk close to him all the way through the door but do not grab him.

Clarke sighs and puts a hand to her head.

“I told you you should have stayed in bed,” Anya grumbles from somewhere near her right.
“Yes. You did.” She doesn’t feel like arguing. Not when she can feel each beat of her pulse in her temples.

“Yes. You did.”

Clarke’s head rises to meet her old mentor’s gaze. It’s not concern that she sees there, Anya would never display something so obvious, and she would definitely never let Clarke see it. She is asking a measured question. As if taking stock of one of her warriors who has stumbled.

“Are you alright?”

Clarke rubs at her temples and blinks. “Who?”

“I…” She pauses for a moment, mouth open and then shakes her head, “No.” She rises from her seat and clears her expression. “Please send in the Shallow Valley ambassador.”

~_~_~

When Clarke returns to her room later that evening she immediately sends out the healers and the servants who greet her and try to assist her. She tells the guards at her door to turn away anyone seeking an audience. She doesn’t give them a reason.

She pulls everything off herself stubbornly, wincing at the way it stretches her skin and the stitches in her wound.

She lies in her bed and stares at the ceiling of her room and tries not to think about tomorrow.

“Are you ready?”

Clarke dresses slowly as the sun rises outside her window. Her hand rests absentmindedly over where the bandage is wrapped around her ribs beneath her clothes.

Black paint strikes the bones of her cheeks and drips down to the cut of her jaw. It hides the bruises. The hollow of her eyes.

A servant clips her shoulder guard into place and another the sword to her side carefully. The small
cog-like emblem is placed between her eyes.

She takes a deep breath, feels the air enter her lungs to the brim like at any moment they might spill over, and nods again, for herself.

When Clarke walks out into the courtyard and sees him it feels like she’s walking on ice that threatens at any moment to crack beneath her feet and send her plunging through water.

He is tied to a post in the center of the city, shoulders pulled back violently, tendons straining with the force. He does not struggle against the binds.

The morning dawns with a violent heat that persists like a final stubborn protest against the turning of the season.

He stares resolutely at the ground beneath his feet. He does not flinch when she says, “Begin.”

The sun rises higher and she watches, stock still, one hand resting on the hilt of her sword, as one by one those of the city and of the clan take their claim on his blood.

Her face remains emotionless, steady. But the grip on the sword by her side grows tighter and tighter with every passing cut they pull from his skin until her knuckles are white.

She feels them all looking at her. Watching her face for the barest hint, the barest betrayal of anything but calm indifference. She wonders if they hope she’ll break.

Too soon the sun is much higher in the sky. It beats down relentlessly against her scalp and she is sweating beneath the layers of a shoulder guard she can’t remove.

His robes are soaked in black as the sun reaches its crest. He hasn’t looked up once. Every single cut was pulled from him with unyielding efficiency but he had not cried out.

His hair looks golden as the sun arches across it. He sags against his binds.

“He,da,” someone prompts with the clearing of a throat. The word is said as if it is coming from someone who has called it multiple times.

Clarke realizes that it is her turn.

She stares at Narrok’s bent head, the way his hair falls in front of his face. At the blood that drips from his arms, from his legs, from everywhere, mixing in black with the dirt at his feet. She can’t look away.

The pain in her side is a fire. A throb that spreads out its fingers and licks into her ribs and skin. She doesn’t let herself feel it. She can’t.

If she feels one thing she will feel everything.

He raises his head.

His brown eyes meet hers steadily.

The memory hits her like a bullet.

*He’s looking at her as Clarke jumps on top of a fallen tree trunk and balances precariously as she*
walks across it. The moss is spongy and new beneath her boots and she revels in the feeling of it.

She is thirteen now, barely. One of the youngest nightbloods. Filled with the feeling that she has to prove that the fire inside of her burns just as bright as it does in the others.

Narrok walks beside her. He makes a move as if he is going to shove at her legs jokingly but she skips out of reach with a laugh. He grins.

The air is bright and so, so green. Spring has just risen into Polis as if the decision was made over night. It rubs its tired eyes and stretches and yawns with bright flowers and dew that sits on the tips of fresh leaves. It leaves the feeling of awakeness and brightness that Clarke can’t get enough of.

She hops off the end of the log and rejoins him as he walks beside her back towards the city, the trees thinning as they go. The air is light and she breaths it in deep as she links her fingers behind her head, feels her muscles stretch. She loves this part of year. It feels like there are so many possibilities as the warmer season begins to approach.

She lets out a groan once the tower comes into sight, its tall frame rising higher and higher above them with each step. “Titus is going to kill me,” she proclaims dramatically, “I haven’t practiced the lessons for today.”

Narrok lets out a light laugh, unsurprised. “You always feel like Titus wants to kill you.”

“Because he does!” she exclaims, moving out of the way of the people trying to get past them to the road. She eyes some of the stalls selling trinkets and food and wonders if she can get away with not going to lessons at all. But the idea of making Titus even more angry has her continuing forward.

He laughs again, an odd sound nowadays as his voice has started getting deeper recently and has taken to dipping at odd moments. She’s sure he’s grown a foot in the last week alone and she tries not to grumble at the height advantage he has over her now when they spar. “Why didn’t you practice the lesson?”

“Because I’m terrible at it!” she exclaims, turning on him to walk backwards through the crowd. “I don’t even understand why we need to study clan history. The past is just full of destruction. Shouldn’t we be moving forward past all that? Don’t we deserve better?”

He hums, offering a slight smile to a woman that passes by as he moves out of her way. “I think it’s important.”

“That’s just because you’re good at it,” Clarke counters with a look, pointing at his chest. “What does it matter if I can recite the ten lessons of the first Commander if an enemy is challenging me to a battle? I cannot fight a sword with words.”

Narrok stops suddenly with a thought and turns to her. “What if I helped you?” he asks. They’re close to the tower now, the shadow looming over the two of them, turning the air chilly.

Clarke looks at him with one dubiously raised eyebrow. “Yeah?” she asks.

He lets out another rough laugh, the corners of his lips pulling up. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

She remains skeptical. “What do you want in exchange?”
He lets out an even louder laugh. The openness of the people from the Shallow Valley clan has always taken her aback but she has slowly grown used to his and it no longer surprises her as much. “I don’t want anything. It will help me sleep better at night to know that Titus is not planning on displaying your hide as an example to the rest of us.”

She looks up at the tower as they near its entrance, feeling slightly better. “Thank you,” she says, turning to him, meaning it.

He smiles with a slight bow of his head.

They head for the tower entrance, not wanting to be late. Someone steps out just as they reach the door and Clarke stops short, freezing up upon noticing who it is.

She meets the hazel eyes that look at her as he passes through the doorway, her eyes catching on the easy slope of his nose and the way his lips pull up in the corner.

“Hello,” he says with a polite smile and a nod in her direction.

“Hi,” Clarke breathes.

She refuses to look back at him as he passes. She feels her face heat and clears her throat.

He is long past when Narrok looks between his retreating back and Clarke’s face with a knowing look.

“Don’t,” she starts, holding up a hand.

But he’s already got a stupid, knowing grin on his face.

“Or perhaps that is why you did not complete your studies?” he asks with a booming laugh, clutching his side.

She shoves him, but he’s laughing too hard to care.

“Shop of, Narrok!” she says, dipping back into trigedasleng. She schools her face in a scowl and heads inside the tower. She can still hear him laughing when the door closes behind her.

Clarke draws her sword and the metal rings as it’s pulled free.

The air is quiet. The crowd is subdued, watching from the outskirts of a circle that the two of them stand at the center of.

Narrok is heaving in each breath, his limbs shivering with pain as the wounds on his body weep into the ground.

Her hand is trembling, in anger, in fear, in something. She grips her sword tighter.

She wants to ask him why.

She wants to ask him why over and over and over again. Until maybe the answer changes. Until maybe she doesn’t have to stand there with a sword in her hand, knuckles clenched to white. Until she doesn’t have to stand there while everyone watches while she feels like she’s drowning.

Black blood drips slowly from his open, gasping mouth as he raises his head to look at her for the first time.
He just stares at her. Waiting. Everyone is waiting.

Clarke takes in a breath that is too shallow, feels it shake through her lungs.

She steps forward.

He blinks slowly. He doesn’t look afraid. He doesn’t even look upset. He stares at her as if this is how it was always supposed to be. Clarke with a blade in her hand, a nightblood at her feet, triumphant over them all.

With each step forward she feels things within her slide and lock into place. Barriers around her memories. Locking them in. Locking everything in and everything out until she only exists in the sliver of space that exists between both.

By the time she is before him her face is blank. Resolute.

She falls into her stance, sword rising above her opposite arm for balance, the tip holding right before his beating heart. For a moment she thinks she can hear it and then realizes it is her own beating in her ears. They stand close.

The words are so garbled with pain coming from his mouth she barely hears them.

“You’ll never survive it.”

Her brow constricts, her eyes stuttering in their concentration to move away from his breastbone to his eyes once more. The light catches in the flecks that sit in the deep brown. He blinks slowly.

“I am strong enough to survive Nia.” she answers, nostrils flaring, the words barely escaping through her clenched jaw. “Strong enough to withstand the entire ice nation.”

He chuckles and it’s a horrifying, wet sound that he quickly chokes on. Blood drips down his chin.

“Not the ice nation,” he rasps and it almost sounds pitying, his eyes boring through her until he’s sure he has her focus. “You’ll never survive yourself.”

He never looks away from her face once.

Not when she feels like something is splintering in her walls, deep beneath the mask of her face.

Not when she takes a steadying breath.

Not when she pushes the sword through his beating heart.

His eyes grow distant like he’s lost in a memory and then, all at once, fade away completely. His head falls forward onto his chest.

Clarke pulls her sword free.

She stares at his body as her blade drips black into the dirt, her breath shaky.

With mechanical movements she’s barely aware of she wipes the blood from her sword and returns it to her sheath. She doesn’t look away as she does it. The wound stops blooming on his chest.

He looks so young, hanging with his hands bound behind him, hair falling before his face.
Her jaw is clenched so tight she’ll wonder later if the tension in her body was the only thing holding her together.

She turns and walks away.

Lexa turns in her saddle, careful of her shoulder. In the far distance the Shallow Valley capital shrinks into the haze.

Things had moved fast after.

She hadn’t even found out they were leaving until the night before. She had been poking at a bowl of some sort of stew rich with a mix of different colored vegetables, trying not to think about what she had watched happen that afternoon. About watching Clarke’s face as she had filled the role of judge, jury, and executioner all in one moment. It had been unsettling to say the least though far from the first person she had seen Clarke kill.

Avery, of all people, had come to tell her that evening. Her tone had been clipped and short but more in a sense of urgency than aggravation towards Lexa.

“We’re leaving,” she had said, approaching the table Lexa sat at alone, eating her dinner. Lexa’s hands still had bandages and it had made holding her spoon rather difficult.

“Right now?” she had asked, putting her spoon back in her bowl abruptly.

Avery started to roll her eyes and then stopped herself, biting something back. “No. In the morning. Be ready to leave by sunrise.” She had left before Lexa could ask why.

But perhaps it made sense. The threat was gone, there was no reason for the Commander to linger.

Lexa had returned to her meal with quiet contemplation after that, chewing through both her food and her thoughts. The look on Clarke’s face rising to mind more often than not.

Lexa faces forward again now and pats her horse on the side of his neck with a soft smile. She’d missed him. She’s pleased by the way his ears flick forward and back again in response and likes to think that he’d missed her too.

She looks ahead as their group plods beneath the low hanging branches of the trees. The leaves crunch beneath the hooves and the path stretches before them in large swathe of orange and auburn.

Clarke rides at the front.

Each time Lexa has tried to catch her eye she studiously keeps her gaze away. Yet multiple times throughout their journey thus far Lexa has turned her head, feeling someone’s gaze, only to see Clarke turning away.

The Commander is setting a pace that gives no hint to the idea that she is injured. In fact, except for the stitches at her temple and the bruises across her cheek and nose, it would be difficult to tell that she had just required multiple days of rest. Lexa is not experienced enough of a rider to truly be able to tell if their pace is fast, but if the looks Avery is sending Clarke’s way everyone once in awhile are anything to judge by, Clarke is making no accommodation for any discomfort she may be feeling.
“Are you excited?” Tahvo asks her, startling her from her thoughts and her staring.

“Hm?” She turns to look at him, careful to duck beneath a branch that sway before her.

“Polis,” he clarifies. He’s grinning, his excitement, despite the likely tiring journey ahead of them, clear.

And Lexa does feel a small thrill run through her. She’s heard enough of them talk about the capital that she wonders if it will live up to the extravagant image she’s built up in her mind.

“I am. Everybody talks of it so highly.”

She doesn’t mention the fact that she had been trying to find a way to go on her own. That in some ways it feels like it is important for her to be there for some reason. Like getting to Polis will give her life some traction that she hasn’t quite yet found since she landed on the ground.

“You’re going to love it,” he guarantees her. And the wistful look in his eyes and the surety of his words makes her believe him.

He’d been sticking closer to her side since they set out, keeping her company and alerting her of holes in the road when she misses them. It was these things among other small details that she hadn’t quite begun picking up on until they had gotten on the road.

She had arrived in the morning with her bag packed, ready for the long journey, to find that someone had already saddled and prepared her horse. She hadn’t been able to find out who exactly, but each time she had met the gaze of another one of Clarke’s inner circle of warriors she had been met with a dip of the head or a polite smile.

It took her altogether too long to figure out that this was their way of thanking her. For what she did for the Commander. They could not outwardly speak their thoughts and gratification, not without informing others of what occurred between her, Ontari, and the Commander. But this small thing, this they could do.

She smiles at Tahvo. “We have to get there first.”

“It’s not such a bad journey,” he responds, his excitement not tempered in the least. “We will travel through Trisana Kru,” his face twists as he fetches the name in english for her. “Bright Forest.”

“Sounds intriguing,” she comments with some skepticism. After seeing some of the way the ground has twisted things that should seem perfectly lovely she has learned to be suspicious first. “What’s it like?”

But he just shakes his head. “You will have to see. It will be worth it if I do not tell you.”

She laughs lightly, amused at the determined look on his face.

They ride for hours, only stopping occasionally to rest the horses or themselves. When the sun dips beneath the trees and it starts becoming difficult to see the road before them Clarke raises a hand and calls for a stop.

“Oh, uh thanks,” she says, suddenly awkward for no reason. They dip their heads with a smile and accomplish the work much faster than she ever would have alone.
She stands with a hand on the back of her neck, looking around for something to help with, thinking maybe she can go grab some firewood or something, when she feels eyes on her.

She turns to see Clarke look away, catching a glimpse of an odd expression. She doesn’t have time to figure it out before Clarke is heading inside her own tent, the flap falling shut behind her for the night.

Clarke keeps them moving. She calls for them to be ready early and they head out with their breakfasts still being chewed on in their mouths.

They seem to understand that she does not want to be brought into any conversations, or disturbed at all and they leave her to her peace. She is both thankful and not, to be left alone to her thoughts.

It pours off and on as they travel, heavy sheets of water that quickly soak through everything and anything. The road is quickly turning to sludge beneath their horses’ but the weather is simultaneously broken up as the clouds get pushed along by the wind.

At some point she glances back and sees her group when the clouds break unexpectedly, leaving them all blinking at the bright light. The leaves shine and all the horses and their riders glisten underneath the sky’s reflection.

Her eyes unwittingly find Lexa, a habit she’d picked up recently without realizing.

The other girl has made a makeshift cover of sorts from her shawl and is in some conversation with the warriors around her. She laughs about something Clarke can’t hear, her smile wide and infectious as she subconsciously rubs at the bridge of her nose. There are drops of rain on her cheeks and the tips of her hair that gleam under the rays of light coming through the trees.

“Heda,” Avery calls her attention.

Clarke turns her head and follows the girls line of sight. It’s a marker in the tree as they pass that has caught Avery’s attention. A subtle cue to those who know to look for it that they are passing across one clan boundary into another.

She nods to indicate her awareness. Avery says nothing else and Clarke returns her focus forward.

The cool air feels good in her lungs and for a moment she closes her eyes as the sun lays itself across her face.

It is good, to be heading home.

Her mind dips back to what she has just left, what she continues to get farther and farther away from.

She had not held many audiences in the small amount of time she had remained, only gathering herself to focus on what needed to be done before she left.

There had been one thing that had been most important of all.

Andere had looked even more hollow than the last time Clarke saw him. His eyes sitting deep in his skull with bruises sowed into the skin beneath. His mourning for his brother had been clear in the set of his shoulders.
She had wondered if it had pained him to not be able to wear the ceremonious robes of a Shallow Valley clan member in mourning. To do so, to wear such an obvious show of loss for a traitor to the coalition, would have been an insult that Clarke would have been unable to ignore.

"I heard your warriors say you are taking your leave soon. You've made your decision, then?" He had asked, watching her carefully, warily.

"I am. And I have," she had responded, standing from the throne.

She had circled the room slowly, looking over the tapestries that hung on the walls. They depicted men and women of the clan in various forms of movement and action. Some throwing knives, others cultivating fields. All moving in some form or another. Forward movement, this is what she had been thinking.

"You told me that you are expectant of a punishment for your inaction regarding your brother," she had said, aware that his gaze was still focused on the ground though she was now at his back.

"I ..." he hadn't seemed to know how to answer her, as if she'd asking him a trick question.

"I've decided that this shall be it."

"I don't understand."

She had turned from a tapestry to look at him.

"You believe that this clan should be led by one of its own. You will do it."

He had paled instantly. "Heda -- I-- I was never meant to -- my brother was always the one --"

"You will do it," she had silenced his protests with a cold look that caused his mouth to snap shut. "And any faults will come down on your head. Your own guilt and the struggle you will face to regain the trust of your people will be the punishment for your inaction."

He clearly had not known what to say but she had been able to see the panic in the white of his eyes.

"Your people will be your judge. If they are dissatisfied," she had gone and sat back on her throne, crossing one leg over the other as she had watched him, "then I will send someone to return to Shallow Valley. And the issue will be resolved."

His face, if there had been any blood left in it, had drained completely at her words.

The threat had been as clear as if she had asked for a warrant for his death and the only action left was for her to bring the sword down upon his head.

"I will be assigning advisors from Polis to remain here. They will inform me of your status regularly."

He had been too full of shock to do anything but blink back at her. The light from the window above her had fallen across his face, illuminating features too familiar, forcing her to look away.

He had stood on unsteady legs as a guard came forward to escort him out, remembering belatedly in his stupor to bow once more.

"Goodbye, Andere." Clarke had watched as he had hesitated at the door but had not looked back. "May we not meet again for some time."
The rain starts to drizzle once again and Clarke adjusts herself in the saddle to try and alleviate the pain in her side. She pushes it from her mind.

By the time they are close to making camp they are deep within Trisana Kru territory and the rain has alleviated to a light drizzle that is mostly caught by the leaves above their heads.

Clarke closes her eyes and wills her mind to stay focused as the day passes. To stay present. But all she sees is a pair of brown eyes staring back at her from the darkness.

*You’ll never survive yourself.*

She opens her eyes and urges her horse forward faster.

She’s fine.

“No way,” Lexa says, mouth hanging open.

Tahvo was right, there really wasn’t anything he could have said that would have prepared her for the glowing forest.

It doesn’t really start until the sun is settled comfortably below the horizon and their fires are licking into the sky as they all huddle around for the evening.

At first it’s glimpses out of the corner of her eye that she thinks she’s imagining. But then she rubs her eyes and looks, *really looks*, and she’s not imagining it, the trees are glowing.

Tahvo and a few others laugh at the look of wonder and astonishment on her face but she doesn’t even care. It’s incredible and she finds herself stumbling away from the campfires after their meals and into the trees.

She hears a few voices calling after her to not go too far, but none of the warriors had seemed particularly cautious in this part of the woods so she takes that as a sign that it is okay so long as she doesn’t get completely lost. She expects they’d be able to find her rather easily if she did. She has yet to learn the skill of covering her tracks.

The sound of their murmured conversations and the snapping of fires falls away as she lets herself get led into the soft glow of the trees, gently holding onto her staff.

Her neck cranes back to take it all in as she walks. Branches arch up with bright fingers into an interwoven canopy that shines in a complex tangling of glowing shades of blue and green. She spins, careful to watch her feet over a log with moss that ripples red and purple.

She lets out a surprised laugh of delight as she watches a butterfly beat its glowing wings before taking off.

She’s never seen anything like it.

For the first time in a while she wishes she had a way to call the Ark. A way to tell them that not everything is destroyed on the ground, and perhaps, there are even some things that are better.

Another butterfly, its wings beating softly, floats ahead of her and she follows its path through the
wide roots and tree trunks that bend and twist at odd angles. They would likely appear menacing or ominous if not for the way the moss atop glowed and shimmered softly, lighting her path.

She is so caught up in the wonder of it all she doesn’t realize she’s stumbled upon someone else until she stands at the edge of a clearing of trees and stops short.

And then she realizes it’s not a clearing at all that she’s stumbled upon, but a body of water. The small pond stands among the trees, its surface reflecting the soft glow of a massive tree that bends over it from the shore and and looks into it like a mirror.

And at the center of it all stands Clarke.

She’s up to her waist in the water, arms hanging loosely by her sides so that her fingertips are just dipped into the surface at either side of her body. Glowing lilies shift quietly next to her and fish with bioluminescent scales circle in slow patterns around her legs. Her head is tipped back with her eyes closed and it doesn’t even look like she’s breathing.

Lexa immediately feels like she’s intruding on a private moment and begins looking for a way to back away quietly.

“Legend has it,” Clarke starts, her voice just loud enough to reach Lexa. “That the people of the glowing forest believe these waters have the ability to heal.”

Lexa stops, pausing for a moment in deliberation. Then, careful of where she places her feet on the glowing ground with its raised roots, she steps a bit closer. She crosses her arms and leans against the trunk of the massive tree with her good shoulder.

A dragonfly hums about the edge of the water for a while, investigating some leaves that spin and float away. Lexa looks at Clarke. Her eyes remain closed and she doesn’t look as if she is going to say anything else.

“And?” Lexa prompts quietly. “Do you feel healed?”

It takes Clarke a moment. But then she opens her eyes even as her head remains tipped backwards. She looks as if she could be stargazing. But her eyes are unfocused as if she’s looking at something else altogether from what resides in front of her.

“No.”

Lexa doesn’t say anything and there’s only the soft sound of crickets and shifting water. Clarke’s gaze comes down from the sky to watch the small ripples that are cast out by her fingertips.

A fish explores around her ankle before slowly twisting around and wandering away. Clarke watches its path with something distant in her eyes though her face remains carefully blank.

“When my parents died,” Lexa starts, surprising herself with her words, unsure of where they’re coming from and already able to feel the way they stick in her throat. “There was nothing that could make me feel better. It just… I learned that there are certain types of pain that maybe we’re always supposed to feel in some way.”

Clarke is looking at her now. Lexa keeps her gaze focused on the surface of the water, watches the way it ripples and bends with a breeze she doesn’t feel.

Eventually she meets the other girl’s gaze and she realizes it’s the first time their eyes have met in days. She nearly forgot how blue Clarke’s are. They look like they’re glowing along with the forest.
as she stares quietly back.

“They got sick,” Lexa answers the unspoken question.

Clarke blinks but offers nothing.

Lexa turns her gaze away and lets out a sigh. She looks around and opts to settle down on a root that rises up out of the ground and twists into something that doesn’t look too terribly uncomfortable. The moss is actually soft beneath her as she settles and leans back against the trunk of the tree. Clarke hasn’t told her to leave yet so she might as well get comfortable.

They both turn to watch as a few fireflies float between them, their light fading in and out as they pass.

“He was your friend,” Lexa says eventually, after some time watching the way Clarke eyes the spot the fireflies last disappeared.

“A long time ago, yes,” she answers quietly, still looking away.

“I’m sorry.”

Clarke lets out a breath.

“So am I.”

They sink back into quiet again after that. Clarke watching something in the water, thinking about something Lexa can’t see, and Lexa watching Clarke.

Eventually Clarke raises her head and begins wading her way out of the water slowly. Her movement disrupts the careful equilibrium of the pond and the pull causes a flurry of colors to move beneath its surface as bright clouds of algae are uplifted. It makes Lexa wonder how long she had been standing there for it to have settled as it had.

Clarke strides out onto the dirt and sand in pants that drip onto the ground in puddles, her bare feet flexing. Water drips from her fingertips as well and she absentmindedly shakes them a bit to let some of the water loose.

She stands for a moment as if she is unsure where she should go, looking over Lexa’s shoulder back towards camp. Water continues to drip off her in rivulets. Eventually she makes up her mind and settles on a root opposite where Lexa sits. She plucks at her wet clothes as she situates herself. Lexa doesn’t ask why she waded into the water with them on.

It doesn’t take long before they’re both studying one another, the forest humming with life around them.

“How’s your side?” Lexa asks eventually, when the quiet feels a bit too much, just to say anything.

“Hurts,” Clarke says, deadpan. But then after she shifts, readjusting her position against the tree, she says, much quieter: “But it could be much worse I suppose.”

Lexa hums in agreement, moving her shoulder a bit and taking stock of how she herself is feeling.

“How’s your side?”

The question surprises her and she meets Clarke’s inquiring gaze.
“Yeah. I’m alright,” she answers with a nod. “Could be worse.”

Clarke nods in agreement, satisfied with Lexa’s answer even as her gaze travels to the shoulder Lexa had just adjusted and then searches as if she might be able to discern where other injuries might be. Her gaze catches on something at Lexa’s hip in the process.

She glances back up at Lexa’s eyes. “May I?” she asks.

It takes Lexa a second to realize what she’s asking and for a beat Lexa wonders what would happen if she says no. But instead she unclips the baton from her waist, flips it, and then stretches across the distance to hand it over. Clarke takes it with careful fingers, eyes intent on the object now in her hands.

She pulls it apart as she’s seen Lexa do, each segment of the metal clicking into place until it’s at its full length. She observes it closely, turning it over and studying it with what is clearly caution.

“It’s not dangerous. Not anymore,” Lexa tells her, Clarke’s eyes dart up to her. “I only had enough power for one more go.”

Clarke nods, believing her, and after a moment collapses it again, the pieces clicking into place. She doesn’t hand it back just yet.

“You did not say anything,” she says eventually.

“You would never have let me keep it if you’d known.”

Clarke almost smiles. “You are correct.” She looks at something over the pond.

She doesn’t seem upset by the idea that Lexa deceived her, or at the very least withheld the truth. If anything she seems oddly amused by the idea. It tugs at the corner of her lip but then is gone so quickly Lexa thinks that perhaps she imagined it.

Clarke is studying the object in her hands without actually seeing it. It turns over and over in her careful fingers. It is a long moment before she asks the question.

“Well, it was either shock her or get stabbed, so --” she tries for a joke, unsettled by the intensity of the look Clarke directs at her.

“No,” Clarke stops her, firmly but not unkindly. “Why did you do it? Why did you come after me?” And there’s a small amount of frustration leaking into her tone mixing in with the confusion as if the very fact that she doesn’t have the answer has been bothering her to no end.

Lexa sighs, leans her head back until it meets the rough bark behind her, considering the girl across from her. Clarke is staring at her with such intensity it’s almost as if she believes she will miss part of the answer if she blinks.

“Because I knew I was the only one that could.”

“You could have left,” is Clarke’s quick answer.
“Yes.”

“But you chose to risk your life instead. For someone that has not made your life easy,” Clarke says, as if by laying out puzzle pieces she hopes to be able to snap them together to form a whole picture.

Lexa lets out a laugh of disbelief and crosses her arms. “Are you complaining?”

Clarke’s brows constrict as she sits back, mildly affronted. “I am trying to understand.”

“You know,” Lexa says, shaking her head with a slightly sardonic smile. “I’ve never actually had anyone be upset that I saved them.”

Clarke stares at her face for a moment, and then, as if she is figuring something out, realization breaks over her expression. “You are angry with me.”

It’s not a question. Lexa looks away.

Her anger feels foolish in a way, in the scope of everything they just went through. But she still feels it, even if it has becomes something more subtle.

Clarke nods as if she agrees, or at least understands something else if not the thing she had originally sought. She looks at the surface of the pond and Lexa can practically see the thoughts running behind her eyes. Then, all at once her expression smooths over, as if she’s decided something.

She lifts her head and waits to make sure she has Lexa’s full attention before speaking.

“Thank you.” The water shifts softly and overhead the stars are silent, watching. “For coming after me. In spite of your anger.”

And Lexa doesn’t want to soften, but it’s difficult not to feel something pull inside of her at the intense conviction on Clarke’s face. She wonders how often the Commander offers gratitude sincerely. She can’t imagine frequently.

Her intense focus has Lexa shifting where she sits and clearing her throat.

“Yeah, well. Hopefully there won’t ever be a situation where you have to return the favor,” she says, trying to leverage some humor into the situation.

Clarke doesn’t laugh, if anything her eyes look a bit disappointed. Lexa isn’t sure who with.

Lexa lets out a loud sigh. And suddenly she’s just tired of it all. Thinks that maybe it shouldn’t have to be so hard. For either of them. She blows air between her lips in frustration.

“Maybe we, you and I, maybe we should just, I don’t know, start over,” Lexa suggests, looking out over the pond. She had started saying it as a joke but somewhere along the way it came out as something more serious. She tilts her head as she considers the idea more. “A clean slate.”

She turns her head back to Clarke who is considering her with an eyebrow that rises higher and higher with each word. Lexa has apparently thrown her for a loop.

Well she’s gone this far, what’s a bit more. She rubs the bridge of her nose and looks away again.

“Maybe we could even be… friends?” she tosses the idea out there with a shrug that she immediately regrets from the resulting sting in her shoulder.

“Friends?” Clarke asks, her tone giving nothing away.
“Yes, friends,” Lexa responds with a small laugh. “You know, two people who don’t hate each other, and maybe even enjoy each other’s company occasionally? Don’t you have friends?”

Clarke rolls her eyes but Lexa can’t help but notice that she hasn’t objected to the idea outright.

“I have subjects.”

Now it’s Lexa’s turn to roll her eyes. “Well, technically, I’m not one of yours. So I guess we’ve found a loophole.”

Clarke says nothing and regards Lexa as if she’s trying to figure out if she’s joking.

“What do you say?” Lexa asks, standing up, suddenly emboldened by the idea and deciding to ride it all the way through. She holds out her hand just to make it as awkward as she possible can, wiggling her fingers with a smile.

Clarke’s face reflects an expression of confused surprise at Lexa’s insistence, mouth hanging open slightly. But after a beat, as if she was giving Lexa time to retract the offer, it slowly transforms into a small and amused, if not still perplexed, smile.

The odd sensation that Lexa has suddenly accomplished something she hadn’t even knowingly set out to do ripples through her.

Clarke’s hand reaches out to grip her arm. Her fingers wrap around the space just above Lexa’s wrist in a gesture that is immediately more intimate than a handshake and Lexa feels a shiver of unnamed sensation run up her arm.

“Friends,” Clarke agrees, in a tone that indicates she hasn’t decided whether to still be amused or puzzled by the idea just yet.

Lexa nods, all serious business. “It’s nice to meet you, Clarke.”

Clarke pauses. “You as well,” her eyes glowing with the forest around her, “Lexa.”
Chapter Notes

Uhhhhh yeah. It's been... a really rather long time. But here we are. Enjoy.

Chapter 10

It starts slow.

Little things here and there that would almost be unnoticeable. A question or two. Or maybe even a gesture. Miniscule moments that shift things in incremental amounts. But movement is movement and all steps get you somewhere.

“How did you train? As a guard for your people.” Clarke asks after what had been a rather long stretch of silence between them.

Lexa isn’t surprised by the questions anymore, they have become more frequent over the days. “We had rooms with equipment. Treadmills. Ellipticals. Things like that.”

Clarke nods and looks ahead. “… Interesting.”

Lexa cracks a smile. Clarke’s unwillingness to admit that she doesn’t know what things Lexa mentions are is as endearing as it is infuriating at times.

“And you had the ability to grow food? In the metal box?” The space between Clarke’s eyes scrunches together a fraction as she clearly tries to picture it. Her eyes search Lexa’s face as if to perceive whether what she’s been told has just been a way for Lexa to mess with her.

The sun is high above them, birds circling overhead as they make their way on the narrow path. The air feels a bit lighter and Lexa realizes with each passing day she feels her body healing from the ordeal of Shallow Valley more and more as the city gets farther behind them. Her face is nearly clear from the bruises even.

“It’s really not like you have down here,” Lexa responds, gesturing briefly as she talks to the sweeping fields they pass through, the wide open air. The tall grass on the edge of the road is golden from the summer sun still and shifts like water in the breeze as it reaches up to touch her boots in her stirrups.

“It was much more... enclosed. Artificial in most ways. It’s hard to describe.”

Clarke lets out a small, non-committal noise and faces forward in her saddle again, still looking unconvinced or perhaps bothered that she can’t quite picture the idea of things growing without the wide sky overhead.
Days later and Lexa now barely feels the beating she faced. Long afternoons in the saddle, however, are still hard on the body as she languidly stretches her arms over her head with a small groan. They’ve stopped for the day and Lexa is trying not to show how happy she is by that fact as she covers her yawn with her hand.

The sky is a deep indigo and if she squints she can see the stars even with the glare of the two fires at the center of their camp. The evenings are a bit colder now and she’s not sure how she feels about it. Cold wasn’t something experienced often on the ark, it was only ever felt as a byproduct of a malfunction of their station’s careful equilibrium.

A majority of the warriors are off on a hunt, trying to secure a few rabbits or some other game after their journey was surprisingly sparse with wildlife. The few warriors that remain huddle around the larger fire, trading stories that have some of them tipping their heads back with laughter.

Clarke sits alone.

Her elbows are resting on her knees, hands clasped gently in front of her as she stares at the shifting flames. It’s not an uncommon sight. Typically the Commander spends her time in her own tent once they’ve made camp. Occasionally she’ll make brief appearances at a fire but eventually her proximity will clearly make some uneasy or overwhelmed if they are staying in a small village, so she’ll take her leave. Lexa glances around, looking for Anya or Avery or anyone she would ordinarily see within the Commander’s company. They are nowhere to be found and now that Lexa considers it more, she has not seen much of the second recently. She can’t say she’s upset by that factor.

“Is this seat taken?”

Clarke’s eyes shift up from the flames, pulled from her thoughts. Her gaze follows Lexa’s outstretched hand until they land on the spot on log beside her. After a moment, Clarke shakes her head and Lexa settles onto the uncomfortable seat with thanks, realizing belatedly that she’s sitting closer than perhaps she had intended. But the fire spits softly in front of them, letting off a warmth that Lexa settles into after neither of them makes to move away. She yawns, failing to cover it up this time. Clarke returns to her thoughts, fingers tangling in the necklace string that hangs from around her neck as the fire snaps in front of them, spitting out glowing remnants of the wood it consumes.

Distant laughter coming from the other fire reaches them and Lexa looks over, cracking a smile even though whatever humorous story they’re sharing in their language is lost to her. She spends some time just sitting and straining her ears, wondering if she can pick out any of the words from the limited vocabulary she’s been building. She’s so focused on her objective it takes her a moment to realize that Clarke is looking at her.

“What?” she asks with a light laugh, touching her face as if it might have something on it, confused when there’s nothing. Clarke is still staring at her, an odd expression on her face.

“Do you miss them?”

“Miss who?” she asks, dropping her hand into her lap once more.

“Your people.”
Lexa sobers slightly at her words, the smile disappearing. The fire snaps and the logs shift. Muffled laughter reaches them.

“Yes.”

Clarke nods slowly, her eyes returning to the fire though she doesn’t appear to feel any qualms about bringing the potentially sensitive topic up.

Lexa does miss them. Everyday. She misses the sense of familiarity. She misses Raven. She misses the anonymity she was allowed to have where she was just a guard who did her job and nothing more was expected of her.

But as she sits and thinks about it more, she realizes with a slow start that she would miss this too.

“Yes, I do miss them,” she says, drawing Clarke’s attention back to her. “But sometimes less than others.”

Clarke holds her eye for a moment before looking away.

A comfortable quiet resettles between them. The fire crackles and shifts.

Small moments.

The days pass quickly as they make their way. The wind runs among tree bristles on the forest floor as storms rumble and toss their way overhead at inconvenient times. Occasionally it is not just rumbles but downpour as the sky opens and tries to cleanse the sense of summer from the ground.

One such time has just passed, leaving the earth wet and pliable. The mud is slick and clings to Clarke’s boots as she walks. The soft undergrowth of the glowing forest is long behind them now. They are that much closer to home.

“I’m not doing it.”

“You will,” Clarke tells her, there is no room for anything but gravity in her voice.

Anya stops walking to whirl back and face Clarke. She’s fuming. Clenching her fists tight in indignation. “I won’t.” Anya stares at Clarke for half a beat, jaw tense as she’s met with a calm and unchanging expression. Then she turns, shoving a branch out from in front of her face as she continues to stalk away in another direction aimlessly.

Clarke breathes evenly through her nose to try and gather herself. She has been on the road too long now to have much patience for someone defying her, even Anya. She stands her ground, refusing to chase. “This is not a request.”

Anya stops once more and turns at the tone, back straight. She purses her lips, searching Clarke’s eyes wordlessly, a war waging behind her own as she so clearly bites her tongue against what she sees as a grave injustice or even a punishment. Eventually, what could be eons later, she looks away with a tense jaw but says nothing else, the closest to an affirmation Clarke knows she’s going to get.
But it’s done. Even Anya knows the limits of how much challenge she can put forward without reprimand.

The sound of twigs snapping beneath uncareful feet has them both turning. Lexa approaches with a questioning expression as she glances between them. She can clearly feel the tense energy even though she doesn’t yet understand its source.

“Lincoln said you wanted to see me?” she says, still glancing between them and taking in the deep scowl on Anya’s face as she looks away.

Clarke ignores the question and cuts right to the chase, one hand resting on the sword handle at her waist. “You still wish to train?”

“I… do I what?”

“Do you still wish to train?” Clarke asks again, more insistent but not in an unfriendly tone.

Understanding breaks across Lexa’s face. “I…” she looks between them. “Yes. Yes, I do.” She tries to rein in the curious enthusiasm on her face but not fast enough for Clarke to miss it. Her eyebrows raise a fraction. “You’re going to let me train as a guard? In Polis?” The surprised hope shines brighter, her eyes wide with her interest caught as she takes a step forward unconsciously.

“No,” Clarke cuts her off, watching as Lexa’s face immediately falls, shuttering. She opens her mouth to ask the obvious next question but Clarke’s patience is spent so she cuts her off. “Anya is going to take you as her second.”

There’s a moment of heavy silence broken only by the murmur of the camp in the distance and some birds fluttering between the branches above their heads.

Lexa’s gaze shifts over to Anya. Anya, for her part, hasn’t stopped staring indignantly at the ground since Lexa joined them, making her opinion on the idea clear.

“Oh. I… really?” she asks, obviously surprised.

“Do you not want it?” Clarke asks, watching the other girl closely, trying to read her face. Becoming a second to a warrior of Anya’s stature is considered an... honor. More than that, actually. To be trained by the hand that trained the Commander is nearly unheard of. She is having a difficult time reading Lexa’s reaction.

“No!” Lexa answers insistently. “Yes, of course I do. I just…,” she glances at Anya again mouth open to say something else. Then all at once she shakes her head, putting something aside. “Nevermind. Yes. I accept.”

Anya rolls her eyes sharply. Clarke can practically feel the disgruntlement radiating off of her. She sends Clarke a dark glance as she brushes past Lexa. “Dison foto strat,” she says to Clarke as she passes, her tone hard.

Lexa watches her retreat, waiting until she is out of earshot to speak. “She doesn’t seem particularly keen on the idea.” she says, turning back to Clarke.

Clarke lifts and drops one shoulder, one hand resting on the hilt of her sword again even as she watches Anya disappear from view. “She will get over it.”

A quiet settles for a moment as Lexa seems to absorb the information and perhaps grasp how her life is about to change a bit more.
“Thank you,” she says eventually as she looks at Clarke. Clarke notices that her eyes are the same shade as the glistening trees around them.

Clarke nods, accepting her thanks. As she leaves, however, she turns back and says: “As someone who has filled the role of Anya’s second, I speak sincerely when I tell you that perhaps you may want to wait before bestowing your gratitude.”

They wake up before the sun has even started considering heading near the horizon. The birds are quiet, unbothered in their nests, waiting for first light to start stirring. Everything is still. It’s the part of the day where nothing quite feels here nor there.

Lexa rubs the sleep from her eyes but follows the warriors that ride their horses carefully on the road they can just barely see beneath them in the moonlight. Despite the tiredness she can’t help sneaking glances at the specific warrior who is to be her teacher for the foreseeable future. She looks out of the corner of her eye but Anya’s face is unreadable except for the slight scowl sitting at one corner of her mouth. But that isn’t particularly out of the ordinary.

She hasn’t even looked Lexa’s way since yesterday. Whether that was to give Lexa time to back out or Anya time to convince Clarke to change her mind, Lexa isn’t sure. She ponders on it as they head towards the light that rises slowly in the distance.

They are heading into Polis early. Lexa deduced that it’s for the same reason they arrived in Shallow Valley early. Less people, less fuss. The more she’s gotten to know Clarke the more she thinks she understands.

"Are we close?" she asks. She’s been refraining from asking that question every few minutes but she is having a difficult time reining in her eagerness to see the place she has heard so many stories about.

"Closer," Lincoln tells her in a voice still gruff with sleep. "We entered the Commander’s forest a while back. The city archers will likely have already announced her arrival to the gates."

Lexa’s gaze quickly looks up to scan the trees for the silent archers, knowing her efforts are futile even as she does it. She doubts she will ever be able to spot them unless they want her to. Or perhaps she just needs to be taught how to see them.

She chances a glance at Anya again, but the warrior is grim as ever.

In the end she isn't prepared for Polis.

The stories and snippets of things she heard over the weeks telling her about its tall buildings and
long roads that circle and interconnect, all leading towards a tower at the center - Clarke’s tower, they did nothing to help her.

She wasn’t expecting it all.

It’s… massive.

Being born floating out in space she thought nothing could ever phase her, that she had seen the cosmos so how could anything be more awe inspiring than that? Lexa’s jaw had begun to drop when even just the gate had first come into view. The road curved and twisted from the trees until it evened out for the last mile where it ran straight, packed dirt running hard and fast up to a large wall. Guards in thick armor, holding spears longer than Lexa’s body, stand at either side of it as well as atop it.

Lexa’s neck cranes to catch sight of a large red flag being raised as they approach, flapping ardently in the wind as it’s quickly sent up upon the sight of Clarke. At the flag’s center: the same cog-like mark that marks Clarke’s forehead now.

Words are shouted across the top of the wall and movement begins flow into a steady flurry as their party grows closer. Suddenly there is a crack in the barrier before them that grows as the gates are opened with a steady mechanical grind that clicks and shudders loudly.

They pass beneath its wide arc, the doors flayed open to welcome the Commander back to her place of rule. Lexa eyes trail over the large bars of iron that twist together like branches of trees, mouth open, stunned at the intricacy of the web of metal that appears both impenetrable and beautiful at once

“Welcome to Polis,” Lincoln tells her with a grin, enjoying her expression.

Lexa’s senses are so overrun with different smells and sounds she’s at a loss for words. Though the sun is just starting to rise, the city is clearly getting ready for a busy day. It’s like Shallow Valley but grown larger by a magnitude and a half, using the best scraps of the old world to construct something entirely new and vibrant.

They don’t avoid all the crowds and splendor that clearly comes with the arrival of the Commander. Word of their presence seems to ripple out ahead of them as they traverse down a wide road that is clearly the main avenue of the city.

The farther inside they venture the greater the color that arrives. The houses are no longer stone or earth colored like the forest that surrounds them but start showing flickers of paint that spell out things from the old world. The graffiti becomes more and more clustered until they reach what Lexa assumes is the main square, a broad space filled with row upon row of stalls that are beginning their day, releasing rich smells of roasting meat and baking bread.

There is a crowd now, full of people in a mix of warrior’s dress and others in eclectic fabrics that likely represent the clan they come from. Lexa sees a few children run by in Shallow Valley robes and she is absolutely astounded by the energy and chaos that is coming to life before her.

Their horses press through the crowd – or rather, Clarke’s horse proceeds and the crowd parts widely before her, a wake of bowing bodies and murmurs and shouts.
Lexa doesn’t think she's blinked once since they entered the gates. There is too much to take in and the flow of the buildings and the color that sprouts from crevices and cracks makes her crane her neck until it aches. She loves it. She loves every single bit of it.

Her astonishment at the sights before her are what distract her from the approach of what their group had been heading for all along.

The tower casts a long shadow across the city with the rising sun behind it. Her head tips back to take it in and she lets out an appreciative whistle under her breath.

“Subtle,” she jokes, knowing Lincoln heard her by the way his lips twitch but doesn’t comment.

As they reach the base of the tower the different members of their group split off at some signal Lexa doesn’t notice. She sees Tahvo give a small wave before hitching his bag across his back and leading his horse in the direction the other archers disappeared in. She notices that he is once again wearing the three painted dots signaling his position beside his eye and wonders how much formality Clarke demands when she’s required to make an entrance to the city or if maybe it’s a personal choice that they all make. Lexa doesn’t get the chance to ask her though.

Clarke swings down from her horse and hands the reins off in a quick motion. People descend on her like a swarm, instantly demanding her attention. They speak with respect but also with a haste that argues that their concern or complaint or report should be heard first. Clarke’s face is a mask as she listens, nodding and turning from one person to the next as they make their way towards the tower’s entrance. In a blink the Commander is swallowed by the crowd of advisors and servants and Lexa is left with her goodbye on her tongue.

When things have settled a bit more, Lexa drops from her own horse. She pats its side gently and grabs her bag and staff from the saddle before making the move to follow the crowd into the tower with a shrug. A rough hand on the back of her jacket stops her from getting more than a foot away.

“Not there.” Anya turns and shoves her in the direction of a smaller building next to the Commander’s tower, younger warriors coming in and out of its door. “There.”

Anya doesn’t linger to give more explanation, just grabs her own bag and stalks inside the tower without a backwards glance, leaving Lexa behind.

“Welcome home, Commander.”

Clarke lets out a breath so deep she feels all the way to the tips of her fingers as she releases it. She breathes in the familiar scent of her belongings with closed eyes. She stands at the entrance to her quarters, the light from the day pouring through the open windows. She knows that if she were to go over to the balcony she would see the city stretching and yawning itself awake far below.

It had taken her longer than she would have liked to get to her rooms. She had been endlessly taken aside by one advisor and then the next, shown maps and placements of their warriors, received an update on the new Shallow Valley leader’s status, the list was endless and her mind works and sorts with the information even now.

She had come close to breaking free at one point but then Titus had caught up with her as well. He had been determined to give her an update on the training of the Nightbloods though she will be
observing them tomorrow most likely and will see them for herself. He had also taken it upon himself to make her aware of his feelings regarding “the sky girl”.

Clarke wants to lean her head back against the closed door behind her and just shut the world out for a moment.

Her handmaidens wait before doing anything. They know she doesn’t like to be pounced upon when first walking in but rather do things in her own time. Their hands remain folded behind their backs loosely as they wait.

As soon as she begins removing her shoulderguard they approach and get to work. Their quick fingers make easy work of its buckles and soon she is relieved of its weight. This is quickly followed by the sword at her hip, the knives at her thighs, the daggers in her boots, as well as the rest of the weapons hidden and tucked against her skin. A gentle, tired laugh escapes her as she realizes she would never be able to fool any of her handmaidens as they know where everything is hidden.

Her grit and sweat-coated shirt is tugged above her head, the fabric pulling at her hair, and she feels more than sees them pause when they find the still-healing wound on her side.

She doesn’t offer an explanation. After a moment they continue their task, knowing that it is not their place to ask questions. This is not the first time they have found her injured and it won’t be the last.

She sighs as she thinks about the bath in the other room, knowing that she can’t use it as it would only risk infection until the cut is healed. Her handmaidens seem to understand and yet still take pity on her.

In the end they carefully pour pails of floral-scented water through her hair and carefully wipe the paint and dirt from her skin with damp cloths. Their movements are slow and diligent and Clarke revels in the show of care after so long on the road.

“I hear you brought an outsider back to Polis with you?” the voice is soft, gentle and humorous, belonging to the eldest among them after Clarke has had enough time to settle into an almost completely relaxed state.

Clarke cracks an eye open, not even realizing that she had closed them in the first place. She finds Kala looking at her with an expression Clarke rarely sees: curious and oddly mothering in some ways. She’s likely the only one that could get away with giving Clarke that look without putting their life at risk.

“I might have,” Clarke responds, closing her eyes once more as warm water is poured over her hair, her head tipping back to keep it from her eyes.

“Who is she?”

The question is clearly not meant to be prying or even sound demanding, more just curious but in a way that wouldn’t mind if Clarke chose not to answer.

Clarke opens her eyes again and stares at the ceiling, watches the light of the morning seep through her large windows and paint the tiles of the room a flurry of blues and greens. The sound of dripping water and small, gentle movements as her handmaidens shift around her is all that fills the room for a while.

“I’m not sure yet.”
The building Lexa walks into is filled with an entry space as well as tables that are spread out with a few younger warriors sitting at them, chatting amongst themselves. It’s clearly a gathering place of some sort and she could easily imagine people sitting down for a meal or stopping for a quick rest.

"Umm, hi," she says to the curious expressions that she receives as people look up from the benches and tables they sit at near the doorway. They don’t answer or respond. Instead they give her a look that she doesn’t lie to herself and say is friendly before quickly returning to their conversation.

A commotion towards the side draws her eye. A girl around Lexa’s age says a long string of words in Trigedasleng as she holds a warrior’s leg still and wraps a bandage around it while he sits in a chair near the window. She’s not ungentle in her movements but they suggest that she has worn through most of her patience prior to Lexa’s arrival. The warrior she is tending to, who looks no older than thirteen, appears slightly chastened by whatever her words were. As he sits still she ties the bandage off with a satisfied nod, observing her work.

Eventually she seems to sense someone staring at her. From where she crouches, she glances over her shoulder at Lexa. “Gaf som in?” she asks, her tone slightly accusatory or defensive to pair with the way her eyes narrow.

Lexa blinks back at her, at a loss.

The narrowed eyes study her for a moment longer, taking in Lexa’s clothes and the strange insignia on her guard jacket. Something clicks for her and her eyes widen a fraction before she covers it.

"You’re the sky girl," she says instead in response, not wanting to linger on the topic. “I guess this is where I’m supposed to be staying from now on.” Lexa looks around the rectangular hall as she speaks which is clearly just part of the first floor of the building. It’s wide and open, large windows on the sides allowing light to illuminate the space. There are a few tables and chairs here and there but not many of them are filled and mostly she sees other people rushing in and out of the hallways and doorways at the other end. A large staircase spirals up in the front corner, its steps disappearing around the bend where she can hear people walking about.

The girl nods as if she hears this quite a bit. "Who is your first?"

"Anya," Lexa answers, still looking around the room distractedly. She doesn’t have a last name to give but from what she’d gathered, people seemed not to have them on the ground.

The girl snorts in response, obviously not believing her. “Right. And I suppose you rode the Commander’s horse into the city too.”

Lexa’s attention returns to her, mildly affronted at the idea of this random stranger essentially calling her a liar.

“It’s true,” she says, eyes narrowing as she adjusts the heavy pack over her shoulder, wishing she could set its weight down.
The other girl still seems unconvinced, arms crossed. Neither of them pay much attention to the young warrior who is listening in interestedly, gaze going back and forth between them as they speak.

Lexa pulls the bag over from around her shoulder and digs through it for a moment. "Well, I have this." Lexa holds up the remains of the red shawl that had been given to her by Clarke all those days ago. It has gained a few gashes here and there but can still hold itself together for the most part, the pin holding it together catches the light.

The girl stills minutely, doubt disappearing from her face to settle on something much more serious. Her eyes narrow in on the cog insignia and she stares for longer than a beat. She meets Lexa's eyes again briefly.

All at once she turns and begins walking towards the staircase, her mind having come to a decision. "Come with me. I'll show you where to put your things."

She's already striding away before Lexa can even process the swift change. She hurries to follow, adjusting the bag on her shoulder with a frown as she stuffs the shawl back into it while also hanging onto her staff.

"Seconds," the girl starts, "both those permanently stationed in Polis and those visiting from other clans, typically stay within these quarters. It is close to both the food hall and the training grounds and it keeps all of you from getting under the Commander’s feet. Some seconds stay in the tower but most remain here."

They wind up the narrow staircase numerous times over but the girl doesn’t stop once to show the other floors. Lexa assumes she will have to do the exploring herself at some point.

She does poke her head out onto their landings once or twice however and mostly just sees the same thing: rows of rooms and people her age or younger running to and fro in a variety of states of dress and armor.

After numerous floors the girl abruptly makes a hard left and then they’re walking down a hall that looks the same as all the ones before it but slightly quieter and clearly less occupied. Lexa is forced to stop short when the other girl halts suddenly.

"Here."

Lexa looks to her right. ‘Here’ is a small, nondescript room with freshly folded blankets and items sitting atop a small, single bed.

"Put your things in this room, this is where you will rest. But if Anya is truly your first I imagine you will not get to sleep much."

"Thank you," Lexa says gratefully with a smile, stepping inside and dumping her bags on the bed, thankful to not be carrying them farther.

She looks around at the simple room. It has a bed, an empty chest for her to put her things in, a small table, and a single chair beside it, carved from some sort of dark wood. It also has a high ceiling that slopes down at an angle, making her realize she’s must be on the top floor. There is a small, singular window just low enough she bets she can reach to prop it open if she stretches on her toes.

She had expected the other girl to leave, so she is surprised to find her still hovering at the door, unabashed in her staring as she leans against the frame with crossed arms.
"The Commander has shown you favor." It’s not phrased like a question.

"Well, I don’t know if I’d say it quite like that," Lexa says with a small laugh. She begins pulling things from her bag and setting them aside, grimacing slightly at the dirt from the road she’s clearly dragged inside.

"There are very few that receive tokens with the Commander's insignia." Her voice is even, cautious almost as she takes Lexa in. Lexa thinks she would be more bothered by the staring if she hadn’t gotten used to it from traveling with Clarke.

Lexa shrugs as she tosses some things into the empty chest. "It’s a long story. But I don’t know, we're... friends," she says, ending with another half shrug.

"I was not aware the Commander had friends."

There’s something about her tone that has Lexa looking up. She takes in the other girl’s posture and the way the words leave her mouth slightly clipped. Lexa stops in her unpacking and turns her attention more fully.

“You don’t like her.”

It’s not a question, Lexa can see it even more clearly now that she’s looking for it. She’s suddenly beyond intrigued having mostly only met people who either see Clarke through a gaze filled entirely with devotion or one filled with fear and misunderstanding.

The girl hesitates for the barest of moments but long enough to confirm Lexa’s statement as she chooses her next words carefully. “I respect the Commander and her dedication to protect her people.”

Lexa sees the non-answer for what it is but doesn’t say anything else.

“Well,” the other girl says, standing up straight from the wall, signaling the end of the conversation. “I suppose I should let you get settled and you look like you could use some rest.”

Lexa blows air from her nose. “Thanks. It’s hard not to look and feel a bit run down after so many days on the road. I think I’m permanently covered in a layer of dirt.” She holds out her arms to show it.

The girl rocks back on her heels briefly, lingering another moment, looking Lexa over with something more than just curiosity. Eventually her eyes return to Lexa’s and she says, “If you need me, you can find me over at the building just across the square. I have lived here long enough I can likely either help you with whatever you need or direct you towards the person that can.”

“Okay, sure.” Lexa says, hand on the back of her neck, surprised by the offer. “Thanks for uh, getting me settled.” Lexa offers her hand and the other girl takes it briefly.

As she lets go she lets out a sigh that’s almost exasperated and with a shake of the head says, "Be careful, sky girl."

"It's Lexa, actually. Little bit less of a mouthful.”

The other girl actually cracks a smile, amused by something she doesn’t share, hesitating at the door for a moment longer before exiting.

“Wait, I didn’t catch your name.” Lexa calls after her, poking her head out as the other girl walks
back down the hall.

The girl turns, sending a quick grin of a smile as she walks backwards for a few steps.

"Costia. Good luck."

“Send an archer to the relay point and have them go through Floukru on their way back. I haven’t yet heard word from Inver and he could use a reminder that patience is not something running deep in Polis nowadays.”

“Yes, Heda.” The nondescript looking archer with the three dots, one gold, on his temple bows quickly and takes his orders and goes. His footsteps make no sound on the stone floor and he’s gone quickly.

Clarke folds her hands behind her back and looks out over the skyline before her. It had been a long day of meetings and consultations and now the ground is gold as the day starts coming to an end. The sound of the door opening has her turning her head for a moment, knowing that the only person bold enough to enter without being announced is the one who has a bone to pick with her.

Clarke cuts her off before she can really begin. “I need you to remain in Polis for a short while and coordinate some things for me.”

Anyá stops just short of the steps that would bring her to Clarke’s level.

“My troops - “

“Will be just fine. I’ve seen to it.”

There’s a brief pause where Clarke drums her fingers against her interlocked hands behind her back as she looks over the city. There’s a pause in the conversation where she can feel more than see Anyá looking at her.

“Shallow Valley has made you uneasy.”

Clarke’s fingers still and she turns her head. But Anyá’s expression is nothing but even, a look she adopted at some point when Clarke wasn’t paying attention in the moments before.

“Not at all,” Clarke says, stepping back from the balcony.

“Cautious, then.”

“It has made me rethink some things -- “

“You’ve sent archers and a patrol to each of the clans that are ruled by a nightblood.” There is some bite in her tone and it sets Clarke back a moment. Clarke meets her eye steadily and says nothing. What Anyá says is accurate and she’s not sure quite yet how she found out so quickly. Anya seems to read her mind on this.

“You think I wouldn’t notice that suddenly half of the archer legates and their seconds are gone?
Others may not know to look for that sign but it wasn’t particularly subtle either. I know you. I know you wouldn’t trust anyone outside that rank to do that job.”

Clarke drums her fingers on one of the stag antlers of her throne where her hand had come to rest. Eventually, after a long moment of deliberation, she says, “I am making no immediate actions or decisions.” She pauses, her hand tightening on the throne minutely as she continues. “But Shallow Valley should have never happened.”

“But it did --”

“Yes.” Anya opens her mouth to say something again but then Clarke cuts her off again, tired of being interrupted. “I am not going to start a war with each of my own clans based on suspicion and paranoia. But don’t think me foolish enough to leave them be after what happened.”

“Do you suspect?”

“No,” Clarke says firmly. She believes it too, for now. “Not yet. I believe they are as loyal as perhaps Narrok once was. Before distance and jealousy corrupted him.”

Anya’s look is level at her, empty even though Clarke can see the way her jaw ticks. If there’s any pity behind her eyes she doesn’t show it. Someday Clarke will have to ask her what she’s thinking in this moment.

“I am erring on the side of caution,” Clarke says, coming around to take a seat in her throne. “What happened in Shallow Valley will not happen again. I will do what I must to ensure that.”

Anya is still looking at her even as Clarke steeples her fingers and descends into her thoughts.

“You’ve changed.”

Clarke’s eyes flick up to her and then away.

“We all change.”

Lexa is marveling at the handiwork of the new clothes she received, fingers tracing over the intricate stitchwork and the care that has so clearly been woven into it. She folds the garment carefully and places it into the trunk at the foot of her bed. Completely unpacked she tosses herself back onto her bed with a sigh of relief and happiness.

The amount of joy that comes with having a space to call your own is sizable to the point of overwhelming, she’s finding. The room is tiny, barely even there with its simplistic style and minimal decor but she loves it. She loves every square inch of it solely because, in this present moment, it is hers.

She is so wrapped up in the joy of her thoughts that it takes her a moment to realize that there is someone standing at her door. She startles and grabs for the staff leaning against her wall. But Anya doesn’t even move, just continues to lean with arms crossed, observing.

Lexa, trying to still her pounding heart replaces the staff slowly.
Anya is still staring at her. Her eyes are intense and intelligent. Lexa wonders if that’s where Clarke picked it up. The ability to look at someone like you’re reading their entire past and deciding their entire future in a blink.

“Tomorrow. Sunrise. At the training fields.”

She says nothing else and instead turns and leaves.

The air is warm, humming with energy from a day full of sunlight, perhaps one of the few remaining days like it as the season begins to turn. Trees within the city are beginning to shed their leaves, littering the ground for the gentle wind to sweep up. Above it all, the large tower at the center of the city sits in the path of the setting sun.

“So this is where you reign,” Lexa observes as she walks about the space, head tilted back and not yet looking at the person at the center of it all, eyes blinking at the brightness.

The room is large, cavernous almost in its outwardly bent ceilings. It gives the impression of being larger than it is. A section of the back wall is open to the elements, the late afternoon breeze plucking at the light curtains. The setting sun sits directly at the back of the room, glaring into it and making Lexa squint against it to see. The architecture has obviously been arranged for just this purpose as it forces the person entering to stand blind or be forced to stand in the throne’s shadow, looking up to face the person sitting there. Lexa does just this, allowing her to drop her hand from shading her vision, bringing Clarke into focus with the sun shining vibrantly at her back. Her hair looks like light itself, the individual strands glowing under the intense illumination as the sun coats itself as golden paint down her arms.

She looks...

Lexa is hit with a sudden and deep level of understanding for the people who believe Clarke to be something other. Something empyrean.

There’s something in her chest that she clears her throat around, swallowing at the way her mouth feels suddenly and inexplicably dry. Clarke leans back on her throne in a slow and smooth motion, crossing one leg over the other. "Technically, I reign everywhere. But Polis is the seat of the Commander's power, yes."

"The throne suits you," Lexa says after a pause, eyes trailing over the antlers and spears that sprout out from the back of the chair.

"A gift from my predecessor," Clarke answers, running her hands over the arms of the chair with light fingers, looking down at it. She almost appears self-conscious in the movement, but it’s likely a trick of the light. Clarke looks back up and her eyes give Lexa a once over, taking a mental note of something she doesn’t share. Eventually she speaks again. “How are you settling in to Polis? Are you finding it to your liking?"

Lexa grins even though she’s so exhausted she’s not quite sure how she’s standing. “It’s incredible.” Clarke softens minutely and gives the barest smile in response, seeming pleased by the very fact that
Lexa is pleased. “I... am glad to hear that.”

The sounds of the city catch on the wind for a moment, floating in through the window and drawing both their attention. “I can see why everyone speaks so highly of this place. It’s so vibrant.”

Now Clarke truly is smiling. “You’ve seen only a small portion of it. There are parts of this city that are easy to get lost in but are also the most full of life. The markets, the training facilities.” She pauses as if she’s debating something and then continues. “The alley of the craftsmen is perhaps my favorite. Weapons, woodwork, tools, anything you can imagine from all over the clans. They can be very private about their work however. People who have known Polis their entire lives are typically the only ones capable of locating each of them.”

Lexa realizes she’s smiling at the very fact that she is watching Clarke talk about something she loves. That same inexplicable thing stirs in her chest.

She can count on one hand the number of times she’s seen the expression she sees on Clarke’s face after Lexa says what she does next:

“Will you show me?”

Clarke’s mouth drops open slightly and her eyes widen. The great Commander, lost for words.

“How did you know that Shallow Valley was the clan to go to?”

Clarke’s expression sharpens immediately and Lexa almost regrets asking as any softness disappears from her posture and expression.

Outside the light dips further. For awhile Lexa thinks Clarke has decided not to answer. But it becomes clear that she is merely just organizing her thoughts on the matter.
“There’s a certain kind of quiet,” she starts, gaze looking at nothing over Lexa’s shoulder as she picks her words, “that is difficult to trust.”

“Shallow Valley was quiet?” Lexa asks, trying to understand as her brow pinches, recalling the bustling streets of the city.

“Not to everyone. Just to those who know how to listen for what isn’t there and take advantage of that,” Clarke elaborates.

“Like Nia?”

Clarke almost smiles, impressed, but there’s nothing kind in the way her lips pull. “Yes.”

“And you.”

“If I’m lucky.”

Lexa can’t imagine Clarke relying on luck for anything.

“Is that why she fears you?” Clarke’s head tilts the slightest degree, prompting Lexa to continue. “Because you understand her.”

Clarke’s gaze over her steepled fingers heightens to a focused point. Lexa feels trapped again at the intensity of it. The switchbacks in the energy in the room since she walked inside have her feeling like she is spending the conversation placing her hand on and off of a live wire.

“I think... that is an astute and perhaps not inaccurate observation,” Clarke says eventually.

The sun falls beyond the trees and the buildings. The haze fading from red to lilac to blue quickly, casting long and soft shadows as it goes.

It isn’t until Lexa has been shown out of the tower and returned to her room that she wonders what the purpose of Clarke calling her up to her tower had been at all.

The morning dawns in a rush. The sky rises from black to blue quickly and Lexa is standing at the edge of the training fields as it does, breath curling out into the chilly morning air.

The area is quiet. The only sounds coming from the wind pushing at the tall trees surrounding them, and the birds who are prompted by the growing light to begin their day.

Lexa swallows, hands gripping and regripping the staff in her hands as Anya stands before her.

The older warrior looks at Lexa and Lexa can see the hum of distaste that sits just below her skin. There’s an anger in the way she looks at Lexa that has Lexa’s heart beating in her ears. She tells herself it’s not fear she feels as she looks back, but her body is taut with tension.

Anya turns the wooden, practice sword she has in her hand over twice, looking at it as she speaks.

“Heda gada hedon ai diyo diz,” she says evenly. “Nou wich em ai na mou disha os kos yu gada hana kom em.”
“I don’t -- I don’t speak Trigedasleng.”

Anya looks up at her then and now Lexa can see the full anger that sits behind her eyes. She pauses and Lexa’s palms sweat. A crow shrieks overhead.

She lifts and drops one shoulder indifferently. “Yu beda dig op snap den.”

And then she attacks.

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**Trigedasleng Translations:**

“Dison foto strat,” - "This is a bad idea."

“Gaf som in?” - "Need something?"

“Heda gada hedon ai diyo diz,” - The commander has ordered me to do this"

"Nou wich em ai na mou disha os kos yu gada hana kom em.” - Don’t believe I will make this easy because you have favor with her.

“Yu beda dig op snap den.” - "You better learn quickly then"

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End Notes

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