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Knife Edge

by [crazywisdom](#)

Summary

Post 3x07. Lexa's stuck between the world of the living and the world of the dead, where Anya wallows. As Clarke and Aden navigate Arkadia's stormy internal battles and the external threat of Ontari's Ice Nation, Lexa fights her past and the what-ifs to unravel the truth of the Flame and reclaim the Commander's throne.

The Silent Sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When she was young, Lexa kom Trikru would run about the village. A scraggly, toothy, back-chatting troublemaker, her name was known. Her father was a well-known stall seller, for his generous cuts of meat; her mother, usually bed-bound, would read to her at night. Just before her father came home. She would not read from books. She would make tales of the stars, of how men could navigate using the clear night sky; she would tell Lexa of dreams cast above the clouds, and sometimes, if you spoke to what twinkled back down at you, dreams could come true.

It was captivating. Her mother always had a knack for making the ordinary sound extraordinary. Lexa supposed that was why her father was so enamoured by her. And yes, her father and her mother were vastly different people. Her father was a hulk of a man—a generous cut of meat himself. He was pure muscle, his forearms rippled with a day's work. Her mother was pale and weak, and though she did not have physical strength, her mind blossomed with thoughts others could not even conjure.

Lexa did not believe a word she said.

But she found herself, one day, wandering towards the plains at night. It was crisp, the chilly bite of the air making the back of her spine shudder. It crawled up her neck and scraped her scalp, but she looked up at the skies nonetheless.

"I want what my mother and father have," she said, to nobody. "That's a good life.

"I want the strength of my father. He's a butcher. Everyone goes to him for meat because he's the best. But nobody visits my mother anymore except me and him. I bet you a thousand cuts of meat; I bet you the sky—that nobody will ever be as strong as her words."

She stayed there for a while, unafraid of frostbite. For a stupid moment, she pondered if that was because of the stars, and her mother had been right all along. "*Words are more powerful than a cleaver, Lexa,*" her mother once said, and she'd grinned, "*just don't tell your father that!*"

It was only until her father found her staring blankly up at the silent skies, tugging her inside to warmth, did she realise her lack of feeling was numbness. He scolded her; told her not to do it again. For the sake of her frozen fingers and toes, she promised she wouldn't. But she never really forgot. And the numbness was better than the notion of pain.

Domm was a big boy. The definition of big, to Lexa, meant *fat*. Him and his chubby cheeks were no match for his protruding belly, and if Lexa had to ask questions, it would be if he usually feasted like an obese King, or if that was just how his poor mother had birthed him.

Unfortunately, she had no time for small talk as he swung his wooden sword for her head, lashing across. Ducking down, she quickly evaded a blind knock-out. She hadn't escaped a smash in the face earlier, and she was quite sure her eye had swollen near-shut, but she'd be damned if she were to be defeated by a fat boy. First of all, her father would laugh for decades. Domm maybe had about three to four years on her, but Lexa was small, and Lexa wasn't an idiot.

It was easy, like coddling a waddling fat boy to breathlessness. The instant Domm's heavy panting started to sound like snorts, Lexa smacked his shins with her chunk of wood and grinned bloodily down at him.

"A six year old," Lexa said triumphantly, poking the end of her stick at his neck until he tapped frantically on the muddy ground. "How old does that make you, Domm?"

"Nine and a half," he grunted.

"Ten," Lexa decided to round up, gleefully. She helped him off the floor. "Tomorrow. Again?"

"You're mad," Domm said, still breathless. "And—you're bleeding."

"First time you got me," Lexa snorted. "Tomorrow you won't be so lucky."

"No...no, Lexa...you're...*bleeding*."

Lexa frowned at him, trying to gauge the terror in his eyes. It was as if Domm had seen an entire army of the Ice Nation right behind her, accompanied by giants and whatever people told in stories now. But he was staring *right at her*. Subconsciously, she wiped her still-bloody nose, and froze.

"It's black," Domm whispered. "You know what they say about kids with black blood?"

"My—" Lexa halted as Domm tugged her deeper into the woods. Nobody frequented the plains anyway, except for those who wished to wash their clothes by the river. But it was too cold today. She shook off his sweaty, chubby hand and frowned at him. "We get chased by Capital Guards. So children with black blood, they—" she struggled to get her words out, "we run."

"Have you ever read a damn book?" Domm snapped at her.

"Is that why you're so big? You read and you don't fight?"

"Lexa!" Domm gritted out. "It's not *black blood*. It's *Nightblood*."

"Same thing," she said dully, "the night is black, and so it's black blood."

"Don't get weird with me. Listen, you gotta clean yourself up. Take my coat and cover your tunic. Go back to your parents and tell 'em what happened today. Tell 'em you got Nightblood. They'll know."

"What about you? If I go and never come back, who's going to fight with you?"

"I bleed red an' true," Domm said wistfully, "There isn't no black blood in me."

"Is that supposed to be sad?"

"Jealousy. You really need to learn to read people better."

She didn't go home straight away. It was near nightfall, and ensured that Domm had run away— with a threat to slit his throat if he told anyone—and that nobody was mad enough to come and

wash their clothes in the middle of the night, Lexa crept out from the woods. She'd been nestling there for the latter half of the afternoon, her stomach growling angrily at her. *It's not my fault*, she almost wanted to say to her belly.

Lexa had no food on her, so she rushed to the edge of the river and cupped a few handfuls of water to try and settle her stomach. And then she tried to get back home—but her feet wouldn't budge.

Just you and me again, Plains. I wonder what the skies have for a kid who's got black blood.

"Everyone's always fighting," she said stupidly into thin air, but things like these, she could never confide in her strongly politically-motivated father, nor her dreamy-eyed mother. Her father was convinced the North would come bearing down on them, in all their icy glory. Everyone else in the village was quite adamant they'd stay as they were. Hidden in the greenery; protected by nature.

"People should stop," Lexa carried on, shuffling Domm's jacket back a little to see the dried black blood smeared across her tunic. "I don't understand why you can't stop it, if the skies and stars are supposed to be magic. I don't understand why you can't just give us one of your stars and let all of this stop.

"My father has been working as a butcher for as long as I can remember. It's my mother who taught me words, but not real ones. We read poems and stories but we read nothing of knowledge. Now Domm says I have black blood and I don't even know what that means. My father's a good butcher but I know he's a warrior. He always talks about it. He always talks about being the best archer in the Trikru. But he doesn't teach me anything about fighting. It's just me and Domm. My mother doesn't teach me anything about my father's politics. It's just the stars. So if I've got black blood and nobody tells me anything, does that mean I'm an invalid?"

The stars twinkled, and said nothing.

"You have no answer," Lexa said impatiently. "I guess my mother lied."

Clarke waited blankly by the bed. Lexa had been asleep for a full day, and Clarke hadn't rested once. Titus was pottering about somewhere downstairs, and Murphy had the respect to keep his distance. It wasn't his battle anyway.

A gun-shot to a non-fatal organ was something they'd let go on for too long. They hadn't called for help until Murphy seemed to wake up and *do* something. Then it was a flurry of bleeding suppression, stitches, poultices, *anything*—anything to save their beloved *Heda*, and here she was, weak and floppy as a piece of string.

Lexa—unnecessarily—had already proven herself to be of unrivalled strength. Her politics reached into the hearts of people; her fighting ability brought down the King of the North. And somehow, *somehow*, after everything she'd been through...the turmoil, the political disagreements, back-stabbing...she'd been given *one singular moment* of happiness, and then it stopped.

Aden, in his first act of secondary Commander—and guided by a watchful Titus—had declared the barricade on Skaikru land still valid. He wouldn't back down from Lexa's decision, and nor would he listen to Clarke's plea for mercy on Lexa's terms. She'd said that if anyone strayed,

they'd be killed. Aden simply shrugged and said that had been the Commander's wish. He did, however, enlist three guards to make sure Clarke would not leave Polis for Arkadia.

Little shit.

There was no choice, to be honest. Clarke's intentions beforehand were null now Lexa had been so gravely injured. Aden visited every day with food and medicines, and a sorrowful glance, but it offered Clarke little comfort. She supposed it wasn't intended for her.

The next day, Aden brought a sketchbook. "It was in the Commander's belongings," he told her earnestly, "I wasn't supposed to go through them but Titus told me to bring you this. I, um..." He scratched the back of his neck guiltily. "I looked through it. I'm sorry, Clarke. I saw your sketches though. They're very beautiful."

It took her a minute or two to realise he'd already opened the page in which she'd neatly folded up her unfinished sketch of Lexa. Aden's cheeks reddened. "I thought you might want to finish it off," he added hastily. "With the next meal brought up, I told the maids to bring some pastels and chalk."

"Right." Clarke stared pathetically down at her drawing, unsure of what to do next. She could recall that day so clearly. Lexa's nightmare. Her doubt—in herself. Blood must not have blood. It had all led to this, in some sick way, and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to sketch a sleeping Lexa when all Lexa had done for days was *sleep*.

Aden cleared his throat. "Well. I've got to go. There's discourse. People think the Ice Nation are trying to sabotage the Commander's reign, but I trust Roan."

"Ontari?"

"That's what I hope to find out," Aden said, "Roan remains King, but I don't know the strings Ontari's pulling. *Heda* told me she was a Nightblood. She taught me that a position means nothing if someone is already playing puppet."

"Do you need some counsel?"

"Yes," Aden admitted, clearly more quickly than he'd have liked to. "But..." His eyes fell on Lexa, her lips dry and cracked from lack of water. Her skin was ashen, and reflected against the sunlight streaming through the window, she was no Commander. She was a weakened woman. Perhaps a dying one. "I think she needs you more, Ambassador."

Clarke swallowed the lump in her throat. Tried not to think about Lexa's sweet kisses. On her lips, down her neck... "She's out. She's been out for days."

"Her spirit isn't," Aden said lightly, "so long as she is inside, she'll feel you."

"You're just as infuriating as she is. You know that, right?"

Aden's face suddenly split into a grin, despite grim circumstances. "You know, she told me you would say something like that to me one day."

Some days, Clarke could feel Lexa stir—all the way from her armchair. Something heavy in her

heart would tell her that Lexa was on the precipice, just about to wake up, and then it would fade away. It would startle her, and she'd rush to Lexa's side, only to find her still weak, and still unconscious.

Some days, Lexa would feel Clarke's pull. She knew her eyes were shut and though she tried, her spirit did not will her to move, and nor did it will her to open her eyes. Just once. It felt pathetic. If she were to die, it should've been on the battlefield—not by her own father-figure's hand, and not by some Skaikru weapon. She wondered how Aden was fielding; if Titus was looking after him. She longed for Clarke, though the barricade would be up in action. Yet she could still feel Clarke beside her.

Some days, she would curse her spirit and yell internally at herself to wake up. She was always rewarded by a sharp, blinding pain to the abdomen.

And then one day, it grew darker and darker until Lexa could not see a thing. She frowned, for she was conscious, but she was bleeding heavily from the Skaikru wound in her belly. Still, she did not feel weak. Instead, Anya stood before her. She said nothing. Next to Anya was a lake.

"How..." Lexa struggled to get her words out. It had been so long. "How did you die?"

"Skaikru," Anya said shortly, "but not how you think."

She hated herself for doubting Clarke. "Did—did you die well?"

"I died the best I could, Commander. I died trying to get a message to you."

Well, she did say that in the tent. "Why am I here?"

"I didn't have this," Anya said a little enviously, "When I died, I just straight-up died."

"What?"

"We're taking a trip," Anya informed her, and out of *literally nowhere*, a rickety rowing boat appeared on the empty, strange lake. "And on this trip you will decide whether you want to die or not. Or rather, it will be decided whether you *should* die or not."

"This wasn't part of my teachings," Lexa snapped back, yanking her arm away as Anya reached for her. Anya looked dull. Her eyes were sunken, and her skin an unpleasant grey. And she *stunk*. Lexa didn't realise she could smell whilst she was dying. "Nowhere does it say that when you're near death, your spirit encounters your mentor and you row a boat out to be judged."

"Nobody told me I'd get killed by some idiots who fell from the sky, either," Anya retorted, "but that's just life, isn't it?"

"If I come with you," Lexa said cautiously, "do I get to go back?"

"Ever the planner," Anya said proudly. "Of course you do. If you're supposed to go back, you go back."

"You weren't supposed to?"

"I already told you: I sort of died straight away."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Me too. But not as sorry as I am for you. Hell, I'd die a thousand times over before having to

venture down *this* path."

Lexa stared stupidly at her. Was she supposed to *thank* Anya for that? She didn't make the trip sound particularly appealing, but the darkness offered no back door, and the only route was via the old boat. So she reluctantly helped a stone-cold Anya onto the boat and rowed.

"This is very strange," Lexa noted, once her (dead?) arms started to ache and they seemed to be going nowhere.

"Mm-hmm. D'you know the last thing I ingested before I died was mud?" Anya mused, staring out into nothing. They'd been rowing for a while, but Anya offered no direction, and there was nothing on the horizon. There *was* no horizon. "Your Sky girl beat me in close-combat."

Lexa barked out a laugh. "You lie."

"I was drugged."

"You still lie!"

Anya put her hands up in defeat. "Life's strange sometimes."

"And so is death." Lexa motioned her head over towards the vast emptiness of her fate. *Wow*. If she was rowing her way to the oblivion of death, then this sucked—but she was glad Anya was with her. "Where are we going?"

"Oh please. You're dying and you still sound like a child. You're going into your past. And it won't be nice."

"Is this the final test of the Commander?"

"Unofficially. Perhaps the final test of a dying Commander."

"To relive my past? To—to change it?"

"You can't change the past," Anya said, and looked at her as if she was a moron. Like any of Lexa's suggestions had been somewhat beyond belief, considering she was *rowing a boat* on an empty lake, towards her impending doom. "But you can see it if you want. Your brain still remembers, doesn't it? We're not on a lake, Lexa. We're in your head."

"And why," Lexa drawled, "would I want to see my past?"

"Because you're a sentimentalist, Lexa."

"*Really?* Really?! Tell that to—"

"Did you keep my lock of hair?"

"What?"

"My lock of hair. The one the Sky girl gave you. Did you keep it?"

Lexa continued to row.

I can only promise extremely irregular updates! Life is hectic but I've always wanted to explore the pre-coalition wars. As for 3x07, you can sort of...ignore Lexa died in it. Oh, and the AI plot. That just goes out the window.

The Young and Wise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Everything was ablaze with fire and fury as Lexa struggled against the Polisian Guards' hold on her. They tried to assure her it was for the best. They told her that with the Commander's teachings, she would become powerful and rule the land.

Except Lexa had *seen* the land. The land was nothing but ravaged villages, in-fighting, clan wars, petty money struggles and starving for a night to save for the next slab of meat. So she did not relent. She kicked and she spat and she screamed, yanking against the Guards' grip on her until they silenced her yells with a thick-gloved hand.

"Gods, you were one heck of a stubborn shit," Anya remarked from behind her, wearing her trademark smirk. Anya creeping up on her did not surprise Lexa anymore. She did not creep. Lexa could smell the muskiness of death a mile away. "The Commander really liked you. I guess she didn't see what an absolute piece of work you were in the pits, or reading."

"I liked reading," Lexa defended herself, meekly.

"Yeah, you did. You liked reading about the clans; about history. But you were this dangly, stringy little thing. Do you remember the first time you picked up a sword?"

Lexa watched as her younger self got dragged away into the woods. There never had been a chance to say goodbye to her mother and father. Only Domm would know of the Nightblood. She wondered if Domm ever told them. "Yes."

"A nice longsword. It was too heavy for you. You had to use both hands and you swung like a lunatic."

"That was before you taught me strategy."

"That was before I taught you *style*. Mind you, I approve of the modification of your style and weaponry since."

Anya grinned at her, and despite herself, Lexa found herself grinning back. It felt wrong, to watch herself get pulled away to Polis in the dead of night, accompanied only by her long-dead mentor. If she watched her closely, she could see the peeling skin of Anya's dulled cheeks, the colourless eyes. Every time they brushed, Anya was stone-cold.

"I'm dead, Lexa," Anya said brusquely, "Stop looking at me as if I'm alive."

"What if this is what I'm supposed to do? Speak to you? Resurrect you?"

"We are—*were*—survivors in a stupid, warring world. We aren't magicians. We aren't Gods. There are no resurrections."

"Just like there are no giant gorillas?"

"That was a one-off. And the *paunae* should've died out years ago. We had a mass hunt."

"Let this be a one-off," Lexa pleaded with her. "Come back with me. I plan to go back. You could, too. You were always my mentor. Titus taught me the ways of a Commander; you taught

me the ways of a leader. A fighter."

"Then fight your stupidity," Anya scolded her. "You can't bring me back from the dead. You're the Commander, yes. But you're no witch."

"If I could ask a witch—"

"You're stalling, Lexa. Don't look at me like that. I've been your tutor for so long...I know you."

Weakness. Lexa sighed, and turned her gaze back to the scene in front of them. It was a complete mess. The plains had been set on fire, even though there was nothing to burn. One of the Polisian Guards had decked her in the nose with the hilt of his sword, accidentally. Black blood—*Nightblood*—gushed from her nose, and the Guards panicked, frantically trying to wipe it up as they pulled her stubborn self away from the plains and into the woods.

She'd never been one to go quietly.

It hadn't been fair. They offered no chance to say goodbye to her parents. Her mother, whom she greatly loved. Her father, brave and strong—all that she'd hoped to be. *It hadn't been fair.* And she'd never gotten the chance to see them again. Not since their village was razed to the ground, as the other clans searched for the new Trigedakru leader.

"What were you thinking?" Anya asked quietly.

"What?"

"Watch."

Lexa obliged, watching her younger self kick and scream and kick and scream and kick and scream—until she stilled, staring at the sky. Her gaze was blank. There was no tell. For a moment, the Guards paused, but Lexa did not use that moment to run or escape. She remained within the Guards' grasp, and her fight became limp as they carried her away.

"I gave up."

"You gave up," Anya repeated. And then she laughed. "I told you: I know you."

Lexa stared after her limp figure, willing her young self to take advantage of the Guards' relaxed barriers and make a run for it. She almost yelled it, before realising that her past would not be able to hear her dying self. Self-consciously, she looked down and saw that her tunic was still stained a dark-red, clinging to her wound. There was no pain.

"Where am I?" she asked stupidly. Anya rolled her eyes. "I'm being serious. How am I able to see all of this? What is the purpose of bringing me to unavoidable events?"

"Because," Anya said slowly, "You're dying really pathetically."

"Excuse me?"

"At least *I* went out with a proper bang. You, on the other hand, linger like a bad smell."

"You're lingering like a bad smell."

"I'd reconsider the way you talk to the dead, Lexa. Terribly disrespectful."

"You're *dead*, Anya. I can't disrespect you."

"My rotten heart says otherwise," Anya said, blasé. "Carry on rowing, will you?"

"What?"

Just like that, they were back on the black, cold lake, in the middle of nowhere. Two seconds ago, they'd both witnessed young Lexa getting dragged to Polis by the Commander's guards. It was for the Nightblood ritual—that much she knew. But she'd felt the piercing flames of the burning plains *just two seconds ago*. Now she was shivering in the void of the lake, where the water didn't seem like water, and she was in a boat with her dead mentor.

Fuck.

"I think we've seen enough," Lexa muttered, still rowing, "What exactly did you want me to learn by reliving the moment I got dragged away from my parents?"

"Nothing, really. Just a bit of a history lesson. The next, you'll want to see. It's funny."

"I already told you: I'm done."

"Then why are you still rowing?"

"I looked up at the stars," Lexa confessed, a little ashamed, as they strolled through the throne room's double doors. Anya gave her a silent, sideways glance. "When they pulled me away. I stopped fighting. I looked up at the stars and I begged for mercy."

"You were always a fool."

"My mother believed in the stars. So did I."

"How did that work out for you?"

Lexa shrugged. "Well. I fell in love with one, and you got shot by one."

Anya laughed, shaking her head. "Have I mentioned you're a piece of work?"

"On more than one occasion."

The duo swept into the daunting, cracked, musty throne room. It was like nothing Lexa ever sat in, once she'd redone Polis over and over again. But this Commander was fierce. She was tall and broad, unlike Lexa. She jumped to her sword first and then words after, unlike Lexa. She was reckless and thoughtless—unlike Lexa. The only thing she was good at was her cackle, and drinking anyone and everyone under the table.

"The Nightbloods have all been assigned their tutors, Anya," the Commander said in a booming voice. "I leave you and Gustus with this girl."

"Heda..." There was desperation in Anya's voice, and Lexa scowled at her. "With all due respect, you cannot leave me with her. Look at her. If I spar with her, she will break like glass!"

"Seriously?" Lexa—real Lexa—exclaimed. "You thought I'd *shatter*?"

"Then break her!" the Commander laughed, tossing her head back. "Puny thing."

"Look at yourself," Dead Anya retorted, "I thought I was being cursed with a skinny little loser. You should've seen Gustus' reaction. I've never seen a man drink so much mead in one night."

"Well, thank you," Lexa snapped, "if that was supposed to instil some confidence in me."

"Did it not?" Anya asked her, as the Commander sprawled on her throne, grinning broadly. Alive Anya led Young Lexa by the hand, and out the door. Her expression was sour. The pair trailed silently after them as Anya wordlessly hitched up a spot for Young Lexa to sleep by. "I thought I'd been assigned you as a joke. I think the Commander intended to, too, for my lack of punctuality. And do you know what Gustus and I achieved in our time with you?"

"Will you gift me with some back-handed compliment now?"

"You became the next Commander; you bettered the rest of the Nightbloods. You stopped a long, long war by joining forces and creating the first coalition. The first time someone called you a *revolutionary*, Lexa, do you know how hard my heart pounded? My blood raced in my ears. This is the one time I'll wish I was alive. I wish you could've felt it. You can't feel it now. I'm dead. But my pride in you—not in myself, nor Gustus, for training you—was unrivalled."

"You got lucky."

"No, Lexa." Anya fixed her a stern look. Well. As stern as the dead could look. "I'll show you later. Much later. But you had my faith from our very first sparring session."

Lexa remained silent, fully aware that they were back on the boat, except this time, she wasn't shivering from the cold. She was instead really rather taken aback by the light in Anya's dead eyes, those lifeless, sunken eyes—and for a moment, she held a torch of hope. And just as quickly as the light appeared, it dimmed again, and Anya lazed back in the boat, grey and waxy. Lexa swallowed hard, and continued to row. *Do not wish for things beyond reach. The dead are gone. The living are hungry.*

Not once had Lexa's stomach growled. She wondered if maybe this was just Death's sick game.

Nobody had prepared Aden, properly, for the life of a Commander. Or temporary Commander. Titus did as best as he could, but Aden was still unused to the morning calls and the maidens insisting on dressing him. Instead, he refused their aid and ordered they focussed on breakfast for the soldiers. He would dress himself, and wet-comb his dirty-blond hair himself. His Commander was weak, and she was dying. Aden, as far as he was concerned, was a capable Nightblood who would fulfil Lexa's wishes. He was not the next Commander yet.

Everyone treated him like he was, and he hated it.

Everyone spoke as if Lexa was already dead, and he hated that even more.

Compassion. Wisdom. Strength.

He spoke those three words to himself in the mirror, every morning, before rushing down the stairs to join the other men for breakfast. They would clap him on the back. All of them were bigger than him; they were all muscle and mead, yet they would force him the largest portions. They would laugh when Aden ate half of it and pushed away the rest, feeling a little sick.

But he had Titus, and more importantly, he had Indra. Today they rode out to Arkadia, where the barricade remained in position. All allied clans, despite Lexa's ill-health, remained loyal in their blockade. It was in Aden's power, however, to change the circumstances of Lexa's commands. It was not in his desire, though, to do so.

Clarke kom Skaikru had asked him, but only once. She'd asked him for mercy. Perhaps she had anticipated his youth would yield; perhaps she'd thought because he knew his Commander loved her, he would yield. But the duty of the Commander could not overlap with love, and so Aden had regretfully refused. Lexa used to speak of Clarke, and sometimes she would call her a fool. It was never said without fondness, but Aden could now understand why Lexa called Clarke so.

"Marcus Kane," Indra said lowly, as a bearded, scruffy man approached the gates with his hands up. Aden dismounted from his horse and walked towards it. His hand reached for his scabbard. "He is an ally."

"He is of Skaikru," Aden noted.

"He's an ally," Indra said again.

"Marcus Kane," Aden greeted, when the man was within earshot. "It's not very warm."

"I trust you're well wrapped-up," Kane replied, eyeing Aden's many furs. "Do we have a reason for this meet?"

"My counsel," Aden gestured towards Indra, "tells me that you're an honest man."

"I try."

"How do I know for sure?"

"Do you see this?" Kane's arms were still up, but he looked down. Aden's gaze followed Kane's, to a red spot just right where his heart was. "My arms are not held up in fear for your people, Commander. My arms are held up because if I step out of place, I will be shot."

"Marcus," Indra started sharply, "You said this would be safe."

"And I kept my word. It's safe—for *you*. All of you. But in talking to you, I'll be interrogated afterwards. In talking to you, I'm not trusted." Kane breathed hard, the cold air turning into wispy clouds as he exhaled. "We're in trouble, Indra. We all are. Pike rules with an iron fist. I'll get beaten tonight—but I won't say a word," he added, when Aden opened his mouth, "The barricade has Pike believing you are the enemy. I know the true enemy to be the Ice Nation, but nobody will believe that if you have a kill order on us."

"A kill order that *my* Commander enforced," Aden said hotly, "out of mercy! Your people committed grave crimes. Your people *massacred* our sleeping soldiers! And you think this is not *merciful*?"

"It isn't what I think," Kane said. "It's what our people think."

"Then make them reconsider." Aden gritted his teeth, throwing a warning glance at Indra. She was going to intervene; he could sense it. But he'd be damned if he let his Commander's order go to pot. "The barricade remains until your people come up with a solution. We all know what that is. The tyrant who ordered the massacre must be brought to justice. If not..." Aden sniffed. The air was crisp. "If not, we will consider the Skaikru at war with our clans."

Indra shot forwards. "Aden—"

"I'm not being unjust," Aden said firmly, trying to convince himself as much as he was Indra. *This is what Heda would do. This is what Heda did.* "But your people—" he motioned towards Kane, "Generalised mine, and they massacred mine. Based on a few rotten eggs. I believe you're a good man, Marcus Kane. But if the Skaikru are allowed to commit such atrocities, then I'll bear this weight and do the same. Push Pike out of power, and we will talk again. Do nothing, and I'll assume you think nothing of the massacre. A slaughter won't go unanswered for. If I slaughtered three hundred of your men, women, and children, would you not seek vengeance against myself?"

Kane stared after the Commander's young successor, mouth agape. Indra didn't shoot him another glance. Tonight he'd get beaten again, but tonight he had no new information. That, he'd take solace in. But as he watched Aden mount his horse and set off with his men, he wondered when Lexa would return. Or if she'd return at all.

"I want there to be as little blood as possible. I want him alive. I want him to answer for his crimes, and I do—not—want—him—dead." Aden clenched his fists and pounded at the war table. "He can't order a massacre of three-hundred and not suffer the consequences."

Around him were Indra, Titus and Clarke. They remained silent, though Indra seemed somewhat wary after their journey to Arkadia. Clarke didn't ask.

Indra coughed. "It was my people he executed. I thirst for nothing except his death."

"Men like Charles Pike don't fear death," Aden said, "But they fear justice. He's a tyrant. A hound."

"If I can speak, Commander?" Clarke said hoarsely, and Aden looked up at her, eyes hollow. He nodded. Speaking to silent counsels did nothing but tire him. Clarke kom Skaikru regularly offered stupidly just options, but if it would save him a few breaths, he'd allow it. "We need to overthrow Pike from the inside. The barricade remains in place, but they have snipers. If we try to sneak in and take Pike, we will embark on a suicide mission."

"I'm not risking any more lives for that man," Aden agreed.

"But if we get in and capture him," Indra argued, "Then we have him as a prisoner."

"We can't have him if we die trying," Aden said, frustrated. "I seek your advice, Clarke. How do we turn the inside against Pike?"

"We use our allies," Clarke said quickly. Indra glared up at her. "We have Kane. Lincoln. Octavia. Miller. My mom, Abby. She's a medic. Kane used to be Chancellor. If we round up enough people, we can—"

"You've listed me five people," Aden interjected, "You think that will be enough to overpower a tyrant?"

"No, but—"

"But what? We have but five allies within Arkadia?"

"Five allies we know of," Clarke assured him. "You told me you wanted him alive."

"Alive or dead, it doesn't matter," Indra growled, "That man killed three hundred of my own. They weren't all warriors; most were volunteers. But he killed them anyway, and executed the wounded. Forgive me, Commander, if I don't share your mercy. Nor the Sky girl's."

"*Our* Commander is still alive," Aden persisted, "and she wouldn't want bloodshed. All her life she's fought for peace. She told us she fought so her hands would be bloodied and ours wouldn't. I won't tarnish that. This is over. We take Pike alive. We build our allies. We don't kill him."

Nothing signalled the end of the meeting. It was tense—too tense—for a moment, and then Titus swept from the room. Shortly after, Indra followed, and Clarke could feel her glower burning through the back of her head. Pike alive was a bad idea, but she couldn't subject Aden to killing him. And nor could she go against Lexa's wishes.

"Clarke?" Aden said quietly. "You should eat."

"So should you," she said. "You did well."

"I did enough."

Clarke considered him for a moment. That bright-eyed boy she'd first met in Lexa's throne room was gone; the amazed teenager at Roan and Lexa's fight...gone. Here stood a young man with the world on his shoulders and a war on his back. Lexa hadn't left him with this on purpose. But she hadn't been wrong in favouring him.

"*Reshop*," Clarke said, clunky. Aden stared at her. "*Heda*."

She left Aden alone, and just as she closed the double-doors, she thought she saw him kneel before the empty throne.

"Where do you want to go next? Let me take one guess. Costia?"

"How many times have I said—"

"The dead are gone? The living are hungry? I know, but you're *dying*, Lexa. You're also not hungry."

"You can't be the judge of that."

"I know the look in your eyes when you want a nicely roasted pigeon." Anya motioned for her to row faster, and Lexa glared back at her. Still, she found herself rowing with more force, to nowhere. "When you were young, you used to salivate over the crispy skin. When Gustus sliced it up, you would steal pieces as he rubbed the herbs into the juicy meat."

Lexa rolled her eyes. "And you'd smack me over the head every time."

"Still it never worked. Maybe that's why you grew up to be such a sentimental idiot. I smacked you over the head too many times."

"You know," Lexa began, grimacing at her, "For a dead mentor, you're really annoying."

"For an alive mentor, I think I was annoying too." Anya grinned at her rakishly, all charm and

sparkle. Lexa absent-mindedly wondered how that was possible when Anya stunk of death, looked like death, and pretty much *was* death. "Just because some Skaikru idiot shot me, it doesn't mean I lose all of my good traits."

"I'd have hoped," Lexa mused, "That in death you would grow all wizened and doting."

"How terribly boring of you."

Lexa continued to row in silence, refusing to make eye contact with a nonchalant Anya. This was the strangest moment of her life. She would never be able to share this experience with anyone. How do you explain encountering your dead mentor and exploring your old memories? Lexa wondered if she was already dead, but if she was already dead, Anya would have simply told her. She was like that. And perhaps that was why she doted on Anya so much. As much as her honesty felt like a spear shoved up her butt-hole, the spear pierced and it hurt, but it was not coated in poison or ill-intent.

There was a purpose to all of this. Something that Anya didn't necessarily want to show her, but perhaps something death wanted to—or perhaps something *Lexa* wanted to see. Maybe it was the key to bringing her back to life. *Really* back to life. But she resigned herself to the fact that she'd be rowing around like an idiot, with her idiot mentor, for a while—until she gained some answers.

She was good at that.

"I think I know what I'd like to see," Lexa said after a while, brooding.

Anya smiled at her. "Yeah, me too. Come on. This boat doesn't row itself."

Chapter End Notes

This became more Lexa-centric than I realised! Thanks for your comments. I hope to learn from this! This kinda stuff I don't write!

ETA: Correcting some typos! Top tip: never write on codeine. Oh, lord.

The Choices We Make

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"You could help once in a while," Lexa told Anya for the umpteenth time. It didn't feel right, her having to row this sodden boat all the time. Mostly, she was worried they'd capsize, with all the stomping around Anya liked to do; furthermore, the boat itself was just... well, it was trash. "You realise I'm not the dead one, right? My arms can hurt."

"Your arms can also build muscle," Anya said.

"In my subconscious! My subconscious muscle doesn't strengthen my unconscious arms!"

"Well, I don't mean to offend," Anya retorted, clearly meant to offend, "but treat the dead with a little more respect, Lexa. You're a strong, lean, young woman. Why on earth would you want to make a rotten, dead person row a rotten, dead boat?"

"You," Lexa growled, "are so frustrating."

"That's the spirit. Keep up that banter, alright? You'll need it where we're going."

"You act as if I don't know."

"I always act as if you don't know. Let's stop here."

They clambered off the boat together to a shore that seemed exactly the same as all the other ones. It was a little off-putting, because Anya shamelessly pissed whenever she needed to, wherever she needed to—usually *on the shore*. Lexa thought, a little haughtily, that in death she would keep some of her dignity.

Inching forward, Lexa wondered if there was a hidden door somewhere, but the shore seemed to merge seamlessly with the pitch-black woods. Anya's cold hand reached for hers, and Lexa hesitated. It was peeling and the stench was near-unbearable, and she wondered stupidly if she touched Anya, she would pull herself closer to death. It seemed like nothing was impossible now. With a huff, Anya answered it for her by yanking her hand anyway.

For the first time since this trip—*this absolutely impossible trip*—Lexa's heart thudded in her chest. There was absolute silence, and then a loud toot of a horn.

"The first death," Anya said quietly, "That went to Tosh."

"The Water boy?"

"Yes. The bookish one. Do you know how he did it?"

"No. He was dead before I could ask him," Lexa said drily.

"He made himself a little burrow. A clever one, he was. He waited and carved out an arrow for himself and shot the big slab of muscle in the first round. Headshot."

"I'd always wondered what had happened to him. I thought he'd be my final kill."

"Thank Tosh."

So here they were, at Lexa's Nightblood trials. Each potential Nightblood was given a schedule. They were not to go about randomly killing each other; that would be breaking the rules. They'd drawn lots at the beginning, so they knew who to kill and who to spare. They knew who to form alliances with, until their number was up. It also meant they could differentiate, in the darkness, between their supposed enemy and their ally; it meant they could hunt.

It wasn't just a killing process. There were tactics involved, too. Alliances to be made; alliances to then be broken.

"I always argued about this concept," Anya mused. "Why have all the Nightbloods kill each other if you want a lineage of Commanders?"

"Because you want the best one," Lexa said immediately. Rehearsed. Anya chortled beside her, and Lexa's shoulders deflated. "I know. It's a stupid tradition. Illogical, too."

"You're not a pacifist, Lexa. I know that much. But what would you have suggested?"

Lexa thought on this for a moment. Just one moment. It wasn't as if she hadn't spent the majority of her adulthood pondering the same question. "Reading," she said slowly, "Writing. I would test the knowledge of potential candidates, and put them in theoretical scenarios involving warring clans. I would teach them how to negotiate; how to remain stern. I would create a tourney that involved skills of the bow, of close-combat, of sword-fighting. There would be lots drawn, yes—but there would be no death. The winning Nightblood ascends to become the Commander; the losing ones regain their pride by claiming chieftdom to villages or positions as advisers."

"How very diplomatic," Anya said, pleased. "Do you think it would work?"

Lexa shrugged. "I never had the opportunity to try. Introduction to upheaval is a slow process, I've learned. 'Blood must not have blood' almost had me on every clan leaders' chopping blocks. You can't build an empire over so many years only to change *everything* in an instant."

"But you've seeped into your Nightbloods," Anya noted. "Compassion. Strength. What was the last one?"

"Wisdom."

"Ah, wisdom. The Commander before you never talked of the 'three pillars'. Maybe she considered it, met you, and made it the 'two pillars'."

Lexa gave her a mock-smile. "Oh, because I'm so brain-dead?"

"I like to think so."

"The Commander died," Lexa said shortly, changing tack. "Who was to question my teachings except Titus? And Titus is my subject. So who is my subject to question my teachings?"

Anya grinned across at her, obviously impressed with the way things were going. Still, they had the trials—a *memory*—to focus on. Lexa watched in silence as her young self darted through the woods, one hand on her scabbard, the other wielding a dagger. She rushed through on deft feet, eyes scanning the forestry for her combatant. Her legs were bent, and she could feel Anya bristle with pride as she watched the produce of her training.

Quick as bullet, Luna of the Boat People—a young, scruffy girl—nothing compared to Lexa's lean muscles and strong stance—tackled her to the ground. Anya scoffed in disapproval. The duo grappled for a while, and Luna fought with the passion of a doorknob. Lexa, on the other hand, barely had to make an effort before her thighs were either side of Luna, pinning her down. Her

dagger went straight for her throat, and then she halted.

Lexa frowned. She could recall it faintly. There had been something in Luna's eyes...

"My brother," Luna panted, a little pathetically.

"Your first round," young Lexa replied, though she kept the dagger by Luna's throat.

"Yes."

"You're in the second round."

"So observant," Anya chirped up, and Lexa—the real one—elbowed her in annoyance, straining her ears to capture the conversation.

"I can't do this," Luna said. It was a pitiful sight. Lexa, as a youth, had never particularly liked Luna. She'd always been too cocky in the sparring pit, and frankly, too sour whenever Lexa crushed her—which was pretty much all the time. Regardless of Luna's sob-story, Lexa had always known, since she'd drawn Luna for the second round, that she'd progress. But Luna and Lexa's history had never been pleasant. Luna didn't like defeat; Lexa didn't like sore losers. "I killed my own *brother*. I can't...I can't kill anymore."

"You have to," Lexa hissed, her eyes scanning the darkness around them. They were alone, and she was obviously scouting for anyone else in case they witnessed the scene. "That's the nature of the trials. If you didn't kill your brother, someone else would've."

"My brother didn't ask to be a Nightblood."

"Neither did I. Still, they pulled me away from my parents and failed to protect them when an enemy clan razed their land to the ground in search of me."

"You *have* to let me go. I'll run away. I'm good at hiding; you know that. Let me go, and you can go on and win this round."

Lexa, clearly infuriated, pressed the dagger harder against Luna's throat. Luna cried out, and Lexa's spare hand clamped over her mouth. "I don't *have* to do anything. You're a coward and a traitor to our tradition," Lexa snapped. "This is how we fight. This is how we choose our next Commander."

"You're a fool to believe it," Luna retorted, so Lexa clamped her mouth shut again, and slapped her across the face. Hard enough to feel Luna bite her hand, but not hard enough to knock her out.

"So are you," Lexa said. "If you didn't believe it, why subject yourself to it?"

"I—"

"Did you decide to back out of this like the coward you are *after* you killed your own *brother*? Is pacifism only stirred by killing your own sibling? You tackled me; you could've bettered me. You could've bettered most. You could've even become the Commander. Do you really think you can change the way things are by hiding? Or by taking the reins?"

"Commanding," Anya commented, clapping Alive Lexa on the shoulder. It felt dead and cold. Anya always did. "But you're still about to do something idiotically lenient."

"I won't kill another," Luna snarled up at her, straining her neck to close the distance between her and Lexa. "I'm not a killer. I'm a pacifist."

"Our land is at war. There is no such thing as a pacifist."

"Then I won't set foot on our—*your*—land."

"Then don't."

Both Anya and Lexa leaned in a little closer, as if they didn't know the result already. Young Lexa still had the dagger by Luna's throat, and all of a sudden, she wrenched herself away in disgust. She spat on the floor, right by Luna's ear, and drew her sword. The tip pointed at Luna's chest.

"Banish yourself," Lexa commanded, still scouting the area for watchers. "If you don't believe in the traditions of our land, then you may as well be an exile."

"Have you forgotten how this ritual works, Lexa?" Luna sneered. "You're supposed to kill."

"So are you," Lexa shot back. "The weak, I will kill; the cowards can run forever, knowing that's all they are."

Luna stared at her, her eyes lacking in amazement but rather a rueful, annoyed look of respect. She did not shake Lexa's hand, for the tip of Lexa's sword was still aimed at her chest. Instead, she inclined her head—and bolted.

Lexa busied herself then; slicing into her forearm, she grunted in pain as black blood spilled from within her. She hadn't cut into a vein, and she would not bleed out—but it was convincing enough to fool anyone that she'd just duelled with Luna. Luna wasn't weak. She was a coward, yes, but she wasn't weak; there was no way Lexa could get away with battling Luna unharmed. Groaning deeply, she smeared the black blood over her face and all over her tunic, making the scene look as messy as possible. Then she ripped part of her tunic off, clumsily suppressing the wound and tying a knot around the makeshift bandage.

"Well," Anya remarked, as young Lexa hesitantly sheathed her sword. Just moments later, a second loud toot of the horn sounded. That was Lexa's. "You were merciful even as a child."

"Not particularly," Lexa confessed. "I just never liked Luna."

"But you didn't kill her?"

"I gave her a way out. Forever. I knew my draw, Anya."

"So...You knew you were going to win, from then on."

"Anticipate as you parry," Lexa said, far-away. "Isn't that what you taught me?"

"I guess so." When Lexa glanced across, Anya was smiling. It wasn't cocky, and nor was it a smirk—as she was so used to. It was that smile she used to get whenever Lexa bettered her in a fight (which was not often), or the time Lexa returned from negotiations with Nia with an alliance, not a war. "I guess so."

This time, Anya rowed.

The least favourite part of Aden's day—and he disliked how often this seemed to occur—was

when Clarke would burst through the doors. It would *always* be in the midst of combing his spiky hair, and he would never say a word until he'd finished with it. He had to look presentable to the public. The public included Clarke kom Skaikru.

"Ambassador," he said respectfully, because his Commander loved this Sky girl, and he would not do her a disservice. "What can I do for you?"

"We need to go to Arkadia," Clarke rushed out. "I've got a plan."

Oh no. That was a buzzword Lexa had warned him about. "What plan?" he asked warily. These things, he needed Indra for. Clarke had not been in the right mindset since his Commander's incident. Indra had warned him not to heed her words too seriously. She was irrational.

She was, as Indra uttered with much difficulty, suffering of a broken heart.

"Not of your concern."

"Any goings-on on my Commander's lands..." Aden trailed off as Clarke raised an eyebrow at him. He straightened up. "Any goings-on on *my* lands are my concern. If you go behind my back you go behind the back of the Commander."

"The Commander's out of commission," Clarke said impatiently.

"I'm not."

Aden wondered, for a moment, how his Commander—so wise, and so strong—could fall for such a reckless, tactless woman. Clarke was the opposite of Lexa, and perhaps it was true what the elders said: opposites attract. But even Aden could see the physical appeal of Clarke kom Skaikru. She was beautiful; her blonde hair was scraggly, but her eyes pierced blue, like the sky. Her breasts...

Aden shook himself, flustered and embarrassed. "What's your reasoning for journeying to Arkadia?"

"It's been days since you made contact with Kane. We need to pressure them. Not Kane. We need to pressure the *people*. They can all see, every time you ride up to the gate. They all know. If we keep loading that pressure, people will cave. If people cave, they will look to Pike."

"And you think there's a chance Pike could go down," Aden said.

"Yes."

"Then ready the horses," Aden called out, satisfied to hear a hasty 'yes, sir!' in response. "We will ride out with Indra. She knows the man well."

They rode out, the three of them, unaccompanied by riders. Aden knew well enough by now that if Arkadia saw any more than a group of ten, they would freak and start shooting. He had not witnessed the massacre; he'd only heard tales of them. Often, he would seek counsel in Indra, not Titus—and Indra would tell him the bare truth. It sickened him, and if this was the only way to heal that wound, Aden would abide by it. If this was also a way of vengeance, Aden selfishly wanted it too.

As they neared Arkadia, Aden surveyed the ground with growing revulsion. How could someone order a massacre like that? On sleeping volunteers? *Indra's* volunteers? He did not see how Indra could be so calm in the face of it all, but Indra was an adept and experienced warrior. Aden still had a long way to go.

They were met at the gate not just by the scruffy man named Kane, but by others, too. All of them had similar red dots pointed at their chest, and their hands up.

The one on the end—the young woman—was wearing war-paint. Aden peered at her curiously.

"Abby kom Skaikru," Indra introduced them, gesturing as she did so, "Octavia kom Skaikru—" there was the girl with the war-paint. And then Indra hesitated. "Lincoln...kom Skaikru."

Aden inclined his head dutifully, though he had no idea of their importance or their status within the Skaikru. He only knew that courtesy would get him far. *Heda* had taught him that much. Never mind the insult or betrayal, she would always find a way to resolve it peacefully—or as peacefully as she could. *Compassion. Strength. Wisdom.* He'd forgotten to drill those words into him today. He recited them silently in his head.

"What is our status, Marcus Kane?" Aden asked when the silence became stifling.

"Nothing as of yet." Kane bore bruises to his face, and Aden's stomach twisted in guilt as he remembered Kane's words at their last encounter. He'd been beaten. "The people remain enamoured with Pike."

"No progress with Bell, either," Octavia added, and upon seeing Aden's confused look, she explained, "my brother, kiddo. He's kind of Pike's puppet at the moment."

"A tyrant pulling the strings of your own blood," Aden mused aloud. He ignored the child comment. "That's not good."

Octavia shot him a fierce look, and Aden decided he liked her. "*Nothing* about this is good."

"My Commander would not want any bloodshed," Aden reinforced, just as Octavia was about to open his mouth. Indra's hand went out to reach for him, but he waved her away. "This blockade may take years, but I shan't disobey my Commander. The North *will* march down on you. If you remain as sitting ducks that is on your Chancellor's head and your people will die. But if you convince your people otherwise, then you will be under my protection."

"You're just a boy," Abby said, a little sorrowfully, "you shouldn't—"

"I'm the chosen Commander-to-be," Aden bit back. "I can do this."

"Aden," Clarke said quietly, clasping his hand in hers. Aden stilled for a moment, and looked at her, eyes full of suspicion. "If you'll let me talk to my mother?"

He could remember the day the Polisian Guards seized him from his home, and the way his mother wept as they drew black blood from his forearm. His father had been out fishing. He halted for a moment, entirely distrustful, but waved Clarke forward. Aden motioned to step in line with her, but Indra shook her head, and Aden stopped. Indra was usually right.

Clarke approached the fence. She gave a quick flick over her shoulder to ensure Aden was out of earshot, and she could feel Indra's eyes on her back.

"Aden's right," she said lowly, ignoring Lincoln's scoff. "We need to overthrow Pike."

"With what?" Lincoln challenged her. "He's got all the support he needs and wants from his people. Need I remind you? *His people.* Even Bellamy."

"I know." Clarke chewed on her bottom lip, and leaned closer. She leaned towards Octavia. "You need to overthrow Pike."

Octavia glared at her. "Haven't you heard a single word—"

"Kill him."

Lexa shot awake, sweat streaming down her face. Her bed was drenched, and the last time she remembered, there had not been sunlight streaming through a window. In fact, there had been no window at all. Panicked, she grappled at the furs, shoving them away from her. *Furs?* She was too hot, and—where the hell was Anya? Wide-eyed, she tossed and turned around, only to be met face-to-face with Titus. He cupped her face.

"*Heda*," he said in wonder, his mouth agape. "You have been unconscious for days."

"Where..." Lexa couldn't speak; she felt like an invalid. Her stomach rumbled, and Titus immediately reached for the stew. There was nothing solid there—only a mushy, flavoursome mix of nutrition. "Anya...?"

"Commander." Titus spoon-fed her, and she felt pathetic. Still: this was Titus, who had been one of her most trusted advisers for as long as she could remember. "Anya is dead."

"So am I."

Titus continued to feed her until all of the mashed-up stew was gone. It turned out the living were indeed hungry, and though the pain in her abdomen had subsided, Lexa still subconsciously rubbed over the healing wound. Titus' eyes followed her hand, and his face immediately reddened.

"Commander—"

"I'll hear no apology," Lexa croaked. "You...you thought you were protecting me."

"My life's purpose is to protect you, *Heda*," Titus admitted. "But this time I failed."

And yet here I am. "Where is she?" she asked, despite herself. "Clarke?"

"Arkadia."

Lexa took a moment to digest this, her stomach stirring with the stew she'd consumed too quickly, and the thought that Clarke had returned home despite her clear offer. Despite the fact that she'd been *shot*. That they'd made...well, love. Still: Arkadia housed her mother, and her people. They'd both accepted these terms the moment they'd agreed to separate, just before they kissed and succumbed to each other. Clarke had made her choice, and Lexa despised the way she couldn't accept it. She despised how much she hated Clarke for it.

"Aden's been doing well," Titus reported, pouring her a glass of water. Lexa took it, and Titus' gaze softened. "Clarke has *journeyed* to Arkadia. She remains here, in Polis."

Lexa's heart jolted. "Even...after the barricade?"

"Yes."

"And—And Aden is still upholding...?"

"As you commanded."

Lexa closed her eyes, sinking into the pillows. Her muscles were of no use. She could barely lift the cup of water to her lips, and Titus had to help her. Her legs moved only a fraction underneath the covers, but her arms felt like string and her head lolled to the side. Still, a small smile spread across her dozy face.

"I'm stuck, Titus," she told him, "between being dead or alive."

"If I may be so bold as to inject my opinion," Titus said, once Lexa had finished her water. He took her hands. "You look very much alive to me."

Lexa laughed softly, and coughed. "It doesn't feel like it."

"*Ste yuj, Heda,*" Titus whispered, and pressed a long kiss to her forehead. Lexa's eyes remained shut, as she slipped into the realms of unconsciousness. There had been pain potion in that stew; she could feel the warmth spreading through her body as she relaxed. It felt dark, and in the darkness she could see Anya's shadow. Titus' voice echoed over them from the non-existent clouds. "Your fight is not over."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks--for the comments, mostly--replying/ speculating, to you guys! :) Thank you so much. I've been in a car accident and the meds = I'm basically narcolepsy lol i..e. the next one msy well be rather delayed!

Breakthrough

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was only a few days before Lexa's Feast Day, of her twentieth year. She was slimmer now, her baby-fat streamlined with a lightweight, armoured skin. A short red sash hung loosely over her plated shoulder, and it swung back and forth as she paced the length of the room. At the end of the throne room, Anya—alive Anya—folded her arms impatiently as she lazed by the door.

"Your counsels are outside," she told young Lexa, "You have kept them there for the best part of an hour now."

"*You* are my counsel," Lexa said stiffly. "I needn't any other."

"Really?" Anya kicked off from the door, and it did not open. Nobody dared to disrespect the Commander by barging in—unless there had been some sort of raid or emergency. "Your land is at war. The Boat people are in exile, but they have ships. The Southern clans house large armies but are safely out-of-reach. Your own people remain hidden in the forestry, waiting to shoot someone. You have allies further North, but if they hit the Ice, there's nothing but enemy exposure. You have the Water People and the Mountain People wanting to wage a war without your word. The Mountain *Men* remain a threat, for you cannot cross the passage through the woods without them deploying their red fog. Do you really think I, alone, can counsel you on all these areas?"

"You've counselled me wisely before. I don't see why this is any different."

"This *is* different. This is different because you are the Commander now," Anya said fiercely. "You have armies at your disposal; civilians who will kiss the ground you step on. I counselled you as a fighter, and I tutored you as you learned. But if you think I can handle every duty a Commander requires, and *still* take control and chieftdom of my own village, I ask for mercy, Lexa."

Lexa stopped pacing. She glanced across the room, where Anya had laid both fists on the table. There was nothing about that woman's stance that indicated she'd back down.

"Mercy?" she echoed.

"Oh, have you run out of sentimentalism?" Anya retorted. "I thought you pledged compassion when you took the Commander's throne, Lexa, or was that a lie? Tell me—the herbalist's daughter in Polis. What is her name?"

The name was forced from gritted teeth. "Costia."

"Do you show *her* mercy? Sentimentalism? Would you, if she were your counsel, subject her to the duties of about five different people?"

"What is this about?" Lexa didn't shout, but the calmness and the stillness of her voice did not lack danger. She advanced upon her mentor, eyes bright with fury. "Why do you talk of Costia when you are asking for some freedom from your duties? Should you not be honoured that you are my counsel?"

"I am *always* honoured, Lexa. But I am telling you that you can't rely on just one person. What if I pass—"

"You will not pass away."

"I will one day," Anya said, a little softer. "And if you bore everything on me, it would disappear with my death. You don't build empires on one rickety foundation, Lexa. You expand from the bottom and you ascend higher until nobody can reach you."

"I don't know these people."

"Yes, you do. You just haven't opened the door. I've ensured you know Trikru faces."

There was a stiff silence between them, and Lexa awkwardly tapped her fingers against the table. The truth was, sentimentalism had never disappeared—and the truth was, she didn't want Anya to know it. Even if she *did*. "I don't want anyone giving me any advice except for yourself."

"You gave up '*want*' after you won the trials," Anya said quietly, "now you '*must*'."

"Anya..."

"Tell me you understand the difference."

"And what of Costia?"

"That is '*want*'."

"I know. But would you counsel me against it?"

Anya's eyes flickered to the door, and she frowned to herself. From afar, the dead Anya and near-dead Lexa could see the anticipation on Lexa's youthful face, untarnished from the scars of war. "No," Anya said finally, and dead Anya's shoulders sunk in disappointment. "But your counsels outside would fight you on it."

"Then do you see why?" Lexa said desperately. "Do you see why I *need* you?"

"My opinion doesn't mean it's the right one," Anya shot back. "They're likely right. You grew sentimental, Lexa, because maybe I was not the right tutor for you. I grew sentimental for you too. You are family." She drew closer to Lexa and grabbed her by the back of the neck. "I can't act as your impartial counsel if my feelings for you want what is purely right for your heart. You're the Commander now, not my tutee. You can't favour me. You can't favour anyone in your counsel. If I commit treason you must subject me to the same fate as you would subject any other villager. However it may be—in public, in private, after five years, or immediately—I must be gone."

"You have to act in the best interest of your *people*. Think of the number of clans, and the villagers they possess; think of the civilians in Polis. Think of the sheer number. The size. I counselled you and I grew too fond of you. I can't let that risk your command of your people. You..." Anya ducked her head, and shook it. "You're too good for that."

"My people come first," Lexa declared, just like she had on Ascension Day. "But that doesn't rob me of the capability of 'love'. If I put my people first, I love them. Costia is of my people."

"And that's different—"

"I won't let it cloud my judgement," Lexa interrupted, and Anya withdrew, far enough so the two purveyors of this scene could see the steel in young Lexa's eyes. "I will love Costia as I love my own people."

Oh, it had been a wishful lie at the time. Lexa had been infatuated with Costia; her dark curls and bright eyes, and her wide grin. The tasty food her mother would always make her for dinner, because Lexa had no mother to cook for her, and she was the Commander. Costia's mother would always insist of how great an honour it was, to dine with the Commander. Every night Lexa would assure her that she was simply a girl plucked from the trials. Every night, Costia would reprimand her as her mother slept, bandaging knuckles and patching up scratches and bruises from sparring activities of the day.

"You're a liar," Costia had teased her once. "You say you were chosen. You fought."

"I fought to be chosen," Lexa had said, grinning into a kiss. "Isn't that one and the same?"

In that moment, in the throne room, Anya had seen it in Lexa's eyes. Lexa was perhaps one of the most proficient liars in Polis, but she could not lie to Anya. Still, Anya held her hands up and backed away. "I believe you, *Heda*. Now, will you let me open this door?"

"You hand-picked my counsel?"

"I trust you'll be pleased with my choices."

Lexa pondered over it for a moment, and then strode over to her throne. Anya watched, impressed, as the youthful Commander's posture straightened. Lexa nodded curtly at her.

Anya's hand paused on the door for a moment. "I would never leave you, *Heda*."

And then she pulled it open.

"I mean, I didn't lie," Dead Anya told her smugly, as Titus, Indra and Gustus filed into the throne room. They all bowed in respect to the young Commander. "I'm still here."

Near-Dead Lexa glowered at her. "You smell like rotten eggs."

"With the clans so split," Titus said as he strode beside Lexa, "Do you not think it unwise to hold celebrations for your Feast Day here, in Trikru territory?"

"I made it clear all clans were welcome," Lexa said. "I can see the Water Commander is enjoying our dark brew."

Titus' eyes flickered over to the bearded, red-faced giant of a man. "Yes."

"What about you?" Lexa was still getting used to Titus' too-formal ways. Anya had always slapped her on the back of the head, or poked her in the face, or said something of insult. Titus was difficult to get a rise from. He was painfully courteous, and there was no mistaking he'd served many Commanders before her. "Do you think it wise to celebrate my Feast Day where I was born?"

"Your home now is in Polis."

"But my people are *here*, as well as in Polis." Lexa folded her arms behind her back.

"Transportation was arranged. I see Polisians here. Would you presume I hold two Feast Days instead? That would seem arrogant of me. Or perhaps be in two places at once? Do you know a mage who can do that?"

Titus quietened, a small laugh escaping him as he shook his head in disbelief. Lexa glanced at him, finding nothing particularly funny about the situation. She wanted to celebrate Feast Day with her people; that extended beyond Trikru, but just because she was the Commander, it did not take away her duties as Commander of the Trigedakru, too. With Gustus and Indra as her right-hand soldiers, they would be familiar faces to the citizens. She did not see how this lacked sense, other than it seeming sentimental to a man who had spent the entirety of his life in Polis. Or perhaps a man who had spent his time serving Commanders who bent to his every will.

Lexa was flexible; but she was steel when required.

"You're young," Titus conceded. "You have a lot to learn."

"Yet I've bettered you tonight."

This time, Titus laughed. It was humourless, but Lexa smiled anyway. "Yes," he confessed. "You have."

From a distance, Titus and Lexa could see one of the drunken Trikru warriors raise his goblet into the air. Red-faced and plump, he yelled, "To the most powerful clan of all!"

"Trikru!"

"Hail the Commander!"

Chants of *Trikru! Trikru! Trikru!* Followed them to the dead of night, and it was only then Titus shot her a warning glance. Lexa could already see the displeasure on the Water Commander's face, and several others. She muttered something to Titus, who immediately set off after the feast table, standing on a stool to proclaim his Commander's words. Meanwhile, she departed for the plains, to take one last look at the sky she once loved.

"What're you thinking here?" Anya asked her from behind, and Lexa watched her young self stare in silence, upwards.

"Things." Lexa smirked across at her. "What? You can't have all my mysteries."

Clarke sprinted up the ridiculously huge staircase to Lexa's chambers as soon as she heard word. Panting by the time she reached Lexa's room, she found Titus in silent prayer by an unconscious Lexa's bed, and her heart deflated. Titus, sensing Clarke's presence, slowly opened his eyes. He rose from his seat by her bed.

"She asked for you," he said stiffly.

"Thank you for telling me," she replied, wiping the sweat from her brow. She immediately brushed past him and knelt by the bed, her clammy fingers reaching for Lexa's pulse. She felt her

skin, slightly feverish to the touch. Her breathing was irregular, just like Clarke's, except Lexa had obviously not been sprinting from the bed.

Gulping, Clarke moved Lexa's furs away and smacked at her knee.

Nothing.

"Are you sure she woke?" Clarke asked, doubtful. "She's..." *In a coma.*

"She woke," Titus said definitively. "She spoke to me. She asked of you; of the barricade; of Aden."

"And this wasn't a vision...?"

"I'm not of your beliefs, Clarke, but I know I did not dream of my Commander speaking to me."

Clarke bowed her head, muttering an apology. She kept doing this—stepping her foot in the shit. Every time she made the effort to respect Grounder culture, she'd excel and then make an offhanded comment that sounded like an insult. Titus, however, was calm and waved it off. She remembered the first time she'd questioned Lexa's belief in reincarnation, but then again, they were in a world of disbelief. They were being chased by a mutated gorilla.

"I need my mom," Clarke admitted, shuffling closer to Lexa's bed. She grasped both hands. "She's a medic. A real one."

"And you aren't?"

Titus and Clarke turned swiftly as Aden leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed.

"Aden..."

"If I lift the blockade for your mother, it shows only leniency," Aden said. "Two Griffins allowed to escape the kill order and given safe harbour within the capital..."

"I know," Clarke said, earnestly, "But I need her expertise."

"Titus said she woke," Aden said. "Perhaps all she needs is you."

With a wave of a hand, Aden gestured for Titus to leave, and the duo left Clarke alone with Lexa. Not for the first time, Clarke buried her forehead against Lexa's hands. They were too cold. Hesitantly, she gently probed Lexa's eye. Her pupils remained unresponsive to light.

She didn't know what to believe, really. Titus was well-intentioned and he was not a liar. He'd also tried to *kill her*. If Lexa woke, she believed him. But *how* could she have woken, if she'd just fallen straight back into a coma? How was Lexa still looking as healthy as this, if she'd eaten next to nothing? There was no technology like they had in the Ark. They could not feed her via a tube. Lexa was fighting, somehow, and perhaps just this once, Clarke had to suspend her belief.

"Just come back to me," Clarke pleaded, though she knew it was pointless. She screwed her eyes shut, even tighter. "Come back for *us*. All of us."

I should be here. Titus' shot was meant for me. Lexa shouldn't be here. Titus hates me for this. Titus hates me. Titus hates me—

"The barricade remains." Clarke decided to distract herself from thoughts that couldn't be changed, and kissed Lexa's knuckles. "Aden's doing a great job of upholding your legacy. He

doesn't want any bloodshed." She faltered for a moment, and decided she'd tell the truth. She'd never been able to hide the truth from a conscious Lexa anyway; there was no point starting, when Lexa was out of it. "I want Pike dead. I ordered Octavia to carry it out. If Pike stays, the barricade remains. Bellamy still believes in him. We'd never be free. My mom would never be free.

"Aden won't budge. He's as stubborn as you, and I guess that's a good thing. A really good thing. But I won't just have Pike die by Octavia's hand. We're going to set something up. I promise you, this time, Lexa, I won't let you down."

Lexa didn't move, and Clarke didn't expect her to. Still, she gripped her hands tighter and pressed a gentle kiss just above her eyelid, then the tip of her nose, and then her lips. "I love you," she said quietly, honestly, but Lexa didn't stir. Clarke closed her eyes. "I love you."

Clarke felt nothing but the thud-thud-thud of her heart.

This was the first time Lexa wasn't followed by Anya and she wondered if she'd somehow lost her dead mentor in the boisterous feast, or if Anya was allowing her some distance out of respect. She doubted the latter option, but the dead didn't get just *lost* in the middle of a memory. Still, Lexa embraced the solitude just as she had when she was younger. She watched herself, away from the feast, staring up at the skies again from the plains.

For the very first time, she could feel something *real* hurt inside her. Just where her heart should be. There was something stinging, burning against her lips; a whisper of a code she couldn't decipher teasing her ears. It was completely disorientating, but it made her feel *sad*. She looked around desperately for Anya, but she was nowhere to be seen.

She clutched her chest, her face screwed up in agony. It went on for about a minute. The more seconds ticked by, the more it felt like her heart would burst from its ribcage. Her lips tasted of a memory she couldn't afford to dream of right now. Her heart twisted and spasmed, just like it had done when Clarke had first kissed her back. And it was impossible, because she was dying, and Anya was dead, and they were on this stupid fucking trip with rowing boats to nowhere, and she was watching herself stare at the skies.

"If a star falls," young Lexa called up to the skies, "I'll catch it, and make Polis the grandest city there is."

Lexa scoffed at her younger self. Naive, and hopeless.

Young Lexa threw a rock into the sky, as hard as she could. "You never answer," she said, frustration evident in her voice. "It was a trick request anyway."

As Young Lexa walked away, Lexa fell to her knees, startled and overwhelmed. *If a star falls, I'll catch it.*

I don't understand why you can't just give us one of your stars and let all of this stop.

The burning sensation on her lips soothed, like calamine had just been applied; like calamine was understanding. Lexa stared upwards just as her younger self had, and wondered if this was all just a dream. She wondered if Dead Anya was just someone her subconscious wanted to see again. But she could taste Clarke, and she knew that was real. And she just didn't know how to get back, because damn her, she *had* to.

She just didn't know how. She sat on the plains, because the shore hadn't appeared and neither had Anya. Lexa supposed they wouldn't for a while.

"Am I dead?" she asked the stars, and got no reply, as per usual.

"Is Clarke with me?"

Her stomach, drenched with blood but usually painless and dull, jabbed and she yelped in agony, clutching the open wound. Nothing could hurt her in this place, she knew that. Anya would remind her of it later—she knew that too. But as she wrestled with the pain of it all, she knew one thing for certain: she had to find a way back.

Pain was real. Reality meant life.

"Thank you," she said, strained, towards the stars. The pain would not subside until Anya found her later, rushing to her in concern. They both pressed against the non-harmful stomach wound like it would help her, but she was beyond that. They both knew that. Lexa looked into Anya's sunken eyes, and shook her head. "I have to find my way back."

"I know," Anya said, somewhat sadly. "You'll make it back in time, you know."

"For what?"

"For her. But you need to see some things first. Deal?"

Lexa thought of Clarke by her bed, and closed her eyes as the pain twisted inside her, like she'd been stabbed and someone was turning the knife. "Deal," she managed, and for a moment she was rewarded with a heady sensation of falling. She was atop the Polisian tower, and she'd spread her wings like a bird. Her lips tinged with the softness of Clarke's kisses and with a smile, she fell.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the comments on the last chapter :) And apologies for the infrequency of these updates. Sometimes they come in quick spurts and sometimes it just takes ages. Nonetheless, it's all plotted out (I ensured that before starting) so a finish line (undeterred) will come one day. :)

Thanks also for the debate re: the last chapter regarding Lexa/Titus. Um, all I can say is watch for it? That's such a douche-y thing to say lol but I can't say more than that. There's more to their relationship than that. And I can confirm the facts you stated: he broke the law, he was gonna kill Clarke, and kind of nearly killed Lexa. So whatever it may be, it won't go unforgotten or without consequence.

Thanks again!

A Pitstop

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Aden usually associated the phrase 'the tables are turned' with something of positivity and glee. However, as he raced up the staircase to his Commander's bed chambers, he could not help but feel fear growing exponentially with every broad step he took. He silently cursed himself, because he was a Nightblood but he was no Commander. His Commander was unconscious.

And *he* was the one rushing to *Clarke*.

It reeked of desperation, but it was his only choice. Clarke had medical expertise and unrivalled knowledge. The poultices and milky pain potions Nyko provided were assumedly working (he could not exactly ask his silent Commander to confirm so, and nor was he sure of what the poultices actually did except 'help her sleep'—which she really didn't need). But Clarke had knowledge of the skies. She'd swept into the Mountain and brought it down. That could not have been just luck.

Aden barged through the double-doors, almost unhinging them. He bent over, panting as he caught his breath back. Clarke immediately startled from her chair, where she was sketching into the book Aden had given her.

"The spies have seen something," he rushed out, and then reluctantly said, "*Wanheda*."

Clarke stiffened. "What have they seen?"

"Ice Nation Warriors, covered in white and blue furs," Aden said. He was suddenly unsure why he'd gone straight up here and not to Titus. Subconsciously, his eyes went over to Lexa. He'd hoped, idiotically, that his words would stir her awake. "They're penetrating too far down south. The Northern clans lack my protection, but I've already ordered Indra to arm the Trikru villages in case of ransack."

"Then you've done all you can." Clarke set the book down by the chair and approached him cautiously. Aden did not move, but he partially wished that the woman his Commander loved would simply stay by *her* side. "What about your spies? Are they okay?"

"I have a solid network. They're as loyal to the Commander as they are to me. Well, they *are* hers. They report to me constantly. I think."

"Then don't fret. If the spies have caught a march, they'll warn you in advance if the Ice Nation is too close."

"Don't you get what this means?" Aden asked, annoyed. "It means King Roan has been overthrown. I don't know anything about him. I just know that he can't be commanding these soldiers down—it must be Ontari, the Nightblood."

"Are you scared?"

"Of course I am. The Commander didn't teach me to be fearless. She said that would be foolish. But she taught me to handle it."

"So how do you handle it?"

"Do you have time?"

Clarke hastily swivelled around to face a dozing Lexa, and then back to Aden. It wouldn't do any harm to converse with the boy whilst the Commander was unconscious—and looked to remain that way for a long time. "Sure."

"It's analytical," Aden explained, thinking back to his Commander's teachings. *You can't control what you fear, but you can control what you do with it, and how you deal with it. It's that control that will determine the consequences. But you must look inside yourself and think: what is it that you truly fear?* "Fear isn't broad. It's pinpointed."

"So pinpoint it," Clarke said softly. "What is it you're scared of? That the Ice Nation will breach your spy network and lay siege upon Polis?"

"No. We're too good for that."

"The fact that you've no news on Roan?"

"No. Roan's either dead or he's a prisoner; the main concern is Ontari."

"So Ontari is your pinpoint," Clarke concluded, and Aden nodded. "What is it you fear about Ontari?"

That she's evil. That she has no heart; no soul. That she was once the Ice Queen's aide, and if that doesn't speak volumes, nothing will. "She's a Nightblood," Aden blurted out. "Just like Heda."

Aden didn't fear for his life; should he ever encounter Ontari in battle, he was prepared for death. However, he couldn't have the one person who *could* stand in Ontari's way unconscious and unable to fight. Lexa was the only Nightblood capable of bettering Ontari. And here she was, still unable to move, unable to wake....unable to do anything.

"If Ontari succeeds," Aden said, "I won't be able to stop her. Lexa could. But I wouldn't."

"Why? Because she fights better than you?"

"Yes."

"Does she have a bigger army?"

"She is a *Nightblood*," Aden emphasised impatiently, trying to shake some sense into Clarke. It didn't matter whose army was bigger; it mattered how you bled. Loyalty to the coalition was something Lexa had crafted over years, but Lexa wasn't truly *here* anymore. She was someplace else, and if Lexa was absent, so was the coalition. "She'll butcher the Commander in her sleep without a second thought. Then she'll ascend to the rank of the Commander herself. Could you imagine Ontari in that position? The Ice Queen's ex-aide? She will kill Lexa and then she will slaughter the rest of the Nightbloods, including myself, without blinking. She'll do so until she's the last one left."

"You need to bring her back, Clarke kom Skaikru. The Commander *loves* you. Titus doesn't preach to me anymore. He no longer tells the Nightblood that love is weakness. He doesn't mention you and nor does he mention his intentions when he nearly killed the Commander. I know nothing of magic and I know nothing of medicine, but *you* do. You're a medic. You're the one she loves. Surely you are the one who can bring her back—and only you."

"This isn't just about—love," Clarke said gently, reaching for Aden's hand. He moved away. She thought of Lexa's irregular heartbeat. Her permanently closed eyes. "This will take time."

"We don't *have* time!" Aden near-shouted, his boyish temper shining through. He coughed, and when he next spoke, his voice was calm once more. "Please. I beg of you. Please bring my Commander back. Please tell her we need her."

"Aden, you're asking the impossible—"

"You fell from the sky and the earth loved you back," Aden tried, "anything is possible."

"I need my mother. She was the best medic on the Ark, and she is the best option."

Aden chewed on his bottom lip, clearly conflicted. He'd already made it quite clear to the obstinate Sky girl that he could not show leniency. What would happen if both Griffins were allowed out of the barricade, and everyone else had to be kept in on a kill order? Pike's power would only rise, and he couldn't replace Clarke with Abby. Upon waking up, his Commander would have his throat for sending Clarke away.

"You need to figure this out," he decided, and he hated how regret crept into his tone. "I will call Nyko up for assistance."

Aden didn't wait for an answer. He didn't want to hear "*I can't*". He swept from the room, his red sash feeling fraudulent as he left.

There was no medicine that could bring Lexa back—and certainly not without the resources from within Arkadia. The notion of approaching Arkadia for help in Polis was laughable, too. The only thing she could do was reject Nyko's sleeping poultices, and the pain potions. She rejected all medication. If the pain was bad enough, Lexa would wake—or she would seize, perhaps. But she would do *something*.

Days passed, and Aden kept checking up on them—multiple times per day. The poor boy had aged years every time he came up, and the frown-lines on his forehead seemed like a permanent staple.

The only thing left to do was believe.

Clarke dismissed Nyko, and shuffled closer to Lexa's bed again. She knelt by the side and clasped Lexa's hands in hers. The only constant throughout their relationship had been Clarke's cynicism for Lexa's many beliefs and traditions. If this would be the only thing to bring her back, then Clarke was willing to throw all science out of the window.

"The Ice Nation is marching down on Polis," she said quietly, into Lexa's knuckles. "Aden's afraid. He doesn't know what to do. And he's right. If Ontari reaches Polis, she will massacre the Nightbloods. *Your* Nightbloods. But if you..." she inhaled deeply, and closed her eyes. "If you wake up, maybe you could stop that."

Lexa didn't stir.

"You're the most proficient fighter in Polis. You're the most capable and revolutionary Commander this land has ever seen. You've inspired an entire generation of children to look up to you and rule in your absence. I wish you could see the work Aden is doing. He's doing brilliantly. But we *need* you to wake up. We need you back." She paused, squeezing her eyes shut to prevent

the tears from flowing. She would not cry now. "I need you back."

Clarke never opened her eyes. She could feel Lexa, unmoving and unperturbed. But she stayed there for a while, kneeling before the bed, and repeating the same thing over and over again. If this was faith, faith *sucked*. But they had no other remedies, and this was the only thing they had left.

Hope. A tiny glimmer of hope in the impossible. And Clarke latched onto it.

"We are *definitely* not going in chronological order," was the first thing that came out of Lexa's stunned mouth as she saw the wreckage that was Polis, and the poor excuse for a fighting pit that was essentially a muddy, broad hole. There were few spectators at the palisade, including an alive Anya, so Anya and Lexa rested their arms on the spiky, wooden fence.

Inside the pen-of-sorts was a lanky young girl, and Gustus.

"You were so thin," Anya guffawed unnecessarily. Lexa scowled. *Any* girl would look thin compared to the giant mass that was Gustus, but Anya was right. Lexa had been underfed and ill-trained. She could already recall this memory, and it was embarrassing.

"I told you a while ago, that I knew what you'd want to see. You agreed."

"Yes, I did."

"Is this what you'd been thinking of?"

Lexa stared as her lanky self circled Gustus, as if she was any threat at all. Gustus barely moved an inch. "Strangely, yes."

Then, sharp like a blade pierced her chest, and Lexa stumbled back in pain. This wasn't the first time. She frowned down at her chest, because nothing could hurt her—not in this strange world of the dead Anya seemed to reside in. There was a lack of sword. Dead Anya stared after her, concerned. "What just happened?"

"I don't know." Lexa was being honest. "I...my chest hurts."

"It can't hurt. You're untouchable here."

"I know. But—" she cringed again, as the sharp pain jabbed once more. Then it melted away into a dull, aching pain of muscle—but it was her *heart*—and she could not explain why. "Anya, what's happening? Am I supposed to go back?"

"Not yet," Anya said. "Is it too much? Do you need to rest?"

Lexa wondered if you could rest in the world of the dead. For the entirety of the journey, neither one of them had slept once. She supposed if she was near-death, her body would be asleep. And if Anya was already dead, then she was definitely asleep forever.

"Come on," Lexa ushered out, her hand still clamped over her chest. It throbbed in disagreement. "Let's go see Gustus humiliate me."

"That's the spirit." Anya meant for it to be teasing, but she could not help the concern that flooded

through her veins—her dead veins—at the sight of Lexa wincing with every step she took, her hand over her heart.

They watched, and it was every bit as embarrassing as Lexa remembered.

She was small, agile, but untrained and thus clumsy. Often she would trip over clumps of mud, and Gustus would immediately point his wooden sword at her throat with a displeased grunt until she tapped on the ground. Blow after blow, Lexa's speed at such a young age was no match for Gustus' brute strength. She always ducked too late for Gustus' swings, ending up with his sword smashing her in the face and knocking her onto the floor, on her back. Every time she tried to be clever and jab at his weak side, he'd twist and elbow her on the nose before grappling her hand and yanking it up so her palm was right up her shoulder.

"You're a puny little thing, aren't you?" Alive Anya yelled from the palisade, clearly enjoying herself as she echoed her Commander's words. Lexa glared across at her, and Dead Anya snickered. "Come on! Too slow! What're your feet doing? Napping?"

Lexa watched and picked out all the faults in herself that she picked out in her Nightbloods. She swung too fast and too recklessly, leaving herself exposed to a heavy kick in the chest once Gustus easily parried her attack away. She jabbed and slashed at the same places all the time, with no variety whatsoever. As time progressed, Gustus seemed to almost predict Lexa's moves because he didn't even need to parry. He just swiftly moved out of the way and bashed Lexa on the back, and onto the ground, her face splattered with mud.

There was one thing Lexa did well: getting back to her feet.

In their duels, Lexa could keep up with Gustus for at least a few blows before he overpowered her. She was quick, perhaps just as quick as he was, even for her age. But she didn't have the height or the strength he possessed, and was ultimately overpowered. Every single time.

Her feet shuffled awkwardly as well. She didn't possess the agile footwork she had now. Instead her legs were ramrod straight, and Gustus had the graciousness to not break both of them. She ran instead of staggering her steps, throwing caution to the wind. It was an absolute mess, and Lexa scoffed every time Gustus had her down on the ground, beaten.

"You," Gustus said eventually, to young Lexa on the ground. "You need some rest. You've done enough for the day."

Young Lexa groaned, and rolled over onto her back to stare at the sky. "I think I'm done for life."

"Don't talk nonsense. If you do not have someone to beat you down, you'll never learn. Soon it will be you beating all the others down. Come on."

Easily, Gustus bent to pick Lexa up from the floor and carried her like a baby in his arms, away from the small crowd by the palisade. Everyone liked to see a young Nightblood getting battered by their mentor. It was supposed to be fun and entertaining.

Without warning, Lexa decked him in the face, satisfied with the surprised groan as Gustus' knees buckled underneath him and he collapsed to the ground. There was bright red blood streaming from his nose, and Lexa picked one of the abandoned wooden swords and held it to his throat.

"Anya said to show mercy," young Lexa recited her teachings, "But she never said to let your guard down."

Gustus hastily tapped out, and Lexa, with a bloody grin, took Gustus' hand as he led her out of the sparring pit. The next eager pair stepped in, and Dead Anya withdrew from the view. Her laugh

sounded exactly the same as Aliva Anya's.

"That," Dead Anya said as she glanced over at her alive self, who was grinning to herself, "was when I knew you were something special."

"Not when I was proposing a coalition?" Lexa asked, the dull ache in her chest spreading to warmth.

"No, no. You were already spearheading a revolutionary idea by then. But this? This was sly and cunning. You duped him. I liked that."

"I cheated," Lexa decided.

Anya rolled her eyes. "Always so honourable. No, you showed Gustus that he shouldn't be fooled by a young girl. You saw a window of opportunity, and you seized it."

"And *that's* why we're here? Because you thought I was some radical youngster who dared to deck her sparring partner in the face when he had his guard down? You thought I was some Chosen One?"

"No," Anya said exasperatedly. "But the spirits chose you anyway."

Lexa watched as Alive Anya sprinted to catch up with the duo, clapping young Lexa on the back. Lexa could recall what Anya was saying to her, and she closed her eyes. Anya had a mischievous grin and an equally mischievous demeanour. And so Lexa had ascended to the throne not by nobility or camaraderie, but by trickery and underhanded fight tactics after she'd already lost.

"You *dared* where nobody would," Anya said, as if she was reading into Lexa's mind. "That's why."

"That's why what?"

"That's why I liked you. You had an attitude. A bit of a swagger, if I may," Anya joked, prodding her side. Lexa chortled as they watched the next pair battle it out in the sparring pit. This was some chubby, bookish loser with no hope—not even with a spear—against Indra. She pitied the boy. Indra was even worse than Anya.

Lexa had always liked that about her, too.

"You've showed me why you thought I was chosen," Lexa deduced. "You proved that I was not one to give up, even when Gustus beat me to the ground. You've shown that I can pretend to be merciful and be merciful at the same time. You've shown my wiliness during the Conclave. You can show me many things, Anya, but none of this will bring me back to life."

Anya lounged against the prickly palisade. "You don't need bringing back to life. You're already alive."

"So...I'm stuck here with a dead person because I'm *alive*?"

"Don't be so droll, Lexa. The world's boring when you're a boring person."

Lexa was suddenly reminded of why she sometimes hated Anya so much. Annoyed, she turned to watch the chubby boy get ripped to pieces by Indra, and then get told multiple times to stand up like a proper warrior—only to get a face full of mud when he attempted. When they started to draw a sniggering audience, Indra glowered around the palisade and escorted her trainee away from the noise.

"That's why I liked Indra," Anya noted, as if she'd read Lexa's mind before. "She'll kill you if she hates you, but if you so much as smirk at someone she's trying to train up, she'll slit your throat."

"I don't think she's quite as tactless."

"I think she is."

They left it at that.

Lexa and Anya accompanied each other in amicable silence as one-by-one, the tutee would get routinely beat by their mentor. It was a lesson. Just because you were a Nightblood, it did not mean you had the right over others immediately. You had to earn your Nightblood, and that was where most people failed. Lexa used the silence to ponder over what Anya had shown her. Strength, flexibility, mercy, control... and so much more. Anya had given her the opportunity to look at herself in a different light and deem herself worthy of being the Commander. Whether it was a way of easing her into a peaceful death, Lexa didn't know. But her heart still throbbed, quite the ruckus in the dead silence of their passageway, as she thought of Clarke. Her thoughts still sometimes drifted to their moments together, alone; the gentility of Clarke's kisses and the shudder up Lexa's back every time Clarke touched her, intentionally or not. With every brush of skin or every sneaked glance, Lexa had fallen for her all over again. She had never really stopped.

"Love is weakness," Anya mused aloud, and Lexa stilled. She could hear Anya's snort. "I thought you'd react like that. You know sometimes you just freeze into a statue, right?"

"They aren't words I'm fond of," Lexa said stiffly, "And they aren't words I intend to follow."

"You did, for a while," Anya noted, "You ushered it away."

"Not because I ever thought Titus was right," Lexa hissed, forcing her body to stop from advancing on Anya—not that she would do much harm to a corpse anyway. Anya was not fazed. "But because people target those I love. When I love, people get hurt. When you love someone, you don't want that." Lexa grimaced at the echo of Titus' mantra, over and over again as he taught her to read and write, to sit properly, to learn the histories of all the clans in case she needed subject for small talk. "I've loved in many a capacity—but in the same instance, I've torn hearts apart—"

"And mended them," Anya intervened. "You saw them crack but you never left them to break. Not fully."

"My love was executed for me."

"And your second love, you salvaged," Anya said firmly. "By no means am I a fan of Clarke kom Skaikru—that girl is hard to *like*, so—" Anya's dead eyes crinkled when she realised this was not making Lexa's dull expression lighten. "When you found Clarke, she was on the brink of ruining herself. She would've died if you hadn't intervened; she would've wandered too far north. You save her from her own recklessness, and that's not something you'll ever be thanked for, Lexa. You may forever be cursed for it. But you did the right thing."

"The right thing isn't always the best," Lexa argued. "I did what I had to. But I took away her free will to live as she wished."

"Live as she wished? She is *clueless*! She's a smart-talker and a dirty fighter but she's not a survivor, Lexa! If you truly loved her, you would've done as you did! How long were you going to let her toe the line of idiocy?"

"I wouldn't have sent Roan if I thought her safe," Lexa admitted.

"Well, there you go—"

"When I took up the throne—" Lexa swivelled, tone cold. She echoed Anya's sentiments. "I gave up '*want*' and replaced it with '*must*'. I couldn't let the mighty *Wanheda* fall into Nia's hands. The coalition would implode of fear, and Clarke would be twisted beyond repair."

"Then why didn't you kill her?" Anya was only challenging her; there was no real malice behind her words. Lexa thought back to the day Titus had implored her to do the same.

She felt tremendously nauseous, holding back the wretch just to save herself the embarrassment of Anya ridiculing her going all up in arms for a girl from the sky. But they were ultimately both right. Lexa's capacity to love had both built and ruined her simultaneously; it made her a strong leader but a fallible one, too. Sometimes she was selfish and sometimes she was too selfless. It made her a walking contradiction of a Commander who pledged her soul to the wellbeing of her people; to the altruistic and sacrificial duties a Commander had to undertake. Yet a part of her just longed to live her days out in peace, in a warm and cosy hut by a lake, fishing for dinner and reading in the firelight. A part of her wanted to run, just like Luna had, to a life where rules did not determine her existence or what her heart wanted. But sometimes, when she thought about it, she wondered what Becca would say. She wondered how it had filtered down the decades that love was weakness, or if it was always so.

Love was human, and Lexa had always thought of humanity as weak. But as Anya had just shown her, weakness did not mean the inability to get back up for another round, battered and bloodied.

"I didn't kill her..." Lexa repeated, slowly. "I couldn't rip her heart out. What would happen to mine?"

Anya gave her a small smile, and patted her on the shoulder. It was not comforting. It was not discomfoting, either. It was nothing. Lexa's mouth remained downturned, a little disappointed with herself. She thought of ways to kill Clarke, and nothing came up. A garish red 'NO' was her answer, and she supposed that was all she needed to know.

They were back on the boat, and this time, Lexa dreaded where her mind was headed next. Anya rowed again.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for the comments! Means a lot and to know what you're thinking too :)
I do like a good old discussion so it's really nice of you to engage. I'm very lucky.
Thank you!

There **are** risks I am taking but I'm just throwing caution to the wind and hoping this work in a not-too-ridiculous way but in a strange, uncertain, shaky way. If that makes sense.

The Flame

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lexa knew what would happen, far too well. The memory had been carved into her brain, permanent and unmoving. It pained her every time she was left alone with her thoughts. But much like her brain, she could do nothing about it. She could not extract her brain, let alone the memory.

"Commander..." Titus' tentative voice was the first to pierce the stuffy silence. "We can have it taken away."

For a selfish moment, Lexa considered having *him* taken away. What would happen—not that Anya would allow her—if she avenged her near-death? What if, whilst stuck in her subconscious, Titus was to kill Clarke?

What if this was why she had to go back?

They could all smell the stench coming from the box on Lexa's bed. By 'they', she meant Titus, Indra, Anya, Gustus and herself. Both the dying Lexa and already Dead Anya waited respectfully in the darkened corner of the room, as if that mattered. Lexa had picked the spot so Dead Anya couldn't see the violent ways in which her fists still clenched at the memory.

Young Lexa's face was ashen. "Is this all the Ice Queen sent?"

"Yes, Commander," Titus said carefully. It felt as if all figures in the room were treading on thin ice. *Very* thin ice. "There was no note."

"Have you looked inside?"

"No, Commander. The...the box was specifically instructed to go straight up to you. I would not—" Titus swallowed, perhaps regretting his decision. The smell of death was familiar to them all. "I would not disrespect you like that."

"Then you did well." Lexa could see it in herself—her young, naive self. She was stalling for time. She really hadn't wanted to open that box.

She could remember, so clearly, the thought process in her mind that day. She recalled the way her heart sank as all her trusted counsels approached the throne room silently, with Anya ushering her up towards her bedroom. She could remember the way Anya dipped her head to whisper in her ear, to tell her to stay strong and brave; to stay as driven and idealistic as she was well-loved to be. She could remember the humidity of the day, and how they were all sweaty just by standing still. She could still feel the heat on her skin, and her heart turn to ice when she heard that it was a message from Nia.

"You stall very well," Dead Anya mused, as they observed Lexa talking about how the box got here without her permission; about how Nia was still the last clan leader to declare allegiance to her coalition; about how every ambassador sent to the North had come back with his head on a spike. Lexa had grown into her position. No longer was she the skinny, under-fed piece of garbage Gustus would beat up in the sparring pit. Now she was tall, with a proud chin and piercing green eyes. Her slim, toned figure easily bore the weight of her body armour, with which she rarely walked without.

"Everyone knew," Lexa replied, just as quietly. "But nobody wanted to tell me."

"It wasn't our place," Anya hissed back, as Lexa closed her eyes. "It was *solely* for you." They watched as Young Lexa approached the bed with trepidation, and how Gustus stiffened behind her. Titus bowed his head in silent prayer. "We all wished it could have been any of us."

"You'd be a fool to say that," Lexa said, watching as her younger self rested a heavy hand on the lid. "As a Commander, then and now, I wouldn't want any harm—any pain I experienced that day—to be inflicted upon my most trusted counsels."

"Is that what you were thinking then, or what you think now?"

"Both."

Dead Anya gave her a toothy grin. Her teeth were all yellow and rotting away, her gums looking like drabs of blobs of flesh more than anything. Lexa found herself oddly used to the dead now. In some ways she sought comfort in the fact that Anya most definitely looked *dead*. She wasn't quite sure how she could deal with her (already high, clearly) level of insanity if Anya had looked just as she was before Lexa had sent her away.

"You were always an honest child," Anya recalled. "You know, when you came out of the woods at the end of the Nightblood trials, all bloodied and bruised and limping, I couldn't believe my eyes."

Lexa laughed a little, realising what Anya was doing. She was stalling—except—she was *really* stalling, Young Lexa's hand remained on top of the box on her bed, and everyone had frozen around her. Nobody spoke. They couldn't.

"What..."

"I need to be sure you're ready to see this again," Anya murmured. "There are some things you don't need to relive, Lexa. This is a memory I doubt you forget. I don't see why we bothered."

"Because this is *my* brain," Lexa said a little angrily, remembering Anya's words. And she'd been asking herself the same question too. She could recite every single detail of this day, but she knew why she'd brought Anya here. "And only *I* bore witness to the weakness I gave into."

"You gave into nothing," Anya recalled. "You were angry, but you were not weak."

"How are you controlling my *brain*?"

"I'm not. It's not physical," Anya explained, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Of course it wasn't. Lexa would've noticed if Anya had plucked her brain out and started shoving her dirty, dead fingers in it. "Besides, I think *you're* stalling, so no, I'm not."

"I think you are."

"No, *you* are. Definitely. I'm *dead*."

"You—" Lexa stuttered, and found nothing came out. She wanted to say that she'd rowed the boat. That she could walk and talk. *Dead people did not do that*. But then again, almost-dying people did not encounter their mentors on a black shore, row across a black lake, and dive into their past. None of this made sense, and still she could not see a purpose. It was as if it was right in front of her, but the fog would not clear.

"Why haven't we landed?" Lexa asked suddenly, aware of Anya's mouth opening. "I mean—properly?"

"Well..." Anya shrugged. She had never been one for mystique. "Your journey hasn't finished yet, dumbass."

"Journey to what? To my death? I already know I'm dying."

"And I'm telling you that you have a choice," Anya insisted. "You can accompany me and stomp on my head, and get your answers, or you can row to the other side and die."

"We've been rowing for about—forever," Lexa sighed, "What if I accidentally hit the other side?"

Anya blinked at her, like she was stupid. "You're a moron."

And just then, Young Lexa's mouth twisted into an ugly shape of frustration and fury. All of a sudden, everyone started moving in the scene they were observing yet again. Young Lexa gripped onto the edge of the box, and then ripped it open.

Lexa shut her eyes.

The silence in the room said more than enough. It often did. Lexa couldn't open her eyes because she could not see Costia like that again. It had haunted her in nightmares; she would not allow herself the displeasure of seeing her decapitated head in her bed for an umpteenth time. She'd run out of patience now, and guiltily, she no longer yearned to see Costia. Dead or alive.

"Can't?" Dead Anya asked her.

Lexa shook her head. "Want."

"Really? Love of your life? First girl you ever kissed?"

"You said it," Lexa muttered, eyes still shut. "The dead are gone."

She could hear Anya bark out a laugh, and for a moment, she was tempted to punch her for her disrespect, only to remember that they weren't really *here*. "I think," Anya said through her laughter, "I'm proof that the dead aren't really gone."

"And why is that?"

"Because I was a part of your life," Anya said softly, "Whether you like it or not, perhaps I imprinted myself upon your brain. The dead may be gone, but the dead can be remembered."

"I just—"

"Get out," young Lexa's voice penetrated the room, cold and flaky. If she were an arrow, she would've been carried away by the wind. She couldn't even get two words out without shaking, Lexa's eyes fluttered open, and the lid was back over the box. "All of you."

"*Heda*," Indra began, "We think it's best if we—"

"I said *get out!*" Young Lexa was yelling now, motioning violently towards the door. "If you don't leave, I'll get my guards and they'll *make* you leave! They'll make you leave and they'll make you *bleed* for not following my command!"

"We're doing our best for you, *Heda*," Titus said desperately. "*Heda*, please. I have been your adviser for as long as—"

"I know." Lexa was panting, her face reddened from a mixture of petulant embarrassment and

exertion. Her quivering hand remained pointed towards the door, and Indra was the first to swivel on her heel, followed by Gustus. Titus and Anya remained. "I will not make you bleed." Lexa's tone was quieter now. "But I will not have company, either."

"We can't just leave you," Alive Anya said, crouching a little so she was eye-level with Lexa. "Look at me. I know you loved her."

"I loved her as much as I love my people," came the dull reply, like something recited from a textbook. Anya recoiled slightly, sharing a disapproving look with Titus, who did not say a word. "But I shouldn't have let her get in harm's way."

"What she sacrificed for you," Titus said lowly, "She sacrificed for Polis."

Something snapped—both inside Alive and Near-Death Lexa. "Get out."

"Heda..."

"Both of you. Get out. Get *out*!"

"This is a notion of *war*!" Anya yelled back, refusing to budge. Lexa stood her ground, her arms now rigid by her side. She would not hit her mentor, but she was close. Her fists tightened until the whites of her knuckles showed. "Don't you realise that? She's taunting you! She's rejecting the coalition!"

"I will make my coalition!" Lexa roared. "I'll make it with Nia or without."

"You need the North!"

"I need them for nothing. They can banish themselves into exile for all I care. They can face judgement from our past Commanders and pay the price for living under their Queen."

"You said you'd make peace," Anya argued, fully aware that she was walking a tightrope here with Lexa's temper. "And you did—with ten clans. But the one clan you can't make peace with, you'll just banish? What does that say about your negotiation skills, hmm?"

"I said..." Lexa was not moving on this subject. "Get. Out. I don't want to hurt you."

"You think you can hurt me?"

"Get out."

Anya held her stare for a moment, level and calm. She knew what Lexa was going through. It wasn't as if she hadn't lost loved ones before. But Lexa was different. As much as she was the Commander, and as much as Titus had invaded her teachings, Lexa was still *hers*. Lexa's eyes shone with the knowledge and brightness that only Titus' tutelage could offer. Anya was of no use in that area. But behind that there was compassion, and wisdom beyond her years. She was strong, but she knew where she was weak. Paradoxically, that was how she was strong. By protecting it.

Minutes seemed to pass before Anya sighed, and gave up. She swept from the room, and Titus hesitantly shuffled behind her. He took heavy steps, as if he was waiting for Lexa to call him back, but she never did. And as soon as the doors shut, Dead Anya turned away, ready for the shore.

"This is my brain," Lexa said firmly, gripping onto Anya's peeling, stinking arm. "If I am about to die, then I might as well show you the instances I failed you."

"You have never failed me, Lexa."

"Then will you spare a moment to look where I did?"

Young Lexa stood stiffly by the bed, and then her shoulders drooped. She did not cradle the box, and nor did she re-open it. She did not curl up on the bed. Instead she trudged around the side of it, and sat down on the floor at the foot of the bed, drawing her knees up to her chest. She stayed there for a moment, like a child squashing herself into the back of a wardrobe, and then she sobbed.

Lexa did not need words to interpret those ugly, throaty noises she was making. She cried for every flower-chain Costia had made her, and she'd said 'thank you' instead of 'I love you'. She cried because she could not bear to face her mother now, and she loved Costia's mother very much. She cried because Costia had not died for Polis; she had died for *her*.

If Lexa had not become Commander, this would not have happened. Anya had criticised the previous Commander for her weaknesses but this was very much embedded within her. Titus had told her time and time again to get rid of Costia, and so they would meet in secret, giggling and kissing, like it was some sort of exciting game of hide and seek. Titus had told her love was weakness, and it was, because when one part of your love died, you died too. Lexa remembered the feeling of her heart crumpling at the foot of the bed, trying to quieten her sobs by burying her face against her kneecaps.

None of it worked. Her breathing hacked and her shoulders spasmed as she tried to catch her breath back, tears streaking down her youthful face. How could she face Nia now, when she had promised her Polisians that there would be no more violence from the Northerners? How could she go on at all?

She wanted them dead. All of them. Women, children, men, animals—she wanted the entire land of Ice laid to waste, but it went against everything she'd promised and it went against every moral fibre in her body.

Justice had to be served. But sometimes, justice took its time.

And so Young Lexa continued to cry, alone. In the darkness, Lexa and Anya weren't quite sure what to do. Lexa wasn't sure if she was supposed to approach her younger self and assure her things would turn out mostly fine. Anya kept looking away, as if it was none of her business to be prying into her Commander's private breakdown. Yet Lexa made her watch.

"You have never failed me," Anya repeated decisively. Anya took in the scene before her; a young woman, barely gone a child, who had just lost her first love at the hands of a scheming, experienced player of the game. She'd held steady until everyone had left. She would go on to forge an impossible alliance. "It is, instead, perhaps the strongest I've ever seen you."

Lexa watched herself in disbelief, unsure of Anya's words, as she picked herself up off the floor. It was like everything that had shattered within her was clumsily clattering back into place.

"I love you," Young Lexa said to the empty room, once her tears had dried on her cheeks and there was none left to cry. "I love you so much."

"The strongest," Dead Anya confirmed, squeezing the real Lexa's shoulder. "You shared this with me. I didn't have to see this. But you showed me. You didn't think of this actively, Lexa. Yet you were brave enough to share a memory you otherwise wanted to keep secret."

And I'm telling you that you have a choice...

"It wasn't brave," Lexa muttered. "Maybe my subconscious was just being honest with you."

"One and the same," Anya said, smiling. "Out of all the dumb young kids they paired me with, they had to pair me with the noble one, didn't they?"

The secret tunnel to the outside felt severely claustrophobic when you tried to cram as many people in as you could. Kane, Octavia, Lincoln, Miller and Abby wedged in together, and Octavia couldn't help but feel irritated by her boyfriend's overly broad shoulders. And the same with Miller.

Clarke's words still lingered in her mind like a horrible smell. *Kill him*. If they were on a battlefield and Octavia was in the midst of a one-on-one duel with the bastard, she'd do the deed. But here she had to keep this secret pent-up inside her because everyone in this stuffy hideout was too damn honourable to even consider Clarke's notion. Miller did not have the guts, though he perhaps would agree with Clarke's sentiment. Octavia couldn't trust him to keep his trap shut, and they couldn't risk involving someone as crucial as Raven in their plans, either. Her disability limited her, but her engineering genius wasn't what they needed right now.

Still, Octavia missed her. She knew things were getting lonely with Raven when she'd crash into Octavia's sparring sessions with requests on archery lessons.

Octavia would agree like the idiot she was, and somehow end up getting dragged away to Raven's latest, genius project.

"Some brainstorming would be excellent right now," Kane said lightly, his fingers still tenderly rubbing over a fresh bruise just above his eyebrow. "The Grounders won't ally with us unless we somehow get Pike to surrender."

"We need to work on Bellamy first," Octavia said. "If we get Pike's right-hand man—" *and my brother*, "—working against Pike, the rest will follow."

"Pike had a following before your brother helped to enforce it," Abby interrupted. "Bellamy isn't the only follower misled by blind loyalty."

Octavia threw her hands up in the air. "Then what the hell d'you suggest we do? You can't play mind games with Pike; he plays mind games with *you*. I'm telling you: if we don't get Bell back, we're lost."

"And if you focus too much on just Bellamy," Lincoln said gently, "We'll get nowhere."

"What if I fake my death?" Miller suggested, holding his hands up as everyone glowered. "I'm serious. That stuff the Grounders have for pain? Seems pretty strong to me. Make a scene and you can all be witnesses and testify against Pike. The people won't support a killer."

"That would be a great idea," Octavia said sweetly, "if it wasn't so fucking stupid. This is impossible."

Kane and Abby shared one of Their Looks. "It isn't the worst one I've heard," he offered.

Miller clapped the ex-Chancellor on the shoulder. "See?"

"I could use my status as a medic to confirm time of death," Abby suggested. "I could make a meal of it."

"This is ridiculous," Octavia snapped, snatching the radio from Kane's belt. She ignored Kane's pathetic *'I need to stop you but I want to do this without punching you in the face'* shouts and jammed her finger on the red button. It was always a red button. This time it'd be her red button. "Indra. Are you there?"

The radio crackled and crackled, but the reply was nothing but static. Kane glared at a defiant Octavia who refused to hand it back. If people were going to play idiots within Arkadia, then she was going to be the bitch. And it really was too hot in this cooped-up space. She considered either kicking Miller out, or asking Lincoln to blow wind on her back.

"*Thirteen?*" came Indra's voice on the radio, and Kane's eyes widened.

"It's the code-word," Kane hissed. He leant over Abby and Lincoln's laps. Only one of them seemed displeased. "*Gona.*" Kane's voice was strained as he greeted her.

"*Are you hurt, Marcus?*"

"No, Indra, it's because I'm holding the radio," Octavia said quickly, drawing it closer to her mouth. Kane clambered away. "He was bent over a medic."

"What?"

"Nothing." Octavia smirked at him. She'd been thinking about getting into contact with Indra for months now. She missed her regular bouts of sparring, and the freedom that the forestry gifted her with. Now, locked away in this grey, miserable shit-hole, Octavia just wanted *out*. "I need a favour."

There was a slight pause from Indra's end whilst Kane mutely told her to cut it out with his hands.

"What do you want?" Even with the poor line, she could hear Indra's hesitation.

"Your little boy Commander," Octavia said, "wants us to take Pike down somehow." She turned her back on the others for a moment, though she was sure Lincoln was the only one who could still hear her. Then again, Lincoln was Lincoln. She lowered her voice. She didn't want Kane or Abby—especially Abby—hearing this. "Clarke came to me with a proposition."

"And what is that?"

"The same thing I think is going through your mind too," Octavia said brazenly, hoping she knew Indra as well as she thought she did. Silence was all she got in return, and Octavia, with a sigh, carried on. "Play with us, okay? Pretend the Ice Nation is upon us or something. Scare the shit out of our people. If we're still barricaded, we'll surely die. But if Pike plays nice, we're free and we can defend ourselves."

"What happens," Indra said heavily, "When your people find out you lied to them?"

"We'll figure it out."

"Ask me the question."

"What?"

"Ask. Me."

"Okay..." Octavia swivelled back to face the others, expressions ranging from concerned to suspicious. "What happens when our people find out we've lied to them?"

"Your people will riot," Indra said. "And they will kill Pike."

Octavia froze. She could hear everyone else's heart thump a little faster too. "You're with Aden," she managed to utter, her frown etched deeply into her face. It was like asking for a sweet, getting it, and then not wanting it anymore. *Shit*. "I thought you wanted this peacefully."

"I want Pike *down*," Indra growled, "I never said that death was not an option."

"But Indra—"

"I'm not the one killing Pike. I have not betrayed my word." Indra huffed out a deep breath, and Octavia's shoulders relaxed. *We're on the same team. We're on the same team.* "I'll give you your favour, Octavia kom Skaikru. But when my favour is done, you owe me one too."

"What's that?"

"When the barricade lifts, you ride for Polis," Indra said. Lincoln stiffened beside her, and Octavia placed a reassuring hand over his. "You train as my second."

"I thought you didn't—"

"Have him killed first," Indra said, and Octavia wished she could've seen the muted horror on Kane and Abby's face right now. *Shit*, they were having some sort of conjoined myocardial infarction together or something. "Then you'll become my second."

Titus' chambers were dark and underground, candlelit—and it oddly suited him. The walls were etched with charcoal, rough sketches of things Lexa had never seen before. It depicted an alien amongst a ruined world, set aflame by the greed and selfishness of humanity. Lexa and Anya marvelled at the sight. Lexa had not often visited Titus' underground hideout, but it never ceased to stun her. Meanwhile, Anya, beside her, let out a low whistle of approval.

Huddled over something stupidly small, were Titus and Lexa who was merely three to four years younger than herself, now. It had been obvious from day one: Titus had seen something in Lexa he had not in previous Commanders. He often spoke of her unique ability to carry on Becca's legacy, though Lexa knew he could not have been old enough to have even have met Becca, and nor did he know what this legacy was. Truly. He could've been lied to. Yet Titus believed with all his heart, and it was hard to argue against that.

Young Lexa's face inched closer to the rusty, but perfect sample Titus held in front of her. He held this tiny thing so delicately, as if it was holy; as if he dropped it, the end of the world would come.

"It's—it's Nightblood," young Lexa said disappointedly. Lexa snorted. She had been hoping for a massive cannon or a literal giant when Titus had instructed her to come down to his chambers, to show her the 'truth' of the world. "It is sealed. This contraption..." Lexa frowned at it, unable to touch. Titus wouldn't allow it. "I've never seen it before."

"It's old. A relic."

You speak like you are a priest, young Lexa had almost blurted out, until she eyed his robes and his etchings across his bald head and settled for 'priest'. "Of what?"

"Of humanity; of all mankind. This is what the clans fought for. This is what your ceasefire ends," Titus said proudly, placing it delicately in its shatter-proof case. "Becca, the first Commander—" he pointed towards the alien-like figure on his walls and Lexa frowned. *That was Becca?* "She believed in free will and peace. She was brilliant enough to engineer it into one tiny sample." Titus inclined his head towards the contraption that held the small container of Nightblood. It was about the length of a pin, the width of a coin. "She arrived to an earth that imploded within its own evils. She strived to save the human race. And she did."

"With Nightblood?" Young Lexa seemed to be getting into the story, as was Near-Death Lexa—though Anya remained dully unimpressed. "She saved humanity with Nightblood?"

"*Some*. This is why Nightbloods must be nurtured and trained; they must be tutored to become a better person. They have to be brave where people are weak; firm when people break. Each Commander is unique—but they all have Nightblood pumping within them. That's what gives them strength. That's what gives them such leadership. Wealthy civilians search for this. We warred to keep this within our reach. My duty as the Flamekeeper—" he bowed his head, "Is to preserve this."

"*That?*" And this time, both Lexa and Anya laughed at the disbelief in young Lexa's proclamation. "Titus, you could smash that contraption and take a sample of my blood. It'd still be the same thing."

"This isn't your blood," Titus said, a little coldly. "This was Becca's."

"I should have it," young Lexa said eagerly, "Inject it within me. I will do her great justice."

"I have no doubt, but—"

"I will be a good Commander. You know this. I can see it."

"Over the years, the Commanders became corrupt. Some served well; some served only for themselves. Some sought the ability to live forever. Some sought invincibility. Some sought everlasting power. Some sought wealth. They were selfish, but they ruled." Titus closed the briefcase, so big considering it contained one vial of liquid. "You are different. You seek peace."

Young Lexa shrugged. Suddenly she seemed very small in her seat. "It's the obvious solution. If you stop cutting off each other's heads, you may see the benefit. You know?"

Anya nudged Lexa, who was utterly lost in the moment. "You still with us?"

"I'm with *her*. Um. Me."

"Right. Yourself. That's..." Anya sighed. "How very Commander-ish of you."

Titus leaned forwards in his seat and cupped both sides of Lexa's face, his smile restrained but pleased. Lexa could only look back on this moment and wonder how she could ever trust him again; he'd tried to *kill* Clarke. This was the man who she'd seen as a father figure, but as she looked back on him now, as she looked back on her younger self utterly transfixed by this wise, sombre adviser of hers—she could see no hint of fatherhood.

There was just—

"Lineage," Titus said into her face, full of wonderment. "You, of all the Commanders that have

been, closest resemble Becca in her altruism; her sacrifice. She loved her people with all her might, and she died with a legion of those fighting to protect her legacy." Titus let go of her, sinking back into his chair. He took a deep sip of his mead, and closed his eyes. "You are selfless, as she was. You think, and trust and you would rather wield peace than the blade of a sword."

"This world needs a peacemaker, not a Commander," young Lexa shot back. "A peacemaker...not a pacifist," she added hesitantly, as she thought of scruffy, well-intentioned Luna. "This world needs an end to violence. Perhaps the road to the end will be littered with awful, inhumane acts. Perhaps it will be littered with wars." Young Lexa shrunk in her seat, appearing smaller if possible. Only the side of her face was visible in the candlelight, but Lexa could see her younger self, her face bunched in deep thought. "But if it takes an era of violence and negotiations for a golden age of peace, would that not be my duty?"

"One day," Titus said, "There will be a Nightblood—a Commander—so great, and so revolutionary—that they will hold all power over the Flamekeeper. They will take the Flame and they will take upon the greatest artefact of man; they will embody Becca."

"So your plan," young Lexa said slowly, "Is to resurrect Becca via some clueless avatar?"

"It's not cluelessness, and it is not usage," Titus snapped. "It's a service."

"Why have you brought me here, Titus?"

"Because it will be you, one day," Titus said most definitively, and there was no mystery or drama around him. Titus said it as it was, and he extended a hand to awkwardly cup the side of Lexa's face. Lexa remained freakishly still in her seat. "You will be the Flame."

"I am myself," she said through gritted teeth.

"You gave yourself up the moment you ascended the throne."

"I gave up *everything!*" Lexa yelled, shooting up from her seat. Anya let out a small 'whoop', and Lexa—the real one—smacked her. "I gave up my parents. I gave up my village. I gave up my love. I have sacrificed my warriors and my people for the greater good. I'd always believed in a greater being—but I am not Becca, and Becca is not me."

"This is your destiny, Lexa—"

"This is the destiny you impede upon me," Lexa hissed, and Titus recoiled, quickly inclining his head as a show of respect. He'd crossed a line, and he knew it. "You can't force someone else's soul into mine. You can't invade my brain just so it fulfils some prophecy of yours."

"Then you're not the Commander I thought you were."

"Maybe not. And I'm glad." Lexa remained standing, towering over a still-seated Titus. There was something about him she couldn't dismiss. His counsel had always been wise, and he never did anything for himself—as many of her counsellors often tried to swindle her. "But I am your Commander still."

"Yes. You are. If...if I may plea for your forgiveness, Commander?"

"We'll talk of it no more," Lexa declared, eyeing the case Titus had long shut. She wanted to rebel and steal it, and just see what would happen. But then again—she was quite happy being herself, even if it meant bearing the brunt of her past.

"You will find another Becca to mould. But you will not find her in me. My name is *Lexa*, and I

am your Commander of the Coalition."

Chapter End Notes

These chapters are looking bulkier and bulkier, so I ask your forgiveness on that! Some of them are looking to be hefty, chubby ones.

Thanks for reading, kudosing and commenting. It's been really cool to explore what you think and predict and discuss in the comments, so I really appreciate your time in doing so.

Lastly, thanks for your patience. I haven't been incredibly well to be honest, but I am thankful. :)

(I have things planned for Titus. For now, you can just slap him if you want)

Repeat. Pause. Repeat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lexa's aching arms had numbed to nothing entirely, and she cursed herself for the style of training Anya had catered to her. It worked brilliantly, and she rarely went undefeated in single-combat. But *damn*, her arms needed buffing up. She wasn't sure, though, if she could quite handle the appearance of—well, Gustus.

"I just don't understand where we're actually *going*," Lexa said. Anya slouched in response, giving her the usual eye-roll. It hadn't been the first time Lexa had asked. "If I'm not hitting the right side with this damn boat—"

"You haven't hit anything, actually. You're a good rower. We've arrived at shores but you've never crashed."

"That's...completely irrelevant."

"Perhaps not," Anya said. Lexa hated how mysterious her mentor had grown in death. It was like her death wish was to annoy Lexa even more. "If you were really meant to die, this trip would've been a one-way trip, and you'd have crossed to the other side by now."

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you death's designated rower?"

"Nope. You're the one rowing."

"You know what I mean."

"I know." Anya smiled, though she didn't grin. She didn't like baring her teeth these days—it was ugly. Most of them had fallen, and her gums were just...slabs of flesh waiting for the same fate. She'd nearly jumped at the sight of her own scaly, grey arms. She didn't want Lexa to see her mentor like this. Well. She had no choice. But she did not want Lexa to be wary of her own mentor. Perhaps it was too late for that, but those who said there was never any vanity in death were liars.

"Listen to me," Anya said. "This is your death. Sorry," she said, holding her hands up cheekily, "your *near*-death. I'd like to emphasise it's *yours*, Lexa. Which means I'm not going to be appearing in anybody else's, and if they ask me to appear in that prick of an adviser Titus', then may the gods forbid me—"

"Who are *they*? Did they send you? What's—"

"Be quiet," Anya snapped, and Lexa scowled, continuing to row. "The spirits. The Commanders gone. Whatever you want to call them. It's all very formal and proper and boring—something you'd probably like," she added in distaste. "Becca sits in the middle. It's this grand hall. All the Commanders passed sit on their respective thrones. Each one is different. I suspect it is the throne they sat upon as they ruled."

"One day, when I die, do I have a seat there?"

"Yes. Probably. I saw the last Commander and her gigantic, rock-formation of a throne."

"How is she?"

"Healthy as a dead person can be. That's the thing. They all look so...alive." Anya shook her head enviously, and Lexa slowed the pace, listening. "It's like something's preserving them. I don't know. The spirits—maybe it's the Nightblood. Maybe that kind of blood never stops pumping. I don't know, but I *do* know I wasn't given that special treatment. I'm just a rotting corpse."

"I'm sorry."

"Do me a favour," Anya said, a little miserably. "When the day comes for you to die, I will come to you. But that's it. When you take your seat in that hall, please let me go as your first duty of the dead."

"Where will you go?"

"To die," Anya said. "I stay because I'm a hypocrite. I embody everything I beat you down for: sentimentalism. I couldn't have you collected by some random dead Polisian, so I volunteered and pledged myself. Becca attached me to your death, too. But I'm just roaming. I don't know why I haven't died properly. When you take your seat, though, Lexa, promise me—as a *friend*—that you will free me."

Lexa swallowed, hating the idea of letting Anya go. But she'd let Costia go, and she'd let Gustus go. *The dead are gone.* "Of course," she said, earnestly. "I don't want you stuck doing something you don't want to do, either, mind you. If need be—"

"I'm not abandoning you—not until the day you die. Properly." Anya's decision was firm, and Lexa knew when she couldn't be swayed. So she shrugged and accepted it. Briefly, she wondered just how dead Anya would look by the time Lexa would *actually* pass. "You're not just the Commander, Lexa. You were my tutee. You're a revolutionary. You're the first to have done —*many* things. And my pride dictates I won't leave your spirit to someone who doesn't know you. When you die for real, I want you to be welcomed by a friend. I am that friend. I know I am; I know I *want* to be. And you deserve as much."

Lexa nodded. "I wouldn't want anyone else." She didn't want it to be Clarke. She hated the idea of Clarke dying first, and leaving her behind. It was selfish, but she couldn't help it, either. Besides, Clarke was not of their beliefs; maybe she wouldn't be subject to this.

"You can drive yourself insane, Lexa," Anya said quietly, "Trying to find the answers. Or you can just get on with it."

Lexa rowed harder.

Lexa was older now, perhaps a year or two before the Ark had fallen. She sat atop the throne, grinning down at a group of children, her legs crossed. It was odd how the throne instantly seemed to fit her. It was jagged and uncomfortable, but paradoxically, that's what she found so comforting about it. This was not a seat where you could relax and make decisions for the realm. This was a seat so you were alert of anything: of enemy threats, or riots...

"Wisdom," said one girl, in Trigedasleng. Lexa nodded approvingly at her.

"Good," Lexa said. The lesson was held in Trigedasleng. "Let's try two more. Can you think: what does a Commander need to be?"

"A good fighter," chirped one of the boys.

"True," Lexa laughed, and from the end of the hall, the dead (or dead and near-dying) pair chuckled. Lexa pointed to her younger self. She was impressive. Demure but sturdy; courteous but sly; a lewd tactician who could execute a kill order in seconds, and then return to sparring jokingly with her Nightbloods.

"I remember this moment."

"Good. Maybe from a third perspective you'll see why I brought you here."

"A commander should be a good fighter, Regan," Lexa encouraged him, "But that's not all. A commander has to face up to their enemies. A commander has to lead an army. A commander has to fulfil many duties as well as be a good fighter. Can anyone think of a word for it?"

It took the kids a moment, and they muttered to each other. One messy-haired boy sat a little distant from the others, though they all knew everyone liked him. "Strength," he piped up.

"*Good*, Aden," Lexa applauded him, and the children quietened. Aden blushed slightly, and Lexa—the near-dying version—felt pride swell in her heart. Aden had always been the most promising of her students—and even before the Sky People had landed, he'd been hard-working and bright. He was no warrior—not yet—he was still too skinny, but he was skilled. And he was better with words than the entire group put together. "Can you tell me why?"

"If the commander is to fight, she needs to be strong to better the opponent. And clever, because she must predict the moves of her foe, and conquer," he added, to the previous answer. "If the commander is to lead an army to face her enemies, she must be clever and altruistic in her decisions even if it means sacrifice for the greater good. She must be wise in the strategic decisions she make or people die unnecessarily."

"So what is the last pillar, Nightbloods?" Lexa said, smiling at him from her throne. Anya nudged her by the side, grinning.

"You always had a soft spot for him," she noted, "He couldn't do a thing wrong in your eyes."

"He barely did," Lexa noted, as the children gabbled and guessed. She was watching Aden again, quiet and deep in thought. "He was never the strongest, but he never seemed to think of his Nightblood as a right. Just a privilege that he had to work for. I think I admired that in him."

"Sentimentalism," Anya said, and Lexa frowned disapprovingly at her. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing. Definitely not with Aden. But you like him for the same reason I always liked you."

The children continued to squabble over the last pillar whilst Aden remained, thinking, and occasionally scowling at the ruckus that disturbed his thoughts. Lexa couldn't help but smile.

"Sentimentalism comes from the heart," Lexa said. "Our hearts aren't pure but they don't lie. So perhaps sentimentalism isn't a bad thing, provided you control it—rather than let it control *you*."

"Mm. What *is* the last pillar, by the way?"

Lexa was mildly offended. "Compassion."

It was then Titus burst through the doors, his grim face permanently set—to 'grim'. Dead Anya let out a dry scoff as he strode towards the throne. Young Lexa was clearly ignoring him, taking suggestions from the children until Titus cleared his throat. The Nightbloods silenced, greeting him respectfully.

"Nightbloods," he said in return, inclining his head. "Commander, if we may abandon this week's lesson?"

"We are nearly finished," Lexa told him, from her throne. "If you'll wait, Titus? I believe my legacy is of great importance of you."

"Commander," Titus said. "This is not a matter that can wait."

"If it's about the clan leaders by the portcullis," Lexa said, "Then yes, they can wait."

Titus rolled his head up to face the ceiling, clearly agitated, as Lexa finished her lesson. 'Compassion' took a while to explain and differentiate between Aya's 'crush' on the blacksmith's boy, and the wider picture. Eventually, they scarpered, every one of them—including Aden—teasing Aya mercilessly. At this point, Young Lexa jerked her head towards the door and with Titus, began a slow walk around Polis. Dead Anya and Lexa took it as their cue to follow closely behind them.

"Keeping our guests is an unwise move, Commander," Titus said.

"Patience is key. If they do not want this alliance, truly, they will bolt. Then I'll know my allies. I note none of them have left yet."

"They've journeyed from afar. I think they will wait."

"Then let them in. Oh, and Titus?" Titus swivelled around, like a dog on her leash. "My door welcomes you. You can watch and observe and contribute to my lessons. But if you interrupt again, I'll have you lashed in the Square."

Polis was broken, poor and crumbling. Lexa had grand plans for it, but it would take time. For now, it was embarrassing to host the clan leaders in their dusty war-room, but it was the best they could afford. Lexa had already proposed the coalition: their eleven clans, including hers of course, would form a council. It'd be advantageous for all. Trade routes would open; potential Nightbloods would be sent to Polis for training, and there'd be no favouritism. Lexa didn't want the scavenger hunt she'd been subjected to as a child. She wanted consent and fairness. It would eradicate the need for Polis to protect the Nightblood for the sake of inter-clan competition. There would be no more dissent over land; they'd all be designated their regions, and rule over it. It would be a fair notion, and if neighbouring clans had claims to the same village, the clan leaders would settle it with words—not blades.

She told them this, passionately. She promised Polis would be a capital they'd be proud of, with high walls and a preliminarily dug-out moat—more like a massive trench that extended around it. There'd be a drawbridge. There'd be an art-house, a library, a war-room, the throne room, bed chambers, houses, sparring pits...

"It's all very ambitious," Dain, of the Mountain People, said. The clan leaders murmured in agreement. "It'd take you years."

"Then years is what I'll dedicate to it," Lexa said firmly. Her eyes flickered over to the Boat People's clan leader. Not Luna yet—but she knew where Luna was. "If our coalition works, don't you all want your capital to be a place of grandeur? Not this—" she motioned about, "—"

wreckage. I don't want my people to live in slums and their health threatened by poor sanity. It's hardly comely. We should be a prosperous, unified coalition. We should share and pool our resources, because we each have specialties. The Trikru will trade openly for arrows and wood, rather than be raided for them. The Water people will provide us with fish instead of other clans breaching their lands and stealing from them."

"And the Ice Nation?" challenged the Water commander, for he was furthest north—and at greatest threat of them. Everyone in the room bristled at the mention of the words. "I notice Nia's lack of presence. I assume she is a belligerent to this alliance?"

"They have much to offer. Furs for our harsh winters—"

"But they're not here," Dain said, gently. The young Commander nodded stiffly, and rested her palms on the table.

"She made her intentions quite clear," Lexa admitted.

"We heard," the Water Commander said. Everyone else remained silent. "We're sorry for your loss, Commander."

Lexa and Anya stood by the door, their ears pricked. This was a negotiation Lexa was keen to hear again, for she wondered if she'd made a mistake. Anya assured her that she hadn't. But this had been the formation of their coalition; this had been the beginning of her life's work. Secretly, though she knew Anya could tell, she just wanted to see it.

"Me too," young Lexa said quietly. "But do you see now? What cruelty can bend someone to do? How cruelty can affect us so?"

"Nia is someone to eradicate; not welcome," Dain said, and the clan commanders voiced their agreement. "We stand by you, Commander—but not by Nia. She is a disgrace to us all."

"I don't disagree," Lexa said, "But do you want this to happen to yourselves? Nia subjected me to this because she has no heart; I would say everyone here has compassion, be it limited to your own clans, or further." The clan leaders agreed loudly. "I ask you: do you want to include Nia in your alliance, where no-one can harm the other in such a way, or exclude her further? Do you want her to execute your loved ones—your mother, father, wife, husband, child—and send their head to you in a box? Do you want to further antagonise her, or will you extend a hand?"

"We must work with everyone—even those who have terrorised us in the past. It's the only way we can survive. If we keep wiping our rivals out, we will die out. If we unify, we will prosper. We will have a capital we can take pride in. We will make allies of each other and each other's resources, and benefit from it. We'll lessen the bloodshed that exists simply because our clans differ. We are what we are. We are who we are. We are *together*. What I propose is that we start showing that."

Anya clapped her on the back, and Lexa felt her chest twinge with a little bit of pride. She wouldn't tell Anya but again—Anya knew her too well. She could see the Alive Anya, Titus and Indra guarding her seat from behind, and the pride on Alive Anya's face. She could feel it stir in her heart, and Anya—dead Anya—grinned. "You always knew how to make a speech."

"It's genuine," Lexa retorted.

"I know. That's why they're so good."

They resorted to silence as the clan leaders shouted in agreement, and once Lexa raised her hand, everyone quietened again. Dain, who was perhaps the most outspoken—yet he did it in a soft way

—inclined his head. "Should the day come—and by the gods I hope it doesn't," he said hesitantly, "If we think you unfit to rule, then what?"

"Then you think me unfit to rule," Lexa said easily. Dain frowned. "A vote of no confidence. Do you know what that is?"

Disbelieving nods circulated the table.

"Should any of you doubt my capability, you will execute this," Lexa said determinedly. From a distance, she could see Titus stiffen disapprovingly behind her, and Lexa frowned. Hadn't he always believed in her? "You will vote. A unanimous vote means you choose a new Commander. I will create and run this coalition, but I am no tyrant. Diplomacy will thrive; therefore you must have equal say in Polisian matters. The coalition should not benefit simply the Commander. It should benefit us all."

"And Nia?" The Water Commander said doubtfully.

Lexa grinned, rakishly. "Well, we need those winter supplies."

Anya and Lexa smirked as everyone in the war-room laughed, proper belly-laughed, in approval. They bashed the hilts of their swords against the table, like they so often did, and praised their *Heda*. She could see the pleasure spread across both Anya's faces, and for making them that happy, Lexa could feel her near-dying heart flutter as well. Dead Anya tapped her on the shoulder, laughing when The Water Commander clambered onto the table, raised his sword and yelled his allegiance. Everyone else followed suit—albeit on the floor. Lexa marvelled at the sight, and Dead Anya smiled at her. "I've got an idea," she said, and Lexa raised her eyebrows. Anya's ideas were never good. She imagined her dead version was not much better. "Fancy a reprieve?"

"I thought the whole point was to relive my past," Lexa said, as she watched Dain hoist her younger self onto the table too. There she pledged her allegiance; her promise to make Polis great, thus all clans great. She could hear the cheers. Somewhere along the line, goblets of heady Polisian wine were being passed around, and Lexa drank like a queen.

"You'll leave me. I'm asking one more time: do you want a reprieve?"

Lexa tore her eyes away from the scene. This had been the first time she'd truly accomplished something for the greater good; something that would inspire her forever, as she ruled. This was what she wanted. The end to inter-clan fighting would ensure the happiness and prosperity of not just the rich, but the poor too. Lexa took a moment for it all to sink in. She was near death now. Her altruism had never been tarnished. That was something to feel proud of.

But by the gods, was she *tired*.

"Please."

There was no boat this time. This time, they were freefalling—and Anya laughed the entire way at Lexa's horrified expression. They were going *somewhere* in Lexa's past, but not even Lexa's brain could detect where and when. Instead, she braced for impact, keeping her eyes wide open. They were falling down an abyss, but memories flashed at her. She could see her negotiation with Nia. She could see herself crying on the floor, with Costia's head on her pillow. She could see her in bed with Clarke, the sunlight pouring through the window and singing of happiness. She could

see Titus' near-fatal shot. She could see a close-up of Clarke's tear-covered face hovering over hers, her trembling voice trying to delay the inevitable...

And then they landed.

Lexa groaned in pain, though Anya sprang up like nothing had happened. Bitterly, Lexa presumed she was too dead to feel a thing. Lexa's entire body hurt from the fall, but she staggered up from the floor, gingerly rubbing the side of her head.

"*You're* the one," her dream version said, toying with her dagger threateningly against her throne. Lexa's blood ran cold. "Who burned three-hundred of my warriors alive."

Lexa could only gape in shock as Clarke, defiant, approached the throne. "You're the one who sent them there to kill us," she retorted, quietly bold.

Anya snorted. "Seriously? *This* was your first meeting? I would've slit her throat. Oh—there goes Indra," she added approvingly, as Indra intervened angrily. "Oh, I *agree*."

"Shut up," Lexa said, still attempting to crack her neck from the fall. "How far did we fall?"

"I'm not sure. Don't worry. I don't think you can die even from falling off the top of the Polisian tower, when you're reliving memories."

"That's..." Lexa shook her head, wordless. Mostly, she was utterly captivated by the scene that unfolded in front of her. It was impossible to forget Clarke's beauty. Lexa had been entranced ever since. She felt her throat bob as Clarke handed her Anya's braid, and Anya touched her hair self-consciously. They glanced at each other, but they knew. Lexa wanted so badly to just touch her. To reach out. But Anya held her back, gently blocking the way. This was a memory—not an opportunity.

Instead, Lexa watched as they negotiated. Clarke, the star who would not back down. Lexa smiled to herself, and she felt her chest ache in longing. She had not seen Clarke in so long. But this Clarke was different. This Clarke did not have the death of the Mountain civilians on her shoulders; this Clarke was not worn down by a cold betrayal and genocide. She was bold and brave, but she had not plunged the knife into Finn yet. She was optimistic, and Lexa had done so much to quash it.

If she deserved punishment, then Anya had unwittingly delivered a whopping blow. Seeing Clarke so untarnished by the grit of the earth dismayed her to the core. She felt nothing but shame. She knew that for the most part, she was responsible for the way Clarke had been gradually worn down. Killing Finn; sending Bellamy into Mount Weather; betraying her; her self-exile.

She stumbled back, her clumsy feet causing her to trip backwards and clatter into the contents of the tent. None of it spilled over because she was technically not present. But the sudden onset of pain was. This pain she'd felt before. Lexa groaned as her chest pulled and twisted, and it was sharp yet dull at the same time. It felt amplified, like this was some line she'd crossed for the third time now. Lexa clutched at her chest, feeling the burn of agony. She cried out, and Dead Anya clambered over and yanked her to her feet, brow furrowed in worry.

"What? What's going on?" Anya's cold hands shook her in desperation.

Lexa stared groggily at the scene unfolding before her. She'd stepped down from her throne, and closer to Clarke. The vision blurred, and she muttered a slurred "no..."

"I—" another white-hot streak of pain, this time right where her gunshot wound was. She groaned dully, trying to maintain stability. "I thought..." It felt like she'd been shot—again. Stupidly, she

considered scanning the room for Titus and his idiotic attempt at killing Clarke, but the pain was too much. It clouded her mind, like Nyko's milky pain potion. "I'm not...supposed...to...*hurt*—" Lexa full-on yelled this time, hating the way she could feel everything once more. This wasn't like the other memories. She could see Clarke exit, and she watched haplessly as her past self squabbled with Indra. Her hands were shaking, and her face drenched with sweat as she tried to battle the pain away. "What—what's happening?"

"If I had a clue, I'd help," Anya snapped, her rotting body bending down to examine the wound. "Lexa, it's not bleeding."

"Why—why—*it hurts*—"

"You're alive," Anya reminded her quietly, "It hurts because you're alive."

"I'm dying," Lexa panted, "I can't be like this—"

"Then you're dying," Anya said, no-nonsense. "Maybe that's why you feel like shit. Let me tell you: bullet wounds aren't nice."

"T-thanks." Lexa's sweaty face still had the audacity to scowl at her, and she crumpled to the floor, her face bunched up in agony. She could hear a whirlwind of voices. She was arguing loudly with Indra now, about Clarke's merits. Anya was trying to talk to her—but *Anya's dead*—and the roof of the tent started to blur, even when Lexa blinked herself awake. *I'm dying. I'm dying.* She could hear Clarke telling her it was okay—but Clarke had long-gone now, off back to the Ark. Lexa's body stilled as she stopped fighting, eyes wide open as Anya yelled in her face, yelled at her to get off to the floor. But she couldn't move. Everything had gone horribly greyscale, and for the first time in a long time, Lexa felt truly *scared*. She dared't move a muscle, in case it aggravated her wound, but it still pierced agonisingly. She was starting to lose her vision, as greyscale slurred into black, but the voices around her still echoed—Indra was yelling, and Anya was yelling, and Clarke was soothing... *You're here...it's okay...I'm here...*

Once again, Lexa fell.

Lexa's eyes flew open, the sweat still abhorrent and her hand flew out to grapple Anya's. Except they weren't in the tent anymore. They weren't...anywhere. It felt like she was in her chambers once more, and Anya—Anya had *gone*. Lexa panicked, and the sharpness of the pain in her belly was the only thing that kept her startingly awake as her arms jerked, her body convulsing—*where the fuck is Anya?*—and she groaned loudly. Her muscles ached everywhere. Her arms felt like *nothing* and she assumed that was from all the rowing. But it wasn't pitch-black and there were no shores. There were furs, and the dampness on her clammy face was not from the humidity of the lake but from her sun-baked chambers, and the sweat drenching her body.

Anya? She tried to call out. *Death...?*

She couldn't move.

Lexa's eyes darted about, and then it was Clarke—Clarke's beautiful, stressed, tired, worn-out face—hovering over her with a wet cloth. The coldness was like immeasurable pleasure against her feverish face, and she couldn't apprehend what was happening. Anya had *vanished* and so had her entire world—or *was* it her world? Was it just some in-between from the dead and the living?—

but she was here, with Clarke...

Clarke was most definitely alive. *Jok*. This was impossible. Lexa couldn't avert her gaze as Clarke dabbed at her, muttering under her breath. Lexa's breath got stuck in her throat and she coughed stiffly and persistently, feeling somewhat stupid because Clarke's blue eyes had caused this and Clarke's blue eyes were also telling her that everything would be alright.

They were a paradox, Lexa liked to think. But she always thought contradictions were beautiful.

The green of the earth was in love with the blues of the sky, and was something Lexa felt grateful for in its beauty. She did not know of a lovelier incongruity.

Her lips were dry and cracked from lack of water. "Clarke..." she managed to rasp, and Clarke smiled softly at her, hastily fetching a tiny cup of water. Lexa couldn't sit up, so Clarke dropped tiny bits of water into her mouth.

"Hey." Clarke kissed her, gently, light as a feather. Lexa wanted to deepen it. To hold onto what she could potentially lose forever—but she sagged back against the pillow, unable to do anything. She was helpless, and pathetic, and it frustrated her to a point where she couldn't even smack something because she couldn't move her non-arms. "It's okay. It's okay. Relax, Lexa. I've got you."

The confusion didn't go away though. Clarke was as real as anything yet it did not pierce through the haze that was Lexa's groggy mind. She'd fallen from the realms of near-death and the past straight to the present. *Disorientation* didn't even begin to describe it.

She stared in amazement at Clarke instead. *You brought me back*, she wanted to say. The pain made sense now. Pain was all they'd truly shared. In a sick way, it worked. *I came back for you*.

"I saw..." Lexa panted heavily in exertion, her hand subconsciously going to her wound. Clarke's hand immediately went to cover it, in case she pulled any stitches, but by *God* did Clarke's hand feel soft and *real*. She wasn't cold and clammy like Anya. She was warm, and her face—her blue-eyed, scratched, lovely face—she was right *there*. Lexa wanted to lean up and kiss every inch of her, but her cluelessness mixed with her injuries just wasn't enough. Clarke smiled anyway, her fingers etched over her lips, which puckered instinctively. She laughed, and perhaps sniffled a bit, and stroked the side of her face.

"You've been feverish," Clarke told her, matter-of-factly. She was tender as she mopped Lexa's face. "You've been completely out of it. I've been tending to you with help from Nyko. Aden regularly sends up supplies, reads to you, and prays for you. He's...really something."

"I..." Lexa struggled to find the words. Her mind was torn between the black water and black shores, the nothingness and her very dead mentor; and Clarke, here, alive and well and smiling. This was where she wanted to be. To always be. "Clarke..." *I think I'm going mad. I think I've fallen in love with someone and she may love a madwoman back*. She could barely get her sentences out. "I—I saw us."

"That's good," Clarke said, laughing, "Because I'm right here."

"No...I..." Lexa closed her eyes, willing to go back, and take Clarke with her. Maybe she could show her. She squeezed them tighter to usher the persistent pain away. "I—I saw—us—in—" Her body shook, not enough to be violent, but enough for Clarke to worry. She dashed through Nyko's items and shakily nabbed his bottle of pain potion. It was milky, and she didn't know what the hell was in it, but it always seemed to work. Lexa's eyes widened in recognition. "*No*—not that—wait—"

"Okay..." Clarke's breathing quickened, her breaths getting shallower. This wasn't a sweet, happy reunion anymore. Truly, she hadn't known what to expect. Lexa had been so far from her world that dumping her straight back in was stupid and a little cruel too. Clarke clamped down on any thoughts about discussing anything remotely political. Hell, she did not even want Lexa conscious for much longer. The distress of being in such a state was something she'd have to slowly ease Lexa into. Her hands trembled as she popped the lid open to Nyko's potion. "Lexa. *Lexa*. Calm down—you're safe."

"What if you're not?" Lexa rushed out as a whisper, willing her legs to stop spasming. Her arms felt like *nothing*. She internally blamed Anya, but Anya wasn't real—*none* of this was real—in fact, she didn't know *what* was real anymore. Was this some sort of fabricated dream? "Clarke, I put you in danger—"

"If Titus was going to try and kill me again, he would've done it by now," Clarke whispered back to her, and pressed a reassuring kiss to Lexa's mouth as she was about to protest. "Aden is doing an amazing job. You'll be so proud of him. I told you so, when you were sleeping. And he's protecting me. Lexa, just take your time—"

"*No*," she said, because if this wasn't a dream, the people needed to see their Commander. "I'm—I'm running out—of time—"

"No," Clarke snapped, firmer than her. "You're not."

"Clarke..."

Lexa struggled pointlessly as Clarke made her sip some of Nyko's pain potion, and whispered sweet nothings to her. It gradually calmed her—tales of Aden's progress, and the suppression of the Ice Nation via her spy network. Aden's ability to negotiate and his stubbornness. Lexa laughed hazily, but it was Clarke she could taste; Clarke that invaded her senses—as Nyko's potion filled her body. It spread through her arms and her torso and all the way down to her legs. Her eyes drooped against her will, and she found herself nodding to whatever Clarke was saying.

"Come back to me properly," she could hear, in distorted fragments as her eyes fluttered shut. Lexa nodded, though it was more her head was drooping. *I'll come back for you. Always. I'll always be with you...* "When you're ready. Come home."

We don't have time...we're at war...Aden can't handle this alone...advise him...

"Come back soon," Clarke whispered, probably hoping Lexa wouldn't hear. She couldn't say anything; her mouth wouldn't work. *I'll come back soon*, she promised her, promised her even as her chambers dulled and her furs were shunted away. Even as the welcoming warmth faded into a horrible chilliness. Lexa shivered for a moment (if she could shiver) and then Nyko's pain potion took over completely as her world dissipated into the darkness.

She was lying on her back, feeling her eyes sting bitterly as she glanced up at the black hole of a sky. There were no stars; no sun; there was nothing. This was death's stratosphere and the pebbles dug into her back to remind her that she didn't have the luxury of painlessness just yet.

"I still don't believe a single fucking word you've said."

Octavia shifted self-consciously, feeling the crowd gather around them. They'd caused a ruckus; a few stray grounders had fled the scene, causing Indra to yell for them to come back. The harsh Trigedasleng was enough for the Arkadians to startle, but Kane and Abby had quelled it and allowed the scene to unfold. "Azgeda!" the flailing escapees were roaring, ignoring the Grounders' feigned disapproval. "Azgeda!"

"The Ice Nation," Octavia had translated unnecessarily. Everyone had seen the fear on each others' faces—and to be honest, Octavia would be a liar if she said she didn't feel fear, either. She was just scared about something else. Well. That and the Ice Nation. Pike had torn from his chambers in order to banish the noise, but he couldn't control the rising dissent within the Arkadians. He couldn't—until Bellamy, equipped to an extent where he was literally just a suit of armour and guns, faced his sister defiantly. *That* scared Octavia. All her life, Bellamy had only ever done things for *her*. Selfishly she had doted on him for it. But today, Bellamy didn't believe her.

"Stop thinking about this in such a black and white way," Octavia retorted. "Those grounders you see? They're gonna be the first to go down if the Ice Nation attacks, but the Commander hasn't told them to stand down at all. The coalition still wants to protect us."

"Then let them take their deaths," Bellamy said. "One by one, they'll be picked off like flies. That's how we'll know. But we're not gonna show remorse to a group of people who blew up our own inside the Mountain."

"For the last time," Octavia said exasperatedly, "It was the *Ice Nation*—"

"And therefore the Grounders," Pike intervened, wedging himself between the ram-rod still duo. Everyone bristled at the word, and Kane wanted to protest. This wasn't how things should've gone. From a distance, he could see Indra gesturing vaguely, but he could not find it in himself to answer. She wanted answers, but he held none. Pike put a strong hand on Bellamy's shoulder, squeezing tight, possessively. "Your brother's right, Octavia. If the Ice Nation are marching down on us, they'll wage a civil war with the others—not *us*. We're the outsiders."

"The Ice Nation won't just take it up the ass," Octavia snapped. Pike raised his eyebrows. "They'll destroy every land they cross and raze it to the ground until they get to Polis. If you knew a bit of geography, *Chancellor*, you'd know we're stuck right in the middle of it."

"I do," Pike said, "I taught Earth Skills, remember? Or—would you?" He pretended to think for a moment, looking around. Everyone was now staring at Octavia, and the way her face reddened in embarrassment and shame. He was winning, but even now Bellamy was beginning to frown. The Blakes knew where this was going—and neither of them liked it. "Oh wait. You were under that floorboard for how many years again?"

"None of your business," Octavia snarled, her advance forward stopped aggressively by Lincoln. He pushed her back by the flat of her stomach, and then softened his grip as his hands positioned themselves either side of her waist.

"Easy," Lincoln whispered, and Octavia wanted to smack him. How could *Lincoln*, of all people, tell her to go easy? Lincoln, the Grounder on Skaikru territory. The Grounder whose accent people would often laugh at him for; they'd challenge him to a fight just because of his size when he just wanted to sit down and eat some lunch, or draw in his book. They'd confined him until he rarely wanted to see the world and look up at the sun he'd been embraced by. He got asked time and time again if Grounder were always just naturally tanner than the Sky people were.

She'd watched the man she loved be ostracised by her people, and retreat to the shadows again, just as he was beginning to emerge from himself. And Octavia hated everyone for it.

Bellamy was supposed to be Lincoln's friend. They had been like brothers, but everything changed since Pike's ideology invaded everyone's senses and Octavia could only watch hopelessly as everyone, including her brother, followed him unquestionably. If they were the sheep, then he was the shepherd—but the wolf was looming across its icy borders, and as much as Octavia knew the *current* threat was afar, this needed to turn around before they were the clan who cried wolf.

"This is bigger than just you and your head," Octavia snapped. "Don't you get it? A war's gonna come pretty soon and we're all going to die unless we ally with those outside these walls. Together we might be able to form some defence."

"Three hundred Grounders provided no defence when we killed them," Pike pointed out.

It was Abby this time who jerked her head in distaste, her mouth agape in disbelief. "Those Grounders you killed were *not* sent by Commander Lexa to antagonise us," she told him coldly. "They were made up of volunteers but you, with your pistols and tasers and shotguns—could not even welcome them to a fair fight. You butchered them in their sleep."

"They weren't asleep," Pike snarled. "They were there to aggravate us."

Octavia butted in. "Oh yeah? You aggravated enough *now*, huh?"

"I won't discuss this when you're just a *child*," Pike scoffed, squeezing his hand on Bellamy's shoulder. Clamping down. Bellamy was his now, Pike was trying to say; not hers. And to be frank, Octavia felt next to nothing. When she looked at Bellamy and knowing he had blood on his hands—innocent blood—and that he was essentially muscle for Pike's scheming, and that Bellamy had reduced Clarke to tears and cuffed her to be taken and sentenced...

She felt so close to nothing. *So close.*

Pike positively beamed. Between them, they'd U-hauled the Arkadian civilisation from diplomatic to autocratic. He'd infiltrated through their Chancellor's sentiment and capitalised on it. He'd taken one of Arkadia's most promising gunners and future leader into a sullen, miserable shell of his former self.

Octavia missed the days Bellamy used to tell her stories, all the time. Sometimes it was about stupid shit he'd seen walking around, to ancient wars of the world beneath them. He talked of legends and Gods and stars and comets and constellations. Once, Octavia had looked at Bellamy like he was her own star—but now, he was just another follower, another believer of Pike's doctrine of hatred.

Pike scoffed at the silent tension between them and declared, predictably, that they would not stand down. If they stood down they would seem weak to the Grounders; if the Grounders really wanted to declare their allegiance, they'd do an ally's duty and defend.

Octavia grimaced. He was sentencing those barricade keepers to their deaths.

As soon as Pike left, the audience dissipated—but only ever so slightly. Octavia had already caused a scene by defying her brother. As Lincoln and Miller edged forwards to back her, it became apparent that this was turning hostile. And Pike had simply left Bellamy to deal with it.

"You're his puppet," Octavia pled for the last time, sighing as Bellamy tipped his head back in exasperation. "He's playing you."

"It doesn't mean he's *wrong*. Who blew up Mount Weather, Octavia? Who killed Gina?"

"The Ice Nation. They declared it."

"And they're Grounders." Bellamy busied himself with looking anywhere but her, and Octavia swore she could've slit his frustrating throat in a second. "They're all the same, Octavia. All of the same blood, just like you and I—"

"You and I are *nothing* alike. Not anymore."

"You can't be like them," Bellamy begged her. "I can't lose my sister to an army of savages. That's all they are; that's all they've *ever* been! They choose their commanders by subjecting them to a child killing pit. They place a thousand cuts into a man for punishment before the commander herself delivers the killing blow. Lexa almost killed Raven! *And* Lexa left us at Mount Weather; she set three-hundred armed soldiers to the Ark. She betrayed *Clarke* too, Octavia, or have you forgotten?"

"But the Ice Nation antagonise her," Octavia said. "Don't you get that? There aren't three sides to a war unless you're completely impartial. But you can't be, because as soon as you get attacked from whichever side, you will retaliate back—and that'll be war. At some point we're either going to be fighting with Lexa or we're going to be kissing Ontari's ass. I really don't want it to be the latter."

"Don't be like them, Octavia," Bellamy requested at a lower tone, inching a little closer. Miller and Lincoln stiffened behind her. "Just...please. Dissociate yourself. It's—" Bellamy sized Lincoln up a little apprehensively, "It's bad enough that you're *fucking him*, but—"

SLAP.

Octavia smacked him across the face, open-handed and thoughtless. Bellamy reeled back from the unexpected contact, his eyes wide and blinking in disbelief. She could think of their younger selves, play-fighting eagerly in the Ark whenever she was free to roam about the room for a while. She thought back to her first sparring session with the grounders, getting knocked down into the dirty, wet mud every thirty seconds and hauling herself back to her feet, her muscles aching with fatigue. She could feel Indra's—*Grounder's*—eyes on her, and all of sudden she straight-up punched him, sending him sprawling just as he was steadying.

Bellamy didn't fight back, and Octavia tried to pretend it was someone else. She punched for every life he'd taken in the massacre and an occasional kick every time he had—for something else. Every time he'd heeded Pike's words over logic. Every time he'd betrayed one of their own. For the time he'd guilt-tripped Clarke to tears, shouted and then handcuffed her like a prisoner. She simultaneously wanted to slap him and kiss him because Lincoln knew what she needed. She needed to just...let it all out. Anger; sadness; frustration; hatred; vengeance...

He was pathetic on the floor, groaning with every kick she delivered to his abdomen. He rolled around, yelling out as she stomped on his face with her boot, blood spurting everywhere. Not once did he try to evade it. Not once did he try to take advantage.

He was still trying to protecting her--she knew it. She could feel it. But what he'd done was so irreparable that she couldn't have *him* fix *her*. Bellamy was not sadistic. He was not evil. *Pike* was, but Bellamy was a soldier, not a leader. And so he followed; he obeyed. This time, he'd chosen wrong, and Pike's iron-strong hold would not let him go.

"Come on, then," Octavia had yelled at her brother, repeatedly. It broke her heart—repeatedly—too. "Hit me back!"

"No!" Bellamy had resisted every time, and it only maddened Octavia further. And with every

time she kicked Bellamy she thought of a time he had put his arm around her and told her it was okay. With every "no" she received, the kicks got harder. *This isn't right*, she knew, and she could see Lincoln in a sea of blurry vision. He was absolutely horrified.

The crowd had scattered in fear. It was ironic how a minor incursion could wield attention, but the moment things turned nasty, everyone would walk away as if the incident had nothing to do with them. Now it was just her beating the crap out of her own brother on the bare dusty ground, quiet save for Bellamy's groans of pain. Octavia bent down and decked him across the jaw, sending him sprawling backwards. He could barely bend up, because Octavia had kicked him to dust. Instead, Octavia took the cuffs off a limp Bellamy's belt and locked his hands together.

"A prisoner," Octavia said right into his battered, gaunt face. Bellamy's eyes nearly dozed shut, and Octavia grabbed his head by the cheeks. She took his radio from his belt and turned it off, making sure there was nothing else on him. *This* was probably the kind of nightmare that plagued Kane on a regular basis. She didn't have much of a plan beyond this. Keeping Pike's right-hand man prisoner would not end well, and nor would it last very long. "You don't get to sit this one out, Bell. Pike's the tyrant here. I'm not..." She made sure the locks were secure, clenching her jaw. "I won't let him take our humanity. And I won't let Ontari take you from me.

"You're all gorging on Polisian meat and fish from the Boat People. You're burning through Trikru territory as you try to expand. Us—all of us—we're destroying an entire coalition that we were *welcomed into*."

"We rejected it." Bellamy coughed, loud and hacking, and spat the blood on the ground. "I don't give a shit about her territory. If Lexa's against us, we're taking her out."

"You have no right," Octavia told him lowly, threateningly. She had experienced these thoughts before. She hadn't been, and still wasn't, Lexa's biggest fan. But she owed Lexa her life, and she owed Indra too. "You're not like this, Bell. You've always been the cleverer one. The strong but bookish one. The sensible one. I'm supposed to be the one acting out, but instead you go ahead and side with *Pike*?"

"He's one of our own, at least," Bellamy growled. "Why? Would you rather be getting smacked into the mud by Indra?"

Octavia grimaced at him. He looked pathetic. "You don't know a thing about Polis."

"I know they're the enemy."

"Then you're wrong."

Bellamy studied her for a moment, oddly analytical and devoid of feeling. It was perhaps out of hope that she saw a flash of sadness in Bellamy's eyes, but Octavia didn't count on it. Bellamy had always indulged her, and she knew all too well the look in Bellamy's eyes when he'd loved her...once. Now, he was blank and brainwashed, and Octavia no longer recognised a Blake.

"You know," Bellamy said, "You were always more of a Grounder than an Arker."

"Yeah, well..." Octavia shrugged carelessly, eager to show that she didn't give a shit about the twinge in her chest. The thing about being so close to your brother? Bellamy knew her inside-out—but it went both ways. "I lived under the floorboards for sixteen years. Maybe I like it better down rather than up."

Bellamy stared at her, trying to search for *something* he could recognise. "What're you going to do?" It came out as a whisper.

"I don't know. But here's the thing Bell." Octavia crouched down, swallowing her self-doubt as her eyes raked over his swollen and bruised face, and the way his torso sagged in defeat. He was cuffed, and Octavia had taken out his direct comms because he just didn't have it in him to fight back. He couldn't fight his sister, but his sister could fight him. "*Jus drein jus daun.*"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for your kudos & comments! Super appreciated and thank you endlessly. I babble and enjoy discussion so feel free to hit up the floor. My gratitude is never-ending. :) I hope you are all splendid.

ETA: I admit I don't remember the Clarke/Bell scene in which he handcuffs her, so if I just made it up that he took her to be sentenced(???) then ... yup, I've made it up. lol

Death's Cameo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lexa stood atop the tallest floor of the Commander's tower. It would be a beacon for all: a huge landmark that boasted of the capital, but also a signal. It should be a point where if a man lost his way in the forest, he could direct himself using his positioning versus the tower's. Lexa wanted it *huge*. She would push and push the constructors and they would always relent to yet another floor, until finally the day came where he talked for a solid ten minutes on how unsafe it actually was to build another floor. Not just for Lexa, but for his team too.

"Were you gonna jump?" Anya whispered across dramatically, and Lexa—not her youthful self on the edge—elbowed her.

"Shut it."

The exterior would be intricately decorated, and the Commander's bed chambers just a floor below the most important room of all: the throne room. There her throne had already been dusted down and neatly placed. A set of steps were laid out in front of her, and each clan leader's seat was comfortable and homely. But they were all placed on a lower floor-level, a little slightly, to Lexa's throne.

"So you can see it all, then," observed Titus from the doorway. Dead Anya and near-dying Lexa nearly jumped out of their skin. Titus was barely inches from Near-Death-Lexa's face. Young Lexa turned her head a fraction to welcome him. She was standing right at the edge. One step forward and she'd plunge to an unpleasant death. Titus, always a little afraid of heights, crossed the room but stopped when he reached the throne. "Polis is heavily damaged. It was a city, before the end of the old world. You don't need to do this," he added, a little unnecessarily because he should've known now, better than anyone (except Anya, but Anya was always an exception) that Lexa wouldn't and couldn't be swayed against a target she'd locked in on.

As of this moment, she was fulfilling her word. She'd promised to resurrect Polis from ruin. She'd promised that her capital would boast grandeur, not havoc and wreckage. She wanted her people to be proud of Polis, but right now, there was nothing beautiful about broken houses.

"It will take years for you to accomplish the city you proposed," Titus warned her.

"It takes as long as it takes," Lexa told him firmly.

She could *feel* Titus' disapproval burn through the back of her head and she rolled her eyes. Titus never seemed to go along with her plans. The previous Commander thrived inside her. But Lexa was not like her; Anya was the first to notice, and then Titus later on when she when she'd commissioned loyal Trikru soldiers to help build their capital. The Stone Clan and the Mountain Clan had been of utmost importance in assisting the Trikru with supplies beyond their own. Every clan was forking out to build their capital, and she could feel the coalition flicker, stirring hotly in her belly. Titus watched her like a hawk. She dismissed it: he was supposed to be her adviser. But she couldn't help but feel a little like some sort of test.

"I meant it," Lexa confessed to Anya "I wasn't being idealistic or anything."

"I know. You achieved it," Anya said simply. "There's no need to justify it to me. Or, by the way, to that bald *nomonjoka* over there."

Lexa tried not to smirk at Anya's crassness.

"I'd rather rule from a fortress than a ruin," Young Lexa declared suddenly, before Titus could open his mouth. "I will *not* be the Commander who drank honeyed mead every night and dined on fine meat whilst my people starved and lived in slums, their sanitation non-existent and their children sick. Plague and disease would sooner wipe everyone out rather than a war. That's not the kind of capital our coalition should be based upon; it's not the kind of place that should even exist. With our coalition, every village and every clan will have goods to trade for." Idly, the young Commander kicked a small stone off the top of the tower and watched its trajectory directly down. Polis was so tragically empty that it did not even bear the risk of hitting some innocent civilian. "No-one starves in Polis. There'll be festivals; there'll be candles and torches lit everywhere; Polis will be full of life. Obstinate, hard-working, happy, fair *life*. It will be theirs. I will give it to them. I'll transform Polis with my bare hands if I must."

Titus' lips twitched in amusement but he said nothing. He had been so used to the lineage of Commanders that no matter their difference in way of ruling, they always possessed the same thing: selfishness. Here stood a bright young woman who oozed altruistic values from every pore, and was intelligent, a natural charmer...

Dead Anya remained silent by her side, listening intently. Lexa couldn't see much reason behind this visit this particular point in her life. Lexa remembered most details. She remembered her initial "Gods help me, who the hell am I with?" situation upon first meeting Titus, but that was about it. She could not remember the slight fondness with which he looked upon her with, and she could not remember the way his eyes crinkled in amusement of her ways. She could only remember the Titus that scolded her incessantly, and the Titus who was forever strict and firm about his teachings.

"Look at this place." Lexa was still clearly on her *'I will rebuild Polis'* run. "We cannot have our civilians living in dumps like this! This miserable, grey, muddy place of desolation...it is poor and more hopeless than our poorest villages." She shook her head angrily and stepped away from the window, seating herself upon her throne. To this, Titus' shoulders relaxed—as if he was afraid she'd jump, or something. "I don't understand. Why didn't our previous commanders *do* something?"

"I daresay they had better things to do than contemplate reconstruction blueprints," Titus mused.

"That is *not* what this is about and you know it," Lexa seethed, words of fire and spoken like ice. Titus knew *exactly* where Lexa was coming from. "I *will* make Polis great. Polis was always *meant* to be great, and so it shall be. They didn't pore over blueprints because they had no coalition to preside over. Just wars, wars and more wars." She could still feel the bitter sting of being dragged away from her village by the Polisian Guards, and she would *not* subject any Nightblood to that anymore. The fear of an *entire village* being ransacked by a rival clan's warriors would not exist in her empire.

"Then I stand by my answer. I didn't mean to offend you, Commander," Titus said. "But allow me to explain: each Commander had their differences in the way they ruled, and differences in what they wanted. You differ in that you want what is right for your people. If I may be bold, that is exactly what a Commander should want. I should perhaps say what I have already said before. But not all Commanders are like you. Some craved immortality; some craved power that could not be challenged; some craved wealth beyond imagination. You can imagine the rest. They tried to protect their people but not without a part of their soul lodged inside the fact that they craved something for themselves. They never came as close to the original Commander, Becca. None of them did—except you.

"Our original Commander believed she could create man with the incapacity to commit violence

or hurt," Titus said quietly. "She had perfected it, but circumstance meant she had to inject herself with the formula, thus embodying the very serum of her own creation. Yet she held it well, and she knew of its purpose—and it is her Flame, her *idea*—that we must treasure. It lays the foundation of the earth we know, and our lineage of Commanders must protect and one day act upon this idea: that violence *can* be stopped, and controlled, with Becca's creation."

Lexa thought back to the many wars waged, and the lands ravaged and families torn apart in each clan's selfishness; in their one-way track to *winning*. But it was not about that at all. This was something much larger. The near-dead Lexa, stood stiffly by Anya, thought back to her older self—well, older than this version—and her talk with Titus in his chambers. She thought of his forceful belief, and how powerfully he'd impeded them upon her. It struck her, in that moment: *what if Titus had been wrong?* What if his search for perfection and *Becca* was not the upheaval this twisted world needed?

Titus spoke hugely and he spoke of grandeur beyond Lexa's greatest imagination—but he gave her space and time to poke around for his own amusement at least.

Rage bubbled within her, and she clenched her fists the young Lexa turned to face Titus. "All of this...all these wars and village raids and clan battles—all for an *idea*?"

"An *ideology*," Titus corrected her. "Becca left behind a legacy that everyone Commander should vow to—as every Commander did, upon taking on leadership. It's her peaceful and unifying lessons and morals that each Commander learns off by heart."

"And yet we have Commanders who have nearly torn that apart."

"That's why the world needs *you*. You are different from the others. You show true altruism, commitment, wisdom, justice and strength."

Lexa did not respond. It was too much. The Commanders and their power over the clans, and the nature of their rule were beyond her. This flame business of Titus' was none of her concern, though she did not doubt that Titus would make it so. All Lexa wanted a capital where children could read and learn; spar in the pit; share their beautiful designs in an art-house; she would erect a square for stalls and vendors; Polis would be defended by high walls, difficult to penetrate, with buttresses and allures. She wanted Polis to be the centre of a grand empire, one to envy, and not once did she want this because she wanted to *lead* it. She wanted it because her people—that included the Rock people, the Stone people, the Boat people—they would not have to worry about timber supplies, or fish and seafood, or building material—they would have all of this, pooled together. They would share, and expand, and be *great*.

"That is both highly ambitious and time-consuming," Titus said, and Lexa's ears reddened when she realised she'd spoken aloud.

"We can spare a few years, can't we? Like I've always said: it takes as long as it takes."

"*Jok!*"

Lexa and Anya grasped at their necks as they were held in invisible suspension. If some devil walked in on them dangling in the air, the devil would laugh at the ridiculous sight in front of them and walk right off. As they glanced at each other, Lexa struggled not to laugh at Anya's kicking,

defiant legs—except the only thing stopping her laughter was the fact that there was some kind of horrible rope around her neck. She swallowed deep for air, eyes narrowing at the way Anya's crinkled in mirth, and she knew she was being internally mocked too. Yes, they looked idiotic. She grasped that much.

The duo had last felt Lexa's youthful rage course through their veins like heady wine, but now it was no time for joking. Lexa still pondered the innocence of Becca's teachings when all it had mounted to was war, death and more death. How could Titus speak of her as if she was some guardian angel when all she'd kicked off was the beginning of this horrific domino effect?

They swore loudly as they were yanked up higher in the air again, and Lexa's arms flailed haplessly just to test—whatever the heck was going on. Suddenly they both missed the cold, rickety shit-brick of their boat and the various shores they had to mount. Something felt horribly amiss today—tonight?—and when even *Anya*, who was about as dead as a dead person could be—could not surmise what on earth was going on, Lexa began to worry. Was it her death she was going to witness? Was this some out-of-body feast upon which she'd watch the sins of her past and then someone—probably Ontari—would wield a blade and shank her?

"I want out," Lexa gasped when she could, and the invisible noose around her neck tightened. They were dangling over a sea of black, and she could not fathom what was happening. "I—I don't want this. I want life. I want—I want—"

"You'll never see me again," Dead Anya sniffed, like it mattered, next to her. Their legs dangled as they hovered over the upcoming, undoubtedly insignificant memory death had to offer her on her path. Anya knew it mattered little. She would be here again to collect Lexa upon her death. Her real one. "Lexa, please—" They were hoisted up a little higher, and they coughed into the airless void that was the grey life between the dead and the alive. "What is it you want to see, Lexa?" Anya asked, surprisingly smoothly considering they were both about to be hung by some invisible force. Lexa felt her blood truly run cold, and this—*surely*—had to be the moment of her death. "You want to see your world burn? You think yourself so insignificant that if you were removed right now, nobody would suffer? Is that it?"

Lexa's slim legs kicked out in anger. "You know that isn't the truth." Her hands grappled around at the invisible rope around her neck and she yanked, hard, drinking in as much air as she could. "But *enough* of this. Of all our Commanders gone and past, none of them have been treated or held in such nicety as myself. There is *no need for it*. It *will* be abandoned, and the moment my spirit passes to Aden's—"

"Your work—" Anya's voice was no longer *Anya's*, but dark and fearsome; she was a vessel for something extraordinary; something beyond imagination. Lexa's dangling legs stopped resisting, and she stared in bafflement at Anya, still in suspension, but her sunken eyes held not one bit of her soul. Even dead, Anya was herself. Now, she was anything but. "—Has not finished."

I don't understand what you mean! Lexa's words were stolen from her as suddenly, the black underneath them both melded into a scene of horror. She could not bring up words nor bile as she watched Polis, her capital, her life's work, burn beneath her. At the gates there was a giant army of Ice Nation warriors, armed and cold to the core. She could see scenes flash before her that caused her gut to wrench and she struggled against her invisible restraints in order to set herself free and fling herself into the chaos. Then, at least she would be able to *fight* as Ontari, spear-heading her warriors, blazed through her territory and crucified anyone with any known association with Lexa.

Arkadia, guarded by her own, had been torn to pieces. Indra was the last standing soldier, wielding a modest defence of just herself, and Ontari and her warriors beat her to the ground. It took twelve of them, but just one to slit her throat as Indra—dying and bleeding—bellowed her allegiance to the Commander, to an air of nothing. To a world that did not care for her good heart.

Lexa yelled out in rage, seeing the unjust world death—or near-death?—was attempting to paint. She felt as if she was fumigated from the depths of hell as she watched the world she knew plunge into chaos and disruption. For the life of her, she could not even *see* Clarke. She could not find her, though her heart ached and twisted to just see. But perhaps her soul did not want her to.

Whatever Clarke's role was in this, she decided she didn't want to know. Not because she thought Clarke as a traitor, but because she simply could not face Clarke knowing that the world she had built from ruin was now being torn down to the same dirt and bricks as it was before. The shame that flared in her belly was something she did not want Clarke to see in the Commander of the Coalition, and that pride threw both her and Anya into the Polis Square, where Nyko—sweet Nyko—was brought to 'justice' by a struggling four, six, men. Anya, dead yet still very much kicking, cried out for her friend as Ontari plunged the first blow through his abdomen, her blade as sharp as the siege. Both women's stomachs jerked as Nyko grunted, and they could only watch in loud, withering *nothing* as Nyko was hoisted upon a wooden cross, his wrists and his feet punched through the material with nails. He died, an honourable protector of Polisians, as his cross was held up by the Ice Nation warriors. He died, and as Lexa looked down, her tears blurring her vision, she thought she saw the flash of a gun.

"*Skaikru*," Anya spat. Grief tore her throat apart as the vision blended into blackness once more, and then it was night-time, when the flames had died down and the world had masqueraded its daytime monstrosity into the stillness of the moonlight.

The portcullis had not been brought down, and Lexa's eyes darted to the scene slowly being put forth before her. This was not an act of war; this was an act of the underworld.

As soon as she realised where they were being suspended above, she jerked and thrashed against her bonds. *Nothing* seemed to inflame her more than this. This—the sight of her sleeping Nightbloods. The sight of everything she hoped to live for. Immediately, guilt settled deep in her stomach as her eyes frantically sought Aden, who was curled up in the corner. His hands were gripping tightly onto a book that he must've been studying for the day, and Lexa's tears were shamefully free-flowing now as she realised what she was going to witness.

She wept for the souls she could not save in this horrific world they'd been harnessed and strapped into. Anya, beside her, could not do a single thing as she watched her tutee withdraw into herself, sobbing. Lexa could not cradle herself; she could not comfort herself, for they still were being strapped to *something*—quite like the wooden cross Nyko had been nailed into—and she could only lower her head in failure as the doors to the Nightbloods' quarters were shattered open.

Anya watched hopelessly as her tutee—the Commander, the unifier of all clans—fell apart.

Lexa's blood was spitting fire and she had never felt more *alive* in her fury. She wanted to break this damn coalition apart. She could not just see Aden now; she could see every single Nightblood she treasured and loved. She could see brave young Tristan, first by the door and first awoken by the sound of ice. His hands immediately flew to not his scabbard, but to his fellow Nightbloods and he screamed for them to defend themselves—until Ontari slit his throat without so much as a look or moment of mercy.

Ontari's men sealed the exits as she blazed through the room, catching every single Nightblood with a single slash of her blade. Not one could put up a fight half of her worth. Not even Aden.

Lexa had screwed her eyes shut so tightly that for a moment she feared she would never regain sight again. And she did not want to, either. As Ontari ripped through the Nightbloods' quarters like a fire set loose, her blood had frozen to ice as she witnessed Ontari's leftovers. An ironic fall from grace, Lexa thought blindly, stupidly, as she gazed at the massacre that awaited her. *I need to*

save them, was the only pathetic thought that streamed through her grieving mind. *How do I save the dead?*

"Where's your *Heda* now?" Ontari snickered loudly at the bloodshed she'd left after her. Her men laughed at the joke, and Lexa tried to kick at her restraints again, her entire body rigid with hatred. It wasn't something the all-peaceful, altruistic Commander should feel—but *fuck that*. If she had to kill Ontari with her bare hands, she would do it. *Now*.

Wake me up now, she pleaded internally, almost stupidly, *Wake me up now and I'll kill her*.

The gunshot wound Titus had inflicted upon her had never bled so freely. But it was bright red and *alive*, and if the only thing was *this*—this horror scene—that was required to pull her back to life, then she was ready. *I need to save the dead. I need to save them all*. It was a foolish necessity that someone like Clarke would say, or perhaps a younger version of herself—unwise, reckless and uncaring of the smatter of blood that would follow her determination. Slowly Anya drifted over, free from her bonds. Her dead eyes that held the soul of her mentor had briefly dipped into the world of the dead and the callous, and when she spoke she did not sound like Anya at all.

"There's still time," Anya said hollowly, and Lexa pushed and pulled and thrashed at her bonds in silent grief as Dead Anya—now truly dead, it seemed—put a cold hand to smear the tears from her face. Lexa instinctively jerked away. Anya felt like ice. Then yet again, so did she. "How alive your tears feel, Lexa."

"Are you—Death?" Lexa asked hesitantly. Stupidly. This was *Anya*. "Am I supposed to be fighting you?"

"You're not a fighter," Anya—Death—mused. "Though this one is. She won't come to me until you do."

Lexa was lost for words. She stared down at the silent slaughter beneath her, and though she had favoured Aden all these years, he did not shine among them. They were all *hers*. They had been, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes ago, bright and unassuming stars of the future. And Ontari had ripped everything she had ever built away from her. Just like that.

"You're not ready for me yet. You have years," Death said. "That's what your mentor keeps telling me."

"And—what?" This was, hands down, the strangest conversation Lexa had ever held. And she'd been head of many. "Are you supposed to grab me when she's turned her head away? Do you want her too?"

"I don't want either of you," Death said. "It's rather crammed down here. So if you may, I'd rather you keep it down until I can settle my own world. All this here? All these innocent youngsters, and the entirety of the world you know? They all die, and their souls are passed onto *me*. I have to open my gates as they all flood in, crying of injustice as a tyrant reigns over the world they are assumed to be in. It'd be very boring." Death—Anya—shrugged carelessly. "I won't come for you yet, Lexa. So long as you owe me."

"I owe you?"

"These lives," Death gestured at the carnage. "Between you and me: the underworld is a little over-populated. If you can give me some time to settle everyone, then I will welcome you with peace when it is your time."

I'm not making a deal with death. I'm not making a deal with death. I'm. Not. Making. A. Deal.

With. Death.

"Think about it." Death was still staring at the scene beneath them, looking somewhat impressed. One person could execute and overhaul an ideology. Lexa knew what she was committing herself to. Or at least, what she was compelled to do. *Just send one. Send one soul to Death, and the rest will have their fair time on earth.* "Quickly. Your mother and father say hello, by the way."

Lexa snapped her head upwards, her tear-stricken face suddenly bare and raw. This was the last straw. Everything she had seen today had simply been enough. "My mother and father? Will—will you let me see them?"

"How selfish of you," Death teased her, and disturbingly, it sounded a little more like Anya than it did Death. Lexa was startled by the notion that Death was somewhat courteous. "Here I thought you were the altruistic Chosen One."

Lexa's mouth fell open as Death slapped her across the face, sending her reeling—not too far backwards for she was still held in her restraints—and before her world faded to black, she thought she saw the gigantic, black, all-consuming shape of a monster and then it flashed to a somewhat puny Anya. Lexa's head lolled back and she wasn't sure who sunk into unconsciousness first.

"She is nothing but a *girl!* A puny, tiny, good-for-nothing girl!"

"What would you rather, Titus? A puny boy? They're all young. That's the point!"

"The point is: she is not suited for this and never will be."

"She needs tutelage. So did every other Nightblood. It is not your fault or theirs that they were subjected to this horrid, pointless ritual far before they were due. They were all the same age."

"The time is always right. Young or old they will become something special."

"I've heard her before. I've heard her ideas and her promises; her somewhat too otherworldly projects-to-be. I can vouch for her. So what is it? Is it because she's a girl?"

"You've given me one vouch, and that is yours, Indra."

"I vouch for her because she has the faith of her mentor within her. I vouch for her because she is not a bumbling idiot. I vouch for her because she has the spirit of the Commander within her, and you should not quash that as her Flamekeeper. You should already be nurturing it."

"Indra—"

"I, too, vouch for her."

"Yes, I suppose you would, Nyko. And you, Anya? Will you, too, vouch for your scraggly tutee?"

A pause. Anya, who had been silent throughout the entire terse conversation, finally shook herself back to reality. She had been reeling from pure shock at seeing her young, babbling grafter of a tutee stagger from the woods, triumphant in the Nightblood trials. "If you don't heed her words,

you'll be defying the greatest Commander there's been. And that choice will be on you."

In the shadowy darkness of the unknown, in the world of life and not death, the ice had penetrated further than expected. Somehow it had happened unbeknownst to the infected network Lexa—now unconscious, thus powerless—once held. Some held their heads on spikes; others, bore the weight of treachery on their shoulders.

It was enough for Ontari to power forwards, through the woods and deeper as they did not so much creep through Trikru territory as they blazed through it. They made noise, and it was something to be *proud* of, she reminded her soldiers. Noise here, and noise there; it would distract the young boy they all called 'Commander' in Polis, and it would distract him enough for her to infiltrate through directly to Polis as he attempted to quell the uproar.

After all, what could a young boy accomplish? Ontari pondered the pointless question as she swiftly made her way through the grand Polisian gates, her henchmen silently knocking out the guards and taking up their position in case the cavalry arrived.

A young boy was stupid; Lexa was not. But Lexa was not in commission—so when better to strike, than now?

Aden sprinted up the staircase, one bloodied hand gripping onto the rails and the other holding the thin wound slashed across his chest. He could do nothing as he bled out, running up the staircase—but he was far ahead of Titus, Indra and Nyko, who provided a tough cover for the young Commander-to-be. He used near the last of his energy to yell for Clarke.

"Clarke kom Skaikru!" he bellowed, so loudly he was sure the Polisions outside of the tower could hear him too. "Get out! Get the Commander *out!*"

It had been a quick raid in the middle of the night. Lexa's spy network had nothing to report, and Aden suspected they had either been captured or simply evaded. It was not impossible in this world; but the possibility—the *reality*—right now was that Ontari, Queen of the Ice Nation, was chasing them up the staircase of the great Polisian tower. Titus had been the first alerted, with the clash and the scuttle right above his chambers, and had scrambled up to alert Aden. The duo had not been enough for Ontari, who was as dirty a fighter as a politician. She had slashed Aden across the chest, grinning for more as he tumbled to the floor. Only Titus had protected him, wielding his sword masterfully as he told Aden—who'd offered minimal defence and had suffered beatings and a wound now—to warn Clarke.

Aden's blood thundered through his ears as every step burned and tingled through his thighs, wearing him down. The blood loss from Ontari's wound was beginning to befuddle his mind, and he was conscious of the fact that the clatter Nyko, Ontari, Titus and Indra were making was nearing him. Quicker, and quicker, with each pained step he took.

Aden was fully aware that this was going to be his first real—and his last—fight he'd put up. And it was pathetic, the way he'd tried to scramble to protect his Commander, and had been stricken down almost instantaneously. A sick part of his brain realised that if any, Ontari was probably the most capable Nightblood there was to spearhead this coalition.

But then again...*Compassion. Strength. Wisdom.*

She had two of the three, and that did not make her a candidate for the Commander's throne. If Lexa had decided that the class of Nightbloods she'd taken on was capable of filling all three, then Aden believed her. And for once, instead of believing blindly in just his Commander's words, he believed in himself.

If this was the last fight he'd put up, he'd put it up for his Commander. Commander Lexa of the Thirteen Clans would not die upon his watch, and he'd be damned if he didn't do anything significant for her. She had nurtured him, along with his entire class, along the path of a *decent human being*. It sounded stupid, but it wasn't exactly easy when they were surrounded by belligerents, traitors, and worse. Like Ontari.

Aden could remember the moment he'd been chosen from his village, a small fishing town south of Polis. The Polisian Guards had not seized him, like Lexa's tales. The Polisian Guards had handed him a simple command, by scroll, and then ridden off. A week later, Aden's parents gave up full guardianship to the Commander and she became his mentor, just like she had become everyone else's. It was a strange, consented command.

He wondered what would've happened had his parents rejected the notion. Would they have been made an example of? Or freed?

And then his chest burned, almost sending him sprawling onto the ground in agony. Aden startled back to the present-day, and the hoarseness in his voice was clear this time.

He yelled for Clarke, again and again—

"Aden!" Clarke burst through Lexa's chambers, horrified to see the young boy scrambling up the staircase. She hurried down to haul him upwards, much to his agitation. "Aden. *Aden!* Calm down —"

"The Ice Queen—Ontari—" Aden gasped, shaken and white. This could not have happened. It couldn't have. It was *impossible*. But somehow, Ontari had penetrated through his impeccable network and she was coming. She was coming for the Commander's soul—and she was coming for the Wanheda's, too.

"You—you need to get out." Aden shuddered as pain rippled through his body, and he convulsed, tripping over his own feet. Clarke yanked him up, her face etched with concern. She could hear the fighting below them. Both of them knew the impossibility of the situation. The only way out of this idiotically built tower was to go *down the staircase*, and that was precisely where Ontari was. It was not his Commander's best work of architecture.

They were sitting ducks. The most powerful Commander of all, and her Commander of Death.

They had been the prize all along, and if the Commander had fallen in love with the Wanheda, they would not be separated. It had been an easy goal for Ontari, seeker of power, all along.

Aden only realised the horror of the situation now—and the lack of meaning in his own life. He near-crawled into his Commander's chambers with Clarke's help, fully aware that he would have to put himself as the first line of defence if Ontari made it up.

"You're not staying there," Clarke said firmly to him as Aden held onto the doorframe. His face was set in determination, his jaw locked, his eyes as focussed as his weary soul would allow. Clarke did not understand. He batted her away, and she held onto him. "Aden..."

"You don't get it." Aden spat blood from his mouth, cursing the *Azgedakwin* as he did so. "Don't you understand? If she kills me, she gains nothing; if she kills you, and the Commander, she gains

your powers. She will be, single-handedly, the most powerful soldier in all of our lands. She'll be the Queen of the coalition, and all resources—all—everything our Commander had pooled in..." His stomach churned at the thought, and he groaned in pain as Ontari's wound across his chest seemed to amplify. "It—it all goes to Ontari."

"Then let her have the Wanheda," Clarke growled, standing by a struggling Aden in the doorway. She wrestled for her pistol, pointing it shakily to the growing noise up the stairway. "She's not having Lexa."

"She's not having you, either." Aden tried to stand firm, pressing his slippery hand against the doorframe, and wielding his sword with the other. "Stand back, Clarke kom Skaikru."

"No."

"P-please—"

The noise smacked into reality. Titus was the first to be shunted through the doorway, knocking an already-weak Aden backwards. The pair wrestled on the ground, both with the intention of protecting their Commander—and both bearing pride on their chest, with their duty. But Titus was battered and beaten, and Aden was hardly better. It was Indra and Nyko who provided the best cover as Ontari burst into the room, her sword glinting in the moonlight that streamed through the open windows.

"That," Ontari said, "was far too easy."

"You will not have her," Indra snarled in Trigedasleng. "The Commander is not yours—your selfishness deems you unfit."

"Yet she's the sleeping beauty and I'm the killer." Ontari analysed the situation in the room; it was pathetic. Titus had crushed the energy from Aden by toppling into him, and both Indra and Nyko were circling the sleeping Commander. Yet it was the Wanheda left exposed, holding her gun shakily at her.

"I thought Skaikru weapons were banned from Polis," Ontari mused. "Well—I thought *all* weapons were."

"When you burst in here and try to assassinate the Commander, we bend the rules," Indra hissed.

"Let's pretend I'm here to consume some power." Ontari grinned at them, all positioned to protect. Their legs were crooked, ready to pounce. The only one out of commission was the young boy, slowly rising to his feet beneath Titus. His eyes were sharp and fierce, yet his body was slim and puny, shaking and fearful. "You all circle the Commander. What if I assume Wanheda's soul?"

Everyone turned to look at Clarke, utterly open. Everyone had scrambled to protect Lexa, but there was not any cover for Clarke. Aden briefly considered it—until his duty pulled him back to Lexa. It said everything, when nobody moved towards her—not even when Ontari pointed it out.

Clarke swallowed hard. *Shit. I'm about to die and the only one who cares is unconscious.* "Then take me," she said, "And fuck off. Leave the Commander's tower."

"Is that a deal?"

"Who are you, the devil?"

Ontari laughed and advanced, pointing the tip of her sword towards Clarke, who held her pistol firm. One shot between the eyes would do. One shot *anywhere*, as proven by Lexa's fatal wound,

would do. Ontari took a cautious step forward, greedy eyes focussed just on her, like a predator. Everyone else remained stock-still, apart from a struggling Aden.

If there was one person who should've been fearing for their lives, it must've been Clarke. Yet everyone's focus was on the still-sleeping Lexa, and *everyone* was willing her to spring into action. Just about *now*. Even Ontari, who had been hoping for more of a duel than a murder-in-her-sleep. How terribly boring. Clarke, however, didn't feel so much fear as she felt disgust. She'd seen Ontari in all her shitty glory, and how she'd trailed behind Nia like a little puppy. Ontari wasn't the fearsome Queen she was trying to be and nor would she be half the leader Lexa was and always would be. No—tonight would *not* be the night of Lexa's death—and Lexa didn't need to be conscious for that. Clarke's decision was cemented in her mind, and the grip on her gun tightened. Determination outweighed any fear, and disgust outweighed her fear too.

She had seen Ontari before her rise to power. If she convinced herself a little bit more deeply, a little bit *more*—she could still see that unimportant Nightblood Nia had on her leash. Clarke kept her aim steady and remembered Ontari as that: a groomed, imperfect clone of Nia's.

Clarke briefly glanced at Aden, and shivered. "I won't let you take these lives. Take mine, and that's it."

"How will you know? How will you know I won't go on to kill everyone in this damn room once I've consumed your soul, Clarke *kom Skaikru*?"

"We'll go backwards," Clarke demanded. Her arm was steady as she aimed for Ontari's head. One shot. *One shot. Just squeeze, and it'll all be over.* It pulsed through her. She was also aware of Ontari's naivety to Skaikru weaponry, and the fact that she could simply shoot and Ontari would go down. She'd *die*. For some stupid reason, Clarke didn't have it in her—yet—to just kill her in front of everyone. She backed towards the doorway, and towards the staircase. They'd move down. They'd move down, and Clarke would kill her. Silently. Alone. "Out of this room. Down the stairs. You take me, and the others recuperate."

"When I become *Wanheda*," Ontari whispered, "Nothing will stop me from running up those stairs and massacring everyone in there. Including the Commander."

Clarke was already backing down the staircase, and Ontari followed. It was easy—it was like slowly goading an animal for the kill. Ontari was young, powerful and reckless—and she didn't think ahead. She hadn't thought ahead when she'd mindlessly stormed the tower. She hadn't thought ahead because her power consumed her intelligence, and Clarke would kill her for it.

One more life. Did that matter, when she'd already killed so many?

Clarke swallowed hard. One sweaty finger was ready to pull the trigger. One more kill. One more ghost upon her back. Just like Mount Weather. Just like all those months in exile. Just like—

Crack.

Ontari's dark, hungry stare did not fade as her knees buckled. There was a single shot, right between her eyes. A bullet wound. Clarke gaped as she realised the only way she'd avoided the shot was because she was much lower on the staircase than Ontari, who was still by the doorway. She watched haplessly as Ontari toppled, her limp, lifeless body yet another gift for Death.

She shook as she hesitantly clambered up the staircase. The scene was both utterly surreal, very anticlimactic, and a huge fucking relief. Clarke couldn't begin to unscramble the thoughts ripping through her mind as she tore her eyes away from Ontari's dead body, shuddering as she thanked the gods for its quickness and surprise but also—oh, *shit*—

He'd been struggling and squirming the entire way—trying to wield Titus' gun. Clarke could only watch in muted horror as the killer's gaze fell upon his own hand, wielding the weapon. It was the very weapon that had near killed his Commander. And he'd just used it to kill the Ice Queen.

Clarke could hear a muffled sob, and she climbed up only to see one boy. One boy, whose gun-arm was still raised in shock. *Aden*, she wanted to shout, her jaw falling open at the sight of the battered boy. He'd been wounded and battered and the weakest one of the lot—but he'd been the only one desperate enough to wield a Skaikru weapon amidst the Commander's chambers.

Aden, she wanted to shout, again and again. *Aden*.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, I'm so sorry for the delay. I've been extremely ill and out-of-sorts these past few weeks. I did get a message however, prodding me - "when will you update?" and I laughed because I'd legit forgotten about this. I'm so sorry. I hope this chapter suffices! I've been aching over this chapter. Things happen quickly, and the dangling of Anya and Lexa made me laugh when I pictured it (there's this gif of Raven flying about on Twitter and ... lol) so pardon me there. But hopefully the next two chapters will clear things up.

Thanks for all your previous feedback. I treasure each and every comment close to my heart. :)

The Aftermath(life)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ice was all that seemed to rule her life and Lexa had had enough. Piercing, painful stabs deep in her chest—deeper than anything that could be anything other than *alive*—consistently twisted within her, raw and horrid. It crippled her to the point where she could barely stand. Theoretically, they should be able to float about and do all sorts in the world of the near-dead—but instead, Anya was trying to steady an agitated Lexa as they wrestled back and forth. Anya, mostly out of protection, but Lexa—uncharacteristically—was allowing her anger and pent-up frustration win over. She was no closer to getting any answers and no closer to returning back to her duty as the Commander, and returning to Clarke.

She knew what it meant. It meant abandoning Anya in this lonely, foreign, desolate excuse for purgatory until the moment she truly died. But she could not keep up this facade much longer. She had already tasted the honeyed temptation that was the reality of Clarke's gentle touch. She had bitten the metaphorical apple and she needed to go *back*.

Something—not Anya—was holding her back. The pain deep in her chest was one for starters. It was inexplicable and sudden, and it would not go away. It pestered like a mosquito bite, except if every one of those bites was a stab wound. That was how it felt. And it made Lexa impotent and pathetic simply a sight, for she could not even row the boat in this dreamworld of the dead and the undead and the whatever-else-in-between.

Ice, Ice, *ice*. It was all she could feel; all she could taste; all she could think about.

Even the sword-sharp jabs into her chest felt as *cold* as ice. Everything about this felt wrong, and as much as Anya assured her, she could not help but argue back. Something was not right—and she needed to correct it.

"No," Anya had said, firmly. "You need to find your way back and I'm with you on that. I'm supporting you every step of the way. But you've got to *find* it. You can't just *ask* for it."

"Why not?" Lexa had snapped. Their role-reversal was almost laughable; Anya was usually the fierce, snippy one. Lexa was the calmer one. But not today. "If I were to embark on a hunt for treasure would I find it or would I *ask* for it?"

"Your stalling has been impeccable, all these years, Lexa. But if you stall for much longer you will lose *yourself*." Anya's gaze did not relent. "Look at me. Do you really want to be resigned to a fate where you roam around endlessly until your Commander passes? That's what *I'm* doomed for. And you know what the worst part is? I *never* want that day to come. And so I'll wander and wander. Because when the day comes and Becca tells me I need to fetch someone from the shore, is the day I will truly die, and I think I'd figured that out a long time ago. I think I'd stopped asking, internally, why I was still here." Anya paused, contemplative. "I've always hated goodbyes."

Lexa did not argue with Anya beyond that.

She helped a slightly weaker Anya off the boat and onto the shore the next time. *Time* was also a factor. Pretty much constantly, Anya reminded her that time passed a little differently here—whatever *here* was—and Lexa surmised as much. She supposed if she spent weeks and weeks nearly *dead*, then she was condemned to an eternity down here anyway. And if time was time, she

was sure Anya would've dropped like a fly about—well, somewhere near the beginning.

"This is the worst thing about death," Anya grumbled as she clambered off the boat. Lexa's hand steadied her by her clammy, grey forearm, "Having your tutee *help you off a boat*."

"You're old," Lexa teased. "It's courtesy."

"You are even more insufferable than I remember. Do you know what I remember? An idiotic, scraggly child."

"See? The old tend to forget—"

"I get it, I get it—will you just *focus* so we're not stuck here? It's kind of cold."

It wasn't until Anya said it that Lexa noticed it—it really *was* cold down here. She shivered into her thin tunic, cursing that this was all she wore before death. Well, she'd always thought she'd die in battle, so armoury and weaponry would've been involved, but *this*? A bleeding wound from a non-fatal organ that had been left running until she roughly had about half a pint of blood left *in* her? It was somewhat pathetic, and Lexa grimaced as she remembered (would she remember this if she woke up?) the way Anya had laughed at her the first time they rowed, briefly. She'd asked her much later what that was about, and all Anya had said was, "I'm so glad this isn't how you *actually* died."

Lexa rowed until she thought she saw the flash of the Northern border, and she frowned. She did not question it, until her final stroke of the oars had been so hard they'd wedged through the door of a war-room very far north, and very cold. Subconsciously, she'd kind of hoped she'd ram the past Nia to death, but of course she couldn't kill the Ice Queen twice.

If only.

"No," was the only word Nia offered her, taunting and smug, as she sat atop her throne. It was much alike Lexa's in Polis, she thought disapprovingly, with a nose crinkle. Lexa could see her younger self shake the defiance off as if nothing had happened. But deep within her, she wondered how she'd faced Nia so suddenly after Costia's death. She'd ridden for the Northern lands almost immediately after Nia's little gift, and when Dead Anya clapped her supportively on the back, she realised that maybe she needed it for the bile that had risen in her throat.

"Very well." Young Lexa nodded, and glanced around the war-room. "Is there much point in me explaining why this is such a loss for your clan, my Queen? Or shall I keep it from your *trusted* counsels?"

Nia frowned as she looked around her, and then carelessly waved Lexa on. Despite ten clans and then her own backing her, Nia acted as if Lexa had surmounted as much faith as a fly. "I would think you'd be better spending your time elsewhere, Commander. But if you must, then do what you will."

"I just thought it'd be nice for your counsels to hear the whole truth, once in a while," Young Lexa said sweetly. With great, *great* glee, Lexa could see the way Nia's face bunched up in irritation. And then, just to rub salt in the wounds, Young Lexa took the scroll Gustus silently handed her, and then unfurled it noisily onto the war-table. The counsels gathered around in loud bemusement, muttering and whispering between themselves.

It was then Lexa realised how isolated the Ice Nation's village chiefs were. Even within Trikrū negotiations, everyone knew each other; everyone had their own opinion. Even in their fledgling coalition, she knew Dain well, and she knew Bryce well—she knew every single leader of their

respective clan. There was never secretive murmuring and she rarely kept her plans from the coalition leaders.

Well, she hadn't found that part necessary yet.

"This is what I've set up," Young Lexa informed them slowly, gesturing to pretty much the majority of the map. Much to her pleasure, almost every adviser leant in eagerly. There was a blatant line drawn between the Northern border and the rest of the land. "And here's what I have yet to accomplish. I trust that Queen Nia reigns with diplomacy, not tyranny," she added, lying and feeling good about it. "I trust that she takes upon your advice—" she gestured towards the counsels, not even trying not to hide the triumph in her eyes as Nia stiffened, "—Very carefully. If I perhaps explained the benefits of a coalition to such a trusted, powerful counsel, then maybe I would get a more diplomatic answer...like a vote.

"Dain of the Mountain People has already committed his resources in order for infrastructure. He's been instrumental in my reconstruction of Polis, which I hope many of you will see. Bryce of the Water People and Hemla of the Boat People gift both their fresh seafood by giving regions for free reign of fishing, and clean water. Hemla has also agreed to supply Polis with battle-ships if necessary. We have the woods, forestry and herb—an entire apothecary, if you will—within the Trikru's bounds. Further down South, we have luxury in the form of herbs, spices and expensive silk. There are gems and crystals of the like to be found in their outer islands. Its heat is both compelling and heady, as is the great Southern wine. Which leaves the Ice Nation." Young Lexa tapped at the untouched region on her map, greatly blocked off with a gigantic, diagonal black line. "My hope for the coalition—and it is proving to bloom—is that we will pool our resources together and share. Instead of having just one speciality, each clan has everything. I believe that with our harsh winters, the Ice Nation are the best prepared, naturally. You have boundless furs and game to hunt, even when the blizzards strike. It is something that has often troubled the Trikru and has endlessly befuddled the Southern clans, who still have not figured out a contingency plan for the winters."

"Will you hurry to your point, *Lexa*?" Nia sneered from her throne. Her fingers, gripping onto the handles so tightly, betrayed how she truly felt. She was unsettled by the girl. Who was she, to come barging in with blueprints and faraway idealisms in front of *her* subjects?

"Like I said: the pooling of resources, of gifts," Young Lexa said calmly, and waved one of her younger soldiers forward. She was holding a box, and everyone proclaimed in disgust at the smell. "I offer my first."

"Your first *what*?"

Young Lexa clasped her hands together in front of her, a picture of serenity. "My first gift, of course."

At that, one of her young soldiers whipped open the lid of the box to reveal Costia's severed head, rotting and deteriorating at a rapid rate. There would be maggots soon, and Lexa screwed her eyes shut momentarily. She knew her younger self had remained defiant, staring straight into Nia's eyes. But here, still she could not bear to see Costia; or bear to *want* to see Costia. It made no sense, but heartbreak was not at the forefront anymore, and it made her feel immensely guilty.

Young Lexa clenched her jaw as everyone in the room bar her and Nia gabbled quietly in shock. "I correct myself: a *return*. Your original parcel did not suffice."

"How dare you bring something so—"

"How *dare* you hunt down the only person I truly loved, and decapitate her," Young Lexa

interjected lowly, her voice not once wavering with fear. No: this was vengeance, and the plate it was served on was *cold*—no, it was *ice*. "Consider this my rejection of your kindly *gift*. You butchered an innocent young woman and sent her head in a box, to me, for the crime of *loving me*. It's an embarrassment if that's the best you can do; it's an embarrassment, how *low* you will go." Young Lexa stood tall as Gustus shut the lid, and all of a sudden it seemed as if Lexa towered over the much-taller Nia, gazing around at the war-room full of soldiers, advisers, engineers, and ambassadors. "It's a crime within Polis to commit cold-blooded murder like that."

"We aren't in Polis," Nia said slowly. She could feel the dangerous lean of her advisers towards Lexa's case, and she'd be damned if she didn't fight for them. "Your words are meaningless."

"It doesn't matter. If all clans voted, it would be unanimously to oust you."

This time, Nia laughed. "How very pompous of you, Commander."

"No, no. They *did* vote unanimously against you."

"Then perhaps you'll do me the honour of tradition," Nia said coolly. Young Lexa inclined her head, and then watched as Nia threw her left glove at her feet. "I, Queen Nia of the Ice Nation, challenge you, Commander Lexa of the Trigedakru, to a combat by trial. My soldier: Atohl. He holds chieftom in one of my villages."

Present-day Lexa startled in recognition: it had been Atohl, killed by the Mountain Men's missile in TonDC. She'd spared his life—and he'd risen through the ranks to one so important that he pretty much represented his Queen in meetings she did not want to attend. Which, unsurprisingly, was all of them. He had been a shrewd, intelligent man. A hard negotiator, but ultimately fair.

"His life depends on your scheming, Nia."

"Oh, I know."

"Your position in this coalition depends on your faith in him."

"I know."

"Just so you're aware." Young Lexa drew her sword from her scabbard, alert eyes already sizing up her foe. She did not twirl her blade or make a show; she instead stood her ground, nodding at Atohl to confirm the beginning of their trial. And oddly, when she was about to fight the representative of the woman who'd ripped her heart out so shamelessly, she felt nothing as she slashed forward, easily bettering the bigger man in speed and agility.

The coalition had never slotted better into place than this.

For once, they rode by carriage. It was strange for Aden not to be riding his horse—a proud present he liked to show off—everywhere and anywhere. But Clarke had insisted on some privacy and a breeze of fresh air only every now and then. Indra was up front with the company, leading their carriage towards the Arkadian lands. Clarke and Aden sat in amicable silence. She wished she could do something for the boy, but all he did was fiddle with his hands. Often, he would still and just stare at them, like the blood had reappeared. And then he'd cover his face, rubbing his eyes. Aden fidgeted the entire way but did not even speak once. Clarke found she didn't mind, and Aden found he didn't mind Clarke's company either.

They reached Arkadia a lot sooner than expected, and then they were settled by the gates. They were a relatively large group of them—fifteen, perhaps twenty. Thus (as if in retaliation) behind Octavia, there were gunners pointed at them. Still: they were roughly a hundred or two yards away. Something told Clarke that the Arkers didn't necessarily want to affiliate with the Grounders at such close proximity, or even Octavia.

Octavia was the only one today and as usual, held her hands up. The red dot was unwavering on her chest.

"Really?" Clarke said in true surprise. Her eyes scanned quickly for the sniper of the day. "Does this happen every time?"

"And then an interrogation afterwards," Octavia reminded her flatly. There had been an adjustment period between them. At first, Octavia hadn't wanted to speak to her at all. But slowly their relationship thawed until they were friends once more. She could not speak the same for Raven, who was still notably absent and struggling with her injuries no doubt. She did not want to face Clarke. It wasn't out of hate, Octavia had told her once. It was simply because she did not want to let Clarke see how weak she'd become.

"She never listens to your mother," Octavia had told her. "Abby keeps telling her this, and Raven will go off and do that. I don't know, Clarke. She barely even talks to *me* anymore. She's exiling herself with work, but she's not building for Pike—she never would—she just builds stuff for herself, and that's it. They don't *do* anything."

"Maybe it makes her happy," Clarke had tried.

"Yeah..." Octavia clearly disagreed. "Maybe."

"We've got some shit news," Clarke said, here and now. She watched over her shoulder as Aden hopped out of the carriage, brushing himself down so he looked presentable. "I think the Commander's gonna deliver it."

Octavia eyed Aden and said to Clarke before he drew within hearing distance, "Seriously? Clarke, just whisper it now. That kid is barely touching puberty."

"Octavia kom Skaikru." Aden's greeting was strong and impressive, considering the ordeal he'd been through just the other night. Indra stood slightly behind him to the left, and nodded curtly towards Octavia out of respect. "I hope you're well."

"We're...coping, Commander." Octavia picked her words carefully. Her eyes widened in genuine surprise, and Clarke couldn't help the almost-proud grin that split her face. She had nothing to be proud of. Aden's skill and affability was all Lexa's doing—not hers. But she still felt a little of her soul owned by Aden, the young and promising mop-head who'd recklessly sworn to give his life to her that night. "How about yourself?"

"There have been developments," Aden said awkwardly. Upon seeing Octavia's expectant face, he turned towards Indra, who motioned for him to go on. Octavia was a trusted ally. "The Ice Nation—" he coughed, patting his chest. "*Ontari*—infiltrated into the Polisian Tower. The Commander narrowly escaped an assassination attempt."

"Oh—*shit*—" Octavia's jaw fell open, as Indra unnecessarily translated the curse-word into Trigedasleng for a confused Aden. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry—is she okay? Are—are *you* okay?" she added in concern as she saw the way he stood, hunched over a little. The last time she recalled seeing Aden, he stood tall and proud. He didn't have broad shoulders to boast, but he had wit and he had *power*. Octavia tried again, stiltedly. "Commander, I, er, humbly ask of your well-being,

and Commander Lexa's."

"She is well. We managed to subdue Ontari and the Commander was unharmed," Aden said shortly. Neither Clarke nor Octavia bothered to point out that he'd neatly deflected the question of his *own* well-being.

"What happened to Ontari?" Octavia asked, catching Clarke's quick shake of the head and frantic hand motions to stop a little too late.

"She was subdued," Aden said again, and then somewhat hesitantly, "I silenced her."

Octavia opened her mouth and then promptly clamped it shut again, unsure of what to say. She wished right now that someone like Kane was beside her. He'd be able to conjure up some politically correct way of saying sorry but also '*we're so glad that bitch is dead*' and she knew the Arkadia camp would be alight with celebrations over the Ice Queen's death tonight. Then again, she saw the look on Aden's face and wondered if this was his first kill. She didn't have the audacity to ask, but with the way his jaw clenched and his eyes kept firmly fixed to the ground, she thought maybe it was.

There had been no Nightblood process since Lexa's injury. Aden had simply been chosen by her before to be somewhat of a Commander Regent in the unlikely event of it occurring.

She *did*, observe, however, that he was filling her shoes incredibly well.

"There is news from Arkadia too," Octavia said almost as reluctantly as Aden, hoping that some distraction would help the boy a little. Also, she needed to tell Clarke—because Lincoln, Abby, Kane, Miller, Raven, Monty and herself had resorted to arguing over each other over the next course of action. "We've subdued one of our own, too. By my hand, Commander. Bellamy Blake—" the next part was harder to usher out, "—one of the partakers in the Hakeldama massacre."

She could see Clarke's eyes widen in shock behind Aden as she processed the news. She just hoped that Clarke wouldn't coat her with sympathy and excuses. It was hard enough doing the deed itself. But Octavia had to face this one alone. She'd lost Bellamy to Pike long before this, and she *knew* Lincoln would get himself mixed up in some deep shit if they hadn't acted. Pike did not have room for mercy in his rule. The fact that Lincoln was his right-hand-man's sister's boyfriend mattered nothing to him. The fact that Octavia Blake was Bellamy Blake's *identical sister* mattered nothing to him.

A little sickened, she knew deep down that Bellamy Blake mattered nothing to Pike, either.

"We need a strategy," Octavia continued, at Aden's expectant silence. "Something that we, as representatives of both parties, can come to an agreement with. Bellamy...he's my brother, Commander," Octavia sighed. "I would never be able to kill him. And he is nothing more than a pawn in Pike's game. He's ignorant, and it's beyond stupid of him, but he is no monster."

Clarke watched Aden closely as he thought about it, and she thought about Octavia's words and wondered how much she actually believed herself. Everything Bellamy had done to her was enough to convince him he was on the path to becoming a monster; butchering those Grounders *in their sleep* was the actual selling point.

Did they truly think that it was to avenge the Mountain? It was so stupid, and the fact that Bellamy of all people could generalise the Trikru with the Ice Nation was beyond belief. He'd been *there* as Trikru and Skaikru became hesitant allies. Yes, he was there when they were betrayed. But she'd tried *so hard* to talk to him. Clarke knew the blame of the genocide in Mount Weather belonged to her, but it belonged to Bellamy too. The fact that he would smear *everything* on her—and he was

supposed to be Lexa's age—was disgusting. The fact that Lexa could put together a coalition in her teens when they were still studying Earth Skills, and the fact that Lexa could maintain a coalition and suppress a reprisal of the pre-coalition wars, *and* try to implement '*blood must not have blood*' at the same age as Bellamy, if a little younger, was mad to think about.

When Clarke thought of the cold motivation that spurred her to point the gun at Ontari the other night, she shuddered at the thought of 'blood must not have blood'. Now, *jus drein jus daun* sounded much fairer.

"I've seen monsters. I'm sure you have too, Octavia," Aden said lowly. "They are instantly recognisable and impossible to forget. If you vouch for your brother then I would not deem him so."

"And we need him, Commander," Octavia said quickly. Clarke listened closely. "We've got him. We just need him to speak against Pike. If he speaks against Pike, maybe everyone else will follow. He is kinda like—Pike's bodyguard."

"Octavia, you need the people to speak against Pike—not just Bellamy," Clarke insisted.

"I know, but right now, Bellamy *is* the people. He lost Gina at Mount Weather. There are those within the forty-four who still look to him as a leader. At this point, he's our best option."

"I agree with the Sky girl Octavia," Indra interjected, and Aden swivelled to face her, relieved for her voice in this. "We could access Pike through his own right-hand man. Octavia kom Skaikru would have that personal connection."

"Then we do that," Aden agreed hastily. Even Indra seemed surprised by the enthusiasm of Aden's negotiation. Clarke assumed he just wanted this all over. "Octavia, I hope we can reward you properly should you come to Polis. I extend my hand in invitation. It is hard to subdue a friend; to subdue your own blood...I cannot imagine. I'm sorry," he added, "if you're hurt."

"A lot more people would be hurt if I didn't," Octavia lamented, and Aden nodded solemnly.

Clarke glanced between them, and then between Indra and Aden. Something had been lacking today and she'd only just realised that this time, Titus had not journeyed with them. Now that she thought about it, Aden often sought Indra's counsel far more often than Titus'. He was a clever young boy, and Clarke wondered if there was particular reasoning behind that move. It had been quietly done, and Aden was too smart to listen to people like Indra and Nyko first, before the Flamekeeper's, for no reason.

Aden instructed Indra to retreat as they bid their goodbyes, whilst Clarke lingered by the gates under the guise of saying a private goodbye to a close friend. This time, he, too, said his respectful goodbyes and wished Octavia the best before clambering into the carriage. Clarke's handshake through the metal bars brought Octavia closer, and she knew everyone hated it when she said it, but she only ever did when, well, she actually *did*.

"I have a plan."

This time, it wasn't a hazy memory and there was no Anya. For a moment, a bizarre, beautiful moment, Lexa wondered if she'd bolted back to life.

The feel of Clarke's marred skin under her calloused fingertips felt so raw; so *real*. Every sense just felt heightened. The warmth of Clarke's weight as she ground down on her lap was intoxicating, and her lips pressed firmly against the hollow of Clarke's throat, sucking hard. The guttural moan Clarke let out sent shivers down Lexa's spine.

"Let me look at you," Lexa whispered, and—*this was real*. Just drinking in the sight of her was getting to her head like the strongest Polisian wine they brewed. It was dark and endlessly tempting, a spectacle she'd never forget. She greedily palmed at Clarke's breast, sucking a nipple into her mouth and grazing her teeth gently over it, closing her eyes as her other arm held Clarke by the waist. Clarke was gently grinding down on her, her head thrown back in pleasure as Lexa played cartographer for the night with just her lips. It was her favourite thing to do to Clarke, and Clarke knew it. Clarke *loved* it. Lexa never seemed to be bored with exploring her body, and she was so slow and thorough and gentle sometimes that she never missed a nook or cranny. And every single time, Lexa would start all over again, just as loving and particular as the first time.

She knew all the spots that would make Clarke groan, and every tiny thing that Clarke enjoyed. She knew how to get Clarke wet within seconds, and she loved the feel of it against her thighs, the sticky bliss she'd later indulge herself with. Her fingernails would scratch slowly down Lexa's already-scarred back, digging in deeper as her tongue swirled around her nipple and then worked its way back up the sternum of her chest to the bob of her throat. Clarke's mouth ran dry, only able to utter a soft "*fuck*" as Lexa palmed her ass, groaning just as she did at the response. Lexa could sit here all day, feeling Clarke grow wetter and wetter against her thighs as she roamed her body, and then kissed her hard. Still sometimes a little too hard, and their teeth would clash and she'd grin into their next kiss, relishing the way Clarke held onto her as Lexa gently tugged on her bottom lip.

The irregular breathing, the frequent cursing Lexa could feel directly against her ear as she dipped her head down to mark her neck was enticing. Clarke's lips were so inviting, so forever gorgeous, and Lexa could kiss her for lifetimes and lifetimes to come. The more she learned about what Clarke liked the more exciting it became. Sometimes they'd take it slow, and they'd be up all night through til the morning, fucking hard and slow; sometimes they'd fuck rough, and bang the headboard against the wall in sweaty desperate want for each other. Sometimes—most of the time—it'd be a bit of both, until they were both exhausted and contentedly limbless the next day.

But *every time*, Lexa would make sure she'd pull this "*fuck*" word from Clarke's mouth as often as she could. It was low and throaty the way it was drawn from the back of Clarke's throat, the four letters dripping in mindless pleasure.

Lexa kissed her deeply, encouraging Clarke's ass to move against her thighs, enjoying the growing wetness seeping down the insides of her legs. She grinned rakishly, knowing she could tease Clarke all night, but inevitably, Clarke would give in. She'd lean in, just how Lexa liked it, and nibble on her earlobe. She'd whisper, "*fuck me*," and Lexa would gladly oblige.

Her thumb idly traced a hard nipple as she groped Clarke's breasts, smugly thinking back to the morning she'd spent torturing Clarke in bed by spending an eternity over each and every single contour of her body. Everything about Clarke entranced her, but nothing quite like Clarke's breasts, and if forever were an option, Lexa would choose to spend her forever right here. Her teeth clamped down onto Clarke's collarbone, biting down hard. Her tongue flicked out to soothe the redness as Clarke moaned loudly, bucking violently down onto her.

"Fuck." It was the umpteenth time, and Lexa laughed against her skin, pure delight sitting heavy in the back of her throat. Her fingers teased Clarke's inner thighs, coating themselves with stickiness. She was smug with herself, they both knew it, and somehow it made Lexa even more attractive. Lexa's head was spinning at this point, as she pushed two fingers inside of Clarke, hard,

and just watched her. She didn't kiss her, or bite her; she just watched as her fingers stayed there and slowly curled the tips inside of her. The long moan she drew out was so worth it, and Lexa kissed the bottom of her chin, her eyes still fixed on Clarke's face.

Her eyes had clamped shut in desire, her ass instinctively moving to fuck herself but Lexa's other hand supported her still. They both knew how this'd go, and Lexa's fingers started to pick up a head-spinning pace. Her earlier teasing had paid off as she took immeasurable pleasure at the *sound* of Clarke's wetness against her slick fingers pumping in and out of her, like music to her ears.

She watched greedily, watched and watched until Clarke tried to shut herself up by grabbing Lexa's face and kissing her hard, gasping loudly in her mouth as Lexa fucked her harder.

"You know I'm just getting started, right?" Lexa teased her as they kissed, her breaths coming out in short, sharp pants too as Clarke threw her arms over Lexa's shoulders, drawing her head in as her breasts bounced lightly. Lexa whined a little, for it was unfair to cover up such a sight, but here she was, fiendishly lapping up Clarke's nipples as her fingers curled and thrust inside her, expertly by now. "You feel...taste...*so good*..."

"*More*," Clarke demanded from her, riding her and chanting it like a mantra, "More, more, *fuck*—"

Lexa jerked forwards, nearly headbutting Clarke—and—oh, *oh*—this time it was *very much* real. She was in bed, in her chambers, drenched in sweat. Her eyes widened at the sight of Clarke who'd utterly stilled in dabbing the edges of her face with a cold cloth. She'd been feverish and Clarke was straddling either side of her, and Lexa was embarrassingly wet. Her throat shrivelled up and died.

Of embarrassment.

Cheeks cherry-red, she stared wide-eyed at Clarke, who held it. "Did..." Lexa wanted to lick her lips. The fatigue of even briefly holding the sitting position was quickly settling in. "Did I...move...?"

"No," Clarke said honestly, "You were just stock-still and then you nearly headbutted me."

"I'm...I'm...did...did I...say anything...?"

"No." Clarke peered at her curiously. "Why?"

Lexa genuinely had no answer for that. Nothing that she could sum up in a word or two, which was about as much as she had energy for. She sank back into the pillows again, feeling a little helpless, and awkwardly sexually-charged. The change in her position meant Clarke had to loom a little over her to dab at the top of her forehead, and her breasts were just—in her direct line of vision. Horribly distracted and wondering if *this* was some kind of otherworldly place too, her hands—weak as they were—managed to find their way to Clarke's thighs, slowly roaming up and down.

Clarke stopped dabbing, but didn't move from on top of her.

"You can take as long as you take, you know," Clarke whispered to her, and they both smiled at the reference. Clarke was a little more innocent of the mind, Lexa presumed, for she was still unashamedly ogling at close quarters. Clarke's fingers combed through her hair, and Lexa shuddered, closing her eyes. It felt so impossibly good. Her heart ached in realisation for just how much she longed for this. Not just sex; never just sex. Just...intimacy. *Clarke*. "I'll wait for you."

I'm coming back. Properly. "Come to bed with me."

"*Sha, Heda,*" Clarke teased her. She knew how much Lexa liked her bumbling Trigedasleng. At first, she'd thought Lexa deemed it adorable. Later on, she found out it was somewhat of a turn-on whenever she called Lexa '*heda*' instead of 'Commander'.

Power trips, huh.

Clarke made sure Lexa was comfortable first, and fussed about in organising their limbs (Lexa was not of much help here). Finally snuggling into Lexa's side, Lexa realised that Clarke was the one who appeared so small against her, curled up into the foetal position. She seemed content, but her eyes were tired, and she looked as if she hadn't eaten properly or slept properly in however long Lexa had been out for.

She wondered how many nights Clarke had spent sleeping, longing for Lexa's body to curl into, her arm slung lazily around her.

"You're healing well," Clarke observed quietly, bringing Lexa's hand to her so she could kiss her knuckle. Then she placed Lexa's arm around her. "Within days, I think you'll be up and running about again."

"What...what happened to this room? It's like a blizzard just tore through it."

"Let's not talk about that right now," Clarke pled, seeing Lexa's eyes already beginning to droop. "Tell me a story?"

"Okay..." Lexa sucked in a deep breath. "I saw Anya."

"...I told you to tell me a story, not to tell me you've gone mad."

"She was waiting for me in the near-dead. She said she'd wait to collect me upon death, too," Lexa carried on slowly, blinking *really* hard to try and stay awake. "I think it's in my past. Whether I live or die."

Clarke chuckled tiredly against her, and Lexa felt guilt build in her chest. All this time Clarke had been trying to nurse her back to health; Lexa had been fretting about the coalition, or Aden, or Anya, or all the sins or weaknesses of her past. She'd just...assumed everything with Clarke was okay.

Clarke felt warm and soft and real against her side. They'd always slotted together perfectly, like two missing parts of a jigsaw. With all the strength she could muster, she pulled Clarke closer and squeezed against her shoulder. Clarke exhaled softly, her arms wrapped around Lexa's abdomen. She was careful to avoid Lexa's bullet-wound, which was stitched up and dressed.

Lexa had spent what was starting to feel like an eternity down there with Anya, but she wondered how few days had actually passed since Titus had shot her in Clarke's bed-chambers. That was something else she had to handle once she returned. The thought made her chest thud loudly, but nothing more so than how at home she felt as of this moment. A huge part of her heart hoped that Clarke felt the same too. As Clarke nestled against the crook of her neck, she couldn't help but suspect that maybe she did.

"Will you kiss me?" Lexa asked suddenly, maybe a little childishly, as a familiar black began to cloud her vision.

Clarke craned her neck up to look at her and nodded, pressing a firm, but not hard, kiss against her mouth. Ever so slightly, she dipped her tongue inside and Lexa allowed it, closing her eyes as she

took in Clarke's taste and locked it away in her heart. She never forgot the taste of Clarke's kisses, but she wasn't too sure if she would be able to remember if she was headed to the shores again. Surely there was not much left...

"When you wake," Clarke's voice was already growing distant, "I'll be right here."

"Have a bit of courtesy next time, will you?" Anya said impatiently as they traipsed through Polis. The reconstruction period had been impressive and the definition of blood, sweat and tears. Mostly hauled up by Trikru citizens, there had been major developments and aid from the Stone and Mountain clans, with the Sun clan providing many of the extensively expensive furniture too. Yet this was a period where a huge proportion of the Trikru had vocalised their isolation and dissent. This was Lexa's own clan yet they felt exiled in a capital they had been most instrumental in building. Chiefs of villages had spoken passionately and angrily about the work their sons and daughters and brothers and sisters had patched up the impressive capital, whilst their own village still struggled to hunt and evaded the occasional poison berry. It was not, as many a chief had argued, a fair reward for the many men and women they had sent to the capital.

Lexa, for the umpteenth time, kept her mouth shut, though she could feel the tips of her ears redden in embarrassment. She knew exactly what Anya was talking about. Anya had never been a prude in life, and she supposed in death she would probably be even worse.

"There are some elements of your head that greatly interest me," Anya went on (and on, and on...); "Sometimes I poke at bits of your brain because people think you're wise when you're really not. And sometimes you're in the middle of fornication—"

"I think that's enough," the Young Lexa (thank heavens) shouted from a makeshift stand in the to-be-Square. There were already preliminary stalls set up. The Trikru construction team set aside their tools for now, their protests fading as Lexa towered over them all, making sure her gaze stretched across to encompass every single one of them until it was completely silent. Dead Anya and Lexa stopped at the edge of the Square to watch the scene before them. "What is this? You are here voluntarily. If anyone thinks I am commanding you to stay, then you are wrong."

"*Heda*, It isn't that," one of the warriors at the front shouted out. "We are here, in a foreign wasteland far from our wives and sons and daughters. Some men have brought their entire families just for the *time* this is taking. We sweat and we struggle to build; the clans provide material, not horsepower. We, the Trikru, are building the capital. Why is it theirs too?"

Further shouts of agreement followed the young man's opinion, though nothing disrespectful was doled out to her.

"This is *Trikru's* capital!" one yell came to.

Lexa—both her younger version and her older version—still empathised with them to this day. Lexa idly wondered how many of these dedicated *Trigedakru* were still alive, and where she could find one of them and thank them for their work. In her heart, she knew she had never properly thanked them.

"Then perhaps the other clans will question my rule too, if my own clan does," Young Lexa insisted from her makeshift podium. She was flanked by Gustus and Titus. "So let us settle this between us first. I solemnly confess, between me, the Commander of the Coalition and the

Commander of Trigedakru, to you—the people of Trikru: I would not want my capital to be built by hands other than Trikru hands."

The last protests petered out until they sounded like nothing but heavy rain against a glass window. The young Commander watched them carefully, motioning for someone to speak.

"I have not seen my wife in six months, *Heda*," one man called from the back. Lexa and Anya glanced over; he was old and crooked, bearing the weight of his left side using a cane. "You say that if I ride back to my village tonight, and see her for a few days, that would not be treachery?"

"There is no treachery in the act of seeing your family," Young Lexa shouted back, though her tone was soft. She waved at them. "You are all here upon my calling. I requested Trikru men and women and I got them. I want Trikru men and women plastered all over the walls of Polis; in every room; smothered over every brick; sprinkled over the very foundation of this coalition. This inter-clan coalition I propose is still very much shaky and it remains a risk, but the resources each clan outside of us has provided is a symbol of their loyalty. Their men and women may not be here, though they are welcome, but truthfully—I would want my capital to be built by no other than the men and women who I grew up with, who raised me as a child, and who taught me the very values I keep true."

There were still murmurs, so the younger version of herself turned her back on her audience to motion for a group of children to gather in front of her. They were level with the crowd, who had backed off enough to get a good glance at the Nightbloods. Something within the older Lexa stirred. There was pride sitting heavy on her chest, and her eyes burned with the crinkle of a smile as she watched the Nightbloods line up in front of her. They faced the crowd, their longswords tucked into their scabbards. The weapon was still a little big for most of them, but they were smart, and they were defiant.

"Nightbloods." This time, it was Titus who spoke, loudly and clearly. "Tell the people of the core values of your Commander."

The Nightbloods exchanged glances.

"Strength," one of the Nightbloods, Mia, declared, and stepped forwards. She bowed her head, and then stepped back in line. Everyone was silent in awe.

"Compassion," Aden, mop-headed to the point where his hair stuck up at all different angles and ends, was the next to declare. He did the same as Mia.

"Wisdom," Faza was the last to declare.

The Nightbloods fell silent, and their audience remained so. Young Lexa waited for a moment, trying to contain the face-splitting grin that was threatening to break across her face. From afar, Anya tittered beside her, and Lexa smiled lopsidedly. It was one of those moments she wanted to treasure for all of time, and though this moment offered no significant clue as to how to get back home—properly—she wasn't sure if she wanted to go without the reminder. It had been so long since she had thought of this. It had been so long since she remembered her beginnings, and of how flawed she had always been. Nothing had truly been one hundred percent equal; she had the forest blossoming in her heart and she had saved the sturdy work of construction for her Trikru. She had not rejected help from afar, but the clans had not sent any physical help at the time.

"This coalition may not even remain," Young Lexa told everyone, welcoming the silence. "It may fail, and I may be removed from this position tomorrow. But I will know, until the day I die, that my throne room was crafted by Trikru hands. I will know that the sparring pit will forever be embraced by a Trikru palisade. People from all walks of life will learn from books and drawings

housed in a building sculpted by our hands. This coalition is about unity. We must learn to give and take what we have and indulge the luxuries of what we once had to steal. Every single clan has that to learn. I will do my best as the Commander to ensure that every clan has equal opportunity within this capital. But I will do my best as Commander of the Trikru to ensure that Polis is my heart because the trees are my heart."

There were a couple of yells of approval and allegiance—perhaps only two or three eager soldiers. Lexa watched her idealistic self from afar and tried to weigh in on how much had changed. It had been circumstantial, but she thought deeply and wondered how far from her beliefs she had been shunted away from. She could not think of an instance she had betrayed her dreamy idealism, even to this day. Briefly, she thought of *blood must not have blood*, and the slaughtered three hundred outside Arkadia. It brought a shiver down her spine. *That* was betrayal. That had been a back-stabbing. Because as she looked at the scene unfolding before her, she realised that she would bleed and fight for every single one of her people. If some tyrant of the Skaikru would butcher her people like that, she would not fold—not even if Clarke was of the Sky.

It presented an ever-present problem. As much as the Sky was forever destined to meet the Earth and as much as Lexa's heart was occupied by the headiness of Clarke kom Skaikru, the very stubborn blood within her pumped black and true. Not just green. It was the colour of her coalition; it was the colour of her people.

She had been selfish, in giving into Clarke's kisses that day—the day Titus shot her. She had been thinking only of her desires, and the wish to keep Clarke by her side forever more, even with the barricade. It was impossibility, and Lexa had toyed with it. She had messed with her power and it had backfired. Hard.

Lexa watched closely, aware of Anya's gaze drilling through the side of her skull, as her younger self paced to each side of the small podium, back and forth. *Sentimentalism*, she could hear, in Anya's voice. But it had always been a small beat within her. She was sentimental in the very foundations of Polis. Her sentimentalism had led to Costia's death, and the hours she'd wept, alone, at the foot of her own bed. Her sentimentalism kept Clarke by her side in a wish for a future that perhaps she would not be able to have. Clarke, burdened—often unwittingly—with the pull of her innate allegiance to her own people. It was the very same pull that existed deep within Lexa, right to her core. And she had never been unaware of it.

"We have all been terrorised by the North," Young Lexa said, keeping her voice level and clear above the mounting cheers of her people. "But we will welcome them into this alliance. Why? We will welcome them because we are not prejudiced against all; we will believe in goodness before we trial upon bad. We have lived in fear of the Ice Nation for too *long*. There will be greater threats beyond the Queen Nia, and so we will welcome her into our alliance because *we do not fear her*. We will avenge those we have lost in the knowledge that we've risen above the ugly depths of power abuse and instead, built a capital boasting everything and anything. We are united, because *we are Trikru*! I pledge my life to yours, as much as you have already pledged yours to mine."

The cheers rose in volume to a point where it engulfed the rest of the younger Lexa's speech, and Lexa and Anya resigned to not hearing the rest of it. Lexa didn't need to hear the rest. She could see the newly founded boldness emblazoned in every Trikru man and woman's blood in that very moment, and she was speechless in how she'd forced it through.

Lexa watched silently as her younger self chatted good-naturedly with the Nightbloods, having stooped to sit on her podium, her legs swinging freely as they talked excitedly with her. She wondered if she could ever shake off the feeling of being selfish, and if that was just being *human*. After all, was that not what she was fighting to keep? A person could not exist without some

selfishness. Her past was littered with it. Costia. Polis. Anya. Clarke. At points she had been crippled by it; at others, she had never been braver because of it.

She knew she was as true as she could be when she talked of wanting the best for her people. That would always remain true.

"Did I do well?" Lexa asked mindlessly, turning towards Anya. Anya smiled back. "I...have always been touted as an altruist. By Titus; by myself, sometimes. But I look back and I have often followed my heart, and not my head. Even when I knew I should follow my head, I followed my heart. At those points, did I fail as a Commander?"

"I wouldn't know. This," Anya pointed to herself, "is not a Nightblood. But I'll tell you what I think. I think you're a good person, Lexa. And I think you think you're a good *Commander*, too. I think both co-exist. You've never talked about it though."

Lexa thought on it. "I try to be fair; to be just. I try to be firm and strong when I am weak. I had never tried to be *good*, though."

"Let me ask you: do you think you can be a good Commander *and* a good person?"

Immediately, she could see flashes of Mount Weather and leaving Clarke in the dark, damp night. She could see TonDC burn before her. She could see herself meeting Costia in secret behind Titus' back. She could see the barricade implemented whilst keeping the Skaikru ambassador in her bed.

The answer slipped from her. "No."

Anya nodded, as if she had been expecting it. "What are the three pillars again?"

This time, Lexa narrowed her eyes. Anya never stopped picking at it. She wouldn't stop *mocking* her because every time, she'd forget *one* pillar and every day it was different from the last. So she obviously knew all three—she was just fiddling. Like she did. "Compassion," Lexa recited, "Strength, and wisdom."

"You got hammered into you a very stone-like, old-fashioned, placid vision of what a Commander should be," Anya said gently, tilting her head to the side a little. In the sunlight, Lexa looked at her and for once, she did not look so *dead*. For once, she looked alive. Just this once. "And then you built a very much human three pillars of your ideals for the next Commander. Let's say we moulded two test babies down each path. Which one, do you think, would be the better Commander?"

Lexa's mouth opened and closed like a fish, and her stomach twisted in a somewhat pleasant realisation at what Anya was implying. *Oh...* And she had been completely right. Titus' teachings had not gone over Lexa's head, but what she so vigorously preached to Clarke was very different to what she taught her Nightbloods. Yet she had never prepared Clarke to bear the Commander-like burden she bore; she was forever preparing her Nightbloods for that. Now both Clarke and the Nightbloods had converged to the same point, via very different paths, and Lexa could suddenly *see*.

"Don't take it as a sudden blessing for gluttony," Anya teased her, watching the transformation of Lexa's expression as the cogs started to creak within her brain. "But think about yourself once in a while, Lexa. It doesn't change the strength of your command."

Clarke found him alone in the throne room.

Aden only ever sat on the throne when he was required to; this was most often when Titus brought in village disputes or clan disputes, or anything formal. Whenever Aden met with Titus, he sat in his chambers or he would sit on the steps and they would converse. Tonight Aden had picked the steps, and Clarke pushed through the double-doors to find the young boy alone, hunched over. She winced slightly at the way the wooden doors creaked at the hinge, and she walked hesitantly towards him, her step faltering when she realised Aden was holding Titus' gun.

"Commander," Clarke said softly, not wanting to startle him. She hadn't exactly been silent. Aden didn't respond immediately, slowly blinking as he turned the device over in his hands. He did not look up, and his locks of muddy blond hair fell over his eyes.

"I've been beginning to let the maids dress me—only my armoury and formal attire," Aden said. "One...one of the girls—Keela—she likes to brush my hair. I comb my hair every day. But for the past few days, I have let her do it. I...I let her do it because I like it when she brushes my hair. That's when we get to talk. She tells me about her parents, and her hopes, and her stories, and she brushes my hair exactly how I want it. It's mostly because I like talking to her, though. I think I only like how she brushes my hair because it is her brushing my hair. Half of the time, I'm not even sure what my hair looks like."

Clarke's eyes were fixed on the gun, hoping to whatever gods Aden prayed in that he would not shoot a bullet tonight. "She must be very pretty."

"She is. The prettiest. She is not beautiful, like the Commander, but beauty is for those like you, and pretty is for boys like me. And I do not think a girl as pretty as she would even spare a boy like myself a second glance if I were not the Commander-of-sorts."

"That's not true. You don't know that."

"I know so. There are more handsome boys my age, but none that bleed black."

Clarke fixed him with a firm look. The boy would not demean himself—not in front of her. Granted, Aden wasn't a hulk of muscle, but he was barely past puberty! He had sharp cheekbones, grand wit, intelligence and heart. That would beat any combination of teen 'handsome'. "Don't put yourself down like that. You are a handsome boy."

"When did you fall for my Commander?" Aden asked, straight to the point. He finally glanced up at her, his eyes gaunt from lack of sleep, reddened and slightly puffy. Clarke wanted to scoop him up and dump him in his bed chambers and tell him to sleep for two days, but the boy was stubborn—as stubborn as Lexa—and he was...by the gods, he was *brave*. "Was it because of her title?"

"I don't care a thing for her title," Clarke said immediately, and honestly. Her lips twitched in amusement as she realised just how true it was: Lexa's bravery and selflessness were traits she greatly respected and admired in her. Her fairness and capacity for justice was unrivalled. But she had fallen in love with the gentility of Lexa's lips, and the softness of her eyes. She had fallen for the woman who'd sworn fealty to her; not for the actuality, but for the thought in the gesture. She had fallen for *Lexa*, and not the Commander—though they were intertwined. And that was a lesson she was continually learning. "When your heart races because of someone; when you can't think of anyone else; when you're just so overwhelmed by them...Titles are the last thing you think of."

Aden fiddled with the gun, and he smiled somewhat awkwardly. They had never been

confidantes—but he confided in her a lot more than he did Titus. He confided in her perhaps the most of them all, because she was willing to listen, and because his Commander loved this reckless, often beyond idiotic Sky woman.

But then, he supposed, *titles are the last thing you think of.*

"You want her back as much as I do?" he asked, even though he was sure he didn't need to.

Clarke nodded. "If it means anything, Aden, you have me for as long as you need until she returns."

"Thank you, Clarke."

He shuffled to the left a little, the rock-hard steps cold and unwelcoming for his bum. But Clarke didn't say a word as she sat beside him, plucking the gun from his hands, and for the first time, Aden talked. He talked about Keela, and her family, and his family, and his favourite foods, and Lexa's worst joke, and his favourite colour, and Clarke's favourite drawings, and they laughed in the empty throne room, momentarily clear of the fear of blood and treachery within their own walls.

"There was this one time in training," Aden said keenly, and Clarke listened just as eagerly, because he so regularly mentioned Lexa—he so dearly *loved* Lexa—in his stories that she just wanted to grasp at any more of her. "One time, I had bettered, somehow, a big lad called Marol. I don't know how I did it. To this day, I still do not know how. I'm not sure the Commander knows how. But we had been sparring for hours. It grew more and more vicious as the minutes went by, because Marol and I sparred very few times. The first time we did it, he floored me within seconds. Then this time occurred, and we went on and on until my arms ached and my brain ached—I could barely think of strategy. But then I bettered him, and Marol was raging and kicking and screaming about it so loud that even when I told the Nightbloods to swear to secrecy, it had already seeped out! By then, even the butcher's boy knew of my victory against him, and all the girls working with Chef Daisey, preparing the spice-rub on the night's roast pork, even stopped that evening to congratulate me. I felt like a God. Lexa—the Commander—she only laughed and told me to enjoy my tenure as a God. Then she gave me her flagon of Polisian wine, and I know nothing of that night except what she teases me. She promises she has not told my parents of this, and also swears that my honour has been preserved—as have other girls' honours," he added hesitantly, pink-cheeked, and Clarke knew what he meant in a flash. She snorted.

"The things you learn," Clarke grinned. "I never thought of you as quite the womaniser, Aden."

"I'm not!" he insisted. "The Commander eventually relented and said I dribbled into her shoulder for most of the feast. Then she carried me home into my bed. She had me believe that I had *kissed* Keela for *weeks*! I could not even look her in the eye."

They quizzed each other, and Clarke probed deeper into Aden's life and upbringing. Aden asked mostly of how many people she'd kissed, how to talk to a girl, and how she could like the taste of wine, and how to feign liking the taste in front of grown men. They laughed as if their Commander was not near death in her bed. They supposed she was sitting on the throne behind them, watching them fondly as they talked well into the night.

Chapter End Notes

I certainly hadn't forgotten to write it -- in fact, I forgot it existed that I had written this

before -- so my deepest apologies for the delay. Life has been manic and I've been near delirious but thank you for the likes, kudos and esp the comments -- they do mean the world -- and I shall reply asap! Thanks again! :)

(These chapters won't stop getting bulkier, either. argh!)

A Whiskey, Neat, Please.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lexa and Anya seemed to journey for weeks, or that was what it felt like in this purgatory. Lexa had pictured a spiritual purgatory to be a little more taxing. It *had* been taxing, but she hadn't expected spare time to exchange secrets with Anya and get mercilessly teased for her daydreams of Clarke, as if Anya was making up for lost time. Maybe a part of her near-death was to indulge Anya in that, so Lexa caved anyway. She continued to row, and sometimes they would just sit and talk in the middle of this endless, depthless river. They never slept, they never ate, and they never even pissed. There was just no need. It seemed stupendously odd now Lexa thought about it, and for a disgusting moment she wondered when the last time she'd desired a shit was. It vexed her enough to not question it at all. She was the Commander of the bloody Coalition. She was not going to soil herself on a boat.

For the most part, Anya didn't *want* to leave her side. Lexa thought back to Anya's firm words and her revelation, of how she'd pledged herself to Becca to be Lexa's designated collector from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. Lexa cringed internally at the thought of having to finally release Anya, and it overpowered any sensation of calm or relief that she would be welcomed at death's gate by a friend. She hated that she was a burden on Anya enough to make her roam around this cold, damp place until she died. She hated that Anya willingly subjected herself to it, because she did not see it fit that Lexa be collected by anyone else. It was also why she had always held Anya so close to her heart.

So when in a flash, Anya disappeared, Lexa dazedly wondered where the hells she'd gone. There was literally nowhere else to go. And *then*, when a too-bright, too-saturated picture of perfection engulfed her, Lexa was totally disorientated by the searing heat of the sun. There were plains in front of her that stretched to miles, and the grass was blanketed by the warmth of the first day of summer. There were colourful flowers and the breeze was welcome. It was an ideal summer's day. There was not a cloud in the sky. All that was there were a hut, a lake, and the plains.

Lexa's first thought was Clarke. *This* was something she desired, but knew she could never have. She wanted plains for miles, and she wanted to sit and talk to the skies like she did when she was a child. In the day she would fish with Clarke, or she would read and Clarke would draw. Perhaps one day they would raise an abandoned child together, and Lexa would teach the child to swim and to hunt.

Her chest hurt because the image was so vivid. It was vivid because she knew, guiltily, of how frequently she thought of it. Of how strongly she wanted it. Of how bluntly she knew it could never happen, and had resigned herself to that the moment the thought sprang to mind. But like ideas, this was how pictures became ingrained in one's head: it had started off as a fleeting desire. Unbeknownst to Lexa, that picture had planted a seed in her brain and every time she momentarily shut off, or went to sleep, that seed would sprout and blossom. It was a full-grown tree now, and every leaf was a picture of what she could not have.

She had many.

She did not want to face her final test—this was, clearly, her final test—alone. Of all moments, this was the one she wanted Anya's counsel on the most, and she supposed that was why Anya had been taken away from her. She did not want to enter the hut and find Clarke messing with their two children—one boy and one girl—and be forced to choose. In this blissful picture she would live with Clarke in some sub-level of reality, but at least they would be *free*. Lexa knew if

she turned her back on this, this opportunity would not present itself in reality.

Lexa stood stock-still on the plains, arms rigid by her side. She felt like an idiot for not moving, and a coward for not being able to face the choice. She knew that the decision was; hells, if she asked Clarke, even Clarke would be able to decide for her.

It was bad enough that she had explored this deep into her subconscious, and that she'd been ensnared and completely overwhelmed by this idea that it had actually presented itself to her. Lexa knew of sacrifice and had accepted that upon taking the title of Commander. Lexa knew that in order to bring herself back to life, she could not stall for a lifetime here. Her heart wanted so badly to spend a never-aging, eternal lifetime here with Clarke, quiet and alone and isolated from the chaos and disorder that awaited them. Even if she recovered and the coalition embraced both the Ice Nation and the Skaikru in some miraculous, decades-long peace, futile arguments and differing loyalties still weighed heavily down on both of them. Here, Lexa could steer away from that.

But here, Lexa would also be abandoning her Nightbloods to a potential butchery by Ontari's hand. She would condemn her people to the fear of ice once more, and she would abandon everything she had worked so hard for. Life, as grim and bitter it was sometimes, was not this. *Desire*, she thought sullenly, was this. This was temptation. She glanced around at the trees, blooming green and dotted with delicious red apples. The berries were a little *too* blue, and the sky *too* clear.

Let the storm rip it apart, Lexa decided hesitantly, letting her feet pull her towards the hut. She didn't want to trap herself here for an eternity, and she knew that if she pulled open the door and found Clarke nursing the children she desired for them both, she would do exactly that. But she could not escape, and she would not damn her people because she could not act as the Commander would.

Swallowing the last of her self-doubt, she yanked open the door.

"Motherfucker!"

Lexa's eyes widened in shock as she held up her hands, a knee-jerk reaction, to the Skaikru weapon pointed at her. And an expletive she *swore* she'd heard Clarke use before. Before her stood a curvy woman perhaps ten years her senior. She was tall, with long, dark hair and an angular, beautiful face. She dressed rather ordinarily, considering she looked so inexplicably ethereal. Lexa could not hide her stunned stare.

"I come in peace," she tested the waters. It occurred to her then that this woman could see her in Lexa's own near-death world, which was (up until this point) impossible, and Lexa had never met her before. The woman kept the gun pointed at Lexa. "I mean no harm. This—this is my head," she added a little stupidly, hoping for an explanation. "I don't recognise you."

The woman's eyes fell to her blood-stained tunic and softened pitifully at the splodge of dark crimson. She continued to examine Lexa in cold silence, though her grip on her gun loosened. Lexa considered darting forwards to subdue her but there was not much point. She was in her own head; how could she kill herself? And she really did not want another bullet wound.

"You're the Commander," the woman deducted, and Lexa nodded slowly. The woman waited for her to speak, and Lexa offered nothing. Was she waiting for some kind of code word? "You're the...current Commander."

"I am dying," Lexa explained, pointing to her stomach unnecessarily. The woman looked as if she would burst out laughing, though Lexa surmised she restrained herself at Lexa's utter lack of mirth. "Well, I am near death, and I figure I am somewhat living in my brain in order to find a way

back."

"In your *brain*?" the woman repeated, dropping her gun arm entirely. Lexa let out a sigh of relief, dropping her own arms too. "That's a new one. The last Commander sailed straight across the shore and knocked on our hall's doors. I think she still thinks it's a never-ending feast for her achievements. And I don't really know what they are apart from a bunch of executions, by the sounds of it."

"Did—" Lexa hesitated, "Did you just say *hall*?"

"Yeah, what the heck did *you* hear?" The joke plopped miserably, and the woman rolled her eyes at Lexa's flat gaze. "Yes, I did. It's where we reside, mostly. Somehow. I don't know why, but this hut reappears for myself only. It's nice to be honest—to get away from everyone else. I've always wanted a life outside of the inner city sky-rises, so I guess that's it. But I've never had a visitor."

"I..."

"It's a bit of a stretch for your *brain*," the woman teased, eyes crinkling in amusement. Lexa could not fathom what was happening. Anya had assured her—*had* she ever assured her, actually?—that this was her brain. This was *her* near-death. It had to be inside her head. "I don't think my hut would reach your brain. And considering we've never actually met, I don't think, well, there are a lot of things I don't think will happen—this included—but—no, it just doesn't make sense. You know, in death, there are no labs to conduct regular tests of my sanity."

"Labs...death..."

"Oh—sorry. Near-death," the woman corrected herself politely. "Yeah, I forgot about that."

"What?"

"You seem confused, but so am I. How the hell did you land here? Like I said, I've never had a visitor. Then again, I've never had a Commander *near-death*. They all just *died*. So...what changed?"

"Changed how?"

"It's okay to be clueless. I know about as little as you do. Do you want a drink? Homemade special brew or some well aged Scotch. Your choice."

"My name is Lexa," she said lamely, trying to digest how someone could brew alcoholic beverages in her brain. She attempted to size the woman up. Was this now another anatomy lesson? Did odd mutants manifest themselves in their brain upon death? Or were they there all along? Lexa's baffled gaze trickled from the bottles of alcohol on the woman's table to the strange contraption propped on a desk. It was like a faded mirror, except it was black yet reflective, and it folded. There were letters she recognised.

"Laptop. Survived the shitfest down, somehow. I always swore that if I kicked an Acer off the top of the Empire State it would still work. Doesn't surprise me that it survived the earth's burning stratosphere." The woman welcomed Lexa in, obviously not cluing into the fact that none of these words made any sense to her. She shut the door behind them, and then extended a hand in greeting. "Becca."

"*Becca*?" Another knee-jerk reaction. Lexa only stared at the hand extended in invitation, blinking hard. She tried to blink herself awake. This—*this* was a dream too far. Becca's brow furrowed in confusion. "*Heda*?"

"Well—yes, as a matter of speaking." Becca spoke in rapid, clattering language—so fluid and so foreign that Lexa took a few seconds longer to catch up. "That's what people started calling me, anyway. I think they saw the Commander symbol on my jumpsuit and just kind of went with it. I mean, it was flattering, but it was also super shitty to see the result of—well—" Becca shrugged sadly. She had completely lost Lexa now, who was still staring blankly at her hand. "Banishment is a form of shame. Nobody wants to be an exile. You can say we were banished from earth as a result of our actions. We were greedy and stupid and capitalist. And then we fought. And you never really know you shitty it feels to be attacking your home until you're *attacking your home*. And then there's fucking radiation, and we find people survive, and it's *nuts*...it's *nuts* how quickly culture and spiritualism can form." Becca stilled for a bit. "Then again, I had a hippie phase in college and I'm pretty sure I blazed through seventy different cultures, so."

This cannot be in my brain. I had never even thought of what Becca's appearance may be. I do not even understand what she is saying. Immediately, Lexa dropped to her knees, dipping her head in sheer respect. If this was some sort of blessing for whichever path she ventured down—life or death—then she was surely compelled to go, just because of this. She had never pictured the First Commander to be so beautiful; so intelligent; so alluring. It was not attraction, but there was a heady pull that Becca possessed. Lexa wondered if that was why Becca bled black and true, and if that was how Becca had engineered life itself.

"*Heda*," Lexa said again, this time lowly and out of reverence. She did not dare look up yet without permission. All her life she had been the one commanding others. People bowed down to her. The only time Lexa had bowed before another was before the Ambassador of the Skaikru. "I don't know of how you conjured this, or how your spirit has entered my welcome gates—but I thank you for the unrivalled honour. I had never dreamed of meeting you, for the blessed duty and obligation passed through the spirits was enough; you pumped through my veins, and I was honoured. This is beyond both comprehension and privilege."

"*That...*" Lexa could hear the amusement in Becca's voice. "That is by *far* the best speech I've received. Jeez, you can really *talk*!"

Lexa still did not look up. "*Heda*?"

"Just call me Becca. It's a lot easier." Becca pulled her roughly to her feet, and Lexa was briefly disorientated by the sudden change in posture—and the fact that she was staring directly into the face of the First Commander, the saviour of the old world. "I'm guessing that's how you managed to make a fucking empire out of the damn place. The one before you was downing my wine so quick, and I think she actually liked that she could stay eternally drunk."

"Just..." *What?* "The last Commander? Uh—Oliss, the Tender?"

"Tender? *Fuck*," Becca laughed easily. Lexa found herself smiling too, though the entire comment flew above her head. It was like watching a divinity stand right before her. It practically *was*. Lexa was aware of how real this felt. This had been the first time someone had acknowledged her presence in the world of the near-death—or her brain—or whatever—wherever—she was. Lexa found herself following Becca silently to the table, and Becca grabbed two clear glasses from a cupboard and poured them both a honey-coloured liquid. Lexa inspected it, catching a whiff of the drink and grimacing. Becca snickered. "It's meant to be sipped. Oliss *the Tender* likes to wash it down like piss-mead."

Hesitantly, Lexa perched on the seat (only after Becca sat) and then drank when Becca drank. She was not much of a conversationalist at the moment; she could barely form a syllable. The strength of the drink—*alcohol*—hit her hard, and Lexa coughed in surprise. Becca laughed again, and it was like music ringing in her ears. She had a pleasant laugh. Lexa shook herself, and took another sip, licking her lips as she silently took in this otherworldly concoction. It was not fiery and

possessed a twinge of sweetness. It sat warmly in her belly, and Lexa took another sip.

"Go easy, sailor," Becca snorted, pouring Lexa another glass before she even realised she'd finished it. Lexa's brain fluttered. "So...how did you get here?"

"I nearly died," Lexa said, more offhandedly than she'd intended. Becca didn't seem to be much taken aback. "I was shot, by your gun. Not—yours. I mean...the Skaikru. It is a Skaikru weapon."

"Sky-crew?" Becca repeated after her, pausing so her lips sat on the rim of her glass. "From the sky?"

"Yes. They fell. From the sky," Lexa added unnecessarily. Becca was pouring her another glass.

"Holy shit. They made it. They really fucking made it."

"Uh?"

"I'll say cheers to that," Becca said in wonderment, clinking her glass against Lexa's. She tossed back the remaining liquid in her glass so Lexa followed suit. Her head spun in response, but Lexa found she rather liked the way this strong potion sat in her belly. It was warm and it masked the nasty bullet wound, and it also masked the thought that she might actually be dead. Mostly, it was a friendly safety cover for the fact that she still could not quite digest the fact that she was sitting opposite the First Commander herself. *I must be dead beyond salvaging.* She wanted to regret it; she wanted to damn herself for not getting back to Clarke, to her Nightbloods, her people—but instead she found herself utterly entranced by Becca's nonsensical talk of technology beyond her knowledge. How Becca had crafted life itself was the work of the First Commander, and that kind of knowledge was beyond Lexa's reach. All she could do was glue together the fragmented pieces of a legacy left by her. *Perhaps, she thought dizzily, that is why we are here. The First Commander cast out the ability for us to come together by scattering us like ashes. I am the Commander to put those pieces together like a jigsaw.*

I do like contradictions. Peace; war. Sky; earth. Blue; green.

Clarke; me.

"How can you see me?" Lexa asked, her tongue loosened by too many glasses of Becca's concoction. Yet Becca kept pouring. Lexa felt her cheeks heat up, knowing she was flushed, and wondered how Becca was not. Perhaps her Nightblood had been stronger; sturdier. What if Nightblood weakened by generation? "Can I seep into other spirits' minds? Would I be conscious of it?"

"I don't think you're quite getting the picture," Becca said, not unkindly. "It's a bit of a mind-fuck. Just think—we're all—we *were*—all living, like...here—" Becca bent her right arm horizontally, and held it mid-air. "This is *my* theory, anyway. I mean, of course, I could just be a fragment of your imagination and therefore *your* theory of what *my* theory is," she added lightly, grinning at Lexa's growing confusion. "But let's say we die, and we're like...here." Her left arm created another horizontal plane below her right arm. "And everyone goes there. Because we've essentially got the blood of a giant-ass computer that I killed in order to save the world or something, yeah, somehow we get a fuzzy in-between...like. Here." Her left arm, still horizontal, rose a little higher. It was still beneath her right arm. "And say our grand hall is at the end of one path diverging off a branch off this plane, the void you're stuck in between your death and your life is another branch."

"It is a tree of life," Lexa concluded.

Becca's arms sank and she took another sip of her drink. She chuckled. "Yeah, kinda. It's a bum theory though. Doesn't explain why you're here. Doesn't explain anything, but you find out that when you die, you have a shit-ton of time for theorising."

"The branches," Lexa said, sitting forward too quickly. She blinked the stars from her vision. "They resemble belief. Without belief you cannot ascertain what we proposed. Without belief there is no coalition; there are no Commanders; there are no Spirits; there are no Gods."

"Right..." Becca looked at her, differently, and quirked a smile. "Your theory is that belief connects these ideas? That *belief* is essentially our diesel?"

"It's a vessel...common belief...it unifies..." Lexa shrugged. "What's a diesel?"

"Never mind." Becca folded her arms, and Lexa knew that when she died—and she also knew in the back of her brain it would not be today—that she would have many conversations with Becca once more. "Enjoy your drink."

A thought hit her. "I hope there are books. I find myself without the time to read what I want."

"Fuck." Becca snorted into her drink, coughing. She smacked her chest, her cheeks pinkening, and Lexa leaned forwards, concerned she was going to be the cause of the First Commander's second death. Instead, Becca was laughing. "I'll arrange for a library in your name when it's your time."

"Right. Thank you," Lexa said seriously, feeling very odd in doing so. That had been her first request for death, and it was *strange*. It tingled all the way to the tips of her fingers and she shuddered, hastily taking another gulp of the concoction—which was getting easier and easier to drink. Becca kept pouring, and Lexa found her eyes drooping in a weird contentment that felt almost forbidden. "If you perhaps oversee us all, what would you say..." Lexa tried to find words. "How would you counsel me?"

"I ain't no guardian angel or anything," Becca said as a disclaimer. Her eyes glinted in amusement, and Lexa felt immediately comfortable at her affable nature. "But you feel like you're a good egg. I mean, you're obviously the philosopher type, which, you know, is refreshing. Oh my *God*, you should've seen me try and squeeze a conversation out of the Commander that followed me. You'll see him. He just grunts. Your intentions are good, though. Like, I can tell you're a good person."

"Would it be mutually exclusive to being a good Commander—in your opinion?" Lexa asked, suddenly very aware of Anya's words sitting in the back of her brain.

Becca eyed her. "I don't know about your political climate, but I'd prefer a good person to be in charge of a coalition than a bad person."

"I often felt protected by a presence that I suspect now was yours," Lexa confessed. Becca's eyes retained their amusement, clearly disbelieving of the young woman in front of her, but somewhat endeared by her integrity. "When I was young, I felt blanketed by the stars. I felt safe. I think, should we pass, if we could look upon the world via the stars, perhaps we can continue to defend our people, for those that believe in such a thing. If my duty, for example, offers solace to people now, as I live, perhaps it is a nice thing to co-exist in death as I can still offer solace." Lexa had confused *Becca* now, so she put her drink down on the table and clumsily bent her arms to represent the different 'planes' of existence Becca had been showing her earlier. A crass misinterpretation, though Becca's smile assured Lexa that maybe she liked it. "Maybe our duty never really stops."

"Your people are lucky," Becca decided suddenly, leaning back in her seat as she examined Lexa

again. Lexa only felt the brush of her kindness. She did not know how this was possible, but she relished it. *Maybe the dead are not really gone. I should have realised this when I saw Anya.* "Now drink up, because you're not gonna get a decent bottle of matured Scotch back where you're going. You deserve cases and cases of it, you really do, and I want you to talk to for a very long time. But I won't keep you."

Lexa smiled dozily. "I just have one question."

"Fire away, soldier."

"The Flame. Is it really your blood? All these years of fighting...just for that—"

"—Vial—" Becca helpfully supplied.

"Yes, *vi-yal*, is that—"

"The 'Flame'," Becca began, making great note of the quotation marks in the air. Lexa's eyes slowly traced her hands, her ability to keep up worn down by the fiery warmth in her belly. It billowed into her blood and encased her body. "It's an ideology. Blew up way quicker than I thought it would. But so long as you have it, the Flame exists."

Lexa scrunched her face up. "Have what?"

"What you've always had, Lexa, and what you've always tried to instil in others: *belief*."

We know you killed our Queen, young boy.

We know you murdered our Queen in cold-blood, on your own turf. How treacherous of you.

So we'll come for you, and we'll come for your sleeping Commander, and this time, we won't do you the service of sparing lives in your beloved capital.

Aden neatly folded the note and slipped it into his inner jacket pocket, staring at his reflection in the mirror before him. He'd ordered everyone out this morning, banned from the entire Polisian tower. A note had been slipped through his door in the middle of the night, and Aden had woken to a threat he naively thought he'd quashed. The fear that wracked his body was unrivalled. The thought that an Ice Nation army could bear quickly down upon them was terrifying. He knew there were barricades. If the Water People's lands were breached, Polis would hear of it. That was miles and miles up North—but then again, the Ice Queen herself had infiltrated his spy network so effortlessly. Aden did not know the severity of the threat. He wanted to trust his gut and think of the note as an empty threat, but there were *many* things he did not know. He did not know who had slipped him the note. He did not know of the Skaikru's position, and how much longer he could extend a hand to them for. Clarke kom Skaikru had become a hesitant friend, but Aden was unafraid to desert her people if it meant bolstering protection for his own. The Skaikru remained belligerent; it was only because his Commander had retained the barricade that Aden decided to as well.

Now he had sparked a revolt, and what good was he doing by upholding his Commander's wishes with the Skaikru if all he'd done was snap the tense truce she'd welded between the coalition and the Ice Nation in two?

The Polisian tower was eerily silent when there was *nobody* save for himself and Lexa in the room above, sleeping silently. Aden exhaled deeply, and peered at his swollen eye, bruised in the scuffle. Nyko had given him a pot of stodgy paste to apply daily, but it stank and it was a strange green colour. Today, Aden put the pot aside. One day of non-application could not do much harm.

He put on a clean tunic and tucked it into his breeches, securing the belt around his waist. Hastily, he took his sword and sheathed it, pulling on his boots. Lastly, he splashed his face with a bowl of cold water, and he took a moment to rest both hands on either side of his wooden case of drawers. Aden dipped his head, knowing why he'd sent everyone else outside. He did not want a single soul to talk to him today except the Commander's. He would not accept an audience, so there was no need for looking presentable. But Aden decided to comb his hair anyway, and plucked a simple black jacket to wear. Then, carefully, he attached the red sash of the Commander's to his uniform and traipsed up the staircase.

Gently, as if he would wake his Commander, he opened the door to her bed chambers. He'd already sent Clarke out this morning. She had been the first to be sent away, because he knew he'd have to get his men to practically wrench her away from Lexa's side. He made sure everyone was rounded up and gone. He'd sent Nyko downstairs to fetch Titus too. Indra was the last, and she had assured him he was doing a good job. He was not too sure if she believed it, but he nodded, and requested she guard the tower with Nyko.

His Commander was asleep, and she looked so at peace. It was the peace she held—it was simply her aura—and the peace she'd so carefully crafted when taking upon this duty. Aden was on the brink of shattering it, and he feared not for his life but for Lexa's disappointment should she wake to her coalition in flames. He stood in the doorway, fiddling with the hilt of his sheathed sword, tapping his foot. He wanted so badly to just shake her awake. Aden clenched his jaw.

There was blood—his first blood drawn—on his hands. And it was not just an ordinary kill; it was the *Ice Queen*. He could still remember, so vividly, the day he'd watched his mighty Commander overpower Prince Roan in her trial by combat. He remembered how mercilessly she'd delivered justice via her point-accurate throw of the spear. He hoped that she would see his actions as justice, and not disregard for her laws.

Mostly, he just wanted her back.

Aden closed the door behind them, unnecessarily, but out of courtesy. It felt a little more private like this. Slowly, he edged towards the bed and sat where Clarke usually would, resting his elbows on the bed as he gazed at her. His Commander was the 'most'. She was the most beautiful; the most revolutionary; the most trustworthy; the most intelligent; the most compassionate; the most understanding...

"I wish you could counsel me, *Heda*," Aden said quietly, sombrely. He knew when Lexa woke, she would return to her duty and he would be just another Nightblood. But he was afraid, because the next time—if he bettered the trials—he ascended the Commander's throne for real, Lexa would not be here to counsel him. Just like now. "I am trying to be compassionate, and wise, and strong. They are but three pillars, yet it is *so hard* to uphold all three of them simultaneously, every day. There are moments in each day I wish to betray them; sometimes, I have done, unwittingly. I will reprimand myself, and subject myself to punishment you judge accordingly when you return, *Heda*. But mostly, I am scared.

"I am scared because I think I have sparked another war. I think our coalition may fragment, though the clan leaders assure me of their loyalty. It is the Ice Nation I am worried about. And I am worried about the Skaikru, too. I have continued to implement your barricade, but the men I send to guard the gates are restless and they want this over and done with. I don't disagree.

Charles Pike is an irrepressible man. He will not join the coalition. I've liaised with our Skaikru allies, but I'm not too sure what can be salvaged there. I'm just...not sure of much. You had such faith in me, *Heda*, and my greatest fear is that I have failed you."

Aden searched her face for any signs of a reaction, but he got nothing. He hadn't expected anything anyway. Nevertheless, he took her right hand in his and clasped tight, noticing the clamminess yet warmth of her. She wasn't cold; she wasn't *dead*. She was very much alive; she just had to work her way back to their world.

If anyone were to fight their way through a forestry of death and near-murder, it would be Lexa kom Trikru.

He did not ask her for an answer or any counsel on the note. That, he would deal with. For now, he would take today to look after his Commander, as he should've done a while ago. Self-consciously, he took the red sash off his uniform and draped it over the headboard. It was Lexa's by right, and every time he wore it he simply felt like a fraud.

Then he prayed as he did every day, for the Commander's health, well-being and happiness wherever she was. Whether she was stuck in her mind, or in another world, or simply asleep for too long, Aden wished that her spirit was well. You could break Commander Lexa's body but you could never break her spirit, so her spirit was what Aden prayed for, as well as swift but complete healing. Truthfully, Aden wasn't sure if his prayers were being listened to, but he believed. And he believed that if he pestered the gods or the spirits or the stars or whomever would listen to him enough, that something would happen.

"I'm doing as you counselled," Aden told her, like he would tell an old friend of his day. "I have noticed, *Heda*, that I cannot say that '*I'm doing as you instructed*' because you never did. Was it intentional? Was it so I could make my own choices?" Aden bowed his head, closing his eyes. "A better interim successor would've done so much good. I've tried, but I've ended up causing so much *bad*. I don't know where I'm going wrong. I seek counsel with Indra, rather than Titus, as you advised. I still remember asking why. The lengthier my supposed leadership is, the further I understand why. But I miss your lessons. I miss your guidance. I miss your Commandership. It will not make you come back to us, but I hope you can hear me. I hope you know. You're missed. So much."

The last part came out as not much more than a whisper and Aden pressed his face against Lexa's duvet, scrunching his eyes up. He would not cry in front of his Commander. But he was so tired; he was so trodden down; so deep in grief, and so mournful of that too.

He was failing. Was that not enough?

Lexa could not even remember rowing this time. It mattered none; she was soon washed up in the middle of Polis, by a young family's small brick house. Anya met her outside the door. It was musky nightfall so Lexa could barely see her until she came right into her face, as she always did, and Anya looked *dead*. Lexa was used to this by now, but Anya's extremities of death—and it was mind-boggling to think one could have *extremities* of such a final process—was ultimately unsettling. She wasn't just a stench to carry around, a grey drab of flesh; there was residue discharge dripping from her like a snail left its tracks. Lexa had bunched her nose up the first time she'd encountered her dead mentor. This time, she nearly vomited.

"Alright," Anya snapped, "There's no need to rub it in."

"You made such grand promises for *my* death," Lexa said, "How dead exactly will you *be* when I die?"

"If someone gathers enough brains to clap you over the head, fatally, quick enough, then hopefully I won't be leaking this green-yellow stuff." Anya grimaced. "I wouldn't recommend touching it."

"What harm will it do my subconscious?"

"I don't know, Lexa. Poison your brain into forever-loops of you and Clarke fucking? If so, then I'm out. Can we please just get back on track?"

"Track where?"

"Last time I checked, we were in Polis."

"Last time *I* checked, you were all out of lessons."

"You don't know that," Anya said shiftily. They glared at each other for a moment, and then Anya huffed. "Alright. You got me. I don't know why we're here either."

"Great."

They were outside a modest Polisian house. It was the first of its kind. Small, lopsided, but firm with stone. Lexa glanced around them. Polis was plain but it was no longer the dusty wreckage they'd assumed conquer of. This was the beginning of Polisian civilisation, and she was sure she couldn't even remember this part. That was until she recognised a mop of red hair.

Lexa racked her brains. He was from the Northern parts of her territory—and his village had been ransacked mercilessly. With his baby daughter, they had journeyed down south once he'd made his value to Lexa clear. He was a skilled cartographer. Lexa remembered now. His name was Konner, and when she saw herself, young and hooded, carrying a flame-torch for navigation, she felt her heart beat a little faster. Her younger self was greeted warmly by Konner, her flame-torch set aside.

"Konner," the young Lexa greeted as she stepped inside, ducking her head to avoid clattering the doorframe. Konner smiled slightly at her, and he gestured to their gurgling newborn, crying a little now Lexa had interrupted their peaceful interlude. "Ah. Forgive me—"

"Please, *Heda*," Konner said, grappling with the newborn and raising him from his cot. The newborn's chubby legs kicked out in argument, but Konner remained stern. "You are not disturbing us."

"You have named him?" Lexa asked.

"Kai," Konner said proudly. "For the number of times you revel at the sky, *Heda*. I've noticed your fondness during our ventures together. We grew close because I would sketch the terrain in the night, safe from belligerents, and guarded by yourself, who wanted something better to do than to stare blankly up at the sky and make your extraordinary wishes."

Anya snorted beside her, and the near-death Lexa elbowed her as hard as she could. It seemed that everyone, past and present, enjoyed reminding her of what a sky-dozy loopy one she could be sometimes. Lexa was almost compelled to ask them: did they not find the sky fascinating? A whirl of endless questions and answers—and apparently, since experiencing the Skaikru—an

opportunity? To feel? To fight? To make peace with?

To love?

A lump had formed in her throat—something she couldn't describe at all. She didn't think this was funny. But she could still feel the way the newborn had made her feel. It made her desire; it made her want; it made her sad, for Konner and Kai had set up a modest but content life in which she could never have. She would be a war commander to her grave. She would not run from duty. But this...this was a glimpse into a future she could never have but could always crave. And if Lexa had really looked at herself, she would've gleaned that she'd only visited Konner to see this.

Konner had been a key part in their talks with Dain of the Mountain People. Like herself, Dain had never wanted war—but he never knew the solution, either. And that was—he barely knew to negotiate. In the rocky first months they'd navigated Dain's terrain, they'd found themselves picked off quite easily. For Dain's archers, it was easy to lurk behind their mountainous advantage and simply shoot accurately at a Trikru warrior who'd wandered out of place. Konner had been the key into unravelling all of that. Lexa remembered not sleeping a night for three months, and that was to secure Dain's respect and friendship. She would often scout with him as he sketched the terrain and land before him, with Lexa providing a good cover as he drew.

It was harder for Dain's people to hunt at night, knowing the Trikru prowled through their territory. Once Konner's first map had been assembled, it had been quickly redrawn again and again, until nearly every soldier within Lexa's unit had a copy of Konner's map. They had swiftly and successfully gained upon Dain's territory in the night, and thus Lexa often drew Konner as the essential man within their squadron. One would not think a cartographer. Konner was not a burly man, but he was lean and he was intelligent, and Lexa valued his integrity and his courage to go out in the middle of the night—with every fear that he'd be killed—in order to preserve his Commander's legacy.

Konner's wife had never been replaced since the early raids pre-coalition, and Konner had never expressed any desire to raise his son with someone else. It was not that Konner was unattractive, or not outgoing—he just lacked desire in finding someone like that. His first and only love, Ana, was buried by the many streams that ran through Trikru land.

But he'd chosen to go to Polis to help with Lexa's blueprints and manual labour. Little Kai would be looked after by a neighbour. Tonight, with the company of Lexa and some sweet mead, Kai would be bouncing on Lexa's lap, chubby, giggling and far too adorable.

Lexa almost expected Anya to be miming the motion of vomiting—but both women seemed to be entranced by the site of little Kai, waddling around.

"I don't know how I shall ever repay you, *Heda*," Konner said as poured mead into mugs for them both. "You saved my life as you scouted with me. You save my life after my village is raided. You are here again in the capital, saving my day, as you play with my little monster there."

"It is nothing." Lexa's dismissal was interrupted halfway by a guttural laugh, as she tickled Kai's belly. Kai near-melted into her embrace, and chubby limbs were suddenly flying everywhere as Lexa continued her tickle mission, face split into a broad grin. She was barely listening to Konner's earnest thanks—and Konner *was* a good friend of hers—because Kai was simply too much.

"Look at that little tuft of hair," Lexa declared proudly, and Konner laughed, sipping his mead. He decided tonight was not the night of discussions; of Polisian blueprints. Tonight he would watch his Commander revert to a child and play with his son. "Look at that muzz of persistent red hair! A bright head for an undoubtedly bright boy. Hmm? *Hmm?*"

"I would hope so," Konner said mildly. He smiled.

"Are you not a charmer?" Lexa made indistinguishable noises (that seemed to disgust Anya) as she muzzled into an all-too-fat Kai, and bounced him up and down from her lap, raising sound effects as she dangled him up, and then a dramatic "zzwwuiiiishhhh" as he fell back down. Whatever noises the young and dazzled Lexa seemed to be making, it was clear: she really adored the boy. Between Kai padding at her nose and then her forehead ("Are you saying I have a big forehead? Is that how you will charm all the girls?") Konner and Lexa discussed the building plans of the grand Polisian tower. It was an ambitious project, but one that would be a marvel once successful. Lexa knew it would be a huge failure if not—but she couldn't think that way. She *knew* this tower would happen. She knew Konner would help her build it.

And so he did.

"It is difficult," Konner confessed after a mug of mead too many, and Kai was quietly snoozing in the cot he'd built. It barely creaked as it rocked with movement, and Lexa bowed her head in respect. Ana had been Konner's wife, and she had been killed in the dozen or so village ransacks the Ice Nation had carried out in a retaliation (of something). Lexa spun it so it was partially her fault—she had provoked them somehow. She did not want her people believing that an entire nation could be as cruel as to raid villages just for the sake of power—but then again, she had been young and naive at the time, too.

"I meant what I said," Young Lexa said seriously. "Should you need any leave, you will tell me. I shan't overwork you, Konner. You are valued, and you have put my life in my hands, and vice versa. Just to build this capital. If you need some time..."

"No, no, I think this is well enough," Konner interrupted her, good-naturedly. "What you have offered myself, and Kai, is more than enough. Ana will agree, in the stars. I must admit—every child needs their mother's touch. I have no desire to give Kai another mother. Is that a sin?"

"No. No." Lexa shook her head, wringing her hands together. What right did she have, to tell Konner this, when she was barely of age? "A woman is not the same as a mother. Should you love another, that would be amazing. Should you not, that changes nothing. You are a good man, who had a good wife, who birthed a good son. None of that changes."

"If I may confess..." Konner refilled their mugs. "I feel like I have run out of neighbours. I have had to give Kai out to them so many times during the day that sometimes I wonder if they talk behind my back and ponder if I neglect my boy. I would never," he added, as if Lexa needed to hear it.

"You needn't tell *me* that. But if you should feel as if anyone needs a *harsh reminder* of the non-existence of your neglect—"

"No, no—" Konner shook his hands, nearly spilling his mead. "That is not what I meant, *Heda*. I simply doubt my duty as a father. I love Kai—of course I do. But..."

"You love Polis," Lexa said quietly.

"Those things you said, *Heda*—about unity, power, joy...all inside the capital built by our Trikru hands! You took me from the North and forged me as a man of the forest. The allegiance raised first by *our* Trikru commander! We spent so much *time* journeying from place to place, securing allies and bonds with the clan chiefs that it was a miracle I had any time to make that little one—" Konner gestured good-naturedly to Kai, who was snoozing, "over there. But I still feel the pump of blood in my ears at the slightest hitch of uncertainty; the sudden and suppressing closeness of everyone when we defended an ambush. The celebrations and free-flowing joy at your many

conquests and wins. Something to not forget, for it is something that will not happen again," Konner added, somewhat wistfully, but proudly, too.

"I know you lost someone you loved, Commander. Oh, me too. We all have. But I know none shall compare to your girl. But when you told me that in sticking by you, you'd guarantee me a life where I could bring up my boy with the best of a coalition's resources, if I just remained loyal, I would scoff in derision. I *did* scoff in derision, but I did it anyway. I can't believe it." Konner's eyes glistened now, brimming with tears he refused to shed. "All my life you were just my *Heda*. Now you are as everyone says: revolutionary, brilliant—"

"But only your *Heda*," Lexa cut him off, not unkindly, as she refilled their tankards. Konner took an embarrassed gulp from it, and Lexa smiled into her sip. "I am only a young woman, still. I think some look at me and expect the wisdom of a wizened, well-trained Polisian politician."

Konner snorted into his drink. "Well, arguably, *Heda*, in some parts—"

"Drink," Lexa commanded him, humorously, and he did so. Though there was a *little* truth to her embarrassment; she didn't want to be seen as some godly divinity because of what she'd achieved. They still had far to go yet. Words like 'revolutionary' and 'upheaval' and 'radical' had always been thrown around. Lately they had started to sound like bellows. Lexa tried not to think of them too much. She would not build a legacy of fair, just, self-providing men, women, children, families—just because she was '*radical*'. She would build a legacy of peace because she loved her people just like the previous Commander...and was perhaps the first to find a way to express it.

It did not come without its pitfalls. Lexa had spent so long obsessing over her people's happiness; Anya had scolded her regularly for neglecting her own. Truly, the happiness of her people was also hers; she wanted to pulsate in each and every one of them. Lexa liked to think of it as inspiring; as powerful. Anya had gotten herself into a heavy smack-down (which she lost, much to ire) when she called Lexa out—on her 'parasitic' ways.

"Would you die for one of your own?" Anya had asked her, breathlessly, in-between rounds. Lexa and Anya had circled each other, taking up spare logs for a battering fight.

Lexa scoffed. "Of course I would. My duty as the Commander dictates—"

"It dictates *nothing*," Anya roared, smacking forward to find herself easily parried by Lexa and pushed to one side. She nearly twisted her ankle in the unsteady ground, and recovered quickly. "You do realise that every single one of your people would sacrifice themselves for you, right? That's the whole point of being a Commander."

"Then I would sacrifice for any one of them. A deal works both ways. A life is a life."

"Yours is not *just* any life! You bleed black! You lead an army with a simple word. You have crafted a new world for everyone to live in. So young kids can grow up without the fear of cold butchery. *You* have done this—*you*—and you still hold yourself among those who would sacrifice? That's for your army, Lexa. Not for you."

"Am I not Commander in Chief of my armies?"

"...Well...yes, but—"

"I know your argument, Anya. And I know it to be true." Lexa rested the tip of her stick and locked it into the mud, glancing up at the pitter-patter of rain that drenched them. It was the kind that felt like walking through the mist only to be frozen to the core in seconds. "But the moment I start abusing my power is the moment gluttony invades; the moment I put myself first ahead of

everyone else, I should suffer a coup. See to that, Anya. I have counsels all around me. But my guidance from you has never been wrong. And I think you the bravest to see a command like this. If clan leaders think me ill to rule, they will challenge me. But if *you* think me ill to rule, then—"

SMACK. Anya's log flew up and decked her across the face, sending Lexa sprawling into the mud. Both the Dead version and near-death version of themselves flinched in the backdrop as they watched Anya and Lexa deck it out in the palisade. Nobody wanted to fight in the conditions, where the rain turned the skies all grey and the mud felt like wading through impossible rapids. Lexa slid a couple of times and even face-planted once in her attempt to scramble back up, steadying herself with her log. Grips on shoes: that would be something to implement at a later point.

But not—*SMACK*—

"You really went for it that day," Lexa said, amused, as they both winced and screwed their eyes shut—only to find themselves memorised by a dozing Kai and a sweetly-drunk Konner in the warm house. Lexa had stopped asking. She didn't even know *when* they had been transported back to the sparring pits, or why they'd been shown that, but—

"You said a lot of things," Anya said shortly. "A lot of idiotic, final, stupid things. You know, all I've gained since you ascending control of not just Trikru but the coalition too, is more talk of your impending death. It's like you started talking about it the *moment* your invincibility was starting to peak. When it did peak, you were practically preaching about your death to me. Do you know how annoying it is to patch you up after a battle, after you'd won someone's territory, negotiated peace with them, only to be rewarded with some grim statement of doom for the next battle you enter? If you take anything away from my dying self, please note that maybe you should lighten up a little."

Lexa raised an unimpressed brow. "Lighten up?"

"Enjoy yourself. Fuck Clarke. Just don't make me walk in on that memory. I don't know. Just enjoy it." Anya was being a dolt, but Lexa found herself smiling at her words anyway. They were patrolling the city walls, where life had sprouted from Polis. Torches were lit. Kids could still be heard squealing playfully. There was a full guard beneath, and as she looked over the city—freshly built, and freshly made the capital—oh, she'd never seen anything like it.

"...Enjoy *this*," Anya breathed, gesturing towards the space beneath them. "My gods, this is otherworldly."

"Mhm. You see her?" Lexa pointed to a kitchen maid, scuttling across the capital in the night. Anya nodded. "It's hers. Oh, and her?" She pointed to the blacksmith's apprentice, sharpening swords. She was muscular and the sweat that clung to her arms shone. "It's hers, too. It's Kai's. It's Konner's. It's still yours. We had a crypt built beneath the city. I wonder if you feel me," she added quietly, resting her forearms on the edge. Anya joined her curiously. "Every time I'm in Polis I visit the crypts at least once a week. At least once, because yours is the one I frequent the most. Do you hear me? Asking for help? Telling you about the day?"

Anya's (very, very dead) eyes softened. They would've crumbled to dust if they'd softened anymore. She offered Lexa a small smile as they accompanied each other in enjoyable silence. Lexa wondered if they could live up here a lifetime. That was two now, counting Becca's place—two incidences in which Death had teased a world much better than her current situation with Life, and Lexa *felt* that pull. Hard.

She did not give a yes or no. "But I *felt*," Anya said, curiosity embellishing her words to show that she didn't have a fucking clue about what this all meant, either. "I felt it when you near-died. It

was as if that bald-headed lunatic shot *me*, too. And I'm already dead. Excuse me if I'm grumpy, but I thought Death was merely rubbing salt to the wound considering some blithering idiot of a Skaikru member shot me down."

Anya rubbed the back of her head subconsciously, and then laughed. "But you're a stickler for reason; you find treasure where others see dirt; you pick diamonds to shine before they are indeed diamonds...you found Clarke kom Skaikru," she finished. "What you two have achieved together is beyond ridiculous. *She* is beyond ridiculous. Maybe that's why you love her."

Lexa stilled, her cheeks reddening. "Perhaps so."

"Then maybe that is why we watch Kai snuggle into his father as he sleeps," Anya noted, as they blew out the candles of Konner's house and snuck out as quietly as they can. Anya shamelessly stole a bread roll and wolfed it down. Lexa did not bother pointing out to her that as promptly as she ate it, it just fell out of her. "Your love for Clarke is unrivalled."

"I loved Costia too," Lexa declared, truthfully. Anya quirked a smile at her. "But...yes. I love Clarke. Immeasurably. With all my heart—as rotten, treacherous and scarred as it is—she knows it, equals it, and accepts it. I don't think she would offer me the choice of *not* loving her."

"Then a reminder," Anya decided, patting the solid door to Konner's house. "It is something I know you do not take lightly, or forget. But don't let her get in the way of your people. Don't—" she butted in, when Lexa opened her mouth, "lie to me. Don't tell me you love your people more than you love Clarke. That's complete rubbish and you know it, so save your breath." Lexa's shoulders deflated. "But you have manoeuvred so tactically brilliantly that you must love her, on the condition that she is of your people. Of course it's more than that. But at least you have a base."

"I didn't create that on purpose."

"I suppose you didn't." Anya saluted at a young boy playing dress-up, seemingly with his dozing father's uniform—he was of the morning watch, it seemed—running around with a few other scraggly boys following him. She grinned rakishly at him, and though they saw only through her, Anya seemed to gain some satisfaction from the similar grin they elicited from Lexa. "I am a mountain of regrets. I wish I had fought for you more. I lost control of you to Titus a long time ago. I wish he never told you that love was weakness. I wish he'd controlled your passion and vengeance and justness and power and let it into your veins; not let it consume you. Instead he imprisoned it, for a man like Titus does not want to risk any mistakes in a polished Polisian regime. He has his intentions," she added in defence of him, shrugging. "It is the Flamekeeper's duty, I suppose. But you are not a little girl, Lexa. You needn't be told to love who and who not to. You choose yourself and then everyone else adapts. Your heart was forced to reside in the stoniest, coldest and cruellest of self-imposed prisons."

It was now Lexa realised there was hardly any distance between them. They were still in Polis, but everyone had seemingly gone to bed (even the drunkard on the street every night). It was eerily quiet, but Lexa knew if they retracked and pushed open Konner's door, he would still be there, sleeping peacefully with his son.

"A commander can't rule from their heart, Anya. Too many mistakes would be made. Sentimentalities must be the price we pay if we are to lead a majority victory—and that majority victory is seeing every, if not most, of my people through to the next day, alive, well-fed, well-trained, and with purpose."

"I am not saying to rule from your heart. Gosh, your brains are too good to be wasted! But I am saying that...this love you have with Clarke..." Anya tried to gauge Lexa's response, and seeing

her flush so vehemently, realised she'd missed the point. "Seeing all these buildings ever built; seeing all those children dance in the streets; seeing your earnest Nightbloods learning the pillars of being a Commander...you don't fashion them of hard, cold politics. You came to Polis to bless it with love. You built it but only allowed those who would *love* Polis, and you, build it. The walls surrounding us, love; the portcullis loves all it welcomes through those gates; the sparring pits love as a cushioning for when we're struck down; you love, from your jagged throne, because it is *not* weak. It is strong, all-consuming, and powerful. It has won you a big ally in *Wanheda*. It has won you the most loyal of mentors in life and death in me. It has won you a dream-team of people protecting you; of the people who may follow, like Aden.

"See as I show you—see as I say—and perhaps you can interject if you disagree—but is this—" Anya gestured to the entirety of Polis, "engineered from your heart, would you say, Lexa? The practicalities of your life's work may rest in your mind, yes—but the idea? The promises? The ideology that we'd be stronger together than apart? That you'd rather team up and prosper, than kill each other like savages? It is not just simple logic to ensure the security of our futures in our sons, daughters, grand-sons, grand-daughters...and so on...it is because you were seized by Polisian Guards the day you were discovered to be a Nightblood. It is because I was a simple foot-soldier when I first saw you: you cried, you sobbed—as they took you away from all you'd ever known. Then you just went limp. I thought for a second then that you had no fight left in you. But I was wrong. It was then, you started to build a reservoir for all the castaways of feelings from your heart. It is a river. It flows and never ends. And that is because you loved—you *love*—and that is what sets you apart."

There was no joking about anymore. This time, Anya allowed Lexa to mull over the words as they actually strode to shore. Lexa knew for sure there was no beach in Polis, but they seemed to walk for a hundred yards and suddenly their rickety boat—undamaged and with no leaks, considering how *long* they seemed to have been rowing for—awaited them. Automatically, Lexa took the oars and rowed out into the lake, unsure of what was next. But in the middle, she stopped, prompting Anya's curious gaze.

She reached over to one side to scoop up some of the water they'd been coasting along, and drank it.

Anya watched her, and it was not fatigued madness that drove Lexa into thinking she was smiling. Smiling at Lexa's bright, intelligent face.

It was as if she'd never been shot.

"You always speak of your people. I thought it would be good for you to be remembered of it, as they remember you for it. Konner is but one example."

"And you say it is love I harbour, that allows for this?"

"Do you proclaim it as anything else?"

Lexa took an empty flagon and filled it with the water they'd been rowing in. It should've been disgusting. Anya had pissed repeatedly in the lake. But as she took another long gulp, she felt she had never been more refreshed in her life.

"Do you think that love I harbour would bring me back to the life I am supposed to be in?"

Anya's eyes glinted tantalisingly, impressed. "That's the spirit."

"Sitting at my desk, going through my files, my items..." The voice came from the door, but Octavia Blake would be damned if she got to a point in her life when she didn't recognise her brother's. She swivelled around in her seat, her eyebrows raised. Her brother was just as unimpressed, moving from slouching against the door-frame to shutting the door behind him. He knew just as well as Octavia that pretences had to be made here in Arkadia—and despite his affiliation, he would not afflict pain upon his sister. Any more.

"What the hell are you doing, Octavia?" Bellamy hissed as he shut the door, and locked it. Octavia bristled. Paranoid—check.

"As you say." Octavia lolled back in her—Bellamy's—armchair, her eyes scanning the blueprints on the wall. There were further plans stuck clumsily up onto the wall—plans of attack, of spy routes—

"Pike finds out you've seen any of that, and you're dead," Bellamy blabbered, whirling her armchair around. His arms held her firm in the seat and she stared at him. Eyes, hollow from the hurt and sin of butchery—the callousness of it, the extremity of their xenophobia—and his heart was like a mountain, spitting lava every now and then. His heart hurt, because his heart existed. Of everyone, Bellamy had always been the one who went heart first, then head; even Clarke—even with something like Mount Weather—had used her brains. But Bellamy went on gut-instinct; collective protecting; fervent belief in something too good to be true.

He was lost. Then he did...*so many things...so many*, and Octavia was not sure if she could even signal him back to her—let alone *pull* him back.

Octavia clenched her jaw. The least she could do was pull him away from the goddamn *door*. Right next to it was a big red button—why was it always big red buttons?—that was a duress one. Luckily for her, Bellamy did not flick the lights on. He supposed he wanted no-one to think that he was home, now that he'd locked the door. She could only see a shadow of his face, but she'd seen him earlier in the compound today. Her brother was *tired*. She could tell by the heavy bags under his eyes and the way he slouched rather than walked. Pike was propping him up only by hatred—not by love, or nurturing, or mentoring.

Pure hatred could not power or fuel a person forever. Eventually it would consume them. Octavia didn't want to see her brother slip into that molten lava. She could already see the spark in his eyes fade away. He'd always been so charismatic, so charming—so *effective*—and that was why Pike had picked him. But Pike had chipped away at him.

"I can press the panic button, O," Bellamy said lowly. "And then all of this will be over. Your little lonely crusade against me..."

"You won't."

"Yeah?" In the darkness she could see Bellamy's big (comforting) palms hover over the button. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't bust your ass. You beat the *shit* out of me, O."

"Because I'm gonna do this." Octavia shot up from Bellamy's armchair, wielding the gun he'd stashed away, clumsily in an unlocked drawer by his desk. Even in the darkness they both could see the shadow of what the weapon was, and what Octavia was doing. Bellamy's hand stilled.

"*Fuck*." Bellamy clenched his fists, and she could see the way he scrunched his eyes up. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* Octavia—Jesus *Christ!* Do you have *any* idea what's gonna happen to you if you shoot me? You and me—we're at odds, *I know* that! But I *still* made up some bullshit excuse when Pike

asked me about my injuries from you. I can't protect you if you shoot me *dead!* Fuck—*fuck*—O, I'm not begging for *my* life here—"

"I don't want you begging for anyone's," Octavia snapped, hoping her voice wasn't quivering. She could feel her arms shaking as she held the gun. "I can defend myself, Bell. You of all people know that."

"I know. I know! Fuck." Bellamy's hands drew away from the panic button to desperately rumple his hair in distress, still closing his eyes. "You're putting me in an impossible position."

"It's not impossible. Dissociate from Pike. Spread the word."

"It's not as easy as you make it out to be, O! There are all sorts of fucking politics and all that shit you know I'm not good at—"

"Maybe if you'd taken Kane's tutelage instead, you would've been better at that side of things," Octavia hissed, feeling her sweaty, clammy palms. She strengthened her grip on the gun. "You went way out of line. You had two paths, and you chose the wrong one."

"What do you want, O? I don't *know* what to do anymore. I don't know."

"I want you to be my brother," Octavia pleaded, slowly lowering the gun. Bellamy didn't advance. "I want you to be the Bell I knew. You were a cocky, threesome-loving dickhead, but you weren't *this*." She gestured at the blueprints. "You weren't genocidal. You didn't plot village massacres. You—"

"I can't." The way Bellamy's voice sounded, it sounded as if he was close to tears himself. Octavia could feel them prick at her vision, and she wondered if this was truly him—her Bell—or if it was the angry monster he'd unleashed at Clarke that day. "You said it yourself. I'm...I'm too far gone."

"Only if you don't let us help you back."

Distracted, Octavia tore her gaze away from him. It was enough having Bellamy storm through the compound with his crew, armed to the max and appearing as if he was on some sort of ambush mission. It was another to see him so...*small*. Indra would call him pathetic. He was whiney; he moaned; but he never begged. He was sometimes pessimistic—but he was never one to give up. He was never one to say *I can't*.

She let the gun stay by her side.

Bellamy didn't move. "You won't get out of this scot-free, Octavia. I've given you enough chances."

His tone had changed. Octavia frowned at him, unsure of how to reply.

It was oddly silent outside. There was usually the hustle and bustle of Arkadia—no matter the time of night. Octavia wondered, for a moment, if Bellamy flicked the light on—if she'd see something she really didn't want to.

She didn't have to guess. "How long?"

"A few minutes." Bellamy folded his arms, and exhaled deeply. "They'll send officers to search and toss every room. But the Chancellor will come to the source of the button pressed."

Octavia licked her lips, breathing out deeply in frustration. The moment had passed. If there had ever been a moment. Bellamy had been beyond reach for a long time now, and she knew—no

matter how far out into the ocean he'd swam—some part of her was always responsible. She should never have *let* him in the first place. It had been long established that since hitting the ground, Octavia was no longer the girl under the floorboards.

The lights switched on.

Bellamy frowned. "The fuck--?"

From each side of the door, Miller and Lincoln jumped out to restrain him, holding him back. Miller had a cloth clamped over his mouth to stop him from screaming out, whilst Lincoln had twisted both arms behind him. They were the only two Octavia trusted; she doubted Abby or Kane would agree to such a reckless plan. And Lincoln was strong enough to take Bellamy any day. Miller had been complicit from the very beginning.

And that was all she was going to involve. Raven, Monty, Jasper...They could all stay out of it. Octavia figured if she was going down, she would not bring anybody else down with her. Lincoln had pledged himself the instant he'd discovered what was going on, and so had Miller. Beyond that, the boys had to stop word from spreading or occasionally protect her whilst she did a bit of digging.

"Any moment now, as per your words, the Chancellor's gonna come through that door," Octavia said slowly, cocking the gun. She fixed the silencer Miller had acquired for her from his boyfriend's standard gear, and took a heavy breath. "I hope he comes alone."

She thought back to Indra's desperation that day; she wanted Pike dead. She thought back to youthful Aden, so abiding and painfully loyal to his Commander. But her policy of *blood must not have blood* had failed. It would not hold, and Octavia knew the moment Lexa woke, that policy would fade out.

She knew it would fade out because Clarke had come to her first. Clarke had instilled it within Lexa's mind in the first place. She didn't know what kind of arrangement the pair had going on, and she truly didn't want to know. An idiot would come to a conclusion that they weren't at least fucking. But the way Lexa looked at Clarke—*God*, they were so much more. It should've sickened her. Lexa had left her and her friends for dead at Mount Weather. She'd enforced the barricade across Arkadia. She should've been taken out a long time ago. But the more Octavia mulled over who would take her place, the more she realised how bloody *difficult* grounder politics could be. Who exactly would replace her? *Aden*? The boy was doing well in holding Polis together, but he could barely rule alone. Octavia could imagine Clarke putting all sorts of ideas in his head already. Or was he old enough to block them out? He wasn't as taken by Clarke as Lexa was.

Anybody could see it. The Lexa they'd met—the one who'd had Finn hunted and killed—was not the Lexa who'd enforced *blood must not have blood*. Octavia could remember the detail Lincoln had given her that day, before they'd marched to Mount Weather, of the grounders who'd chanted that. That the Commander had started it, as a mantra. Blood must *not* have blood sounded suspiciously like Clarke, and that meant she'd drilled right through to Lexa's core.

The door burst wide open, and Octavia gave Pike a cold glance—a split-second one—before she shot him. Three bullets to his forehead, in a triangular pattern.

He'd come alone.

Lincoln, Miller, and Bellamy, who'd clattered to the floor as soon as the door bust wide—groaned in shock. Octavia's shaky breaths filled the scarily still room, but there was no time for shock. Or maybe that was exactly the substance driving her bones forward. She clambered over Pike's dead

body, and signalled a quick nod to Lincoln, who slammed his fists across Bellamy's temple, knocking him out cold.

The trio shut the door quietly, dragging Bellamy's limp body back towards his armchair. Lincoln placed him in a sitting position, slumping him forwards by propping him slightly on the desk. Octavia carefully placed the gun on his hand, wrapping his fingers around it and around the trigger.

"Convincing enough?" Lincoln asked, shooting Octavia a worried look.

It wasn't the scene he was worried about. Octavia looked like she was going to vomit.

"We weren't here," Octavia said flatly, closing her eyes. There hadn't been a version of this she'd imagined in which Bellamy didn't get lynched by the Arkadian crowd afterwards. And there hadn't been a version of this where she'd shown Bellamy enough mercy to make some other arrangement. But this was the only solution that would take both of them out.

"Kane will come up with some political shit," Miller assured her. Octavia remained unmoving. "He'll campaign for being a pacifist or something. Bell won't—"

"Won't what, Miller? Suffer the consequences?"

"It's too late to think about that," Lincoln silenced them both, firmly. "Octavia, we need to go before the guards suspect something's up. We're only a floor up. If we go up the back stairs, we'll make it for the head-count."

Octavia nodded blankly. "We were never here."

Chapter End Notes

NB: I had to slip in some lame pharmacy joke in there in the previous chapter. Marol is a brand of Tramadol, an opiate painkiller, so...that's where the origin of that name came from. Slap me 'cause I'm nerdy. I'm ready. XD

In other news – this chapter's a bit of a trip. I think it's grasping onto the realms of "what the wha???" so – I hope you'll bear with me. It's also a horrendous 12k+.

Thank you :)

The Missing Words

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Kill him!"

"Do worse! Torture him—*then* kill him!"

"Hang him up like a Scarecrow—see how long he lasts! Crucify him! *Judas!*"

Kane and Abby stared hopelessly at the riot before them. Hours before, Bellamy found consciousness, holding an incriminating gun with three bullets fired. Within shooting range, Charles Pike was on the floor. Dead. It took him seconds to shake the disorientation off—horror settled quickly—before a scrupulously planted tip-off had led the search party to Bellamy's office.

How was it that the Sky People had alleged themselves as better, or superior, than the Grounders—when this was what they were demanding? Torture? Death? It had been everything they'd mistakenly pinned the Grounders as: monsters. Kane would be a liar if he'd said he hadn't given the thought a second glance. It was easy to be swept up in group mentality. It felt better to be the good guy versus the bad Grounders, but as time clunked by, Kane was beginning to realise that they were no more monsters than they were human. And that philosophy went for the Grounders, too.

Any allegations Bellamy had made against Lincoln and Miller had no leg to stand on. They'd made it to the guards' head-count, and they had Octavia's alibi. Predictably, Bellamy hadn't brought his sister into it.

Kane screwed his eyes shut as he listened to the ever-growing mob, getting angrier and angrier. The gunners had formed a firm barricade around a handcuffed Bellamy, his head bowed in shame and humiliation. He could say nothing about the truth the other night without implicating Octavia. Octavia refused to lift her alibi for Lincoln and Miller. And so Bellamy, broken-hearted, confessed. He'd detailed that Pike had been working him too hard. He'd said that Pike was making him carry out assassinations he did not want to participate in anymore. He'd set a silent panic alarm for the Chancellor's attention, knowing he would come alone, to lure him into a fatal trap.

Kane knew Bellamy well enough to know it was all bullshit. Then again, this was the boy—no, the *man*—who'd aided in the massacre of three-hundred sleeping Grounders.

He rested his fists on a table, and glanced haggardly across at Octavia. "What'd you reckon?"

Octavia blinked. "Me?"

"Would your brother be capable of this?" he asked testily. "Pike was his mentor, effectively. Bellamy cut all ties with me to go under Pike's tutelage. Do you believe his testimony?"

"He just said—"

"You know him better than anyone. And words don't mean a thing. Not anymore. By the ex-Chancellor's law, treachery means death. Tell me again, Octavia, that you had no involvement in this."

"You heard his testimony."

Kane sighed, as the riots seemed to get louder. Abby tried to console him, rub his back and whispered something in his ear. It didn't seem to please Kane. Nothing did, these days, Octavia thought with distaste. But she could barely look at the scene she'd caused without feeling sick. If Kane was going to condemn Bellamy to death, it'd be all her fault. And he was *still* trying to protect her. So if Kane was going to give the kill order, Octavia would have to betray another friend in order to get Bellamy out.

She couldn't figure her loyalties out. She *knew* the longer Bellamy stayed with Pike, the less he'd be of the brother she loved. Pike would suck Bellamy's soul from within him and discard it, and turn him into a brainwashed bodyguard. Octavia couldn't bear that. But neither could she bear the thought of being responsible for his execution. She'd fucked up—but what else was she supposed to do? Watch as Pike stole her brother from him?

When Clarke had told her to take Pike out, she'd hoped for a simpler solution than this.

"Those very people that are angry at the same people who sided with Pike," Lincoln observed, leaning into the table so he could speak to the group in confidence. "Brand Bellamy a traitor. Fine. But remind them that the war is with the Grounders."

Kane slowly turned his head, his eyes narrowing. "I'm listening."

Octavia's stomach sank. It felt as if she was in the middle of this hurricane—or at least she was the very root cause of it—and she was doing *nothing* to help calm the situation. Everyone she'd drawn into this mess was suffering the consequences or doing their best to patch up the warpath she'd left behind. *Lincoln*, of all people, was trying to spin this against the Grounders—against *himself*—again.

"Make an example of him. Call him a traitor, but remind them that the real enemy lies beyond the barricade. Not within. That'll reduce the desire for Skaikru blood."

"And increase the desire for Grounder blood?" Kane said humourlessly.

"Not if you say it right," Lincoln said. "Increase the desire for Ice Nation blood. Who blew up Mount Weather and admitted to it?"

Kane rubbed his scruffy beard in contemplation, but Lincoln was not messing around. Octavia clenched his arm in support, and he gave her a short smile, clasping her hand in return. He'd felt settled, once. Once, Bellamy had been his friend. Now Lincoln was attempting to negotiate for his life whilst still pinning a fake murder charge on him.

"If we remind them that the enemy's the Ice Nation, it might remind them how much we need the Commander's coalition," Abby interjected.

Flashes of Indra and Aden filled her vision. Octavia knew all Abby was thinking of was the picture of her daughter on a horse, far away from home, nursing a comatose Commander back to health. But all Octavia could see now was her brother, isolated on a raised platform and guarded closely. He'd been beaten badly earlier by Pike's men, until he succumbed to imprisonment. Yet without Pike, who had chosen Bellamy as a subordinate, there was no natural leader. Everyone looked to Kane yet again, but things had changed a *lot* since Kane was last chancellor.

"It could get Clarke back," Octavia said quietly. She didn't ignore the way Abby stiffened at that or Kane's hand against her elbow. His finger rubbed gently against her.

"Let's get to work," Lincoln suggested.

"*Quiet!*" Kane shouted, clapping Lincoln on the back. "*I said quiet!*" It took him a couple of times

for the crowd to silence, and he clambered onto the raised podium with Bellamy, seated alone and handcuffed. "We've all heard Bellamy Blake's sentencing earlier today. We've heard allegations and we've heard them retracted. We've heard a full confession. Is there at this point anything else the accused wants to say?"

Bellamy scanned the room, his eyes slowly finding Octavia's. One was swollen shut, and his face was marred with blue and purple and blood. A lump built in Octavia's throat, constricting like Arkadia's walls, dangerous like Lexa's law of the barricade.

"No," he croaked.

The people jeered at him, and it took a few minutes for Kane to shut them up again. They were like dogs. They wanted blood for Pike's death, and for a moment, Octavia wondered if this would all backfire. She'd spilled blood to cause this. If Kane's diplomacy didn't work, and he ended up in a coffin, she would've failed her brother, herself...Clarke...the coalition...

"This—" Kane waved at the general mob, when they'd quietened, "is exactly what your enemy wants! They *want* us to be unsettled! Divide and conquer." He pointed towards Bellamy.

"Bellamy Blake is a traitor to Arkadia, but in this time, *especially* in this time, he is one of our *own*. If you had an Ice Nation warrior here, stood next to Bellamy Blake, equally in handcuffs, and you had one bullet in your gun—who would you shoot?"

Octavia watched as the crowd muttered, and she flinched in disbelief they'd even try and squabble at the question. It was utterly hypocritical of her. She'd put Bellamy in this position in the first place. But what other choice did she *have*? Bellamy would've only assumed Pike's position against the Grounders, and Pike's death at the hand of his opposition would only stir up further support. It would only complicate things for the coalition, for Lexa, for Aden—for *Lincoln*—who she still couldn't believe was *alive*. Lincoln, as if he sensed something was wrong, moved closer so he could entwine his fingers in hers. She squeezed, her lower lip quivering as she fixated her eyes on her brother, his broad shoulders upright in pride. But he was battered and beaten within an inch of his life. Him just sitting there was starting to look exhausting, and she just wanted to reach out and feel him again. To hug him again. To feel reassured and safe with him—not fearful and hateful.

"You'd shoot the Ice Nation warrior," Kane said firmly, shutting down any arguments just by the tone of his voice. "You wouldn't even have to consider."

"He betrayed one of our own—no less the *Chancellor*!" one of the crowd members yelled. The rest shouted their agreement. "He should be sentenced to death, not your *words*, Kane!"

"Charles Pike would have had you *all* killed, with his philosophy," Kane snarled, advancing to the forefront of the podium. The mob lashed out in response, roaring their dissent and he staggered back in surprise. "Do you think that big wall can protect you from an entire legion of Ice Nation warriors? Do you not remember who blew up Mount Weather—and then proudly *confessed* to it? Do you have any knowledge of the Grounders' clans? Any knowledge of the Grounder Commander's history with the Ice Nation? We *all* know the story. It has been filtered down as gossip but it is as true as it is sick. The Ice Nation delivered her lover's head in a box. She is not their friend. She is as much at war with them as we are. The only difference is, is our settlement is closer to Ice Nation land than theirs is."

"We are better prepared," said one of the crowd—this time, more reasonably. "We have guns and other weapons the Ice Nation are not prepared for. The other Grounders don't have that."

"You can think that way," Kane agreed, holding up his hands. "I'm not saying you're wrong. But you're chancing heavily there. *What if* their numbers overpower ours? Hm?"

"If you'll preach to us about the Grounders being different again, then—"

"I lost Gina," Bellamy said hoarsely, and among the growing anger within the crowd, *somehow*, his broken voice seemed to cut like a knife through the air. Everyone fell silent. "Others lost their loved ones, too. But Gina... How many times does Kane have to spell it out to you? The Ice Nation *admitted* to this. They committed this act of terror. They even challenged the Commander's authority in a trial by combat. Commander Lexa is no part of the evil that blew Mount Weather up.

"You can let that hatred eat you up. That's what I did, and I got strong because of it. Commander Lexa left us for *dead* at Mount Weather. But she saved Clarke Griffin's life in the North because she loves her. Commander Lexa is a lot of things—and a lot of things I don't *like*—but she is not the tyrannical enemy we assume her to be. She has overseen a lot of change. A lot of reason. She is no savage, and she is the reason why her people are not savages either. Their ways are different. They cut. We shock lash. They kill." Bellamy hung his head, and Octavia could feel three hundred sleeping lives loom over the audience. "So do we."

At that, Bellamy left it. Everyone fell silent again, and Bellamy—it seemed as if he'd said everything he needed to say. His changing and fledgling testimony had finally settled, and he'd finally had his last word on the matter of the coalition. From now, it was Kane's chance to take centre stage and sort this once and for all. Now Pike was out of action, it would be between him and Bellamy for the Chancellor's badge. With Bellamy labelled as a traitor now, the odds were hardly in his favour.

Murmurs began to infiltrate the air once more. Octavia bristled, and her agitation did not cease despite Lincoln's comforting hand encircling her back. This was ridiculous. *She* was ridiculous. What else had she expected? She was responsible for all of this. Clarke's words had been the spark; she'd caused the fire. Her actions had condemned her brother to death, and Kane was starting to lose faith from his very own people.

Recklessly, she jumped onto the stage. She carefully avoided looking at Bellamy and concentrated on the heavy, rapid thudding of her heart. She was known for two things: 1.) Being Bellamy Blake's sister and 2.) Being the girlfriend of a Grounder. They were polar opposites in terms of *problems*, but it meant that she wasn't particularly desired. However, she was going to sort this out. Kane didn't have the balls; he was too diplomatic. Abby was too kind.

Octavia wasn't.

"How many of your children have been killed up North, since landing?" she asked sharply, directing her question at Pike's posse. The stone-cold silence remained, and Octavia shrugged. "How many more are you willing to risk? How about Mount Weather? We're not fucking *idiots* here! The Ice Nation was responsible for the deaths you suffered since landing on their territory. The Ice Nation has proudly claimed responsibility for the attack on Mount Weather. The *rest* of the Grounders, including the Commander who resides in Polis—they're responsible for this protective barricade. And I'll have you know," she added, because she knew Kane had heard no word of this, "that the Commander narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on her, at the hands of the Ice Queen. Well." Octavia snuck a glance at Kane, whose eyes were as wide as saucers. "Former Ice Queen."

Roars erupted from the crowd, most of them joyous. They punched the air in triumph. Some were simply happy the tyrannical Ice Queen was dead; others were a little more worrying. Octavia heard a few who'd yelled, "*One less Grounder to go!*"

She didn't have time to entertain Kane with the latest news. Now Ontari had been wiped from the

equation, she had no doubt that the rest of the Ice Nation would be looking to retaliate. For a moment, she wondered if it was worth questioning if Roan was still alive. He was, after all, the rightful King, was he not? Or had he been banished yet again?

Amidst the ruckus, Octavia picked the Chancellor's pin from the floor and held it up in the air. She stomped on the pedestal a few times until everyone settled down.

"Tell me," she said loudly, "What does this mean to you? Nothing?"

"The Chancellor's pin," a voice broke out.

"Yeah. And It's about time we appoint someone who isn't a xenophobic piece of shit," she added, cocking her head at the angry protests the remark stirred within the far and few Pike supporters. "We need the Grounders. We need to be part of their coalition. We need to work in conjunction with them; not against them. Then we'll have strength in numbers *and* we'll have guns and the like. So tell me: do you want someone who's politically experienced and diplomatic? Or do you have a better candidate than Marcus Kane?"

"Commander." Titus nearly unhinged the double doors at the speed he seemed to barge through them, startling Aden from his thoughts.

He'd fallen asleep on the steps, and he supposed Clarke was the one who had covered him with a blanket and a pillow to prop his head. Remnants of their conversation made him smile a little, but Titus was no fun and all business. With a deep sigh, he rose from his uncomfortable sleeping position, stretching as he did so. He cracked his back, or so it sounded like, and neatly folded his blanket, propping his pillow on top. He took his time (Aden had never been a morning person) to ensure the throne room looked pristine, and self-consciously padded his messy hair down.

"Yes?" His voice was hoarse from lack of sleep, and he rubbed his eyes.

"Sorry to wake you," Titus said with a frown. "I've received news from Arkadia."

"Ah. What is it? Have they made more demands about the barricade being lifted? You can tell the messenger a simple 'no' shall suffice."

"Not quite," Titus said, rubbing a shaking hand over his bald head. "Charles Pike is dead."

"*What?*"

"It was announced this morning. Octavia kom Skaikru approached the barricade and told them. A messenger rode from Arkadia to Polis with the news. We have fed him."

"Give him a bed, should he need one," Aden instructed with a wave of a hand. "And bring Clarke kom Skaikru to me."

"I'm afraid I can't," Titus said. "She is busy with Indra in the sparring pits. I think she's trying her hand at close-combat," he added in light amusement, though Aden felt his heart sink. His two most trusted counsels—gone, like that. He didn't want to interrupt, so he shook his head. "If I can be of any assistance, Commander..."

Aden swallowed the lump in his throat. Perhaps he had to bend the rules a little in extenuating

circumstances. Lexa had always taken counsel from Clarke, and Aden had found that once he'd been accustomed to her strange tendencies, she was helpful and comforting in many ways. Last night on the steps was something he'd remain forever thankful for. He hadn't laughed like that in a *long* time. And Lexa had advised the Nightbloods, once, to take a true warrior's counsel too. With a fond smile, Aden could not think of any truer warrior than Indra.

There was an air around Titus that immediately warned him to back away. Yet he was the Flamekeeper, and adviser to Lexa for many years. Aden nodded slowly, and sat on the steps again.

"You should take the throne," Titus advised. "When—"

"The villagers and the guards—they're not here," Aden said sternly. "I will not sit upon this throne unless it is to keep up public appearance. This is the Commander's. Not mine."

Titus opened his mouth to speak, but noticing Aden's determinedly furrowed brow, decided against it. Instead, Aden reached into his inner pocket and slid the neatly folded note he'd received across the floor. He raised his eyebrows at Titus, wondering what his counsel would be *now*. He hadn't shown *anyone* this, and watched warily as Titus unfolded the note, intelligent eyes scanning the words.

"This," he said quietly, "Is nothing but a threat. There are many barriers between the Ice Nation and us—"

"Yet Ontari somehow managed to filter through," Aden said uncertainly. He wasn't sure how his Commander had managed to talk and persuade and fight her way through the pre-coalition wars. Alliances were as shaky as *paunae* on a tightrope and Aden was already beginning to lose sight of his enemies and his allies. "You say Charles Pike is dead. What does this mean for Polis? They will undoubtedly think it of our hand. Are we at war once more, Titus?"

"No," Titus said plainly, "One of their own—Bellamy Blake—confessed to his murder."

Aden mulled over his words for a few seconds, squinting at *why* the name rang a bell. He could see Octavia kom Skaikru by the gates, and he could hear her—he could hear *himself*—the sorrow in his voice as he lamented on how difficult it would be to subdue a brother.

But if he'd been *subdued*, then...

Oh.

Aden rested his head in his palms, slowly rumpling his hair. "The Ice Nation will retaliate for what I did to Ontari."

"You did your duty. You protected Commander Lexa from death."

A near-death of your doing, Aden thought sourly. He swerved away from his bitterness. "Sometimes...it feels like my duty is not enough. My duty cannot bring *Heda* back. My duty cannot stop men like Charles Pike from waging wars they cannot win."

"Your duty," Titus said quietly, "Could bring the Skaikru back into the fold. Should the Ice Nation truly attack, they would hit Arkadia first. They have far more advanced weaponry than we do. If we take the Southern clans and have them fight for our fort here in Polis, some Trikru warriors as well as the Water and Mountain clans can aid in a blockade in the forest. The Mountain and its missiles are decommissioned ever since the Ice Nation shot itself in the foot. It shall not come to war, but if it does, it will be more favourable to us than it would be to the Ice Nation."

"Commander Lexa would not want another war."

"That was her duty. This is *yours*."

"Then you could do me a favour," Aden said, with more malice than he'd intended. He stood up, feeling his knees creak in the process, and strode towards Titus confidently. The Flamekeeper towered over him, but Aden did not feel frightened. "Stop talking about her in the past-tense. She is in a deep sleep. That is all. She—" His voice wavered, and he clenched his jaw to stop it. "Her spirit has not moved on. We'd have all felt it. So I will do my duty until then, but I won't make any rash moves that leave her in a vulnerable position. *That* is my duty."

"I am only in a position to offer my teachings to the throne—"

"That is some twisted position then, considering Commander Lexa lies on her potential deathbed because of *you*!" Aden snapped, eyes widening at the sudden flare-up of fury. Titus stared at him, unsure of what to say. Aden's chest heaved, though he was not sorry at all. His anger at Titus had been building for some time now; he knew everyone—Titus included—awaited Lexa's comeback for judgement, but it made him feel ill that the man who'd nearly killed his Commander could stand and retain his position. "I should have you locked in a cell and I should throw the key away!"

Titus exhaled deeply. "Then why have you not?"

"I am in no position to do so. I respect that at least."

"Should you become Commander soon," Titus said, looking at him curiously, "I would have something to show you. It is a relic—of the past."

"Did you show the Commander it?"

"Yes."

"Then you can keep showing her," he said snappishly, jerking his head towards the door. "I will not be taking Commander Lexa's throne any time soon."

"Commander—"

"*Aden!*" The boy rarely found himself agitated enough to roar, but this time, he did so, his cheeks red with rage. It was unfathomable. He did not even know *why* he felt like this. But as he looked at Titus, and the strangeness with which his gaze was met, he could not feel his anger subside. "My name is Aden! The *Commander* is in our care. I am her interim. I am *not* blessed with the spirit. I'll do my best until she wakes. *Until—she—wakes!*"

"I'm sorry." Titus bowed his head, shuffling backwards. "I didn't mean to offend. Aden."

"Then get out of my sight," Aden snarled, wielding a kind of menace he didn't even know he had in him. Perhaps it was fear. Perhaps it was the notion that Titus—Lexa's closest adviser, to Aden's knowledge—had seemingly given up on her. But Clarke hadn't. Indra hadn't. Aden would rather take his own life than to give up on her. "Remind yourself who is your Commander. Don't come back to me until you have the right answer."

Titus swallowed hard, shoving his hands back into his pockets. He could feel his grasp around the vial of Nightblood—Becca's—loosen a little as he watched the fair-headed boy pace up and down across Lexa's throne. He could feel black blood—real leadership—pulsating through Aden's skull, through Aden's heart. But the boy was having none of it

Titus clenched his jaw and nodded, making sure he shut the double doors behind him as he left. Lexa had rejected him once; Aden was going to, again. He wasn't sure if he'd make a lifetime of rejection, of passing on Becca's legacy—not when the duo was so stubborn.

Still, his loyalty lay with the Commander, thus it also lay with Aden.

He just wondered how much longer he'd last, alive, playing this game of cat and mouse.

Nosily—because it was his job to probe and probe and probe—he peaked through the double-doors he'd shut. A tiny slit. And he could see his Commander-in-waiting—Aden—slump on the steps before the throne, resting his head in his hands. A slow hand rumbled through his messy hair, and Titus quietly shut the door before the first of Aden's tears fell.

"So..." Anya relaxed (as much as the dead could relax) as Lexa continued to row the boat, her jaw firmly set in 'do not fuck with me' mode. "Where are we going now?"

"I thought that was your decision."

"It's *your* brain. Don't tell me we're going to play around with flowers and Costia."

"No," Lexa snapped, a lot angrier than she should've, "We're not."

Anya had been consistently pestering her with this *every single time* they'd clambered onto this shitty boat of theirs. Every single time she'd questioned whether they were finally going to visit Costia and relive some of Lexa's loved-up memories. Every time, Lexa had cut her off, brusquely and unapologetically. Some memories she just didn't want Anya to invade. Just like the memory—or the dream—she'd had, in which she'd been kissing Clarke, undressing her, making *love* to her. And every time it was asked of her to reveal a sweet memory with Costia, it stung, and then she felt guilty because those very moments were the ones she'd lacked with Clarke. Those moments they still had to build, if—no, *when*—Lexa woke up. Anya was her—had always been—her best friend, her tutor, her confidante—but that didn't mean she could see everything that was going on in Lexa's life.

She had a right to love. She had a right to privacy. And Anya should've at least respected that.

"There are a lot of things I wish to see," Lexa confessed as they paddled aimlessly. They stopped for a moment of reprieve and Lexa leant forwards, placing her head in her hands. Anya's ice-cold hand on her back, rubbing, offered no comfort whatsoever. Still—it was a presence (even if it was as cold as death)—and Lexa tried to cherish it. "There are many things I *don't* wish to see. Ever. But I have a feeling that I won't be able to control that."

"Isn't this *your* brain?" Anya asked gently.

Lexa thought back to the honey-coloured liquid she'd shared with the First Commander, the saviour of the old world—Becca. She thought back to the garble she spoke, of 'laptops' and 'Ayers' and 'Empire States' and she wasn't so sure anymore. For a while, she had been confident that this was simply a trip into her memories. There were lessons to be learned whilst peeking through a third person perspective on the actions of her past. But then there were visions she could not reason with; visions she'd never seen as a child or teenager or adult. She could not explain Becca. She could not explain...*many* things. And Lexa wondered if it really was all in her dying mind, or

if death had already embraced her and this—this was so much *more*.

She thought of the invisible noose around her neck as she watched Polis burn, and her Nightbloods murdered in cold-blood, and she thought of Death, and how they'd talked.

"I'm not so sure it is," Lexa confessed.

Anya didn't bother her. Years of being her mentor meant that Anya knew her better than most people. Whenever Lexa did her tasks—like now, rowing the boat—with her clenched jaw and determined eyes, it was a signal for 'no disturbing'. The woman was deep in thought, and Anya knew she'd be the product of a second death if she probed too deep. Instead, she let Lexa think it out. After all, wasn't that what she'd trained Lexa to do?

She allowed Lexa to row in peace, sitting in amicable silence. For once, her dead heart pounded. There was nothing but pride that flowed in her cold chest as she watched her tutee advance in this never-ending lake of theirs. Somehow, she'd grown, like a phoenix from the ashes. Every time she'd been pounded into the mud by Gustus or herself, Lexa had picked herself up and blossomed into perhaps the greatest Commander the new world had ever seen. Anya wondered if the Grounders knew of their luckiness, or if they had been blind to it—just like she had been, she thought guiltily, right up until the moment she'd been shot by a Skaikru bullet.

The boat slammed into a hard-rock shore and nearly capsized. Stunned, Anya stared at Lexa who could only stare back. Neither of them dared to touch the black water just in case they were sucked up by some death-inferno—but they scrambled onto the shore as quickly as they could, as if that could offer some protection.

"Did you aim for that?" Anya gasped as soon as they caught their breaths back, bent over. She rested her dead hands on her dead knees, and Lexa shook her head.

"I was just rowing," Lexa explained, "I—I just rowed, and it hit the shore. Hard."

"Were you aiming for something? Did you—were you thinking--?"

"Nothing," Lexa admitted, scratching the back of her neck. She'd straightened up now, and Anya thought with a twisted pride in her dead heart that—*jok*, she was proud of the woman Lexa had become. The *Commander* she'd become.

Lexa thought back to the alcohol she'd shared with Becca in the hut and wondered silently if Anya had been privy to it at all. A foreboding sense in her chest told her to spill her guts out. She had rarely hidden secrets from Anya, and it made no sense to start now. It struck her, quite violently, that she hadn't actually *told* Anya about her encounter with the First Commander. It obviously made *no sense*. She knew Anya would laugh at her. But if she couldn't tell her closest tutor, then who else could she tell? Clarke would assume insanity. Aden was too young. Indra—Indra just wouldn't understand. It had to be Anya, and yet—

"That is your weakness." A voice—not Anya's—pierced through the suddenly-cold environment. Lexa shivered, both in contempt and of genuine frost. They were in the Ice Queen's grand hall, and after Nia's advisers had scattered and Atohl, wounded but spared, had scraped away with Costia's severed head, Nia and Lexa had been left alone. "You love. You care. You are supposed to be the Commander of a fledgling coalition. Do you honestly think people will care that you loved a herbalist's daughter once? That you love your capital so much that you will build it from ruin? All your big, grand promises? Once it's done, Lexa, nobody will remember. Nobody will credit you."

"Then we differ." Lexa, young and stern, stepped forward. Awed, the dying versions of Lexa and

Anya stood aback, watching the war of words waged between two heavyweights. "I don't care much for my reputation or what people think. I care for my people. I care for their health; sanitation; children. I care for their future. I *don't* care for the rule of ice you uphold here."

"My rule has kept this nation from rupturing for decades," Nia hissed.

"Your rule is tyrannical! Your rule—nobody dares speak against you!"

"And that is what you should aim for! Diplomacy—do you *honestly* think, that after the First Commander departed, that diplomacy would favour over regal reign? You are too young, and this is too soon! Power is wielded through examples. It is shown through ruthlessness. You are pathetic in your kindness; your willingness to listen to others who will twist your mind. You call yourself the Commander of a Coalition but you are just a child who bends to every clan leader's whisper in your ear."

"That's untrue. I have rules of my own. Polis will be the capital, and Polis will have conditions."

"Then tell me..." Nia stood up, towering over a still-young Lexa. Lexa did not cower. Nia advanced, confidently and with such gentility that it contradicted her sheer brutality. "Why the gift, Lexa? Why bring back your Costia's head? To make a show of me, hmm?"

"To show that you do not scare me."

"Oh, but I do." Nia's voice was now a whisper, and she was barely inches from young Lexa's face. Nia's lips curled maliciously, half-admiring how Lexa stood her ground. A feebler version would've crumbled, and they would've done so quickly as well. "You brought Costia back to me because you did not know what to do with her. You did not know where to bury her. Have you even told her parents? That her love for you cost her her life? You returned her to me because you did not know where to put her. And that..." Nia tilted her head, mock-sympathetically, "Is why you are weak."

"Weak? I just embarrassed you in front of your advisers. And you're telling me I am the weak one?"

"Yes." Nia was almost smiling now. "Didn't anyone tell you, dear? It's weakness."

"What is?"

"Love."

Almost immediately, the near-dying duo seized and crumpled to the ground. Lexa in particular clutched at her chest, her eyes bunching up in pain. The vision of Nia towering over a stunned young Lexa blurred as she tried to quash the pain and bury it—but it wouldn't go away. A strained stretch of her neck meant that she could see Anya too, thrashing about on the ground. Drabs of scaly skin and tiny bits of flesh flew off as she struggled, but it was Lexa who felt the brunt of it. Something—scarily noose-like (*again*)—dragged her back across the pebbly shore as they both yelled, in vain, for each other.

It felt as if Lexa's mind—or whatever this was—was literally dragging them through the pits of hell. Anya cursed loudly as they slammed heavily into a door, so much so that they barrelled through it.

Behind it sat Lexa and Titus, younger versions of themselves, unburdened by the current threats of today. They were candlelit, and it was sometime before Lexa's damning conversation with Titus about Becca's Nightblood vial. Anya gaped in disbelief as she watched Lexa's adviser clasp both hands in his, and shook them.

Lexa scrambled on the ground, asphyxiated. She felt as if her breath had been robbed from her, and she tried to gulp in some air as Titus spoke to her younger self.

"This...affair," Titus said quietly, frowning. "It can't go on for any longer, Commander."

"Affair?" Lexa—young Lexa—tried to play stupid. "What affair?"

"Yours, with the herbalist's daughter," Titus said matter-of-factly. "It is an unwritten rule, Lexa. You would be jeopardising the entirety of this coalition you so passionately want to build if you let Costia into your heart."

Lexa, emblazoned by affection, perhaps, stood her ground. "And why is that?"

"Because it is weakness," Titus scolded her. "If you let her into your heart you do not know what she may be capable of! What if the Ice Nation capture her, and torture her for information? Do you know how long a trained soldier can last in captivity? Especially with the Ice Nation's ways? Costia is no soldier. She will break within hours—and then all your secrets will be divulged to the enemy!"

Lexa wrenched her hands away from Titus', as if she'd been scalded by hot water. "Costia is not the enemy. And she would never betray me."

"Words of a foolish young woman in love! Words that will get you *killed!*"

"You'll remember who you are talking to!" Lexa yelled, shooting up from her seat. From the ground, the dead Anya let out a faint 'whoop' of delight as Titus stood up too, stunned by her reaction. "Am I not your Commander?" Titus nodded. "Am I not the overseer of this coalition? Did I not create this with my bare hands? With my words? My promises? This—*all of this*—this is *my work!* I will *not* have you dictate what is right or wrong for me!"

"I'm not doing this out of hatred, or malice," Titus pled. "I am doing this because my duty to you is to protect you—from evils you cannot foresee. My duty is to handle the what-ifs. You will not see to it that Costia is captured. But I have to ponder the maybes of this scenario, and I have to tell you."

"Then go away. Go back to your chambers and prod about again. You pressed the wrong button today, Titus, and you will consider it a mercy that I will ever let you work for me—"

"*Commander*, I am doing my best—"

"Interrupt me again," Lexa said, her voice low in malice—a malice she did not recognise—"And I will have you hung, drawn and quartered. I value your advice, Titus. But your closeness does not grant you immunity."

Titus stared at the young Commander in shocked silence, unsure of what to say next. Beside her on the ground, Anya let out a low whistle, despite the side-eye it resulted from a disgruntled Lexa. An added "*nomon-jooooooooo-kaaaa*" was the total of her unnecessary glee, but Lexa tried to shake herself. She could barely remember this. But this was never the first time her beliefs had clashed with Titus', and deep in her heart, she could feel pride swell as even her younger self faced up against him.

Titus had never been one to maliciously twist things against her. In fact, even now, holding his bullet wound in her belly, Lexa never believed him to be anything but unwavering in his belief in her. But his actions were misplaced, and his behaviour towards Clarke near crime. Lexa swallowed the bile in her throat and allowed the scene to unfold before them. Without another

word, Titus bowed deeply and swept from the room. Anya and Lexa both watched from the floor as he swiped his sweaty forehead in worry, elbowing through the double-doors.

"Did you ever make him smile?" Anya pondered, watching after him.

Lexa thought on it. "Erm. I don't think so."

"Huh. Thought not."

And then—

"*Jok!*"

Both women grappled at their invisible reins yet *again* as they tore through Lexa's memories—brain—another *world*, perhaps—as they shattered through years and years of repressed love and hatred and desire and every single emotion Lexa had ever felt. Lexa clamped her eyes shut, unwilling to pry them open to just *see* what on earth was going on. Anya provided rapid but nonsensical commentary as they blistered through Lexa's underworld like a hurricane, until eventually they both smacked against a forest floor.

The leaves were green, fading into brown, and suddenly, Lexa felt at home.

Trikru.

"Oh...*Jok*..." Anya moaned as she picked herself from the ground, a spring in her step. Lexa scowled. The woman was *dead*. Any pronunciation of pain was simply from a dramatic scale—and she did not appreciate that, considering she was *sure* she had broken her ribs in the fall. Then again, she was *near* death, so what did that make her? A drama princess?

Lexa brushed the leaves from her shoulders as she slowly clambered to her feet, her limbs and bones aching with pain and confusion as she processed the scene in front of her.

There was a funeral pyre. They were in TonDC.

In front of the burning pyre, now dulling down, stood two figures. One had messily braided blonde hair, dirty and muddy, trailing down her shoulders. The other stood tall and proud, a bright red sash adorning her uniform.

"Oh—*whoa*..." Anya gaped at the scene in front of them. Clarke and Lexa stood silently beside one another, watching the fire dwindle. "When—what happened?"

"Finn," Lexa said dazedly, tempted to stagger forwards and touch Clarke. She wondered if it was possible. She wondered if Clarke would even feel her; if she could even sense their presence. Judging by how loudly and violently they had landed, she guessed she could not. But there was a greedy part of her soul that just wanted some acknowledgement. She knew in this moment she had not offered Clarke much comfort considering the justice she had served Finn—or allowed Clarke to. The only cheat she'd given Clarke was that Finn was given a quick, swift death. Not the thousand cuts. It was the kind of mercy that Lexa should've clocked onto earlier.

Something about Clarke kom Skaikru had enchanted her ever since their first meeting, and little acts like this—as gruesome as they were—were painfully obvious. The allowance of a merciful death at the hands of the Sky girl—for butchering members of Indra's village—should not have even happened. But as Lexa watched the scene unfold before them, the uneasy silence between the younger Clarke and Lexa, she knew deep in her heart that if she could've gone back, she would've let Clarke do the same. The moment Clarke stepped into her space, she'd known her intentions.

And she'd let her do it.

"When did you know?" Anya asked her softly, stumbling so she fell into step with an entranced Lexa. Lexa barely acknowledged her, so Anya pressed. "When did you know you loved her?"

"She..." Lexa shook her head, unsure of the answer herself. Was there a pinpoint moment? She knew when she'd fallen for Costia. But somehow, she wasn't sure when it came to Clarke. Yet the overpowering love she had for Clarke was nothing like what she felt for Costia. She wondered if that was the reason why she had no specific time. Costia was love. Clarke was...*more*. "When we had Finn burned, she told him—she said—*yu gonplei ste odon*."

Silence was all she received from Anya. Momentarily. Anya nudged her, a little brutally, and snorted. "You mean she spoke a bit of rubbish Trigedasleng and you decided you loved her?"

"Not like that," Lexa said through gritted teeth, feeling her cheeks burn in embarrassment. She could feel Anya's smugness radiating beside her, like an irritating mosquito hovering and buzzing, and she wanted to slap it. "That's not it. You don't understand."

"I think we have time."

"Time?" Lexa said, a little incredulously. "We just got *dragged* from the Ice Nation! Time is hardly a factor here—"

"Oh, you think I don't know that? Can you see me rotting at a normal rate?"

"Why is it that you mentor me when you're alive and pester me when you're dead? What is it about me you cannot leave behind?"

"Do you want this? Now?"

Their tones had been raised—but it didn't seem to disturb the eerie silence that befell the pair watching Finn burn in front of them. Anya, a pitiful, greying sight, squared up to a staggering Lexa. It had been building for some time now—the tension between them. It was born mostly of misunderstanding and confusion. Anya knew her fate. She had condemned herself to it. She was not to be moved from this otherworldly purgatory until Lexa passed. But Lexa wasn't so sure. She felt like she'd been through hell and back, and she was *done* feeling guilty for subjecting Anya to the same. That had been Anya's choice. Antagonising Lexa had been Anya's choice.

"You can't beat a dead woman, Lexa," Anya said scathingly. "So come on. Try."

"I'm not going to hit you," Lexa scoffed. "I'm not a monster."

"Why?" Anya challenged. "Because you're a revolutionary?" She could see Lexa stir at her words, and she pressed further, closing the distance between them. "Because you're the Commander of the Coalition? Because you'll be a legend? Because you loved? Because you love a star that fell—"

SMACK.

As soon as Anya collapsed to the floor, Lexa scrambled to her aid, wringing her fist in pain. Never in her mind had she imagined it'd actually *hurt*, decking a *dead woman* across the face. Then again, she never thought she'd be in a fight *with a dead woman*. Lexa crouched so she could get a better look at Anya, expecting some sort of bruising—and then realising how stupid she'd been. Anya had been dead for a long time, and nothing had changed. Her grey complexion remained. The bits of flesh that were falling out were falling out. Instead, Anya chose Lexa's

moment of sentimentalism to shove her knee into Lexa's belly, jumping to her feet as her once-tutee clattered to the ground in agony, yelping out.

"Come on, then!" Anya shouted, raising her fists protectively. "How long have you wanted this, Lexa?"

"Never!" Lexa bellowed back. "You—you don't know me!"

"Yes I do!"

"No—not now! You did! You did—and then you *died*!"

"So—so when will you stop blaming the Skaikru for that, then?" Anya yelled, slowly dropping her fists when she saw Lexa's mouth, upturned in grimness. She blinked hard, uncertain of whether Lexa was gasping for breath out of grief—or just because Anya had delivered a breath-stealing blow. And then she bit the bullet. "When will you stop blaming *yourself*?"

"I sent you." Lexa had lost all fight in her. Her voice was hollow, her face haggard. Nothing about her screamed 'fight'—instead, it screamed *loss*. "You were my chosen ambassador. My representative. I sent you to subdue the Skaikru threat and—" She choked up, staring up at the skies—as if they had an answer for her. They hadn't answered her for over twenty years. Why would they start now? "I sent you, and you never came back."

Anya's arms dropped by her sides, one eye watching Lexa and Clarke by the fire, stationary. She heaved a sigh. "Lexa, that was never your fault."

"So you just stopped caring?" Clarke's voice bit into the cold air, and Lexa closed her eyes. She was so *tired*. "About...everyone?"

Lexa didn't need to hear her answer. She rubbed her eyes. The world had played her heart for far too long. Retribution was not something that had crossed her mind when she thought of ways to repay the world for the injustice it had dispensed her. But she could only stare at her once-mentor, knowing how badly she'd failed her.

"Love is weakness," Lexa said hoarsely. She didn't believe. "I loved you, Anya."

"Me too." Anya wasn't going to lie to Lexa. She'd done so, so many times, in life; she wouldn't make the same mistake in death. "You know I would've stopped time for you if that's what I thought was right. If I *could*. But look at what you have achieved. Without me."

"I visited your crypt as often as I could. You had me. I had you."

"No," Anya tried to be as gentle as she could, traipsing over to a desolate Lexa. Lexa didn't budge away as Anya's ice-cold fingers intertwined with her own. Even in near-death, Lexa was the kind of soothing, enchanting warmth she'd always been. That was heart. That was *love*. "No, you didn't. You had yourself. And you did...*all* of this. You believed, Lexa. In me, in the coalition, in Clarke...you believed. And that's why you're here."

"Here? Re-watching and revisiting all my memories? Of all the times I'd failed you? Clarke? The coalition? Aden?"

"I told you that you couldn't change the past," Anya murmured. "But it's not like many people get to actually see it. What you do with that knowledge—that privilege—is up to you. You might do nothing. That's acceptable. You might change the world. That's acceptable too. Who am I to decide? Who am I to say that maybe you haven't changed the world already?"

Lexa glanced sideways, to where her past self left Clarke by the dwindling pyre, alone. She closed her eyes. "I loved."

"I know."

"I really, really did."

"Costia? Clarke?"

Lexa laughed and nodded tiredly, but then she said, "I meant you."

The fall didn't hurt as much this time.

Perhaps it was because they both expected it. In the frame of sunlight filtering through the window, Lexa could see herself faced with Clarke—and how *different* she looked, after the Mountain, after the wilderness, after *everything*. Anya and Lexa watched in silence as Lexa approached Clarke from behind the cover in her bedroom, utterly unexpected, her hair down, her guard down. Clarke's face was ridden with fear, her back and soul covered with scars and lives of hundreds. It wore her down. She was beautiful—and she was broken.

So was Lexa. Years of being in command had pulled her into an abyss nobody could enter. She was alone in that regard. Nobody would understand the burden of shouldering an entire coalition, an entire *people*—on her own.

Nobody except Clarke.

They weren't necessarily two missing pieces of a jigsaw. They were broken shards of glass. Sharp enough to kill, yet miraculously, enough to slot together to make whole.

"Don't be," the past Lexa said softly, as Clarke approached with an apology.

The present Lexa tensed, scrunching her face up in silent pain. Anya watched her intensely, not daring to watch the scene unfold in front of them. She didn't feel *right* here. Lexa and Clarke had many memories she'd peeked upon, but this—this was solely *them*. Anya felt unwelcome. An intruder. And she prayed, for the first time in a *long* time, that the Gods, or Death, or *whatever*, would spare her the audacity of stumbling across something like this.

This memory was Lexa's. It was Clarke's.

Not Anya's.

"You have to go back to your people," Lexa whispered, and Anya fixated herself on watching the present-day Lexa. Her wound remained black and dried-up, and she couldn't bear to think of what would happen just hours after this.

There was a pause, and past Lexa advanced, just a little.

"That's...why I—"

"*Love you.*"

Anya's head snapped up, for she had been staring at the floor as if she could back out of this

situation. The words had slipped from Lexa's mouth without much thought at all, and though the past Lexa said something utterly different, Anya *knew* Lexa. She had taught her for the majority of her life, and the sheer, sad sincerity in her voice was the utmost, pure truth.

Lexa was a smooth talker with a sharp tongue, but when she spoke the truth, it was innocent and meaningful. She was passionate. She *loved*. She loved, despite it being deemed a weakness by *everyone* she encountered—and she conquered it majestically. Anya approached her in trepidation as the scene before them faded into black, and she decided she didn't want to know what had happened afterwards. She could guess, but she wasn't interested.

Meanwhile, Lexa was still utterly transfixed by the scene that had faded.

"I didn't say it," Lexa admitted quietly, after a while. "I should have."

"I think she knew," Anya tried. "I really think so."

"What if I never get to tell her?"

Anya swallowed. "I think she knows," she said again.

This was the last time.

Lexa could feel it. The outer rims of her vision were beginning to fill with black spots, and she sank contentedly against the wall both her and Anya had slouched against. Before them, an entire village erupted in flames, and she could see the familiarity of the huts burning down, right by the plains and the lake. People scattered and screamed as guards from Polis stormed through on their high horses, slashing swords. They were hunting.

They were hunting for her.

"Why this moment?" Anya asked curiously, just as tired as Lexa felt. Lexa felt her head loll to one side, completely drawn in by the vision before her.

"It isn't a memory," Lexa murmured, bright eyes darting back and forth as she inspected every single woman and man who ran towards the lake, hoping for some mercy. "I wouldn't have remembered this. This is the night the Polisians seized me."

"Then how--?"

"I don't know," Lexa admitted, and for once, she was quite glad she had no fucking clue whatsoever. They watched apathetically as the Polisian Guards continued to storm and ransack the village, upturning nearly every hut in search for the kid with black blood. Lexa knew she wouldn't see the result. She knew it already anyway. It was the reason why she was here.

"You don't have to do this," Anya told her unnecessarily.

Lexa bit her lip. "My mother and father died in the raid. Not trying to protect me. They were just collateral damage."

"I'm sorry." Anya already knew.

"Me too."

They watched in a strange silence, with Lexa feeling oddly empty at the raucous, horrific sight unfurling in front of them. She could not see her parents among the blend of panicked faces, running for their lives. She could not see even the Polisian Guards anymore. They must have stormed Lexa's house at this point and uncovered her.

Briefly, she wondered if she had been conditioned for this kind of mayhem from a very young age. Though the thought of her parents slain like that still caused a twinge in her chest, the weight of watching such a tragedy unfold was disturbingly light. Was it just because she'd been in the middle of this crossfire anyway? Or had she worn so many tragedies that revisiting one simply repelled off her?

It perturbed her. All this time, she had been scolded for giving too much heart; for loving; for sometimes trusting her heart over her head. Mostly, she did what was right by the majority. She made heavy decisions based on the wellbeing of her people—the giant population she personally oversaw. But it was like her journey with Anya had screeched to a sudden, anticlimactic halt. She'd experienced heartbreak and loss and rage and betrayal and revolution—all over again—this time with her trusted tutor every step of the way—and she could feel it concluding with...this.

"Has this come to an end?" she asked, whipping her head around to take in the scene before them. Her village was on fire. Her parents had just died. She had just been plucked by the Polisian Guards. And the thud of her heart was missing. The burning pain in her chest, the sensitive nature of her memories flooding back—gone. Just like that. "My—my duty as the Commander. Have I stopped?" *Did I die?*

"Your duty never stops," Anya mused, crossing her arms as she slouched. "You should know that."

"You must come." Lexa couldn't stop the words from tumbling out. Intelligence was her forte; so was efficiency. Time was of the essence, and she refused to leave Anya yet again. She couldn't. Not in this wasteland between life and death. Who was she, to condemn a dear friend to *this*? Until Lexa properly died and they could finally cross the river together? Even though Anya had put it voluntarily, she didn't like the idea sitting in her chest. Anya would not give up an afterlife for her. Lexa didn't want to allow it. "Come with me. If I am headed back to the world of the living, then come."

"It isn't that simple," Anya decided to play along. "I can't just waltz back into everyday life. I was shot by a Skaikru gun."

"So was I."

Anya fixed her with a scolding stare. "You know what I mean."

"I *mean*," Lexa emphasised, "if this journey was for anything, it should be to rescue you. We were destined to meet. You were destined to collect me. It has to mean I'm bringing you back."

"No, Lexa..." Anya's voice was soft, and genuine. "It was to rescue *you*."

"But—"

"And I think we did a bloody good job of it," Anya carried on triumphantly, clapping Lexa on the back. It felt familiarly cold, and Lexa dreaded the thought of coming back to life without Anya's drabs of flesh dripping behind them as they walked. "And you *did* rescue me. I thought I'd been cheated. A cheap shot left me without a chance to bid my Commander farewell. I offered you my

life in service. A bullet wound did not kill me. It was knowing that you weren't there."

"I'm here," Lexa rushed out. "I'm here for you. And I can be—I always will be. If you just—"

"I'm not going anywhere, Lexa. Besides, who's going to collect you when you really do pass?"

Lexa had no answer for that. The atmosphere around them shifted, and the world tilted sideways just a little. Lexa should've felt a heavy adjustment but the way the scenario seemed to just seamlessly slide into a picturesque, brightly-hued patch of plains with a modest hut set up seemed a little too coincidental. She almost expected Becca to step out with that honey-coloured drink of hers, but nobody did.

"This was always coming to an end, Lexa," Anya told her, smiling. "You made the right decision."

"I...didn't make one."

"You did." Anya gestured around. "I will wait for you."

"This isn't how it should go. We should've gone together. In some big battle, in glory—"

"Save yourself," Anya laughed, and Lexa's vision blurred with tears she refused to shed. She blinked them back, her lips forming a grim, upside-down U-shape as she forced the emotion down her throat. She had never truly said goodbye to Anya. Anya hated them. And she wondered if this was going to be an exception, or if this was yet another case of *see you later*. Because if Anya stayed true to her promise (and Lexa believed she would), then this was not a goodbye.

"This isn't how I wanted this to end," Lexa said, somewhat helplessly.

Anya blinked up at the glaring sun, and grinned toothily. "What did you expect?"

"I—I don't know. Not this."

"This? This seems like bliss you've gifted to me," Anya assessed, dragging herself up from the floor. She wasn't wrong. It was a nice, peaceful, sunny patch of land a dead woman could roam about until Lexa truly passed. It felt like a nice cover-up for a condemnation of a soul that had always been restless until this moment occurred. "Go, Lexa. Live. Don't come back. Not for a long time."

"I won't see you."

"Good. Give me some peace, then, eh?"

"I won't hug you."

"You'll probably contract some sort of infection if you do."

They laughed, humour quickly fading into a bizarre sense of yearning. It felt like Lexa was losing Anya by the minute—and she was, really—and she had every option of avoiding it, but fate inevitably tugged her the other way. Yet the rope that had always connected mentor and tutee never felt more solid, and Lexa took solace in this as Anya brushed the grass from her breeches, ready to walk away. Lexa stood up too, a bit too suddenly, and her head spun. *Goodbye*. The word died in her throat. *Not yet*.

"Save it," Anya told her, knowing the thoughts that would run through Lexa's noble head. Hugs and well-wishes and emotion—all of that—everything that she'd scolded a young Lexa for, had

turned out to be everything that she adored her Nightblood for. It was everything that had made Lexa great. So Anya wanted to cherish that for later, when death became a little drearier, and the only good thing she had coming was something she never wanted to happen: Lexa's actual death. "Go back because you love, Lexa. Everything. Don't let anyone ever tell you it's weakness."

"I won't."

"Go back and live. Don't just survive."

"I will."

"Go back."

Lexa stood ram-rod straight and nodded curtly. "*Ste yuj* for me."

The darkness grew differently, cold and unwelcoming. On the shores of nothing, the duo buckled with the world on their shoulders and a universe of regret and guilt and wishes bearing down on them. Anya dusted the pebbles from her body, but it was Lexa—unmoving and groaning quietly—that she was concerned about. Uncertainly, she approached her, for she was writhing—slowly—on the ground.

The bullet wound had re-opened.

"I thought it had been stitched up," Anya hissed, falling to her knees beside her tutee. Lexa only grunted in acknowledgement, pressing her hand to the wound. Her right hand was drenched with black blood, and even though Anya was *sure* that Lexa would be okay—in the real life she belonged to—she couldn't fathom *why* this was happening now.

Did it cause her harm? In the life she was supposed to be in?

Panic flooded her senses, and she knew Lexa's senses were completely blindsided by this. Lexa was so often frustratingly good at hiding her pain, but this time, she didn't bother. Open about her agony, she attempted to twist onto her side and failed miserably, yelling into the nothingness of their pathetic purgatory. Anya swivelled around desperately, knowing they were alone. The boat had vanished from the shore, and she clenched her eyes shut.

Lexa swore under her breath. "Please," she begged, her eyes gaunt. "Please..."

Anya wondered, for a moment, if she was stuck in her own nightmare. A dagger had appeared in her hand, and she stared in bemusement at it—horrified and completely thrown off-track—as she glanced between the blade and her dying tutee. It was the most awful of deaths—to die by her already-dead tutor's side, bleeding out into a shore that didn't care, a world—an underworld—that didn't care.

Lexa had been a gift wrapped in a ribbon for Death. This was a sick game. Death knew of the Commander's power, and wanted to slurp it all from her. Lexa was Death's life source, and the power she wielded over the clans, over her *world*, was surely enough to condemn her to this cruel twist of fate.

Anya's blade glinted against—well, there was no sunlight at all—and she knew it was a sign.

"My time with you is over," Anya realised, cradling Lexa's ashen face with her palm. Lexa shuddered, her body wracking with pain, and the coldness Anya's hand brought to her.

Lexa coughed, and then laughed weakly. "We had a journey, didn't we?"

"The best." Anya knelt closer, placing the flat, cool side of the blade against Lexa's belly. "I think we made up for lost time, you and me."

"More..." Lexa closed her eyes as she smiled. Anya marvelled at her. Even in death, she did not lose her sheer charm. "You were my tutor, and you carried on...being...my tutor. You...you taught me."

"Yeah?"

"You loved me," Lexa said, "You loved me. And I loved you."

"That's right." Anya watched as her blade smeared with black blood, and something felt horribly off. All this time, with Lexa freefalling into abyss and smacking herself on the ground—all this time, she had never really bled like this. Something must've happened for her to suddenly buckle to her knees and then the ground. Then again, Anya wondered what was real and what wasn't. She had been aimlessly waiting for Lexa to truly arrive to her, and she refused to believe that it was like this. "Is Clarke with you?"

"Always," Lexa whispered. "Always."

Anya bent her head as she knelt over Lexa, feeling her grip on the hilt of her dagger tighten. She could spare Lexa the mercy of a slow and horrible death, bleeding out on the shores of nothing.

"Imagine Clarke is with you," Anya told her.

"The pain," Lexa said feebly, and then her hand, wet and slippery with her own blood, covered Anya's blade. "My duty has to be over."

"Why are you dying, Lexa?"

"Why aren't you dead, Anya?"

"Lexa..."

"We can go back to the start." Lexa stared at her as if a revelation had just sparkled in her brain, as if the next coming of something great had just occurred in her mind. Anya could only look on in confusion, but her heart just didn't have it in her to plunge the fatal wound into her tutee's stomach. Lexa's speech was slurred now, and anything she spoke—it was rubbish. Going back to the start? Of what? Her birth? What difference would that make? "You and me...we can go back to the start...you found me...had me...a scraggly...child...we can go back..."

You want me to kill you. You want me to end this. You want to be with your mother in the stars.

Anya used to pride herself on never crying—but she couldn't stop herself. Tears, salty and foreign, fell onto Lexa's cheeks as she bowed her head in shame. She couldn't end her tutee's life out of the very thing she always scolded Lexa for: sentimentalism. Love. All Lexa wanted was to go back to the start, when she was unburdened by the duties of a commander, when she'd never antagonised the Ice Nation, when she'd never fallen in love with a Sky girl, when she'd never been fatally shot by a Skaikru bullet...

All she wanted was some quiet. Some peace. An end.

"I'm not the person for this." Anya's voice shook between tears, her chest heaving. "Lexa..."

"Back to the start. A last time. And a goodbye, for you and me—until the next time."

Anya's voice quivered. "I'll row the boat for you."

Lexa smiled up at her. "I'll set you free."

Lexa's hand clamped over Anya's on the hilt of the dagger.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your comments and kudos! Mean the world!

I've been in an accident recently so excuse my sporadic updates. It was a car-accident - some jerk decided to T-bone me, basically...

(Lexa is in the next chapter - whatever state that may be).

First Steps

Chapter Notes

I've been asked by a few people if I would consider transferring my work to Patreon. To those people- I've discovered it isn't like fanfiction.net (you will not find me there either) but you have to pay to see work. I don't think you need to pay to see mine. Trust me, save your money, lol. Thank you, though! Here's 21 Word pages...

"Charles Pike is dead."

Aden knew this already, but Titus made the formal announcement in front of the clans' ambassadors in the throne room. He fidgeted uncomfortably on Lexa's throne, rubbing at Lexa's red sash. He'd tried to protest for his own, maybe a blue colour like his eyes—but Titus had overruled him on tradition, and the fact that the colour red was simply more powerful. Half the stuff that came out of Titus' mouth barely made sense to Aden anyway, so he let it slide. But the longer he sat on the throne, the more of a fraud he felt. He knew only very few people in the room were aware of that feeling, and Clarke kom Skaikru was one of them.

Clarke kom Skaikru looked like she was going to vomit.

The rest of the ambassadors murmured in subdued joy at the news, and carried on muttering as Titus read out minor matters here and there, squabbles to be sorted in the Square, and such. Aden found himself zoning out, his eyes fixated on Clarke.

Something was off. Aden perhaps should've foreseen it. Charles Pike was a monster, but he was one of Skaikru. *Of course* it was going to affect Clarke—he just hadn't anticipated how.

He waited in silence as Titus finished his formal announcements and then he dismissed the clan leaders one by one, bowing his head in respect as they left the throne room. It was duty now, to perform this every single week—and it was *boring*. He didn't even *know* what was happening. Perhaps that was why Lexa was such a good Commander. She had the patience to listen. Aden was merely thinking of Hemla and flowers and black blood and guns—

He was distracted, and Titus could sense it. He stopped Titus' barrage of questions with a simple wave of a hand and dismissed him too, suddenly tired of everything today. It was only early afternoon, but he was not putting up with any more of Titus' preachings.

"Something is troubling you," Aden pointed out. Clarke remained in her ambassador's chair, her gaze glassy, and she only seemed to jerk back into consciousness when Aden spoke to her. "Are you quite alright, Clarke?"

They had never been confidantes, but Aden had—maybe naively—felt *some* sort of connection to her after she'd comforted him over Ontari's murder. And on a base level, his Commander was head over heels in love with the woman. He had to be looking out for her in some way. It felt integrated, as part of his duty.

"Just the actions of my people," Clarke said, glancing at Aden. The throne was far too big for him, and the red sash just looked unnatural. Aden's line of thought was similar and he slipped off the throne onto a spare seat beside Clarke. "I got Pike killed."

"Impossible. You've been in Polis the entire time."

"You, being so closely tutored by someone like Lexa, should know that once you set off a series of events, you don't need to be present for its climax."

Aden fell silent, contemplating Clarke's confession. His brow furrowed in bemusement, and he didn't *want* to believe that the woman sitting beside him had somehow engineered Charles Pike's death. From what he'd heard, it had sounded like a carefully-constructed assassination, carried out by Pike's right-hand man Bellamy Blake. He was the wayward brother Octavia kom Skaikru had spoken sadly of by the Arkadian gates. Aden didn't find it much of a stretch to believe that Bellamy was simply the kind of person to grow jealous and greedy of Pike's power and had decided to recklessly claim it for himself, only to get caught in the process.

"It wasn't Bellamy," Clarke mumbled, as if reading Aden's mind. "It was me."

"Again: impossible." Aden didn't like Clarke's version. "I will vouch for you. You have been by my side."

"A whisper into the correct ear can set off a chain reaction, no?"

Aden's eyes sought hers, trying to win Clarke back. Even if it was with a lie. He didn't *care*. He didn't want to start a war with Arkadia—which looked like it might be impending—and he didn't want the instigator to be his Commander's lover. He didn't want a war at *all*, to be frank, so he shook his head violently. "Whatever you just said, I did not hear. Should there be charges pressed for the murder of Charles Pike, there will be none put forward to yourself. You must know that whilst Charles Pike retracted the Commander's offer of the coalition, *you* remain in the capital. It is a declaration to everyone that we still have a connection to Arkadia. They will soon be with us too. I cannot have you charged for the former Chancellor of a newly-joined member of the coalition."

"Aden—"

"I need you," he intervened, brusquely and honestly, "and so does the Commander. I need the Skaikru too. I will not have you imprisoned for murder because of some far-reaching testimony of yours."

"Even if it's the truth?"

Aden bristled, the prickly feeling in his heart suddenly becoming quite familiar. This, surely, was how Lexa must have felt, day in and day out, making the tough decisions, and sometimes living with the knowledge that it was the wrong one too. The unjust ones. Yet for the greater good, Aden could not have the *Wanheda* pulled up for meek murder charges against a tyrant everyone hated anyway. It was the fair way of the world. Charles Pike had killed three hundred sleeping Trikru volunteers. If he had to bend the rules a little, he would.

"*Especially* if it's the truth," he decided finally, swallowing the last bit of guilt down his throat.

As a sign of peace—and perhaps power, judging by the carriage ride and the way they were flanked by both riders and footmen—they immediately journeyed to Arkadia upon hearing the news. Aden hadn't slept well the past night, but when had he ever? He jumped out of his carriage first, careful to self-consciously brush down his hair so he looked somewhat presentable in front of the three figures waiting by the gate—Kane, Abby Griffin and Octavia. He was acutely aware that Abby Griffin was Clarke's mother, too.

Automatically, he dipped his head in new-found respect to Clarke as he extended a hand towards

her, helping her down from the carriage. She hesitated for a millisecond, surprised by Aden's move, but clasped his clammy hand in hers anyway. She could feel the nerves shuddering through him, so she squeezed tightly in assurance.

Aden quirked a half-smile at her. "Does it feel good to be home?" he asked quietly, as they were still out of earshot.

"I'm not sure where that is anymore," Clarke admitted, moving her hand so she could grab his shoulder firmly. He had been sparring well recently, and she could feel lean muscle on him. He wasn't some scraggly child anymore—he'd sprouted *so* quickly. "But I know where I house my heart."

"Would you care to share?" Aden made conversation as they trudged together towards the gate, followed behind by Indra at a respectable distance.

"She is asleep, in Polis," was all Clarke said. The way Aden smiled at her suggested that in that moment, they were one and the same. Lexa had been out of commission for far too long, and running the coalition following her footsteps hadn't been easy. Every night Aden was plagued with the thought of him single-handedly bringing down the coalition his commander had fought so hard for, all these years...

"She will wake soon," Aden promised her, and Clarke only nodded mutely, appreciative of his kindness. Aden had grown up quickly. He'd had to. His conversation was smoother than usual, and his civilities were well-rehearsed and well-versed. He spoke fluently in both Trigedasleng and Old English, and chaired ambassador meetings with the confidence of someone who had been in command for a long time. It had been all Lexa's doing, truly—but only now, as Aden started to grow into the role that had enveloped him at first—Clarke could see what Lexa had spotted from the very beginning. She suspected that even Aden was starting to see it in himself, too.

He carried himself with self-assuredness, and a grounded nature that meant he wasn't cocky. He knew his place, and he was wildly aware of how much everyone wanted him replaced by Lexa. He wanted it badly too. But for now, they would just have to cope with him. A compromise.

Aden walked quicker than Clarke, hopping over a small mound. It had been raining overnight, and the mud squelched beneath his boots. It was slippery and it stank, and at every opportunity, he extended his arm so he could help Clarke walk too, even though she didn't need him. Either way, she took his hand graciously.

"Octavia kom Skaikru." Aden's greeting was just as impressive as the first time he'd said it, and Octavia inclined her head towards him out of awkward respect. He greeted Kane and Abby too, and they both bowed a little deeper than Octavia. Mostly, Abby could not stop staring at Clarke, so Aden courteously stepped aside a little so they could be closer.

"Commander." Everyone noticed that Kane was now wearing the Chancellor's pin. "You look well."

"As do you, Marcus Kane. Thank you for your..." Aden scanned the background, pleased with the lack of gunners. "Warm welcome."

"There is no animosity between allies," Kane declared, and Aden nodded in solemn agreement. Clarke eyed him, pleased with the boy's maturity considering he was talking terms with a politician so experienced compared to him.

"I agree," Aden said. "I have a request, if I may be so bold?"

Everyone, including Clarke, turned to him in surprise. Kane coughed. "Yes, Commander?"

"Will you open this gate? For just a minute?"

"Commander?"

Aden chewed on his bottom lip, fiddling with his belt buckle. He wondered if his own thoughts of his dead parents had come back to bite him in the ass, but Lexa had always told him love was strength—not weakness. It wasn't what Titus deemed it to be. So Aden nodded, as if to reassure himself. "Yes. I believe there is a mother-daughter reunion that cannot wait much longer."

Clarke stared at him, her mouth falling open. Without another word, Kane and Octavia rushed to unlock the gate from within and before she could even process Aden's soft smile or Kane's look of utter disbelief, Abby lunged forwards and crashed into Clarke with an all-encompassing embrace. She wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter, cradling her in relief back and forth, muttering nonsense, sniffing loudly. Clarke's hands immediately flew up to hug her back, clenching her eyes shut at the feel, the smell, the headiness of her mother's love coating her. She buried her face against Abby's neck and half-laughed, half-sobbed, knowing her mother was in a similar state too.

"Oh, I've *missed* you," Abby breathed into her hair. "I've missed you so, so much. My beautiful girl."

"You too, mom," Clarke murmured, rubbing Abby's back. "I love you."

"I love you too. There's so much we should talk about—"

"And not much time," Clarke reminded her, pulling a few inches away and acutely aware of their audience. Aden had averted his gaze as if to offer some privacy, and in that moment she could've kissed the boy. They embraced again, mumbling quick updates about each other's health, and Abby offered a rapid run-down of her friends and how they were doing—and naturally, as Abby retreated behind the gate once more, Clarke stayed by Aden's side.

Octavia, shooting an uncertain look both ways, locked the gate.

Clarke's heart pounded in her chest, still spasming in shock at what had just transpired. The mercy Aden had shown was something she'd thank him forever for. But it was the initial thought that slammed into her. The fact that Aden had been sensitive enough to even consider it made her want to hug him, and she knew—their conversations grew and grew—that there was space to learn about Aden's own parents, too.

"I hope that suffices for now," Aden broke the silence stiltedly, scratching the back of his neck. Abby nodded at him, a grateful smile adorning her face as tears filled her eyes. Soon she wouldn't see her daughter again for another stretch of time—and it was this—this *boy*—who had offered a mother's embrace. This boy understood just how much that meant, and this boy had it in his heart to give it. "I apologise for the gates must stay in place. I assume, as your people built the surroundings, that it is the general consensus within the Skaikru?"

"For protection, Commander," Kane said quickly. "It is not of isolation."

"Then let it be known that no army of Polis shall antagonise yours," Aden assured him. "I think perhaps that belief was instilled previously by Charles Pike. I hope to turn it swiftly around."

"You have. You absolutely have, Commander."

"Interim," Aden corrected him hastily, his gaze burning through the ground. An awkward silence shrouded them once more, and he shifted his feet. Something was stuck in his throat—something

he didn't necessarily want to say. But his purpose was to make the difficult choice when no-one could; his job right *now* was to carry on his Commander's wishes. "The barricade remains, Marcus. It is not of animosity—but of formality. It remained during my Commander's tenure and I shan't bring it down until she does."

"*What?!*" Octavia spoke up for once, furious eyes directed straight at the boy. "I just had my own *brother* on trial for you—everyone wants him *dead!* And you're saying that the kill order won't be lifted?"

"If the gates aren't barricaded by a kill order, what stops your people from fleeing?" Aden countered, taken aback by Octavia's ferocity. He could not find the empathy in him to understand her situation, but she knew what she had done and the consequences of it could not be understood by himself. "There will be no Skaikru lives taken by my hand, Octavia. You have my word. But I will not defy my Commander as she sleeps and bring down one of her orders."

"Surely the whole point of you being *Commander* is so that you can *make* these executive decisions?"

"The whole point is to ensure the safety of my Commander, the steadiness of the coalition, and stopping anyone from falling over the edge into war." Aden stood his ground, his grip on the hilt of his sheathed sword tightening to a point where Clarke could see the whites of his knuckles. "I am not the Commander. The Commander remains in Polis. I am the reminder that the Commander's spirit is still very much aflame inside her."

Still shaken by her reunion with her mother, Clarke hesitantly stepped forward, raising both hands as a sign of peace. Octavia was heaving—but she did have a right to be. Nobody quite understood her feelings right now. Nobody else had betrayed their twin brother and framed him for the murder of a Chancellor. Nobody could say they were in Octavia's position. But Aden's politics had been perfectly fair, and through sheer friendship, Clarke could only hazard a guess that Octavia's anger was the concoction of confusion and devastation—not at Aden.

"Your brother will live, too; you have my word," Aden added, testing the waters. Clarke stilled. "He will not be harmed by any under my command."

"He'll be lynched by his own, probably," Octavia gritted out.

"I won't invade your politics," Aden promised her. "I only offer what my Commander offered the Skaikru previously: a position as the thirteenth clan of our alliance. Your former Chancellor rejected the notion. I ask once more, humbly, that you join us."

Nobody moved, and Aden took one of the many badges that adorned his uniform off. Traipsing forward, and utterly unsure of traditions, he offered the badge in between the gates. In return, Kane took off the Chancellor pin, and silently exchanged it for Aden's badge.

"To peace," Aden said hoarsely.

Kane smiled at him. "To Lexa kom Trikru."

There wasn't a word for this.

Everything Lexa had been numbed to—pain, being shot—suddenly slammed into her, sending her

crumpling to the ground. She winced as her belly felt as if it had been shot again, though no fresh black blood spilled. It was internal. All of it was. *This is inside my head, and I need it to get out.* Lexa struggled as her hands scrabbled for the pebbly shore, feeling very lonely and very much abandoned in this world of the near-death. She didn't even know where to begin. How could she return to life when she'd barely established where she was?

But it *would—not—stop*. The pain was so overbearing that it crippled Lexa, and rendered her immobile for what seemed to feel like forever. She couldn't get to her feet. Heaviness smacked relentlessly down onto her shoulders, and she bowed her head, feeling—with shame—her eyes fill with tears she *refused* to let fall—as she recalled Clarke whispering the Skaikru's Traveller's Passage to her.

It was all she could hear. She could barely digest the words. It was the crack in Clarke's voice, the invasion of grief, that knocked Lexa for six. And like some kind of sick radio, the devastation in Clarke's voice, the unforgettable memory of Clarke's tear-stained face hovering over hers—it just wouldn't go away.

"It hurts," she moaned, knowing nobody could hear her. Even her dead confidante (how on *earth* would she explain this to people?!) had vanished now. Lexa was truly alone, shivering and feverish with pain, heart crumbling to pieces as she heard Clarke's broken voice over and over again in her mind.

This was surely it. The last sick piece of torture before Lexa could go back. Surely it had to be the last. What else could they subject her to?

"But I'm ready," Lexa managed weakly, to no-one. She could hear Anya's scoff in the back of her brain. *A commander's work is never done, Lexa.* Damn right it wasn't.

"Make Polis great again," Lexa she had heard herself mumble so many times before, wondering how many times she'd said that very sentence in her lifetime. Too many. "Let's fix this coalition," she once added, to nobody in particular—this underworld of sorts hadn't exactly provided company since Anya's departure, so Lexa spoke to the still, musty air. Was she falling through time?

She was in limbo. Lexa was many things but she was not an idiot. There were sins she still had yet to condemn herself to—but it all seemed relatively insignificant compared to...well, this. Coming back from the dead. That'd be a new story for Aden to blab.

It didn't make sense. Lexa wanted to come back. Lexa had every intention of fixing everything. An impossibility, but Polis had been impossibility once, too. Yet—after all this fighting, after the restored friendship with Anya she'd been silently craving for so long—nothing felt as if it had been actioned.

"Why?" she bellowed up into the star-less sky this time. "I've put myself through hell and back! I have relived parts of my past I wish never to think of again. So *why?*"

Silence.

Lexa should've known better. Face crumpling, she buried it in her hands as she kicked a pebble violently across the shore. What was it now? Yet another condition before she woke up? Anger pulsed through her veins. She'd cheated death, and now death was cheating her back. The rage built until it was nearly unbearable, and then—

She'd had enough.

She was alone anyway. Everything: flashbacks of her first meeting with Clarke, flashbacks to Finn's funeral pyre, flashbacks to Costia's head in a box, flashbacks—flashbacks, flashbacks, flashbacks—and none of them held a key to returning to the land of the living. She was doomed, like Anya, to roam around the underworld like some lost, pathetic soul—and Lexa didn't even want to have this lifted from her for the sake of mercy. She still had a job to do. She was still the Commander, as excellent as Aden had been in her place.

She still loved Clarke.

Lexa couldn't hold it back anymore. She did not cry out of missing Clarke; she cried because she was worried she would never find her way back—that her soul had been lost, permanently. Lexa withdrew into herself, feeling ashamed of the salty tears that trailed down her cheeks, hating how vulnerable this made her. How *weak* it made her.

Except love wasn't weakness. *Love is not weakness*. Lexa would be damned if she taught her Nightbloods like Titus had taught her. If Lexa was never going to wake up, she knew, with Indra's help, that Aden would be in good hands.

A sob escaped her, and she watched pitifully as the tears splashed against the pebbles beneath them. Not weakness, she had to actively remind herself. It was hard to toss away an ideology that had been so viciously drilled into her mind. But Lexa thought of her children—her students—and she would not wish this upon anyone, especially not the bright youngsters, of which, one of whom would succeed.

Lexa caught it, slowly. She watched her tear hit the pebble, and it felt as if her ears had blocked, and there was no rush. No rush, except she had to get back to consciousness *as soon as possible*. And as Lexa stared forlornly at her grief on the shore, she felt her knees buckle beneath her as the world faded to black once more.

One of the maids had screamed their throat out in faffing about Lexa writhing in bed, muttering under her breath. By the time the news reached Aden, the story had been so warped that it had come down to Lexa having a seizure in her bed, frothing at the mouth. Clarke had confirmed it was utter nonsense, but it looked like she had been up all night tending to her. Noticing the bags under her eyes, Aden assured her he'd delegate his duties for the day and take over whilst Clarke took a well-deserved rest. Clarke gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as thanks, and Aden found himself completely flustered and a boy without words when she left.

It was perhaps a little late *now*, but Aden finally understood why Lexa had fallen so hard for her.

Sure, there was a mountain of other things Lexa and Clarke shared that he obviously wasn't privy to (and he didn't want to be, either). But Clarke was—she was attractive, and kind, and considerate. She was still—and Aden hadn't moved from his opinion—a reckless lady who asked too many question sometimes, but Aden had grown to respect Clarke kom Skaikru, quite heavily.

Aden fumbled around with the wet cloth, wringing it so he wasn't essentially splashing his Commander's face with water. Instead he dabbed at her forehead. She'd been sweating and Aden wondered how long she'd been on the precipice of consciousness.

Come on. Aden tried not to get too excited, or too hopeful. *Please, Heda*.

He left the stitches for Clarke to check. He trusted that she had checked them properly last night, and she was the one with the medical brains anyway. All Aden could do now was pray, or distract himself, perhaps. He'd found himself a little faithless recently. He'd spent an hour a day praying to the Gods that Lexa would wake up, and there had never been a reply. He wasn't a devout believer of tradition like Titus—now he was just *too* old-fashioned—but Aden tried his best. Spirituality was important within oneself—that was what his Commander had told him. It was intertwined with peace.

Aden popped the vase of flowers he'd picked for his Commander by the window, where the sunlight filtered through. He'd made a swift (and hopefully smooth) visit to the florist this morning, quickly catching Hemla out the corner of his eye, and he'd smiled at her. By some miracle, she'd smiled back and hugged him in greeting. Still a little stunned, Aden's fingers delicately played with the petals, closing his eyes as he remembered the way Hemla smelled—that musky, sweet smell of hers. She'd explained every single flower's meaning to him, when he'd explained he wanted to bring something meaningful to Lexa. But in reality, he just wanted to listen to her and her silky smooth voice talk about...

"Aden?"

Aden stilled. There were two people in this room. One was unconscious, and the other was him. He stayed where he was, his eyes slowly moving to the side to the door—and nobody was there.

The next thing he knew, he nearly sprinted the small distance from the window to the bed, sliding to his knees before his Commander. She was pale and weak, and he immediately grabbed a small cup of water to tip some in her mouth. She thanked him quietly, and then flat-out grinned at him.

"Look at you." Lexa's voice was croaky, her eyes drooping, as if she'd slip from their grasp yet again. Aden would be *damned* if he let that happen. "The Commander's outfit looks handsome on you, Aden. I knew it would."

"It fits best on you, Commander," Aden told her earnestly, and her face softened.

"You've grown."

"I assure you I have not. I wish I *did*," he added petulantly. "I can't stay this short forever, right?"

"You still have a long way to go, height-wise. A joke, Aden." Lexa shook her head, giving him a light-hearted eye-roll at his dismal denseness. She motioned for him to come closer so he drew up a chair and practically hogged one side of the bed, his elbows resting against the mattress. Lexa covered both his hands with hers, and they felt so warm with life that Aden's eyes brimmed with tears he'd wanted to shed for *so long*. "The duties of a Commander are not easy. I guess you now have some interim experience."

"There *has* been a lot," Aden said hoarsely, clearing his throat. He wanted to be strong for his Commander, while she was still weak. "*Heda*, you were right. Indra's counsel has been outstanding. And Clarke—oh—do you want me to fetch Clarke for you?" he added in a rush, quickly realising that the first face Lexa wanted to see upon awakening was probably not him. "She'd been up all night tending to you. I sent her to sleep, but I think—"

"Let her sleep," Lexa decided. Aden didn't miss the flash of longing in her eyes. Everyone knew they were in love—though Aden was maybe the only one who didn't quite grasp the magnitude of the concept anyway. "She deserves that. Some peace, you know."

"Do you want anything? There's some bread, cheese, fruits—it's in that basket. I brought flowers too. I put them by the window. I'll get a refill of this jug of water, actually—"

"Aden." This time, Lexa's voice was firm. Aden imagined it took a sizeable amount of energy to muster up a tone like that so he quietened instantly. "I'd like to request," she began, and Aden leant in eagerly, clearly trying to do his best to appease his Commander, "an audience with my Interim Commander, *Nightbleda* Aden."

He bowed his head, his cheeks reddening at the almost animalistic way he'd pounced on Lexa waking up. It had been something he'd been dreaming of for weeks now, and now it was real, he didn't know what to say. So much—so much *bad*—had happened in those weeks. The only upside was that Lexa was awake. Now that Aden thought of his actions in her absence, trying so painfully hard to toe the line—he'd committed a grave, fatal crime in Polis. Yes, it was Ontari. But it was still a crime. Multiple crimes.

He wanted to speak to her about Hemla and make her laugh, because Lexa knew exactly what was going on with the pair of them. She'd kept pushing him to 'go for it', but Aden had never.

"I didn't think you'd be so quiet," Lexa noticed, cocking her head to one side to get a proper look at him. Aden was *tired*. The weight of the Commander's uniform looked as if it was near-burying him. At her gentle instruction, Aden shucked off the armoury into a neat pile, and then carefully, almost with reverence, folded Lexa's red sash for her. She appreciated his tenderness, and noticed how he brightened automatically just because of the loss of uniform. And she was worried she'd put him through too much.

"Sorry *Heda*," Aden said after a while. "I feel if I detail you in on my actions as your interim—which I will anyway—you will be disappointed. And I fear that, most vividly and perhaps irrationally."

"Getting shot by Titus was not an opportunity to test you, Aden," Lexa said, eyes twinkling in jest. Aden chuckled, shaking his head. "What is troubling you?"

"I...I just..."

"Remember, Aden?" Lexa prompted, and he looked up at her. She was still pale, but the more she spoke, complexion returned and so did her fluidity with words. He passed her another cup of water and this time she could hold it herself, sipping occasionally. "Remember how every week you'd request a word with me after class? And you'd tell me you were worried about some technique you'd learned in the sparring pits, or you were worried about formal speaking, and every single one of those times, what happened?"

"You advised me," Aden said, and then added with a laugh, "Then you'd tease me for staring inappropriately at Hemla."

"And Evie, once," Lexa reminded him with a smirk.

"That was *once*!"

"Come on," Lexa laughed, extending her spare arm to cup his face. Her smile faded, but her eyes were soft. "Talk to me, Aden. You're troubled."

Aden's grin fell away too, and his shoulders seemed to shrink. Nodding to himself, he hung his head in shame. "I used a weapon in Polis," he said slowly, eyeing Lexa's unmoving face. "The weapon used to shoot you."

"What?"

"There is no justification, I know," Aden said miserably. "I wielded the weapon because Ontari of

Azgeda had infiltrated the Polisian Tower. She had advanced her way upstairs. As Titus, Indra and Nyko delayed her downstairs, I ran up the stairs to warn Clarke kom Skaikru, who was by your side. Ontari came through, so I took Titus' gun and—" he shuddered, forcing his eyes shut. "I shot her dead."

"You...killed Ontari?"

"Yes."

There were at least a thousand follow-up questions Lexa wanted to ask (though half of them were inappropriately gleeful)—one of them being Roan's welfare. She assumed, if Ontari had the means to infiltrate their spy network in the woods, then it was obsolete. It also meant that she likely had control of the Northern territories.

"I think I can count myself as impartial. I know to distance myself," Lexa said.

Aden nodded sadly. "I know. But *Heda*, if I may be so bold to say: I don't regret killing her and saving you. I regret breaking the laws and letting you down—"

"So I know I will not condemn you to death, and I make that decision of my head, not my heart."

"*Heda*?"

"Let me put it to you this way: is it a crime to save your unconscious Commander's life from an impending doom? Would you feel guiltier killing Ontari, or letting Ontari kill me? Death had to pick someone that night. It was going to be me, and you subverted Death's plot. You won. So ask me again if I'll punish you—because the answer will remain the same."

Aden sunk into himself in silence, pondering the question. Lexa already knew his answer and his silence only cemented his newfound perspective. She felt a slight twinge in her chest as she wondered for how long he'd been torturing his mind with that. With the expectation that his Commander would wake up and sentence him to death for breaking Polisian rules.

"What about the weapon?" he asked carefully. "It is still in Polis. It was used to shoot two Nightbloods."

"What would you do?"

"With all due respect, *Heda*, you're back in capacity to rule—"

"I know," Lexa interrupted shortly, "But I'd like your counsel."

"Mine?"

"Yours."

"I'd...I'd dispose of it. I'd punish the initial wielder." As soon as the words tumbled from his mouth, Aden realised it was *Titus* he was suddenly condemning. Lexa nodded in mute agreement, and for a moment, he wondered—and he didn't dare ask—if that was why Lexa was so resolute in telling him to seek Indra's counsel, Clarke's counsel... She had barely mentioned Titus, and for some reason he hadn't questioned the oddity of it at the time...

"*Heda*." Aden swallowed hard, feeling tears prick at his eyes again. He swiped at them desperately, knowing Lexa had caught on immediately. Her brow furrowed in concern and she waited in silence for him to go on. All of it was overwhelming. Lexa's return was an unexpected swerve, and it had been so *quick* that Aden's brain, recovering from shock, was only beginning to

readjust. And then emotion crashed over him like a tidal wave. Every day—conscious or not—he'd revered Lexa, loved her, idolised her. Just as all the walls seem to close in on him, and the throne he sat on had never felt so foreign, Lexa had come back. "I've missed you so much. We all have."

Lexa smiled at him, her eyes studying him. He was the sweetest of her class of Nightbloods—so she'd warmed to him instantly. His intelligence, eagerness to learn—all the qualities that had made him a rather successful interim—had blossomed. Aden was a young man now, not a boy. She wondered if he knew.

"Every day, I wished for you to come back," he confessed, and he spoke freely now, like he was cleansing his soul. He did not bother wiping his tears away this time. "Every day, you would remain asleep. I did my best, *Heda*, I really tried. Indra has really been the one. And—your—your love," he added hesitantly, unaware of the way Lexa shifted at Clarke's mention, "she is truly something else. There are so many things I wish to tell you. I wrote you letters every day. I collected them all and I've saved them for you. I needed you. I needed you and you came back."

Aden was crying now, and Lexa didn't have the strength to embrace him. Instead, she squeezed his hand in comfort. The very first time she had sat atop her throne, the responsibility had slammed violently into her too. She could remember the first few days, weeping softly in her sleep for the lives she'd taken in the Nightblood trials, and for the lives she had to now preside over. But she'd been fully prepared and entered into the trial; Aden was not. And so she could only *nearly* empathise.

Instead, she moved her hand to tilt his chin up so he could look at her. His bright blue eyes hadn't dulled, and she took solace in that. His eyes were puffy from crying, and she flattened his messy mop of hair, fondly. He smiled.

"Read me a letter," she told him, and he scrambled for his collection.

There was still a massive slice of her heart missing and that was Clarke. She hadn't wanted to wake her so it would have to wait until tomorrow. But for now she was comforted by the fact that her coalition had been left in steady, reliable hands. And as Aden ruffled through his eye-widening stack of papers, she settled against the pillows, relieved to be back with the potential Commander-to-be, rather than languishing with the Commanders gone.

She'd dozed off halfway through Aden's letters and guiltily made a mental note to apologise to him next time. He had left her well-covered with furs and lit a few candles for the night. It was late evening now, and she had been walking aimlessly around the room just to gauge her strength.

It was enough.

She dressed simply, in a beige tunic tucked in her breeches. She didn't tighten the belt too much in case it aggravated the stitches just above the belt-line, and then she pulled on a jacket for the crispy night air. Slowly, she made her way down the staircase, hesitating at the next floor. It was her bedroom, but she knew Clarke would be in there.

Sometimes it took Lexa hours and days to ponder over decisions, but this one was done in a split-second. She diverted from the staircase and gently pushed the door to her own bedroom open.

The room was dim, the light provided by a few candles dotted about. Asleep on her bed in the most ungraceful of ways was Clarke. Lexa tried not to laugh at the position she'd fallen asleep in. Her limbs were everywhere, and Lexa marvelled at how she had managed to fill an entire double sized bed with her tiny body. Shaking her head, for it looked like Clarke had literally dived onto the bed and dozed off. Lexa took some spare furs from one of the cupboards and draped them tenderly over Clarke's body, careful not to wake her. Aden had told her that it often seemed like Clarke would go days without sleep.

She stayed for a brief moment, careful not to creep herself out by watching Clarke sleep. But it *was* ever so entrancing—the way the side of her face was illuminated beautifully by the candlelight. Her mouth was embarrassingly wide open as she breathed in heavily in her sleep, and Lexa chuckled, feeling content that she could at least see this upon awakening.

This is why I came back. Lexa knew it was a mix of many factors, but right here, right now, Clarke sleeping, as peaceful as an angel, was a blessing. A gift. Her chest clenched as she tucked a stray strand of Clarke's fair hair that she loved so much behind her ear. Spurred on by—well, nothing—she placed a feather-light kiss on her forehead, murmuring those three words she couldn't usher out the day of the barricade, and then slipped away from the room. Clarke would be left in peace tonight.

Lexa felt restless. Anya's absence was once again painful and noticeable. She had not considered this: now she had lost Anya *twice*. She was grateful that they had somewhat made up for lost time, but she had silently never intended to come back *without* Anya, even if it was impossible to do so. It was a heavy blow to carry, and Lexa wasn't sure—if she cut herself deep enough to bleed out into unconsciousness, would she keep seeing Anya?

She did not bother trying. She was too weak and quite frankly, she was fed up of injuries. The bullet wound remained tender, and she clenched her fists at the very thought of it. It angered her further that it had now tarnished young Aden's mind. A part of her marvelled that his first kill had been the Ice Queen of the time, but mainly, she felt guilty. Training of the Nightbloods had not neared completion. Aden should not have been killing people already. Shouldering such a massive transfer of responsibility, often so suddenly, was a massive risk. The fact that it had been Aden, who hadn't even finished training, made Lexa's stomach churn remorsefully.

That gun needed confiscating. Lexa would take care of that gun soon, and she needed to get to Titus, too. They had passed each other today and Lexa had not bothered to greet him. A petty section of her heart refused to forgive the man who had tried to kill Clarke for the crime of loving her.

Lexa wandered aimlessly, suddenly feeling a little lost. The underworld of near-death had started to feel like home, with her and Anya trading jokes as they rowed on the black lake neither of them dared to touch.

Briefly, she wished Anya had been the one to kill her on the shore.

She had the hamper of bread and cheese Aden had brought up to her. Not particularly hungry, she'd chosen to save it and walked through Polis at night with it instead. Tonight it was quiet, though the inns were open and some people remained drinking mead and singing jovially. She took a neat turn down a darker corner where there were more residents, squinting hard to locate the building she was looking for.

It was stone now, instead of the modest hut made of all sorts of scrap material back then. But she knew the Polisian blueprints off by heart, and so did this man.

Lexa knocked on the door, rocking back and forth on her heels. The door creaked open, and Lexa

stared stupidly at thin air for a moment—before her gaze fell down on a young boy, with an abundance of curly red hair atop his head.

"Kai?" Lexa blurted the name out before she even had time to think. The visit was simply to drop off some supplies—nothing sentimental. Konner had been straining for some time, with no wife and she knew he'd struggled bringing Kai up alone. Lexa had made sure that Konner was always employed with her, and she provided generous pay and generous paid leave in case Kai was in any trouble. But she hadn't visited them—not since the night Anya had showed her before.

"*Heda!*" Kai exclaimed in awe, clumsily bowing and then performing an absurd curtsy. "Did you want to talk to my father?"

"No," Lexa decided. She had all the time in the world to talk to Konner—she saw him every week, and they spoke often. For now, she marvelled at little Kai, who'd lost his baby-fat and was something of a young, lean piece of cheek. She knew Kai wouldn't remember being bounced around on Lexa's lap as a child, and Lexa's heart warmed as she remembered how much she'd adored the sight of him. "I wanted to talk to *you*."

Kai's mouth fell open. "Really?"

"Of course!" Lexa knelt on one knee, so she was eye-level with him. It had made her feel melancholy that night, knowing she would never have a little Kai of her own. But she forced herself to remember: every single Polisian, member of their coalition—they were all her children, effectively. "You see, I'm good friends with your father. So I talk to him all the time. I wanted to talk to you, Kai. How has your day been?"

"Good," Kai said eagerly. "Today I took lessons in Trigedasleng and Old English, and my tutor said I was excellent." He was proud of this, and pointed to himself. "Do you see how I talk Old English?"

"It's very good," Lexa admitted.

"I had lunch with my father because they let him go for a longer lunch break. Then when he had to go back to work, I went into the woods, only the edges, 'cause my father won't let me go deeper, and tried to do what my father does. I went to work with him once, and once he had to make notes on the landscape, the sometimes sketch parts of it. I think he was making a map," he added conspirationally, putting his finger to his lips as if this was their secret. Lexa snorted, but promised she would be quiet about Kai's observations. "I want to do that someday. I'm going to do what my father does. He teaches me about it when he's free."

"You'd be excellent, just like your father. You know, I have a very special friend who loves to draw."

"A special friend? Like a girlfriend?"

Lexa sputtered, knocked for six. "Uh—"

"I have seven girlfriends," Kai boasted, and Lexa didn't even want to ask. She laughed, careful not to wake Konner up. "Do you love your girlfriend? How many do you have? You're the Commander, so you must have *thousands*."

"Just the one," Lexa felt she had to clarify, "Like I said: she's very special to me."

"You're very special to *everyone*," Kai said, "Does that mean everyone beat out thousands to love you?"

Lexa stared down at the little kid, ruffling his hair. "I very much doubt that, Kai. What do you think?"

"I think so," Kai informed her, as if he was some spy, "Everyone always says *Heda* this and *Heda* that and all the kids in my fighting class love you, so I love you too, and my father loves you, so your special friend obviously loves you too."

Lexa couldn't help but grin and then realise she'd spent her entire day with—well, children. And it had been the most honest welcome back to Polis she'd had.

"Goodnight, Kai."

She handed over the hamper and walked briskly away, tucking her hands into her pockets and snorted loudly as she heard a loud exclamation of "*blueberries!*" from Konner's house.

Lexa retired eventually, and her feet pulled her subconsciously to the throne room. Her mind filled with thoughts of innocent children and honourable Konner, and the uncharacteristic fear that pulsed through her veins as she wondered if she'd ever get this conversation with Clarke.

Logistically, it would have been a no. Lexa knew it was a bizarre request but what if her revolutionary expansion of Polis hadn't stopped yet? Children still lived in slums; some were homeless and stole stale bread for dinner. They fended for themselves, in hope that being in close proximity to the Commander would grant them good fortune. But *what if?* What if she could truly clean up these streets by taking the scragglers *off?* Butchers and charm-sellers and wine-samplers had already called for their banishment—but Lexa didn't want to take this lightly. Everyone had been children once. So had she. She knew mischief ran through her bones like blood; she knew survival was what drove these kids—not malice. If she could round them all up, assure them no fear would come of it, then maybe she could save them. Maybe they could be re-educated, and make their lives into something worth living for.

The door opened noisily behind her, and she shook her thoughts away. As she swivelled, Aden was hastily slamming the double-doors shut behind them.

"Did you get used to retiring here some nights?" Lexa asked teasingly.

Aden's cheeks reddened as he began earnestly. "No, Commander. Of course not. Whenever there were meetings that involved village chiefs or official business I would perch on your throne. But there is no other fit but yours, *Heda*."

"Aden..."

"Did you want me to get Clarke for you? She often sleeps but not for long. I think she might actually be awake—"

"I'll go to her," Lexa decided firmly. "Come here, Aden. We haven't spoken properly."

"We haven't been given the chance," Aden reaffirmed, lightly adding, "You seemed a little unconscious."

"A little bit?" Lexa laughed, punching his arm and missing him. It impressed her. It was not a particularly difficult job to avoid but the boy's readiness and his agility had been well kept by

Indra. Aden, pink in the face, found himself grinning. It looked indescribably good to see his *Heda* up and well, when for so long they had been agonising over whether she'd see this day at all. Aden glanced up at the throne behind them, for Lexa had chosen to sit on the steps beside him, like whatever they discussed beyond the throne was no business of any Commander's. Eventually, Aden settled down and took a seat next to his Commander. "What smooth mouth were you waiting for?"

"Not Titus'," Aden joked, and Lexa snorted. He grinned, pleased to see that some things were making her smile. "It was actually Clarke kom Skaikru's advice."

"Do share."

"She kept telling me off for calling people fat or rude or smelly," Aden said sombrely, and Lexa tried not to laugh by covering it up as a wavering smirk. "So if I called people 'a little fat' or 'a little rude' I would seem courteous but I'd still point out the problem, and that usually spurs people to action."

"I assume," Lexa said slowly, for she respected Clarke's word like anything else, "you only used this piece of advice to settle the small village disputes. I will not have you telling Princess of the Sun Clan that she is *a little fat*."

Alarmed, Aden ruffled a hand through his hair. "We have a meeting with them tomorrow—what do I say? That she is *rotund*?"

"This is why I was sent back. No, by the gods! I could come—"

"No," Aden said, with the sternness of Indra, Clarke and Nyko combined. Lexa hesitated, impressed by the quiet boy's progress. "I'll hold it. I just need...Gods, she *is* fat!" he whined.

"Call her beautiful."

"I do not lie—"

"Call her it as you dip your head to kiss her." This was like solving a children's game. "Then you won't need to fear the wrath of truth in her eyes and at least you've kissed her hand."

Boys.

Lexa supposed she could not have relied on Clarke or Indra to teach him the gentlemanly ways of doing this or doing that, so she shrugged him away, for it was late. Aden was glad to see the back of the Commander's throne room—as the interim. The duty and the wobbly alliances were difficult to keep in track of himself, no less the common disputes in the Square and pondering the right choice of action for justice broken. How badly was justice broken? Who were the two to suffer? Though he perhaps should've let Octavia take credit for his worst decision in tenure, the worst for him was when he ordered a right hand chopping off for consistently stealing apples, from a fifteen year-old, well-built, strong lad. A potential army runner one day. Now, a cripple—because of him.

He left the Polisian tower not a man, but no longer a boy. He'd made too many bad decisions; he'd killed the Queen of Ice Nation with no less than a Skaikru weapon. His real intentions had been clear as day—to protect the Commander's life, at all costs. But, as he hadn't hesitated in telling Lexa, nobody had thought to protect *Wanheda* except *Wanheda* herself. He'd spoken of her defying Ontari, offering her life above Lexa's. Nobody had had the move to protect Clarke. Only as Clarke advanced down the stairs, Aden decided he could not let the two battle it out. Clarke had been as much of a mentor to him as Lexa, sometimes. So he'd shot.

"Aden?" she called out, swivelling around far too fast. His mouth opened, his faint argument of "*your healers will kill you!*" dying in his throat as he caught the way the length of her neck caught in the candlelight, her lips dancing with such *life*... "Aden?"

Stunned, he bowed before her. "Of course," he said hoarsely, clearing it subconsciously. Lexa raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. "Shall I—shall I go? Yes? That's...I'm going."

Lexa struggled the portion of the walk, but the Polisian tower was completely devoid of activity at night-time. Quite easily, she navigated towards one of the more luxurious guest-rooms. Aden would never do her the dishonour of housing Clarke kom Skaikru anywhere else. She knew which room Clarke was in, and as her fist rose to knock against the door, she hesitated. She thought of how she'd been completely ignorant of the change around them; of how Clarke may be a different person now; of how she'd seen herself, intimidating and fearsome, upon their first meeting. She swallowed. She wasn't that person anymore.

She draped Aden's cloak around her to keep her from shivering. Then she knocked.

A tired, but very awake voice called out, "Yeah?"

She turned the knob, finding Clarke's door creak open. Still a little hesitant, she poked her head around the corner and then found Clarke, poring over some drawings, and also some blueprints Aden must've given her to re-sketch and distribute amongst the soldiers. She remained silent, feeling suddenly very naked, for her bare feet had been padding along the tower, and she was nearly freezing her guts off here. Clarke took a moment to register Lexa's lingering presence by the door and she looked up, exasperated by the introduction—and there it was.

All the exasperation, exhaustion, grief—it all melded into one magical cauldron of disbelieving relief and Clarke shot up from her chair, nearly tripping over a box on the way. She rushed to the door, shoving it behind them and locking it.

"Oh my God," she breathed, shucking off Aden's cape and dragging one of her furs closer. She draped it over Lexa's shoulder, breathing heavily. Lexa could see Clarke's throat bob in effort as she did so, and Lexa meekly took the fur, thanking her. "You...you shouldn't be walking around. You might tear out those stitches."

"I've been at risk of tearing them out for too long," Lexa said impatiently, lifting her thin tunic up to reveal a chiselled torso, and a nasty gash that was healing well. There were no signs of infection, and unless they were about do something really strenuous—Lexa's eyes couldn't help but flick to the bed—then she was at no risk of pulling them out simply by walking. "It got tiring and boring in my chambers. I thought I would visit you."

"Did you debrief Aden?" Clarke asked, sitting at her chair again. Lexa frowned, unsure of why this was so business-like. Hadn't they shared something special back then?

"Yes," Lexa said. "I will give him some time. He's done fantastically. There will be time to adjust from Aden to myself, when I am fully fit."

"That's good. Aden's been truly fantastic."

"He has always been special. Not the best fighter; not the most well-read; not the most experienced—but he melds the trio into something fantastic. I was relieved when my faith in him

proved to be."

"I assume your medication's died down," Clarke said, fretting about unnecessarily. "Do you need any more pain medication? I can call Nyko and have him mix some of that—"

"No," Lexa said sternly. "I don't want his pain potion. It dulled my senses, including pain. I would rather suffer the pain that reality offers, than to feel nothing at all."

"You're a different patient to most," Clarke said, lips twitching.

"I am the Commander." Lexa took solace in Clarke's mild amusement, watching awkwardly as she settled back into work. She wasn't aware of where she was supposed to go from here. "Aden told me that he saved your life from Ontari."

"That's..." Clarke closed her eyes. Lexa cursed herself at bringing it up now. "Yes, that's true. And you better not punish him," she added, desperately. "He was trying to save my life. He'd already been wounded. What he did—he didn't do it out of malice."

"He used Titus' weapon," Lexa murmured. "The weapon used to shoot me."

"Where is Titus?"

"I dunno. I assume he's pottering around downstairs, being all Flamekeeper-ish."

Lexa didn't make a noise of amusement, and in the dim candlelight, Clarke set aside her quill. It was a little old-fashioned, as she was used to the ballpoint pens up in the Ark—and she was a horrible writer—but she'd been getting used to this old way of writing. Especially when the feathers were supplied by the best birds in all of Trikru. Yet something wasn't right with Lexa tonight. There was something Lexa was refusing to tell her, and Clarke was no in position to demand in from her. Here, near-naked except for her night-gown, Lexa was exposed to everything. She must have come here for a reason, only for that reason to get stuck in her throat.

"Are you hurting?" Clarke prompted gently, aware that the horrible bullet-wound was hidden by the gown. Lexa shook her head.

She hated being on the back pedal. So rarely she was caught off-guard that it really just didn't happen anymore. Yet seeing Clarke after all this time—or what had felt like forever—was something she hadn't anticipated. A wave of emotion crashed down on her, of all the sweet nothings she wanted to whisper in Clarke's ear, of all the declarations of want, of affection—of *love*—and it had gone unheard to her almost-grave. Lexa realised that she had *almost* missed out on the opportunity to give her loved one a proper goodbye. She could still feel the saltiness of Clarke's tears as her grubby hands touched each side of her face, bidding her the Traveller's Goodbye or whatever the Arkers called it. It was oddly touching, and the way Clarke's voice cracked into sobbing as she recited it meant she believed in it wholly. And who was Lexa to tell Clarke want to believe or not?

She believed it would give Lexa comfort in death, and all it had given her was a rotting Anya.

Huh. The way the world worked.

Lexa realised she'd been stood stock-still for a while now, and this time Clarke shunted her writing equipment, paper, and even the little trinkets Aden had sweetly bought her when he'd been around the Square.

"Apparently, they bless the betrothed with good fortune," Aden had said awkwardly, presenting this cheap, tacky trinket. He made a gross motion for a pregnancy bump. "In case, you know, you

were—"

"Aden, the last person I slept with was a *woman*. Explain to me how I'd be pregnant."

"He said it was also good for those you cared about! Aden blurted out, his cheeks burning in embarrassment. Clarke's eyes softened in amusement, and she closed the space between them, stroking his cheek. "You're sweet."

"You are very beautiful," he'd said honestly, adding more colour to his cheeks. "I mean, with all due respect to the Commander, *go her—*"

"Aden," she'd said sternly, "Go off."

"But—"

"I'll use it," Clarke had promised, waving the cheap bit of coin Aden had clearly been cheated out of by the Polisians in the Square. Idiot of a boy. Still, she kept the trinket by her table so she could see it, reminding her that the interim Commander was a dolt.

Now the real Commander stood before her, both weak to her—her, from the sky, and there were those who detested her for it—she did not know what to do. It felt like her mouth would not work. Her limbs. Swallowing, she took a few steps forward and Lexa remained unmoving.

"I just..." Lexa shook her head, rubbing her eyes. "I shouldn't have intruded. My apologies."

"*Lexa*. Come here."

Without another word, Lexa closed the gap between them and sunk her head into the space between the bottom of Clarke's neck and her shoulder. Weak hands roamed up and down Clarke's sides, a comfort in its own. Here Lexa was, warm and throbbing and *alive*. Everything they'd worked so hard towards was becoming a possibility again, because Lexa was in her arms. Someday, Clarke and Lexa's romance would matter. One day, they would be crafted into tragic tales of romance in which commanders of the coalition and the outside clan Skaikru had found himself embroiled in a forbidden romance. But Clarke didn't give a shit. She swayed gently from side to side, occasionally shushing Lexa as she tried to speak. There would be an eternity for speaking later. She kissed the side of Lexa's head, her arms tightening around her as if to remind her: this was home. Everyone here in Polis had been waiting for this moment—Clarke included.

Their Commander had finally returned to them. Clarke welcomed the warmth Lexa brought back into her life. The taller yet slimmer one, Lexa had always been on the receiving end of Clarke's embraces, but for now, all Clarke wanted to do was to hold Lexa til dawn.

"Clarke..." Clarke held still. "Aden debriefed me." That was all. Clarke made comforting noises, grunting a little as Lexa's hold onto her waist tightened, her fingernails digging into skin. She wrenched herself away, breathing hard. Her gaze was fixated to the floor, and the throatiness of the declaration did not take away from the determination she had. "*Jus drein jus daun*. We were wrong, Clarke."

Clarke withdrew from their embrace. "What do you mean, *wrong*? The deal was blood must *not* have blood."

"There is no deal from my accounts," Lexa declared, and even though she was simply in her night-gown and looked as if a strong gust of wind would blow her over, she looked stronger than she ever did. "You forget: you and I come from very different descents. I *understand* why you pledged that idea to me. But practicality deems it a failure. I'm sorry, Clarke. But *jus drein jus daun*. That is how things must remain."

"Lexa..."

"You would make yourself ill working too hard." Lexa blew out the candle by Clarke's desk. She behaved as if the massive disagreement between them had just been quelled, but it hadn't. Clarke could still feel the promise of peace bubble inside her, and Lexa couldn't. Clarke closed her eyes. She'd have to think of this another time. Charles Pike. Lexa had nearly died. Bellamy was on trial for Charles Pike's murder. Ontari had been killed within Polis.

"Do you remember?" Lexa asked, a little sheepishly, a little child-like. "When we kissed, and I made love to you? Do you remember?"

"Yeah...I...of course," Clarke said, distracted. She ran a hand through her knotty hair. "Lexa, of *course* I remember."

"I was going to say something to you that day." Lexa looked as if she'd swallowed a *pauna*. The greenness in her face was all to do with nausea and nothing to do with Trikru. Clarke's eyes widened in alarm, and she placed a comforting hand over Lexa's, squeezing hard.

"I know," she said tenderly.

"You know?" Lexa repeated.

Clarke hesitated. The resolution with which Lexa had declared *jus drein jus daun* was still magnifying in her mind, and the arguments and quarrels they would undoubtedly have to go through in regards to that tradition sticking would be ugly to say the least. But she knew what Lexa was about to say to her that day. A response had been on the tip of her tongue. *Jus drein jus daun* be damned for now.

"*Ai hod yu in,*" Clarke said, knowing her horrible grasp of Trigedasleng had been an arrow to Lexa's heart. Every time. She laughed, and gently pulled Lexa to the edge of her bed. "Was that what you expected?"

"Not to be reciprocated," Lexa admitted.

"Then I'll show you." The door finally slammed shut behind them as they fell into step. Clarke felt driven back by the meek force of Lexa's forehead knocking against her own, tipping her feet backwards. And then—and then Lexa moved, swiftly, courteously, and it was the most beautiful move, for her lips were on Clarke's in a second, just as Lexa's lips embraced Clarke's, her arms wrapped possessively around her waist too. In one fell swoop, Clarke was engulfed by the Commander who'd been away for too long; the woman who faded but not enough so Clarke couldn't feel every sensation of sheer love come flooding back to her as they kissed. It was clumsy, and growingly urgent, as they tiptoed together until the back of Clarke's knees tapped against the foot of the bed.

Lexa's face was clammy and slightly off-colour, but she surged forward to kiss Clarke forcefully again, her hands grappling desperately by Clarke's hips as her fingernails dug in. "Down," she panted, one hand yanking so hard at Clarke's shirt that she genuinely thought it would rip. "Get down on the bed."

"Lexa, take it slow—"

"I will look at you for an eternity," Lexa said quickly. Clarke wondered if this was rehearsed—or if Lexa had just really wanted to say this for a really long time. "I will turn and face you and smile and kiss you for as long as the spirits will allow me. But lie *down* on the bed."

"Your poor lips," Clarke teased her. "So parched...for water, hmm?"

"I will miss no contour." Lexa bent her head to nibble on Clarke's earlobe, whispering, "Please let me show you."

"Let me show *you*."

Clarke smiled at her, and shifted so Lexa was lying, back-down, on the bed. She shucked her undergarments away, and hovered over her, pressing a gentle kiss to her mouth.

"There was one detail I hadn't forgotten," Lexa said breathlessly, her callous fingertips wondering over Clarke's hips. "How utterly beautiful you are."

"Then kiss me," Clarke demanded. "Show me how *alive* you really are."

Jus Drein Jus Daun

Strangely, Lexa started to miss Anya's company—albeit dead. She offered a window into what Lexa would not become. She knew she was not destined for Anya's shameful death at the hand of a brute—or a Skaikru gunner, whatever they called themselves—but she knew death was not far from her. She struggled to keep this within her, because Polis had just received their Commander back. She did not want to be talking about the possibility of death when she'd just recovered.

Instead, she focused on Clarke.

It had been considerate of Aden to install blinds in her chambers, but the sun peeked through the slits and it woke Lexa up. She hadn't been a heavy sleeper lately, and the smallest of noises would wake her, as if she was constantly alert—for *something* to happen. Anything.

Her mind floated off to Aden and wondered how the boy had been coping in her absence. Reports had not been positive; apparently Aden had been consistently praying for her to wake up, often weeping at night. But as she took a smaller council and asked of his performance in the dailies, the reception had been positive. Aden had at first looked squeamish on the throne, but he had otherwise executed fair and firm duties.

The fact that one side seemed so overwhelming supportive and the other—namely from Titus' reports—had been quite negative was starting to cause her a headache. She would ask Indra, for it had been no lie that she'd advised Aden, in and out of sleep, to take a warrior's counsel over the *Fleimkepa's*. She doubted that Indra's counsel would actually be any better, but she was sure to tread wary ground around Titus. She did not know if he still had the gun after the showdown with Ontari. She knew he disapproved of love.

She loved Clarke.

And that was a compromise she wasn't sure Titus was willing to take. Another problem that had yet to resolve: Titus. Lexa wasn't sure how she was going to handle it. She did not want it public—for Titus' sake and for hers. But he had broken a sacred law in Polis—two sacred laws, really—and everyone knew what the punishment for that was.

She sighed deeply, allowing her eyes to flutter shut. It was as if she'd woken up and the weight of the world had body-slammed into her. Aden had offered his services in order to transition her back into the life of a Commander, but she'd refused—kindly. She wanted him to live a sweet life, a life as sweet as himself, and if he was going to be dealing with the dumb politics of the coalition, then that wasn't fair on him. He'd done more than enough in this rough world.

"I want two favours," Lexa had said to him, before he'd scampered off, "Firstly, I want a written report on your little crush on Hemla." She revelled in the way he turned crimson. "Secondly, you will be my sparring partner when I recover."

"*Heda*," he said respectfully, bowing and then quickly exiting.

The fond memory stayed with her, a glimmer in the darkness their world had become shrouded in. She dipped her head, her chin lightly brushing the top of Clarke's head. Clarke's arms encircled her waist, careful to avoid her wound. They had been tender last night, with Clarke over-cautiously about what she could do and what she could. In the end, they'd ended up utterly spent, sweat glistening off their bodies.

"Where did you go?" came Clarke's sleepy voice, a distant way away...

Lexa snapped from her daze, of Anya, of Aden, of Hemla...she had been daydreaming the moment she'd woken up. Instead, she apologised quietly, explaining she hadn't quite seemed to have forgotten everything. Clarke's tired eyes immediately crinkled by the sides, crinkling into a smile.

Lexa, forever unable to resist Clarke's charm, gently pulled her in by the back of her neck for a lingering kiss. It felt like they'd been frolicking under the covers for ages, and she knew someone would knock for her, but Lexa decided she didn't care. She deepened the kiss, the arm slung over Clarke's shoulder slackening a little as Clarke returned him fervour, grinding against Lexa's leg. She let out a small 'mmp' of approval, closing her eyes as she angled her head, slipping her tongue inside Clarke's mouth. She could feel Clarke tease her, her teeth dragging Lexa's bottom lip out, smirking.

"You dare tease *me*, the Commander?" Lexa mocked her, her hands under the covers grabbing the side of Clarke's hips, laughing as she shrieked hysterically. "I heard from a little bird that someone—" she jabbed at Clarke's right hip again, snickering when Clarke slapped her hand away, "—is a bit ticklish."

"I *will* find a weakness in you," Clarke promised her darkly, "I'll bribe people."

"Bribing is nothing compared to the loyalty to the Commander. You will not win, Clarke."

"I can," Clarke decided, clambering on top of Lexa. The way Lexa's eyes blew open, her jaw opening slightly, told everything. How long had Lexa been out of it? How long had it been thinking about Clarke going down on her? She could guarantee they were the same questions ricocheting through Lexa's mind as Clarke kissed her deeply, careful to trace the edge of Lexa's angular face and letting that hand traverse down her collarbone to her sternum. She kissed her gently, and then Lexa tried to rise from the bed to quicken the kiss, their teeth clashing in desperation. Clarke shoved her back down against the pillows, quickly tossing her tunic aside. Her breasts had enraptured Lexa since the beginning, and as Lexa moved up to touch them, caress them, Clarke pinned her hands down against the bed. "Not until I tell you to."

"Clarke..."

"I'm not messing. You make a move, and I'm starting again."

The noise Lexa let out was something of a cross between a groan and a whine. Grinning at Lexa's defeat, she kissed her way down Lexa's neck and her chest, making sure to spend extra time worshipping her breasts with her mouth. Lexa loved to do it to her, and the thought that she couldn't reciprocate this killed her inside. Clarke watched her as she did so, catching the half-lidded gaze Lexa gave her in return, nearly completely black in desire.

Clarke kissed her way down Lexa's body, pressing the softest of kisses against Lexa's wound. And then she felt her face being yanked upright, eyes facing Lexa's, laced with concern.

"It is ugly," she said firmly, looking a little ashamed. "It is no scar of a war hero."

"It's part of you," Clarke whispered against her mouth, quickly kissing it. "I find you as beautiful as I find every inch of your body."

"Clarke?"

The question came just as Clarke parted her legs, licking the inside of Lexa's thigh. She could feel the Commander shudder against her mouth. "Hmm?"

"Be—be soft?"

Clarke didn't need telling twice. She knew Lexa hadn't had this in a while. She knew even before Lexa had been shot, they'd barely had the time to consummate their relationship. She pressed the flat of her tongue against Lexa's wetness, experimentally, as Lexa's back arched from the bed in pleasure. Her eyes had scrunched up almost painfully, and Clarke's hand shot out to hold hers. "Steady..." she said, muffled by Lexa.

"I meant it," Lexa panted, as Clarke sucked on her clit. Whatever she was going to say died a pleasurable death in her throat as she bucked up to meet Clarke's mouth, firm and steady, wrapping itself around Lexa's clit. She sucked, and it was all that was needed to bring Lexa teetering on the edge. The waves of pleasure crashing in Lexa's mind were nearly unbearable, and if she blinked she swore she saw stars. The—*things*—Clarke was doing to her...just doing—her—*tongue*—

"Meant what?" Clarke hummed against her clit, licking gently. "Mm?"

"I...that's why I..." Lexa's hand clamped onto the headboard rails, head thrown back in pleasure as Clarke took the answer she needed. She sucked harder on Lexa's clit, her hands roaming up and down the back of Lexa's thighs, clenching the firmness of her ass. She sucked and raked her fingernails down soft skin, waiting for Lexa to stop bucking, her mouth open in an 'O' shape as she rode out her climax, her hips jerking awkwardly.

Clarke grinned devilishly up at her. "Ready for the day, Commander?"

"Quiet, you." Lexa dragged her up the length of the bed, giving her a lengthy kiss. "We haven't finished."

Aden had bartered quite terribly. So far, he'd given away enough coins for a couple of decent loaves of bread, cheese and even some fruits—all to separate people. The sparring pits had been fully booked, and he'd been meticulously going through the log to try and argue the case for the recovering Commander. It wasn't until his fourth transaction, with a man named John, who wanted to buy a trinket for his wife, that a grumpy-faced Lexa caught him by the collar, lifting him up the air. Aden swallowed hard, his feet kicking for mercy.

"What," came Lexa's low voice behind him, and he squeezed his eyes shut, "are you doing?"

"The sparring pits are full!" Aden insisted. "I've managed four hours. Of course, now I need to shop for a trinket, but—"

"First rule of being a Commander: don't *barter* for anything," Lexa said, releasing the boy onto the ground. He nearly stumbled, crimson-faced. "You're supposed to be the Commander. Well, interim Commander. The people should know that and they should allow you to do what you want without question. Tomorrow, you will track down the people you donated to, and you will tell them it is by the Commander's order that you take back what you promised."

"They were in need," Aden hissed, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword buckle. Lexa stopped in her tracks, raising her eyebrows at him. "They are much poorer than me. I know most of my wealth comes from the throne, and I appreciate that, but if we cannot do some good across Polis, then why are we here?"

"Because the coalition needs us. Because we need to stabilise the storm becomes it rips into civilisation and destroys us for who we are."

"That can't be what you believe, Commander. These people—*your* people—"

"Enough!" Lexa took a blunted sword and threw one at Aden too, who caught it perfectly. He kept his sharpened one sheathed. "You find who asked for the bread. You give the bread. The rest: you will take back."

"Commander..."

"Sometimes you must compromise, Aden; sometimes you must prioritise. Sometimes you are limited and you must separate need from want. You must learn to recognise it in others. A man asked for some bread. It is basic. He likely lives in a slum. A man asks for a trinket. Was he fat?"

Aden tried to guess the punch-line before Lexa got to it. He relented. "Yes, he was."

"He feeds likely on cheeses and breads and refined wines and Southern cocoa chunks," Lexa said, wrinkling her nose. "Polis is not equal. You know this?"

"Yes."

"So you will listen to me. Those who ask for cheese and fruits are asking for luxuries. A man asking for a trinket? You can take that one back too. The man who asks for bread will be given his bread. Do not think it will be taken from your dinner tonight."

"T-thank you, Commander, I—"

"There is no need for blubbering. Seeing as you have secured us four hours in the sparring pits, let's begin there. I had another idea."

Aden did not question it, for he felt he had embarrassed his Commander enough for the day. Lexa talked them through the day. Aden would recite their daily exercises with the Nightbloods, and then they would pair up and spar, gently at first, building their pace when they could. Lexa's footwork was still slow and clumsy from lack of use, but she knew Aden was a more than appropriate Nightblood for this to work. The first few hours flew by, with Aden winning far more than Lexa did, simply because of his agility and his nimbleness around Lexa's move. As she grew more and more tired, her moves became predictable and soon Aden's ability to strike the death-blow was getting quicker and quicker.

The four hours swept by and they exited the pit, sweat drenching their bodies. Aden offered a cloth to wipe the sweat from her face and she did so, splashing water over it as well. Aden took the bottle as well, panting heavily.

"You had me beat so many times. Even injured, you are a warrior," Aden remarked in wonder, staring as the next pair stepped into the pit. Both burly men, both wielding longswords. "Fully recovered, there shall not be a soul on this earth who will not fear you."

"Do you?"

"Do...you're talking about me?" Aden was caught off-guard.

Lexa nodded, taking a long sip of water. Aden sought his mind, wondering if this was some kind of test—but he had no answer for it except the truth. Trusting his gut, he shrugged. "I fear your reputation in battle. I think it is natural for the enemy to fear anyone bearing the flags of Lexa kom Trikru." Aden fiddled with his flagon of water, his messy blonde hair falling over his eyes as he

looked down. He didn't have Lexa to advise him on when to get a cut. That, he'd missed.

"But I do not fear you. *Heda*, you have taken me on, nourished me, taught me, and you have prepared me for Ascension Day should it be me or not. Should the day come, and you pass, I would wish I'd passed before. I do not want to fight with my comrades for your position. But if I have to, I would be proud. And with the time I spend under your tutelage, my pride would remain and fear would not be an issue but a suitable staple." He fidgeted with the mouthpiece of the flagon, clearly uncomfortable.

"I love you like a mother. I think that encompasses both fear and love, does it not?"

Brow furrowing to understand, Lexa could only keep her stare fixed to the ground. Aden had been a product of her close training. She'd heard the whispers. Aden was a clear favourite of hers, and it made her fear sometimes that the Nightbloods would stray from the initial pick of the draw and they would eliminate him or set him up in the first round of the trials just to get him out of the way. But if Lexa had taught the Nightbloods anything, then it wouldn't happen.

She realised, though, that besides Clarke—she could trust Aden with her life.

"I had a plan for us," she told him. "We would fight in the woods. It would give a more accurate representation of terrain as well as the forestry. Sometimes the trees are weapons in itself."

"We could do it next time," Aden said eagerly.

"Next time." Lexa smiled, and ruffled his sweaty hair. He'd always been a daydreamer of a boy. He looked to heroes and stars, and Lexa realised he wasn't so different from herself. "You've broadened."

"Indra told me I should be slim, not skinny. I think I agree. I have muscles now," he bragged.

Lexa snorted. "Does Hemla like that?"

"I have yet to really do anything," Aden confessed, reddening. "I...don't know what to say."

"You're a charmer. You'll figure something out."

"I hope so. Clarke kom Skaikru has been teaching me the ways of etiquette."

"Oh?"

"In return, I spar with her."

Lexa burst out laughing, bent over forwards by the waist. "*What?*"

"She says she wants to improve her combat skills! I must say—" Aden cut himself off, afraid he would offend Lexa. She good-naturedly waved him on. "She has the response time of a blind donkey. It is impossible."

"You have a good heart," Lexa decided, laughing. "Taking on a project as such is not easy."

They towelled off, chatting amicably of the day and everything Lexa had missed. Full debriefs from her counsels had trickled their way into her day, but she missed genial, idiotic conversation like this. She'd missed ravishing Clarke, like their world would crash around them—and it *had*, in a way. She missed Aden; she missed the Nightbloods' antics. Most of all, she missed overseeing her Polis from the top of the tower. People saw it as grandeur and power; Lexa supposed only very few people alive knew of the blood and sweat that adorned its walls.

"There's a favour I want from you," Lexa said carefully, and she'd been beating herself up until this moment. This burden should not be carried by a teenager, but it had to be done. "Do you know what happened to me in my chambers? That I was shot by Titus' gun?"

"I used it to kill Ontari," Aden said hollowly, "I remember the weapon well."

"He should not have kept it in Polis in the first place," Lexa said. "He used it to kill Clarke kom Skaikru, for his belief is that love is weakness."

"But—" Aden bunched his fists up, sweat still dazzling on his face in the sunlight as he tried to process the information. *I've known this all along. Why do I struggle to process it now? Or am I just forever haunted by the thought?* "I—" He struggled to get the words out, feeling his eyes sting with tears. So much had happened over the past couple of weeks, and although he felt as if he was still waiting for the burden to crash on his shoulders, this was yet another blow. Emotion overwhelmed him as he groaned, shoving his face in his hands. He did not want his Commander to think of him as weak. "I wanted so badly to kill him," he managed, as Lexa crouched to her knees, rubbing his back consolingly. "I wanted to kill him with my bare hands. I've never wanted to kill anyone, *Heda*—not even the Ice Queen. But when I saw what Titus had done to you, and by extension done to Clarke, I could not bear the thought of him walking around Polis—alive."

"I am not a killer. When I killed Ontari, I sobbed into my pillow for nights and nights. My eyes were red and puffy the next day. The men would tease me, but only Clarke kom Skaikru seemed to understand. My duty is forever to protect you, but I will *always* extend it to Clarke kom Skaikru if that is what is needed. I'm not a killer, *Heda*."

Lexa's eyes softened as she watched the boy in front of her bowed his head, shamed tears trickling down his cheeks, and she knew instantly that this wasn't just because of Ontari or Titus. Ever since she had been unconscious Aden had assumed all duties of a Commander. It was not an easy ask, and ever since she'd returned, she'd tried to keep close to Aden just in case something had happened, or in case he needed her. No teenager should be subjected to her responsibilities like that.

She thought back to the baby-faced leader of the coalition she had once been.

It wasn't like that, though. Aden was not fully trained and he had been shoved into this position with nothing except for "*I think he's the commander's favourite*" and all of a sudden, an imaginary position called the interim had been made for him. In reality it should've been Titus, Indra or someone who knew the City Guard intimately.

"I'm not here to ask you to kill Titus," she said quietly, squeezing his shoulder. His sobs quietened, and he rubbed his eyes, apologising frantically, though she wasn't having any of it. "What happens to Titus will be by my hand. And I know you have been in a position where you haven't necessarily been cared for," she added, studying him closely as he nodded reluctantly. "I'm back, Aden. I promise you. And if you witness what I do to Titus—you know, I have never finished my Nightblood preparation for you lot—but if I have one final lesson, it is to look for the light, as mangled and disgusting as the darkness that threatens to shroud you is."

"Titus broke a sacred law within Polis. He wielded a weapon—a Skaikru one nonetheless—to try and kill Clarke kom Skaikru. It hit me instead. What awaits him is punishment, and I shall be the one to dictate the magnitude of it. I need your help, Aden. You are my interim; you will be my counsel sometimes."

Aden nodded, barely understanding Lexa's word. Instead he leant forward and Lexa took him easily in her embrace, rocking him back and forth like a child. It wasn't fair for him to undergo all of this, but he'd handled everything supremely well. She knew she would reward him in due time.

But for now, she just wanted to hold him, because the Commandership should not have so hastily fallen into his lap. She closed her eyes, taking in his wracking sobs, for whatever he'd done—he'd kept it in a log by the Commander's desk—and forgave him instantly.

"I need you to be at the Square, tomorrow, at noon," Lexa murmured, into his mop of hair. Aden nodded against her. "I will meet you an hour later."

"An hour?" Aden withdrew, wiping his tears away. "What am I supposed to do for an hour?"

Lexa slipped him a purse of gold coins. "Buy some flowers. Tell them they are for someone special; someone you adore with all your heart."

"I can't," Aden persisted. "I'd have to give it to her *daughter!*"

"So do just that. Buy them, and then give it to her."

"And then what? What am I supposed to do for the next forty-five minutes?"

Lexa glowered at him, a little disbelieving that Aden would leave this potentially life-changing moment for himself *fifteen minutes*, but she gave him another pouch of coins with a sigh. "*If*," she said lowly, "and only *if*—you do not succeed in some hour-long, messy, tearful confession of adoration, then you can buy some cocoa we imported from the Southern islands. They have properties in them that are supposed to make you feel better in spirits."

Aden gave her a look as if to say '*that's your plan?*' but did not question it further. He hastily pocketed the coin pouches and scuttled from the room, flattening his hair that always seemed to stick up. She knew tomorrow when she saw him he would look like an idiot, but—oh well. She couldn't guide him through everything.

"Aden?" she called, as he was headed for the door. "An hour past noon, alright? No matter what Hemla says. Or...*does.*"

Aden almost looked offended. "Of course, *Heda.*"

He wasn't quite familiar with the time loss associated with intoxicating females just yet.

The jeers and riots grew only in volume as Bellamy kom Skaikru was brought into Polis, beaten, chained and muddy. Clarke watched from the side, pity heavy in her eyes. What had *become* of him? He'd been the symbol of leadership once. When the delinquents had no-one to look to, Bellamy had been their beacon. As soon as Clarke had grappled with the ins and outs of leadership, Bellamy had become a faithful soldier. But he was *not* a xenophobic piece of crap. Bellamy Blake, who had looked after his sister under the floor-boards for sixteen years; who'd crawled into Mount Weather knowing it was a suicide mission just so his peers would have a slim chance of freeing the prisoners.

That was the Bellamy Blake Clarke had known. Now, to see him at the very bottom of the pile—she wondered if the Polisians even classed him above vermin—was nauseous. Amidst the crowd, Aden's mop of messy hair was distinct and he wove his way through, tapping her on the shoulder. The lack of uniform looked good on him, and Lexa had trained him well; he was not skinny. Rather, he was lean. "Clarke kom Skaikru," he said, almost regretfully. "You're needed in the throne room. It is not a matter that can wait."

"Aden, Bellamy Blake is—"

"Exactly. It's about this. If you may?"

Clarke followed Aden, uncertain of how this would play out. So this was about Bellamy, and she was about to be transported to Lexa. She could already form about four or five nightmare scenarios.

"Are you gonna give me any warning?" Clarke tried. The (rightfully) bloodthirsty crowd outside, clawing at the murderer of three-hundred of their own, had been a nightmare. But Clarke knew that whilst passion was rife outside, the real politics remained inside.

"I'm not sure. I don't know what is happening. I've only been instructed to find you."

"They'll kill Bellamy," Clarke muttered. *And it's all my fault.* Blame was heavy to carry on one's shoulders—and she hadn't the energy to shuck it off. Aden remained a gentleman throughout the walk, opening doors for her and bowing his head as she walked past. "*Jus drein jus daun.*"

"Perhaps not," Aden reasoned. "It doesn't look good to seal an alliance with an execution."

"What choice does Lexa have? If she doesn't kill Bellamy, it'll—"

"Charles Pike is dead. For most, that news was enough."

"Lexa wasn't even *conscious* when Pike died."

"Mm." Aden pondered on this for a moment. "The Commander won't harm the coalition, Clarke. She is too wise for that. You are lucky she returned when she did."

"Why?"

Aden swallowed the lump in his throat. "I want Bellamy Blake's head on a spike."

Clarke found herself stunned into silence, awkwardly processing Aden's sudden dark turn. She had never seen an inch of malice within the boy, and even when he said it, he scratched his head in guilt. There was no conviction behind his words, but Clarke knew if Aden had been in charge and leapt to emotion, the outcome would be exactly as described.

They reached the double-doors much sooner than Clarke anticipated, and dread filled her stomach. Aden's hand paused on the door handle, and uncharacteristically, he placed a hand on her shoulder. Clarke bit her lip. They weren't used to touching each other—as affectionate of Aden as she'd grown lately.

"Are you ready?" he asked quietly.

"Perhaps." Clarke smiled and squeezed his hand. He dropped it. "Thank you, Aden."

He pushed open the doors.

"Ambassadors—please greet Clarke kom Skaikru, Ambassador of the thirteenth clan," Aden announced. The clan leaders rose from their seats and knelt on one leg. Lexa nodded at Aden, and Aden nodded back. "Ambassadors, please rise."

They did as he commanded.

Lexa did not greet her from the throne, though she noticed the warpaint was back on in full-force.

The ambassadors of neighbouring clans gave her a wary stare, and then all of a sudden, the door was kicked down by Indra and Titus. They threw Bellamy to his knees. His head hung low, probably out of exhaustion. The sweat dripped off his face onto the tip of his nose, which dripped to the floor.

"Bellamy kom Skaikru," Lexa said loudly. It had been the first statement, really, since she'd made after being nursed back to health. "Would you like to present your case?"

"What case is there?" Bellamy spat. "I killed Charles Pike. But it's none of your fucking business seeing as we were never part of your shitty coalition anyway."

"I'd mind your language," Aden warned him, stood behind Lexa's throne. "The Commander does not take kindly to threats."

Bellamy laughed, his grin bloody and humourless. "What'll you do? Hmm? You think you can take me? Shit, you think you're all powerful 'cause some lunatic decided to finally try and off your Commander and you had to take her place? C'mon then. Combat by trial? You know nothing of me. What I've had to face."

"We do not know you, as you have correctly deduced. With no great pleasure, I hand you over to another ambassador." Lexa's voice rung horribly in her ears, and Clarke could suddenly feel all eyes on her.

Shit.

She did not have a back-up plan for this; she didn't even know Bellamy was coming to Polis. Lexa fixed her gaze on her, looking half-apologetic. Only half. The other half realised that there was no other solution. "Clarke kom Skaikru, if I could ask you..."

Clarke took the raised podium without hesitation. She leaned across Lexa's throne to appear as if she was confiding, but she snarled up at Lexa, "If you pull a stunt like that, without consulting me first, *ever again*, I swear—I will take your head, Lexa."

Lexa did not cower. "Will you dispense justice for this man, Skaikru Ambassador?"

What choice did she *have*?

Clarke stood tall before Bellamy, and her heart broke for him. "This isn't you," she said, her voice cracking. "You didn't kill Pike."

"Does it matter?" It hurt her more than Bellamy's eyes filled with tears too. He had the ghosts of three hundred grounders on his shoulders too. If Clarke let him off gently, she would have the coalition's wrath on her too. "I never, *ever*, meant for any of this, Clarke. I've been blinded. *So* blinded. But I can't take back my actions."

"You are a traitor to the coalition," Lexa accused him hotly, jabbing her finger at him. "I sent three hundred of my own, volunteers, to protect your encampment. But you shot them—you didn't even honour them a fight! You murdered them in their sleep!"

"What choice did I have?" Bellamy cried out. "I couldn't just reject Pike—"

"Yes," Clarke said coldly. "You could have."

"Clarke..."

"You tried to guilt-trip me for the entirety of Mount Weather, even though you *promised* me I

wouldn't be taking the blame alone. A load of shit that was. Then you side with Pike, who wants to wipe every Grounder from existence, forgetting the help the Grounders have been to us, been to your *sister*—Jesus, did Pike perform some kind of brainwash surgery to you or what?"

"I didn't know it would come down to this," Bellamy pled, his eyes downturned in misery. "Please, Clarke. You have to believe me."

"I do believe you." The words came out quicker than she'd anticipated, but there was no doubt about it. She believed him. In her heart, she had always believed Bellamy Blake. But sometimes, belief was not enough to save a soul from the depths of his actions. "So I'll let you go back to Arkadia."

Silence fell in the throne room. Not a single person—not even the accused—could see what this was meant to accomplish. Clarke stared back at Aden, who simply shrugged, ruffling a hand through his hair. Finally, she glanced over to Lexa, who was deep in thought. If anyone would understand her intentions, it would be Lexa. But it seemed to be taking time, and so Clarke stomped on the platform, shutting up the murmurs.

"You, Bellamy Blake, will return to Arkadia—where you belong," she spat the end words with disappointment, thinking of the lives lost in the massacre. She knew what that had been about. Charles Pike and his determination to send the Grounders back where they belonged. "When the Ice Nation army march upon us, you will be the barricade. You will witness, first-hand, what we have striven to protect all of you from. You have rejected help again and again, stuffed to the brim with your pride, and you will suffer the consequences of that. You will be clanless. You may as well make a run for it."

"Clanless?" Bellamy erupted, struggling against his restraints as the Polisian guards seized him. He kicked and thrashed, his big body proving hard work for the guards—but they managed to drag him towards the entrance. "What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"Marcus Kane is your Chancellor," Lexa said plainly. "In the early hours of this morning, he signed an agreement to say he would be rejoining our coalition as the thirteenth clan. Any harm that comes to the thirteenth will be under our protection," she announced, waving off the mutters and murmurs that this kind of news usually caused. "I made some negotiations. It seems not all Arkadians are innocent; not all of them are free from *Grounder blood* dripping off their hands, are they?"

"Then—then under your act—"

"You are his prisoner," Lexa said smoothly. "If Marcus Kane and his people seek shelter elsewhere, they will not bring their prisoners along. That was a condition."

"But—"

"You chose the wrong side," Lexa whispered as she crouched at his level, the slightest of smirks hinting at her lips. Clarke saw over her to where Titus was standing, his expression pinched in displeasure. It seemed whenever Lexa made a decision these days, Titus stood as opposition. Bellamy, out of spite, spat at her face and she ordered for him to be locked away until Marcus Kane ordered transportation for him. Disgusted, she wiped her face with a handkerchief, a brief glance around the room noting Titus' displeasure. She would have to talk to him about it later.

But now was the chance to make an example of Bellamy Blake. "I'm not unfair to any who fall under my coalition or not," she announced to the clan leaders, waving to Clarke. "But when you murder hundreds of innocent, sleeping Grounders and continue to antagonise us, then there is no side, I am afraid, that puts you on—except for 'not our own'.

"Heed reckless Bellamy Blake's punishment and learn from it. Know that the Skaikru Ambassador dispensed fair and true justice today. That is what you shall gain from not abandoning the coalition, but actively trying to fight innocents. Banishment from our unification is not a crime. But killing innocent people of mine *is*."

The clan leaders applauded in agreement, and Lexa's head hunched over as she made her way to the throne, stopping by Clarke's seat. She reached out to touch Clarke's hand, and Clarke found himself neatly evading it.

"I'm sorry." Lexa meant it. "I should have told you."

"You should've given me warning."

"Let us talk later." It wasn't until now that Clarke realised how *tired* she looked. "Don't come down for dinner. I will have some warm food brought up to you for dinner, and I will come by your chambers—" she caught herself, the tips of her ears reddening. "If that is alright by you?"

Clarke stared up at her as if she'd asked permission to talk. "Yeah, of course. Why not?"

"Nothing." Lexa adjusted her uniform self-consciously, and nodded curtly to her. "I will see you later."

Lexa was timely, as expected. She pushed through the doors with her back, holding two plates of steaming food in both hands. Clarke rushed to greet her, having just finished a sketch of her own. It felt as if she'd been cooped up in here all day after Bellamy's trial—perhaps at Lexa's insistence, and perhaps for her own good.

"Pigeon," Lexa said, gesturing her head towards the plate. There were a variety of vegetables scattered about. And there was no cutlery. Clarke looked at it helplessly. "Come on, Clarke. You have been a Grounder." Lexa's grin fell a little at the lack of response. "We've always eaten pigeon with our hands!"

"I seem to have the ass," Clarke said dully, lifting one of the chopped pieces for inspection. Yep. She had the ass. She licked her fingers clean, wiping them on her breeches. "What makes you think I need to have some isolation for my dinner?"

"It can't have been easy, what you did earlier." Lexa made time for a warm bowl of water for the duo to rinse their fingers in and then tore into the pigeon, almost tactfully. She chewed as if she had to—as if food was just diesel to be put in the engine. "I didn't want any Polisians giving you any of their nonsensical behaviour. I apologise if it felt claustrophobic in here. I did not want that for you."

"A bit," Clarke said cynically, "I feel like Rapunzel, locked away in her tower."

"Rawh-pun-zzel?"

"No, it's a—never mind," she snorted, shaking her head. She tried the pigeon. The meat was juicy; the skin was crispy, a nice brown colour. Her hands, still used to a knife and fork, were a little delicate in eating it. She glanced up at Lexa, who seemed to blizzard through the meat without making any mess at all. *The skills of a Commander*, she lamented. "You wanted to talk?"

"I wanted to see if you were alright," Lexa rectified, staring determinedly at her plate of food. Clarke frowned. "I was concerned for your welfare after Bellamy Blake's sentencing."

"You could've been a little bit more concerned during the actual thing." It had a little more bite than Clarke intended, and Lexa flinched.

She sighed. "I apologise for putting you in that situation. But I had to make an example of the Skaikru; I had to make an example of mass-murders. And I had to have *Wanheda* do it."

"We're never quite past it, are we?" Clarke didn't feel hungry all of a sudden. "The titles and the reputations. *Heda* and *Wanheda*. Have you ever just wanted to be 'Clarke and Lexa'?"

"*Want* resides in a different world to *need*," Lexa said flatly. Another lesson drilled into her brain. "What we need we do not always want; what we want we do not always need—or *cannot* always need." She looked up at Clarke, and her confident face fell. "I wake every day fearing an enemy of mine will exploit another weakness I parade over the realm: that is *you*."

"I can handle myself."

"I know. I know. I just..." Lexa closed her eyes. "My touch is death."

"So is mine."

"Perhaps we are truly equal, then."

"Lexa...why did you bring your dinner up to me? You could've just brought mine and gone back downstairs."

Lexa rinsed her hands, chewing the last of her pigeon. "We haven't talked," she said flatly, "not properly. I've spoken to Aden, and Indra, and Titus—but the one person I always wanted to speak to, who always evaded me, was you."

"It wasn't intentional, Lexa."

"I know. I know. Time does not allow for the besotted." Sometimes, Lexa would say things and they would sound like quotes from stories or legends of the old world; sometimes she just spoke like that because *she spoke like that*. Clarke only registered the full meaning of it a few seconds later, and she smiled drily at Lexa, who was staring down at her vegetables.

They had no cutlery.

"I might have made a mistake," Lexa confessed.

Clarke full-on laughed at the dismal guiltiness stretching across Lexa's half-hooded eyes and tossed her head back, nearly falling off the seat. She'd made perfect preparations for the pigeon but there had been nothing for anything else. A fool would do it, no less a Commander—yet Clarke cheekily wondered if they were one and the same.

When she recovered, she realised Lexa had been staring at her. There was not a word for the way Lexa looked at people. Sometimes, her big green eyes would fixate on you and you would feel like the only person in the entire world that mattered. It was utterly transfixing, and Lexa didn't even know it. Clarke held her gaze unsteadily, being the first to look away for a sip of water. Soon after that, Lexa's tensions seem to unravel opposite her as she sipped her drink too.

And that *wasn't* a sip of water. Clarke's hand reached for the jug of heady Polisian wine, and Lexa grasped her wrist as she did so.

"Is there something you want to talk about?" she asked, uncharacteristically vague.

"Yeah." Lexa looked patient. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Clarke..."

Clarke shook off Lexa's hand and made her way to the edge of her bed, where she flopped. She was tempted to straight-up star-eagle and snooze off, but that would be undignified, even for her. Like a puppy looking for its owner, Lexa followed her, and Clarke made sure she had enough space to sit beside her. For a moment, they remained quiet, in amicable silence. There was nothing to say but there was also a world of things to say. Lexa would mutter about Anya and Costia and Nia in the moments she came to and from consciousness, and once she had a full conversation about Polis without even waking up. Clarke's end hadn't been easy either. She'd just executed Bellamy, effectively. Ontari had almost killed her. Titus didn't like her. The only friend she'd found in Polis was Aden, and he was a *boy*. He'd been the sweetest, most courageous young boy. She could still recall him springing to action as he nudged her out of the doorway, as Ontari advanced up the steps, only to be knocked back by Titus. He'd been willing to save his life for Lexa *and* Clarke, and he'd been the *only* person in the room to do so.

"You look tired," Lexa said softly, moving to cover Clarke's hand with hers. "Anything you want me to deal with?"

"No." Clarke shook her head. "There's only so much I can go weeping to my Commander about. I won't abuse your position just because I'm *tired*. I can handle myself, Lexa."

"That's not what I'm asking—"

"I *know*!" Frustration bubbled from nowhere, and Clarke wasn't even sure why her ears were pricking with tears anymore. All the events that had occurred since Lexa's gunshot wound had all gone to hell. Aden had been a more than adequate interim Commander, but everything had gone to shit. She knew Titus was still her enemy. She knew given the chance, he'd wield that weapon again and get the job done properly. Something that haunted her at sleep was that Titus still had the gun—and nobody seemed to be doing anything about it.

"I'm not trying to antagonise you," Lexa said, "You know I am *always* by your side."

"Maybe you shouldn't be," Clarke said dully. "I'm a killer. I'm a genocidal—"

"Aren't we all?" Lexa mused, and without warning, she shucked her tunic off. Clarke startled for a moment—as if it was nothing she hadn't seen before—and showed her her back. It was not as marred with scars as she'd expected. "There isn't enough space on my back for it. And you know what the funny thing is? People still call me the greatest Commander there was. I've caused more deaths than any Commander has, in order to forge this coalition."

"If you hadn't, there would've been plenty more deaths," Clarke insisted.

"It makes me wonder: is all the blood worth the peace? All the bloodshed I've committed? Is it not somewhat of a tragic irony, that I must commit so much bloodshed to achieve a lack of it? That in some regions they call me Lexa the Peacemaker, just as Oliss was Oliss the Tender, but what Peacemaker am I if I just *kill*?"

"They never said you never killed. They never said you were a pacifist. They never said that. A peacemaker. Do you know what that means to me?" Lexa motioned for her to carry on. "It means to me that it's a person who will do *anything* to ensure peace for the future generations to come."

Lexa kissed her, then. Clarke kom Skaikru had always been her Achilles heel; her one very weakness. She knew she had many that would be difficult to recover from, but true fear struck at the thought of losing Clarke. And so she held on tightly. Deepening the kiss, she coaxed Clarke's mouth open to slip her tongue inside, their kisses gently and a little sloppy. Eventually they fell into bed, with Clarke clumsily clambering over Lexa's body as Lexa laughed beneath her, tugging down her breeches as she did so. Clarke scowled, yelping as she did so, though she was laughing too. And it had been so long. *So long* since their lovemaking had not been laced with sadness or something else.

Tonight they were two young women who wanted to enjoy each other's bodies, and as Lexa slowly made her way up Clarke's body with her hands and her mouth, enjoying her beautiful curves and her gorgeous breasts, Lexa knew she'd hit the jackpot.

"You know I was going to tell you that day," Lexa said breathily, kissing her lightly.

"Tell me what?"

"That I loved you," Lexa said without thinking, bending her head to kiss a trail down her neck. "I hesitated. I should never have done so. I am not going to hesitate in how I feel for you. If it should one day bring me shame, then I will fight it."

Clarke pulled Lexa's face so it hovered directly over hers. "I'll never be ashamed of loving you. You know."

Lexa studied her, using her right arm to prop her up, her palm pressing against the pillow just to the right of Clarke's ear. The bags underneath her eyes were noticeable, but the stress around her eyes, the redness in her eyes—out of tears, or lack of sleep, she didn't know—was unmistakable. Lexa kissed her ever so softly, gently nipping her bottom lip. "You're tired."

"It's been a lot," Clarke confessed. "I just..."

"Were you scared? That I wouldn't come back?"

Clarke wouldn't lie to her. "Yes."

Lexa nodded, bending her knees and sitting upright. She took Clarke's hand in hers and traced them over the recovering bullet-shot wound. It was ugly and marred, and every time Clarke encountered a slight bump she shuddered. *It was meant for me*, she thought in despair. The thought of Titus pointing the gun at her was crystal-clear. The memory haunted her in her sleep, and she wanted nothing for it to be gone. "I saw an ugly side to me when I...nearly died," Lexa murmured, deciding not to mention Anya in case everyone thought she'd gone mad. "I fear it will only grow uglier. I do not want to hold you to me if I am to make decisions that are not agreeable, even if I make them for what I believe is the greater good, Clarke."

"I," Clarke's finger traced Lexa's full lips, pressing a kiss to them, "find you beautiful *every single day*."

"Even after everything?"

"There's a saying: time heals. Sometimes I think it's bullshit. But when you commit to it and you think, and you *really* think, of all the different perspectives that could have been, then it makes sense. The execution is not always forgivable, but if you're worried about me finding your actions 'ugly', then you won't find it in me."

"So long as you can still see a heart of mine that isn't rotten, I will let that assure me I'm not entirely consumed by some of the things I've done."

"Do you want my diagnosis, as one of your healers?"

Lexa laughed, and held her hands up. "Alright."

"I think you have been punishing yourself the day you got dragged away from your parents," Clarke said quietly, and Lexa felt the remark sting the bottom of her heart. The very last vision she'd shared with Anya had been that one exactly—and neither of them knew why. Lexa knew the circumstances in which her parents die, but to revisit that raid—and not even see her parents—seemed pointless. "You survived a near-fatal gunshot wound—and it wasn't even intended on you. Yet you punish yourself for Aden's stress, and my well-being, and Indra's, and Nyko's. You punish yourself when a village is raided. You punish yourself every time one of your people is hurt—and do you know how many people live within your coalition? Twelve clans of how many? You shoulder this burden alone, but sometimes, it isn't your choice whether it's yours to shoulder or not. You're not responsible for every single person's pain in this realm."

"I'm the Commander," Lexa said hoarsely. "Anything is mine to shoulder."

"Not when you're out cold, it isn't."

"I will not have it weigh down on Aden's young shoulders."

"Aden is older and more capable than you think," Clarke told her, cupping her cheek. "He seems naive but he has been holding meetings in your place most successfully. Tutelage from Indra and Titus has shaped him into an excellent youth. And if you asked me before your accident if I believed in him, then I would say no; if you asked me now, I'd say yes."

Clarke's hands traversed down to tenderly touch the belly-wound, shushing Lexa when she flinched in shock. Nobody had really touched it like that before—so lovingly, so reverently. She supposed she didn't *want* anybody else to, except Clarke.

Lexa pushed Clarke back against the pillows, feeling Clarke's hands instantly fly to her hips, her fingertips spreading out to explore as much skin as she could with a touch. Lexa smiled down at her, and kissed her, her eyes scrunching up slightly. This was for all the times she'd left Clarke in the dark. For the time Titus had tried to kill her. For the loneliness she must've felt in Polis, save for Aden's gentlemanly graces. She kissed her for the missed *I love you*, and she kissed her for everything she'd seen with Anya. The funeral pyre. Their first meeting. The betrayal. She kissed her because she'd loved Clarke then, and she had never had the courage to tell her.

For all the hurt she'd ever caused. The pain. The self-exile. Lexa kissed her hard, forcing her tongue into Clarke's surprised mouth. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—*

"Mmph—Lexa—wait—" Clarke pushed her back, her lips swollen with the force of Lexa's kiss. "A-are you okay? You know you don't have to—"

"I want this—you—" Lexa was surprised with how gravelly her voice had become. A familiar throb ached between her legs, and as Clarke tried to sit up, Lexa's forehead pressed against hers, causing her to lie against the pillows again. "I want to make you feel loved."

"I *know* I'm loved. I'm just worried that—"

"It won't happen," Lexa assured her, wondering what kind of sex Clarke had in mind. Clarke flushed a dark purple as Lexa moved to make quick work of her neck, sucking hard on her collarbone. Clarke's back arched off the bed as Lexa's hand moved to palm her breast, groaning as Clarke breathed heavily in her ear in response. Her mouth went to suck her nipple, reverent in the way her tongue swirled around the hardening peak, clamping down lightly with her teeth. Clarke

moaned loudly, trying to toss her head against the pillows to muffle it.

"I want to hear you," Lexa told her as she kissed her way down Clarke's body, grinning. Clarke mock-slapped her on the head, but found herself moaning loudly anyway as Lexa's tongue worked its magic. It felt as if they had never been separated.

Quickly, Lexa flipped them over, careful to keep Clarke sitting in her lap. She placed her forehead against Clarke's, feeling the way they both breathed—heavily, gasping for oxygen. Clarke ground down on her thigh, and Lexa stifled her groan against Clarke's unmarred shoulder, kissing and biting the smooth skin there.

"I want to be yours," Lexa said gruffly, feeling Clarke's wetness rub against her naked thigh. Clarke embraced her with both hands, burying her face against the crook of Lexa's neck. As she sucked, Lexa moaned, slipping a finger inside of Clarke's wetness. She could feel Clarke rocking uncontrollably against her, and as she watched out of the corner of her eye Clarke throw her head back in pleasure, she forced another two inside, quickening the pace until nothing could be heard from their room except the slickness of Lexa's fingers pounding inside her.

The sun had long gone down on them as Lexa and Clarke lazed about on the bed, with Clarke tossing her grapes, impressed with the way Lexa seemed to catch every single one in her mouth. It gave Lexa a great amount of glee (who knew? The Commander had a hidden talent) but it also gave her a clock to watch. She knew in more than twelve hours from now, she was going to meet Aden in the Square and she was going to exact revenge.

And it would not be nice.

"Remember me when you think me beautiful." The words slipped from Lexa's mouth before she knew it, and she knew it sounded more of a plea than anything else. "When I'm still scarred but because I've done good."

"What is it?" Clarke's brow furrowed in concern. "You know I will *always* see you as who you are."

"The less people it involves, the better." Lexa pondered this for a moment, and shuffled so Clarke could rest her head against Lexa's chest. Clarke didn't remark on the way Lexa's chest pounded desperately, an erratic *thud-thud-thud* that either meant she had a cardiovascular problem, or she was scared shitless about something. "Will you?"

"You're an altruist. You do things for the better good; for the good of other people. Never you—not first. And when you're not, you're lawful. You abide by the law you set. You stick to your vote of no confidence. You are no tyrant, Lexa—you are fair, and just, and *too stubborn*—" they both chortled at this, "—but you are not a bad person."

"There are some laws within Polis that are very strict," Lexa said carefully, thinking of Aden and Hemla tomorrow, and how his day of joy would turn to a day of blood. "Some laws within Polis require death as punishment."

"And there is no diplomatic way of resolving it?" Clarke stroked up Lexa's chest, looking up at her, but her gaze was fixed firmly on the wall opposite them. It was glassy and soulless, and Clarke found herself kissing the space where Lexa's skin covered her heart.

"A death," Lexa said, "is rewarded by such. There is no argument about that anymore. *Jus drein jus daun*. That is the way our lives have to be now. No more revolutions."

"It was suggested because it was a barbaric way of solving things," Clarke said. "*Jus drein jus daun* goes against all of your policies. To settle matters—like murder—with more blood only spins the cycle further."

"It stops the cycle," Lexa argued back. "*Jus drein jus daun* does not go against my policies. It is the policy I stuck to when I assumed Commandership. It was the bloodiest war we'd ever seen, but when we drew the coalition together, it did not spare anyone. There was blood everywhere, and soon the clan leaders had had enough. The cycle does not feed itself; the cycle dries out, and then peace is made."

"Lexa..." Clarke's voice was dangerously low. "What are you going to do?"

Lexa gritted her teeth. "Dispense justice."

Dispensing Justice

Lexa allowed the sun to sit on her face, upturning her head so she could close her eyes and bask in the heat. She was five minutes early, and she hadn't told Aden to come until it was an hour past noon on the dot.

She blinked, her vision clearing to see Titus walking around the Square. She'd enlisted him with an impossible list. They would have a feast tonight. Lexa would celebrate *jus drein jus daun* as a re-installment of their previous agreement with the Grounders, and Titus had agreed heartily. *An entire lamb*, she could remember writing, on the endless scroll, *some herbs Chef Daisey can use. Preferably mint.* That had been another one. There had been endless bouquets of flowers, candles, wine—everything that required Titus to bring a cart with him. She watched from a distance as he occasionally barged into people, apologising—only for the people to let up when they saw it was the *Fleimkepa*. Just like Lexa, Titus had a reputation in Polis.

"Commander? *Commander?*"

Lexa's consciousness was immediately shaken by Aden, who stood by her side. One hour past noon. The boy had not failed. He was, however, wearing a daisy-chain for a bracelet and his cheeks were bright pink.

"I know this is serious," he said giddily, "But Hemla kissed me!"

"We'll talk about how magical that feels in a minute," Lexa promised him, trying not to think too much of tongues and tongues and more tongues. She grimaced and watched Titus in the square. She was dressed in a free-blowing black gown that hid her normal attire underneath ("why are you in black, *Heda?* It's boiling!") and she hadn't kept her eye off Titus for about a half-hour.

"Are you ready for this?" Lexa asked, to make sure. Aden seemed white as a ghost when she'd heard his plan. "I don't want to put anything else on your shoulders, Aden."

"Commanders carry burdens alone, *Heda*—that is what you taught me," Aden said. "As your interim I would like to lend a shoulder for when the weight is too great."

"It isn't. You can always—"

"Opt out. I know."

"Aden?"

"I shot Ontari, and I shot Ontari using Titus' gun. This is my ghost too, Commander."

Lexa looked down at him, ready to pull him into an embrace—afterwards. For now, she nodded, feeling her stomach twist in guilt. The right thing to do was to send Aden home. Or back to Hemla. She knew he was here because she had to make sure Titus was punished accordingly—and if left alone with Titus, she was worried she would not carry it out. "Tell me what you see."

"He has a cart," Aden said pointlessly, wanting to be of *some* use. "Erm. It has a lamb in it."

"Help him with his shopping," Lexa ordered.

"*Help* him? He almost killed you! He tried to kill Clarke kom Skaikru!"

"So I'm asking you nicely: *please help him.*"

Reluctantly, Aden scowled at her and then matted his hair down, undoubtedly making a show for Titus. A part of her felt cruel. She didn't want to bring Aden into their internal matters—but she could not trust Clarke with this part of the deal, and Titus' breaking of the sacred laws would not go unpunished either.

She remembered, faintly, when she had first woken. Titus had cradled her face, his eyes filled with love. He had been nothing but a father figure to her. He'd begged for forgiveness when he'd shot her, and out of duty, she had given it. There was no question: Titus loved her. But his execution of that emotion had wronged and nearly killed people along the way; the very fact that he held a weapon within Polis, a Skaikru weapon, and had not disposed of it after shooting Lexa too, was more than enough reason for what would happen today.

Oh, she'd forgiven him. She thought maybe she loved him a little too. But she made no exceptions when it came to justice; immunity was non-existent when it came down to the law.

Titus had guided her every step of the way. But father figures did not stay around together.

She'd discovered that with Gustus.

Lexa watched from behind as Aden did exactly as she'd instructed. He'd spoken loudly of a cheap wine merchant behind the main Square, and even joked about the amount of alcohol that would satisfy a man should they come to the feast. Lexa rolled her eyes, knowing it was likely a true story. Cheeky sod. What impressed her most was that if he did indeed triumph in the Conclave, he not only had the fairness and hard justice of a Commander, but he had the personality and affability too.

She flicked her blade into her wrist, wriggling around with it. It had been the same blade Clarke had tried to kill her with. Lexa could almost feel the blade, the cool steel of it, pressed to her throat again.

Circles would come around. Titus had intended to kill Clarke kom Skaikru using her clan's weapon. By her very blade, though not by her hand, he would suffer.

"I think..." Lexa followed Aden and Titus until they were in a darkened part of an alley now, and Aden scratched his chin. "It's right. Sorry, I know you're lugging your cart and all that. It's definitely right. We used to purchase it from this merchant whenever we wanted some. He knew we were underage, but he didn't care, so long as we had the money."

"You bought alcohol, underage?" Titus quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Please." Aden scoffed, his amusement too fake; *too* much. "It's not as if you've never broken a Polisian law before."

Titus stopped in his tracks and Aden stilled too. Lexa swore under her breath. Aden had played his card far too soon. Juvenile, youthful and unused to this game of cat-and-mouse, Aden tumbled backwards as Titus leapt for him, his strong hands by the boy's throat, pressing down. Aden had been too easy to read. He was too earnest; too full of integrity. He had no ability to bluff—not quite like Lexa. He was an honest boy.

"You will sabotage me like this?" Titus said angrily, as Aden gasped for breath. "What do you think this is, young man? Do you think your position as interim Commander remains?"

"You—" Aden choked, and Titus let up his grip slightly to let the boy speak. "You committed a grave crime—within Polis—and—and you *will* see justice served."

"I won't be jumped by some reckless Nightblood in an alleyway," Titus said lowly, "if I am to be brought to justice, I will be publicly judged."

"Is that so?" Aden grunted as Titus pressed down on his throat again, blocking any air from entering him. His feet struggled, too weak to pull up and try to kick Titus away. Titus had him well and truly pinned down to the floor. "You—never offered—Clarke kom Skaikru—*or—Heda*—the—same—fate!"

His face was purple from exertion as Aden grappled for something to hold onto—anything solid—that he would whack Titus over the head with. The duo scrambled on the ground as Aden smashed a rock over the side of Titus' head, coughing and spluttering. He staggered forwards a few steps, and Lexa was careful to remain in the shadows.

Aden knew exactly where she was. *Be nimble. Be agile. Be unassuming. You don't know your enemy until they strike.* He recited the words in his head, his breath coming out in short, sharp bursts. Lexa had not readied him for this. She'd readied him for one-on-one combat, but with someone like *Titus*? He held out his pathetic rock as a means of defence, his arm quivering as he did so.

Titus held his hands up, though his right hand did not let go of a dagger he'd wielded. "We can resolve this quietly, Aden," he said. "You've always been the Commander's pet. Do you really think she'd want you to wash up, dead, because you challenged her Flamekeeper?"

Lexa closed her eyes, ready for Aden to take the bait.

Aden did, in a second.

"You started all of this!" he yelled, his voice cracking with emotion. Tears streamed down his face as he shook his fist at Titus, who was not scared by a rock. Aden was focussed on his rage now, pain overwhelming him. "You shot her! You tried to shoot Clarke kom Skaikru because *Heda* loved her, and you almost ended up killing our Commander! Wielding a weapon is a sacred crime but *so is almost killing our Heda!*"

"Aden—"

"*Heda* loves her! You see it and you think it weak! But she *loves* her, and you *hate* that—tell me, if love is weakness, then what is *hate*? Is that what you preach, Titus? Is that what makes you powerful?"

"None of it was intentional." Titus tried to stay calm, trying to gauge the boy in front of him. Emotion had inundated him, and he was barely looking at Titus anymore, kicking the sandy ground beneath him as if it would garner some response. "I have been Commander Lexa's tutor for *years*. If I did not know what was best for her, I would not be here! Clarke kom Skaikru is nothing but a danger to our *Heda*. Sometimes in life, Aden, you must do what nobody wants you to do—in order to keep the bigger picture safe."

"What bigger picture?" Aden said shakily, still holding his rock out. "What?"

"We would revolutionise the entirety of the coalition," Titus said. "Polis was our first conquest. Beyond that, our troops—armed to perfection—would march down upon the Trikru settlements, the Mountain and the Rock people's settlements, and form civilised cities such as this."

"That isn't the duty of the Commander. The duty is—"

"To protect all that is within her realm, yes," Titus said. "And this would be within her realm."

"She would've told me."

"There are many things she wouldn't have told you." Titus tried to sound sympathetic, but it failed miserably. Lexa closed her eyes. Aden hadn't backed Titus up far enough, not yet. But she couldn't bear to hear Titus try and lure Aden into his way of thinking.

Yes, her and Titus had a plan once. They would revolutionise every poor village within the realm—until she'd visited and performed in some traditions; until some revered her and thanked her for letting them keep their ways. How could she cause such an upheaval when her people were *happy*? Did she want diverse lands where villages and villages had their own rituals and traditions? Or would she decimate that in order for the civilised way of Polis? That had been another point she'd disagreed on with Titus. He'd proposed a systematic cloning of Polis throughout the realm. Lexa had fought back, knowing she was the hypocrite here: they could not lose the identity of their outlying villages.

Polis was Polis, and each village was its own. Even TonDC had rituals separate to the capital. "The Commander is as secretive as they come," Titus said. "What she shares with me is not essentially what she would've shared with you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Aden's aggression, so typical of a teen his age, caused him to edge forwards. Titus backed away slowly, eyeing Aden's pathetic excuse of a weapon. It was a rock, but it was Aden's passion that frightened him. Ever since seeing him as a dreamy-eyed young boy, Titus had never seen him with some darkness in his eyes—the darkness that signalled the desire to *kill*. "What're you hiding from me? What is *everyone* hiding from me?"

Lexa's back remained cool against the stone of the building she leant against, unfolding her floating, black attire into her fists. *Almost, Aden. Almost.* Underneath, she wore her lightweight Commander's uniform. She could see Titus' brain working, like cogs in a machine and she didn't want this to go on for any longer. She could see Aden's tears streaming down his face in confusion, and every time he took his eye off Titus, Titus' feet would move just inches forward, his knees bent.

He wasn't going to take Aden's life. Not Aden. He'd almost taken Clarke.

Somehow, *somehow*, Lexa believed him. Titus always acted of his best intentions—but he never considered the intentions of everyone else surrounding him. He hadn't considered that Lexa might not have wanted Clarke dead. He hadn't considered that Aden was far too young for mind-games like this. Titus was well-intentioned—but he was well-intentioned only when it suited him.

"Stay back," Aden warned him, wielding the rock again. He could see fresh blood pour from the wound he'd just given Titus, and a part of him felt proud.

"I've looked after you all of my life." It was the plea of a dying man. "You, my Nightbloods...Aden, you will not do this to me."

Titus backed away.

Checkmate.

Lexa grabbed him from behind, forcing a dagger against his throat as she shoved the black attire down his mouth so he couldn't scream. Aden could only stare in horror as she motioned for him to run, but he couldn't; his shock grounded him, and though Lexa knew Aden would never betray her, he didn't want such a young soul to see—to see *this*.

"If love is weakness," Lexa hissed in Titus' ear, and Titus protested, muffled, as he realised who it

was, "then why do you proclaim your love for me?"

Aden stood helplessly by Titus' shopping cart, as Lexa's rage crashed into her like a tsunami. She had expected her emotions to hit her quite so violently, but as she strangled her mentor psychotically, she couldn't think of any reason why she would not. She watched with displeasure and anger as Titus turned pink and then purple in colour, his struggles against Lexa's iron-grip fading.

"You broke the sacred law of wielding a weapon within Polis," Aden decided to say out loud, unshed tears clogging his voice. Typical Aden—he had to make this somewhat official, even if it was an ambush in the middle of a dark, unused alleyway. "You tried to use said weapon against a coalition ambassador. Instead, you nearly killed the Commander of the Coalition. You set sail on stormy waters for our coalition. You carry the Skaikru weapon to this day. These are your charges. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Titus, still strangled by Lexa's wrath, could not say anything at all. Aden closed his eyes at the scene before him. He felt sick.

"Aden." Lexa's voice pierced the thick tension in the air. "Don't look, Aden."

Despite his Commander's orders, Aden's eyes fluttered open to witness Lexa jam the tip of the dagger forcefully through Titus' throat. His heart stopped, and he jumped at the scene, quickly wheeling the cart towards Titus.

Titus' eyes were wide with shock as his knees buckled, and Aden nearly vomited again. The myths were wrong: men did not die instantly. He gargled and made a choking sound, his limp figure collapsing to the floor. Lexa crouched by his side, wrapping the black, long scarf she'd worn earlier to cover the throat wound, pressing down to make sure Titus suffered—but not for too long.

I will have to do this one day, Aden thought to himself, stunned still. His face was ashen, and as Lexa pressed down on Titus' throat to stem the bleeding, her eyes briefly flickered up to meet Aden's, and he purposefully stared at the ground.

Aden couldn't bear to look at his Commander. It had been a half-merciful death. The charges read out against him had come out almost automatically, and though a breathless Lexa thanked him—truly—he could not see anything positive that had come out of the encounter. Titus was dead, by Lexa's hand, and Aden had been the only witness.

He knew if Lexa turned on him at any second, he would be next. There was no disguising the disgust and the horror Aden felt in the pit of his stomach as he watched the life sap from Titus' body. Aden had killed Ontari and it hadn't even been single combat. He'd been using a coward's weapon to do a cowardly deed.

Here, as he watched his Commander up close and personal with her tutor and secondary *Nightbleda* teacher—as he watched her *shove a knife through his throat*—he wondered if he would ever be betrayed like that by his counsels in the future. If one day, he would lead an unsuspecting Nightblood with him, and show him or her how to kill a man.

"Aden..." Lexa's voice was low, hoarse, and Aden didn't know if it was a warning or if it was a genuine call of concern.

Aden was not many things. He was not the most proficient fighter of the group of Nightbloods; he was not the brightest; he was not the best-looking; he was not the kindest. Sometimes, he argued with the boys bigger than him. Often, he disappointed his mother, who never saw him as the son

she'd wanted. Aden thought she would've been proud of him, but for as long as he could remember, his mother never had been.

There was one thing Aden liked to think he was, though: he was loyal.

Before they left the scene, he swivelled his head to make sure nobody was to turn down the alley, and dropped to one knee.

"*Heda*," he said, bowing his head, "I promise you I will not repeat this tale to a single soul. Ever. There will be no word of how Titus died. To me, it looks like a professional assassination. Perhaps retaliation for the few Ice Nation spies we caught."

Lexa stared down at him, slightly marvelled by the new way Aden seemed to carry himself. His tenure as interim Commander had done him good, and if he was not chosen as the next Commander, then gods forbid the spirits. Lexa tapped him on the shoulder and he arose, her arm slinging over his shoulder as they walked away from the scene behind them.

Nothing had happened. They were never there.

Aden had not finished. Impassioned, he went on: "My loyalty lies with the Commander, and that is you, *Heda*. But further than that, my loyalty lies with my family. You have nurtured me when I was young; you loved me when I was nothing; you trusted me with your coalition as you fought back to life. I owe you my life. You *are* my life. And I will never betray you, so long as the sky is blue and I bleed black, I am yours."

Titus bled out onto a back alley, carefully placed into the cart of shopping he'd been enlisted. Lexa's list was still in his inner pocket, and Lexa would offer Aden's alibi.

"Aden." Lexa crouched down and tapped his shoulder, standing up as he did. "I asked you to do what you did today. Now Titus' blood is on my hands—not yours. You will not take this burden. I will. You will not worry I doubt your loyalty. I never have. What you *will* do, Aden, is go home tonight and tell your mother you love her. You have a strained relationship, I know. But I am not your mother."

"My mother does not recognise me really," Aden said, "She tells me I spend too much time away from home to be her son."

"She should be proud her son is a Nightblood."

"Perhaps. But I do not see her as family as I see you."

"If you will not love your mother as your mother, then I am not one to tell you differently. But do you think you can do me a favour?"

"Anything, *Heda*."

"Love yourself. I learned too late that it was *not* a crime to do so. One day you may love Hemla—but you cannot do so until you face your demons and accept the path your life has followed."

"Even if I don't like it?"

"*Especially* if you don't like it."

Lexa stared guiltily at her dead tutor, feeling guilty for the fact that her heart was absent of it. Titus had been her tutor for many years—but he'd also been her puppeteer for many years, too. She did not blame him, still. He did everything with the intention of the Commander's welfare in mind—

but he had to know that the Commander's welfare did not always match with his vision of it.

Titus was not a bad man. But Lexa found herself hollowed out in the sense that she could not mourn him. She had loved him once, when she was younger and more impressionable. When his advice seemed like the only sane piece of advice anyone was feeding her. She had started to push Anya away, push Gustus away, push Indra away...

Lexa's memories of her hesitancy in welcoming a new council flashed before her eyes. She could still feel the ache in her heart as she begged Anya to be her right hand woman. Anya had duties within the Trikru she could not ignore, even if it meant leaving her beloved tutee at the hands of a council she trusted. Lexa wondered how different things might have been, if she'd installed someone like Tristan to take over Anya's duties and keep Anya close to her in Polis. Would she be alive?

Had her weakness, her easiness of succumbing to Anya's soothing words, been her downfall? Anya's? And now Clarke's?

"Does love give someone the power to kill their tutor?" Lexa bent down to ask the dead Titus quietly, keeping clear out of Aden's earshot. She didn't want the boy infected by her vengeful malice. "You underestimated it—just like you underestimated me."

Aden was already trudging over to one side of Titus' body. In silent coordination, they grunted in effort as they hauled Titus' body onto the cart. It was sick, but Aden was impressed with the tidy job Lexa had just carried out. There was no blood, save for a few specks here and there—and there was blood down every alley in Polis. Lexa had taken his upper body, and given Aden the legs, to ensure his hands would not be covered by the bloodshed Lexa had been solely responsible for.

With a flick of the head, they adjusted and tucked Titus' body into the cart and kept his throat wound covered with the black cloth. Aden and Lexa did not say another word to each other. Instead they walked side by side, as if nothing had happened. Lexa tried to repress everything she felt; she didn't want to think of it as killing her tutor. It was killing a sacred law-breaker. It was justice.

Keep thinking that way. One day you'll believe it.

They bought new clothes from a shabby store down one of the other back alleys (Lexa did not question Aden's knowledge of these passages) and quickly changed into them, facing away from each other. Hastily, they discarded of their old clothes—discarded of their act of illegality—their act of *justice*—and walked away.

Aden's neck throbbed in pain. He knew there would be bruising later, and his mother would scold him yet again for fighting so pathetically in the pits. She did not know his prowess with the staff; she had never watched. Too many times he had walked home alone whilst Marol's mother brought him some bread to eat, and Mia's father hoisted her up like a champion. Aden's trip was to the Square first to buy his mother some satisfactory meat to cook for dinner that night.

The sun ebbed away at them, and as Aden's tired head lolled upwards to squint at the bright star in the sky, his lower lip trembled. And he broke.

He sobbed into Lexa's chest as she comforted him, rubbing soothing circles into his back. He promised over and over again he would not speak—as if she would not believe him. But of this twisted world, Aden was perhaps the one boy she *did* believe. She shushed him, rocking him back and forth like a child—and whispered softly in his ear, "We were never there, okay?"

"No," he said shakily, sniffing. "We were never there."

"I will not show mercy." They were in Lexa's bed chambers, with Lexa only confiding in Clarke. The *Fleinkepa* had died a mysterious death in the markets, all of which Lexa had an alibi for—as did Aden. Clarke didn't suspect Lexa anyway; she found that her lack of care was to do with the lack of care she felt for Titus as the minutes ticked by, and the thought of Aden being part of something so atrocious was ridiculous.

Here, Lexa held the scroll that was the paper holding the Skaikru and the coalition together. If she tore it and burnt it to shreds, it would be nothing. There would be no coalition at all.

Making up her mind, she crossed the room and folded it neatly, sealing it with her wax.

"The barricade remains in place, as does the kill order," Lexa told her, clenching her jaw. "I will not have those Skaikru vermin escaping the wrath of the Ice Nation. When the time comes, the Trikru volunteers will disappear and they will be safe, leaving the vultures that are the Ice Nation ready to pick and choose which cowardly Skaikru *murderer* they want to nibble at next."

"What about Kane? My *mom*?" Clarke pled, moving forwards. "You can't just leave them there for the Ice Nation to just pick off!"

"Kane is the Chancellor, and he is on this list." Lexa held the folded up scroll in front of her, and tapped it against her head, before filing it away. "He provided a list of names to be spared. Yours is amongst them, as are your friends: Raven Reyes, Lincoln—of the Skaikru, Octavia kom Skaikru... Your allies are there, Clarke. I have already arranged transport for them to Polis. The ones who travelled with Charles Pike, and the ones who carried out the massacre—their names are missing. And they will be the ones who suffer. Finally."

"And that's what you were on about?"

"What?"

"*Dispensing justice.*"

Lexa's face turned slightly red at the mention. She'd been talking about Titus. It had been a neat way of killing him, dragging his body, his blood contained only at the throat and blockaded by Lexa's black cloth, far from the crime scene. Nobody would find out. Justice was silent sometimes. "Something like that."

"Is there something else I should know?" Clarke asked tentatively.

Lexa thought of the way Aden's face had crumpled earlier in the Square, falling into her arms. It had almost been automatic. She'd waited for it. The tears seeping through her cheap tunic felt like Titus' blood drenching her, and they embraced for a long time, Aden's sobs growing more and more agitated.

"Tears do not mean you are not brave," she had assured him, as he apologised frantically, wiping furiously at his eyes. "Aden, you have not been trained to kill yet." The *yet* lingered on her mind. "You killed the Ice Queen and then you witnessed me kill my own Flamekeeper. If you think this is easy; if you think *I* had an easier time as a Nightblood—then you're very, very wrong. What you endure—it is your *strength*, Aden."

She'd walked him home, making sure she did all of his mother's shopping for him. Lexa was far from the best conversationalist, but polite charm she could wield like a blade. As much as she could, she tried to lighten the atmosphere with a pun or a joke here and there, until Aden smiled as they parted. She'd bought him an extra slab of meat, in case his mother wanted to make a stew the next day. And then he'd left, and Lexa wasn't sure who she had sent away—Aden, her promising Nightblood, or a haunted boy who would forever see Titus' dead eyes.

Lexa shook herself, feeling slightly nauseous.

"Those murderers stole three hundred of my people—while they were sleeping." Lexa plopped down in her armchair, rubbing her temples in stress. She'd just killed her tutor of many years. She could almost feel Becca's soul punching her insides. "*Jus drein jus daun*. Your way did not work, Clarke. This time, justice is to be served—and I will do it myself. The barricade remains until danger is alerted to them. They will scarper, and the guilty Skaikru, who would have been fed rations of bread and cheese to the point where they are nothing but skin and bone, will fend for themselves." She looked up at Clarke's mildly horrified expression, and she held up a hand. "I am not here to be judged today. I made a choice, and that choice may not sit well with you, but they *killed* my people! I am showing mercy in the smallest way I can, but I will have those lives answered for."

"I'm not judging," Clarke told her quietly, truthfully, as she perched on the arm of Lexa's chair. Almost immediately, Lexa's hands encircled her waist, tugging her until Clarke, yelping in surprise, landed on her lap. She faced Lexa's desk and wondered if this was how the Commander must've felt every day—surrounded by stacks and stacks of *paper*. Paper was light but the sheer volume of paperwork and books just seemed so suffocating.

Lexa's breath was hot on her neck, and she pressed a soft kiss to her collarbone. Clarke *hmm'd*. "I know you're up to your neck with tough decisions, but I want you to know something. You're the Commander, I'm the *Wanheda*—"

"Thank you for relaying that information."

"I wasn't done!"

"Alright—my apologies. Please, do carry on."

"You're the Commander, I'm *Wanheda*, and I love you."

Lexa buried her face against Clarke's neck, feeling a fond smile split her face. She felt soppy—melodramatic levels of soppy. She knew Clarke would roll her eyes at a formative declaration of how deeply she reciprocated Clarke's love, so she left it. But her grip tightened around Clarke's waist, and she closed her eyes. She had not felt loved since Costia—and that had been *different*. It was still love, but it had been carefree and devoid of responsibility and differing loyalties and philosophies. Clarke was blue and Lexa was green. Clarke challenged her and argued with her but ultimately she loved her.

Lexa knew the warmth she felt in her belly was gratitude, and the furious *bom-bom-bom* of her heart was the passion of which she felt it—gratitude, love, lust—and she kissed the side of Clarke's neck. Her lips lingered there. Lexa wanted to taste Clarke's skin for all eternity.

She would find a way.

It hit her out of the blue, but Lexa briefly thought back to her time with Anya and the never-ending, black lake. She wondered how she fared now. Would she truly wait until Lexa passed—for real? Was there really a grand hall of all the Commanders past? How would she get back to

Becca's hut?

The questions came thick and fast, and she realised that despite the time she'd spent in the underworld, encountering Death (if that had been real) and seeing horrible visions of a future she didn't want, she knew nothing at all. She had learned nothing.

Well.

It wasn't entirely true. She knew she loved Anya. She knew that without her, the coalition would not have come to fruition. She had been an instrumental part to this realm's success, and she would be damned if she let it slip through her fingers. The Nightbloods she'd trained were hard, fair and just; they would not bend to bribes and threats. They had been trained to reject the very things.

They were trained to reject things like love, too. Trained to reject people like Clarke.

Affection overwhelmed Lexa for a moment, rendering her still. For so long, she had jammed her heart into a box that was too small, slammed the tiny door shut and thrown away the key. It had been the best for her, everyone told her. Everyone a Commander loves ends up dead, everyone had said. Lexa's loyalty to her people was unwavering, but Clarke could only ever be a weakness for her if she *let* it be. And she would never.

Lexa was acutely aware of Clarke's warmth weight on her lap, and she jiggled her thighs, grinning as Clarke laughed. She rested her chin against Clarke's collarbone, pressing a kiss to the side of her cheek.

"If you were here like this, all day," Lexa said, "I'd get nothing done."

"There's *plenty* you'd get done."

The suggestion was prominent in Clarke's tone, and Lexa grabbed at it. She didn't want to think about *dispensing justice*. She didn't want to think about Bellamy Blake. She didn't want to think about *jus drein jus daun*. For now, all she wanted to think about was Clarke's intoxicating allure, teasing her as she ground ever so slowly against Lexa's hips. Lexa's right hand dropped the quill onto the table—whatever the heck she was going to write anyway—and moved so both of her hands steadied Clarke by the waist. She dipped her head down, muffling her own laughter against Clarke's skin.

"Do you like this?" she asked lowly, as Clarke rocked against her thighs once more. She moaned softly, her hands unable to keep still as they roamed Clarke's thighs, squeezing the soft skin beneath. "Is this what you like? Taking me against my table of work?"

"I mean, really," Clarke tried to sound disappointed, "You should be getting your work done. Your duty comes first."

"Mm-hmm. It does." Lexa found herself agreeing, smirking as Clarke whined loudly at the absence of her touch. Lexa's quivering hands went back to her quill and her piece of paper, completely forgetting what she had intended to write in the first place. Well, *jok*.

"I could let you have me here," Clarke said wantonly, tossing her head back to expose her neck. Lexa licked her lips, her hand clenching the quill so hard she was sure she'd snap it in two. "Your powerful desk, where you make all your decisions—"

Lexa snapped the quill down onto the table, ravishing Clarke's neck as she so pleased. She could hear Clarke chuckle lightly against her, a small gasp drawn from her breath as Lexa bit her neck, ever so slightly. If Clarke wanted Lexa to *take her* then she would. Sometimes it was as if Clarke forgot Lexa was not always so civilised. She had been brought up by Polisians, but she had never

forgotten her Trikru roots. Lexa bucked up against Clarke, feeling her moan loudly as she kissed her way up from the bottom of Clarke's neck, one hand gently nudging Clarke's face so she could capture her lips in a kiss.

She knew if Aden or Indra suddenly burst in, as they were prone to do, they'd be scarred for life, but she did not much care. Instead, she yanked Clarke's breeches down, taking no time in relishing Clarke's skin. No, this was going to be hard and fast and loving and she would make Clarke come for her again, and again, like worshipping a God.

Clarke shucked off her breeches, hastily taking off her boots as well as she met gazes with Lexa, panting heavily at the sheer desire in Lexa's eyes. It was something she couldn't take her eyes off, and Lexa shoved her hard against the table, using both strong arms to hoist her up. The other arm brushed everything aside, and the duo kissed fervently as papers and quills and inks clattered to the floor. That would be something for Lexa's maids to complain about later.

"You..." Lexa's voice was close to a growl as she tore into Clarke's tunic, breathing heavily as she took in Clarke's breasts before her. It was a sight that would never grow old, and Clarke enjoyed having someone like Lexa lace her breasts with such glorified adoration. Every. Single. Time. Even when they were rough and quick, or when Lexa was soft and loving. Lexa's lips closed around a nipple, forcing her hands down Clarke's pants as she did so. "You're making me misbehave."

"I think you're the one doing—that," Clarke strained as she groaned, feeling Lexa's fingers curl expertly inside her. The first time they'd slept together, they'd been a giggling, bumbling mess of adventure of finding out what the other liked. Now it felt like they could have sex on any surface, at any time; Lexa was ravenous, and Clarke enjoyed it. "You're the one who's supposed to be drafting a letter to who knows fuck."

"Mm." Lexa kissed her on the mouth, deeply, as her fingers slowly dipped inside of her, eliciting the slightest of groans, and even a whine, as she did so. She kissed her, kissed her until she drew away, and made sure Clarke watched as she sucked the glistening wetness from her fingers. "Do you want me to taste you?"

"Do you?"

"I always want to taste you. I want to be drunk off you," Lexa told her as she knelt before her, eyes never breaking contact. Clarke shivered in excitement as Lexa spread her legs, her gaze utterly overtaken by the lust heavy in Lexa's eyes. "You are a dying woman's oasis."

"You," Clarke scolded her, patting the top of her head as Lexa nibbled on the inside of her thigh, "are far too over-the-top."

"Maybe." Lexa flattened her tongue and pressed against her, causing Clarke to jerk upwards from the desk. Lexa supported her weight with her hands, flinging each of Clarke's legs over her shoulders as she buried her head between Clarke's thighs. Lexa knew everything. She knew how to bring Clarke to the edge; she knew how to make Clarke wait; she knew how to pound into Clarke and make her come in a matter of minutes. It was frustrating, it was sexy, and it was all Commander Lexa. Clarke decided she wouldn't have it any other way.

Lexa buried her tongue deep inside her, groaning as Clarke did, steadying her as she bucked uncontrollably against Lexa's unrelenting mouth. Clarke was completely at Lexa's disposal. Whether she wanted to slow the pace by gently tracing outlines against Clarke's outer lips, or whether she wanted Clarke to come fast and hard by fucking her with her mouth, and sliding a finger inside the slippery wetness of her cunt, Lexa knew how to play with her like a fucking toy.

Lexa held Clarke steady as Clarke rocked against her, her moans getting louder and louder until she shook the entire table, crying out as Lexa fucked her with her fingers too. She fisted Lexa's hair for want of something to grab onto, and moaned and moaned until Lexa helped her come down from her climax, steadying her by the thighs.

Clarke's heart thudded in her chest as Lexa moved up with a rakish grin on her face, her mouth glistening with Clarke's wetness. She was about to wipe it when Clarke grabbed her by her tunic and kissed her, open-mouthed, feeling her own arousal against her tongue.

It was moments like this when they could not control themselves; they were like teenagers who could not stop touching each other. It was love, Aden had decided to tease them, but Clarke knew it was much more than that.

Love was simple when it came to Lexa and Clarke. Both of them knew this. Neither of them particularly wanted to talk about this. But so long as Lexa loved Clarke and Clarke loved Lexa, and they made love, and they spoke, and they laughed, and they kissed, they could dodge the shadow of duty that would inevitably cloud them one day.

Aden wasn't sure why Lexa called for an audience so late—in Titus' chamber no less—and combed his hair as he did every day, making sure he looked presentable. By the sounds of it and the questions he'd asked the maids, Lexa had disappeared downstairs hours ago.

By the time Aden knocked on the door, Lexa ushered him in, sitting in one of his armchairs. Opposite her was a kneecap-tall, round table with a silver case of sorts resting on it. Aden took the opposite chair tentatively, not daring to look at Lexa, but addressing her all the same.

"Don't panic," Lexa said, when she saw the boy's ashen face. "I'm not going to murder you and then dump you in Titus' chambers."

Aden's head pricked up. "That's *so* not what I thought—"

"Yes it was."

"Yeah, it was," he relented lamely, rubbing the back of his neck. Lexa laughed, reaching over to pet him on the knee. The warmth of her touch and her laugh made him feel safe again, as he always had felt around Lexa. There was something different about her teachings. Aden knew he would always get called the "Commander's pet" for the way Lexa treated him, outright, in front of all the other Nightbloods too—but something connected them.

He'd been interim Commander for her. He'd kept her murder of Titus a secret. He had not left her bedside in the days she had been unconscious. Aden did not expect any reward, but he knew there was good reason why Lexa treated him differently.

"Look around you." Lexa had lit the dark and damp chamber up with candles, and Aden swivelled his head around, taking in the markings on the wall. In the corner there was some giant contraption that he couldn't explain; he'd never seen it before. But it was the drawing on the far-left of the room that befuddled him. Some giant creature, with four limbs just like a human, had made her way out of some sort of entrance. She entered the general populace and the people in the drawings bowed before her like she was a God. Like she was a Commander.

Aden stood up slowly, his legs drawing him towards the depiction. He followed the series, in

which he supposed was in chronological order. It depicted the tragic death of the creature, only for something wispy—he wanted to guess it was a spirit—to be transferred into the next person, who did not have such big limbs and a strange head. This picture depicted a broad man with a spear for a weapon, his big beard proud and brave. The wisp entered his head and like the first picture, people bowed to him.

Except this time, Aden knew who he was. He'd been a keen studier of History of the Old Earth and this was the Second Commander, Marshall the Large. He was instantly recognisable by his weapon, his armoury, and the flag he carried: the Water people's flag. Which meant that the wisp

"The Commander's spirit," he whispered to himself, his fingers etching over the rough drawing. He was aware of Lexa studying him from afar, silent. "That—that's the First Commander?"

"So I believe. So Titus believed." Lexa waited for a shocked Aden to return slowly to his seat, easing himself down. The armchair had been so soft earlier; now it felt like he was sitting on stone, and his buttocks were beginning to hurt. He ruffled his hair in confusion, and Lexa tapped the briefcase. "When I was your age—perhaps a little older—Titus pulled me aside to show something to me. It was his duty as the Flamekeeper to protect a relic of the past."

"Wait," Aden apologised silently for interrupting his Commander, but she let him go on. "He told me the same thing. He asked me about this relic. He wanted...He wanted to show *me*." His eyes brightened in realisation. "I snapped at him that day. He did not have faith in you making it alive, and had made preparations to show me the relic."

"He'd already asked?"

"Is it in there?" Aden asked eagerly. The curiosity hadn't faded; now that *Lexa* was on the brink of showing him, he found a sort of childlike giddiness rise within him. "Is that it?"

"He calls it a relic," Lexa said. She tried to keep the boy's expectations down. "It is not."

"Titus had such faith. If it is not a relic, then why would he risk his life for it?"

"Because he believed."

It was a good enough answer for Aden. Wars were driven by belief. Beliefs of peace after decades of ransacking and kidnappings. Beliefs of a steady coalition and a decentralised system of power meant that relatively anyone could cast their lot in with the one who promised all of this. As of now, that person was Lexa. She struggled with the clasp of the briefcase and then pulled it open, to reveal a tiny *vi-yal*, Becca had called it, of Nightblood in the middle. The rest of it was surrounded by some sort of protective, foam-like material, but the actual sample was small enough for one injection only.

"Titus believed it was for me," Lexa explained, as Aden stared disbelievingly at the sample. It was so...*small*. "He believed his duty as a Flamekeeper would be to pass down the Flame to a worthy successor. To behold the Flame is to be empowered by the First Commander, saviour of the old world, creator of the new. To be with your Flamekeeper is to be protected from harm for Becca's spirit is all-good, all-seeing, and all-great."

"So the Flame—" Aden paused, scratching his chin. "Am I staring at the Flame?"

Aden's jaw slackened as Lexa nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"I'm staring at the Flame."

"You're staring at the Flame, yes."

"*The Flame.*"

"Aden."

"Commander."

They stared at each other for a moment, and when an eye-rolling Lexa decided it was worth carrying on, and she knew she had his full attention, she said: "Titus thought I was the promised one to carry the Flame. Since Becca landed, she united the Desert People as well; now they are in the dead zone. Mutilated, they are ostracised from our coalition—though it is my belief that I am to question such exclusion. Becca built a network of all people and ages and shapes and colours—because who would not believe a celestial being had fallen from the skies to answer all their prayers, bleeding black, if it were not Becca?"

"Titus had not been given the details of how to pass the Flame from one person to the next. In this case, he wanted to preserve it. I was young, and I was greedy. I thought I had enough promise for Titus to inject the Flame in myself, so I could embody Becca and resurrect the great Commander of the Old World we all wanted. But he did not do so. Instead he kept it."

"Why?" Aden was drawn into the story, leaning so far forwards Lexa was sure they'd bump noses. "Why didn't he just do it? There has not been, in history, a single better Commander than yourself, *Heda*. Should one of us, from your class—should *I*—succeed you, after a long and prosperous reign," he added with faith, "there is no competition. *I* would not be worthy of the Flame. If Titus was to inject Becca's legacy, and have this world rid of war and death and sickness—then he missed his opportunity."

"But he didn't," Lexa said with a half-smile, lamenting Titus' demise for a moment. He'd been a traitor. He'd smuggled in a Skaikru weapon and he'd shot at an ambassador; luck would have it that it hit *her* instead. But there had been times Titus had shown her real love; times Titus had risked his life to protect her. However, it wasn't enough. Titus was spiritual enough to understand that sometimes a hundred sacrifices was not worth one heavy slip-up, and in his botched assassination attempt, he had slipped up *badly*.

"Then we're doomed," Aden said miserably. "There will be no Commander who will be like yourself," he said, ignoring Lexa's protests. "If you cannot carry Becca's legacy, then who can?"

"Titus wasn't to inject anybody with it. He showed me it so he could explain the etchings on the wall. He showed me it so he could explain her 'escape pod'. He showed me so I believed in the spirit bubbling inside me; so that I believed that when I passed, the spirit would choose wisely." Lexa carefully extracted the sample from the case and closed it. "This vial doesn't represent an injection; this vial doesn't mean that once you shove that into your veins, you become the revolutionary Becca became. This vial represents our only driving force in this world: belief."

"It has filtered down through the years," Aden said thoughtfully. "Yet there has never been another faith quite as prominent as this. We all know how the Spirits pass on. We know they choose at the trials. We know it is a faulty system, but if the Spirit deems it right, then it must be so."

"There are things you will never come to understand; things *I* still don't understand. Aden, I'm telling you this because my spirit is reaching for yours. When my time comes, and you hold my hand on my deathbed, you *will* become Commander. And you have already shown that you make an excellent one, too."

"I don't want to think about you dying. I just...don't want to think about it." Aden dipped his head, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. Lexa pretended not to notice. "I don't want you gone."

"One day I will be. That's why I have to work *so hard* to ensure you are prepared."

"Then inject me," Aden said recklessly, his voice hoarse from tears. "Take my vein and insert me with Becca's serum. I cannot be the Commander you wish me to be; I will carry Becca's spirit and I will carry on your legacy."

"No."

"Commander—"

"*No.*"

Without another word, Lexa dropped the sample onto the floor and crushed it with her boot. Both of them stared, stunned, at the spillage of holy Nightblood before them. It was the last of Becca's legacy, and the legacy—the Flame—that had kept Titus' job valid for years. He was never willing to inject anyone with it. He was a preacher. He used the samples, the stories—all to build belief within each Commander. Lexa did not doubt for a second that he had shown every Commander he'd served the briefcase, and explained the story behind it.

Something had to explain Titus' absurd sketching on the wall; something had to explain the otherworldly pod in the corner of the room. Titus had held the religion of the Spirits, of the Commanders, for so long now—and now Lexa had crushed his only evidence with a simple stomp of the boot, she glanced up at Aden.

"I ask you, because I trust you," Lexa said. "If I had never shown you the Flame in its physical, tiny form, would you still believe I am the chosen Commander?"

Briefly, she thought back to her insane encounter with Becca in the hut. She thought of Becca's messy theory that their worlds had multiple planes, and they were simply crossing paths on different branches of existence. Lexa stood firmly by her story. Coalitions, allies, enemies, death, life—they were all connected by one life-source. It was invisible. It was never spoken of.

It was belief.

Lexa did not want a lie for an answer. "Do you believe I carry the Flame? That I am the Commander of the coalition, chief of thirteen clans?"

"Yes." Aden bowed his head respectfully. "I swear to you that on this day, Lexa, Commander of the Coalition, Commander of Trigidakru, I *believe*. I believe you have the spirit of the Commander pulsating within you, and that when you pass, that spirit shall choose its next candidate wisely for a prosperous and peaceful rule."

Lexa nodded, satisfied. Without another word, Aden rose from his armchair, his eyes still fixed on Lexa's. "Did you still want me...?"

"Yes. Do you have anywhere else to be tonight?"

"No."

"Not with Hemla?"

"Her mother is cooking for us tomorrow," he said brightly. "Mutton stew with root vegetables and bread rolls. She's saved some well-aged wine for us, too. She says since we are both practically

adults, we must behave like ones too."

Lexa laughed, pleased with the bright-eyed adoration glistening in Aden's eyes. Long ago, she felt as if she would never feel that way again—that horrible day Costia disappeared, and then reappeared as a head in a box. *Love is weakness. Love is not weakness.* Lexa had made decisions with her heart, with her head—and she found no difference. The best decision was *the best decision*—whether it came from the head or from the heart.

"Then sit with me." Lexa rummaged through some of Titus' belongings, pulling out two wine glasses. She took a flagon from her hip and poured generously for the both of them. It felt strange, doing this in a dead man's chambers, but they clinked glasses and Lexa gulped quickly. Aden took a sip and coughed, his face bunching up in disgust. "You'll find that as an adult, taste is not of importance; the head-spinning forgetfulness is often comforting the next day. The vomit: not so much."

Aden did not find this comforting.

"I want an audience with you tonight because I want to show you something." Lexa took the dagger from her sheath, ignoring Aden's protests, and carefully slit a line across her wrist. She knew to avoid the veins; that would end up with her embarrassingly bleeding out as she tried to prove a point. "I bleed black." She passed the dagger onto Aden. "Take care to avoid your blood vessels. Shuck off your waistcoat—"

Aden sliced the dagger across his abdomen, gritting his face in pain as he did so. "That scar is for you, *Heda*," he said sternly. "It is so I never forget who trained me; who made me into a man."

Sometimes, Lexa wanted to grab Aden and take him as a son of her own. Life made it impossibility, but the boy was so wise beyond his years that if he did not take Commandership after her, she would wreak havoc amongst the Spirits. Aden ripped two pieces of cloth from his tunic and offered one to Lexa so they could stem the bleeding.

"Do you see how we both bleed black?" she asked.

"Yes," Aden said. "It is a sign of those who are selected—who are worthy—of being Commander."

"Yes. It is not a sign of holiness, or a sign that you are guaranteed that position. It is a sign that you have promise that the Spirits saw in you. Do you remember my three pillars? Compassion; wisdom; strength? The Spirits saw qualities like that blossom in your soul, and they blessed you with the blood of the night."

"Okay."

"Then here is perhaps one of my last lessons to you," Lexa said to him honestly. Aden opened his mouth but she shushed him. It was not out of some doom she'd foreseen. It was simply because Aden didn't need many more lessons at all. "You must remember that you and I, whilst we both bleed black, we do not bleed the same."

Aden frowned. "Commander?"

"What Becca did as the First Commander has been an inspiration to us all," Lexa explained. "The legacy I leave you—as I should believe it will be you—will be something similar, but perhaps not so great. The point I'm trying to make is that you do not copy my reign. We bleed black but we bleed as Lexa and Aden. This blood means we can make decisions others can't. Use your heart. Use your head. But do not use my dead counsel."

It was a lot for Aden to digest in one night. He'd trudged down, barely awake. But despite Lexa's minute doubts, Aden finally nodded.

She rested in her armchair, relieved.

She knew this talk could not occur with anybody else—not any single one of her Nightbloods. Aden had been exposed to too much of her dirty work and he'd been burdened by too many secrets that she *had* to tell him. But Aden was a boy who idolised. He idolised the First Commander, and he idolised Lexa, too. It was time to rid of that. They bled the same, but they were different people. Their fates were controlled by Spirits up above, but they had no control over *them*.

The only thing she had to trust Aden with was the crushed vial on the ground.

Lexa excused Aden, for it was late at night, but she slouched in Titus' armchair for a while, thinking. She had single-handedly destroyed the Flame; the reason for Titus' existence.

But why? Nobody had ever *seen* the Flame unless they had been promising enough for Titus. Nobody had seen it physically, and now, nobody would ever find it. The Flame was preposterous. It did not exist—not truly—in life. Titus shielded it from that, and perhaps, Titus did it for good. If Titus was known to be in existence for Becca wielding life itself, then he would become an immediate target.

Lexa placed her head in her hands, trying to get around the whole idea of this. The Flame was gone. The Flame had never truly been there. Destroying it physically made no difference to the way the world was balanced; it made no difference to the Ice Nation belligerents, and it made no difference to the beliefs of the realm. The Spirits would deem that. Her realm slept as she destroyed it. There had been no clench of the souls; no populace-wide scandal. Nobody felt the Flame. But once mentioned, everyone believed.

And Becca was wrong.

Lexa realised this quickly, and it felt as if a giant hammer had just slammed into her chest. Becca's idea of multiple realities couldn't be wholly correct. She hadn't mentioned anything about the Flame; Lexa wondered if Becca even knew she was the key to unlocking every single Commander's existences.

So long as her people believed in the idea, then the idea would remain. Lexa spent time covering up the smashed-up vial of Nightblood and placed it carefully in a pouch, making sure no glass shards would poke at anyone handling it. The physicality of the Flame had been destroyed, but the belief in every single Grounder's brain? The rituals, the vows, the coalition—none of it would be affected. And as Lexa left Titus' chamber, she felt free.

The physical Flame dragged her down no longer. She closed her eyes, and prayed quickly to Becca for forgiveness. She prayed that her gamble would pay off. And she prayed that Clarke would be waiting in bed for her tonight.

By the time she arrived back in her chambers, Clarke was fast-asleep in bed, snoring loudly. Lexa cringed. It had been a pet-hate of hers, and she didn't mind it so much when she fell asleep *first*, but—she needed to get that looked at.

Instead of joining her, she lit a candle by her desk and sat there for a moment, staring into space. Tonight had been heavy for her; she could not imagine what Aden was thinking right now. But as ever, there were things beyond her control and things she still had to deal with that couldn't wait. She could roll around in bed with Clarke all day, but duty did not call for that, and it would achieve nothing. Coalitions did not maintain when the Commander was fucking the *Wanheda* all day, as much as Lexa would've liked to believe it.

Instead, she dipped the tip of her quill into the pot of ink and flattened the piece of paper in front of her.

With a wax seal that was unique only to her, this letter would a couple of carriages' worth of innocents to Polis. Only a few, though. Lexa swallowed down the idea that yet again she was condemning the majority to a possible slaughter—but they should've learned that lesson all those months ago. Never mass-butcher a Commander's soldiers—and some volunteers—in such a vile manner. Transport to Polis had to be quick and during the night-time. Lexa bit her lip, guilty she had not penned this letter earlier. She'd made hasty work of the word going around, but she knew some of her guards were stubborn, and some would need a scroll signed by her.

She sighed heavily.

The piece of paper was not empty before her. It had been half-drafted, addressed to the Skaikru Chancellor Marcus Kane. It was his ticket to freedom in Polis, granting access for all the names he'd requested. There was a condition. Upon arriving in Polis, they had to state a speciality and they would be allocated work. They were not welcome, long-term guests here. They were to be Polisians.

It was the bottom quarter of her letter she could not quite figure out. She could see Octavia kom Skaikru in her eyes, brave and true—qualities Indra found herself liking. She could see Clarke before her, having survived months on the ground in a *co*-leadership position.

Lexa put her quill to the paper.

Your prisoner, Bellamy Blake, is to be transported alongside the citizens of Polis you have deemed to be free according to my ~~limitations~~ terms. He is to be taken to my prison in Polis and punished accordingly. Should you agree to this term, and only then, I shall arrange for transport tomorrow at sundown. For all of you.

She stared at it for a moment. Bellamy Blake did not deserve justice. He didn't deserve the pathetic shock-lashes of Arkadia. He deserved something brutal; something that would break him to the core. Lexa did not want Bellamy dead. She wanted him worse.

A quick death by Ontari was hardly justice, considering the slaughter of hundreds of her people. With newfound determination, she folded up the piece of paper and stamped it with her seal, quickly opening the door and passing the message along to a guard.

"With haste," Lexa whispered, "It is to arrive at Arkadia and be responded to tonight."

The guard rushed down the stairs, instantly replaced by another. Lexa bade goodnight to them, with murmurs of "*reshop, Heda*" echoing as she shut the door. Clarke was still snoring. Sighing, she slipped into something more comfortable and clambered into bed beside her, wrapping strong arms around her waist, her nose nuzzling against Clarke's neck.

The snoring stopped.

"Then...then you just...it felt like you were gone. I could feel it."

Lexa wavered in and out of sleep, drooping eyes adjusting to the darkness of their room. Her ears zeroed in on the sound—and it came from right beside her.

Clarke had wriggled away from her so her back faced her in bed. She was talking into the pillow. "Jesus, *fuck*, Lexa, I thought you'd died—" a heavy sob caught in her throat, and Lexa's chest tightened. "I love Aden to pieces but I thought you'd be replaced by some skinny kid with blonde hair. Fuck. *Fuck*. Lexa, I've worried about you for so many days and nights and I sometime think: did you ever worry about me? Just—*fuck*. Just...fuck's sake..."

Lexa stilled in bed, stunned by Clarke's ramblings. She carried on, and Lexa's ears—which seemed to be ringing of shock—caught only short phrases like "*he tries to be like you, and I think it's for me, but it's not you*" and "*fuck spirits—I just want you and your eyes and your hair and your skin and your lips*" and "*we're each other's ruins but that's how we're so good together. Don't you get it? I'm fire and so are you, and we will continue this motherfucking blaze forever.*"

Clarke's sleepy rants continued, but Lexa knew she was fully awake. She was fully aware of what she was saying. And if she were a coward, which she was tempted to be, she would've rolled over and pretended to be asleep too.

But relationships were hard; relationships when you were *the Commander* were even harder to maintain. It was automatic. Anyone with close affiliation to the Commander of the coalition immediately put their loved ones at risk. And as Lexa so often enjoyed repeating to Clarke: "*ai hod yu in*".

If anything, Lexa had learned nothing from her trip with Anya except that her memories were either dull or tragic. But she'd been reminded of her young pact with the stars. She'd seen how she'd crumpled over Costia. She had seen her confrontation with Nia. She had seen that despite every single person doubting her—including Titus and sometimes Anya—she had persevered.

So maybe love *wasn't* weakness.

Or: if she *believed* love wasn't weakness...then it wasn't.

Lexa tentatively shifted in bed so she faced Clarke's back, and slowly wrapped her arm around her waist. Clarke froze in position and Lexa suddenly realised how silent it had become.

"You will not like the things I will do, and have done," Lexa whispered against her neck, pressing a soft kiss there. She could feel Clarke shudder against her mouth, and her fingernails dug into soft skin. "I will not like the things you do or propose to."

"Lexa..."

"You believe we are two people who met under extraordinary circumstances. I believe fate was always to pull us together. I refuse to say which is the right option. But whichever it is, it still ends with the same result: I love you. I always will. And you love me."

"I'm not ridiculing your beliefs—"

"Let me speak," Lexa implored softly, and Clarke did so. Clarke wasn't sure what she was going to say anyway. The only one who'd ever understood her; her burden; the only one she'd ever openly offered her heart to in such a manner—was here, lying beside her, having escaped the

clutch of Death. Clarke squeezed her eyes shut. She would let Lexa speak for an eternity. She had spent so long speaking to an unconscious Lexa that she was growing sick of her own voice. "I believe what I believe; you believe what you believe. There is a difference. This is not a compromise," she added lightly, and Clarke laughed quietly. "This is a promise. I vow to you that however you feel or think, I shall not brush off. I vow to you that I will try to understand the way you think, even though it is vastly different to how I think. I vow to you that as long as my spirit is on this land, I will love you with all of my heart." They both thought briefly of Costia, and Lexa added firmly: "*All of it.*"

"Then—" Clarke swelled with emotion, shuffling so she was face-to-face with Lexa. Her beauty was neither enlightened nor dimmed by the night; she was just *beautiful*. Her voice cracked as she spoke. "I promise I'll always support your beliefs, even if I don't believe it myself. I promise I will be honest with you, even though I intend to be by your side. Always."

"Always is a long word," Lexa noted.

"Then I'll say it again," Clarke affirmed. "*Always.*"

"Always," Lexa repeated, and intertwined their fingers together. Slowly, she brought Clarke's palm to her mouth and pressed the softest of kisses against her skin. "Love is not weakness."

"No. No, it isn't."

"It brought us together."

"Mm-hmm."

"Let me love you," Lexa murmured, her mouth moving against Clarke's. "Let me love you forever."

"*Forever* is a long time."

"So is *always*."

"Lexa..."

"Let me believe you were the star that fell for me," Lexa begged her. "Let me believe the stars saved me when I prayed to them every day, because no-one else would. Let me believe we are threaded together. Let me believe that as much as I will love you, that you will love me."

Clarke's heart rammed against her ribcage. It had been a delayed reaction. The love of her life had suddenly bolted back into action, and she'd hardly the time to process it. She had not mapped out every contour of Lexa's skin yet. She had not professed her endless love, ten times over, yet. But she could feel the overwhelming emotion of it all consume her like a tsunami. She was the eye of the hurricane and her hurt, her anger, her rage, her need for vengeance and—*everything* she felt for Lexa—was swirling viciously around her.

By the Gods, she had fucking *missed* Lexa kom Trikru.

Clarke, allowing herself a moment to feel like a fucking idiot—broke. Completely. She sobbed into Lexa's chest, compliant as Lexa wrapped her arms around her, shushing her and soothing her with just the tone of her voice. She did not speak of anything. She only held her and kissed her head, full of thoughts she could not quell; thoughts of *what-ifs* that had not made its escape from her brain. Clarke squeezed her eyes and allowed herself to cry. She could not do so in front of Aden. She had to be strong for him. She could not condemn herself as a weak Ambassador in front of Indra and Titus. She could not be the weeping figure in Polis whilst everyone depended

on her in Arkadia.

But whenever Lexa had promised her that she understood, Clarke had brushed it aside. It was too late, but only now did Clarke begin to process the depth of what she truly meant. Only Lexa knew what it felt like to condemn a mass group of people to death. Only Lexa's hands were drenched in the same amount of blood as Clarke's was. Only Lexa had a burden so heavy on her shoulders that every step she took in life felt like a drag.

And with some time, Lexa had pushed her hand into Clarke's soul and alleviated the weight from her. Simultaneously, Clarke had unravelled Lexa to her very being—to her pulsing heart—and massaged it lovingly.

"You're a good person," Clarke remembered herself telling Lexa once. "You've just been put in the wrong circumstances. You're a fighter. You're strong."

Lexa had responded similarly.

But tonight, Clarke just wanted to grab her face and kiss her. Tonight, she just wanted to embrace the feeling of gaining back that singular person in the whole of the world she loved the most. Tonight, she wanted to be Lexa's and she wanted Lexa to be hers. Grabbing Lexa's face, she pulled her in for a deep kiss, sighing into Lexa's mouth when she balked in surprise then eagerly returned Clarke's passion, coaxing her mouth open as their bodies, sweaty already, writhed against each other's.

Polis would sleep tonight—but Clarke and Lexa would not. Perhaps they were the silent vigil over Polis. Perhaps they were the ever-burning candle that would not blow out on top of the tower. Or perhaps Polis held vigil for *them*, as they allowed two young women to love each other in one universe or another. Lexa kissed her deeply, and knew that if there were universes beyond them, Lexa kom Trikru would always find Clarke Griffin, and they would always fall in love.

She kissed her as her room's candles dwindled and the stars outside twinkled, and Lexa cared not for the working of the world. She cared for Clarke's skin, so malleable and easy to control with her deft fingers, and she cared about how *this* would be her forever.

Somewhere, sometime, young Lexa felt a strange bond with the stars. It had prompted her to go back regularly and talk of her everyday activities, as if the sky was her friend.

Tonight, Lexa revelled in the magic of her stubborn, reckless, beautiful glimmer of stardust as she moaned in her bed, and marvelled in how stunningly gorgeous their intertwined fates—as argumentative and clash-worthy it would be—was.

Ai hod yu in, Lexa had said.

I love you, Clarke had said.

And that, was, quite simply, *that*.

Full Circle

Chapter Notes

It's done! *flings self away from fanfiction for life* lol. I do love plotting out multichapters. As weird and as odd this one was, I hope you enjoyed it. Because i'm fiddly, quite like Rise into Ruin, there are things I wish I could've done more. But ultimately, I'm pleased with what I did manage to achieve. I think the key, what has always been the key, is "belief". I think that's why 'American Gods' inspired so much of this.

Mostly, thank you for all your kudos, bookmarks, likes and lastly comments: they mean the world. Most comments actually have been really cool to read, to read you theorising, to read mentions of Styx and I've had some great conversations. I enjoyed that the most. I think if I provoked any thought or anything that made you want to ask questions or talk of mythology or anything like that...then yeah, I'm really bloody pleased. Thank you. :)

"People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen." – Neil Gaiman, 'American Gods' (2001).

Lexa woke far before Clarke, contentedness filling her body as she briefly snuck a glance to her left, where Clarke was dozing, peacefully. A smile etched its way onto her face, her lips quirking in a sort of lopsided smile. They'd taken it gently last night. A kiss of relief had deepened into one of worry, then one of sheer lust—and before they knew it, they had been ripping each other's tops off in desire, careful to keep their mouths firmly attached to the other.

It was the kind of warm, human connection Lexa had craved. She would pay the entire war stash just to be reunited with Anya once more, but that was not how the world worked. Instead she could do the best of what they made of their future here. She had a real chance with Clarke. It did not matter to her that it would not result in a happy son like Konner and Kai, but if she had a chance to keep this city for themselves, to look over the tops of Polis with the dim candlelight and a comforting bed awaiting them, then Lexa felt greedy to ask for more.

She ruled Polis with an iron fist. A small part of her knew that at some point, her ideals would come head-to-head with Clarke's, and they would fight, and fight, and fight. But for now, they had Polis, unchallenged, all to themselves. They had the respect of the Polisians, and Clarke had done *so much* for her, in terms of helping Aden come to grasps with the politics of being Commander, and her help with Nyko in the apothecary.

Clarke, being Clarke, made Lexa throw a question to Aden about the barricade, to which he'd answered unsurprisingly. Clarke had attempted to use her unconsciousness to try and bend Aden to her will—but impressively, the boy had pledged himself to Lexa first. Triumph was small as it leapt in her chest, but it was something she'd expected.

It was yet another example that she couldn't trust Clarke entirely. A paradox itself. She trusted Clarke with her life, and she knew that she and Clarke had become so messily entangled that she did not know where she ended and where Clarke began. But it didn't mean Clarke was incapable

of underhand motives like this. Pouncing on Aden the moment he was installed power? That had Clarke kom Skaikru written all over it.

Yet, as she mindlessly traced patterns over Clarke's unmarred skin, she wondered if there was something she wouldn't do for her. Reversing the preposterous proposal of *blood must not have blood* was a necessity—not an unfortunate pull of the public. *Jus drein jus daun* had been a Grounder principle that had been worked, and was stable, for years. For Clarke to barge in and demand an upheaval of everything was ridiculous.

Still, Lexa scolded herself for trying. There would be nothing accomplished of it, yet Clarke's earnest nature had knocked her for six.

She knew she had to block that out sometimes.

Contrary to Titus' beliefs, Clarke was not her Achilles heel. Clarke was strength; she formed new ideas; she was reckless and sometimes idiotic, but Lexa was not an idiot. She would not take Clarke's counsel for the sake of taking it. Because she loved her.

"*Ai hod yu in,*" Lexa said, her voice crackly and croaky in the morning, as she pressed her lips gently against Clarke's forehead. Clarke was still asleep. "That is what I meant to say to you that day. You knew it; I knew it—but I thought I might as well formalise it."

Clarke remained unresponsive, and in Clarke's utter tiredness, Lexa found it infecting herself too. She yawned, but she still let the tip of her nose brush softly against Clarke's, resting their foreheads together.

"The world will challenge us," Lexa whispered. "We will *fight*."

Her eyes drooped, and she kissed Clarke on the cheek. "You and I, we *will be*."

The cold was familiar, as was the pebbles on the shore—as dark as night, they may as well have been coal. Lexa walked precariously on the surface, unsure why she'd been pulled back here. Hadn't she escaped the claws of death? She could feel the coolness of the flat side of the blade against her belly, placed there by Anya, who'd let tears slip. A sign of weakness. Something she had never meant to show Lexa.

But she couldn't do it. If this was the life of the near-death and the lost, dying souls, Anya would not rob someone who still had their hands clinging onto the shores of life. She'd spared Lexa that day, seeing how weak her mentor had become. All mental defences had come crumpling down the instance she'd seen it—and Anya frequently scolded herself for not allowing Lexa to just—succumb to the end.

Yet as Lexa stood before her, in her night-gown and not much else, Anya wondered if that had been the right decision. The idiot mentee before her was practically *glowing* with affection, and if the dead could be sick, Anya was sure she'd just vomited.

"Am I still dying?" Lexa asked incredulously, noting that Anya was not dribs and drabs of flesh anymore. She looked very much alive, except there was a horrible loss of blood just between her shoulder blades. Her entire body was covered with mud. "Why...aren't you dying?"

"I *am* dying," Anya growled. "Ever since you left, I was...rewarded...with the fate of...how I died."

"And how was that?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does, to me," Lexa said earnestly, taking a step closer. Anya, upset over something, wrenched away from Lexa's extended hand. "Anya, you are my tutor. My *only* tutor. Should you be killed by forces that still roam this earth, I *will* avenge you."

"Has all this time with you taught you *nothing*?" Anya said, almost sadly. "You can't promise vengeance upon those who killed. I told you: Skaikru gunners took me out in the middle of the night. I can give you no names. I was drugged. We approached the Skaikru settlement, where they barely realised Clarke. They did not realise me, and shot me dead."

"They should've taken you in for questioning," Lexa said through gritted teeth. "They shouldn't have just killed you on the spot!"

"I'm a Grounder." Anya idly kicked one of the pebbles, and folded her arms behind her back. "I was a Grounder before you came along and added the Skaikru to our coalition. You made it a crime to punish Grounders. You accomplished peace, where so many would've fallen straight to war. You have no-one to compare to, in this circumstance, Lexa. But trust me, you did the right thing."

"And I will have you die? And the hands of this—this barbaric act--?"

"They grew. And trust me, I'm not saying it because I'm all soft now I'm dead. I want to kill every Skaikru prick who thinks they can point their fancy Skaikru guns at me and press 'shoot'. But my death was the signpost. You stopped hundreds, perhaps thousands, more Grounder deaths by installing your laws and your hard-earned coalition. This place..." Anya gestured broadly around them into the darkness. "It could well be easily populated by Grounders who'd died the same way. It isn't. That's down to *you*, Lexa."

Lexa briefly wondered if this was yet another test. She'd already proven herself with Anya's corpse—but what would she do if Anya was on the *brink* of death, her blood still very much pumping inside her, covered in mud? Would he haul her back to reality? To Polis? What would that change? Would Clarke kom Skaikru ever come to Lexa's tent? Would Finn have died? Would she ever meet Clarke?

"Are you starting to understand, now?" Anya asked, when Lexa fell silent. Reluctantly, she nodded in response. Anya reached out to her and placed a muddy hand on her cheek. "You can't save me, Lexa. Nobody can. But if you save yourself, and save that spritely spirit of yours, then you'll do me proud."

"All I ever wanted was to be up to your standard, when I was young," Lexa confessed. "You smacked me down in the sparring pits and I got up every single time because I just wanted you to tap me on the shoulder at the end of the session and tell me I'd done alright."

"I know. That's why I never did."

Lexa and Anya stared across the now-familiar black, never-ending lake before them. It didn't feel right. They'd said their goodbyes a while ago. She wondered if Anya had charmed some sort of spirit into seeing her tutee for one last time, or if the spirits had mercy embedded within them too. She knew if Anya got on that boat and rowed, she would row for years and years until she was instructed to collect someone—*Lexa*—from the shore.

But here, nobody disturbed them. There was no invisible noose yanking on their neck, sending them scrabbling across the pebbles. There was no rush. There was just—nothing. Not even darkness. It was all-black. *Nothing*.

"I think this is what time looks like," Lexa mused.

"I don't think time *looks* like anything. It's just...there."

"You're wrong."

"Want to fight me?"

Lexa raised a bemused eyebrow at Anya, who had her fists up in preparation. The sight before her was ridiculous. Anya was bleeding to death from a bullet wound on her back, and she was covered head to toe in filth. Lexa barely wanted to touch her, let alone fight her.

"That's probably why you died," Lexa mocked her, because apparently it was okay to disrespect the dead now, "They marked you for an idiot and shot you."

"Oh, they marked *me* for an idiot and they missed Clarke?"

"Ha *ha*."

"*Ste yuj*, Lexa," Anya said, dropping the tone all of a sudden. She did not close the gap between them, and nor did she pull her in for a (muddy) hug. Instead, she clapped Lexa on the shoulder, eyes filled to the brim with faith. Lexa thought back to her talk with Aden. Faith. Belief. Weren't they immovable forces on their own? "I don't think the path awaits you is going to be anything but dark, but you keep that big Polisian light lit for all travellers, from all walks of life, to get to. You love Clarke. You light as many additional fucking candles you want. Don't consume yourself with hate; revenge; darkness. Don't get angry when you can't avenge something. Someone. If we're leaves on a tree, we fall in the winter. When the Ice comes down for you, I need you to be evergreen."

"They will only come down for peace talks." Lexa found herself choked up. Death had played a cruel game. They had said their goodbyes before. To put herself through that again—to lose Anya for a *third time*—just didn't seem fair. It shattered her heart, because *what if?*

"I don't want you to see this shore for many, many years," Anya said. "Got it? I don't want to be called up by Becca in a few weeks' time telling me I need to collect someone. You rule your realm. I will row endlessly for you."

"My mother used to tell me these outlandish tales," Lexa gabbled, as Anya climbed onto the boat. She didn't want Anya to push off the shore with the oar just yet. "My father, a strong, political man, would call her ridiculous—but he loved her so much. She would talk of the stars. I wanted to learn Old History, Old Languages—everything a school-aged child should learn—but she spoke of astronomy and myths and wishes—she spoke of the fantastical."

"Did anyone ever tell her she was wrong?"

"No." Lexa didn't want Anya to go. "My father was strong until he died. My mother was always weak, but her words strengthened my heart just as much."

"What did you wish for?" Anya asked quietly.

Lexa stared down at the pebbles. It was a familiar sight now, but as Anya said, she didn't want to see them for years. "I wished that a star would fall for me. To stop the fighting."

Anya grinned at her, and then used her oar to push off the shore. "Sounds like your mother was one heck of a woman."

"She was."

"Her kid ended up ruling the world. You know, this is your empire, don't you? Your story."

"How does my story end?"

"Wear your crown a little longer. Give me some time to row about. I want to travel," Anya said sarcastically, and Lexa laughed. "If Lexa kom Trikru rules her realm and realises she deserves and has earned every inch of it, I will row forever in this abyss because I would rather live here forever than be called up one day to collect you from the shore."

Lexa smiled sadly. Inevitability hit hard like the truth—sore and bruising. "You will have to—one day."

"Those scars on your back, Lexa..." Anya changed tack completely. "We used to self-inflict for every kill. You have so many you do not have need for them. But if a dead tutor can ask her live tutee one thing, may it be this: that you do not beat yourself up anymore? That you may be the beacon of hope for a realm, but you do not bear everyone's burdens alone."

"That is the life of the Commander," Lexa insisted. "To bear—"

"That's the *belief*. One person would crack under all of that. Love. Be free. Be *you*. After all, isn't that why your spirit conquered the Conclave?"

Lexa mulled over this, thinking of three hundred grounders massacred in their sleep. She thought of the Ice Nation's impending threat. She thought of her Nightbloods, fresh-faced and eager. She thought of Clarke, and the way her touch seemed to heal all ailments...

"We will wait," said a voice behind her, and Lexa whipped around, briefly catching Anya's soft smile. Gustus towered over her, his blood-stained tunic still on him, but his wounds did not seem to hurt him. Lexa's stomach plummeted to the floor, the memory of her inserting the final, fatal wound into Gustus flashing in her mind. Shame filled her gut, and she stuttered in disbelief. Gustus bowed deeply before her.

"*Heda*," he said, and Lexa closed her eyes, remembering how she missed the gruff rumble of his voice.

"Gustus, I..."

"*Ste yuj, Heda*," Gustus simply told her. Final words and final-final words; Gustus had not changed his mind. He watched as Lexa's knees buckled and she knelt into the pebbles, placing her head in her hands. If she stayed here she would be with the people she'd lost and loved; if she went back she would be with Clarke, and an entire world of responsibility. If she went back, she would have to put her people first every time, despite her active decision to choose to love Clarke as she did.

"I've never feared death," Lexa said.

Gustus glanced to Anya and crouched down beside her. "Then don't. We will be waiting for you—be it an eternity or not. We will be here. Go and rule; go and love. Lexa kom Trikru, you are my *Heda* but your heart beats as mine does; there is no shame or weakness in allowing it to be nurtured."

"I love her. You told me the coalition would be the death of me, Gustus. But I love her."

"Then you love her," Gustus said simply. "Besides: you are not dead, *Heda*. So perhaps I am incorrect in my assessment."

Lexa laughed. True. "*Ste yuj, Gustus.*"

Lexa was preoccupied with some coalition difficulties Clarke did *not* want to ask about, considering the stormy look on her face when she'd woken up. She'd kissed her good morning, but her tone was iron and it felt like talking to a brick wall. Instead, when Aden came up, with his hair cut and neatly combed aside, dressed in a smart tunic, breeches and a decorated jacket, she could only smile. It seemed Lexa had green-lit him for a blue sash which he proudly wore like Lexa did with hers. He extended his arm for her to take, and even Lexa laughed at Aden's effort. She nodded for them both to go, and Aden courteously took Clarke down the staircase.

"You look grown-up," Clarke said truthfully. "You look very handsome."

"*Heda* allowed the blue." Aden grinned. "Your beauty, Clarke kom Skaikru, is as dazzling as the sun."

"Jesus, when did *you* get to be such a charmer, huh?"

"I—"

"Ohhhhhhhh." Clarke nearly tripped over laughing, revelling in Aden's purple cheeks. The boy was masquerading in gentlemanly courtesy (well, he *was* a courteous little one) behind his scandal. "Someone got a kiss."

"It—just came out of nowhere. Well, I don't know. I was...I was sad, and then—then she kissed me."

"Did you like it?"

"I—I liked it with her," Aden said. He looked like he wanted to strangle himself. "I'm not sure I understand the appeal of—I mean, I love holding her hand and talking to her and—it's just—the *tongue*—it's so *wet*—"

"Okay—" Clarke stopped Aden before he went into any further detail, utterly grossed out. "Just wait 'til you get laid. Oh my God, you're gonna dissolve into yourself."

"Laid down where?"

"I—just—forget I said anything."

"I'll ask the Commander—"

"Please don't."

Aden did not persist, but he *did* persist on being a gentleman anyway. He held doors open for her, and complimented her beauty as passers-by recognised the pair. Clarke found herself flustered by his smooth words, which she knew only to be laced with a hundred percent truth, and that was why she liked Aden's company so much. Her world was so rife with betrayal and facade that it was refreshing to have Aden knock everyone off-beat with his sheer honesty and integrity.

He was not Commander material—not yet. But Clarke could remember the first time they'd met, before Roan's duel with Lexa, and how heavily Clarke had doubted him. He'd been a young, scraggly thing then. Now, he behaved like a prince accompanying his princess through Polis.

"It is a relief to have *Heda* back," Aden admitted. "The responsibilities were beginning to get too much for me. I think you saw me crack, Clarke kom Skaikru."

"You didn't. You bent, and you ached, but you never snapped."

"I understand." Aden didn't elaborate any further as they reached another building, shoving the door open and holding it for her. Clarke took pleasure in this. It had been a while since someone—especially adorable young Aden—had treated her like royalty. That excluded Lexa in bed. "I mean, I understand why my Commander loves you so much."

"Oh?" Clarke stopped walking, and Aden did too, for their arms were interlinked. "Why's that?"

"I will write to you," Aden said, blushing. "I think I am courting Hemla. I do not want her to think that I take fancy to the Commander's betrothed."

It was Clarke's turn to blush this time. Well—she turned a violent purple, anyway. She stopped Aden in his tracks, because if there was one fault with the boy, it was that formality was always his way. It was Lexa's fault too, but Lexa was...*Lexa*. She knew it would be a charm once he grew older and his shoulders broadened; he was the *perfect* gentleman. "Wait," she said, sputtering over her own words, "We're not betrothed."

"It may be soon," Aden said dreamily. "I imagine the Commander's way of courting is very direct. Do you think you will have two ceremonies? One here in Polis and the other in Arkadia? Or do you consider Polis your home now? I reckon the Commander will give passer-delegations to Indra, but I hope to at *least* sing my song—"

"There will be no ceremonies! I'm not—Jesus, Lexa is not *courting* me! We're not 'betrothed'!"

"Does she know that?"

"She never asked!"

"Oh." Aden scratched the back of his neck. "I think I have lost five golden coins."

"You *betted* on this?"

"Marol started it," Aden said, sounding like a petulant child again. Clarke's face refused to lessen in the purple department, and she was ready to lunge for the skinny idiot's throat when he held his hands up. "In all fairness, we have never seen the Commander so happy. It was only natural for us to ponder the...details of your relationship." He groaned, as if he realised something else. "Of course! There was no ring. I cannot *believe* I have lost—"

"Aden," Clarke said stiffly, "Lexa and I are not betrothed, and we will never be *betrothed*."

"But—"

"It's not possible. Not between us. We've discussed this."

"There is a law," Aden said patiently, "it allows people who love each other to take the name of the other and be joined for life. Nightbloods are no exception."

"I *know*. But it's not about that. It's about...politics. Safety."

Aden eyed her cautiously. Something seemed to click in his eyes, and he shifted uncomfortably. "Right."

"Then you understand, Aden?" Clarke spoke to him out of desperation now, lowering the tone. Aden's head immediately snapped up at the sound of her voice, worried. If Aden was to be the next Commander, he had to know that he couldn't put his childhood sweetheart at risk. Lexa had been the example of that mistake; she was holding up the rule to save Clarke the trouble, too. "Do you understand why Lexa and I..." She trailed off, feeling her chest ache. She had never spoken about it properly, to Lexa—but she knew this was what had to be said. "We cannot be. Not properly."

Aden held her gaze, swallowing as he did so. He hadn't thought so far ahead. "Just because there is no formality in change to your titles, it does not mean nobody in this capital knows of the extent of your love. Perhaps you and the Commander should take it as a warning. Or perhaps you'd trust in the coalition. I do not know of it. But my Commander once told me that no force on earth would be able to stop the force of love. If it is consensual and you choose to love another, nothing will blow that away. Love is within your heart—not your titles—so the Commander said. The world wears bodies down, but not the heart."

"Aden, I know you're so *young* but—never forget Lexa and Costia. Please. If you grow to love Hemla so, then—"

"I will protect her," Aden said adamantly. "Commanders cannot make wise decisions without their head; but they cannot love the realm without their heart. Should the situation arise, would you not agree that the heart is a muscle? It will withstand the jabs."

"Aden..."

"Commander Lexa loves *you*. But does that make her weak? I think not."

Instead, he took Clarke's hand in his again, this time squeezing to try to comfort her. His musky essence and the fact that he had practically grown up before her eyes was solace enough. He walked her in amicable silence towards the gates of Polis, where he locked eyes with one of the City Guards.

Aden dipped his head and kissed the back of her hand. "Clarke, I bid you good day."

"You escorted me here?" Clarke asked after him, curious. "Why?"

"The Commander wants your happiness," Aden replied. "I decided: so do I."

Aden bowed before her. The City Guard accompanying her did not make any conversation, until several carriages were allowed passage through the gates. Clarke stared in confusion, wondering what Lexa had engineered, and what Aden had agreed to.

It was only when her mother jumped off one of the carriages, still moving slowly, that she realised. Briefly, she glanced back to Aden, who smiled at the sight. Rushing to help Abby to her feet, her eyes widened in disbelief at the outreach of Lexa's power—and mercy—as Abby embraced her, rocking her back and forth. Nobody would ever embrace Clarke, *ever*, with the power Abby had. A mother's embrace was like no other.

It was not a lover's. It was all-consuming. It was relief; happiness; excitement; pride; sadness—all at once. Nobody had formed a bond with Clarke ever since she'd been sitting inside Abby's foetus except Abby. Nobody would ever be able to replicate that.

"Oh, God," Abby blubbered, weeping freely as she stroked Clarke's face over and over. Her hands were callous as Clarke briefly looked over to where Aden was helping Raven off the carriage, followed by Octavia, Kane... "Look at you. My beautiful girl. Look at you."

"I've been taken care of, mom," Clarke assured her, though it would never stop a mother's worry. "Trust me."

"I do, I do. A boy rode to us in the middle of the night. That—that boy." She gestured towards Aden, who must've seized Lexa's message from the City Guard himself. It explained why the stable boys were cleaning Chestnut, and why Aden, despite looking like he was the richest suitor on the earth, had horrible bags under his eyes. He hadn't slept. Aden stood alone as everyone dismantled from the carriages, scuffing the ground with the heel of his boot. "He passed the letter on and Kane read it. He started telling me tales of you, and Lexa, and himself—he's—*Clarke*—" Clarke, surprised, found herself engulfed in another tight embrace, suffocating, almost. It was as if Abby never wanted to let go.

It wasn't just Abby who felt it, too. The time she'd spent away from her mother was beginning to hit her now, and she realised she'd disappeared without a word. She had been effectively missing. The thought of Abby having only Kane and perhaps Raven for support was something she never wanted to do to her mother again. Clarke closed her eyes and allowed for Abby to hold her as if she'd never hold her again—because that's exactly what Abby was afraid of. That she would disappear, like she had done, without leaving word.

It wouldn't happen. Not in Polis, and not while Lexa allowed it. Guilt washed over Clarke as she found her eyes pricking with tears. Not wanting to hold back any longer, she sobbed, muffled against her mother's body as Abby shushed her, hoping that ten minutes of solace would heal months of radio silence. For all Abby could've known, Clarke could've been dead. And Clarke hadn't even thought of it.

Abby wasn't the bad mother here. It was Clarke—the bad daughter. The prodigal daughter. They broke apart eventually as Kane rested an arm on Abby's forearm, muttering something to her. Sniffing loudly, Clarke promised they would dine, alone, tonight—and they would catch up. Ever since Jake Griffin's floating and Wells Jaha's death, it was important to look out for another. She'd failed her mother in every aspect, and if she could make it up to her in *any way*—

She knew Abby would ask nothing of her. She knew it. But if they could claw back time, then maybe it would be patching up a wound for now.

Clarke counted heads. Abby, Kane, Raven, Octavia, Lincoln, Miller, Monty, Sinclair...that made eight. There were hundreds in Arkadia. "Just—this is the only drop-off?"

Abby nodded. "We suspected the Commander did not do this for us," she said hoarsely, "we supposed she did it for *you*."

City Guards seized the last carriage. *Nine*. He'd ridden alone. Bruised and barely conscious, Bellamy shook himself awake as he was shoved forwards by the City Guards. "Walk," one of them merely said. Octavia stared after him, as if she wanted to say something—but Bellamy refused to look at any of them. He knew what he had done. It hadn't been his conviction—but it had been a warped sense of justice served.

Clarke thought back to the screams she'd heard in the Polisian prisons, and wondered if it really was.

"What's that?" Clarke asked, confused. "He was supposed to stay in Arkadia. The Ice Nation would raze it to the ground, and Bellamy would be collateral damage. That was the deal."

"Your deal," Kane said, scratching his beard. "Your Commander changed her mind."

"What?"

"Think of it as an act of mercy," Kane said. "Or not. I don't know. Do you really want to leave Bellamy behind for dead? Lexa's reason was that she wanted him to suffer, not die—she wanted him to suffer for the hundreds he'd killed in the massacre. I couldn't argue, Clarke. It's the Grounders' way—it's now *our* way—of justice. An eye for an eye. I guess she didn't want him dying too easily." Kane paused, his eyes flicking over to Octavia. "Maybe she didn't want him dead at all."

Clarke thought back to the rage that had consumed Lexa the moment she'd heard the news. There was no way this was an act of mercy. Lexa had other reasons for it—other reasons Kane had deduced and told her. Lexa had been infuriated the moment she'd heard it. She'd smashed things, cursed in Trigedasleng—she'd ordered a full-scale attack on Arkadia until Clarke had stopped her. *Blood must not have blood* was not a system they abode by anymore, but it had saved Lexa from wiping out an entire population for the actions of few.

"The Commander apologises for her absence," Aden said loudly, over the loudness of the reunion. He wrung his fingers together, eager to get this out of the way. He was reading from a card, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "She is preoccupied, but if you will do her the honour of joining the feast tonight, officially as our thirteenth clan of the coalition, she would be privileged."

"Consider it done." Kane smiled at him. The young boy had promise. He extended his hand. "Marcus Kane, Chancellor of the Skaikru."

"We've met before, sir," Aden said. "And I am just a Nightblood, merely passing on the Commander's word."

"You were the interim Commander, were you not?"

"For a while."

"Then let us be equals," Kane said diplomatically, clapping Aden on the shoulder. Clarke smiled at him, pleased he was getting some recognition for sturdily holding the coalition in place. Tonight, all clans were invited to a great feast. Luna of the Boat People had already journeyed with cart-loads of fresh fish, and the Southern clans had gathered enough wine for an army...for weeks. The fresh meat was still being hunted by some of Trikru's most skilled archers, whilst Roanok, clan leader of the Rock people, brought the furnishings. It was all glitz and grandeur, which was something the Skaikru initiates could appreciate.

"Abby Griffin kom Skaikru," Clarke could hear Aden say in the distance, outstretching his arm. His mother looked about utterly baffled. "Would you like an escort? I think we should perhaps walk around Polis."

Abby smiled at him. "Oh, oh, it's okay—"

"I insist," Aden said chirpily. "Let Polis see the Skaikru our Commander saved. If I may have the honour of your arm, Abby kom Skaikru?"

"It's been a while since someone tried that," Abby joked, but she took Aden's arm nonetheless. Kane and a couple others trailed behind them, as Aden and Abby made easy conversation. Clarke stared fondly at them. Her mother was laughing at whatever shit Aden was spewing—*really* laughing—and she hadn't realised how much she'd missed the sound until it twisted her chest.

"So long as Lexa's not planning on tying me to a pole and cutting my arms open," Raven said drily, hobbling up to Clarke as she embraced her, "*then* I'll be okay with you fucking her."

"What?"

"It's so obvious. You're glowing. You'd make a lesbian baby if you could." Raven clapped her on the back, ignoring Clarke's look of disgust. She winced as her leg pained her once more, and Clarke crouched down to examine the mechanics of it. It seemed to fit perfectly. "It's nothing, Clarke."

"It's chafing," Clarke said. "The leg itself looks fine, but if you keep walking and it keeps chafing, it'll hurt. It keeps chafing, the skin will rip and you'll cause yourself an infection."

"You sound like your mother," Raven deadpanned.

"Just—shut up," Clarke was unable to resist Raven's idiotic sense of humour. "I'll get a cream or ointment to you straight away. Both, actually. Apply the cream during the day and use the ointment overnight. I just need to get some ingredients."

"Have I ever told you how much I *don't* miss you?"

Clarke grinned brightly at her.

The scene before her made her heart fill with happiness. Some of the City Guards were conversing easily with Lincoln and Octavia. Kane had taken some of Monty's moonshine, the same peace-offering as before, and Aden had gulped a worrying amount of it to test. Within fifteen minutes, his face had pinkened and he'd called Clarke 'mother'.

"That's hard liquor," Clarke scolded Kane, "You know he can barely hold his wine?"

"He looks like it," Octavia snickered. "Skinny chump."

Clarke silently told Kane she expected better. She supposed Kane got the message. There would be heavy days ahead of them. Lexa refused to offer them free refuge or a village; she wanted them in Polis, but she wanted them to work for her. It made sense. With Titus' death so timely, Indra or Nyko was the easy candidate to take the Flamekeeper's position; the one who wasn't chosen would keep an eye on Kane and his politics. Abby would assist Clarke and Nyko in the medical department. Clarke wondered if she could expand it so she could educate the citizens of Polis on basic CPR because most of the time, Nyko's shabby infirmary was filled to the brim with citizens who were not ill.

Octavia had already promised to be Indra's second. Raven and Monty would be crucial parts of the coalition and Polis' expansion if Lexa was to rely on technology. There was a position for everyone if they were willing to work for it. After being cooped up under Charles Pike's rule for so long, the company seemed eager to stretch their legs and see what they could do.

Clarke made her way around the newly-arrived Skaikru, hugging everyone and anyone. The uneasiness of having the Skaikru settle within Polis was something she would have to discuss with Lexa. Lexa's invitation had been clear, but it had been shrewd; she didn't want the Skaikru out of her sight, and if they were *in* Polis, they would have to abide by Polisian law.

The only thing was, Clarke didn't want Polis overrun by her people. It didn't seem fair on the Polisians or Lexa. If they could just provide safe cover for a nearby village, would that not be enough? Or was Lexa truly so suspicious of the Skaikru that she wanted them practically under her nose?

Was this all—distrust?

Aden patted his uniform down as he approached Clarke merrily, folding his arms. "I have *always*," he said—slurred, even, "thought you beautiful. I think the Commander does, too. Is it not a wonder, when two beauties collide?"

"I think you need to go to bed," Clarke laughed.

"Will you come with me?"

"No."

Clarke excused herself and escorted Aden home, where his mother started 'talking' at him. With a sigh, she plopped Aden in bed, who was still muttering something about bosoms, and so she tried to turn to Aden's mother with a straight face.

"Please tell your son, when he wakes up," Clarke requested politely, "that the thirteenth clan thank him for all he's done for us. Please send him the Commander's *personal* thanks too, for his bravery and maturity. He is a handsome boy. He's..." Clarke glanced over to a snoozing Aden. Since Lexa's slip into unconsciousness, they had been unwittingly each other's rock. Aden had provided solace and vice versa. Aden was more than just handsome. Brave. Mature. Clarke couldn't find the words, so she crossed the small space of Aden's modest home and pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead. "Please tell him Clarke kom Skaikru, the *Wanheda*, says thank you."

"I will," said Aden's mother, stunned by the gesture. "My—my boy, Aden?"

"Yes, yours. Keep him safe, fed and cared for, will you?"

"Y-yes. Of course."

Clarke left Aden's house with a great weight lifted off her chest. A Nightblood and the Commander's favourite—and Aden still wasn't appreciated around the house? She noticed a lack of a father—she wondered if he was just at work, or if he was up with the spirits now.

And then she stopped walking.

It had been the first time she'd consciously believed in them. Reincarnation, when they had first (briefly) discussed it in danger of the *pauna*, seemed so far out-of-reach it was...well, it was ridiculous. Once people died, they *died*. Spirits did not pass on, otherwise each Commander would just be the same. But for some reason, it had caught Clarke off-guard. She'd never believed in the spirits and Lexa knew that. They loved each other anyway. But this...this had come unexpected.

She could still see the Skaikru members by the gate, hugging each other. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her mother watching her, and like so many times before, she made a decision.

She found Lexa poring over stacks and stacks of papers as she entered the Commander's bedroom. Startled, Lexa glanced up, frowning at Clarke's appearance. Hadn't she just told Aden to take her downstairs? Slowly, and recognising something was off, Lexa put the tip of the quill back

into the ink-pot and organised her desk, resting her elbows against it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"The spirits," Clarke said. "I—I thought of Aden's father, and I thought he might be with them."

Lexa shrugged, returning to her paperwork. "Aden's father was one of my best archers. During a raid, we sent a small bunch to surprise-attack the enemy. Aden's father died in that attack. So yes, he is with the spirits. Is that what troubles you?"

"I—you know I don't believe in that kind of stuff." Clarke meant it kindly. Lexa nodded in understanding, leaning back in her armchair. "But it just popped into my mind, as if it had been there all along. Like—do you just...believe a non-believer can do that? Was it a momentary lapse?"

"I think these are questions you should be asking yourself, not me," Lexa said matter-of-factly. "You know your own brain better than I do. Why ask me?"

"Because I need to know I'm not going mad."

Lexa quirked an eyebrow at that.

"Sometimes..." Lexa set aside her quill again, sighing. "Compromise is a necessity between us. You know that. I know that. You have your beliefs and I have mine; we clash on morals; we clash on beliefs; we clash on many life-changing decisions. We change; we warp—but the one constant that remains is that—is that *ai hod yu in*, and you can come to me with any ridiculous theory or argument against mine, and I listen to you, always. I will love you, always."

"*Always* is a big word," Clarke muttered.

"You will do things I dislike, and vice versa. I'm happy for that to happen if you are."

"It's not that, Lexa. You know I'll take you as you are. I *love* you. But it's—"

"I know," Lexa intervened firmly. She pushed her chair aside so she could stride over to Clarke, placing both her palms firmly on either side of Clarke's cheeks. She could feel Clarke's jitteriness, and she smiled. "Come and take a walk with me. I want to show you something."

The walk didn't occur until long after Clarke leant up on her tiptoes and kissed her, whispering they shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be doing that, and it wasn't long before they tumbled into bed together, laughing.

When night fell, and everyone seemed to be asleep except the pair of them, Lexa nudged her on the shoulder. They got dressed, despite Lexa's attempts to keep her in bed by kissing her neck. Thirty minutes later they were outside in the relatively warm air of Polis, dressed in nothing but a plain tunic, breeches and a jacket. Lexa had spoken of wanting to blend in with the populace, though Clarke was sure if anyone recognised the Commander, they would be mobbed.

It was relatively quiet tonight. The feast had been suspended until tomorrow, until the Skaikru could get settled in with their new homes and jobs. Lexa did not want to give them a free pass, and she was determined that if her Polisians had to work for a living, so did they. They were, now, Polisians, after all. They were Skaikru no longer.

They passed the City Guard, with Lexa greeting both burly men warmly, and then made their way onto the plains. It wasn't far out from the Polisian walls—they could still see them—but the plains seemed never-ending. It was beautiful. The grass was finely-cut, a bright green colour, spoiled

only by the tracks necessary for horses and cargo to travel in, through and out of Polis.

Lexa picked a spot to its right and jogged a few paces, tugging Clarke with her. She tugged and tugged as Lexa upped the pace until they tumbled onto the ground, laughing, and a little out of breath.

"Are you taking me on a date?" Clarke asked cheekily, ignoring the way the joke deflated as the meaning flew over Lexa's dense head. Still—she was happy. Lexa had orchestrated something so incredible since her recovery that Clarke had to blink a few times to double check she was still living in the real world. Aden had been a stronghold of the coalition, but Lexa's urgency in moving the prisoner Bellamy Blake as well as Clarke's loved ones, here in Polis, on the condition that they worked—it was perfect. She'd batted away Clarke's worries about them taking over Polis, of them essentially becoming targets for the original Polisians.

"They are no longer Arkadians. They are Polisians now, and they will follow Polisian law," Lexa had said, determinedly. "They will be subject to Polisian punishment if they break it."

And that was that.

Lexa's political swindling had been impressive to say the least, but to accomplish it in such a short space of time was ridiculous. Clarke watched Lexa, comfortable gazing at the stars, flat on her back. She joined Lexa's side, feeling nothing as she stared upwards, for she did not understand astronomy. Her fingers found Lexa's, and they intertwined.

"There was something I never told you." Lexa's words came out more confused than a revelation; it wasn't that Lexa had purposefully withheld anything from Clarke. It was the fact that she hadn't thought Clarke would be particularly interested anyway. "It's about my parents."

"You know you can take all the time you need," Clarke said quietly, "if you don't want to talk about your parents, you don't need to talk about your parents. I'm sticking with you for a long time. Just so you know."

"It's not that. It's just...I never told you because I never *thought* to. I don't mind. I want to tell you the world. I just need to find the time."

"Tales of Lexa kom Trikru's serial killer parents?"

Lexa laughed, slapping Clarke on the stomach. "No, but it's equally stupid. Granted, I was a child at the time, but foolishness is for all ages."

Clarke snorted. "I'm here for a bit of Lexa kom Trikru stupidity if you are."

Lexa side-eyed her to show her how not amused she was, but Clarke squeezed her hand good-naturedly, a rakish grin splitting her face. Lexa had never told her anything of her childhood—only that her village had been raided, her parents killed, and Anya, since then, had taken her in.

But she must've been at least six or seven. Clarke wondered what kind of stories Lexa had saved for her.

"I used to talk to the stars," Lexa admitted, a little surprised there was no laugh from Clarke's end. They remained still in the grass, their backs against the ground, as if they were lying in wait for an animal to hunt. In the eerie stillness of the night-time air, Lexa turned her head a fraction to face Clarke, and found only intense concentration reflected in the gaze back at her. Swallowing her hesitation, she carried on. Her face remained undeniably pink in the cheeks as she thought of her juvenile idiocy.

"My mother was not a well woman; she used to tell stories and stay at home, whilst my father, a butcher—respected and strong—brought home enough money for us to eat. I never saw them again upon being drafted to Polis. I'd always assumed my mother died of illness and my father of some nameless battle. But I never gave them time of thought." Lexa blinked, suddenly feeling the weight on her chest. It had been sitting there for nearly twenty years. She wondered if she'd accidentally just stumbled across its regrettable cause, knowing there was no way she could find an answer to her predicament. "My mother used to tell me stories about them. I never believed her, but I think I wanted to, otherwise I would not have tried to trade wishes."

"There's nothing magical up there," Clarke mumbled, fiddling with the hem of Lexa's tunic. "It's just black space and a bit of glittery stuff. I don't know. When you spend your whole life stuck up there orbiting the fantastical earth you'd only heard about in grand tales, then it's kinda...boring."

"When you spend your whole life surrounded by the green, you find it a bore compared to the varying blues, pinks and black of the skies," Lexa returned lightly. Clarke started to see her point, and Lexa knew the moment she did, because the way her mouth wanted to smile finally curved upwards.

"I used to dream about earth," Clarke said.

"I dreamt of the stars."

"It's a compromise I can deal with," Clarke joked, and Lexa laughed. *Compromise*. She thought back to *blood must have blood*, and how that had no longer been as much a compromise as much as it had been a necessity. Idealism meant that she wanted to dispense the opposite; life meant that the long-reigning tradition of the Grounders' had stuck.

Clarke wondered what had spurred her on to try and make such a radical upheaval. Hadn't Lexa's revolution been enough? To shake the foundations of an already crumbling, new, fledgling force had not just been risky: it had been downright stupid.

Perhaps years and years down the line, a successor would consider *blood must not have blood*. Clarke, sick of blood—black and red—knew that as much as earth dictated the sky was blue and the trees were green, blood had to have blood. For now. It was the way of today's world, and as earth spun on its axis, it did not account for good intentions or sentimental beliefs.

Time could, perhaps. But the world itself? No. Absolutely not.

"Maybe I dreamt of you," Lexa said quietly. Clarke shifted her head so she could watch Lexa—so beautiful in the dim light of the night, her jawline clenched in thought—and she could see Lexa's eyes close, a soft smile on her face. Dozy. "Maybe in any given universe, you and I..."

Clarke smiled back at her. "*Definitely*."

"If you and I were destined to meet then let the world be grateful it was you and I," Lexa said from nowhere, boldly, proudly. "Should anyone lesser have matched me or vice versa, this partnership would have been crushed and we would not have the luxury of this brief escape tonight."

This brief pretend-moment of freedom. Clarke pondered over Lexa's audacious statement. She spoke of it like she was implementing a law: like it was fact. This was why Lexa was so highly esteemed across the realm. She had a habit of making impossible worlds feel so tantalisingly real.

"Someone's cocky."

"I mean it. If you had been any other, I would not have fallen in love with you. If you had landed

and encountered another embodiment of the spirit, they would not be able to tolerate you." She said it jokingly, and Clarke smacked her on the arm, laughing.

"What do you mean?" Clarke asked. "You think if anyone else, any other two souls, went along the same journey we did, they wouldn't make it?"

"The sky meets the ocean eventually. Perhaps I was always meant to crash into you."

"What, and have one send three hundred big dudes after my ship? Have the other kill those three hundred? Have a betrayal by the Mountain?"

"I never said our hearts were pure, Clarke, nor our actions. But if you think our paths converged so neatly *just because* of how the world spins, then I find it much more ridiculous than you may find our belief in spiritualism."

"But that's *your* belief—"

"Then what is yours?" Lexa challenged. "I would like to hear it."

"I don't *believe* in all of that, and you know this—I *love* you, but—"

"Then do you believe me when I suggest we are perhaps two parts of a whole? If the Old Earth was created and its prodigal daughter cast out of the sky, what happens when the force that brings the rain down, the thunder down, the snow down—suddenly brought you down, too?"

"Then I'd think that really fucking lucky."

"Indulge me."

"I think you like making me happy. I think you *do* make me happy. I think you enjoy loving me. I think I enjoy *being* loved by you. I think it is you and me, and there's no involvement with the stars or Gods or earths of the old and new—I think it's you and me and I think I really love you."

She thought of compromise and she thought of Lexa, and of how the two were inextricably linked yet polar opposites. Lexa was far from a compromise—more like a junction. Clarke wondered, briefly, what would have happened if their fates had soared beyond each other's.

What would've happened if Lexa had torn through the ground a generation before Clarke had or vice versa? Would earth erupt in flames of destruction and despair, or would it blossom? They were both young and they had both overseen destructive, unforgiveable actions; they could command armies with a sentence.

Lexa looked at her as if she held the earth within her eyes. "I love you too."

If a twisted galaxy of gas and stars and comets twirled and spun and whizzed around in the universe until it smacked itself to ruin, then it would finalise itself in self-destruction and chaos. The universe would return to its usual disorderly madness. But if two of such collided and meshed and boomed into a supernova, did that not make for quite the dazzling show? Two galaxies, embroiled in each other's heated, scorching, caustic dance of dominance and power...

They'd sprinkle itself across the universe in a smatter of cosmic impossibilities and questions, only to be inevitably sucked into itself by its own gravity as a supermassive black hole.

Wasn't that how physics worked?

Compromise was necessary within their cultures. Joined as a people, Clarke did not pretend that

the Skaikru would grow accustomed to the Grounders' ways any time soon—but she knew she would have anyone shock-lashed for resisting it before Lexa could get to them with her ways of a thousand cuts. Compromise had built the majestic coalition.

Compromise had been the middle ground in which Clarke had steadied herself on, pushed herself to understand, until she'd realised the only reason why she had any ground to stand on was because Lexa had built, from her very own hands, her pedestal to stand on. The only reason why life bolstered and crackled within Polis was because a young, idealistic Commander had rooted out the slums and crime and rammed a broken shell with sanitation, work, determination, craft, beauty...

"I'd wished for a star to fall that night," Lexa carried on, scoffing fondly as she recalled it. She stared up at the skies, and Clarke found herself entranced by the way Lexa sagged against the comfort of the ground, the familiarity of it; her eyes adorned Lexa's strong jawline, and Clarke was overwhelmed by the sudden desire to just lie here and count every single long, beautiful strand flicking up off Lexa's eyelid as time simpered down at them and stopped. "I called for my mother's stories.

"My mother used to tell me that if I made one wish to the stars, they would be merciful and grant it. In a way, she taught me that the stars were almost Gods. Perhaps she meant that there were Gods within the stars. I don't know. But when you fell down onto my earth years later I thought nothing of it. When you rattled my heart I thought nothing of it. When I felt your lips against mine for the first time, and I thought my head would implode from the beauty you emanate, I thought nothing of it. I thought nothing until I lay here tonight with you by my side, and I wonder if after all these years, the stars took mercy in my actions, in my *soul*—whatever is left of it—and gave me a chance to taste the stardust I dreamt of for myself, for so many years."

Clarke shivered at Lexa's words. She always had a way of coating them with romantic elegance. It was not cold. She did not want the responsibility of being Lexa's so-called dream of the stars; she did not want Lexa to think she was some gift from the Gods who had fallen for *her*.

The fact was simple: she'd been locked away as a criminal and sent to earth for investigation of life. She was not sent because a young Commander had wished for her.

But the more she thought about it, the more she preferred Lexa's version. If she hadn't fallen there would be no peace—not like this—with the coalition's Commander. Lexa's heart would still be locked in a fortress. Clarke's journey to earth had been littered with bad decisions, and so had her time on the ground—but meeting Lexa and burrowing into her heart was not a crime.

The only reason why the Commander embodied a spirit nobody had ever seen or heard before; the only reason why the Polisian tower signalled out to every man, woman or child who blinked and the horizon cleared before them; the only reason why Lexa was revered by people young and old and could pass on an invisible legacy to a promising, bright-eyed class of children was because they were all shackled into this boat, sailing blindly as they ran a course of *belief*.

Clarke supposed she resembled the heckling, cynical side of belief or religion. She did not possess the powerful spiritualism Lexa or any of the Grounders did. Even up in space, she did not take much interest in the old earth's religious studies. The idea of a deity seemed odd when their rations were grey and their laws were mundanely totalitarian, and if innocent men like her father could get floated for being *so good*, then what was the point in all these Gods? These Gods, who were believed to be all-powerful, all-seeing, *all-good*?

"I always thought Becca, the First Commander and Saviour of the Old Earth, was my watchful eye," Lexa continued to muse. She did not find Clarke's silence perturbing. "Now I reconsider and I wonder if it was you all along."

"I don't want to be your God," Clarke said immediately, her gut churning at the thought. She felt embarrassed at the way she said it. "I don't want that responsibility."

"You aren't."

"You just said—"

"A star is not a God. A star can fall; Gods cannot."

Clarke shifted so she could look at Lexa properly, frowning. She rested the side of her cheek on her upper arm, genuinely curious. "Who do you think I am, Lexa? A star? For you?"

"I think you are Clarke kom Skaikru," Lexa said plainly. "The question is: who do you think *you* are?"

"Why, who d'you think *you* are?"

"I think I am a blind woman who has been deceived. You see, love cannot be weakness if love is the very driving force behind years of war. Love is the result of two powerful beings colliding together and realising that they are a stronger weapon united than apart. Love is the coalition I built from my bare hands, because there is love I feel for every single Polisian that sings, dances, fights, builds and guards my city. Love is the hand I extended to Costia. Love is the very same hand I extend to you. Do not be mistaken. I loved Costia, but my world was dark even as I laughed and smiled with her. It does not mean I did not love her. Yet I love you, and you are my light-bringer. I extend the same hand but it does not make that love equal. To compare is to imply I question what we have anyway. I do not. I know only that I love you; *ai hod yu in*. You are my equal. You understand my burden as I do yours. You understand that my people come first...but you *are* my People now.

"I think: if I have accomplished peace for *now*, on the neglecting of *love is weakness*, then I cannot tell you who you are or who you are not, because I don't think I know that fact myself." Lexa cocked her head to the side to meet Clarke's gaze, quirking her lips up in a smile. "I think if you know who I am, and I know who you are, then I am happy to blindly walk this path with you."

"What path is that?"

"I don't know yet. The Polisian tower is illuminated by a great flame that is a beacon for any lost soul in the wilderness. *You* are that fire in the pitch-black void of my subconscious, and I'd hope if anything, that is a guide onto some path."

Clarke felt her stomach drop, though not unpleasantly. A smile broke out across her face, despite herself. She did not want the responsibility of being Lexa's *flame* or *guiding light*; nor did she want to be the reason why Lexa would throw caution into the wind for walking some blind path alongside her.

Then again: when had she ever? If Lexa had been embroiled in all of this from the start, and she'd betrayed Clarke by the Mountain, and she'd enforced a kill barricade on Arkadia, then who was Clarke to assume Lexa would immediately melt into an unrecognisable sop the moment she spoke of something other than her self-sacrificial duty to her people?

She wondered if Lexa spoke so dramatically only for it to amount to be...about a young woman in love with another young woman.

If that had been such a foreign story all her life, then with good reason it sounded so outlandish.

Lexa spoke of love like it was magic, and perhaps Clarke was at fault. She had never *initially* taken the Commander for a romantic. Lexa really wasn't. Not at first. But there was a difference between someone who knew, appreciated and embraced romance, compared to someone who was overwhelmed by it. Lexa was not succumbed into the world of weeping love; she was the embodiment of power, and she consciously allowed it to sit beside her love.

Clarke's heart thumped.

"You truly believe all of that?" Clarke asked, after sifting through an encyclopedia of questions. She figured this best captured all the emotion felt.

Lexa's nose bumped against hers, and she rested there for a moment. They did not kiss, though Lexa's forehead remained pressed gently against hers.

Lexa laughed humourlessly, but humorously, and quietly, then raucously, and suddenly she seemed bigger than her skin, like staring right into the middle of a raging fire as it engulfed and consumed and grew and grew and grew. Yet as Clarke held her, Lexa felt like nothing except the slim, chiselled, very human piece of extraordinary plucked from a field of ordinary.

"I *let* myself believe, Clarke. I don't do it on a whim. I don't think fondly of the skies for no reason. My mother used to tell my all sorts of stories of tales and magic in the stars. I was a cynical child, but I was not immune to her. No-one was." Lexa paused, smiling slightly at the memory of her mother. Clarke, automatically, found herself smiling gently back. "I don't obsess of it. But I *do* believe you crash-landed on my territory for a reason."

Clarke kissed her softly. "I'll play devil's advocate, then. We landed based on calculated coordinates for Mount Weather. We came pretty close, right? So how do you take our shooting star now?"

"Then let me think of why the Mountain was so close to Trikru territory."

"I never marked you as one with their head in the skies, Lexa."

"Oh, no." Lexa grinned. "My head and my heart are firmly on the ground. My soul is racing through the trees of TonDC's woods and the houses of Polis. But every once in a while, it's nice to escape."

"Here?"

"Always here."

"It *is* beautiful," Clarke admitted, glancing up at the clear skies above. She thought of little Lexa and her star-gazing hobby, and she could not help but wish she could've seen Lexa as a child. She would have been beautiful; Clarke was sure she *was*. In space, it all became a little boring and monotonous. Earth was their magic, as the stars were Lexa's. But looking up at them now, she could see why Lexa liked to embrace this moment in peace-time. Perhaps she *was* a Grounder after all.

As she stayed with Lexa, a crisp breeze engulfing them, it was easy to forget the bloodshed and fights and betrayals and wars and botched assassination attempts that had led to this moment. It was easy to forget Aden, drowning in his duties as the interim Commander. It was easy to forget Bellamy, and his animalistic appearance as he was carted into Polis as a prisoner. It was easy to forget the crimes the Skaikru had committed against the Grounders, and how Lexa had still welcomed selected Skaikru into her coalition regardless. A smart political move, but a compassionate one too. Oh, it was so easy to forget...

Oh...

"And this is why you are here?" Clarke asked quietly. "To forget?"

Lexa enjoyed nestling her nose against Clarke's, and she did so again, their lips so close they were almost touching. "Never," she said firmly. "To *remember*. To always, *always* remember."

Clarke's hand clenched against Lexa's skin a little tighter. Lexa had nearly slipped from her grasp as a result of Titus' poor judgement and strict teachings. Silently, she vowed to never let Lexa go again, even though she knew Lexa's tendency to bear everyone's burden robbed her of that selfish wish. For now, whatever Lexa believed of the skies and of fate and destiny, Clarke accepted mindlessly. All she knew was that Lexa was real and warm and hard muscle and soft flesh against her. All she knew was that wherever Lexa had gone, she had returned.

Lexa kom Trikru was the Commander. And she was finally back.

"Do you honestly believe I'm a star and I fell for you? That Anya's a spirit waiting for you by a lake? That the fabric holding everything together is just your belief?"

Lexa's gaze was piercing. If the stars had been a blessing for her, then Lexa's eyes—an endless journey of forestry, politics, wisdom, perseverance and sheer *love*—was something Clarke found herself instantly believing. She thought for a moment that if she looked deep enough, she would see the mystical Flame that ignited her soul as a Commander. A Commander who had revolutionised her realm; a Commander who allowed herself to love, not out of selfishness, but out of inevitability.

"Do you remember, Clarke, that once, you told me we must not only survive—we deserved something beyond that?"

Clarke could taste Lexa's first kiss all over again in that tent of hers, tentativity and shyness and gentility. "Yeah."

"My belief is my strength; my compassion; my wisdom. My belief holds this coalition together. My belief holds me to *you*. And I will fight lifetimes to retain it. I love you. I would love you in any universe thrown at me. I would love you down here on earth or up there with the stars."

Slowly, for Lexa's stitches were still tender, Lexa shifted so they were closer—somehow. They slotted together perfectly—they always had. They would not rest in the plains tonight, but tonight the stars boasted of their beauty and Lexa's lips begged silently for a kiss. Maybe one day, a revolt would send Polis spiralling. But tonight, the candle atop the Polisian tower signalled the light of the capital, the beauty of their love, and a beacon of hope for all.

Clarke grabbed Lexa's face with both hands and kissed her deeply, laughing slightly at the surprised "*mmph*" it elicited from Lexa.

I love you, Lexa kom Trikru, Clarke said in her kiss. So let there be spirits and Becca and black blood and the Flame.

Maybe, Clarke thought as she lost herself in Lexa, there was true, pure, innocent good in this world. Maybe in Lexa's tortured and big heart, a haunted soul harboured a deep-hidden haven for that. Lexa likely wouldn't believe it. No fortune would tell her the future. No doctor would take Lexa's heart and dissect it for a safebox of goodness. But as Clarke coaxed Lexa's tender lips open, drawn in by her lover, her equal, her *Commander*--she finally believed.

If Lexa could be steel, forged by the Flame and ignited by the belief of her people, and also be the

softest, most courteous romantic in the entire realm at the same time, then Clarke would believe that the stars lived and blessed her with stardust. If Lexa could drench her hands in blood with multiple wars shed and casualties in her name, yet touch Clarke and trace her skin so gently, then Clarke would believe.

Lexa was a solid, iron-cast Commander and she was the most beautiful juxtaposition in the world.

Lexa was the contradiction of everything a person should be; she was the embodiment of everything that should not exist *simultaneously* in the world.

And as Lexa deepened their kiss, needy, tender hands grasping at up Clarke's sides, as Clarke raked her fingernails down Lexa's back; as Lexa moaned loudly in her mouth and she was the Commander and she was Clarke's and she was the People's and she was *just a woman* in this moment—

She was everything, all at once. Young children, generations from now, would believe in the radical Lexa kom Trikru, Commander of the first Coalition. They would believe fantastical tales of her bravery in battle and her clever, sly tactics. They would hear one story; some would hear another.

Clarke believed in all of them.

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