Survival is a Fool's Errand

by Ebozay

Summary

Clarke is spared the same fate as her father by being sent to Earth in a drop pod, a metaphorical canary in a coal mine. All in the name of saving what is left of the human race. To her surprise and short lived excitement she finds that the ground is survivable, that she won't burn as soon as the air touches her. But the scarred and brutal people she encounters? Maybe she's a fool to think she could survive life on the ground after all.
Chapter 1

There’s perhaps two things Clarke hates the most in the world. The first being the too cold bite of the recycled air that breathes through the hallways of the Ark. The second is the fact that she’s used to the cold and its constant and familiar embrace. But she thinks she’s found a new enemy, a new foe that she can hate the most, a new thing to replace the constant chill that seeps into her bones, and as she’s buffeted sharply, hitting her elbow hard into the arm rest she thinks she really, really hates gravity.

She feels it then, the terrible shaking and the terrifying clanging around her.

I’m going to die.

She feels the chair give a painful lurch, her shin colliding with the roll bar beneath her feet, a curse falling from her bloodied mouth.

I’m going to die.

She feels her muscles stretch and pull and twist from her body as gravity takes hold and spins her around and around and around.

I’m going to die.

She feels the thudding as she punches through the atmosphere and the burning heat and the crushing weight on her chest as she slams into something.

I’m going to fucking die.

It’s a mantra that she is sure she’d be voicing, be screaming if her vision wasn’t fading, if her limbs weren’t weighed down and her head wasn’t burning out in agony.

And as the last of her vision fades, as the last of her strength is ripped from her bruised body she thinks she sees the green and the blue and the white of long lost dreams through the cracked and charred window. And then the front of the pod is ripped open, air crushing into her, slamming her head back.

And as consciousness drains from her tired body she thinks she sees the rushing of the ground as it comes to greet her in an all too unwelcome and sudden embrace.

Oh...

Float me.
Chapter 2

DAY 12

Prisoner 319.

That’s all she is now. A criminal, one of the last of humankind, reduced to nothing but a number, a cell all that she has to call home. And as she paces back and forth, as she counts out the steps from one side of her cell to the other she thinks she feels the steady drumming of her heart as it beats lonesome in her chest. Her feet take her as far as they can before her nose brushes against the cool of the metal wall and as she pauses, as she presses into it and as her eyes close, if only for a moment, she imagines that the chill of the wall isn’t so cold, but is warm, is comfortable and safe. She imagines that the steady, constant thrumming of the recycled air that breathes through the cell is instead a gentle, warming beat, a quiet tune that can lull her mind into a restful slumber and she imagines that the arms she holds around herself aren’t her own, frail and cold but her fathers.

And maybe she’s surprised when a wet trail creeps down her cheek, maybe she’s surprised when she opens her eyes only to find the grey of an uncaring world facing her. And maybe she’s surprised that her life only has 353 days left.

But maybe she’s not.

Isn’t she a criminal?

Isn’t she a traitor?

Isn’t she just a girl?

DAY 27

The food sucks. It’s a grey paste. A green goop and a slimy soup of nutrients. Enough to keep the human body going. But it leaves her in a constant state of hunger, her stomach a constant grumbling to keep her company. And maybe, if only because all she has is the space in her mind, all she can do is lay down or walk and pace, she imagines it a creature, a monster that growls and roars and speaks to her and keeps her company throughout the days that pass.

She finds that the air breathes through her cell on a cycle, every 237 beats of her heart and then she feels the rush, she feels the soft caress of air that will grant her another 237 beats of less stale, less musty oxygen. And she laughs when she realises, when she counts three times, just to make sure, if only because she has nothing else to do. But she laughs at the realisation that now, as prisoner 319, she isn’t worth a constant supply of fresh air.

And isn’t that ironic?

DAY 89

She isn’t sure who exactly has smuggled in the chalk. But she has an idea. And so she cries, she laughs and sobs and breaks down in the middle of her cell. And she curses and swears out and wails when she crushes the first piece accidentally, by gripping too hard in her pain, in her lonely relief.
And so she uses her daily supply of water. She mixes it with the broken pieces and makes a paste, a watery paint that could cling just enough to the surface of her cell and so she painted, she smiles and lets her imagination take hold. She brushes her fingers over the walls and the floor and she imagines a world of colour. A world of greens, living, breathing and swaying in the gentle hold of the earth, of soft yellows mixing with the vibrancy of the sun as it crests the earth and she paints with the explosion of reds and pinks as the sun kisses the morning grass. She paints the water as it swims and lives and breathes through the rivers in all its calming beauty.

And she cries.

DAY 239

She is sure her muscles have atrophied, have wilted and have wasted away. And as she pulls her shirt over her head, as she looks down at her stomach she thinks the dips and curves are just a bit less, just a bit too thin, too absent, all that shows is the faint outline of ribs, of hip bones that protrude just a bit too far.

And as she strips the remainder of her clothes, as she tucks them into the corner of her cell she waits. She counts down slowly. And she braces herself for just a moment before the spray of the water falls, as the chill of the too cold stream freezes her limbs and soaks her face. She scrubs her fingers through her hair, 30 seconds all she will be given, and she rakes her nails over her skin, anything to wash away the week of sweat and filth that accumulates. She’s halfway through scrubbing her leg when the water stops, when it cuts out and leaves her a shivering, naked mess in her cell.

And she hates it.

DAY 361

She wakes to a realisation, a thought. A broken truth. And all she can do, all she can manage is to roll over, to tuck her face into her arm and cry. Her fingers dig painfully into her palm, her shoulders shake and her breath comes ragged and desperate.

And she knows. She knows all she has is four days. All she has is four meals. All she has is one more too cold shower.

It will all be over soon.

DAY 365

She lies awake for hours, her mind unable to rest, her body unable to sleep. And so she memorises the trees that surround her. She memorises the birds that perch and sing and fly through the branches and she smiles at the lives they have lived. She traces the river as it winds and twists and curves around her cell and maybe, just for a moment, she imagines the way the sun would feel kissing her face, the way the water would feel as it rushed through her fingers. And she laughs quietly at the squirrel that hangs too precariously from a branch, too eager in its attempt to get to another tree. And she smiles, just a bit, at the sun as it shines down on the land she has made.

And maybe she cries just a bit, for just a moment when she hears the footsteps that approach.
And maybe she closes her eyes.

Maybe she tries not to imagine the air that is forced from her lungs.

Maybe she tries not to imagine what it must feel like to float, helpless, and spinning through a nothingness for the rest of her life.

And maybe she tries not to imagine what death must feel like.

*It will all be over soon.*

They tell her to face the wall, they tell her to put her arms behind her back and to lean her forehead against the cool of the cell. She winces quietly as the bite of the shackles sting into her wrists, and she grimaces at the pinches she feels digging into her flesh. And she’s pushed out the cell, her feet a stumbling, unsure mess beneath her and her breathing a steady, calming thing that grounds her, that surprises her in the moment. But she is sure that panic will set in, that desperation and a will to survive will rear its ugly head. Only when it’s too late.

And so she’s pushed forward, told to follow the guard in front of her and so she moves, her eyes downcast, her vision beginning to blur and a wet trail beginning to form despite her wishes.

*It will all be over soon.*

She knows where she will be floated. She knows that when she gets to the end of the passageway she will turn right, will be walked further until she comes to an airlock. And she knows her mother will be allowed to see her just once more. And maybe she smiles for a moment, and maybe she cries just a bit harder, a sob coming just a bit louder when she realises she won’t see her again. Won’t feel a loving embrace again past the next 20 minutes.

It’s only a few more paces, just a few body lengths, and she knows she’ll turn right. She knows she’ll see more guards, lest she make a run for it, lest she try and break free. If only because it happens, if only because others who are to be floated sometimes find the courage. Or the desperation to flee, to stave off death for just a few more minutes.

But she’s tired of waiting.

She’s already waited long enough.

*It will all be over soon.*

To her surprise, to her confusion, the guards turns her left. They walk for just a few steps before
pausing. And as she stops behind the one before her, he turns, his eyes curious, his expression careful.

“Wait here,” is all he says before stepping back, before turning from her.

And it’s strange, it’s an odd feeling and it’s frightening.

“What’s happening?” she asks, her voice quiet, her mind buzzing with a dread and a confusion.

“Be quiet,” is all she’s given, the guard behind her prodding her forcefully in the back.

She isn’t sure how long she waits. And maybe it’s minutes, maybe it’s hours, but she hears it quietly. She hears footsteps approaching and so she peers past the guard before her. And as her eyes fall on the figures that approach, she thinks her eyes water, she thinks her lips tremble and she knows she cries when Abby rushes to her, when she’s engulfed in warmth and when she’s held close in a mother’s embrace.

And so Clarke reaches out, her fingers digging painfully into her mother’s arms as she holds her as tight as she can.

“I love you,” she sobs quietly, painfully and brokenly into her mother’s chest.

She feels Abby’s hand rub soothingly across her back, a gentle circle that quiets her mind. Just for a moment.

“It’s ok, Clarke,” and she knows it isn’t, she knows the words to be a falsehood, to be the whispered words of calm that a parent would whisper, should whisper at a time like this. But still, perhaps she can find a comfort and a solace, if only for a short while.

She doesn’t realise that they move, that she is being walked and carried and dragged until she stumbles, until Abby’s arms tighten around her shoulders. And so she looks up in confusion, her vision a blurred mess of tears.

“Where are we going?” she whispers out.

“You aren’t being floated, Clarke,” and the words stun her, they dig painfully and cruelly and tauntingly into her mind. And she is sure she heard wrong, she is sure she will wake, back in her cell. And so she shakes her head, a refusal and a denial burying themselves into her mind.

“No.”

“You’re being sent to the ground, Clarke.”

“No.”

“It’s the only way I can keep you alive.”

“No.”

“It will be ok.”

“No.”

“Clarke, listen to me,” Abby stops walking, the guards forming a tight circle around them both. “Jaha agreed to send you to the ground. You’re going to see if it’s survivable.”
“What?” Clarke is sure she hears wrong.

“Those earth skills classes, with Pike,” Abby squeezes her arms tightly, “they were to teach you how to survive.”

“What?”

“You were chosen, Clarke. You’re going to save us.”

It starts with a gentle scratch, a quiet thrumming of her head. And maybe she isn’t quite sure how long it takes, but maybe, if only by the careful whistling that wriggles into her ears and the steady pressure on her chest, Clarke thinks herself alive. It continues with a careful dripping, a slow pained throb that winds its way through her mind and into the fibres of her flesh and muscle. And maybe, if only because it hurts, if only because it burns, Clarke thinks herself still breathing. It ends with a painful stabbing pressure that slices into her body, that bruises and crushes against the lungfuls of air she tries to breathe.

Clarke knows she is alive.

Consciousness greets Clarke in a cold embrace, a lonely hold, an agonising hug that steals her breath, and as she opens her eyes, as her vision swims and blurs she thinks she hates gravity. And she knows she hates the burn and the ache of her body.

She finds her hair falling away from her face, her body hanging, trapped and dangling in her seat, her legs and arms falling down in front of her towards the ground. And it’s a whimpered, broken, whispered groan of pain that escapes her lips when she tries to move, tries to pull herself upright. But, perhaps dangling almost upside down, perhaps having been punched through the atmosphere and crushed against the earth is something that her body resents.

Her fingers fumble and grasp at the buckles that hold her in the seat, that keep her from rushing to the ground. And she think she smells the tang of blood, the faint echoes of smoke and burnt earth that lingers close.

It takes a moment before she can wriggle her finger beneath the buckle, before she can fully grip the lever that releases her. And she falls. She falls with a thud, with a crunch and a bruising of her body. And so she lies there, her cheek pressed into the ground, her hair twisted and mangled falling across her face and her thoughts, her worries and her mind a lost, dazed thing.

Clarke turns then, rolls to her back and looks up at the drop pod that hangs, lodged between the branches of a tree, the bark burnt and blackened, the limbs gnarled and weathered from the raging of what she thinks must be the wind, must be the elements that still exist on the ground.

And as her eyes trace the tree, as her vision blurs just a little less, as she wipes the blood that drips from her mouth she sees the blue of the sky, she sees the clouds as they sail before her eyes.

And she laughs. She laughs and coughs and splutters a pathetic, adrenaline fuelled wheeze.

*I’m not dead.*

She feels the crunch beneath her, she feels the cold touch of the earth and the jagged of the rocks she
must lie on. And she smiles, it’s a broad thing, a happy thing. And she knows she’s alive, she knows the air won’t burn her flesh, won’t char her throat and won’t melt her eyes and so she struggles to her knees, she struggles through the throbbing of her head and she screams out, her head thrown back and her arms thrown in the air.

And she smiles.

I’m not dead.

The tears come next. They flow heavy and steady down her face, mixing with the blood and soot and grime that still clings to her cheeks. And Clarke realises, in this moment, as she kneels on the ground, as her sobs echo against the trees that surround her, that she is alone.

It takes her a short while, just enough for her to steady the pained heaving of her chest and the ragged expansion of her lungs but she wipes her hand across her face, shakes her head to clear the fog that stills clings to her mind. And as she stands Clarke finds that her legs feel heavy, they feel just a bit less sure and firm underneath her. And she smiles as her hand reaches out to steady herself against the trunk of the tree.

It takes her a second of staring around herself, at casting her eyes to the ground. It takes her the time it takes to raise her face to the drop pod to realise all her supplies, all she will need to live off the ground is strapped into the drop pod.

Fuck.

She whispers it quietly, her breath coming out in a soft cloud.

She flops back down then, her back to the tree, her face turned up to the drop pod. And she stares for a long while, and she is sure her thoughts are still jumbled, still clouded by the experience of falling to the ground.

And perhaps it was the adrenaline, perhaps it was the pumping of her blood and her too hot entry to earth, but only now, as she relaxes just a bit, she realises the cold bite of the wind that clings to her body. And as her eyes scan the ground she finds it covered in faint wisps of white that shines carefully as the sun touches it through the clouds that hang overhead. And she smiles for a second at the realisation that she looks upon snow, and so she reaches out, lets her fingers drag through it and maybe, just for a quiet moment Clarke thinks the ground beautiful.

And she is sure her tears must be falling, her shoulders must be shaking.

And she is sure she feels the fear, the terror and the panic begin to creep in, begin to latch on and dig its way into her mind.

“Clarke, listen to me,” Abby clutches her face carefully, wiping a strand of hair away, “All you’ll need is in the drop pod, ok?” and so Clarke nods, her head feeling too numbed, too dazed and lost in the moment.

“How will you know it’s safe?” she asks, her voice quiet, her heart raging in her chest.

“We’ll monitor your vital signs,” Abby says, lifting Clarke’s wrist to indicate the bracelet that
pinches into her skin, “and you have a radio to contact us when you get down,” Abby pauses for a moment, a finger brushing against her eyes, “and you have supplies, enough to last weeks. Enough to last until the Ark comes down, ok?”

“Ok,” what else can Clarke say in this moment? What else can she do? She’s an experiment, a lab rat, a test. A gamble. But it’s a chance, it’s a fool’s errand, but its a chance at life.

“Remember. You need to get to Mount Weather, you need to see if it’s still there. Be strong,” it comes out a whisper, a quiet plea, “be safe. Don’t take risks. May we meet again.”

And as Abby hugs Clarke once more, as she clutches her tightly in a fearful embrace Clarke feels the press of a small object into her hands, feels the brush of lips against her forehead.

And she feels afraid.

She’s not sure how long she sits by the tree. But as she looks back to the sky she thinks the sun has moved just a bit lower in the sky, casting shadows that linger just a bit longer than before and she shivers, the chill of the wind slowly creeping into her battered body and so she stands, stretches her legs and winces at the biting ache that still clings to her.

She looks back to the drop pod that hangs above her, and she curses her luck, curses the tree that still holds it in a steady embrace keeping it far out of reach. And as she looks up at the drop pod there’s only two options she thinks are available. The first is to walk away, to leave her supplies and radio. But she needs them, she needs the supplies that will keep her alive, will keep her breathing long enough for her to radio the Ark, to tell them the ground is survivable, long enough for her to make it to Mount Weather. Wherever it is. She could try and climb the tree, scale the limbs and branches to reach the drop pod, but as her eyes follow the haphazard branches, as she eyes them swaying slightly in the wind she thinks her chances of success low and her chances of falling to the ground high. And as she listens to the aching of her body she thinks she’s had enough falling to the ground to last her a lifetime. But what else can she do?

It takes her even longer to muster the courage, to build a resolve, but as she reaches for the first branch, as her fingers close around the weathered limb she pulls. She scrambles and winces and curses her body but she is able to swing her leg up, she is able to hook her heel onto the branch. But she hangs, precarious and desperate for a moment, and then she rises. She rises cautiously, she rises slowly and she rises with a curse and a prayer and a hope falling from her lips. Her legs tremble, her arms ache before she reaches the fourth branch and she rages at her time locked in a cell. She rages at the body that she is left with. And she knows all it will take, all it will need is a careful slip and she will fall. And so she hugs the branch tightly, holds herself close. And she reaches out.

She is sure it takes her an age, her breaths coming in ragged and desperate, her arms burning from the strain, but she inches forward, her body pressed against a branch, her fingers digging painfully into the bark. And she knows it’s only an arm’s reach, only a gentle push and she will reach the drop pod.

And she’s terrified.

And, maybe in moments later she will think herself foolish, but she looks down, if only to see how far she has to go and the distance makes her head swim, makes her stomach drop and her heart
clench painfully in her chest. And so she gasps, curses her stupidity and closes her eyes as tight as she can.

*I can do it.*

Her fingers dig painfully into the bark and she pushes forward just a bit with her feet.

*Don’t fall.*

Her hand reaches out slowly, her eyes still firmly shut.

*I can make it.*

She feels the gentle touch of metal against her finger tips, the rough edges where the flames had licked at the drop pod. And she smiles, she thinks she laughs for a quiet moment. And so her eyes open and she eyes the drop pod carefully, thoughts of it crashing and falling to the ground, thoughts of it taking her with it coming into her mind. And as she eyes the way it sits in the branches she thinks it will be fine, she thinks it will hold steady. She hopes it won’t fall. And so she reaches forward, takes a hold of the door that hangs open and she pulls herself in with a careful, fearful scramble.

Her chest heaves as she rests for a moment, but she cries out in surprise, the sound echoing around her as it sags, as it groans and trembles around her. And she knows she must hurry.

It’s a quick fumble in the dark of the drop pod, her hand searching under the seat for the bag, and as her fingers snag it, as she gives a careful tug she smiles for just a moment before pulling her arms through the straps, before securing it tightly to her back. And it’s one last scan of the interior, one last careful check to make sure she has everything, and then she’s crawling out, she’s hugging the tree and she’s descending, weighed down by the supplies, weighed down by the aching of her legs and the trembling of her arms.

And she falls, her finger slipping from a branch and her body plummeting to the ground. She lands with a heavy thud, her head clouded in pain and her body aching once more. But she made it, she’s alive and she thinks she hasn’t broken anything. Right? And so she laughs, she laughs freely, the sound coming out ragged and wheezed once more.

And she thinks herself a fool, she thinks herself on a suicidal errand. But at least she lives.

What more could she wish for?

*A lot. Probably.*

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To her relief she finds a weather proof jacket in her bag, she finds a map, a compass and a torch. But she knows all good things must come to an end, and so as she continues to rummage through the bag she finds the green nutrient paste the only thing for her to eat. And she knows her weeks spent on the ground will suck, will cause her to suffer. But at least she’s free. At least she’s on the ground. And so she spreads the map out before her, her eyes finding Mount Weather marked with a circle, and so she casts her gaze around her, tries to spot the mountain in the distance, tries to identify a landmark. And she is sure she looks for too long, for long enough to know that the dread and the fear that begins to creep back is not just because she is alone. And as the land around her remains unrecognisable,
landmarks not where they should be, she thinks she knows the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

And she knows.

She knows.

And perhaps it’s the emotional whiplash, it’s the time spent plummeting to the earth, it’s the time spent lying dazed and confused on the ground and its the time spent scaling a tree with a too weak body. But she laughs, she laughs harder than she has in the moments she has spent on the ground.

Idiots.

She knows she is lost, she knows she is not where she was supposed to land. She knows the Ark sent her to the wrong coordinates.

Float me.

She knows she needs to move, needs to find shelter, a place to stay.

I’m fucked.

She knows survival is a fool’s errand.

Clarke thinks, she prays, that she has guessed that she landed further north than intended, and as she begins moving south, as her eyes follow the needle that guides her forward, she can’t help but to stare amazed at the land that surrounds her, at the trees that glow faintly in the sun, at the snow that clings to the branches and that blankets the ground in a light dust. And maybe, if only because it is real, if only because it is the ground, she loves the cool chill, she loves the gentle fog that breathes out with each exhale of her lungs. She kicks a branch she passes, her lips curling into a smile, her eyes following it as it rolls and tumbles through the snow. She must only walk for half an hour, for just a short while, but her legs begin to burn once more, her body tiring from the ache and the constant forced travel and so she stops by a fallen tree.

She takes a moment to cast her gaze around her, if only to check for no obvious signs of danger, for no obvious signs of wildlife that might have survived. And she thinks she’d rather not come face to face with a mutated bear, a too large wolf or any other kind of creature. And so, as Clarke sits, her back to a moss covered tree trunk, the weight of her dilemma comes crashing into her, comes screaming into her mind.

“What am I supposed to do?” it comes out a whisper, her eyes gazing up into the branches overhead, her mind a broken, tired and desperate thing that screams out to her.

She pulls her jacket around herself just a bit tighter, the cold of the afternoon stinging a little bit stronger, a little bit harsher.

“What do I do?” it’s a broken prayer that falls from her lips.

She wipes a hand across her eyes, the tears that form smearing across her cheeks and freezing against her lashes.
Her fingers brush against the buttons of the radio, her hands rapidly cooling, her limbs numbing in
the cold. She presses the power button, turns the dial and she waits. She waits for the crackle, she
waits for a sign to tell her the radio works, that she can talk to the Ark. That she isn’t alone. But as
she stares at the broken plastic and metal in her hands she knows that no sound will come, that no
calming reassurances will be received from the Ark. And she knows it won’t work.

And maybe it’s funny, maybe it’s a cruel joke and a taunting laugh. But as she stares at the broken
radio, as her eyes trace the twisted and cracked lifeline she had, she thinks her lips curl into a quiet
grimace. And she thinks that at least she will die on the ground, that at least she won’t feel the cold
embrace of space as the air in her lungs rushes from her mouth.

Maybe dying so far from home isn’t so bad.

*Won’t it all be over soon?*

She finds herself curled into a small ball, her knees tucked into her chest, her back pressed against the
hard bite of the fallen tree. She knows her eyes feel heavier, more heavy than just from a need for
sleep, and she knows she should try and wake, try and move, try and fight the cold that seeps into
her body, that blankets her in a warm layer of snow that slowly steadies the beating of her heart. But
as the sun dips below the horizon, as light slowly fades and snow begins to fall gently over the
ground, she thinks she feels the slowing of her breaths, she thinks she feels the tired pull of her mind
and she knows she feels the tears that freeze against her cheek. And as her eyes close for the last
time, as her vision fades and her body stills, she thinks she traces the edges of her fathers watch that
rests comfortably against her wrist.

*It will all be over soon.*

*I’ll see you again, dad.*

It’s a strange, odd feeling to think herself swaying, to think she feels the warm press of a body
against her back and the lurching of muscles beneath her. But she thinks herself too tired, too weak
to open her eyes, so she leans back into the warmth, leans back into the dream she is sure her dying
mind must be conjuring. And perhaps she imagines her father, perhaps she imagines his warm
embrace guiding her to a place that isn’t so cold, that isn’t so harsh and lonely.

And maybe Clarke smiles for a moment, maybe her lips twitch gently as her mind fades, as she falls
steadily into a quiet sleep.
And maybe she doesn’t notice the horse she rides on.

Maybe she doesn’t notice her hands bound behind her.

Maybe she doesn’t notice the leather strapped warrior that holds her firmly in place, whose face is scarred, weathered, painted a deathly white.

And maybe it would be better to have died.
Clarke hates the cold of the Ark. She hates the crisp, cool, too chilling hug that seems to spread and wind its way into her skin and into her clothes and into her mind. She hates the steady, constant buzzing of the air that breathes through the Ark, that gives life to those that live within its cold walls. And she hates that she is used to it. She hates that she can ignore the humming, can ignore the bite of the cold.

But she thinks in this moment, as her mind wanders restlessly, as her muscles protest angrily and her breaths come stuttering and heavy, that she hates the feeling that descends on her. She thinks that the cold of the air seeps into her flesh and muscles, that it is damp and wet and moist and clammy as it grasps at her skin. She knows she hates the way the air rushes against her flesh, she hates the way the air crashes against her body and she hates her mind as it continues to live and taunt and laugh in her face.

Her eyes open slowly, they open painfully, a heavy stillness clinging to them. And it takes her a short while, just a few long moments for her to realise that she isn’t dead, that she isn’t dreaming, that she isn’t buried beneath layers of snow. And she knows she is alive.

She finds the room she lies in a dark, still space, the air a heavy chill that weighs her shoulders down and steals the breath from her lungs. And as she sits slowly, as her back scrapes against the harsh of the rock wall behind her, there are three truths that creep into her mind. The first is that she lives. She hasn’t died, she isn’t dreaming, and that her heart stills beat within her chest, still pumps blood through her veins and her lungs still breathe life into her tired body. The second truth dawns on her slowly, and it’s a terrifying realisation, her mind screaming out, trying to sift through the thoughts that race and scramble over themselves in their confusion. People still live on the ground. The bombs didn’t wipe out all of humanity. She isn’t alone. And as that thought winds its way through her mind she realises that her hands are bound behind her back, that her feet are shackled to the floor, a rusted, heavy chain holding them steady and surely in a cool grasp. And as her eyes trace the dark of the room, as her eyes follow the stone of the floor she rests on, the cracks that race up the walls, and the rusted, heavy door that sits recessed into the far wall, she knows she is trapped. She knows she is held in a dungeon, in a prison, something not meant for escape. She knows she is a prisoner.

And it’s funny. Or maybe it isn’t, but as Clarke stares at her ankles, as she eyes the raw of her skin, as she eyes the door that sits too far out of reach, and the walls in all their cold company, she thinks a laugh escapes her lips yet again. And it’s ironic she thinks, it’s pathetic, it’s a sick, cruel joke that she now finds herself a prisoner once more. But perhaps this is worse, if only because she knows not whether the people who hold her prisoner, who keep her captive are friend or foe.

And so she sits. Her fingers pushed painfully against the wall, her back a tired, bruised pain that burns dully and her shoulders a steady ache. And she can’t help but let her imagination run free, can’t help but to let the images of a grotesque people, of mutated faces that lurk in the recesses of her mind. For surely, after all this time, after the exposure to the radiation, the people who have survived must be more than human. Must be less than human. Right?

She doesn’t know.

She doesn’t know how long she sits, how long she waits in the chill of the dungeon. But she counts out the careful dripping she can hear, of what she assumes to be water leaking from a crack somewhere above her. And she counts out the beats of her heart, the constant ache of her battered body the sole company she has. But she hears it quietly, she hears the faint thumping as feet touch stone, she hears the careful creaking of clothing, of the clang of metal scraping against metal. And
she hears the voices. And she feels the beat of her heart, she feels it clench and thump erratic and frantic, a thudding echoing through her ears.

She is sure her breathing comes laboured, comes pained and ragged when she hears the scraping against the door. She is sure that as the door creeps open, as the shadows of her captors fall across the floor, that her mind retreats, that her eyes close and her body trembles.

she feels the heavy thud of feet approaching, she feels the air before her brush against her cold body. And now, as she sits before her fate, she realises her state of undress, she realises all she wears is her shirt, torn and tattered, her pants ripped, caked in blood and sweat and mud and ice.

And she thinks.

She knows she will die.

She holds her eyes closed, her face pulled to her shoulder, anything to calm her frantic heart. But she feels it. She feels the closing of a presence, she hears the scraping of something that nears. And it stops. There’s a quiet pause, a still moment where all Clarke hears is the raging of the blood through her veins and the ragged, broken breathing that escapes her lips.

It’s a faint, quiet sigh, a gentle exhale and a whispered thought. And so she lets her eyes open slowly, lets the presence that sits close to her catch in the corner of her eyes, and then she turns her face, turns her head so that she looks at who sits before her. And maybe it’s surprise, maybe it’s shock, maybe it’s a strange arrogance. But the face that looks to her isn’t grotesque, isn’t monstrous and isn’t twisted from radiation. But still, despite the humanness, it scares her. The face that stares at her is scarred, raised ridges slashed across her cheeks. Two horizontal sliced across her chin and a cruel, diamond edged cut on her forehead.

But, despite the harshness that lives across her face, despite the hard edge to her eyes, Clarke thinks she still sees a youthfulness cling to the woman’s face, if only from the careful roundness of her cheeks, the gentle slope of her nose and the slight quirking of her lips as the woman’s eyes trace over her slowly.

And so, albeit slowly, painfully, Clarke forces herself to sit more fully, forces her knees underneath her, if only so that they are level, if only so that the person who sits on a stool before her doesn’t do so towering over her.

“Who are you?” the woman says it quietly, and Clarke’s eyes must widen for a moment, fear must flicker across her face, shock must linger for a moment too long because the person’s lips twitch once more, her eyes holding the gaze both girl’s share.

“Who are you?” the question comes once more. But, despite the question in her words, Clarke can’t help but feel it as a demand, as an order and not as a question that the words conjure.

“Cl—” Clarke chokes and coughs on the name she tries to voice, her throat a scratchy, rough cage for the sounds she tries to make. And so she splutters for a moment, swallows harshly, “water— please… water…” and she knows her eyes water, she knows her voice breaks and her lips crack and bleed. And maybe if she wasn’t so scared, wasn’t so caged she’d consider what it would mean for these people to speak English. To understand English. But for now, all she needs is water, all she wants is to soothe the burning of her throat and all she considers is the pain of her body, is the ache of her limbs and the burn in her throat.

The woman smiles for just a moment, a shadow falling across her face as she leans back, her arm disappearing from view. And as she moves, as she turns for just a short instant, Clarke can’t help but
trace the clothes the woman wears, can’t help but let her eyes skate over the furs that line her collar, the leather that straps her arms and legs and the braces that hold her steady. The woman brings her hand forward then, a water skin offered. And so Clarke leans forward, her hands still tied behind her, and as her lips meet the water skin the woman tips it back, enough that the liquid can pour easily, and so Clarke drinks as much as she can, uncaring of the water that drips down her chin, that spills past her lips.

“What is your name?” the woman asks after a slight pause, enough for Clarke to swallow a mouthful of water.

“Clarke,” it’s just a bit less hoarse and broken than before.

“Clarke,” the woman repeats as her eyes flicker over Clarke once more.

And as Clarke lets her eyes take in the woman once more, as her eyes trace the fur and the leather that clings to the woman before her, and as her gaze falls onto the knife that sits comfortably against her thigh, she thinks her stomach clenches just a bit, she thinks her mind flashes a warning and she thinks her throat tightens just enough for her to feel the tremble and the unsteady beating of her heart once more.

“Where am I?” it’s a quiet whisper that breaks the careful silence that hangs between them.

“That is not important,” and the woman leans forward, lets her face approach Clarke’s and lets her eyes stare quietly.

“Please,” Clarke pauses, licks her lips and grimaces at the blood she tastes, “please… I’m lost. I— I just…” her voice trails off, uncertain and broken, “please,” it’s a pathetic whisper by the time it reaches the other woman’s ears.

The silence stretches out for a long while, the quiet drip of water echoing in the distance, the steady chill of the dungeon creeping into her bones.

“What do you come from?” Clarke looks back to the woman then, lets her eyes hold the searching gaze. And she knows she can’t answer truthfully, she knows from the clothes this woman wears, from the way her hands are tied, from the way the water skin is stitched that these people do not use technology, that these survivors are vastly different to those that live on the Ark. She knows that her truths won’t be believed.

“I—” she pauses, her mind searching for an answer, “I come from across the sea,” she finishes, and she is sure she saw the ocean when she fell, she is sure these people must know of it.

“You arrived in a flame.”

The drop pod

She knows how it must look, she knows how it must seem to this woman. To who ever this woman answers to.

“My ship,” she says after just a moment’s pause, “it caught fire,” she finishes.

Clarke sees the woman nod for a moment, see’s her eyes narrow for just a second before she leans back, before she lets a space breathe between the both of them, and perhaps Clarke can’t help but let out a relieved sigh, if only because the intense stare the woman held her with had unnerved her, had made her stomach twist in knots.
“You fell from the sky,” she says then, her eyes again holding Clarke’s for a long moment.

And maybe it’s in the following moments of silence, maybe it’s in the posture of the woman, in the glint of her eyes or the tightening of her hand around Clarke’s throat as it races forward.

Clarke knows her survival is in peril.

“I do not believe that you come from across the sea,” it’s a hissed, quiet utterance, her hand squeezing tightly, clutching Clarke around the throat, “you are of the Mountain,” her fingers tighten further, a spluttering mess coughing from Clarke’s throat, “we will not let you survive.”

The woman leaves Clarke a whirlwind of frenzied thoughts and bruised muscles. And as the dungeon door slams shut, as the emptiness echoes around her, and as she is once again left alone, Clarke can’t help but to feel the shuddering of her breath as it breaks against her chest.

She isn’t sure how long they leave her alone, but if only by the three meals she is given, if only by the steps that echo outside the dungeon door, she thinks that perhaps she is kept for three days in solitude, the burn of her throat, the constant aching of her bones and the pain in her wrists all that keeps her tired mind company, all that keeps her too cold body warm.

Clarke finds herself sleeping most of her days, though she is sure her sense of time, of when it is day and night is skewed. But she lets her eyes close when she feels sleep pull at her and she wakes when the door bangs open, a tray of food pushed her way. And perhaps, if only because it was the first piece of real food she has ever eaten, she savours it, she savours the texture of what she thinks is meat, and she knows that it must be what is considered the scraps of a meal. But as the flavours burst within her mouth she can’t help but to groan, can’t help but to whimper at the cold slop she feeds into her mouth.

And she can’t help but to cry.

If only because she is once again a prisoner.

If only because she thinks she is a fool to expect to survive.

Sleep digs coldly into her mind, a soft whimper escaping her lips, a furrow spreading across her brow. And she turns into the wall, tucks her head against it and tries to forget the pain that still tears into her shoulders and that scrapes against her ankles. But she wakes with a start, her forehead banging painfully with the wall before her.

And as she curses, as she splutters on the blood dripping down her brow she turns at the noise, she rolls over to face the door that clangs open. Light floods into the room then, torches carried by
figures blurred by her tired eyes. But she thinks she sees a figure move forward, she thinks she sees
the swaying of clothes and the careful gait of a predator that approaches. And as the flames near, as
her eyes squint she thinks the figure becomes just a moment clearer, just a bit more focused.

Feet end just short of Clarke’s vision, and so she looks up, tries to bring her knees beneath her. She
sees the grey furs first, the soft swaying and the heavy set that wraps themselves around the figure.
And it’s a woman, Clarke sees the angle of her nose and the white of the scars that adorn her face.

Clarke is sure she shrinks back for a moment as the woman kneels before her, as her face edges
closer. And Clarke is sure her lip trembles and her eyes water for just a second as the woman reaches
out, as she brushes a careful finger across her forehead, swiping a loose strand of matted, knotted hair
that clings bloodily to her face.

“Shhh…” it’s a quiet breath that lingers between them, and Clarke is sure her eyes must be watering
now, tears must be falling, “…don’t cry,”

“Please… I’m lost,” she whispers it out quietly, “I’m not dangerous, I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

And maybe pleading would be pathetic, maybe it would be desperate. But Clarke thinks she has
nothing left.

“Clarke,” it comes gently, firmly, fingers holding her cheek for a moment, “don’t be afraid, Clarke.”

It must take her a long time but the shaking of her shoulders and the tears that flow come to a steady
pause, and so Clarke turns her face briefly, bringing her shoulder up in an attempt to wipe away the
tears that cling to her cheeks.

But she feels it then, the rough hands that hold her for a moment, that pull her away from the wall.
And then she feels the tugging at her wrists the cold sting of a blade sliding against the ropes that tie
her hands behind her back and then who she thinks must be guards are stepping back, are fading into
the darkness that clings to the shadows of the walls that surround her.

“I’m sorry, Clarke,” the woman says, her voice just a bit softer, just a bit kinder, “we didn’t know if
you were an enemy,” she finishes quietly, a small smile gracing her lips.

“I’m lost,” it’s all Clarke can think to say, all she can hope to say.

“I apologise for Ontari’s behaviour,” there’s just a slight pause, just a slight flashing in the woman’s
eyes, “I apologise for how she treated you,” her hand reaches out once more, a gentle stroking of
Clarke’s cheek before it retreats, “she was afraid of you.”

“I’m not dangerous,” Clarke repeats it, if only to convince the woman, if only to show her that she
means no harm, that she can do no harm, “I’m lost,” and so she looks the woman in her eyes, holds
her gaze for a steady moment, for as long as it takes for the woman to see the truth of her words.

Clarke isn’t sure how long the woman sits on the stool before her, but in the time she waits, in the
time that the woman takes to look at her, to assess her, guards bring in more food, fruits this time,
fruits that she hasn’t seen before, hasn’t tasted before, and as she bites into the flesh, as the juices spill
past her lips Clarke thinks she groans, she thinks she wolfs the pieces down and she thinks her
stomach growls and rumbles painfully.
“My name is Nia,” the woman says after a quiet moment, and so Clarke wipes her hand across her mouth briefly. And the woman, Nia, follows the movement with her eyes gently, “you fell into my lands, Clarke.”

Clarke looks up then, and she is sure she feels a gentle twisting of her stomach.

“Tell me,” she leans forward, a shadow falling over her face just briefly, the scars that adorn her temples shining softly in the faint light of the dancing flame, “how did you do that?”

And what can Clarke do in this moment? She thinks of the Ark. She thinks of her mother, who must now think her dead. She thinks of the oxygen that is wasting away, she thinks of all those that live in the station, whose days are numbered and whose lives she had been entrusted to guide to safety.

And so she breathes for a moment, holds it just long enough for it to burn.

“I lived in the sky,” she steals herself, straightens her back, holds Nia’s eyes, “I was sent down to the ground. To see if my people could survive.”

There’s a gentle intake of breath, just enough for Clarke to feel the worry begin to creep in slowly, just enough for her pulse to thrum just a bit stronger in her veins.

“I see.”

And maybe Clarke grimaces, maybe she thinks she over spoke, said too much, was too literal in her words. For surely what she has said is too bizarre, too far fetched, too alien for such a people.

But Nia stands then, a gentle casting of her eyes over Clarke’s beaten, bloodied state.

“I apologise again, Clarke,” she smiles for a moment, and it’s a kind thing, a soft thing that traces the edge of her eyes, “I have had Ontari punished for her actions,” and perhaps Clarke gulps slightly at the words, at the threat and the treatment she thinks the other girl must have faced. And maybe she tries not to linger on the punishment, on what a people who scar themselves must be capable of.

Nia walks back to the door then, Clarke still on her knees, the juices of the fruit a sticky mess clinging to her finger tips.

“I will have furs and new clothes sent for you, Clarke.”

And as the door closes behind Nia, as her footsteps echo and recede from ear shot, Clarke thinks her mind numb, her wrists aching and burning in the air, the scrapes of the ropes now exposed to the chill air.

But above all?

She knows not how her life will proceed.

True to her word, furs are brought to Clarke swiftly, pelts from animals, from beasts far larger than Clarke could ever have imagined. And as the furs are laid out on the ground she can’t help but revel in the softness of them, in the foreign textures that brush against the rough of her skin. And the clothes she is given bring a smile to her tired eyes, if only slight, if only because they aren’t caked in dirt and blood. If only because they are clean.
The guards unshackle her feet too, leaving her able to pace back and forth in her cell, and so she waits until they leave. And as the door shuts with a gentle thud she strips her clothes, dresses in the gentle brown of the tunic she has been given, pulling on the fur lined pants, and the boots, one too large, one too small that dwarf and crowd her feet.

She sits then, her hand splayed out through the furs that she sits on, and as her mind begins to settle, as her thoughts focus and her head aches just a little less, she thinks over the actions of her days, she thinks over the events that have led her to where she finds herself.

And she knows the Ark sent her down too far north, off course. She knows that people still live, still survive in the harshness of the ground. And she knows she fears them, she knows she fears the brutal scars, the weapons that she eyes strapped to the guards. She knows she landed in Nia’s territory. But the one thing that wriggles in the corners of her mind, that moves when she wishes to lay still, and that screams out at her when all she wishes is for a quiet moment. That one thing is the way Ontari reacted in her assumption of Clarke coming from the Mountain, and maybe it’s her mind, maybe it’s the shock of being exposed to such a revelation, but she can’t help but wonder, if only for just a moment, that the Mountain is important.

A doctor or a healer, from what Clarke can assume, is shown to her the following day. And as the woman, just a bit older, face scarred walks in she smiles warmly at Clarke before ushering her back down where she sits on the furs. She checks over Clarke’s wrists, her ankles and the still healing cuts that litter her body.

Clarke blushes for a moment when the woman pulls her shirt up slowly, only to eye her visible ribs and the thinness that still clings to her body, and she flinches for a moment as the healer prods her ribs carefully, a soft sorry spoken to her, before she continues.

It’s a relief when she can pull her shirt back down, a barrier to the outside chill returned to its place. And the healer begins searching through a satchel she carries, her fingers deftly, nimbly pulling vials and jars out before spreading them before her. And perhaps it’s the work Abby did on the Ark, perhaps it’s the medical training Clarke already has, or maybe it’s just the newness of what she sees, but Clarke follows her actions carefully, her eyes straining to pick out each movement, each step as the healer mixes pastes and liquids, as she brings a brush through them and as she coats bandages with the soft grey blue paste that remains.

“Thank you,” Clarke says as the woman wraps her wrists and ankles in the bandages, a soft stinging pulling at the corners of her mind. The healer looks up then, a gentle incline of her head all the recognition she provides before she continues her work.

The woman leaves soon, a foul tasting potion pushed Clarke’s way and a soft goodbye and a gentle squeeze of a shoulder left behind before she exits the room, the door thudding shut behind her followed by the scraping of the lock.

And maybe it’s an ironic thing, maybe it’s a cruel twisted sense of fate that Clarke finds herself once again trapped in a cell, once again at the mercy of others. But at least she has real air to breathe. At least she has real food to eat.

But maybe as her eyes close, as her mind begins to still, she wonders of Mount Weather, she wonders of her mission.
She wonders of her fate.
Chapter 4

It’s a quiet thudding, a gentle scraping of metal and the soft caress of a hand upon her shoulder that brings her tired mind into a more wakeful state. Her eyes open then, the soft light of a flame dancing in the corner of her vision, the scarred face of the healer kneeling above her. And so Clarke sits up, her eyes falling across the woman’s hair, braided and dark, as it falls across her back. And perhaps in the gentle light of a flame Clarke can appreciate the scars that run down her temples to her cheeks, gentle slashes, as if a stem of thorns grows from her hair.

“Come, Clarke,” it’s a gentle smile that pulls Clarke to her feet, that steadies her as she stands.

And as the healer guides Clarke to the door, as she holds her elbow gently, she can’t help but to realise that she doesn’t know the woman’s name, and so she asks, “I don’t even know your name,” and she pauses for a moment as the healer looks back to her, a gentle smile gracing her lips.

“Entani,” she says then, and so Clarke gives a smile of her own and ignores the stinging of her lip where it cracks open at the motion.

“Thank you, Entani,” she voices as she is led towards the door, and she pauses for just a moment as she steps through the threshold, “where are we going?”

“You have been given quarters to stay,” she answers, her voice echoing out through the dungeon Clarke is sure they both walk through.

Her eyes follow the torches that burn lowly in their place against the walls, her eyes follow the other doors she passes, locked, heavy set and imposing. And her ears still hear that faint echoing drip, the gentle rhythm of water that crawls over the walls and that winds its way into her mind. And she thinks she shivers for a moment, shivers at the too cold dampness of the air and the too cold chill that clings to her body.

She passes guards then, they nod quietly at Entani, their eyes following Clarke and she hears the whispered greeting in a tongue unfamiliar and rough to her ears. And the thought from times past call out to her then, and so she turns to Entani, lets her eyes wander over the leathers and furs she wears, the scars that adorn her face, even the handle of a knife she sees against her thigh.

“You speak English,” it’s a quiet question, a gentle observation that breaks the silence that hangs between them both.

“Gonasleng,” Entani says, “the language of warriors,” she continues, “but all who serve must speak it.”

“Oh,” what else can Clarke say?

Entani takes Clarke further and further through the dungeons, the stale air lessening with each tired step. And maybe Clarke wonders about who else must be locked in the cells she passes, what their crimes have been, what their punishments will be. But maybe she doesn’t wish to intrude, doesn’t wish to push her luck. And so she lets her eyes skate over the doors, lets her eyes gaze upon the guards, their faces scarred, their eyes narrowed and their bodies leather strapped. And she keeps her thoughts to herself.

They reach stairs after only a short while, yet Clarke’s chest heaves, her lungs burn and her body...
aches and protest the motion. And she knows she must regain her strength, must try and show Nia, Ontari, even Entani, that she is not weak. If only because she thinks a weakness is not tolerated.

For surely a people who scar themselves are harsh. Are brutal. But maybe that is what it takes to survive on the ground.

Exiting the dungeons is an assault to her eyes, the harshness of the sun that glints off the snow a piercing flame that makes her squint and turn her face for a moment as her eyes adjust. But as her gaze steadies, as her vision clears Clarke can’t help but to stare, to wonder and gape. Turning behind her she sees the entrance to the dungeons that fall down into the ground, a small wall adorning three sides of the drop that is the stairs she just climbed. But before her lies an open field, snow covered and wide. And as her gaze passes over the snow she can’t help but to smile for a moment at the sun that shines and glints against the snow, that brings it to life and makes it dance before her eyes.

Her gaze is interrupted by a flashing of browns and blacks and she is sure she gasps, she is sure her eyes widen and her heart beat frantic in her chest when she sees horses ride past, leather wrapped around their massive bodies, the browns and greys and blacks of their hair shining smoothly in the morning light. And maybe Clarke feels a small sense of dread when she sees, what she can only assume, are warriors that sit atop the horses, that guide them with careful flicks of their wrists as they hold the reins, or a gentle prod of their heels.

Clarke feels Entani take her by the elbow once more before she is pulled in the direction of a large building that sits at the far end of the field, backed by a large wall that spreads out on either side until both ends of the walls touch the base of what Clarke realises are rocky outcrops that blend into the surrounding land, that rise up into what she can only assume to be a rocky wilderness beyond. And she can’t help but to stare, can’t help but to let her eyes linger too long on the people she passes, on the warriors, all scarred, all fur and leather strapped who pass her, and she is sure she stares at the people too, not warriors, but still hardened to the elements. She stares at some who lead horses, who carry bundles of furs, who carry baskets and other supplies she is sure they must use to survive. And she thinks she smiles for a moment at the life and the society that lives on the ground.

“What is this place?” Clarke voices, her mind still spinning, still trying to sort the images she sees.

“Ronto. It is only a small town,” Entani answers, “close to the border of another clan.”

“Does Nia rule over them too?” Clarke asks, and she smiles at a small child that stares openly at her, despite the harsh prod that he receives from another that stands by his side.

“No,” and Clarke doesn’t miss the tightening of Entani’s voice, doesn’t miss the lack of further detail, and so she lets the silence once again fall between them, once again lets the quiet comfort spread, and perhaps Clarke is merely content to watch the life that moves past her.

The walk to the building isn’t far, and as she approaches she finds that it must be three stories tall, and she sees flags that sway and dance in the breeze, that hang from windows and that drape the
walls of both the buildings and the larger walls that back it.

The doors open before her, guards bowing their heads for a moment as Clarke is ushered inside, and she lets her eyes wander from surface to surface, the stone of the building dancing in the light of fires that sit against the walls, and from light that pours in from the open windows that sit high in the walls.

Entani guides Clarke up a flight of stairs, their edges worn, smoothed from generations of use. They near a door then and Entani pauses, pushes it open before she steps aside. Clarke is left with a quiet Your room and then she is left standing in the doorway, Entani’s footsteps fading back the way they had walked.

Clarke’s eyes roam the room then, she gazes out the window that sits in the wall, the wooden blinds rustling gently in the breeze, and she follows the wall, her eyes taking in the chair and the desk that sits by the wall, before her eyes fall onto the fireplace, a small fire already crackling, already warming the space before her. But the bed draws her attention, and she can’t help but to let her eyes widen, can’t help but feel a giddy sense of excitement that courses through her, if only because beds do not come in such a size on the Ark, do not come with such lavish furs, despite what she expects is merely normal here on the ground.

She moves forward then, her feet treading awkwardly, the too small and too large sizes of the shoes she wears a small nuisance she is happy to bear, and she smiles just a bit more when she reaches out, when she brushes her fingers against the furs of the bed.

And maybe being a prisoner isn’t so bad.

Perhaps it’s habit, perhaps its the steadily increasing whisper in her mind, but as she paces back and forth, as she memorises the steps from one wall to the other, Clarke can’t help but to worry about her pack she had, can’t help but worry about the map she had, that would guide her to Mount Weather. And she knows she must bring it up with Nia, must tell her more of her mission. If only so that she can try and help the Ark, if only to tell her mother that she still lives.

She feels the steady building of her resolve then, the quiet thump of her heart, and she knows she can’t back out, and so, as the thoughts begin to take hold in her mind, with a goal of finding Nia, Clarke turns to the door, takes a steadying breath and then she moves forward.

She reaches out for the door then, and as it swings open, she pauses, her eyes widening in surprise when she comes face to face with another. And she gulps. She takes a step back and eyes the woman who stands in the doorway.

“May I enter?” it’s a careful question, a pained utterance and a guarded thought Clarke hears.

“Yes,” Clarke is sure her voice must tremble for only a moment, but she pushes it aside, and her eyes follow Ontari as she walks into the room. She sits then, in the chair that rests alongside the desk, and if only because Clarke doesn’t wish to offend she sits too, her hands steadying herself on the furs beneath her as she rests on the bed.

Clarke watches Ontari for a moment, and she can’t help but to eye the purple of the bruise across her cheek, the swelling of an eye and the cracking of a lip that falls painfully and swollen across her face.
And Clarke is sure Ontari must do it on purpose, must let the silence hang for a too long moment, an awkward dance of laboured, worried breathing the only thing that lives between them both, but after a too long moment Ontari sighs, lets her eyes meet Clarke’s.

“Sorry,” it’s a finality, a careful, measured sound that escapes her. And so Clarke shrugs once, bites her lip for just a moment in thought, only to curse quietly at the pain that still lingers.

“It’s ok,” but it isn’t. She thinks she can hold a grudge. If only because Ontari did choke her.

But she stands then, her eyes casting a lingering look around Clarke’s room, “you are expected in the dining room, Kwin Nia wishes to see you.”

Clarke follows as Ontari leads her out of her room, she follows as Ontari paces down the stairs, her feet moving a rapid, quick step, the only sound between them both the pained curses that fall from Clarke’s lips when she trips or stumbles over the poorly sized shoes she wears.

Clarke can’t help but to take in more of the building she walks through, the flags that still adorn the walls, the guards she passes, some moving, their own destination in mind, some standing sentry by doors she assumes not welcoming of visitors, and she thinks she sees servants that move quietly in and out of rooms, their eyes curious as they fall upon Clarke.

She comes to a set of double doors then, and Ontari pauses for only a moment before she pushes them open, a glance over her shoulder all she needs before she is moving forward, Clarke still in tow. And her eyes must widen when she sees the table that sits before her, and she knows her mouth waters, her stomach growls and her fingers twitch when she sees the meats, the fruits and the breads and drink that sits comfortably before her. And she thinks she flushes when she catches Nia watching her carefully, their eyes meeting for a moment, and so Clarke lets a careful smile fall across her lips.

Ontari pushes her towards a chair then, on the opposite side of both Nia and Ontari, and perhaps Clarke feels a twisting in her stomach, and maybe she can’t help but think this a test of some kind. But for now she is content to eat.

And so, as she eyes the food before her, Nia whispers gently to her “eat,” and what more can Clarke ask for in this moment?

“So,” Clarke looks up as Nia leans forward, “tell me, Clarke. What did you do in the sky?”

Clarke wipes her mouth then, swallows the mouthful of food she chews on and she looks up to see Nia and Ontari gazing at her steadily. And maybe for a short moment she thinks she should be wary of her thoughts, be wary of the words she will voice.

“It’s where I lived,” she starts, “my people live in the sky. In machines,” and she pauses for a moment, unsure whether the ground knows of machines and technologies and so she adds, “boats, that float in the sky,” and maybe the analogy is crude, is poor and too simple. But Nia’s lips twitch for a moment.

“We might not use these machines,” and Clarke is sure she hears a distain and a derision that seeps into her words, "but we know of them.”
“Oh,” Clarke is sure she swallows painfully, an obvious bobbing of her throat.

“Tell me, Clarke,” again Nia holds a steady gaze, her eyes careful, “why were you sent down to the ground?”

“I—” she pauses, swallows just a moment, her heart beating just a bit stronger in her chest, “my people are running out of supplies,” she thinks that simple truths must be the best thing to provide in this moment, “I was sent down to see if we could survive on the ground,” she finishes.

“Why were you the only one?”

Perhaps it’s the constant questions, perhaps it’s the careful way Ontari’s eyes follow her, or perhaps it’s the fact that she still must be getting used to existing on the ground, but Clarke is sure her palms must sweat just a bit, she is sure her heart must still beat a moment too strong in her chest.

“We didn’t know if the ground was safe,” she thinks the truth is the easiest answer. Is the safest answer.

“And now that you know that it is safe will they come down?” and perhaps Clarke senses where this line of question must be going. For surely, if she were Nia, wouldn’t she wish to know if a new people were soon to encroach on her own lands?

“No,” Clarke holds her gaze steady as she looks at Nia.

“Why not?”

“I had a way to talk to them,” she thinks of the broken radio, “but it doesn’t work anymore. And they had a way of checking on me,” she continues, holding up her wrists, “but I guess you had it removed when I was found.”

“I see,” and there’s a gentle pause, long enough for Clarke to think that the questions have ended, and so, as she brings another mouthful of food up she again is interrupted by a careful prodding.

“Did you have a task to complete when you arrived?” she thinks of Mount Weather.

Clarke looks back to Nia, lets her eyes flick to Ontari for a moment.

“No.”

The rest of the meal passes comfortably, the earlier tension fading away, replaced by a careful, quiet comfort that sits quietly between the three seated at the table. And perhaps Clarke should feel insulted, should feel slighted when Nia and Ontari begin to speak in their own language, but she’s too tired, still too sore to really put too much effort into feeling anything other than the comfort of the food she eats.

But she looks up again when she feels the silence hang carefully over the table, when she feels her neck prickle for a moment. And she smiles awkwardly when she catches Nia eyeing her once again.

“Tell me, Clarke,” it’s a warm smile that graces her lips, “what did you do where you come from?”

It’s a safe enough question to answer. She thinks.
“I was training to be a doctor,” she says, her thoughts turning to Entani.

“A doctor?” Ontari asks then, her voice cutting into the conversation for the first time.

“Like Entani,” Clarke offers.

“I see,” Nia says, her smile reaching her eyes, “you will train with her. Healers are always needed.”

And maybe Clarke can enjoy that.

At least until she can find a way to make it to Mount Weather.

It’s a loud banging on her door that wakes her, that causes her to bolt up in the bed, the furs bundling around her waist, and she can’t help but gasp and try to cover herself as Ontari pushes open the door, as she walks to Clarke, dropping a bag before her.

“You are late. Entani is waiting for you.”

And as Ontari exits as swiftly as she came, Clarke can’t help but feel stunned, too tired, too shocked at the interruption to do more than gape at the open door.

She finds herself still breathless as she exits out into the open field, the morning sun shining brightly, the night’s cold chill still lingering too long on the warming snow. But Clarke sees Entani waiting for her, an extra bag at her feet and her foot tapping lightly on the ground, and so Clarke lets out a small apology as she nears and as she bends to pick up what must be her own bag.

“What are we doing?” she asks as she shoulders the it, the bundle resting heavily upon her shoulders.

“You will follow and learn,” Entani says, already moving away. And so she follows, wrapping the fur coat tighter around her shivering body, the snow crunching underfoot and her steps still unsure and uncertain beneath her.

Clarke finds her days long, full of hours following blindly as Entani moves about the small village. And Clarke can’t help but to stare, still awed, still amazed at the horses she sees riding in and out of the village, her eyes always following the warriors that sit proud and menacing above them. And she finds herself transfixed that people have survived on the ground.

She watches as Entani stitches a wound, her hands steady as she finishes wiping away the blood.

“So,” Clarke says, already handing Entani fresh bandages, “I’m in Azgeda lands, right?” and she smiles just a bit when Entani hums a response, “and Nia—“
“Kwin Nia,” Entani cuts in.

“Kwin Nia. She rules Azgeda?”

“Yes.”

“But there is a coalition of clans?” and Clarke thinks of the bordering clan she has already heard of, “who rules them?”

And Entani looks up at the question, her eyes thoughtful for a moment.

“Heda, The Commander does. She is imperialistic. She demands others follow her. That we bow down to her will and follow her rule.”

And Clarke thinks she grimaces for a moment, if only because she knows history, knows of the damage dictators and harsh rulers have caused. And maybe if just by the cruel circular cycle that history follows, she can’t help but feel a remorse that despite what has happened on Earth, dictators and cruel leaders still survive.

“Is that why Kwin Nia doesn’t like her?”

“Yes. Azgeda has survived and can survive without the other clans. We are strong. But the Commander forced us to join her coalition or suffer. We would not have survived a war with the other eleven clans.”

“But doesn’t the coalition stop conflict?”

“Only the strong survive on the ground,” and Entani eyes Clarke for a moment, lets her gaze linger, a firmness taking place. She takes a breath then, “is it fair, Clarke, that Ice Nation — Azgeda, must share our supplies with the Desert clan? Share our food with the Valley clan, who can not provide for us? Or the Rock Line people, who can not give us supplies we need or want? What good is the sand the Desert clan trade? Or the stone of Rock Line? What good is trade when we already have what we need?” and perhaps it does sounds unfair.

“I guess... It’s not the best?” and maybe she could have worded it better, could have provided a response less ignorant of the situation. But still, didn’t she only just realise people still survive on the ground?

Clarke turns back to the bandages that still lie before her, and she eyes the other healers that move about the small building she is in. She lets her eyes wander from warrior to warrior, many with small cuts across forearms, bruises that adorn their scarred faces, bloodied noses, blackened eyes.

“Why are there so many warriors?” she voices, though perhaps she knows the answer, for what else would a person do if life was so harsh, if it took a coalition to stop bloodshed?

“All must provide for the clan,” Entani says, her hands carefully sewing shut an open gash on another warrior’s bicep, a small grimace falling across her lips for just a moment. “Some choose to be warriors. Some choose to be healers,” she smiles up at Clarke then, “some are farmers, some are blacksmiths or builders. But everyone must provide for the clan.”

“I see,” Clarke says, again passing Entani another fresh bandage.

“And conflict still exists,” Clarke looks up for a moment, “bandits are not uncommon.”

“Bandits?” she asks.
“Those who are banished for crimes,” Entani pauses again for a moment, “and we still fight the Mountain.”

“The Mountain?”

“The Mountain. The clans have been at war with the Mountain for generations,” she says, and perhaps Clarke can see a fire that burns quietly in Entani’s eyes, perhaps she can see the clenching of her fingers.

And Clarke lets her gaze turn for a moment when the warrior before Entani and her curses, a gruff sneer escaping his lips at the mention of the Mountain.

“Is the Mountain another clan?”

“Perhaps,” there’s a brief pause as Entani looks to the warrior in question, perhaps unsure how best to answer.

“They live in the Mountain,” the warrior answers, “they are cowards who bring acid fog down upon us. Who take our people, turn them into reapers.”

“Oh,” and maybe there’s a small tightening of her stomach, maybe there’s a small clenching of her heart at the thought that forms slowly in her mind. “Where is the Mountain?”

“Further south. In Trikru lands,” comes the answer.

And isn’t further south where Mount Weather must be?

And isn’t it possible that a people survived in it?

Wasn’t it a stronghold, designed to withstand the end of civilisation?

Perhaps, as the beating of her heart settles for a moment, as the clenching of her fingers lessens, Clarke thinks is better off staying here for now, in Azgeda.

But what of her people still on the Ark?

What of her mother?
Chapter 5

It must be a week before her bag is returned, and Clarke doesn’t miss the fact that the map and technology she had is missing. But she thinks she can be happy with the fact that her father’s watch still remains, and as she straps it to her wrist she is sure a tear falls down her cheek slowly, and she is sure her shoulders shake and that quiet sobs escape her lips. And she is thankful that she is alone in her room, and that it is late, and that servants and warriors alike are absent to the sounds of her quiet heartbreak.

But as she dries her eyes, as she packs away the bag, she can’t help but to think that this is her life now. That she must make of her life what she has been dealt. And perhaps escaping, perhaps making her way to the Mountain or Mount Weather is a doomed task. Was always a doomed task.

But still, as she looks out her window, as she traces the stars that sit quietly in the night sky, she thinks she can mourn the loss of a life not her own anymore.

She thinks she stays by the window for a long while. Long enough that the stars burn a quiet trail against her eyes, long enough that she thinks if she squints hard enough, if she imagines just enough, that she can see the Ark as it races through the sky. But a laugh escapes her lips then, not a happy thing, not a carefree thing. It’s a sad, bittersweet, broken thing that sounds more a choking sob as it sits somewhere in her throat.

She turns from the window then, pulls her clothes off, the small sleep clothes granted to her already laid out on the bed, and so she pulls them on, blows out the small candle that lights the room a gentle orange-red, and she pretends that the tears that fall from her eyes don’t exist, and that the shaking of her shoulders are from the cold, and that the clenching of her heart is just a cruel, imagined thought that dances quietly in the recesses of her mind.

She wakes to the banging on her door again, her mind still unused to the early mornings that she must now live, and so she quickly dresses, thankful that Ontari now waits by the door, rather than walking straight in. And so, as she rises, as she brushes a hand through her hair she lets a careful smile grace her lips, ever tentative in her interactions with the other girl. If only because she would prefer not to be choked once more.

“Kwin Nia says I am to train you,” it comes out crisp, just a hint of annoyance that sits comfortably in the words Ontari utters.

Clarke shrugs then, her hands trying to braid her hair in the style she sees the women of Ronto wear. But as she winces at a particular knot that has formed she can’t help but notice the exasperation that creeps onto Ontari’s face, and she doesn’t miss the sigh that falls from her lips nor does she miss the tapping of an impatient foot.

“If you want to me to hurry you could help,” she growls it out, her fingers pulling the knot free, but perhaps by the look Ontari flashes her way, she isn’t sure whether Ontari is more likely to punch her or to help her.

It surprises her then when Ontari holds up a hand briefly, before pushing her down onto the chair.
“Do not move,” and so Clarke sits still while she feels Ontari move behind her, and she grimaces when her hair is pulled painfully and she winces when the knots are removed sharply. And it isn’t long before her hair is braided, Ontari muttering quietly to herself, words of which Clarke is sure are not so pleasant. But she feels the fingers still in her hair and so she stands, running a quick hand over the simple braids Ontari has formed.

“Thanks,” she says to the retreating back of Ontari.

The walk outside is a fast, quick pace, Ontari barely casting a glance behind her and so Clarke follows steadily, a careful nod to the servants and guards she passes. And as they exit the building she follows Ontari through the open field, the morning sun still hanging lowly in the blue sky.

She watches as warriors race past, their feet strumming steadily beneath them as they run a circular pattern around the field, and not for the first time she thinks life on the ground must be harsh and brutal when all she sees are warriors who train, who injure themselves and who scar themselves. And she knows life on the ground is harsh and dangerous when even servants, when even those who didn’t choose to be warriors can be seen carrying a knife strapped to their thighs, or who can be seen training amidst the warriors in the early of a too cold morning.

“Where’s Kwin Nia?” Clarke asks then, her thoughts drifting to the woman who controls so much of her life now.

“She has returned to the capital.”

And Clarke merely shrugs at the finality of the statement, fast becoming accustomed to Ontari’s habit of not providing more than enough in her answers.

“Look,” she says then, wiping a strand of hair from her eyes, “we have to get along now. And I’m guessing Kwin Nia told you to behave,” and Clarke lets her mind wander for just a moment to when she had seen Ontari, face bruised and lip cracked. “We should at least try and get along.”

And Clarke is sure if she hadn’t been slowed down by her still ill-fitting boots she would have walked into the back of Ontari, but she comes up short and Ontari rounds on her.

“I do not trust you,” and perhaps Clarke steps back for just a moment as Ontari nears her, as her face leans in closer, the scars on her cheeks twitching just a bit, her lip curling into a snarl.

And Clarke is sure a scowl forms on her own face, she is sure her jaw clenches for a moment, “you don’t have to be so rude.”

Ontari eyes her for a long pause, her gaze steady, the furs around her shoulders ruffling in the wind for just a moment. And when she speaks her voice comes out a low, crisp breath of cold.

“Perhaps Kwin Nia will kill you when she realises she has no use for you.”
Clarke thinks that Ontari must enjoy violence, must enjoy pain and even take pleasure in it. If only because she smiles once more down at her from where she stands, the sun a halo that crowns her head a blazing light. And so Clarke winces, squints her eyes and struggles back to her feet.

She moves to stand before Ontari again, her feet spreading apart, her gaze eyeing Ontari as she moves to stand before her.

“You are weak, Clarke,” she begins once more, “you are not strong,” and maybe Clarke’s eyes roll, maybe she huffs out an exasperated growl. “You must use what you have to your advantage.”

“Maybe it’d help if you showed me. Instead of just beating me up,” she retorts and she is sure from the wicked smile that spreads across Ontari’s face that she won’t enjoy the next lesson Ontari has planned.

“You are small, so you must use it to your advantage,” Ontari begins circling slowly, “avoid allowing a larger opponent to grasp you, to take hold of you,” she lunges forward, her hand snaking out, striking Clarke across the face and tripping her up once again before retreating back a few paces.

And as Clarke rises to her feet once more, she thinks she really dislikes Ontari’s way of teaching.

*Float you.*

That night Clarke falls into bed, her bones aching, her arms bruised and tired. But at least she can smile at the fact she managed to kick Ontari in the shin.

*I hope it hurt.*

She is sure time flies by, a blur of pain, of bruised bones and tired arms. Some days she spends her time with Entani, still helping the wounded that seem a steady occurrence each day, sometimes she spends it with Ontari, often resulting in more bruises, more aches and more pains to add to her still frail body.

It isn’t until she slaps Ontari across the face one morning’s training session, if only by luck, that she is shown how to handle a weapon. And as Ontari passes her a knife, the blade the length of her forearm, she can’t help but feel the dread that seeps into her stomach, and she is sure her heart clenches and her palms sweat when she eyes the deadly blade, and she is sure she swallows painfully when her eyes catch the smirk playing across Ontari’s lips.

She finds that the knife isn’t so bad. And perhaps she smiles at the careful way Ontari eyes her as she swings it in a careful arc, the length a comfortable thing that balances in the palm of her hand and that brings forth memories of painting, of sweeping brush strokes and of careful guidance as she
stitches and sutures wounds on those unlucky enough to find themselves in the Ark’s med bay.

And maybe she feels just a moment more sure, just a bit stronger than the days past as she feels her fingers grip the handle of the blade and as she hears it sing through the chill of the morning air.

There’s two things Clarke hates the most. The first is to way Ontari’s eyes light up when she is about to strike, when she is about to land a too hard, too enthused blow upon Clarke’s tired body. And the second is the mornings after, when her legs ache, her cheeks bruise and her body protests each movement.

But she thinks she has found a new foe, a new enemy to despise the most. And as the horse gives an ungainly lurch, its head rearing up quickly, she thinks she really, really hates riding.

“Sit straight, Clarke!” Entani yells out across the field, a smile falling across her face as she squints up at Clarke. “Do not squeeze too tight with your legs,” she continues, “or I will see you amongst the wounded!” and maybe Clarke can be forgiven for holding her breath, for hoping she isn’t trampled to death.

But perhaps as the horse slows just a bit, as it steadies just enough underneath her, Clarke thinks that maybe, just for a little while, horses aren’t so bad. And so she smiles, turns her face towards Entani where she stands, a smile falling across her feet, and perhaps Clarke scoffs at the way Ontari eyes the horse beneath her, as if urging it to misbehave through sheer thought alone.

*You aren’t so bad, are you?*

She pats the horse briefly, her fingers tugging gently into the mane of dark brown before her.

But she’s wrong, and the horse rears back, it’s front legs kicking wildly, and she is sure a scream much too loud to be dignified escapes her mouth as she falls backwards, tumbling, her limbs sprawling out wildly and so she groans a broken, bruised sound as she lands in the snow. And as she lies there winded, the sun shining brightly into her eyes, she thinks she hears the distant laughter of Ontari, no doubt enjoying another moment of her pain, and she thinks she hears her name being called, Entani running to her.

But she’s thankful the horse doesn’t trample her.

*And perhaps the ground isn’t so bad.*

*At least it isn’t the Ark.*

*Right?*

She hears the words, but slowly, dully, if only because it isn’t in English anymore and so it takes her just a moment for her mind to translate what she is sure is an insult or a threat.

“If we do not eat tonight it is your fault,” and it’s a whispered breath against the shell of her ear, and
she can’t help but to scoff, if only just slightly at the venom she is sure she doesn’t imagine in Ontari’s voice.

“Shh…” it’s a quiet hush that Entani breathes, her eyes still glued to the deer-like animal that grazes on the frozen roots not far from where the three of them lie.

Clarke rises slowly then, her knees spreading apart as she balances on the icy snow beneath her, and her eyes roll for just a moment as she hears the creak of Ontari’s own bowstring that she pulls back.

“I have it,” she growls quietly, and as she draws her bow she breathes out steadily, her heart beat slowing for just a moment.

“Raise your elbow, Clarke,” Entani encourages, a spear in her hand that she readies, her own body braced for the lunge forward.

She pauses for just a moment, for just long enough for her to picture the arrow that will fly through the air, that will pierce the animals heart.

And she releases.

The arrow sings through the air, a gentle whistle, and as it nears the animal she sees it look up, she sees its legs tense and its body begin to bound. But she hears the pained sound it releases, she hears the thump as the arrow embeds firmly into its side and she sees it wobble for just a moment before a second arrow silences the animal, the end quivering in the animal’s head.

“You missed,” is all she hears before Ontari is up, her bow being slung over her shoulder.

“Whatever.”

Skinning the animal isn’t so bad she finds. She’s seen her fair share of blood from her time on the ground, from her time stitching wounds that warriors bring to her attention. And she has seen injuries from the Ark too.

And so, as the knife slices through a tendon she grimaces for only a moment before continuing to make cuts where Ontari indicates.

The night is spent huddled around a small fire, the three women had set out two days earlier, all in the name of teaching Clarke how to better survive the harshness that is the ground. And as Clarke brings her hands to the flame she smiles for a moment at the warmth that breathes life into her fingers and that warms her chilled face.

“What was it like?” Entani asks then, herself lying back on the furs beneath her, her eyes searching the stars shining quietly in the night sky.

And so Clarke leans back too, her eyes flickering over to Ontari as she stokes the flame for a moment. And she pauses for only a short while as she thinks over the question. As she thinks of her
Mother, of Wells and all those still on the Ark. And maybe she hopes that they still live. Maybe she hopes that they found a way to fix the lack of air that would leave them to suffocate.

“It was cold,” she looks over to Entani, her eyes still shining softly against the flame, “not like here,” and she hears Ontari shift besides her, and she feels her lie down too, the warmth of their three bodies bleeding together quietly.

“It was never warm enough. Always too cold. Enough for you to feel it, and we couldn’t do anything about it,” and perhaps from her tone, perhaps from the way her eyes must shine, a dampness to them in the orange light, Entani must sense that a pain still lingers. And so she lets the silence hangs over them, and it’s just a gentle blanket, just a quiet calm that lingers between the three women, their eyes gazing up at the stars.

She wakes to the quiet chill of a still early morning. The air that clings to them still too biting, still too cold for her tired body. And she’s happy to rest for a short while, just long enough for her tired mind to waken. And so she buries her face into the fur that brushes against her, happy to share in the warmth of the bodies pressed to her sides, all in the name of staving off the too cold bite of the ground. And so she lets her mind wander back into a gentle slumber, the sound of Ontari’s breathing calming her thoughts, and the beat of Entani’s heart echoing against her head.

“You look Azgeda, Clarke,” Entani says, her eyes flicking over the grey-white and blue furs she wears, the leather that clings to her frame and the knife that sits comfortably across her thigh.

And Clarke smiles for just a moment before grimacing, Ontari’s hands pulling painfully at her hair as she braids it quickly.

“She has no Azgeda marks yet,” Ontari says, and maybe, just for a little moment, she can’t help but wonder what it would be like to be Azgeda, to belong somewhere once more.

Her feet strum steadily beneath her, and maybe, if only because the snow still clings to her boots and the air she breathes is fresh, and wind brushes against her face, she can enjoy the way the sun only just crests the horizon, only just warms the snow field that she runs through.

She passes a warrior then, her hair shaved, scars running along the top of her head, a quick nod all the acknowledgement that is needed, and she continues forward. Her lungs expand carefully, a measured, steady beat to her heart and her lungs breathe in smoothly. And if only by the warmth of the blood that races through her veins Clarke thinks she enjoys the way the snow crunches underfoot. She rounds a bend in the field, her path taking her along the far wall and she follows in the shadow as she continues through the morning routine until she comes to a tired stop by the main building.
She leans by the wall then, already reaching for the water skin tied to her belt, her hands fumbling with the knot for only a moment before she brings it to her mouth. And she smiles as the liquid runs down her throat, as it quenches her thirst and soothes her mind. And she coughs for just a second as she brings the back of her hand up to her forehead, wiping away the snow that clings, kicked up by her feet.

It’s not far to the bathhouse, just a few moment’s of stumbling over a foot of snow, but as Clarke reaches the main entrance she smiles, lets the heat of the steam welcome her and pull her forward.

She strips slowly, the morning air a chilling blanket that prickles her skin, that breathes life into the shivers that rake her body. And she grimaces as her toes touch the scalding water, as the steam twists its way up her legs slowly. But she continues to move forward, letting the water lap at her thighs and burn into her flesh until she stands waist deep. And perhaps, as she moves deeper, as she dips herself fully into the water, she is thankful that the ground has hot water, however rudimentary it is created. And so she smiles, lets it linger across her lips, as she breaks the surface.

She scrubs herself slowly then, having taken a wash cloth from the basket that sits by the entrance. She lets the coarse material bruise into her flesh, and as she scrubs away the sweat she thinks she feels the muscles that have grown, that have strengthened and formed since she came to the ground, and she is sure she is thankful of the time Entani has spent guiding her, the time Ontari has spent chasing after her, all in the name of survival.

She lets her mind wander as she rests comfortably against the side of the heat pool, the water a soothing warmth that steadies the thoughts that move gently through her mind. And she thinks her time on the ground has been harsh. Has been brutal, if only because she has helped stitch closed wounds, even burnt ones together that were too severe for sutures and stitching. She remembers the mornings of broken bones she has set, the concussions she diagnosed and the warriors she has healed, only for them to wander back into the healer’s building days later. And despite the brutal training Ontari puts her through in the afternoons, the lessons on knife work, of how to disarm, of how to kill, there is perhaps a gentle twitching in the back of her mind that tells her that perhaps she is still a prisoner, still someone not fully trusted.

But it must be better than the Ark. Right?

If only because she has real air.

If only because she has real food.

If only because she is on the ground.

But what of the Ark?

She doesn’t know.

It’s strange. The pain burns and writhes against her skin. And she knows she should be horrified, knows she should be shocked and should recoil at what stares back. But maybe it isn’t so bad. Maybe she can live with it.

What else can she do?
And so her eyes trace the cuts that sit comfortably across her cheeks. Two slashes across each cheek that bleed down diagonally from the corners of her eyes towards the corners of her mouth. And she follows the prominent ‘V’ cut that etches itself across her forehead, pointing down between her eyebrows.

*Clarke Kom Azgeda*

*Clarke Griffin*

She’s not sure who she is now.

She’s not even sure how old she is now.

Twenty?

But at least she has a place to belong.

The bow string rests comfortably between her fingers and she lets the steadying of her heart guide her thoughts and calm the pain that still lingers against her face.

She breathes in, hold it for just long enough for the burn of her lungs to pass into the discomfort, and then she releases. The arrow snakes forward, a gentle whistling in the morning air and she watches as it curves just a bit through the space between her and she smiles when it lands with a small thud, the arrow sticking into the target before her.

She reaches down, her fingers grasping another arrow, and she smiles as she feels the pull in her muscles, as she feels the stretch and the resistance through her arm. And so she lets her lips curve into a quiet laugh as she releases the next arrow, and she smiles as she reaches down, and she smiles as she notches the next. And she smiles knowing this one will once again hit its mark.

She smiles as she bends, as her back arches and her legs slide beneath her. And she smiles as she draws her blade. And she knows that she will strike once with her foot, a quick, powerful front kick that will either connect with the stomach of her opponent, allowing her to lunge forward, or it will be blocked with a broad swipe of an arm, forcing her to turn with the motion. And if it is blocked she knows she will spin with it, let herself drop to her knees and let the snow ice beneath her carry her away from a retaliatory strike.

And so she kicks, her foot snapping out quickly, and for just a moment she thinks it will connect, but her opponent sees it coming, and so her leg finds nothing but air, an arm slapping it away. And so she drops, she spins and she throws up snow before rising to her feet, her knife held out in front of her, her eyes searching for her next opening.

She blocks the return strike, the sword swinging for her throat, and she lunges once more, her fist colliding with a cheek and she grimaces at the thump she hears, but as the face snaps back, as she feels space being forced between them she lets the momentum of her punch bring her forward before
snapping her elbow around, once more colliding with a jaw. And then she pounces forward, her knife aimed for the exposed throat and she smiles when she feels the body beneath her sag for just a moment and then she rolls on top, her legs straddling her victim, the momentum carrying them both down to the ground. And so she plunges her knife forward, and she smiles and she laughs as it buries into the snow besides the exposed neck and she knows she wins.

She rolls off Ontari then and she wipes off her blade, holding out a hand for Ontari to grasp.

“You are not so helpless after all,” and Clarke knows she won’t get much more than that. And so she shrugs, her arms falling back to her sides as she takes her place once more in front of Ontari, other warriors already moving about them, all engaged in their own sparring.

She sits before a warrior, his lip split open, blood dripping down his chin. And so Clarke whispers a quiet *Sorry* as she dabs it with a paste, and she is sure it stings from the slight grimace that flashes across his cheeks.

“The Commander has Roan prisoner, right?” she asks then, her voice carrying over to Entani as she splints a warrior's broken arm.

“Yes,” she pauses for a moment, brushing a braid back behind her ear, “Trikru and Azgeda fought before the Coalition formed.”

And Clarke smiles when the warrior before her grunts his own opinion, “and we were winning.”

“Yes,” and she is sure she senses a pride behind Entani’s words. “But as punishment for Azgeda aggression,” a third warrior spits on the floor then, “Prince Roan was taken as assurance,” Entani finishes.

“The Commander seems spiteful,” Clarke muses then, a frown sitting across her face.

“Yes,” Entani lets her thoughts catch up to her for a moment, “she speaks of trust, of peace, of fair trade. But she offers us no trust and treats Azgeda with suspicion and distain.”

And Clarke looks around for a moment as she hears murmurs of agreement from the few warriors that rest in the healer’s building.

“We should break from the Coalition,” the one in front of Clarke says then.

“Don’t move,” she hisses quickly, holding his chin in her hands as she brings the needle to his lip. But as she pulls the stitching through, and as she closes his wound, Clarke can’t help but to feel the agreement that rolls off those that surround her.

Her feet strum beneath her, and she feels the steadying of her breath and the quieting of her mind. And so she pauses for just a moment, already rolling into a mound of snow, her eyes gazing quietly before her. And she feels Ontari press next to her quickly, her bow readied and her eyes darting
forward and back.

Clarke turns to her right, Entani crouched low, her own spear readied, another warrior by her side.

“What exactly do these reapers look like?” it’s a quiet whisper, more exhale then speech.

“You will know a reaper when you see it.”

Helpful.

She waits for long moments, her ears prickling and her fingers twitching. And it’s a gentle hooting she hears first, a soft birdcall that carries on the wind. And so she signs just once with her finger, a quick hooking of her index finger and a raising of her thumb.

Trikru?

And Ontari answers with a shrug.

We’ll find out.

And so Clarke rolls her eyes. And she is sure her heart must be beating just a bit faster.

She casts her eyes forward once more, and she scans the trees before her. And she knows that the trees mark the border between Azgeda and Trikru. And she knows that despite the Coalition, relations remain tense and ever dangerous. But for now she has a task of clearing reapers that have wandered much too close to Azgeda lands and so she focuses her mind, lets her eyes gaze towards the trees and waits for the reapers that the scouts found.

She thinks she hears them much sooner than she sees them. And she knows that they are more monster than man, more beast than human. And so she shrinks back, if only in shock when they emerge from the trees, their eyes bloodshot and their mouths frothing.

And maybe it should surprise her when she looks to Ontari for a moment only to see a roaring flame burning in her eyes, a wicked, carefree smile gracing her lips.

But maybe not.

She has beat me up more times than I can count.

And so Ontari bursts from the snow mound, the white of her fur shining in the sun, and so Clarke follows swiftly, an arrow already being let loose. Her feet crunch against the snow, and she casts her eyes sideways to see Entani already throwing her spear towards a reaper.

Clarke ducks then, the whistle of an axe singing overhead, and as she rises she releases another of her own arrows, and she turns, already knowing it will find its mark.

She finds Ontari already in the motion of beheading a reaper, hand already missing, and so Clarke lunges forward, intercepting another reaper as he makes a move towards Ontari’s exposed back. And as she feels her blade plunge into his chest, as she feels the spurt of blood that splashes across her face she hears the rustling from the trees and the roaring of more reapers.

She turns then, her chest already heaving, ready to face the next. And she sees five more reapers running towards them, blades swinging maniacally in the air. And as she readies another arrow, as her eyes focus on her target she catches a motion from the trees and so she follows it, and she hears Ontari spit out an angry Trikru before she sees seven figures drop down, five landing on the backs of
the reapers catching them unawares and another two circling forward. And if only because it was impressive, she smiles just for a moment as all five reapers are quickly beheaded.

It’s an awkward, tense pause then as both parties come to an uneasy calm. Clarke's eyes dart to the seven Trikru before her, and she takes in who she thinks is the leader, her hair bronzed, the tips a dirty blonde her eyes a careful squint, and her cheek bones a sharp contrast. Her gaze flickers to the man besides her, muscled and bald, eyes careful as they move from person to person before him and then Clarke’s gaze falls to the younger warrior by his side, her hair braided back, her eyes fiery and angry in the morning sun.

“What is Azgeda doing close to the border?” the leader says then, her hand resting comfortably against the sword at her hip, and Clarke is sure she feels Ontari bristle besides her, she is sure she feels her own feet widen beneath her and her fingers twitch.

“What is Trikru doing close to Azgeda borders?” Ontari replies then, a sneer lifting her lips.

And Clarke watches as a smirk lifts the woman’s mouth.

“There are reapers,” she shrugs once, her gaze falling to the dead reapers by her feet, “we wouldn’t want to mistake Azgeda for them.”

And Clarke’s eyes narrow, she feels the insult sting across her face and she feels her fingers twitch towards her knife that sits against her thigh.

*What a bitch.*

And she is sure she senses the others in her party tense, their eyes narrowing as they prepare for the next exchange of words.

“Perhaps you are blind, Trikru, if you would mistake Azgeda clothing for the filth you and the reapers wear,” and Entani steps forward, her spear lifting for just a moment, a snarl gracing her own lips.

“Lower the spear or I will remove your hand,” and Clarke’s eyes dart to the younger Trikru warrior, her sword already raising before her.

“Muzzle your dog,” Ontari hisses, her eyes meeting the Trikru leader’s, and Clarke sees the younger warrior step forward, her lips turning into a snarl, her eyes glaring at Ontari.

But the leader shrugs just once more before raising her hand, “stand down, Octavia, we have no quarrel with Azgeda scum. For now.”
“Trikru are in the trees,” Clarke looks to her left, Entani crouching low, wiping a hand over her face, smearing the white of Azgeda war paint across her cheeks and forehead.

“Do we kill these reapers?” Clarke asks, her eyes turning back before her, already counting the few reapers that move through the trees.

“Only if they cross into Azgeda lands,” Ontari answers, her own face a deathly white, her eyes gazing towards the trees across the clearing.

And so Clarke lets herself relax for now, the many warriors by her side a steady reassurance, their breathing quiet, their weapons readied.

“Why do you think the reapers are so far out from the Mountain?” she voices, her eyes turning towards the sky as she traces a cloud that drifts by lazily.

“I do not know,” Entani says before looking to Ontari, “perhaps the Mountain is desperate.”

And Clarke smiles when she hears a warrior somewhere close by snort, a few others snickering quietly. And she thinks her heart settles and her mind clears as she lets her gaze fall upon those that lie in the snow by her side, their faces painted a deathly pale, the grey furs flowing gently with the morning breeze, and the white of the fabric woven into their braids blending into the snow that rests by their sides. And as she looks down at the furs that cover her shoulders, the leather that holds her firm and her own hair, white cloth braided through it, she can’t help but to feel a slight stinging across her cheeks, the scars still fresh and reddened.

But maybe she thinks that it isn’t so bad.

She hears the quiet birdcall then, and she feels those around her tense for a moment and then she sees the rustle from the tree tops before Trikru are dropping down, their weapons readied, quickly moving to cut down the reapers that lunge forward, and Clarke’s eyes narrow for a moment as she sees the same young warrior from yesterday, her lips turned up into a snarl, her eyes glinting in the sun light.

“Should we help, Ontari?” a warrior voices quietly, an arrow slowly being drawn back.

“No. Let Trikru bleed.”

“Bring them close, wait until they are in the deep snow before you retreat,” and Clarke can’t help but to feel her heart beat just a bit less steady in her chest.

“And why am I the one doing this?” she asks, her fingers twitching towards the knife that rests by her thigh, her eyes gazing towards the reapers that feast on a deer carcass, the cracking of bones and ripping of flesh carrying over the snow field, the few trees doing little to dampen the noises.

“I do not wish to be the reaper’s next meal,” is all she is given before Ontari slides away carefully into the snow.
She reaches back then, her fingers brushing against the arrows that sit in her quiver and she lets the familiar bristles of the feathers calm her mind. She slinks forward then, crouched low into the snow, her boots softening the crunch beneath her feet and her furs moving quietly over the snow that clings to her knees.

And there’s four of them, all grotesque, all bloodied, covered in a filth she can smell even from the distance she leaves between them. She stays low, her bow extending out horizontally before her, and so she raises up on one knee, her other leg extending before her to steady herself.

And she smiles for a moment as she feels the quiet creak of the bowstring, she lets her lips curve up gently as she feels the bow bend in her hand. And she breathes in for just a moment as the arrow rests against her fingers.

She eyes the reaper turned to her, his eyes still down towards the carcass, his teeth sinking into the flesh repeatedly. And she knows she can hit the first one, she knows she can move to draw the next arrow before the first arrow even strikes her target. And she eyes the other three reapers, their backs to her, and she knows the one closest to her will be next, and she knows she can silence that one too. But perhaps the third arrow will not silence the next victim. And she knows she will only have time to fire at it without aiming before they are moving.

And so she breathes out once more.

The arrow flies forward whistling through the air, before punching into the reaper’s throat with a splatter of blood. And as the sound of gurgling and choking reaches her ears, the second arrow already sings through the cold morning, she rises, the steady thump of the second arrow piercing the reaper’s back echoing gently across the snow field, her feet already taking her back towards where the rest of the Azgeda warriors lie in wait, and she doesn’t look as the third arrow snakes forward, she doesn’t look as the fourth reaper springs to its feet and she doesn’t look as she rushes through the snow, her feet kicking it up as she pushes through it, the depth clinging to her legs, slowing her movements.

But she does look, she does turn her head for just a moment in horror when she hears the roar and she sees more reapers springing through the trees, the snow flinging up around them, a frozen storm and a fierce mist of white that blurs the beasts that give chase.

And maybe she curses Ontari as she continues to run, maybe she curses the Mountain wherever it may be for creating such foul beasts and maybe she curses the snow in this moment as her lungs burn and her legs move frantically beneath her.

And as she runs, as the air stings against her face and as she reaches behind her for another arrow, she turns for just long enough to release it, and she smiles as she hears the thump and the groan of it finding its mark. And so she runs, her hair billowing out behind her, the boots she wears helping her stay above the deepest parts of the snow, the furs she wears keeping the cold bite from clinging to her and she squints as the sun flashes against her eyes and she grimaces as the glinting of steel shines fiercely before her and she smiles when she dives to the ground, when she twists in the air and when she fires yet another arrow before landing hard on her back. And she smiles when around her Azgeda warriors burst free from where they lay, the snow flinging from their bodies, arrows flying forward. And she smiles when she is pulled to her feet, a warrior lifting her up. And she smiles when she sees Ontari crashing against the lead reaper, her scars glowing in the morning sun, her lips curling into a snarl.

Entani throws her spear and Clarke follows it with her eyes for just long enough to see it smash against a reaper, the end pinning it to the ground.
And so Clarke joins the fight, her knife snaking out to strike and slash at the flesh of reapers, her arrows piercing the leathers that they wear.

And she smiles.

If only because she feels alive.

If only because in this moment, as she is surrounded by Azgeda, she feels like she belongs.

Her brow furrows for a moment as she pulls the furs from Ontari’s shoulder, the red of blood causing her fingers to slip in their motions as she tries to wipe away what she can.

“You know,” she says then, a needle being held to a flame for just a moment, “I don’t think you’re as good at fighting as you make everyone think,” she finishes with a laugh, Ontari’s lips curling into a gentle snarl.

“I will kill you,” she says, her eyes following the needle as it pulls her flesh together.

But Clarke shrugs, a small smile gracing her lips for a moment, and she knows now that Ontari merely jokes. In her own, strange, often violent way.

“Sure,” and she laughs as Ontari glares harder.

The small war party rests for the night, a rocky outcrop their camp for the dark that settles around them. And so Clarke lies back on the furs, her eyes tracing the stars that shine in the night’s sky and the crackling of a warm flame soothing her tired body. And maybe it’s this quiet moment, where others not on watch lose themselves to their own thoughts, when a quiet silence hangs around her, that she lets her mind wander, lets her thoughts turn to the past, turn to the years she lived in the sky. And maybe it hurts for just a bit.

And she wonders if the Ark still breathes, she wonders if her mother still lives. She wonders if Abby ever cried, ever broke down in their quarters at the loss of her daughter. And as her fingers trace the edge of her father’s watch that rests quietly against her wrist, she can’t help but to wonder if Abby would recognise her now, would recognise the scars that adorn her face, the braids that keep her hair from her eyes when she kills to survive and the furs and leathers that wrap her body and keep her steady in the cold that sits on her shoulders.

And maybe, if only for a moment, she thinks that Clarke Griffin never survived coming to the ground.

Maybe she thinks the girl who came to the ground had been a fool to think she could survive.
The horse moves smoothly beneath her, her eyes gazing towards the horizon, and as the wind picks up for a moment, as it blows her hair from her face and as the crisp bite of the cold wakes her mind she thinks she spies the hazy shape of the capital as it emerges out of the distance before her.

Snow rests ever constant to the ground this far north in Azgeda lands, and Clarke can’t help but to think it beautiful as the snow shines softly in the sun and as it rolls over the curves and gentle rises of the land before her. And in the distance, as she squints just a bit, she can even make out the rising of mountains, their peaks white tipped and reaching far up into the sky and for a moment she wishes she had paints, she wishes she had the time and the space to bring a brush to canvas. But for now she feels content to watch as the horse she rides on brings her forward, and so she commits the view before her to memory.

She had set out with just twenty other warriors from Ronto, a message coming from the capital that Kwin Nia had summoned her, and so she had been accompanied by Ontari, ever present by her side, and Entani, always a steady presence herself, and maybe, just for a little moment, she thinks a smile lifts her lips as she thinks Entani may have only come so that she could heal any wounds Ontari would no doubt inflict upon Clarke in her often too enthusiastic lessons.

She smiles gently at the people she passes too, some warriors atop their own horses, their heads nodding in acknowledgement to their clansmen, and she passes villagers, traders and craftsmen, people who move in and out of the capital at a steady pace, and they make way for the horses, children staring wide eyed, their faces awed as the warriors pass.

It doesn’t take too long for the horses to reach the main road, a path cleared of snow, wide enough for two, even three carts abreast to travel down, and so Clarke lets her eyes trace the lines of the capital as it sprawls out before her.

There’s a wall that spreads out in front of her, Azgeda flags draped across it, the fabric swaying in the breeze. And as she eyes the tops of the walls she sees warriors who patrol, the white of their fur shining brilliantly in the sun and she eyes the gates that sit, recessed and strong in the centre of the wall, their doors open wide, a welcoming sign for the weary travellers that near it.

“How many people live here?” she asks out to those near her, her eyes still staring at the stone of the walls she nears.

“Many thousand,” replies Entani, a smile living in her voice.

“Large numbers of warriors are stationed in the capital,” Ontari adds, “it is in the centre of Azgeda lands, and so many stop for rest as they move from village to village, from outpost to outpost.”

“And trade flows freely here,” Entani continues, her head jerking towards the people they pass, “other clans too,” she adds as she eyes a number of people, the furs they wear splashed with reds and rich browns.

“But most trade happens closer to the border. The cold is too much for the weaker clans,” Ontari adds, just a hint of derision colouring her tone.

“It doesn’t look too big,” Clarke adds then, as she eyes the walls that spread out before her, yet she thinks the tops of buildings don’t appear above the walls.

“We don’t build tall structures,” Entani replies, wiping an errant braid from her eyes, “most only have two or three levels, some five — if they are important. We build out, not up,” she spreads her arms out then, “this wall is only part of the outer defence, more lies behind it.”
True to her word, more walls lie behind the first, the roads between them smaller.

“To slow down invaders,” Ontari had said.

And so, as they reach the final set of walls, these ones much larger, the stones weathered, ice clinging to them and the warriors that walk about fierce and eyes ever moving from person to person, and Clarke can’t help but to feel awed, and perhaps just a little nervous as she hands the reins of her horse to a young girl, her hair a crimson, her cheeks reddened from the chill of the wind.

She follows Ontari then, pulling her furs around her shoulders, her hand coming to rest atop her knife for just a moment out of habit, and she returns the smiles the warriors that had travelled with them give, some already moving to where she is sure taverns must lie, and some to the markets in search of new clothing or repairs.

She follows Ontari into the main entrance, Entani close behind them. And she smiles when the warmth of a raging fire greets her, the cold quickly being replaced by a soft blanket of heat and so she loosens the furs around her neck just a bit and she eyes the large fire that blazes in the centre of what she assumes must be an atrium or main hall, she eyes the pillars lining the sides, torches already lit hanging from sconces and she smiles at the few children she sees wandering about, some staring awed at the warriors that stand guard by open doors, some moving in and out of rooms and some talking quietly by the fire. She smiles too at the servants she passes as Ontari takes her deeper into the building.

They come to a stop at the opposite end of the atrium, and as Clarke turns back briefly she can’t help but admire the way the light shines in from the wooden slats that hang open above, that let the morning air breathe through the building, the occasional snow flake drifting in, despite the heat of the burning flame.

“Remember,” Ontari whispers then, turning to face Clarke, “do not speak unless Kwin Nia asks you a question,” and Ontari reaches out briefly, her hands coming to sit around Clarke’s collar as she smoothes the furs, and then Ontari brings a hand up to the blonde braids that crown her face, and Clarke is sure she winces for a moment as Ontari forcefully tucks a strand behind an ear.

“She looks fine, Ontari,” and Clarke is sure Entani roll her eyes by her tone.

“She is my responsibility,” Ontari hisses, her eyes turning back to Clarke’s hair as she carefully before nodding to herself once more.

Clarke turns to face the doors then, two guards flanking either side, their furs much more pristine, the whites of their scars shining prominently against the red of the light cast by the many burning flames.

The doors groan open then, and the guards nod briefly before stepping further aside.

*Here we go.*
The walk forward isn’t far, but she is sure the distance, enough to feel just a moment awkward is purposeful, is a show of force if not also a defensive mechanism, if only because more guards line the walls, enough to intercept any that would try to rush the throne that sits at the far end of the room.

And perhaps Clarke had seen too many vids of evil villains on the Ark, because she finds it surprising as she moves forward that the throne room is lit brightly, fires burning along the walls. And she sees furs, thick and coloured warm greys and gentle whites, that rest against the walls, that keep a quiet blanket of warmth to the large room she walks in.

She sees Nia sitting on her throne then, the large chair backed by what Clarke thinks is a bear head, the white fur draping down across it, providing a gentle cushion for whoever occupies the throne. And her eyes meet Nia’s gaze, and as she sees the small smile that lifts the Kwin’s lips, Clarke can’t help but feel her own return the gentle motion.

The three women come to a stop a few body lengths from the Kwin’s throne, and as Ontari and Entani both drop to their knees Clarke follows the motion quickly, bowing her head as the other women do so.

“Rise,” it’s a quiet utterance, but it carries smoothly to them, and so the three women rise.

Nia lets the silence hang for a moment then, her eyes shifting carefully from face to face before her, and Clarke is sure her heart beats just a bit more frantic in her chest than moments prior.

“Tell me, Ontari,” Nia pauses once more as her eyes snap to Ontari, “how has Clarke performed against the reapers?”

Ontari steps forward for a moment, and perhaps Clarke imagines it, but she thinks she feels the shifting of the guards closest to Nia, if only slightly.

“She has served well in the time under my care,” Ontari answers, her chin lifting proudly.

“And Entani,” Nia’s eyes turn to Entani quickly. And so Entani steps forward.

“She is a capable healer, Kwin Nia.”

Nia nods slowly then, her eyes shifting to Clarke.

“Leave us,” she says then, her gaze still holding Clarke’s. And so she swallows painfully for just a moment as Entani and Ontari both bow their heads before turning and leaving. And it’s not that Clarke feels fear, but perhaps she feels a ten year old once more as her mother stares down at her for something she has broken.

“You may rest easy, Clarke,” Nia smiles then, her gaze flickering over the furs she wears, “you look Azgeda,” she adds, an approving glint to her eyes. “Your scars sit well,” she finishes, a small smile once again finding her lips.

Nia pauses once more, her eyes turning thoughtful for a short while.

“Ontari has treated you well?”

“Yes, Kwin Nia,” she wets her lips just for a moment as Nia raises an eyebrow, “well enough,” Clarke adds nervously.

“Ontari can be harsh,” Nia says in answer, a gentle smile finding its way into her voice. And Clarke
is sure a smile must grace her own lips for a moment.

“Yes,” is all she says.

“I was unsure of what to do with you, Clarke,” she says then, her eyes steadying, “when you were found I knew not if I was to kill you or let you live,” and maybe Clarke feels her heart once again beat just a bit more frantic than before, but despite the blood that pumps through her veins she lifts her chin, her eyes holding Nia’s gaze.

“It would have been a waste,” Nia adds, “you have served well.”

“Thank you, Kwin Nia.”

Nia looks to her left then, her hand raising for just a moment, and Clarke follows the motion with her eyes as a guard steps forward, passing a rolled up piece of paper to her.

“Tell me, Clarke,” Nia unrolls the paper before holding it out for her to see, “why did you have a map to the Mountain?”

Perhaps Clarke knew this would come back to bite her, would come back to ruin what she has forged for herself. But in this moment she thinks all she has is the truth. And so she takes a breath, holds it for a gentle moment before releasing it in a steady exhale, her eyes holding firm to Nia’s gaze.

“I was sent down to the ground,” she sees Nia’s eyebrow raise once more, “I was sent to see if my people could survive on the ground. We thought that the Mountain might have supplies we could use,” and as she finishes she maintains her gaze, her nails digging painfully into her palms.

“You did not know that the Mountain takes my people?”

“No.”

“You did not know the Mountain kills my people?”

“No.”

“And what will you do now that you know the Mountain is evil?”

“I have killed reapers, Kwin Nia, I have fought for Azgeda,” Clarke pauses, “my people abandoned me. They sent me here not knowing if I would live or die,” she steels herself once more, her thoughts raging inside her mind. And maybe she isn’t sure the truth she is next to say is a truth she wishes to face. But she thinks that in this moment it is all she has left, and she knows, deep in the recesses of her mind that what she will next say is a truth she accepted long ago.

But still after all this time, it hurts, it makes her heart clench and her mind cry out gently into the turmoil of her mind.

“I am no longer Clarke Griffin, Kwin Nia.”

“And who are you?”

“Clarke Kom Azgeda.”
Clarke paces back and forth in the room she is given for her stay at the capital, her mind racing as she thinks over the conversation she had with Nia. And she is sure Nia believes her, if only because what she said was a truth, and she had made sure her eyes never wavered, never faltered. But despite the time she has spent on the ground, despite the time she has spent bruised and battered and the time she has spent drenched in the blood of wounded warriors and the time she has spent freezing in the storms that rage through Azgeda lands, she still feels a longing for the Ark. For her friends, for her mother. For her father.

She feels the tears that form then, a gentle wetness that clings to the corner of her eyes and so she sits on the bed, her fingers tracing the curve of the watch that wraps around her wrist.

And she thinks it hurts, she thinks it’s a cruel, whispered thought that winds its way through her mind when she thinks of her father, when she thinks of what he might think of her now, face scarred, hands bloodied from the lives she has taken in defence.

She turns to the window then, the blinds half shut, but she traces the flashes of the clouds that drift past, and she traces the rays of light that hang lower in the sky, the sun beginning to drop past the horizon.

And maybe she thinks her life has been tumultuous, has been unexpected and not what she had wished, not what she had wanted.

But at least she breathes real air.

At least she eats real food.

At least she isn’t dead.

And what of the Ark?

What of the Ark.

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Clarke wakes to the voices of children shouting outside, to the neighing of horses and the chatter of people who move about, and so she rolls over, buries her face into the warm furs of the bed and she tries to relax for a moment longer.

She rests for just a short while, enough for her tired mind to clear and her thoughts to settle and then she rises, the chill of the morning air a comfortable cold that prickles her exposed skin and that settles against her body.

She dresses in light leathers before exiting the room, her feet taking her to where she thinks the bathhouse must be. And she nods to a guard she passes, a smile of his own gracing his lips for just a moment before he jerks his head to the left, already assuming her destination.

She finds a servant carrying a basket further ahead, and so she follows quietly, the patter of her feet echoing around her and mixing with the sounds of a waking people.

She smiles when she feels the warmth of the steam and she smiles when she smells the soft scented
soaps of the bathhouse. And so she enters quietly, reaching out to grasp a washcloth from the pile that lies by the door. She strips quickly, the warmth soothing her muscles, and she steps into the water, the scolding heat a welcome reprieve from the cold.

She dips her head under the water then, for long enough that her lungs burn painfully and then she breaks the surface, pulling her hair from her face as she begins to scrape away the sleep that still clings to her muscles. She lies back after a while, her head resting against the edge of the bath she occupies, the one besides her taken by an older man, his face scarred, his body littered by signs of battle.

She rests for a while, long enough that the water begins to cool just a bit, and so she rises, reaching for a towel that she wraps around herself as the cool of the bathhouse brushes against her naked body.

She lets her eyes follow the lines of baths then, many already occupied, some being refilled and she smiles for just a moment as she sees the scars that dance across faces, some old, some weathered and some young, full of life yet to be lived. And maybe, as she catches a glimpse of her own reflection in the water she thinks she feels a comfort that she fits in here, just another whose face is scarred. Just another who wakes to the chill of a too cold morning.

Just another of Azgeda.

She pads her way to the change rooms then, already drying her hair and she smiles when she sees Ontari, her hair still wet.

“You are still alive,” Ontari says then, her eyes shining quietly in the orange light of a flame that sits by the wall.

And so Clarke laughs for just a moment before turning to face her.

“Yeah, Kwin Nia must like me.”

Clarke’s half way back to her room when a guard intercepts her.

“Kwin Nia wishes to see you in the throne room,” she says holding an arm out to guide Clarke to her destination.

And so Clarke follows the guard, her thoughts wandering where they please until she is guided through the large double doors. And as she enters her eyes narrow for a moment as she sees a number of warriors gathered, Nia pacing back and forth before them as she reads from a piece of paper. And so she quietly takes her place next to Ontari and Entani as they both part for her.

“What’s happening?” she whispers, her eyes following Nia’s movements.

“A messenger came,” Entani replies, her head nodding to a man who stands aside, his leathers dark browns and greens, a tattoo running down the side of his face, “and Kwin Nia called for the captains that were present in the capital.”

“Trikru,” Ontari adds quietly before turning back to Nia.
Nia stops pacing after a short while, her eyes flicking over to the messenger for a moment before she turns to the warriors that stand in front of her.

“The Commander,” and Clarke doesn’t miss the hint of mockery that laces Nia’s tone, and she is sure she feels the quiet growling of the Azgeda warriors that surround her, “has summoned the clans to fight the Mountain.”
Chapter 7

Nia holds her gaze as she dismisses the captains that are present in the throne room, and so Ontari casts her just one quick glance before she and Entani both take their leave amongst the sea of warm greys and sharp whites of the furs that the Azgeda warriors wear.

There’s a moment’s silence that hangs between them both, Nia back in her throne, her gaze holding Clarke’s steadily. She leans forward then, her fingers steepled before her.

“The Mountain,” she pauses, “tell me, Clarke, do you know of any weaknesses?”

“No, Kwin Nia,” Clarke pauses for just a moment to ponder her next words, “I only had a map to where it was.”

“I see,” Nia leans back, her hands coming to rest against the arms of her throne, her fingers splaying out against the furs draped across it. “You will be going with those I send to fight the Mountain.”

And Clarke thought as much.

“Torvun,” Nia calls then, looking to her left, and as Clarke follows her gaze she finds a man stepping from the shadows, barrel chested and hulking, his forehead carrying two horizontal scars running from temple to temple, head shaved with a beard braided and wild covering his chest. Nia turns her gaze back to Clarke for a moment as she eyes her carefully. “Tell me, Clarke. What do you think of the Mountain?”

And so she thinks back to the times she had discussed the Mountain with Ontari and Entani, even with Nia.

“They take our people,” she starts, “they turn some into reapers. They attack our borders. They kill us,” she finishes.

“They use tech, Clarke,” Nia pauses again, her head tilting for a moment, and perhaps it should have dawned on Clarke sooner, that to turn a people into a crazed, deranged monster would require something more. “I think they are more alike with your old people. In the stars.”

“You wish for me to spy on them?” she asks then.

“Not quite,” again Nia pauses, for just long enough that the moment treads into the uncomfortable, “you may perhaps understand them more than any other. Perhaps you are the most valuable person in all the twelve clans.”

“I see.”

Well, that’s not a lot of pressure.

“You will understand them. You will fight them. You will kill them,” Nia leans forward once more, “and Torvun,” she looks back to the beast of a man, “he will guard you. He will follow your orders. And you will return to Azgeda.”

And perhaps Clarke senses the mission she has been given, maybe she senses the careful wording and the quiet threat that lingers in Nia’s words. But she has no love for a people that would turn man
and women into beast, into unthinking creatures. And so she lifts her chin, her gaze steady as it holds Nia’s.

“I have no love for the Mountain, Kwin Nia,” Clarke says, “I will serve Azgeda proudly.”

And perhaps can be forgiven for the shiver that runs down her spine as Nia dismisses her, as she is followed by Torvun and as the cold greets her once she exits into the bright glint of the morning sun.

But she is Azgeda now.

And her people are either long dead, or are trapped in the sky with no way for her to reach them. Right?

“So…” she turns to Torvun who rides besides her, “you have to do what I say?” she asks, her eyes tracing the scars that line his forehead. And she smiles just a bit when she sees him smile, a shrug lifting his broad shoulders.

“To an extent,” and maybe Clarke assumed too much when she first met him, if only because Torvun seems much friendlier than one would expect, “but in battle I would protect you over any orders you give,” he pauses for just a moment as his eyes scan Clarke, “I would guess,” he leans closer, his voice dropping in level, “that I am better at fighting than you,” and he laughs at the mock offence that colours the gasp Clarke lets out. But, as she eyes the quiver strapped to his horse, the large sword strapped to his back, the scars that litter his hands and the careful way his eyes track the horizon, she thinks that Torvun perhaps speaks a truth.

“So…” she pauses once more, her eyes turning back to the horizon, squinting for just a moment as the sun catches her eyes, “you are one of Kwin Nia’s guards?”

“Yes,” he answers, his eyes turning back to her.

“Yes. It is an honour to be selected to guard the Kwin.”

Clarke hums a response then before turning her attention elsewhere, Torvun content to let the silence sit between them.

They had set out hours earlier from the capital, their numbers almost 300, each warrior atop a horse, supplies strapped to saddles, some warriors even guiding other pack horses, their backs laden with extra provisions. And as Clarke eyes the convoy that spreads out before and behind her she can’t help but feel just a slight strumming in her chest, the gentle beating of her heart and the steady excited fraying of her nerves.

“Why didn’t Kwin Nia send more warriors?” she asks then, her mind turning to the many hundreds she had seen throughout the capital.
Ontari turns at her question then, her own horse walking beside Clarke’s, “we will meet perhaps a
couple hundred more during the journey,” she answers, “but sending a larger force would leave Azgeda
borders weakened, and large numbers do not move swiftly,” she finishes.

“The clans will also send warriors,” Entani answers from behind them, “so numbers will be greater.”

“Makes sense,” Clarke hums to herself then as she wipes a stray hair from her eyes.

A cool breeze buffets her then, and so she pulls her furs tighter around herself, her eyes gazing out to
the horizon, the sun a lonely beacon that stretches the shadows out beneath her.

“How far away is the Mountain?”

“From here?” Ontari looks to her, and so Clarke nods once, “three days at this pace. But we travel to
a village first. Ton DC. So four.”

And so Clarke sighs just once, the days quickly counted in her mind, and so she settles back in the
saddle, her fingers brushing against the horse’s mane that blows in the breeze.

She slinks forward, her boots softening the crunch of the snow beneath her and she pauses as the
breeze shifts, as her hair blows out around her and so she drops quietly into the snow. Ontari eyes
her quickly, an eyebrow raised as Torvun scans the horizon.

They hear the gentle hoot then, a quick birdcall that sounds out from across the field.

“Entani is in position,” Ontari whispers, “we target the largest one when they flee.”

And so the three of them rise slowly, their bows readied, their arrows aiming at the target before
them.

It takes only a moment for the wind to die down, and then they see the quick explosion of snow as
Entani leaps out from across the field, her spear already flying through the air. Clarke tracks the
largest target as it leaps from the spear before bolting away, and it’s just a moment’s pause for a clear
shot, and then she releases, two other arrows joining hers as they whistle through the air. And she
grimaces for only a moment as she hears the pained yelp and the thudding of the arrows as they
pierce flesh and then Entani reaches the deer, her chest heaving, knife in hand, already in the motion
of slicing its throat.

“Do we win something if we have the largest deer?” Clarke jokes, already bending down to tie the
deer’s feet, her hair a frizzled mess of braids and ice snow.

And Torvun snorts as Ontari replies all too seriously.

“Pride and glory for village Ronto.”

The walk back to the camp isn’t far, and as they make the final push across an empty field, the snow
beneath their feet icy, Clarke eyes the horizon, her gaze falling to the orange pinks that bleed into the snow from the setting sun and as the last rays of light grace her face she smiles for a moment at the beauty of colours as they wash the ground in a gentle warmth.

“Trikru live in the trees, right?” she asks, turning briefly to Entani who helps carry the other half of the deer.

“Yes, they live amongst the trees.”

“Ever been?” and Entani nods her head once.

“Yes, but I have not left Azgeda for many years,” she pauses as she thinks back, “not since before the current Commander ascended and before the Coalition formed.

“You haven't wanted to travel more?” Clarke asks.

“No, and I am sure the Commander watches any Azgeda that move through the lands. She does not trust us, and so I do not wish to move through Trikru lands feeling like a hunted beast,” and Clarke turns to Ontari as she hears a scoff.

“The Commander speaks of trust. Yet she gives us none,” Torvun answers from where he walks in front of them, his bulk helping to clear the snow in their way.

“How long has she held Prince Roan prisoner?” Clarke asks, her thoughts drifting to previous conversations.

“Since she became Commander,” Ontari answers as she readjusts her bow and quiver across her shoulders, “perhaps almost six years.”

“We should demand that the Commander free him or we break from the Coalition,” Entani says.

“It is not that simple,” Torvun replies, turning briefly to check on the three women behind him, “we would lose the trade of some of the less useless clans.”

And Clarke laughs briefly as she hears Ontari scoff once more, “we can survive.”

She’s glad that Azgeda mastered the art of sharing body warmth, if only because she is sure she would freeze as the chill of nightfall descends upon the many warriors that huddle together by the fires that dot the rocky outcrop of their temporary camp. She murmurs a words of thanks then as Ontari sits down besides her, handing a bowl full of cooked deer and broth to her and Torvun, Entani already bowl in hand.

“You know,” Clarke begins as she moves closer to Ontari’s side, pulling the furs around herself, “I think you’re starting to like me, Ontari.”

“Perhaps,” and Ontari lets the warmth they share spread closer as she leans into the Clarke’s body, bringing a spoon to her lips, “now be quiet and eat, Clarke.”

The four of them sit in silence then, the gentle scraping of bowls and spoons mixing with the quiet murmurs of tired warriors that huddle by the fires the only sound that sits around them.
Clarke wakes to a gentle squeezing of her shoulder and the still dark of an early morning and so her eyes open to Torvun’s face above hers.

“We have the watch,” he says before stepping away, and so Clarke runs her fingers across her face briefly before she pulls herself from the tangle of limbs and bodies of Ontari and Entani.

Clarke finds herself perched atop a large rock that juts out from the ground, the emptiness of the Azgeda snow fields lying before her and in the distance the faint haze of trees that mark the border of Azgeda and Trikru lands. She turns her gaze back, deeper into Azgeda territory then when she hears the gentle sound of a horn that echoes across the snow and she squints for just a moment as she sees the soft orange of flames as they sway smoothly in the dark.

“More Azgeda forces,” Torvun says, “we number over half a thousand now,” he continues, a hand combing through his beard, his furs pulled up over his head to shield from the night’s freeze.

“It seems more than half a thousand. Kwin Nia wishes to send a message to the other clans?” she asks, her gaze following the fires that move closer.

“Yes.”

“Who will command all the clans?” Clarke asks, her thoughts turning to the armies that will soon converge.

“The captains will command those under them, but the Commander will give the orders,” he answers, his eyes turning thoughtful for a moment.

“Rules of the Coalition?” Clarke says.

“Yes, the Commander controls everything,” he says, a gruff note of contempt colouring his tone.

Clarke hums a gentle sound then, letting another revelation of the iron fist the Commander rules with sink into her mind before she turns her eyes back to the border, her gaze tracing the tree tops she can just glimpse through the gentle light of the moon.

“Do you think Trikru is watching us?” she voices after a passing of time, her eyes still tracing the trees through the haze as wisps of snow dance in the breeze that lives across the field.

“Yes,” Torvun says, his own gaze turning to the border, “perhaps there are even Trikru scouts across the border now.”

“They’re allowed to do that?”

“Yes,” he shrugs broadly, “the Coalition allows free passage across the clan borders without issue. Only large numbers of warriors are forbidden.”

“Besides for when it pleases the Commander?” Clarke asks, her gaze turning back briefly to the flames she sees approaching slowly.

“Yes. Unless it pleases the Commander.”

“Do you think that we should break from the Coalition?” she muses it out loud, an answer not really
expected, yet she finds the question that lingers between them both a curious one, something that sets her mind into a thoughtful journey.

“It has been useful,” there’s a gentle pause as Torvun scratches his beard, the careful scraping a soft rhythm to the cold that beats around them. “But unfair for Azgeda and some other clans,” he continues, “and I think if we break from the Coalition that Prince Roan would be executed,” his eyes turn back to Clarke’s then, a gentle fire burning in their depths.

The silence once again stretches out between them and so Clarke lets her gaze shift from the approaching Azgeda force and the border, and as she stares out past the trees she can’t help but wonder, just for a moment, what life would have been like if the Mountain never turned evil, if what she thinks must be survivors never took control, never waged a grotesque war upon the clans. Her fingers find the edges of the watch then, the softened leather a comfort and a reminder of times past, but perhaps she finds that it doesn’t quite sting as forcefully anymore, and perhaps it only bruises her heart, only tightens just a bit around her mind. Perhaps it doesn’t break her anymore.

“Have you ever fought against the Mountain?” she pauses for a moment as she looks to Torvun, but she sees his eyes turning mournful, a bittersweet image living somewhere within the scars of his forehead, “—sorry, you don’t— I didn’t mean to intrude,” she adds quietly.

“It is ok,” he says, “my brother was taken by the Mountain many years ago. It will be a good day when we destroy it,” he finishes, a timber just a bit stronger filling his voice.

And so Clarke nods her head, her eyes scanning the snow field briefly before she looks into the sky, the stars a quiet presence of familiarity that soothes her cold body.

“What do you think changed?” she voices once again, her mind turning to the Mountain, to what she knows. And as she sorts the information she thinks the Mountain must have existed since the bombs fell, that it must have terrorised the clans nearby, must have created reapers for generations. “Why do you think the Commander is willing to face the Mountain now?”

Torvun runs a hand over his face briefly, “she must think she has an advantage,” he pauses, turns to look out across the border once more, “she is no fool.”

Daybreak comes too cold and too slow for Clarke, but she wakes to Ontari’s arm wrapped around her waist, Entani sandwiched between her own body and Torvun, and a large fur spread over them, enough to keep the gentle, constant snow fall off their chilled bodies. And maybe she wishes for the tents that are packed, yet she knows the leathers would freeze in the cold of Azgeda, and so perhaps she can look forward to the warmer weather of Trikru lands, if only because she thinks a more comfortable place to sleep will be found.

She sits then, and as she glances around she sees the warriors who had watch walking through the camp, waking the many they pass, and she smiles at the waking faces and the drilled actions of those who already begin to pack, already begin to prepare for the last march out of the snow fields.

Ontari wakes quickly, and as she sits she pulls the furs off the four of them and Clarke smiles for a moment at the quiet curse Entani lets escape as the cool bite of the air washes over her face.

“We move,” is all Ontari says before she is up, moving to pack what belongings they have.
The war party, now numbering over half a thousand wakes much more quickly than Clarke would have imagined, and as she finishes strapping on her quiver of arrows she finds Ontari leading their horses.

“War paint,” Entani says then, holding out a jar of the thick white paste they wear, and so Clarke takes it, a quiet word of thanks in exchange.

She dips her fingers into it then and the cool of the paste clings to them in a thick blanket, and as she brings her finger tips up to her face she closes her eyes and she feels her breathing settle, her body steady and her mind focus. And she thinks she likes this moment as the white spreads across her cheeks, she thinks she enjoys the way it clings to her skin and she knows she embraces this moment as the paint washes her face a deathly white.

And so she opens her eyes.

She smiles when a sea of deathly white spreads out before her. She smiles as the sun shines brilliantly across faces, scarred and fierce. Clarke smiles when she reaches for her horse, and she smiles when she swings herself upright, mounting the saddle and she smiles as she feels other Azgeda warriors around her do the same. And she smiles as the warriors move out, a quiet beating to their footfalls and the snow a solid crunch beneath their weight.

And so she smiles.

_Azgeda is coming._

The journey across the snow field takes half the morning, the sun still a shining beacon to guide the warriors. Clarke rides near the front of the war band, Ontari a horse length in front while Torvun and Entani ride besides her. And as Clarke traces the trees that begin to emerge from the haze, just a moment more defined as they reach up out of the ground, the snow slowly giving way to dirt, she turns to Entani, her eyes glancing around her briefly.

“Whose orders do we follow besides the Commanders?” Clarke whispers it quietly, the silence that surrounds the warriors just a moment too uncomfortable, the stillness to the wind just a bit too stifling.

“We will follow Ontari’s orders,” comes the whispered answer, Entani’s own eyes falling to Ontari’s carefully swaying back.

“Oh…” perhaps Clarke isn’t entirely convinced, if only because Ontari doesn’t seem to be the most experienced, and she isn’t the oldest.

“Would you disobey her orders?” Entani adds, an eyebrow raising slowly.

_Probably not._

“Good point,” she finishes, her eyes once more turning forward.

The war band comes to a careful stop a small distance from the first number of trees, the ground beneath them more dirt than snow, careful pools of melting ice clinging listlessly to the stone that sticks up, jagged and sharp.
Ontari rides to the front, Clarke and Torvun still following closely, Entani taking up the rear. And as the group of four part those at the front Ontari raises her hand before turning her horse around to look back at the war band.

“We enter enemy lands now,” she pauses, her voice echoing out as she eyes those before her, “do not let yourself be ambushed. And we watch for attacks,” and again she pauses, her eyes glinting in the sun, “We watch for attacks from reapers or from others,” and the message is understood, a gentle ripple of confirmation spreading through the Azgeda warriors.

And so she turns forward once more her hand dropping by her side, and then a horn is sounded, the deep baritone of it echoing against the trees and sending a cool chill through Clarke’s bones, and she runs her hand over her horse’s neck quickly as its head jerks to the sound before settling.

They proceed carefully through the trees, the white of their faces blending horribly with the dark browns of the trees they find themselves between, yet Clarke is sure that the scene must be fearsome and intimidating, the whites of their faces a clear sign that Azgeda forces move. And so she continues forward, her eyes scanning as far forward as she can see, her fingers resting just close enough to the blade strapped to her thigh, the quiver and bow strapped to her back a soft weight that steadies her thoughts.

They ride through leafless trees for a long while, the crunch beneath the horse’s hooves and the occasional neighing all that is heard above the careful sounds of the war band as they move forward. Warriors begin spreading out too, archers and scouts moving further away from the main group as they move further and further into Trikru lands.

She hears a quiet shriek of an eagle from behind her then, and the war band comes to a stop.

“Movement to the left,” a warrior whispers, and in turn arrows are drawn quickly, warriors readying weapons, some dismounting before slinking behind trees.

And Clarke is sure her heart is beating faster, she is sure her fingers twitch, yet her arm holds steady as she breathes in gently, her arm holding her bow out before her, her eyes focusing into the distance.

And she sees the figures that begin to emerge from the few trees present, she sees the swaying of riders atop horses and she hears the quiet sounds of hooves hitting the ground. And so an Azgeda warrior further left turns from where she perches halfway up a tree, her hand moving before her, an index finger hooking, her thumb pointing up.

_Trikru._

And so the warriors relax, just a bit, if only because an attack from Trikru is unlikely. They wait as the small Trikru force nears, and as they come within talking distance Ontari moves her horse forward to meet with those that have come to greet them. And Clarke finds that she recognises the Trikru that come before her. She recognises the dark skinned man, his head shaved, his eyes ever careful as he appraises the Azgeda that spread out before him, she recognises the leader, the ends of her bronzed hair a dirty blonde, her cheeks a sharp contrast to the dark smudges of war paint that surround her eyes. And she recognises the younger warrior too, the woman Ontari had insulted, and perhaps Clarke smirks at the memory. And she is sure she hears the few Azgeda from Ronto who accompany them chuckle quietly too as they recognise those before them.

And so Ontari raises a hand in greeting, her body a careful slouch in her saddle, her head tilted to the side just a bit in thought.

“I see the reapers did not kill you,” she says, her hand coming to rest against the hilt of her sword and Clarke sees the Trikru eye the movement carefully.
The leader nudges her horse forward slowly then, her chin lifting for a moment.

“We are to escort you to Ton DC,” she says then, “on the Commander’s orders, of course.”

“Of course,” Ontari answers, and Clarke is sure she hears the rolling of her eyes through tone alone. And so Ontari raises a hand, signalling for Azgeda to follow, and as Ontari moves further from the Trikru leader she calls over her shoulder.

“Kwin Nia sends her regards,” and Clarke is sure she sees the Trikru leader’s fingers tighten on her sword, she is sure a fire burns just a bit brighter in her eyes.

The Azgeda war band continues moving further into Trikru lands, and as they pass, the Trikru merely keep their horses steady, and so the Azgeda flow around them, a sea of white that morphs around the dark of the Trikru paint, and as Clarke passes the younger warrior their eyes meet for a moment, the fierce brown that stares at her a piercing gaze that holds her own for just a moment.

The trees begin to turn more brown, the richness to them a bit more warm as they move further from the border. And as dirt is replaced by the careful greens of plant and vegetation Clarke can’t help but to let her eyes gaze in wonder as she takes in the way the leaves dance and sway in the wind that breathes though the trees and the way the sun filters through the branches that hang overhead.

And as she looks out around her she sees that the Azgeda forces have spread out into smaller parties, perhaps twenty to thirty strong, each one moving in the general direction, yet far enough apart to move quickly if ambushed. And her eyes find the Trikru that ride off to the left, just ten that follow close, their eyes warily eyeing the few Azgeda that ride by them. And Clarke is sure that now, with the trees more dense, taller and more giant than at the border, that Trikru watch the Azgeda, scouts who remain hidden, ever watchful. And so she turns to Torvun and Entani who ride besides her.

“We’re being watched,” she says, her eyes quickly moving to the trees once more.

“Yes,” Torvun answers.

“Trikru will be in the trees above,” Entani continues, “that is why Ontari has split us up. If we are attacked the Trikru will not be able engage all of us at once.”

They continue to ride in a careful quiet for the remainder of the day, the occasional conversation flowing between the Azgeda forces, the Trikru an ever constant quiet presence that watches them and that moves between the Azgeda forces and Clarke is sure that the Trikru count their numbers, assess their strengths and their weaknesses.

And so she holds the gaze of the younger warrior when she approaches the party Clarke is with, and she feels those around her stiffen just a bit at the new presence that joins them.

“You aren’t subtle, you know?” Clarke says, her voice breaking the tense silence that hangs around them. And she sees the woman eye her carefully, her gaze moving from the knife strapped to her
thigh and then to the quiver and bow across her back.

“Know,” comes the answer.

And so she rolls her eyes briefly, “Octavia, right?”

“Yeah,” and she meets Clarke’s gaze, her own holding a guarded shadow.

“Clarke,” she says.

“I don’t care,” Octavia replies, already moving away.

*What a bitch.*

“Float yourself,” Clarke whispers out to the retreating figure, her eyes already falling to the trees that surround her.

“What?” Octavia turns her head quickly, her eyes staring at Clarke.

“Nothing.”

Night comes just a bit less cold the further south they travel, and as they continue to pass amongst trees Clarke can’t help but to feel awed as they continue to grow taller, continue to grow more giant as she rides past. They come to a clearing then, trees lining the edges, some huddled together where their seeds fell and so the Azgeda forces spread out quietly, tents already being erected, horses being cared for.

Clarke brings her horse to a rest near the edge of the clearing, Ontari already setting up the tent as Entani unpacks supplies.

“I’m joining the hunting party,” Clarke calls out quietly, already unslinging her bow and so she begins moving towards the few others that prepare for a hunt, Torvun close by her side.

She’s surprised to find Octavia, whose eyes follow her carefully, already moving with her, a bow in her own hand. And so their eyes meet for a moment before they begin moving forward with the other Azgeda hunters, the occasional disgruntled gaze being thrown towards the young Trikru warrior.

The moon hangs lowly in the night’s sky, a quiet breeze and the gentle rustling of trees the only sounds that reach Clarke’s ears. And she waits. She waits until the wind breathes once more before she moves forward, her footfalls dampened by the furs on her feet, her eyes trained on the deer not far from her. Torvun follows close behind, his eyes turning from the deer to Octavia and the surrounding forest with every move they make.

Clarke stops then, her bow slowly being drawn and she rises, just a bit, enough for the arrow to clear the bush that spreads out between her and the target, and her eyes catch the motion of Octavia as she
also draws her own bow.

The wind picks up, a stronger whistling that blows an errant strand from her braids and so Clarke waits, she lets the wind whip her face and fill her nose with the scents of the forest. And she feels the shift. She feels the dying of the wind for just a moment, and so she holds her breath, waits until her heart beats. Until it pauses. And then she releases. Her arrow whistles forward, Octavia’s quickly following, and as they both spin through the air, as they impact the deer and as they silence its cry of pain she stands, her bow slung over her shoulder once more.

She reaches the deer quickly, already bending down to tie its legs, all the while ignoring Octavia, their previous conversation still moving through her mind. But as she looks up briefly she finds the woman watching her carefully, the dark paint that smears her face a cradle for the light that dances within her eyes from the moon light.

It takes them just a short while to secure the deer before starting their walk back to the camp and so Clarke lets her mind wander to what will soon become her life. Her thoughts turn to the Mountain that must lie in wait and that must cast its gaze over the clans and she thinks and she wonders just for a moment whether the people inside are like those of the Ark. If only because they use technology. If only because they don’t live amongst the clans. But she thinks they must be a cruel, evil people to turn a person into a reaper. To be willing to even consider such a thing. And so she casts the thought from her mind, her eyes focusing on the foliage that moves around her. And Clarke looks behind her quickly only to see that Octavia stays quiet behind her, half the deer held over her shoulder as she follows Clarke’s lead, her eyes gazing intently at her.

They near the camp, the smell of already roasting meats reaching her and so she smiles at the warmth she can just feel across her body from the fires that rage quietly. Torvun walks ahead, his eyes ever careful as he scans the trees. And it only takes them a short while, but just as they reach the edge of the clearing he stops. His hand raising quietly before he drops to a knee. And Clarke hears it too. She thinks she hears the rustling of leaves and the bending of branches not from the wind. And she thinks she hears the camp react to what must be coming too, if only because noise cuts out suddenly, if only because eyes turn towards the trees and weapons are reached for.

And she hears it. She hears the deep growling and the heavy footfalls. And she knows. A horn is sounded then, cries of warning and of direction rising above the cacophony of motion. And then there’s an explosion of activity, of frantic movement and moving bodies.

Clarke drops the deer, already reaching for her bow, already running to the Azgeda forces at the clearing, Torvun quickly by her side, his broad sword drawn. And as she burst from the trees she comes face to face with an Azgeda warrior, bow already drawn.

“Get down!” the warrior yells, and so Clarke and Torvun drop as the warrior releases his arrow, and so it whistles overhead and she hears the thumping and the gurgle of blood.

And she turns to see a reaper clutching at his throat and so Clarke only spares him one quick glance before she is rising to her feet, her eyes searching for a target. She finds reapers bursting from the undergrowth charging for the Azgeda and she sees Octavia running to where the few Trikru group together, sword already bloodied.

Clarke fires an arrow then at a reaper that charges the Trikru warrior and she smirks as Octavia rounds on it, only to find her arrow embedded in its chest. And then Clarke’s running, she fires another arrow off into the trees, and she’s vaulting over a tent before drawing her knife. A reaper lunges at her only to be intercepted by Torvun who snares it with a large hand, his fingers around its throat before he throws the reaper to the ground, his sword slicing its throat in a smooth arc.
She bounds over the falling body of a reaper, two arrows piercing its chest and then she charges another, this one looming over an Azgeda, a gash running across her cheek and so Clarke snarls as she drives her knife through it's back before pushing it behind her, already feeling Torvun moving to finish it. She reaches down quickly, her chest heaving and she grasps the warriors arm, pulling the warrior to her feet, and a quick smile is all that is exchanged before both women are running to join other fights that rage on around them.

She finds Ontari smiling wickedly in the pale moon light, the white of her face dripping with the blood of those she has killed. Ontari ducks then before throwing the reaper over her shoulder as Entani rams her spear through its chest. And both women turn quickly to see Clarke and so they nod once before they again turn back to the reapers that attack.

The ambush is dealt with swiftly and brutally, the reapers far out numbered by the Azgeda. And as Clarke removes her knife from the still twitching body of a reaper she casts her gaze around her to find Azgeda already finishing off the last of the reapers. And so she smiles briefly, a relief flooding her when she finds a lack of white faces and grey furs amongst the dead on the ground.

She holds a needle to a fire then, more torches and camp fires giving light to the few wounded Azgeda that sit as healers see to them.

“You are lucky,” she says as she begins pulling needle and thread through the wound, “you could have lost an arm,” and she smiles when the warrior merely shrugs his free shoulder.

“We lost none,” Ontari says then, sitting down besides Clarke, “just a handful wounded.”

“Good,” she hums in response, her eyes still tracking the needle, “I’m surprised more Trikru didn’t come.”

“I think they let the reapers through,” Ontari sneers, her eyes falling to the Trikru that sit apart from the Azgeda forces, “to test us,” and the warrior before Clarke grunts his agreement with what Ontari says.

“Yeah,” Clarke answers, her thoughts turning to Octavia and how she had been following her closely, “I don’t trust them.”

“I do not trust them either,” Ontari finishes.

And so Clarke turns her gaze from the wounded warrior towards where the Trikru sit. And as Clarke lets her gaze settle she finds Octavia sitting on a tree stump running a whetstone over her sword, the young warrior's eyes gazing intently upon her.
Chapter 8

It’s a warm, comfortable embrace that pulls Clarke into a state of quiet wakefulness. She feels the press of an arm around her waist and the tickle of her against her face. And so she lets her mind catch up to her wandering thoughts for just a small while, for just long enough that she can focus her ears to the outside of the tent, to the sounds of Azgeda warriors on watch moving quietly through the night and the soft calls of animals that live in the moments when the sun sleeps.

And so her eyes open to the dark braids of Entani snaking their way across the furs they share and Ontari, arm wrapped around her waist, face snuggled into her shoulders, and so she sits up, just a quiet movement, the dark of the night still clinging to the trees. The tent she sleeps in drapes lowly over the three women, a small thing, homely, comfortable and quickly erected. And so she stands, just a small stoop to her back before she treads her way across the small space to the tent flap, and as she ducks out she meets the eyes of Torvun who sits near the entrance, a pile of arrows at his feet, feathers being prepared for use as fletching in his lap.

“I’m just going for a walk,” Clarke says, her eyes looking around briefly and so Torvun stands, a quiet nod to Clarke before they begin making their way through the camp.

They wend their way between the tents, the occasional head of those still awake nodding in greeting as they pass. The trees this far south of Azgeda lands are wide, their bark a rich brown with a gentle blanket of moss that shines just a bit in the moonlight that passes through the clouds overhead, and as Clarke scans the treetops she can’t help but enjoy the way the light dapples through the leaves and how the branches seem to hold the swaying of the trees in the wind and the air that breathes around her.

She walks not far from the the camp, just far enough that the trees begin to obscure the fires that burn around the perimeter and so she pauses, casts her gaze around for a place to rest and she catches Torvun’s eye for a moment before she sits, her back to tree that reaches up into the night’s sky.

As she gazes out around her she thinks she can feel the swaying of the branches that spread out through the forest and she feels Torvun stand close by, his gaze, she is sure, moving around them, ever careful, ever watchful and ever mindful of their surrounding.

And it’s peaceful, she thinks. It’s a quiet moment, where others rest, some wander and the weary let their thoughts drift to times less fraught with danger. But for now she finds herself content to just be. If only because she knows not what will happen tomorrow when they arrive at Ton DC.

And so she casts her gaze skyward, and maybe she wonders what it would be like to still be floating through space, another lonely star that moves against the dark of the night.

A comfortable quiet rests around Clarke, her mind happy to wander aimlessly as thoughts flit in and out of existence. She pulls out her knife then, a soft glint from the moon shining in her eyes as she gazes upon the blade, the length a gentle curve that comes to a sharp point. And she thinks she spies her reflection as she twists the knife just enough to more fully capture the moon, and maybe she thinks herself aged, more lived, more careful. If only because the eyes that look back seem tired, seem just a bit more careful, just a bit more different. And she runs a finger over the scar that graces
her forehead then, the shape etched into her skin a careful reminder of the life she now lives and the one she was forced to leave behind, but as her fingers trace down her cheeks, as they follow the ridges that line her face maybe she can’t help but to feel a comfort sit warmly within her. If only because she doesn’t float, lifeless and cold and broken through the vastness of space.

She runs her hand over the ground beneath her, clearing a space large enough for what she intends to do. And so she smiles softly as she drags her knife through the dirt, a gentle arc that stretches out before her. Her eyes trace the structure she paints with the cold bite of her brush. She traces the turning segments of the Ark, she draws the windows that shine, stars to the outside world that was her life, and she colours the sun as it flashes against the metal of what once was her home. And maybe she smiles. Maybe she cries, and maybe she feels a sadness that clings somewhere further back in her mind than she can reach.

She isn’t sure how long she sits, she isn’t sure how long she looks at what she has drawn. But she thinks it long enough, and so she returns her knife to her thigh and she kicks the image away, lets the dirt and the leaves and the sticks steal the image from her mind and from her gaze.

And then she leans back, her head resting against the tree, the moss a cold pillow for her tired mind.

And she lets her gaze turn upwards.

“Trikru approach,” Torvun murmurs, his body moving to stand by her side and so she rises, her hand falling to the knife strapped to her thigh.

She hears the careful approach, steps not intended to be hidden, and so she relaxes for just a bit. She sees two figures emerge from the shadows then, their eyes reflecting the moon light that breaks through the thick branches that hang overhead.

The figures stop a short distance from them, their eyes meeting for a long, short pause.

“Did you want something?” Clarke asks, her eyes narrowing as she recognises Octavia, habitual scowl in place.

There’s a moment’s silence as the Trikru let her words hang between them.

“It is dangerous to be out in the forest at night,” the Trikru leader says then, her eyes focusing upon Torvun who stands close to Clarke. “Especially for those less familiar to the trees,” she finishes.

And so Clarke’s eyebrow quirks up briefly, her feet planting just a moment more firmly beneath her.

“It’s only dangerous if enemies are close,” she snarks back, her eyes snapping to the woman who stands before her, “and we’re friends here, aren’t we? Azgeda and Trikru, the other clans, too.”

And so the women tilts her head briefly in thought, her eyes raking over Clarke’s figure, and she is sure the woman’s gaze focuses on the hand she still has resting upon her knife. And Torvun moves to stand more fully by her side then, his feet subtle as he shifts a branch that lies close to their feet, his own hand coming to rest by the knife on his hip.

“Perhaps it would be best if you leave,” Torvun says then, his eyes shifting between Octavia who stands back further in the shadows, and the leader before them.
“We are allies,” the leader holds her hands up slowly, palms facing both of them before she crosses her arms. “I am Anya,” she adds, her eyes moving to Clarke’s.

“How about your friend over there comes out of the shadows then, Anya,” and his words come out low and gruff, his gaze focusing on Octavia who merely shrugs before stepping forward, her eyes still trained on Clarke.

“It’s ok, Torvun,” Clarke says, her arm coming to rest upon his briefly, “we’re allies after all,” she finishes, yet she is sure she feels her heart beat a moment more firmly in her chest as Octavia continues to hold her gaze.

“You speak the truth,” Anya says, a smirk lifting her lips as she turns her attention back to Torvun, a scowl spreading across his face, his eyes careful in their movements. And so Anya lets the silence once again spread out between them before she looks back to Clarke. “Octavia says you killed a reaper that was about to attack her,” Anya continues, “I thank you.”

Clarke’s eyes narrow then, and she is sure there is more to this conversation, more to this meeting than just a shared sleepless night and of giving thanks.

“Speaking of truth and reapers,” she says then, “we’re in Trikru territory now,” she pauses, her chin lifting as she meets Anya’s gaze, “did you let them through? To test us?”

“Would it matter if we did?” comes the reply, a shoulder lifting as a smirk spreads across her lips. “No one died. And now there are less reapers that roam these lands.”

“We’re supposed to be allies fighting together,” she retorts, a slow burn of indignation building within her mind, “not hiding things from each other. Not trying to get the other killed,” yet she adds silently.

“Then I would guess,” Anya pins her with a fierce look, her eyes shining in the moon light as Octavia takes a measured step closer, “that you and I both are hiding things from the other.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Clarke says, her tone a biting cold, and as her fingers close around the handle of her knife, she feels Torvun’s body edging closer to her.

And so Anya’s own gaze follows the movements for just a moment before she shrugs just once.

“It would seem that we both have secrets, Clarke.”

The walk back to camp is a tense, quiet affair, Torvun’s eyes continuously moving as he peers into the dark that hangs around them, Clarke’s own hand resting against her knife, the words that were exchanged filling her mind.

It’s a slight relief then, as they break out of the tree line, the fires of the camp shedding away the dark of the night, and so Clarke nods to a sentry she passes, already heading back to her tent.
Morning comes swiftly, the sun a warmer companion than days prior. And so the Azgeda forces break camp quickly, their tents being packed with a familiar practiced ease. Clarke finds herself sitting on a small stool, her fingers dipping into a jar of white war paint once more, and so she closes her eyes as the cool bite of the paint spreads across her cheeks first, the raised lines of the scars that slice across her face a familiar presence. She smears the paint across her forehead, and her face is covered quickly before she opens her eyes to see Ontari doing the same, and when their eyes meet a smile is shared between them before they both stand, slinging bows and quivers over shoulders, strapping supplies to their horses.

They ride more swiftly now, the proximity to Ton DC spurring on the Azgeda forces, and so they push their horses just a bit harder than before. And perhaps Clarke shouldn’t be surprised when she feels the trees become even larger, the land flashing past her more greens and yellows than the dark browns, greys and cool whites that she is familiar with.

And the war party comes to a gentle incline then, the horses slowing in pace as they begin a careful trot further into Trikru lands. She notices the trees begin to spread out for a moment too, their trunks keeping a distance between them greater than usual, and so, as her horse breaks through the tree line, she can’t help but to let a small gasp escape her lips at the view that spreads out before her.

She finds the Azgeda forces moving out along the ridgeline, a small valley spreading out before her gaze. Ontari comes to a stop besides her, their horses neighing quietly in the warmth of the sun that brushes against the ground.

“The Mountain,” Ontari says, her hand pointing out into the distance, and so Clarke follows the outstretched hand, and in the distance she sees the careful rising of the Mountain in the distance, a soft haze blurring it just a bit. “We are close to Ton DC now,” Ontari finishes, already nudging her horse down the slope, the Azgeda warriors quickly following her lead.

They rest for midday, the sun sitting high in the sky. And Clarke finds that many Azgeda begin to remove their furs, the leather of their tops enough for the wind that breathes a bit warmer in these lands.

And so she smiles when Entani flops down by her side, the other healer’s furs already removed, her arms bare to the elements.

“I do not like this weather,” she grumbles then, “it is hot,” she continues as she lies back in the grass, her eyes closed to the sun.

“It’s not that bad,” Clarke laughs, and perhaps she can’t blame Entani for complaining, but yet… “at least we aren’t freezing.”

“True,” Entani replies as she sits up, her eyes gazing around her, “I am hungry I hope the hunters return soon.”

“Yeah, me too,” Clarke finishes, and so she turns her eyes upwards, the sky just a bit more blue, the
clouds just a bit less grey this far south, and so she lets a smile grace her lips as she enjoys the change in scenery for a while.

“That Trikru woman watches you again,” Entani says, her voice pulling Clarke back to the present, and so she follows Entani’s gaze to where Octavia sits besides the other dark skinned, bald Trikru warrior, his eyes ever careful as he takes in what surrounds him.

“Yeah,” she pauses for a moment as the previous night’s conversation bleeds into her mind, “she’s been watching me,” she turns back to Entani, “I don’t like it,” and Entani snorts once.

“Perhaps she fancies you,” and Entani laughs for a moment, “perhaps Trikru can not even satisfy themselves.”

And Clarke is sure a small smile finds its way across her face.

“I don’t think that’s it…” she again pauses as she thinks of their interactions. “I don’t know,” she shrugs lamely, “I’m pretty sure Torvun has a plan to kill her though,” she laughs, the noise dancing with the sound Entani also lets loose.

“I would not be surprised.”

A quiet silence hangs around the Azgeda, their numbers pulling together as they near the village. And Clarke is sure she sees, or perhaps only feels the presence of Trikru that move through the trees, that follow them and shadow their every move. And so she lets a glare live across her face, her fingers tightening their hold upon the reins she has in her grasp.

Ontari raises her hand then, the Trikru with them quickly racing ahead before disappearing into the trees.

“We arrive at Ton DC now,” she calls out as she turns her horse to face the Azgeda behind her. “We make no trouble.” she continues, holding the gaze of those before her, “but if you are attacked by reaper, or other, you may kill them,” and again a gentle ripple of acknowledgment passes through the ranks of Azgeda.

Ontari lowers her hand and it’s swiftly followed by the low echo of a horn to signal Azgeda’s presence.

The Azgeda force begins a slow approach, their horses moving four abreast through the trail that begins to appear before them. And Clarke finds herself near the front, her eyes following Ontari’s back as she leads them quietly forward, and she thinks she begins to hear the sounds of life.

The trees part for them, and she lets her gaze settle upon the large walls, green from moss, trees spreading their branches out and over the gates before her. And she can hear the sound of metal on metal, the thudding of bodies crashing together and of training warriors that fight and spar and bruise themselves. She hears the voices of children that yell and play and live a life yet to be marred by the harshness of survival and she hears the voices of adults that rise above the careful din, enough to tell her that a people live well.

Her head turns quickly to the side when she hears a branch breaking underfoot, and she sees a hunting party emerge from the trees, the muddy red-browns of their clothing a stark contrast to the
greens and browns that surround them.

“Another clan,” Entani says, her own attention drawn to the newcomers.

The gates to Ton DC open with a low groan then and so the Azgeda forces move forward. And as Clarke enters through the gates she finds a village square that spreads out before them, warriors moving about, their furs and clothes and leathers of different colours, flags and banners of the different clans already unfurls and breathing in the wind. She sees a woman standing before them, her back straight, her skin dark and her face tattooed. And so Ontari dismounts her horse, handing the reins to another Azgeda before she walks forward.

And Clarke is sure she sees a tension in the woman’s body as she raises her chin in greeting, Ontari’s own body tense. And they share quick words before the woman points away from the square before bowing her head just enough to be polite.

Clarke finds the village to sprawl out around her, the trees and the buildings blending together. Some of the buildings are made from sheets of metal, from stone and wood, some she even thinks must be relics of before, constructed of brickwork that survived the years. She finds larger buildings too, communal ones she thinks must be for gatherings, and she finds small huts dotting the village, wooden structures that house the inhabitants of Ton DC and she even sees a number of tents, some large, some small, all temporary structures for the Trikru warriors that have gathered.

“Other clans won’t be housed in Ton DC, only trikru get that honour,” Ontari scoffs as she follows Clarke’s gaze, “the other clans will make camp in the surrounding forests,” she finishes.

They come to a clearing, large enough to house a vast number of warriors and their supplies, and so the Azgeda spread out quickly, staking a claim to most of the unoccupied lands, other clans already taking up the far end of the clearing before it rises up to a hilltop where a lone tent sits, large and dominant that dwarfs those near it. And so Clarke dismounts her horse, supplies already being spread out as Torvun and Entani unfurl their shared tent, clearing the ground beneath them of branches.

“Who’s tent is that?” she asks, her eyes gazing up the hill, and maybe she already knows the answer, but Ontari looks up at her question, a roll of furs in her arms.

“The Commander’s,” she grumbles.

And as Clarke’s eyes trace the burning torches that run from the entrance down the hill, as she traces the Coalition flags that dance in the wind, and the guards she thinks stand by the entrance she can’t help but to snort at the whole spectacle.

*What a princess.*
The Azgeda forces settle into the campsite quickly, and so, with little to do, Clarke finds herself at the training grounds.

And she smiles at the familiar stretch in her muscles as she draws the bow string, the quiet creak of it a soothing sound to her ears. And so she waits until the wind picks up, she waits until it blows a braid loose and then she shifts her aim, just slightly to the left, and then she releases. And she smiles as the arrow springs forward, her hand already reaching for another, and as she draws back once more she hears the thud of her first arrow hitting its mark, and so she breathes in once more, the next arrow sailing through the air.

She repeats the process until all her arrows are embedded in the target, the white of the feathers a stark contrast to the darker ones of the Trikru arrows in targets next to hers, and so she waits for just a moment before the other archers have finished before she walks forward, her gaze flicking to the Trikru by her side. And as she reaches the target, her hands already pulling arrows loose she sees Ontari in the sparring pit, her furs tied around her waist, her collar opened, and her arms bare to the warmth of the sun as she attacks an opponent.

Clarke watches as the younger Azgeda warrior lunges at Ontari, his hand snaking out to grip her around the throat, and Clarke smirks as Ontari ducks quickly, her body twisting as her leg comes up before she lashes out with her foot, a satisfying thump of it echoing across the training grounds. But he rolls with it, already spinning to charge at Ontari again. She side steps his movement, her eyes shining fiercely in the sun light and then she’s on him, her elbow smashing into his jaw before she throws a leg behind his, her hip rolling around with the momentum as she lifts him over her shoulder. And Clarke lets a smile linger across her lips as the warrior goes flying. And so Ontari smirks, her chest heaving as she stands over the winded warrior, her arms raised in triumph. And maybe Clarke can be forgiven for eyeing the trail of sweat that rolls down the dip of Ontari’s throat before it beads across her chest.

Clarke sees the same Trikru woman from earlier walk up to Ontari then, a scowl firmly in place, and Clarke recognises the same look that she is sure she often sees across Octavia’s own face. The woman says something to Ontari then, before she’s turning and walking back the way she came, and so Ontari looks around until her eyes find Clarke, and then she gestures quickly for her to approach.

“The village chief, Indra,” Ontari begins, wiping a hand across her sweaty brow, “says the Commander wishes to see us,” and Clarke smiles as Ontari rolls her eyes, “Come, Clarke.”

Clarke follows Ontari out of the training grounds, Torvun quickly joining them from where he had been throwing his knife into a target nearby.

“Where’s Entani?” Clarke asks, her eyes skimming over the Azgeda faces she sees at the training ground.

“At camp,” Torvun replies, “some already injured themselves,” he finishes as he sheaths the knife on his hip.

The walk to the camp is a tense thing, Ontari, Clarke is sure, already resenting being at the beck and call of the Commander and so Clarke follows her quietly, her own thoughts drifting to what she
knows of the Commander. And she’s arrogant, Clarke knows that much. And from the tent that
overlooks the camp, its large size and the torches that mark the path to the entrance Clarke is sure the
Commander thinks highly of herself, and so she scoffs out loud, her eyes rolling as she sees that the
torches remain lit, burning despite the sun that lingers high in the sky.

They stop at their tent, Entani sitting on the ground, carefully folding bandages.

“We’re going to see the Commander,” Clarke tells her, “coming?”

“No,” Entani snorts, “I do not wish to waste my time with her.”

And so Clarke smiles, a shrug lifting her shoulders as Ontari begins rummaging through their
supplies until she finds the warpaint, and so she hands a jar to Clarke and Torvun.

It opens with a quiet pop, and so Clarke dips her fingers into the cool paint before she brings her
fingers to her cheeks. And it’s quick and practiced swipes of her hand that brings her face to a
deathly white that shines in the sunlight. And so she smiles briefly at Ontari as their eyes meet and
then Ontari brings her own fingers up to Clarke’s chin, quickly covering a spot against her jaw she
missed before both women stand, quicks nod to Torvun, his own face and beard covered in large
streaks of white.

“What does the Commander want?” Clarke asks as they make their way through the camp, the
Azgeda they pass nodding in greeting.

“I do not know. Probably to send us hunting,” Ontari says, her shoulders shrugging broadly.

“She wishes to see who commands the Azgeda forces,” Torvun sighs, his body casting a long
shadow behind the two women.

“She will already know,” Ontari retorts, “That Trikru leader or Indra will have already told her.”

“It’s a power play,” Clarke adds, her thoughts turning to the many times Jaha had summoned her
mother on the Ark.

And so Clarke smiles once more as she hears Ontari muttering under her breath, words of which she
is sure would have her head removed if the Commander were to hear.

The walk up the hill is perhaps the second most infuriating thing Clarke has ever done, second only
to having to try and survive Ontari’s teaching methods. The path up the hill winds and bends back on
itself multiple times, tents having been set up as to block a direct approach, and so, as they pass even
more torches that bring the ambient temperature up more than needed Ontari’s mood begins to
worsen further.

“Breathe,” Clarke whispers to Ontari, her own neck prickling at the eyes that follow them, sneers
upon the Trikru faces that they pass.

“They watch us, look at us like scum,” Ontari hisses back, her eyes glaring at a Trikru warrior that
moves past her.

“Peace, Ontari,” Torvun adds, “you do us no good antagonising Trikru at this moment.”
The rest of the walk passes in silence, Ontari’s breathing somewhat more controlled and so, just before they reach the Commander’s tent she pauses, takes in just one more deep breath before continuing forward. And as they approach the entrance Clarke eyes the guard that stands outside. And he’s large, she thinks, his head shaved along the sides, a large tattoo winding it’s way across his cheek and a large beard unfurling down his chest. And she thinks she sees his eyes flick over Ontari and her before settling upon Torvun behind them, and she is sure he gauges the danger Torvun presents.

The guard steps forward then, his eyes once more flicking to Ontari.

“If you so much as look at her the wrong way I will slit your throat,” he intones, his eyes narrowing as he stares at Ontari.

But Ontari merely sneers once.

“Move Trikru, the Commander wishes to see us,” and then she’s pushing past him, Clarke and Torvun following closely behind, the guard shadowing their movements.

Entering the tent is a strange, tense and quiet moment, the sound of the outside camp falling away, replaced by a quiet stillness. There’s more guards too, their hands on the swords by their hips, their eyes ever watchful as they follow the three Azgeda who move into the tent. And as Clarke enters she finds the interior awash with the soft dappling of light that filters in through the sheer fabric overhead, enough to illuminate the interior, yet still cast long, foreboding shadows across the floor. She finds a table on either side of the tent, both covered in maps of the surrounding area. Furs line the floor too, the rich browns and reds of the animal they came from bleeding together. And as her eyes follow the furs deeper into the tent she finds them resting against the foot of a throne backed by antlers and wood that stretches and twists and bends upwards, framing the woman who lounges in it, her legs crossed a careless lean to her body as a knife is deftly danced between her fingers. She finds that the village chief, Indra stands to the Commander’s left, her eyes glaring sharply at them, the guard who confronted them at the entrance present too, his body standing close to the Commander’s. And Clarke’s eyes narrow for a moment as her gaze settles on Anya who stands close to the guard, her hand resting comfortably on the hilt of her sword strapped to her hip, a smirk resting across her lips.

And Clarke takes the time to assess what she sees sitting before her. And she thinks her first assessment was correct, and she sees the warpaint that spreads across the woman’s cheeks, that drips from her eyes, as if an animal had clawed at the black that sits heavily around her gaze. She sees the red of a sash that hangs from a pauldron atop her left shoulder and she finds her hair to be braided intricately, enough to keep it out of her eyes in times of motion, enough to show that she is perhaps a capable warrior, if not also one for theatrics. And Clarke sees that the woman’s eyes stare, focused and calm at the three Azgeda who come to a stop before her.

“Did I not ask for you to come alone, Ontari?” she says then, breaking the tense silence that lives within the tent, her knife coming to rest, point first, into the arm of her chair with a quiet thud.


The Commander’s eyes flash to Clarke’s then, her chin lifting for a moment in thought, the green of her eyes a fierce beast that lives within her gaze.

“You’re the one Anya says saved Octavia’s life,” the Commander voices, her words dripping with contempt.
“You’re the one who let the reapers attack,” Clarke snarks back, her jaw clenching and her eyes burning as she holds the Commander’s gaze.

Indra snarls then, her hand moving to draw her sword and the guard also moves forward as Torvun growls out a threat, his hand coming to rest on his own knife.

“You will speak to the Commander with respect,” Indra growls, her eyes staring sharply into Clarke’s.

“Indra, Gustus,” the commander holds her hand up lazily, “enough.”

The Commander stands from her throne then, Gustus shadowing her movements as she approaches the three Azgeda, and she comes to a stop before Clarke, the green of her eyes drilling into the blue of Clarke’s.

“We have come together to fight the Mountain,” the Commander says, her chin lifting slightly, “Not each other,” she finishes, her eyes flicking over to Ontari and then up to Torvun, “you may leave us now, Azgeda,” she finishes, already turning back to her throne, the red of her sash flowing behind her.

And it’s all the dismissal Clarke needs, and so she turns with Ontari, Torvun taking up the rear as they leave the tent, and as they exit into the air Ontari spits on the ground, her eyes aflame, words of anger muttered under her breath.

And so they make the walk back through the winding trail towards the war camp. And as they move further away Clarke sees a man walking their way, his eyes focused on the Commander’s tent, and as she takes in the clothes he wears, the hard shell of the armour and the black of the fabric, she finds it oddly familiar. And so, as she nears, as her eyes trace over his face, she thinks she stares, she thinks she gapes and she thinks her mind screams out to her. And she knows she recognises the lines of his face, the furrow of his brow and the angle of his nose.

And she knows she recognises Kane.

What.

The.

Fuck.
Chapter 9

She sighs quietly, just a gentle exhale of breath that lingers against her lips. She lets her fingers dance against the handle of the knife as her mind wanders for a moment as thoughts drift and flow and meander their way through her head. And she knows this will be a problem, she knows it will cause a headache and that it will be a thorn in her side in times to come. But for now she must face the options she has been given and so she raises a hand, and she quirks her fingers just a bit.

“Leave us,” and so her eyes follow the few guards throughout her tent, their heads bowing slightly before they duck out through the entrance.

“She disrespects you, Heda,” her eyes turn to Indra, still standing by her side, fingers still white knuckled around the hilt of her sword, and perhaps she’s not sure whether Indra refers to Ontari, a sneer ever present on her face or whether Indra refers to Clarke, blonde hair braided back fiercely and faced scarred, blue eyes radiant, defiance aflame within her gaze.

“All of Azgeda are the same,” Anya responds, “they did not show respect when they travelled with us.”

And Gustus merely grunts, his lip twitching momentarily.

And so she ignores their words of frustration for a moment.

“You are sure of what Octavia says?” she says then, her eyes turning to meet Anya’s.

“She did not hear enough to be certain, Heda,” Anya answers, her head inclining slightly, “she watched her though, but saw no other indication that she is not from Azgeda. She talks like Azgeda, sounds like Azgeda. Has the scars of Azgeda.”

“Disrespects us like Azgeda,” Indra once again snarls out.

“Her scars looked new,” Gustus adds.

“She has a guard, Heda,” Anya continues, pushing through the interruption, “I am sure of it,” and she pauses for a moment in thought, “I confronted her at night, and that Azgeda warrior, Torvun, was with her.”

“He carries himself like a guard,” Gustus says, “he is experienced, perhaps he even served Nia.”

And so Lexa lets a moment stretch out, the silence a comfortable embrace for the thoughts that she contemplates, the things she has seen of Clarke Kom Azgeda, and perhaps the young Azgeda woman who stood before her matches the description of Clarke Griffin.

“Only someone of importance would be given their own guard,” she says after a moment, her eyes meeting the nods of agreement from the three who stand by her, “Nia would not risk sending a member of the royal family,” she pauses, her thoughts turning to Roan briefly, “and she would not send an important member of Azgeda unless she thought it would give her an advantage in our fight against the Mountain,” Lexa says then.

She casts her eyes across the room, and she finds Indra, scowl in place still glaring at the entrance of the tent, and so she turns to gustus, his eyes thoughtful as he no doubt considers the events of the meeting. And she meets Anya’s eyes, the older warrior lost in thought for only a moment before she lifts her chin, her eyes meeting the Commander’s once more before she voices her thoughts.
“So she is the lost girl of the sky?”

Yes.

“We will soon know more. I have summoned Kane,” she says as she reclines back into the throne, her eyes turning to the entrance of the tent.

She hears the approaching footfalls and the familiar crunch of feet against dirt. She hears a guard outside call out a greeting before he ducks through the entrance.

“Kane Kom Skaikru is here, Heda.”

“Send him in,” she says, her hands coming to rest upon the armrests of her throne.

Kane ducks in then, his eyes squinting for a moment as they adjust to the darker shadows that linger within her tent, and he smiles briefly when his eyes find hers, and he nods just once to Indra before walking forward, coming to a stop a few body lengths from her throne.

“Heda, you wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” she answers, her eyes taking in the man that stands before her, “Anya, Indra, leave us,” she finishes, already knowing that Gustus will not leave.

And so the two other women duck out, whispered Heda’s reaching Lexa’s ear.

“Kane,” she begins, “tell me, Abby had a daughter, yes?”

And she sees his eyes widen momentarily, her question throwing him.

“Yes—” he starts, his brows furrowing for a moment, “Clarke. We sent her down two years ago. To see if see the ground was survivable,” he pauses once more, “I thought you knew that, Heda.”

“Yes,” she answers, “I did.”

“Forgive me, Heda, but why do you want to know?”

“What does she look like?” she asks, leaning forward just a bit as her eyebrow quirks up, already recalling the image of Clarke Kom Azgeda that she has in her mind.

“She’s blonde, Heda — light hair,” he adds quickly, “blue eyes—” and he pauses suddenly, his eyes narrowing. “Why do you want to know what she looks like?” he asks, taking an involuntary step forward, and so she holds up a finger pausing Gustus as he takes his own step forward in warning.

“Azgeda forces arrived today,” she says instead, “more than half a thousand warriors,” and she leans further forward, her gaze steady, “and healers,” Like Abby she need not add.

“Heda—” he begins once more, but she holds her hand up, quickly silencing his interjection.

“Is it possible that she arrived in another place?” she asks, and Kane’s brows twitch for a moment in thought.

“It’s possible, Heda,” and she can see his fingers twitching forward, his thoughts living in eyes.

“I met with the leader of the Azgeda forces,” she continues, “she was accompanied by another. Whose name was Clarke,” and now she is sure Kane must be trying to contain the questions and the thoughts that run through his mind, if only by the way his eyes still remain widen, if only by the way
his mouth opens and closes momentarily and the way his fingers clench painfully together.

“Please, Heda,” he says, eyes beseeching, tone quiet, “can we see her? To make sure? Abby would want to know.”

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**Kane.**

Her feet take her forward, and she is sure Ontari must be saying something, must be muttering words of hate and anger, yet all she can comprehend is the face she just walked past. And so her head turns and she looks back over her shoulder as she eyes the back of the man that retreats from her. And she knows she recognises the clothes he wears, the dark black of the guard jacket, the hard outer shell of its armour, and she knows.

*She knows.*

The man’s hair is longer, a beard covering his face, yet she is sure. She is certain. And so she goes to turn around, to chase after him, to ye—

“Clarke, let’s go. I do not want to spend another moment near these Trikru,” Ontari grabs her by the arm, already dragging her towards the Azgeda camp, Torvun still close behind.

And so Clarke follows dumbly, her mind still a jumble, thoughts crashing into each other as she considers what Kane being on the ground means.

And she is sure others must be here, others must have come to the ground, others must be close. Right? That has to be the reason why the Commander in all her pretentiousness now thinks she can destroy the Mountain. The Ark is on the ground. It’s here. It’s close. How did she not know? Where’s her mother? Where’s Wells? Are they alive?

“Clarke.”

Her arm is jerked harshly, Ontari looking at her, eyes narrowed a fraction.

“I’m ok,” she whispers, her tongue licking her lips briefly, “I’m ok.”

But she’s not.

“Do not let the Commander intimidate you,” Ontari says, her eyes softening for a moment, her fingers squeezing gently. “She will use it to her advantage. Be strong. You are Azgeda.”

And Ontari’s hand lingers for just a moment longer before she nods once more, already moving away, and so Clarke follows, her eyes unfocused, her thoughts breaking and splintering.

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They make their way through the Azgeda war camp, gentle nods of greeting being sent their way by the many they pass, yet Clarke’s thoughts are still turned to the man she saw, and so she doesn’t realise they stop, she doesn’t realise they arrive at their tent until Ontari turns around.
“I am going to the training grounds. I need to break something,” and then she turns, walking away, her gait angry and swift.

Torvun eyes her carefully before he takes a seat on a stool, already pulling out his sword as he rummages in a pack for a whetstone, and so the quiet grinding of a sharpening blade takes Clarke’s ears as she ducks into the tent.

She finds Entani still seated, healer’s packs around her, bandages in hand, some folded, some still waiting to be prepared. And so the woman looks up, her eyes thoughtful for just a moment as she takes in, what Clarke must think is a worried, confused and desperate appearance that clings to her face.

“Are you ok?” Entani asks.

And really, what’s she to say?

That her people might be alive. On the ground?

That they’re close. Perhaps even in this same war camp?

And so her mouth opens once before she closes it, and as she brushes away a loose strand of hair she is sure her fingers come away unsure, shaking and weak, a small smear of white paint clinging against her fingertip.

And Entani stops her motions then, her fingers stilling on a bandage, her gaze holding steady. Clarke looks behind herself briefly, if only to make sure the tent flap is closed, before she leans forward and wets her lips for a moment.

“I saw someone,” she begins, a quiet tremor in her voice, “I recognised him,” and Entani eyes her careful, a small confusion lingering within her gaze. “He was one of my people,” Clarke finishes.

And maybe the widening of her eyes, maybe the way her mouth falls open would be funny to Clarke if her own thoughts weren’t so scattered.

“You are sure?” comes the hissed response, and so she nods once, a braid falling across her face, “have you told Ontari?”

“No. Not yet,” and so the other healer’s eyebrow raises in question, “how do you think she’d react?” Clarke asks, the rhetorical question hanging in the space before both women, and so Entani shrugs once more, acceptance colouring the motion.

“I—” Clarke closes her eyes, shuts them tight as her thoughts drift too far from her reach, “I just—” she brings her hands up, balling them into fists as she drives them into her eyes painfully, rubbing them harshly across her face for a moment. “I need to know. I need to. I have to know,” she finishes, her head shaking.

Entani reaches out then, the gesture tentative and unsure, but Clarke pulls her arm away.

“I’ll be back,” she says then, an idea burning through her mind, her legs already scrambling underneath her, pulling her out of the tent.

And as she ducks out she finds Torvun still sitting by the entrance, only catching his eyes briefly before she is moving towards Ton DC, the short walk not far enough for her thoughts to solidify and reconsider what she plans to do. She hears Torvun stand quickly, and she hears the gentle swish of the sword being sheathed before his shadow joins hers as they make the quick walk to where her
idea beckons her.

Her feet take her further and further through the camp, her eyes moving from face to face she passes, all in the hope of recognising a smile, of recognising the colour of a person’s hair, or the way they walk, the way they carry themselves. She bumps into a warrior, a diamond etched scar across her chin, and so Clarke offers quiet apology before she’s pushing past, moving from the edges of the war camp.

Trees sprout out around her, just a few, most large, wide and looming, but enough to block out the sounds of the war camp, enough to keep the quiet. And so she pushes forward, warriors of other clans moving through the trees too, their own destinations in mind, yet she spares them no thought, no place in her mind.

The sun beats down heavy and harsh across her back, the afternoon giving the day one last push of heat, and she feels the trail that drips down her forehead, the sweat that lingers against her skin.

The trees part for her quickly, the green of the moss and the brown of the branches giving way to the cool, roughened metal and stone of the walls of Ton DC and so she pushes forward, bumping into a pair of Trikru warriors who linger outside the gates, and she is sure they curse her, go to push her back, but she feels the growl Torvun must give, and she is sure she hears the curses they send his way before backing off.

She moves through the gates, a gentle breeze picking her hair up, blowing it across her face as she moves forward. And her eyes continue to look at the faces she passes, and she hopes, and she prays, and she feels the want that lingers within her. And as she passes yet another group of Trikru they follow her movements with a careful, guarded look, one that speaks of distrust, but for now her mind is elsewhere and so she ignores them, her feet taking her further into the village. She takes a turn, a sharp right that hooks her around, and she passes a large fire pit, one she is sure is used for gatherings. Her feet kick at a stick that lies in her path and she ignores the bouncing and the clattering of it as it skims against the smoothed stone of a building wall.

She comes to a stop before a building, the wooden structure a long, weathered thing that stretches out to her left and right. And so she brushes her hair from her eyes once more, tucking the braids back into place, and she is sure her paint is smeared now, she is sure the white of it must cling to her hair. And she is sure she shakes, she is sure her chest still heaves and she is sure her breathing must come laboured and pathetic. And so she wets her lips just once, casting her eyes to the building.

She feels a hand on her shoulder then, just a gentle press of fingers, rough and weathered from years of use. And so she turns around, just for a moment.

“I heard you talk to Entani,” Torvun says, his eyes gazing steadily, the sun shining fiercely against the top of his head, the paint still clinging to his scalp. And at Clarke’s expression he shrugs broadly, “guards must have good hearing.”

And maybe she smiles for a moment.

And so he squeezes her shoulder just once before he lets his hand fall.

“I will wait outside.”

And so Clarke smiles up at him, just for a moment, just for long enough that she feels the strumming of her heart within her chest. And then she takes a steadying breath.

She turns back to the building, takes a few small steps forward and she reaches for the door, her
fingers splaying out against the rough of the wood.

And she knows. She knows if what she searches for exists on the ground, if it is near, it would be here. In this building.

And so she pushes it forward, lets the creaking of the door bring a steadying to her mind and she steps inside.

She’s greeted by the low burning flames of torches that rest in sconces along the wall, the smoke a gentle, spiced scent that soothes her frayed mind. And as her eyes adjust to the darker shadows that fall across the floor she finds rows of beds that rest along both walls that stretch out either side of her. And so she casts her gaze left, sees the beds that rest quietly, some with warriors lying in them, wounds from training sessions or from attacks from reapers lying there, some with bandages across forearms, across foreheads, some with stitches being attended to by young seconds. At the far end she finds a curtain, figures moving about behind it.

She turns her head right, more beds stretching out this way too, these also occupied by a few warriors, some from Trikru, some from other clans.

A healer approaches her then, his eyes just a bit guarded, yet she thinks a kindness lives within them, something careful, something just a bit less threatening. Her eyes trace the tattoo that sits on his forehead, and the one that rests comfortably against his cheek, and she sees the braided beard he wears, and the roughness of his hair.

“I am Nyko,” he says then, the gruffness of his voice bringing a soothing lull to her mind. “Do you need a healer?” he asks, his eyes quickly scanning over her as he searches for a wound.

“No,” she answers, her voice just a slight tremble. “Is—” she licks her lip quietly, a silent hope burning within her heart. “Is Abby here?” and she sees his brows twitch for just a moment, his gaze turning thoughtful.

And so he shrugs, just once, and the movement lasts just long enough that perhaps Clarke thinks she is on a fool’s errand.

“Over there,” he points.

And she follows his eyes towards the far end, where the curtain is that must provide some privacy for those more seriously injured. And so Clarke nods just once, sure that her voice would fail her, and so she begins moving forward, her legs a weak, unsteady gait beneath her that takes her further and further into the healer’s building. She passes an Azgeda warrior, her arm in a sling, and she nods once when their eyes meet.

It’s only a few body lengths from the curtain then, the sounds of grunted pain coming out from behind it. And so Clarke pauses, just for a moment, just long enough that she can run a hand over her braids, just to make sure. And then she reaches out carefully, her fingers trembling.

And so she scrapes her fingers over the fabric, enough to signal her presence. And maybe she smiles, maybe she grimaces, maybe she breaks and maybe her eyes water for just a moment when she hears a woman call out.

“Give me a moment.”

And she knows that voice. She knows the way it breathes out just a bit, she knows the way it inflects at the end of her words and she knows the way it sits within her mind.
And so she closes her eyes tight, holds them shut for a long moment, for long enough that she sees patterns dance and twirl behind her eyelids, long enough that she thinks the world spins and turns without her.

And then she hears the curtain pulling away.

She hears the pause.

She hears the gasp.

She hears the silence that follows.

“Clarke?” it’s a whispered, shocked, broken sound that reaches her ears. “Clarke?” it’s a prayer and a hope and a love that graces her mind.

And so her eyes open.

And she smiles.

“Hi.”

Abby’s eyes widen. She sees them flick from her eyes to her face. And she thinks she sees just a moment’s grimace as she sees the scars that stand out, a stark reminder of the clan she has called home for years.

And then Abby lunges forward, her arms snapping out, embracing Clarke in a hold, a tight, desperate thing that squeezes her body, that crushes her heart and breaks her mind.

And she knows they both cry. She knows her shoulders shudder and her chest heaves and she knows Abby’s own tears and quiet sobs echo out in the silence that hangs around them.

“Cl—” she hears her name and it comes broken, and desperate, “—arke”

“It’s me,” she says, her head still crushed against Abby’s shoulder, “It’s me.”

And she thinks it feels nice to be held in her mother’s arms once more.

She thinks she’s missed it.

She thinks she’s wanted it.

It takes them a long moment before they separate, Abby holding tightly to her daughter, quiet sobs still echoing around them.

But Clarke finds herself ushered into a far corner, Abby’s hand gripping hers tightly, her eyes never wavering from the gaze they share, a desperation and a disbelief lingering clear for Clarke to see. And Abby sits Clarke down in front of her, and her hands come up, and so Clarke leans into the touch as Abby cradles her face, her thumbs brushing over her cheeks.

“Clarke—” Abby chokes on her words, tears once more wetting her cheeks, “Oh, baby. Clarke.”
And Clarke knows she breaks, knows she sounds grotesque and ruined.

“I’m here, Clarke,” she leans further into her mother’s hands, “I’m here.”

Long moments, broken only by quiet whispers prayers, and strong embraces, pass before they speak again.

“We thought you died, Clarke,” the words come out broken, shattered, “I—” Abby looks away, her eyes shutting painfully, “I thought you died.”

“I didn’t,” Clarke chokes out an answer, her vision a blurry mess of tears.

Abby’s hands come to rest on her shoulders then, her fingers squeezing, speaking of a want to keep want sits before her present. If only to reassure herself.

“Where were you?” she asks, her voice a rough whisper, “where’d you stay? How’d you survive?” her questions come rapid fire, one after the other, barely a breath between them. And her eyes must trace the scars across her cheeks, the scar on her forehead. “What did they do to you?” her eyes widen, and maybe Clarke sees a disgust, a shock and a quiet anger that begins to burn. “What did they do to you, Clarke?”

“I landed further north,” she begins, her mind turning back the years, “in Azgeda — Ice Nation,” she adds. “I thought I was dead,” she closes her eyes once more, “the radio, it broke. I was lost,” Abby’s hands run over her shoulders once more. “They saved me. They found me. Gave me a place to stay,” she continues, “this is how they mark themselves,” she waves a hand over her face. “warriors have marks, healers have ones too. Almost everyone,” she finishes, but she thinks as Abby’s eyes hold her own, that there is an anger and a shock at what has happened to her face. But for now Abby remains silent. “It’s ok,” she says, “they don’t hurt much anymore,” and she sees Abby grimace.

“We searched for you,” Abby’s lip trembles, “we did. We searched. I—” she looks away, “I hoped. I did. I hoped so, so much,” tears come anew, staining her cheeks, and so she brings a finger up, brushes it away forcefully, “I thought you were dead. I thought I killed you, Clarke,” and she takes her in another strong embrace, her arms shaking terribly.

“I’m ok,” Clarke whispers once more.

But she feels Abby shake her head.

“I thought I killed you.”

Silence stretches out once more, Abby still holding Clarke in her arms, the quiet tears they share bleeding into each other. But eventually Clarke pulls herself from Abby’s arms, wiping away the tears with the back of her hand, and she smiles for just a moment as her hand comes away, the back covered in a mess of white paint.

“Sorry,” she whispers then as her eyes catch the white of the paint that clings to Abby’s shirt.

But as Abby looks down, she merely shrugs, a watery smile all she gives, “it’s ok.”

“How?” Clarke whispers, her thoughts slowly stilling, slowly coalescing into coherence. “How’d
you know it was safe? How’d you come down? Where is everyone?"

Abby smiles again, a thumb running over her cheek, just a careful brush against the scars.

“We sent down a hundred kids first,” and she looks away for a moment, a grimace falling across her lips. “From Prison Station,” she breathes out quietly.

“They were like me, weren’t they? A test.”

“Yes,” Abby answers, “your life signs told us you didn’t die from radiation. That the ground was liveable…” and she trails off.

“But they told you I died some other way,” Clarke finishes, and Abby nods her head mutely.

“They told us your body temperature dropped,” and her voice breaks again, “then we lost your signal.”

“It’s ok,” Clarke whispers again.

“The hundred we sent down,” Abby continues, “the grounders,” and confusion must flash across Clarke’s face for a moment, “—it’s what we call the people who live on the ground, and they call us Skaikru—the hundred and the grounders fought. They thought we were invading,” she pauses, her thoughts catching up to her in pieces. “And then we sent the rest of the Ark down. And things got worse,” and again Abby pauses for a moment, “a lot of the hundred died, Clarke, the grounders killed them, and then we arrived and we killed a lot of them,” and Abby once more closes her eyes, her lips trembling slightly, her chin quivering just a bit at the pain the memories must be conjuring. “A lot of people died on both sides,” she finishes quietly.

“Are you prisoners?” Clarke asks.

“No,” Abby smiles gently, but perhaps it’s a bittersweet thing, full of pain, “we aren’t prisoners. We’re working with the Commander now.”

“Why?”

And Abby pauses for a moment, and perhaps Clarke sees a sadness live within her eyes, and maybe she feels a defeat and a loss that sits upon her mother’s shoulders. And so Abby’s eyes turn watery once more before she speaks.

“We’re fighting a civil war, Clarke.”
Chapter 10

“Civil war?” she’s sure confusion flashes across her face. “…what?”

And Abby once more closes her eyes, once more takes a shaky breath.

“When the Ark came down we fought. Grounders killed us and we killed them. A lot of the parents, they wanted—you have to understand, Clarke. They were angry. Their children had been killed,” and she pauses, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes briefly, “we fought with the grounders. For months.”

Abby takes a deep breath again, to steady herself, to sift through the thoughts that must rage through her mind.

“We used the drop ship as an outpost. But the grounders attacked it. The guards there called for reinforcements but when we arrived everyone was gone. They’d all just vanished.”

“The Mountain,” Clarke realises then, her mind still awed that her people had been on the ground for months. Maybe even more than a year.

“Yeah,” Abby swallows hard, “we got there and there was a message, saying that we had allies, that the Mountain had been fighting the savages too. That we weren’t alone on the ground. That they would help us.”

And Clarke thinks her blood begins to boil, begins to burn.

“The Mountain is evil,” she hisses, “it steals my people, attacks my clan, kills Azgeda,” and she sees Abby’s eyes widen momentarily at her outburst.

“I know, Clarke. I know. But we didn’t know. Not then,” and she grimaces, “the Ark, it was too valuable to give up, so almost half of us went to the Mountain, Jaha led them, a lot of the parents who lost children too. They just wanted to be safe. To feel safe,” Abby blinks away tears again, “but then the grounders attacked again. They came with more warriors, more than we knew they had—”

“—The Coalition?” Clarke asks.

“Just a few clans, the ones close by,” Abby answers, “but enough. So the Commander gave us an ultimatum. Surrender or die.”

And Clarke snorts, just once.

“We surrendered,” Abby continues, “but we realised—we realised we were wrong Clarke. When we saw what the reapers really were. The Mountain told us that they were just crazy grounders, mutated from the radiation. But we realised what the Mountain was doing, that they were stealing grounders and turning them into these monsters” and Abby lets tears fall down her cheek once more. “I was disgusted. You have to understand Clarke, we didn’t know,” she whispers, a pleading edge to her voice.

Clarke reaches out tentatively, wraps her fingers around her mother’s wrist and squeezes briefly.

“We tried to warn the others, to tell them what was happening. But they didn’t listen. Jaha—” Abby again looks away, “—he thought we were better than the grounders, and a lot of the parents were with him. People who had lost family since coming to the ground. They wouldn’t listen.”
“So now you’re helping the Commander?” Clarke asks.

“Yes,” Abby nods in response, “we still live in Arkadia— what we call the Ark. But we help here too, in Ton DC.”

“The whole Ark came down?” Clarke adds, her eyes widening for just a moment as surprised flits through her mind.

But Abby looks away once more, just briefly, just enough to bring a small sense of dread back into her mind.

“Not the whole Ark,” she begins, her lip trembling slightly, “we— There were sacrifices while we were still in space. There were riots when the hundred were sent down. When parents realised what we did.”

“Jaha floated people,” and it comes out a whisper, and so Abby nods mutely.

“And then people found out about the problem with the oxygen. But after we sent the hundred down —” and once more Abby trails off for just a moment, “we made plans to bring the Ark to Earth. We knew it was survivable. But a few stations didn’t make it,” she says quietly. “All this death, Clarke. It made people angry. It made them mad and they just wanted to feel safe.”

“So that’s why they're still with the Mountain?”

“Yes.”

The walk back to the camp is a quiet affair, her thoughts still just a moment too distracted to really recognise the people she passes. And it’s strange. She thinks it’s an odd feeling that sits in the pit of her stomach now, that makes her mind turn and her thoughts run freely. Abby had said most of the Skaikru were living in Arkadia, just a few here at Ton DC to help. And maybe she’ll visit. Soon. But for now her mind teeters on the brink of sleep, the last of the days sun having been spent in the healer’s building, telling Abby of her time on the ground. And so she had left, a quiet promise to visit again whispered past the influx of wounded warriors from the training ground, the night too dark for safe training, or as safe as slashing weapons at each other can be.

And so her feet take her back to the war camp, Torvun a quiet shadow that clings close to her, eyes ever constant. She greets the Azgeda on watch as she reaches the border, heads nodding in greeting briefly before she passes between the many tents that have been erected. And so it isn’t long until she reaches the tent she shares, and so she ducks in quickly, Torvun already taking a seat by the entrance, the small fireplace already being lit.

As her eyes adjust to the dark of the shadows that cling to the tent walls, cast by the gentle swaying of the candle flames that burn around the tent, she finds Ontari sitting on a chair, her sword in her lap as she runs a whetstone over it.

And so Clarke approaches quietly, the careful rhythm of the stone running across the blade a small caress to her tired ears, the furs wrapped around her shoulders keeping the soon approaching cold of the night at bay for just a bit longer.

“Entani tells me you saw someone from where you came,” it comes out just a bit cooler than usual,
the orange of the flame dancing against the scars across her cheeks. “I looked for you. To see if you wanted to hunt,” she looks up, her eyes gazing at Clarke’s steadily. “I could not find you.”

Her chin lifts, a small defiance beginning to once again rise within her chest.

“I went to find my people,” it comes out firm. “I needed to know,” she continues.

“And did you find your people?” Ontari says as she rises from her chair.

“My people made it to the ground,” she replies, “some are fighting for the Commander,” and Ontari sneers for a moment, “some are fighting for the Mountain,” she finishes.

“And what are you going to do now?” Ontari presses, her eyes not wavering from Clarke’s

“I—” and she pauses for a moment, looks away and takes a breath.

And what is she going to do?

She feels stuck. Stuck between three people. Those from the sky, who fight against her, and who fight with her. And Azgeda.

“I can help Skaikru, Ontari,” she begins, but she sees Ontari’s eyes narrow just a fraction. “I’m still Azgeda,” she says, her eyes holding the other woman’s gaze.

“You owe them nothing,” and it comes out a bite. A cold breath carried by an anger that burns in Ontari’s eyes.

“I know. But they’re my people,Ontari. I can’t just igno—”

“They are not your people!” it comes out angry, it comes out sudden and forceful. And it comes out surprising, and so Clarke takes a step back as Ontari advances.

“They threw you away. They left you to die,” Ontari closes in on Clarke, her eyes seething quietly. “They discarded you. They abandoned you. And you think you owe them? You think you can ignore Azgeda?”

“Wha—” Ontari pushes her firmly in the shoulder, cutting the words off, and Ontari’s fingers grasp at the furs that line Clarke’s shoulders then, holding her in a firm grasp. And it infuriates Clarke in this moment. And so she pushes back, an anger building within her own mind, and so she presses forward, her fingers splaying out across Ontari’s chest.

“I’m not ignoring Azgeda!”

“Azgeda found you! Azgeda saved you. Azgeda gave you a home. Azgeda is your people,” and Ontari pauses for just a moment, her feet having carried her close enough to Clarke that her breath brushes against her nose. “The azgeda outside?” she jerks her head towards the tent entrance, “They are your people. Entani is your people. Torvun is your people,” but she pauses again, takes a steadying breath, her eyes just a moment gentler, just a moment softer than Clarke has seen. “I’m your people.”

She sees Ontari’s eyes flick down for just a moment, she sees her brows quirk together and maybe, if she lets herself look closer, for just a moment, she sees a small slice of fear that lingers in the brown eyes that look back at her.

And so the next words Clarke hears come out a soft whisper.
“You owe them nothing, Clarke. Nothing.”

It’s just a soft exhale of words that grace her ears. And so she meets Ontari’s gaze and she holds it for just a moment longer, and perhaps she feels the lingering touch of Ontari’s fingers against her shoulder, just a brief thing, just a gentle pressure. And maybe she feels the frantic strumming of Ontari’s heart where it beats beneath her hand, still resting against the rising of her chest.

“The hunters have return—” Entani pauses, halfway in the tent, her eyes widening as she sees Clarke and Ontari standing close, hands grasping at each other. “Never mind.”

The fires burn brightly in the deep grey of a fading day and as Clarke stretches her legs out she can’t help but to groan at the gentle ache pulling of her muscles. She rolls her shoulders back then, a small pressure easing, the tension carefully rolling off her. And she can’t help but to smile for a moment as she sees the other Azgeda around the large fire, the glow of their scars dancing together as the night settles around them.

Her eyes find Ontari approaching, the other woman’s eyes guarded, two bowls carried in her hands, full of meats and broth and roots.

“Thank you,” Clarke voices as Ontari hands her a bowl before sitting down besides her, an awkward silence stretching out between them since their conversation.

Torvun and Entani join them shortly and so Clarke lets the quiet of whispered conversation lull her into a quiet revelry, her thoughts taking her where they wish. And maybe she can’t help but to find herself thinking of her people, of what their life must be like now. And she feels the small embers of frustration, of anger and even hope that smoke gently within her. And maybe she feels helpless, maybe she feels unsure, and uncertain of what she should do.

She has no wish to abandon Azgeda, has no wish to turn her back on the people who have given her a second chance at life. But yet she feels responsible, in some twisted, cruel way, for the people who left her. And so she snorts at the thought, a disgusted sound lingering in the back of her throat. And Ontari’s eyebrow raises in question as she eyes her carefully.

“Nothing,” Clarke sighs, spooning a mouthful of broth greedily to her lips.

“Trikru and Skaikru approach,” Torvun says, his eyes looking out past the Azgeda that sit around them, and so Clarke follows his gaze, her eyes finding Octavia, her mother and two other unfamiliar faces in tow.

It’s a tense moment’s quiet that hangs heavily around the Azgeda then, their eyes careful as they appraise Octavia, the colours she wears a stark contrast to the whites and greys of the Azgeda. And Clarke is she even feels a number of the warriors ready weapons, if only because a person can’t be too careful, too lax in the presence of another clan.


“Whatever,” Octavia says as she nears, her eyes moving around carefully.

And Clarke puts her hand on Ontari’s arm then, just a gentle pressure, but enough to stop her from
rising, from issuing a challenge and from making a scene, and so she whispers out quietly, “we’re allies,” and Ontari stills, her jaw clenching tightly.

“Can we join you?” Abby asks, her eyes just a bit guarded as she looks around her.

“Yeah,” Clarke replies, already motioning for them to come closer, “can you tell your guards to put their guns away though?” she asks, already spying the two who follow her, weapons held in hands, “or at least not look like they’re about to shoot someone,” she says, motioning around to the Azgeda around her, their eyes following the two guards carefully.

“Yeah, sorry,” Abby grimaces briefly, “Bellamy, Finn you can relax,” she sighs.

And Clarke rolls her eyes as she sees the two cast a furtive glance around them before slinging their guns over their shoulders. And so Octavia takes a seat by the fire, already clearing a space for the two guards, despite the grumble of the Azgeda too close to her, and maybe Clarke smiles for just a moment at the brazen young Trikru warrior. And so Abby takes a seat on a log in front of Clarke, her hands pulling the jacket around herself as she eyes the blonde before her. And Clarke can’t help but to notice Abby’s eyes linger across her forehead once more, and she thinks she even sees another flash of pain before it is hidden before Abby’s eyes turn to Ontari, no doubt taking in her own scars, before she then looks upon Entani’s face.

“You have similar scars,” Abby says awkwardly, her hand waving between the three women.

“Yeah,” Clarke answers, a small smile lingering across her face, “we’re from the same village. Each one has similar patterns, but they’re all slightly different from person to person,” and Clarke motions to three other Azgeda who sit nearby, slashes across cheeks and cuts etched into their foreheads, “we’re all from Ronto,” she says, giving them a small smile.

“I see…” Abby finishes quietly, a grimace twitching her lips momentarily.

“You don’t like them,” Clarke says then, her eyes holding Abby’s gaze.

“No— it’s just… Sorry…” she whispers, “I’m just not used to it.”

“It’s no different to Trikru tattoo’s,” Clarke says, “all clans mark each other differently. This is how Azgeda do it.”

“But…” Abby once again starts, “who are your friends?” she asks looking at Ontari for just a moment before she turns her gaze to Entani.

“Ontari,” Clarke says, her head nodding towards Ontari briefly, “and this is Entani,” she finishes gesturing to her other side.

And Ontari merely shrugs once, already turning her attention back to the bowl in her hands, but Entani lifts a smile for a moment before nodding to Abby.

“and the big guy is Torvun,” Clarke finishes, lifting her chin in the direction of Torvun who sits quietly to the side, his eyes focused on Octavia and the two guards.

“Thank you,” Abby whispers quietly, her eyes moving between the two Azgeda women, “for keeping my daughter safe.”

And Ontari raises her eyes then, lets her gaze hold Abby’s for a long, quiet moment.

“Clarke is Azgeda now,” her chin lifts just a bit, her jaw clenches for just a moment, “we protect our
And Clarke thinks her mother sees the threat, sees the hidden meaning that lingers in Ontari’s stare, that lives in the timber of her voice and the tone of her words.

*Clarke is not one of your people anymore.*

“We’re all here to get along.” Clarke adds in the silence that follows, a small smile gracing her lips for a moment. “We’ll fight the mountain, and after we can talk more,” and Abby nods at the words, at the message Clarke gives.

“How many Skaikru are at Ton DC?” Clarke asks, her eyes turning to the two guards.

“Kane’s probably with the Commander right now and Jackson’s back at the healer’s building,” and she is sure she smiles at the mention of her mother’s fellow doctor, “we’ve got a mechanic here, too. She’s helping fix some radios so we can communicate more easily between Arkadia and Ton DC,” and then Abby turns to the two guards, “then there’s Finn,” and one of the guards smiles warmly at Clarke, his hair hanging in his eyes, “and Bellamy and Octavia Blake,” Abby finishes.

And Clarke is sure she does a double take as Octavia smirks at her, “I guess we’re more alike than you thought, Clarke,” Octavia says, “we both have secrets, and we’re both more grounder than sky person now.”

“Yeah…” and she had heard rumours and whispered words of the illegal second child. And she thinks a smile lifts her lips once more at the constant revelations that she finds herself exposed to. And maybe it hasn’t sunk in yet, maybe she hasn’t really come to terms with the truth that her people live on the ground, but maybe despite the dangers it’s a nice thing. It’s a kind thing. If only because her mother sits before her, eyes kind as they gaze at each other.

“Well…” Abby begins, “he went with Jaha to the Mountain,” she says quietly, and Clarke is sure she sees a pain linger with her eyes. “Just in case you wanted to know.”

And Clarke grimaces for a moment. And the anger and the hate that had filled her years ago seems less now, seems muted, softened. But maybe she can hold a grudge. At least for the time being, and so she shrugs once.

“I’d ask if you wanted to come back to Arkadia,” Abby once again says as she looks around her before turning back to Clarke, her eyes gazing at the braids in her hair, at the furs she wears, before her eyes fall to the knife strapped against her thigh, “but I can see you’re comfortable here,” she finishes quietly.

“I’ll visit,” Clarke replies, her gaze softening, “I promise.”

The conversation continues as the night goes on, just small bits of information passed between mother and daughter about their time on the ground, about what they’ve missed. Bellamy and Finn add small things too, when they can, their eyes ever wary of those around them. But despite the mundane nature of the words they exchange, Clarke can’t help but to feel the ever looming presence of the Mountain that hangs over their shoulders, that sours talk of a future and next time. But for now she think she can live in ignorance for just another night. And so she smiles when she can, laughs when it’s needed and maybe she even enjoys having her mother here, on the ground, alive.
The moon sits high in the night’s sky by the time she bids Abby and the others farewell, and so she heads back to her tent, the embers of the dying camp fire drifting away in the night’s breeze. And as she passes the few Azgeda still milling about quietly she feels a prickling against the back of her neck. And so she turns around carefully, her eyes searching for the gaze that she is sure follows her and her eyes find the torches that burn along the rising of the hill, and as she follows the path they create her eyes land upon a lonely figure silhouetted against the tent that sits lonesome on the hilltop. And she is sure their eyes meet for a long moment despite the distance and she can’t help but to feel the Commander’s eyes hold her own, can’t help but to think they follow her movements as she pauses. And so she sighs out quietly, before turning, before continuing to her tent. And perhaps she even feels that steady gaze as she passes Torvun, ever present at the tent entrance as she ducks inside.

A tired yawn escapes her lips as her eyes adjust to the dark that sits within the tent, and so she pauses for just a moment before continuing forward, already loosening the furs around her shoulders. And as she nears the fur lined bed in the corner she finds Entani’s sleeping form already sprawled out, her gentle breathing living within the quiet of the tent.

She finds Ontari sitting on the edge of the bed too, a chest band and small shorts all she wears, a bloodied dressing around her ribs. And so a sigh leaves her mouth as she nears her.

“Let me look at that,” she says, already pulling her healers bag from the table. And so she kneels before Ontari, fingers reaching out tentatively. “When did this happen?” she asks as the bandages come away, just a small wince leaving the other woman’s lips.

“Earlier today,” comes the quiet reply.

“You didn’t clean it,” Clarke continues, already wiping away the crusted blood with a damp cloth.

“I did not think it was serious,” Ontari replies.

“It could be if you don’t clean it,” Clarke sighs back as she brings a candle closer, the flame giving light to the work she prepares for. And she smiles briefly at the noncommittal sound that leaves Ontari once more.

She works quietly, the needle she brings through Ontari’s flesh a quick, stinging thing that leaves the other woman’s muscles clenching briefly, quiet grunts of pain all she hears.

“The Skaikru do not seem so useless,” Ontari says, her eyes following the needle Clarke pulls through her skin.

“No,” Clarke hums out, “they’ll help with the fight,” she finishes as she wipes away the fresh blood gently before she reaches for the fresh bandages.

“Sorry,” Ontari whispers quietly as Clarke begins wrapping her ribs, “for before,” and so Clarke looks up from her work, her gaze meeting Ontari’s.

“It’s ok,” she shrugs, her hand resting against the other woman’s knee for a moment.

“I was still angry from meeting the Commander,” she adds lamely.
“I know,” Clarke says as she puts away the healers bag.

And so Clarke turns back to the bed, Ontari already leaning back. And as Clarke reaches the bed she tugs the remainder of her heavy leathers off before she slips into the furs, sleep already tugging at her tired mind. And she is sure sleep reaches her even before her eyes close.

But maybe she smiles as she feels Ontari wrap a tired arm around her, and maybe she smiles as she feels the press of another tired body against her.

Her feet take her up the winding path lit by torches, the morning sun lingering in the sky, and she is sure sweat must drip a steady trail through the white of the war paint that covers her face.

“So,” she begins as she turns to Ontari, “who’s going to be here?”

“Whoever leads the other clans will be present,” comes the reply, Ontari no doubt already tensing for whatever confrontation awaits them.

They near the entrance to the Commander’s tent, voices already greeting them and so Clarke sighs just once, glancing quickly to Ontari and Torvun before the guard waves them forward.

Her eyes adjust quickly to the tent’s interior, a number of candles burning quietly, giving enough light to the many that stand around a war table, a large map spread out on the top of it.

Clarke’s eyes find the Commander gazing at her carefully, her chin lifting for just a moment as Torvun pushes through the throng of grounders, Clarke and Ontari close behind him until they stand closer to the table.

Clarke’s eyes move from face to face then and she finds Octavia standing next to Indra, both Trikru warriors standing by the Commander’s side, Anya and Gustus standing on the opposite side. She finds a number of others from different clans eyeing them carefully, some expressions less hostile, some more so, she finds Kane standing close by, too, Bellamy and Finn by his side and she nods quietly at them from across the table, Kane’s eyes just a moment softer as their gazes meet. And she smirks when she hears Ontari curse out a warrior who gets too close, the red-browns of his clothing bleeding into the red feathers that are braided through his hair.

“Enough,” and silence drops quickly as the Commander raises a hand briefly, eyes moving from person to person. “Now that we are all here we can commence planning how we will attack the Mountain.”

Clarke thinks she rolls her eyes countless times as the planning dissolves into threats and shouting matches as warriors argue over the best strategies to engage the Mountain and how best to attack the reapers. But the Commander once more raises a hand lazily.

“Jomm,” she says, eyes falling to a warrior, clothing stained a deep blue, “Skaikru will deal with how to gain access to the Mountain and how to remove the threat of the acid fog,” and Jomm pauses
mid tirade, his mouth snapping shut.

“And how will that be done?” Clarke asks in the silence, her own curiosity spiking.

“Explosives will get us through the main door,” Kane says, his eyes falling to those around him, “and we have an inside man,” he continues, gentle murmurs echoing out through those present. “He’ll be able to take out the acid fog.”

And Jomm curses loudly, “you rely on the skills of one person?” he says, disbelief colouring his tone. “What if he is captured? What if he is killed? What if he fails? Then what? We all die in the forest? The acid fog will kill us all.”

“We have faith in our guy,” Kane says, his hands coming up placatingly.

“This is why I have summoned you all here,” the Commander cuts in, “with Skaikru we can breech the Mountain’s defences, and with the Coalition together we can destroy the Mountain.”

The war meeting continues for what seems like hours, many of the arguments held over why they must rely on a person inside the Mountain to destroy the acid fog, or how he can be trusted. And she finds many clan representatives not trusting of Skaikru, often dismissing Kane’s input.

And so her eyes roll once more as Jomm once again begins questioning Skaikru worth.

“What use is skaikru if all they provide is an inside man?” he growls out, a finger pointing to Kane, “and we have to protect them? They can not even protect themselves.”

And Bellamy bristles, she sees his eyes narrow as his jaw clenches, and Jomm sees it too, and so a smirk plays across his face.

“You know it is true,” and a sneer lifts his lips, “you can not fight. You rely on tech, on these guns,” he says motioning to the weapon slung over Bellamy’s shoulder, “you are weak.”

“Stand down, Bellamy,” Kane says, turning to push Bellamy back.

“See, even their warriors won’t defend their own honour,” he laughs once more.

And maybe Clarke feels slighted, if only because she feels just a small belonging to her people, despite all that has happened. And so she takes one deep breath, holds it for just a moment before she shoves past a warrior, before she comes to a stop by the Jomm’s side.

And so she smiles as she snakes her hand out quickly, his attention focused on Bellamy’s fuming gaze.

And it’s a quick strike, a brief attack that smashes against his nose, that bloodyes it and causes him to reel backwards painfully. And so she lunges forward, grabs him around the collar, trips his feet before pulling him forward.

Torvun lunges forward then, smacking a warrior who moves on Clarke before he takes a stand by her side, a growl rumbling in his chest as he stares down a third man of Jomm’s clan, Ontari moving close to Clarke’s side as well, a harsh glare being sent to any that meet her eyes.
“Skaikru are fighting with us,” Clarke hisses into Jomm’s face. “Get used to them being here.”

And then she releases him with a push backwards, her chin lifting as he stares at her angrily.

“Azgeda scum,” he hisses, wiping a hand over his bloodied lip, “you know nothing but unthinking violence. What good can you do in this fight?”

“We at least fight,” Ontari says, her voice an icy sneer, “and what can you lake people offer?” she continues, her voice rising, “besides float in your lakes?” and a few chuckle quietly in the silence that hangs heavily.

“Enough,” the Commander says, her voice cutting into the noise that slowly rises. And she steps forward, her guard and Anya moving by her side as the others part for her. “We fight together. Skaikru and the Coalition. We share a common enemy in the Mountain,” she finishes, her eyes moving from face to face.

She follows the arguments that move back and forth, Kane often the target of many insults, his observations often dismissed entirely. And so her eyes narrow from where she stands as Jomm once more insults Skaikru, even insulting the warrior that stands besides Kane. And she knows she will need to intervene soon, will need to quiet the discontent that is beginning to breathe within the tent, but a movement catches her gaze and as she follows it she thinks a small, barely there whisper of a smile lingers across her lips as she reads the movements of Clarke and what the woman intends to do. And so she sees her take a deep breath before lunging forward, before striking Jomm in the face and grasping him around his collar.

And maybe she can find pleasure, for just a moment, at the arrogant Lake Clan representative’s pain. But she feels tension rising and so she steps forward.

“Enough,” she calls it out, her eyes falling onto the warriors around the table. “We fight together. Skaikru and the Coalition. We share a common enemy in the Mountain,” and she knows discussions and war planning will not get finished today and so she raises a hand lazily.

“Leave us,” she calls out, “we will meet once more tomorrow,” and so her eyes follow the warriors that grunt an acceptance to her words. And she nods just briefly to Kane as he leads the Skaikru out of the tent.

“Clarke,” she calls out, “remain,” she finishes as the blonde turns, their eyes meeting, and she is sure she sees a confusion lingering within the blue that holds her gaze. And so her eyes follow the movements of Ontari who lingers close by Clarke’s side, a quiet whisper shared between the two women, and she sees Torvun lingering too, his eyes moving to the Trikru that remain, and she is sure now that he assesses the danger and his chances of being able to defend Clarke should she call out for him. And then the two other Azgeda duck out of the tent, Clarke standing awkwardly on the opposite side of the war table. And she raises her hand then, signalling for Anya, Indra and Octavia to also leave, and so they do with a quiet Heda whispered to her, Gustus the sole other occupant in her tent.

“You have met the Skaikru,” she begins, her hand coming to rest on her knife out of habit.

“Yes, Commander,” and the response comes out just a moment brisk and stilted, and so her chin lifts just slightly, her eyes gazing steadily into Clarke’s.
“You will work with Skaikru and you will speak for Skaikru at these meetings,” and she sees Clarke’s eyes widen for a moment.

“Why?”

“You will be more effective at these clan meetings” she answers, her head tilting just slightly, “the clans do not respect Skaikru and their customs. But they will respect Azgeda, and so they will respect you. If only because you wear Azgeda marks,” she continues, and she feels just a small tightening in her chest at a long gone memory as her eyes follow the scars that live on Clarke’s face.

“So, what? I’m just something for you to order around? A tool to be used?” Clarke replies, her jaw clenching, her eyes burning with a stubbornness that brings just a moment’s smile to her lips.

“No,” she says, her eyes holding Clarke’s gaze, “not a tool to be used. But a weapon to be wielded in our fight against the Mountain.”

And she sees the other woman’s eyes roll, her arms coming to rest across her chest, arms folding tightly.

“Nia was right about you,” Clarke says then as she leans forward just a bit, and Lexa’s eyebrow raises, and maybe she feels Gustus rumble quietly from where he stands. “You think you can tell people what to do, that because you’re Heda you have the power to make us do what you want?”

And she thinks an anger burns quietly within her mind, something that writhes and snarls within her heart. But perhaps it’s a strange, sinking feeling in her stomach she feels as she eyes the way Clarke’s own gaze moves between her and Gustus.

“I am Heda,” she says, her voice hardening, her eyes holding steady, and she pauses for just a moment as her thoughts catch up to her. But the words that come next surprise her, make her think of words she should have said and times long gone. “You do not know everything, Clarke,” and maybe she curses herself as Clarke eyes her carefully, her brows furrowing for just a moment.

“I’ll do it,” she says then, “can I go now?” and she gestures towards the entrance.

“Yes,” she answers, and so her eyes follow as Clarke ducks out the entrance.

“You give her too much leeway, Heda,” Gustus says as she moves to her throne, “she speaks ill of you.”

“You give your too much power. She may come from the sky, but she is Azgeda now. She carries their scars, she wears their clothes. She speaks to you and disrespects you like Azgeda. Yet you give her power over Skaikru too?” he continues quietly. And so she turns her head to Gustus, her eyes thoughtful, and she knows he doesn’t question her to undermine or disrespect, only to ensure she has considered all options.

“She is special, Gustus,” she says after a moment, “Nia will have poisoned her to the Coalition already. I am sure Nia has plans for her, I am sure Nia is herself wielding Clarke as a weapon. So for now I will do the same.”

“And if she is more loyal to Azgeda than to Skaikru or the Coalition?” Gustus adds quietly, his eyes shifting briefly to the tent entrance.

And so she turns to Gustus fully, her mind already sifting through the options she is left with.
“Then I will have her killed.”
She pauses for a moment, her ears picking up the quiet rhythm of steps moving against the ground. She searches around her briefly, her eyes peering into the undergrowth that spreads out around her and then she thinks she sees the gentle swaying of a bush in the distance. And so she smiles, looks over her shoulder briefly before she stalks forward, her bow already being drawn carefully, an arrow at the ready.

And she pauses. She lets the pull of her muscles quiet her mind and she breathes in for a moment, holds it until it burns for just a bit. And then she exhales.

The arrow snaps forward, the quiet twang of the bowstring ringing out through her ears and she smiles as the arrow flies through the air, and she smiles for just a moment as it strikes its target, a satisfying thud echoing out around her.

And she stands, her bow already being slung over her shoulder, the other hunters around her standing also.

“Here,” she says, throwing a length of rope to the bald Trikru warrior she had first seen when the reapers had wandered too close to Azgeda borders, and he smiles as he catches it.

“You shoot well,” he says, already bending down to tie the deer’s hind legs together.

And so she shrugs once, a smile sitting across her lips, “I make do.”

Her fingers twist and knot the rope quickly, and then she stands, brushing a loose strand of hair from her eyes as she gazes up at the sun to gauge its movements through the sky.

“Lincoln, right?” she asks, turning back to him for a moment and she sees him nod briefly before her eyes track the other members of the hunting party, some already carrying animals on their backs.

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The hunting party makes their way through the trees, just ten strong, two for each clan present. And it’s funny, Clarke thinks, as she eyes the Lake clan, that the Commander thinks she can force clans to work together, to fight together, all in the name of the Coalition. Despite that though, Clarke eyes the two Lake clan people carefully, sure that their dislike for Azgeda will cause trouble in the times to come. She is grateful though, that the others keep to themselves, their eyes ever careful of their surroundings and so she turns to Torvun briefly, her ever present guard, and she watches as he holds up a hand briefly, the hunting party coming to a careful stop.

And she feels the quiet tension build in the air for a moment, she thinks she can even sense a something that lingers and so she catches Octavia moving closer to Lincoln, the warrior’s eyes carefully peering out into the trees. They stand still for a short while, those not carrying an animal readying weapons quietly, taking positions more suited to defence. But the danger passes, the air seems to lessen and the tension in her shoulders relaxes and so Torvun’s hand lowers carefully, a hand still clutching the sword strapped to his back, his knife already drawn.

“Something has been through here,” he whispers, the words carrying over the breeze quietly, and so Clarke nods, others around her also agreeing silently.
“Let’s move,” she says, already shifting the animal on her shoulder, Lincoln carrying the other half giving a quiet murmur of agreement.

They continue on for a while, the sun a constant companion that brings a slight sheen of sweat to her brow and so they stop for the afternoon. She drops her end of the deer down, thankful to be free of the weight and so she reaches for her water skin, the cool of the liquid bringing a moment’s reprieve to the thirst that lives within her throat.

“So…” she starts, her eyes meeting Octavia’s, “how’d you end up with Trikru?” and she sees Octavia eye her for a moment in thought, her brows furrowing slightly.

“Skaikru were never my people,” she says simple, “they floated my mother when I was discovered. I lived under the floor,” she shrugs, just a hint of anger burning in her eyes. “I owe them nothing.”

“Oh…” and it makes sense then, that Octavia would want to distance herself from Skaikru.

“Yeah,” she replies.

They let the silence live between the both of them, and it’s comfortable, just a quiet thing that lets their thoughts wander while they rest for a few short moments. And so Clarke turns her eyes skywards, lets her gaze trace the clouds that float through the sky, that drift aimlessly as they dance with the wind.

“Do you miss it?” Octavia asks, her eyes gazing upon Clarke thoughtfully.

“Space?”

“Yeah.”

And does she?

“Yeah,” she pauses for a moment, thinks back to the times she had looked up at the stars and longed for the past. “I guess a bit,” and she shrugs just once. “Maybe I miss simpler times. Not having to worry about anything. At least before…” and she trails off, her thoughts turning to darker times.

“Yeah, I get you,” Octavia says quietly, “but the ground’s better,” she continues.

“Yeah,” Clarke replies, a small smile lifting her lips. “It is. At least we ha—”

And a twig snaps. Heads turn towards the sound.

A growl erupts from the undergrowth before bodies explode forward, faces bloodied and eyes reddened.

“Reapers!” a warrior yells.

Clarke’s already rolling back, and as she finds her feet she looses an arrow into the first reaper she sees, and she grimaces for just a moment as her arrow punches into its throat, a spray of fouled blood spattering across Octavia’s face, the other woman’s sword halfway drawn. And so a brief smile is exchanged before both women turn to face other reapers.
Torvun is by Clarke’s side in a flash, his sword already drawn, a broad swing of it taking the head off a reaper as Clarke ducks under its falling body. And as she rises her feet snag on the dead reaper by her feet and so she cries out briefly before she falls face first into the dirt.

And it’s a quick, desperate, frantic scramble forward away from the body and she throws her bow from her, knowing it will do her no good on the ground amongst the tangle of limbs, and so she reaches for her knife, and as she rolls onto her back she finds a reaper standing over her, lips turned up into a snarl, blood dripping from its mouth.

And her leg snaps out, and she feels the crunch as it connects with the reaper’s knee and so she lunges forward, the small moment all she needs before she drives her knife into its thigh. But the reaper’s fist comes down, it smashes against her face, and pain erupts through her nose, a bloodied mess smearing across her mouth. And so she pushes away, and she scrambles back on her hands, and the reaper advances on her. She rolls away as it lunges, a handful of dirt grasped in her fist before she throws it into the reaper’s eyes and as she finds her feet she stands, her chest heaving as she reaches for an arrow, ready to drive it into the reaper.

There’s a flash of brown and then the reaper staggers back before falling to the ground, Lincoln straddling its torso, his own knife plunged deep into the reaper’s chest. And so she smiles for just a moment before she turns to find Torvun, his hand holding down a reaper as he removes his sword from another. She sees Octavia slide under the haphazard swing of her own reaper before she slashes out, her sword opening the reaper’s stomach, blood and flesh spilling out messily.

She races forward then, intercepting a reaper about to lunge at Torvun’s exposed back and she blocks the swing of a sword, her knife deflecting it away and so she pounces, a snarl forming across her own lips, and her elbow strikes out, a satisfying crunch all she hears before she throws the reaper over her shoulder, her knife plunged firmly into the reaper’s chest.

And as she whips her head around in search of another foe she finds the others in her hunting party breathing heavily, the last of the reapers lying dead on the ground. And she meets Octavia’s eyes briefly, the Trikru warrior’s own sword bloodied, a fresh cut across her arm bleeding slightly.

“Is everyone ok?” she calls out quietly, her own chest rising, and she meets the nods of several others, quiet yes’s finding her ears and so she smiles grimly, satisfied that none have died.

She finds Lincoln kneeling over the reaper he killed, his eyes mournful, his lips a grim line, and so she approaches quietly, her knife sliding back into place against her thigh, and she bends down, her bow quickly snatched off the ground.

“Did you know him?” she asks, her eyes taking in the reaper that lies on the ground.

“Yes,” Lincoln replies, already reaching to take the cloth wrapped around the reaper’s neck. “He came from Ton DC, I know his brother,” he continues, his fingers folding the faded green of the cloth, “his family will want to know his fight is over,” he finishes sadly.

“We should go,” another warrior says, her eyes peering out into the trees.

And so Clarke nods, but as she rises, as she begins to turn from the dead bodies that lie around her she finds her gaze drawn to a reaper’s neck. And so she does a double take, her eyes must narrow for just a moment as she sees the wounds across the reaper’s neck.

“Wait,” she calls out as she bends down, her fingers reaching out to turn the reaper’s head away for a moment.
And she knows the marks on the neck. She recognises them and knows what they mean.

“These marks,” she says, her lip between her teeth, “do other reapers have them?” she asks, her eyes turning to Torvun who stands close by, and so he bends down, already searching another reaper.

“Yes. They are on this one, too,” he answers gruffly, his eyes turning thoughtful.

“Octavia,” she calls out, “they’re injection marks, right?”

And the other woman nods as she inspects another reaper.

“Yeah,” she looks up, “so?”

“We don’t know how the Mountain turns us into Reapers,” Clarke begins, her mind turning quickly.

“Does it matter?” comes the reply, Octavia’s lips pursing.

“I have an idea,” Clarke says as she wipes away the blood dripping from her nose, “Torvun, take this one,” she finishes, already lifting the reaper for Torvun to carry.

They walk back quickly, eyes ever careful. And so she’s thankful when the sound of the war camp reaches her ears. And she lets out a relived sigh as she recognises the Azgeda warriors she nears. She stops for only a moment as she drops off the deer that was hunted before beginning to make her way to Ton DC, Torvun following close behind, the reaper still carried over his shoulder.

“This reaper is important,” he says, his tone inquisitive.

“Yeah,” she pauses for a moment in thought, “I need a second opinion, but if it’s what I think it is then we have a way of dealing with the reapers,” she finishes and she smiles when she hears the quiet grunt of Torvun’s acknowledgement.

It’s strange, she thinks, to now be standing with Azgeda and Skaikru behind her back. But for now she merely sighs and listens as Abby once more details what they think the marks mean for the reapers.

“—So if we can get a reaper that’s still alive—”

“You do us no good, Skaikru!” a Trikru warrior interrupts quickly, his eyes aflame, his lips turned into a snarl, “we should not waste our time on curing these reapers when we should aim to kill them.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Abby says, her gaze hardening, “we can save the reapers—”

And once more the Trikru warrior scoffs, his eyes rolling, “It is a waste of time,” he snarls out.

And so Clarke sighs again, her mind quickly racing with thoughts. And she is sure this warrior’s
hatred must stem from something deep. But for now she has no patience for idiocy, and so she sighs just once more, her eyes meeting Ontari’s for just a moment before she steps forward, her hand coming to rest against the knife on her thigh.

“Are you stupid?” she snaps out, cutting him off, her eyes hardening and her chin lifting.

And a silence settles around the war table then. And she feels the eyes of the Commander snap to her, and maybe, as she meets the Commander’s gaze she sees a thoughtful gaze lingering within the green for just a moment.

“Are you stupid?” she asks once more, her gaze turning back to the warrior’s.

“You question me, Azgeda? Or is it Skaikru? You can not even decide who to belong to,” he snarls out, his fists coming to rest against the table.

“Watch your tongue Trikru worm,” Ontari hisses from besides Clarke, her eyes narrowing as she stares down the warrior.

“I would kill you where you sta—”

“Enough, Quint,” Clarke’s eyes snap to the Commander, her hand raised, her eyes glaring at the warriors around the table. “Speak, Clarke,” she says, her eyes falling to Clarke’s.

And so she leans forward, her eyes holding Quint’s.

“I’m going to spell this out for you — assuming you can spell,” and she smirks at the quiet chuckles she hears, “if we cure the reapers we reduce their numbers,” and she looks around the table, meeting the gazes of those present before her eyes settle upon Abby for just a moment, a small smile lifting her mother’s lips, “and we increase ours. And we save our people. It would be stupid to ignore this,” she finishes, eye brow raising as she holds Quint’s gaze.

And Quint glares at her, and she is sure she feels the hatred roll off him, she is sure she even feels Torvun stepping just a bit closer to her.

“It is settled,” the Commander breaks the silence, “if the reapers can be cured then so be it.”
The Commander’s gaze turns to those present around the war table, and she holds their gaze for a short moment before she nods just once, satisfied that an agreement has been met.

“We will once again meet tomorrow. Leave us,” she calls out, and so the many warriors present bow their heads for just a moment before turning to leave, “Clarke, remain.”

And she is sure a sigh leaves her lips once more as she catches Ontari’s eyes roll briefly before the other woman ducks out of the tent, Torvun close behind her.

“You should not antagonise Quint,” she begins as she walks back to her throne.

“If he wasn’t such an idiot maybe I wouldn’t have to,” Clarke replies coolly, her eyes following the Commander’s movements as she sits in her throne.

“Perhaps,” comes the answer, an eyebrow raising just slightly, and maybe she sees just a sliver of mirth live in the Commander’s expression. “You will continue to speak for Skaikru in these clan meetings,” she says after a short while.

“Yeah, I figured it wasn’t a one time thing,” Clarke replies, her eyebrow raising for a moment as Gustus glares at her from the corner of the tent.

“You should not antagonise Gustus, too,” the Commander says again, her head tilting for a moment in thought as her eyes move across Clarke’s face.

“Is there a reason why you wanted to me to stay…?” Clarke asks then, her eyes turning back to the Commander’s, their eyes meeting for a long moment.

“You may leave now, Clarke,” and the Commander raises a hand once more and so Clarke nods her head, a small confusion lingering within her mind, an uncertainty as to the reason why the conversation had just taken place sitting within her thoughts.

But she ducks out of the entrance, a deep breath being taken as she feels the sun touch her face briefly. And perhaps she feels an anger, perhaps she feels a frustration that lives within her at the stupidity of Quint, and the arguments she has to sit through during the clan meetings. But she shakes it off, already moving from the Commander’s tent.

She finds Torvun waiting for her not far from where she stands and so she nods briefly in greeting as their eyes meet.

“What did the Commander want?” he asks as they make their way back to the war camp.

“I don’t know,” she shrugs, “just to make sure I’m still following orders i guess,” she finishes lamely.

And so Torvun grunts roughly besides her, his gaze as always peering out around them as they move past the number of warriors moving about the war camp.

“Where’d Ontari go?” she asks.

“Training grounds with Entani,” Torvun says.
She watches as Abby inspects the dead reaper on the bed, and she grimaces for a moment as Abby removes the layers of clothing, crusted with dried blood and sweat and dirt. Jackson meets her eyes briefly, a small smile passed between the both of them before Abby draws blood from the reaper, a syringe carefully held between her fingers.

“Will you be able to figure out what drug caused this” She asks.

“Maybe. If we can catch live reapers then it could be easier,” and she pauses for a moment, “but I’m sure it’s a drug, these needle marks have to come from the Mountain. And it explains the bloodshot eyes,” Abby continues and her gaze hardens as she looks at the reaper before her. “It’s disgusting,” she says.

“Yeah,” Clarke replies, “it is.”

She makes her way back to the war camp, her thoughts happy to wander where they wish and so she looks up in surprise as a shadow falls across her path. And she smiles briefly as she finds the two guards, Bellamy and Finn following close behind another woman, her hair dark, a muddy red jacket worn over a dirtied grey shirt.

“Clarke, right?” the woman says then, her eyes moving from Torvun and then back to her.

“Yeah,” she replies.

“Raven,” the woman replies, a smile spreading across her lips, “Abby talks about you a lot,” she continues as she holds out a hand for Clarke to shake.

“She does?” she says as their hands meet for a moment.

“Yeah, well. Not so much now, but she stills does, but before…” Raven trails off, “you know,” she finishes with a shrug.

“Yeah,” Clarke shrugs too, unsure of what to say, and maybe it’s just a bit sad she realises, that conversation flows less easily between Skaikru and herself now.

“Nice meeting you, Clarke,” Raven says, “you should visit Arkadia sometime, after all this is done,” she finishes with a careful smile.

Her thoughts catch up to her slowly, the gentle pressure of the furs against her back a grounding presence that soothes her mind. And so she lies still for a quiet moment, her thoughts drifting where they please until she feels sleep slip too far from her. And so her eyes open slowly, the dark of the tent and the gentle flickering of a torch outside all that her eyes see.

She rolls over gently then, lifting Ontari’s arm from where it rests around her waist so as not to disturb the sleeping woman. She lets her breaths come even and slow as she stares up at the tent roof. And it’s a quiet sigh that leaves her lips. And so she sits up carefully, pulling the furs from her and so
she creeps from the bed, the cool of the night prickling her skin, a gentle shiver running through her body.

She turns briefly, just in time to see Ontari roll into the warmth left by her body, her arm reaching out and coming to rest around Entani’s own body. And so she smiles at the image as she pulls on her clothing, the leathers and furs a familiar weight that steadies her mind. And she smiles at the comfortable pressure of the knife she straps to her thigh before she ducks out of the tent.

The moon greets her as it sits high in the dark of the night’s sky. And she looks around briefly, the occasional Azgeda warrior moving through their camp catching her eye, the lights from the flames of the other clans burning in the distance. And her eyes trace the camp as it spreads out to the hill, and she follows the trail of torches that wind their way up to the Commander’s tent, and maybe for a moment she thinks she sees a lonely figure moving to the tent, the long coat and the red of the sash glowing quietly in the haze of the night, the light of the torches casting a gentle shadow around the figure.

She finds Torvun in his usual spot by the entrance, his eyes closed, his breaths coming even and soft, his beard moving carefully with each exhale. But his eyes open smoothly as she begins to move from the entrance, and she sees them scan briefly before his eyes settle on her figure.

“I’m just going to relieve myself,” she says as she passes him, a quick pat on his shoulder all she gives before she moves off, “you can come search for me if I’m not back soon,” she says, a quiet smile lingering across her lips as she hears the grumble of reluctant acceptance.

She moves through the tents, her feet quiet footfalls and her eyes ever careful as she passes figures. And she sighs deeply, her mind still just a moment too caught up in thought and so she shakes her head, already moving into the trees.

It’s not often that she finds herself with a moment of quiet and so she takes her time wandering back to the camp. She comes to a stop by a large tree, the bark a gnarled, weathered thing covered in the green moss common to the area, and so she sits down, her back resting against the tree and her eyes turned upwards.

She lets her eyes trace the light that dapples through the leaves and branches, that gives light to the darkness that surrounds her and she lets her thoughts wander freely.

She finds herself thinking of the Ark in this moment. She finds herself running a finger over the watch she still wears around her wrist and she thinks a small smile lifts the corner of her lips as she sees the gentle shining of stars.

And maybe she’s not so saddened by the events that have occurred, maybe she isn’t angered by the way her life has unfolded. And maybe she’s happy that she has found a place, despite the turmoil of it.

Her thoughts continue to drift from moment to moment, but it starts with a gentle prickling of her neck, just enough for her ears to turn to the sounds of the forest. She thinks she feels a quiet fall around her, the gentle singing of the trees stilling and the quiet of the wind lessening.

And she knows.
Her fingers move to the knife on her thigh, her eyes searching out around her. And so she rises to her feet, her body a low crouch as she scans around her. And she thinks she hears the quiet rustling, the careful pausing of sounds that approaches.

And she knows she is hunted.

She breaks cover then, sure her hunter has found her. And so she ducks under a low hanging branch, her feet carrying her through the trees back to the war camp. And she hears it. She knows the gentle creak and the careful whistling and so she dives to the ground, the steady thwack of an arrow embedding into a tree all the confirmation she needs to know that a warrior hunts her.

“You can’t hide forever, Azgeda scum!” and her eyes roll as she recognises Quint’s voice.

But she ignores the taunt, already moving through the underbrush. She thinks she hears the snapping of twigs then, and she smiles for a moment in realisation that Quint’s anger carries him forward.

“I guess you aren’t even good with a bow and arrow,” she taunts, already moving from where she rested.

And she hears the curse and the change in direction as he follows her voice. And so she scans around her before settling on a direction. Her feet take her forward, her breaths coming even and measured, her eyes carefully scanning. And she smiles for a moment when her eyes fall on what she needs.

She watches as he comes crashing through the undergrowth, his breaths a frantic, furious thing that lifts his chest and gives away his position. And so she rolls her eyes as she follows his movements from where she sits.

And she knows she needs to time it right, too soon or too late and she’ll miss. And perhaps it’s in this moment that she is thankful she wears furs, if only because they deaden the sounds she makes as she inches forward on the branch. And so she smiles as Quint nears the tree she hides in, his eyes following her tracks that she has left behind.

She readies her knife, her eyes trained on the bow and arrow Quint holds in his hands.

And so she takes one steadying breath as he nears where her trail ends. And it’s just one more moment, one more quiet breath. And then she drops.

She drops hard and fast, her knife already poised to strike.

But his gaze hardens for a moment as he reads her trail, as he realises it disappears at the base of a tree and so he dives out of the way, a curse leaving his mouth as her knife slices into his shoulder.

Clarke hits the ground with a roll, her hand throwing dirt up into his face as she lunges forward then. Quint back peddles, his foot coming up before him with a sickening thump as it hits Clarke square in the stomach.

And she drops with a grunt, her hand coming to clutch at her ribs.

And she hears the creak, and so she rolls, ignoring the burning in her ribs as the arrow whizzes over
head. And she comes to a low crouch as she faces him, her knife held out in front of her.

“Fight me like a warrior and not a coward,” she hisses as she eyes the bow in his hands.

And he snarls just once.

“I will enjoy killing you, Azgeda,” and he drops the bow, his own knife being drawn, a wicked smile spreading across his lips.

*You idiot.*

Her mind turns back to the times she had fought with Ontari, of the times spent being beaten and bruised and pitted against warriors twice her size. And maybe she’ll smile later in thanks at the times Ontari forced her against larger opponents. But for now she eyes the knife that dances between Quint’s fingers.

And as she eyes him carefully she knows he is angry, she knows he is quick to anger, quick to confront. And so she smirks briefly.

“Did Azgeda kill one of your family?” she asks, a careful lilt finding its way into her voice.

And she sees his eyes harden, she sees his jaw clench.

“Or did you fight Azgeda? Did you lose?” she lets a laugh find its way into her eyes.

And he snarls, lunges forward and strikes out with his knife.

And so Clarke reacts, she slips back, just enough that the knife slides through air and so she brings her own knife past her body, a clanging of metal on metal echoing out around her before she drops to her knees and spins under his arm.

And she comes up behind him, but he turns quickly, his knife lashing out in the hopes of catching her unawares, and the movement halts her advance.

Quint lunges again, his eyes fixated on her neck and so she ducks, the knife slicing against the furs of her shoulder and she brings her elbow up, striking the underside of his arm before she lashes out with her foot, a satisfying crunch all she hears before he cries out sharply. And she rolls, but as she passes under his arm he drops it, and it collides with her cheek splitting it open with a painful crunch.

She spins with the blow though, her knife slashing out behind her as she finds her feet, her chest heaving as she comes face to face with Quint.

And so they begin circling each other, her gaze careful as she eyes his feet, the ground they stand upon and the sticks and leaves and rocks that litter the forest ground and the trees around them.

“You think you are Azgeda,” he spits, “yet you do not belong. You aren’t even Skaikru,” and his knife dances in the moonlight. “All you are is a half clan bitch,” he snarls.

“At least this half clan bitch can read,” she says.

And then he lunges forward, his mouth opening to the sound of a guttural roar. And she smiles.

She backs up until she feels the press of the tree behind her.

And she waits.
She waits for just a moment. For just long enough that Quint commits himself to the charge.

And then she drops.

She feels the press of his body crash over her and she hears the sickening crunch as he smashed into the tree.

But she curses as his knee smashes with her face, as she feels the impact against her cheek and as her head hits the ground painfully.

But she rolls out from under him, rushing to her feet and she jumps forward. She lands on his back, and she grips his chin in her free hand. And so she grimaces as she drives her knife hard into his throat, the blood spraying out from the wound. And it’s just a final tug, just a final slice of her knife before he drops to the ground, his breaths coming in broken, wet, wheezing gasps, blood frothing and gurgling from the jagged, wretched wound across his throat.

And then he stills.

She picks herself up from his back, her face stinging, her eye already beginning to swell. And so she brings her fingers up, a small wince escaping her lips as she feels the wound that sits painfully across her cheek.

“I told you not to antagonise Quint.”

Her head snaps around, her knife coming out before her as she searches for the voice.

She finds the Commander standing not far from where she is, her gaze trained on Quint’s lifeless body, the pale moonlight casting her in a gentle glow that shines against the dark of her clothes.

“He attacked me,” Clarke says, her chin raising in challenge despite the pain.

“I know,” the Commander says, “I saw.”

“Some help would have been welcomed,” Clarke replies, annoyance colouring her tone.

“I did not wish to distract,” comes the reply, a gentle lifting of a shoulder all the answer she is given.

“Him or me?” and her eyebrow raises for a moment.

“It does not matter now,” the Commander replies, her hand coming to rest against the knife on her hip as she eyes Clarke and her own knife, blood dripping from it freely.

“Were you following me?” she asks, her eyes narrowing, “or were you just out for a late night stroll?”

“I was following Quint,” she replies, “I did not think he would leave you alone.”

“I’m flattered you care,” Clarke snarks back.

But the Commander ignores her remark, her eyes just briefly running over the wounds on Clarke’s face before they fall to Quint’s body once more.

“Where’s your guard?” Clarke asks, her eyes peering out behind the Commander.

“Behind you,” and maybe Clarke sees the faint twitching of a lip flash across the Commander’s face as she turns around quickly to find Gustus standing close by. “We should return, Clarke. I am sure
Torvun searches for you.”

Clarke glowers at the Commander for a moment longer as their eyes meet again and she is sure she sees mirth dance within the green that holds her gaze. But she feels Gustus bend then, and so she breaks their gaze to find Gustus picking up Quint’s body before slinging it over his shoulder.

And so Clarke sighs just once.

“Lead the way, Commander.”
Chapter 12

She finds Torvun moving through the trees quickly, the sounds of the fighting having drawn his attention. And perhaps she smiles for just a moment as Torvun and Gustus come face to bearded face. And she stifles a pained smile when she notices that they look similar, if only because both men eye each other warily, both stand much too tall for normal and both jut their chins out proudly.

“I’m ok, Torvun,” she says as he moves to her side, his hands quickly coming up to her face as he turns it left then right, his eyes peering intently at her bloodied nose, her eye swelling shut and the blood drying across her cheek.

“What happened?” he asks, his eyes turning back to Quint’s body still slung over Gustus’ shoulder.

“He happened,” she shrugs, and so she sighs for a moment as Torvun grunts out disapproval, his eyes moving to the Commander.

“Come, Clarke,” the Commander says then, “we should not linger in these forests. A pauna lives close.”

And so Clarke rolls her eyes again as she follows behind the Commander, the swaying of her long coat guiding her back to the war camp.

And so it’s not long until they make their way back to the camp edge, the fires dotting the outskirts shining through the leaves and branches. And so Clarke begins moving towards where the Azgeda made camp, her mind already wishing for sleep, already dreading facing Ontari’s furious gaze when she finds her wounds. But the Commander stops for a moment as she hears her moving away.

“Clarke,” her voice calls out over the small distance between them, “you will come with me,” she finishes, her chin lifting, her eyes a hard glint that holds the gaze they share.

“Why?” she says, “I’m tired. My face hurts. I want to sleep.”

“My healer will see to you, Clarke,” and then the Commander turns, Gustus close behind her and so Clarke follows with another roll of her eyes, Torvun close by her side.

They make their way up the winding path of torches, Quint’s body passed to a group of Trikru warriors with instructions to prepare a pyre. And so she sighs tiredly as they come to the Commander’s tent.

“Gustus, find Nyko,” the Commander says as she moves to the entrance, briefly looking over her shoulder at Clarke.

“Wait outside, Torvun,” Clarke says cautiously as she follows the Commander inside.

And it’s strange, she thinks, as the Commander moves through her tent, as she removes her sword and as she loosens the collar of her coat. And it’s disconcerting, she thinks, to watch as the Commander rolls her shoulders smoothly, just a little, just enough that perhaps she thinks she imagined the motion. But Clarke’s eyes follow the Commander as she moves to one of her tables, a
candle burning gently in the centre, as she places her sword down besides her pauldron that already rests comfortably across the tabletop and as she removes her gauntlets, placing them down gently on the table next to her sword.

“Is there a reason I’m here?” Clarke asks, her eyes tracing the river she sees winding its way over a folded map.

The Commander looks up then, her eyes careful in their movements as they take in the injuries that litter Clarke’s face.

“You are hurt, Clarke,” she begins, “my healer will see to you,” she finishes with a gentle raising of her chin.

“I’m a healer,” Clarke answers, her eyes guarded in their appraisal of the Commander, “I have healers back at the Azgeda camp,” she continues, “no offence Commander, but I don’t need a Trikru healer.”

And so the Commander hardens her gaze, a long shadow falling across her face.

“You are important, Clarke,” she says, her hands coming to rest behind her back, “so you will forgive me if I wish for my healer to see to you, rather than to trust the skills of another.”

And Clarke’s eyes roll as she comes to stand a few paces in front of her.

“I’m getting tired of you telling me what to do, Commander,” she answers, “I get it. You want me to work with you. You want me to work with Skaikru and you want me to speak for Skaikru during the war meetings and smooth things over between them and the other clans. I’ve already said I’ll do it. But I don’t have to let you baby me,” and she pauses for a moment as she eyes the other woman who stands before her and she is sure her eyes narrow a fraction when the Commander’s head tilts just a bit.

But perhaps a thought takes hold. Perhaps a reason for why the Commander has a vested interest in her wellbeing spreads its root through her mind.

“It’s not just about Skaikru, is it?” Clarke presses, and she smirks as a flash of a moment’s thought flits through the Commander’s eyes. “You need me,” and again she pauses, worries her lip for just a bit as her thoughts organise, as they dance through her mind and settle. “Azgeda’s place in the Coalition isn’t as strong as you want, is it?” and she sees the Commander’s jaw clench just a bit, but enough to tell her where to press, where to push and where to dig deeper. “What, you think I can smooth things over? Between Azgeda and the Coalition? Between Azgeda and you?” and she leans forward, her eyes holding the Commander’s, “Between Nia and you?”

And the Commander eyes her, but it’s a curious gaze, it’s a quiet tempering of thoughts that live in a darkening of green eyes, and it’s a careful glint in her eyes that appraises her, that measures her bearing and studies the thoughts that live in her eyes.

“You think me evil, Clarke?” the Commander begins as she circles the table slowly, her eyebrow raised in question, a sole finger trailing the edge of the worn wood. “You think me unkind? You think me unfair? You think me unfit to lead the Coalition?” she finishes as she comes to a stop across from her, the table a sea of flickering lights and dancing shadows between them.

And Clarke’s eyebrows twitch together for a moment, her mind unsure of where this conversation leads. And as she watches the Commander she thinks a lie would be recognised easily, would be scoffed at, would be met with mirth and derision. And so she settles for the truth.
“Yes,” she lifts her chin, her hands coming to rest against the table in front of her as she gazes at the Commander from across the candle light between them. “You treat Azgeda poorly. You force us to trade with clans that offer us little. You dictate what we must do in our own clan. Even here, in Trikru lands.”

“Yes,” the Commander answers, and it’s a simple thing, something that beckons no arguments, no alternatives. But still, Clarke thinks she sees the Commander’s thoughts move for just a moment more across her face, and so she quiets, lets the thoughts she sees form into words for her to hear.

“You do not know everything, Clarke,” the Commander says, the words a repeat of memories already shared. “The clans were at war before the Coalition. We fought each other. We killed each other,” the Commander’s eyes harden, “so yes, I will dictate how clans act if it will keep the peace,” she finishes, her eyes unflinching in their gaze.

“Power can be corrupting,” Clarke answers, iron finding it’s way into her voice.

And the Commander stills for a short while, her eyes steady in their calculation, leaving a burning trail across Clarke’s face, the steady stinging and the pain receding into the recesses of her mind as she holds the Commander’s gaze.

“You do not trust me.”

And so Clarke pauses, her mind turning carefully in thought. She wonders who the Commander must be, and she takes in the curve of her cheek that bends a lone shadow as it falls across her face. She thinks of what the Commander must be, and she traces the slope of her nose and the way the light shines against the green that lives in her eyes. and she thinks of what the Commander must have done to now control all twelve clans, and her eyes trail over the coat, collar opened, the rough leather and fur marked with the battles the Commander has no doubt fought.

And so Clarke meets her gaze steadily.

“No. I don’t,” and she is sure she feels her heart beating just a moment faster than normal as the words leave her mouth.

The moment hangs between them for a long while. It stretches, it pulls and pushes against her mind and she is sure she feels the twitching of her muscles and the ache in her bones. But she sees the Commander’s eyes narrow a fraction, she sees a thought that lives for only a beat of a heart in the green eyes that look back at her. And then the Commander sighs just once, a barely there, barely audible sound that finds its way to her ears.

“Lexa.”

“What?” and she blinks in surprise.

“My name is Lexa,” she hears the quiet revelation and she thinks her mouth falls open slightly, “If we are to work together. If you are to trust me,” and she pauses, her brows furrowing for just a moment, and then the Commander’s mouth opens, words forming on her lips and—

“Heda, you sent for me?”

And Clarke turns, the healer she had seen days prior standing in the tent entrance.

“Yes, Nyko,” the Commander replies, already moving from around the table, “Clarke Kom Azgeda is wounded,” and she motions to her, the injuries clear for Nyko to see.
She makes her way back to the Azgeda camp, Torvun quietly moving by her side, and she is sure that after Quint’s attack, he won’t leave her side willingly. And so a sigh finds its way into the air, the pale light of an early moon giving guidance to their steps as they wind through the tents, as they move past tired warriors and watchful sentries.

They come to their tent and Torvun nods to Clarke as he takes a seat by the entrance, his knife already unsheathed, a whetstone held in his free hand. Clarke ducks through the entrance, the cool of the early morning replaced by the gentle warmth that lives within the tent and so she pulls the furs from her, their warmth just a bit too warm and she grimaces at the motion, her ribs aching dully. And so she lifts her shirt and inspects the bandages Nyko wrapped around her waist, and she sends a quiet thanks that none were broken. And so she sighs, rolls her shoulders painfully and brings a hand up to her cheek, just a gentle wince finding its way from her lips as she brushes her fingertip against the cool paste that still clings to her face.

She moves towards the bed in the hope of catching up on the last few hours of sleep she can get before the morning war meeting. But as she nears the furs and the sleeping women, she finds Ontari’s eyes peering up at her tiredly, a gentle frown resting across her face.

“You were gone a long time,” she whispers as she sits, the quiet of a candlelight shining across the chest binding Ontari wears and the furs falling to bundle around her waist, and so Clarke shrugs deftly as she approaches.

“Yeah,” she begins, unsure of how to bring up what had happened. But maybe she’s thankful that the dark hides the injuries that live across her face. At least for the moment.

But she thinks Ontari’s eyes narrow, she thinks that as she approaches Ontari must see the flickering of a something because she sits up fully, her eyes hardening.

“What happened?” the woman hisses quietly, already moving out of the furs, her exposed skin prickling in the cold of the quiet morning.

“Quint, happened,” Clarke grunts out, already removing her boots as she sits on the edge of the bed.

“Quint?” Ontari asks, “the Trikru scum from the war meeting?” she growls out as her eyes take in the extent of Clarke’s injuries, “I will kill him,” she snarls as she comes to kneel before Clarke, her fingers stilling in their motions to take Clarke’s face in her hands.

“No need,” Clarke whispers, a small smile finding its way across her lips, “he’s the burning pyre you’ll see in the morning,” and Ontari’s eyes narrow even further as she ghosts a finger over Clarke’s cheek, the paste coming away with the movement.

“Are you ok?” she asks, her eyes careful as she searches Clarke’s face, and Clarke sees her grimace at the swelling of her cheek and nose.

“Yeah, I’m ok,” Clarke answers, “I’m not dead yet,” she laughs quietly and so Ontari meets her laugh with a quiet smile.

“Good.”
Clarke finds herself back in bed, the warmth of their bodies a comfort that steadies her thoughts and so Clarke lets herself be lost in the warmth of the furs and the soft press of Ontari’s body behind her and the gentle sounds of Entani’s breathing.

And maybe, as sleep encroaches on her mind, as she lets it pull herself further and further into a much needed rest, she smiles, if only because she feels Ontari’s arm wrap tentatively around her waist, if only because she feels the press of Ontari’s body and the warmth of her skin and the gentle ghosting of her breath against the back of her neck.

And she thinks it’s nice to have a clan where she belongs.

And she thinks it’s nice to have friends.

She thinks it’s nice.

“I think,” Entani says as she pulls a shirt on, “that you should not encourage Trikru anymore, Clarke,” and she throws her a smile as she runs her hands through her hair.

“Quint was an idiot,” Ontari answers from behind Clarke, her fingers quickly moving through the blonde braids, “and now he is dead,” she finishes.

“Where was Torvun?” Entani asks as she looks at Clarke, “was he not with you?”

“No,” she shrugs, Ontari’s movements through her hair making the gesture awkward in its motion, “I went out for— you know,” she finishes lamely.

And she smiles when Entani snorts, “I think you will not have anymore privacy now then.”

And Clarke thinks her correct. And so she sighs, her eyes turning to the entrance for a moment as she continues to feel Ontari pull on her hair, braids quickly being rewoven.

“You aren’t coming to the war meeting?” Clarke asks Entani after a moment.

And the other woman shakes her head, “no, our warriors hurt themselves in training so I must see to them,” she sighs, “but it is preferable to listening to clan bickering.”

And Clarke lets a smile form on her lips at the answer. But she finds her thoughts move on their own, she finds her mind shifting back to the night, to the conversation she had had with the Commander— with Lexa. And maybe she can’t help but to consider the role she is sure she will take part in with the coming war. If only because Nia told her she is expected to serve Azgeda, if only because she is expected to serve Nia, isn’t that what she was told? And she is sure Lexa has a plan too, has a use for her. And maybe she thinks she doesn’t appreciate being a pawn in a chess game played by others. But for now? For now she can play her part, she thinks. For now she will serve Azgeda. For now she will wait.

“All done,” Ontari whispers quietly, breaking her wandering thoughts, a hand coming to rest against her shoulder with a gentle squeeze.
The walk to Lexa’s tent is a quiet thing, other clan’s warriors join them quietly, the sounds of their feet brushing against the ground all she hears.

And as she moves through the burning trail she finds the smouldering remains of a pyre, the smoke rising lazily towards the sky and so she lets her eyes take in what remains, the charcoal and the burning wood and the ash that dances on the breeze, carried away on the wind.

And as she passes the pyre she finds a few Trikru gazing at her, their eyes careful and guarded, but maybe, if only because they now stand by a pyre, she thinks she sees less hostility, less open distain.

And so she smiles.

They come to stand around the war table once more, the warriors that stand around it turning their gaze upon Clarke as she stands besides Skaikru, Azgeda also by her side.

“Skaikru,” Lexa begins, her eyes turning to Kane before quickly moving to Raven, “has progress been made?”

“Yes, Commander,” Kane begins, briefly gesturing for Raven to step forward.

“We think we’ve found where the Mountain gets their power from,” Raven begins, her eyes turning briefly to the Lexa before she looks back to the map. “This river, there’s a dam here,” and she looks up at the silence before adding, “how they survive,” she says simply. “We destroy it, we can get through their front door. But we can’t get close until the acid fog is down. So we’re still waiting for that to happen,” she finishes as she looks back at Lexa.

And Clarke sighs once as she hears the grumbles of annoyance spread around the table, the reliance on a single person bringing frustration to the warriors gathered.

“We wait,” she says, her eyes cutting into those who grumble. “You might not like it. But waiting is all we have at the moment. Or do I have to remind you what happened to the last person who questioned Skaikru?” and she jerks her chin towards the exit, the cooling pyre the clear target of her gesture, and she smiles as the dissent lessens.

“Scouts found a number of reapers moving through the forest, Heda,” and Clarke looks to Anya, her eyes trained on the map, “they move close to Arkadia, perhaps they mean to attack, to disrupt our connection,” she finishes.

“Or distract our forces from Ton DC and the warriors here, Heda,” Indra adds, her eyes moving between Ton DC and where Arkadia is marked on the map.

“Azgeda has the second largest force here,” Lexa begins, her eyes holding Clarke’s gaze for a moment, “You will deal with the reapers.”

“What of the other clans?” Clarke says, her eyes hardening. “You expect us to do all the work?”
“No,” Lexa answers, her voice firming, “Azgeda can afford to send warriors without their numbers weakening. Trikru will accompany you,” she finishes, her tone leaving little room for discussion.

And Clarke is sure she feels Ontari glaring angrily at Lexa, and so she reaches out below the table and squeezes her hand for a moment.

“And,” Lexa continues, “you, of all the warriors here, are most familiar with Skaikru medicine. So you will lead the attempt to capture a reaper in this attack.”

It’s quiet. That’s the first thing she notices. Well, not exactly quiet. If only because the reapers grunt and snarl and make whatever noise a reaper makes. But the birdsong ceased long ago, the reapers having driven them far. Even the other animals seem to have fled the area. And it’s still. The wind hardly breathes through the trees where Clarke finds herself.

And so she keeps watching the three reapers move before her. Their guttural sounds reaching her ears over the quiet of the forest. She waits until they pass, until they move away from her and until they turn and present their backs.

And then she rises.

She feels the bow in her hands flex and she feels the brush of the fletching as it ghosts against her cheek. And she ignores the sting that still lives across her face as she takes a breath. And she holds it for just a moment.

And then she releases.

The arrow flashes forward, a sharp whistle through the air, the sound of two others close behind. And she watches as the arrows snake forward, as the reapers pause for a moment as the sound reaches them and then she smiles grimly as the arrows punch into the reapers. Their cries of pain quickly silenced as their blood leeches from their ruined bodies.

And so she stands, casts her eyes around her and she moves forward. Azgeda faces rise from the underbrush, their usual white faces a dark black, if only because Azgeda aren’t stupid. Not when they’re sent into a reaper camp.

And so she meets Ontari’s eyes for a moment as they slink forward, their bows re-notched, arrows poised to strike once more.

“That’s the third group we’ve killed,” Clarke whispers as they pause, the Azgeda fanning out around them, their eyes trained into the trees that spread out.

“We are getting closer,” Ontari replies.

And her ears pick up the quiet birdsong that echoes through the trees, and so both women turn to the sound and they wait. The sound comes again, two quick hoots before it dies and so Entani looks up from where she inspects one of the dead reapers.

“These reapers appear fresh, newer,” she whispers, “not as deformed as others,” she finishes with a grimace.
“They must be recently taken,” Torvun adds quietly from where he crouches besides Clarke.

And they hear the hooting once more. A longer one, something that lingers in the air for a moment.

“They found the reaper camp,” Clarke whispers. “Remember,” and she casts her eyes to the Azgeda around her, “try and capture one. But if your life is in danger don’t risk anything, ok?”

And the Azgeda around her nod their heads in understanding, a few eager smiles gracing their lips.

“Let’s go.”

Her feet pound against the dirt underneath her shoes, her breaths come quick and controlled and so she dives over a fallen tree trunk, spinning in the air until she faces back the way she ran and she releases the arrow. And as her back hits the ground she rolls, she moves and she finds her feet again, her fingers already drawing another arrow.

She hears the grunt to her left and she turns quickly, Torvun already fighting off two reapers, one with a gruesome gash that runs across its chest, another with a bloodied nose.

And so Clarke drops to a knee, her chest rising rapidly and she pauses for just a moment between lungfuls of air.

And she smiles as the reaper drops, her arrow piercing its chest, and she catches Torvun’s eye as he removes his sword from the second.

“There are more coming!”

And Clarke turns at Entani’s warning, the other healer’s spear sliding out from the stomach of a reaper. And she sees more bursting from the trees, their faces ravaged by whatever wretched drug the Mountain uses.

She backs up, Torvun behind her and she rushes to Ontari’s side, the other woman locked in battle with a reaper. And Clarke lunges, her knife driving into its side before she pulls her knife free, dropping to her knees as Ontari swings her sword, taking the reaper’s head off in a single slash.

“Where are the Trikru!” Ontari snarls, her eyes an angry, violent glare that moves from reaper to reaper that attack the Azgeda with them.

Clarke ducks under a reaper, Torvun already pinning it to the ground and so she fires an arrow at another looming over a wounded Azgeda, and she chases after it. Her arrow hits the reaper low in the stomach, doubling it over long enough that the Azgeda warrior can plunge his knife into its chest before struggling to his feet. And Clarke makes it to his side, her hair clinging messily across her forehead, and she pulls an arm over her shoulders, already dragging him back to where the other Azgeda warriors have bound together, wounded lying behind them.

Torvun takes the warrior from her, his chest rising heavily before he passes the wounded man to Entani, herself already wrapping a bandage across the chest of another Azgeda.

And Clarke turns back to the reapers that advance on them with a frustrated curse and she sees their rusted weapons glinting in the sun and she lets a snarl bring her lips into a gruesome contortion. And
she knows they need to pull back. She knows there are too many reapers here for her and the other Azgeda to face.

And so she curses the Commander, she curses the Trikru who have vanished, who were supposed to accompany them and she curses the reapers and the Mountain.

“We move!” she calls out, “pull back, take the wounded, forget about capturing a reaper,” and she looks behind her briefly, wounded already being lifted onto shoulders.

Ontari fires an arrow then, anger burning in her eyes before she turns and begins running, and so Clarke fires her own, other Azgeda archers quickly moving from tree to tree as they fire off into the advancing reaper numbers.

She isn’t sure how long they run, but it’s long enough for her legs to burn and her lungs to wheeze painfully. And she knows that they must be close to their horses, and so the thought spurs her on, and she ducks down onto a knee, twisting back just enough that she can sight a reaper giving chase and she fires off another arrow. And then she turns, not caring to see if the arrow finds its mark and she runs, she scoops an Azgeda up whose foot catches on a root and she pushes the warrior forward with a curse.

And she runs, she runs hard, she lets the anger fuel her frustration and she lets her fury bring her feet one after the other. But she hears a loud crack, and it’s deafening. It’s piercing and it thunders through her mind and she winces, she claps her hands over her ears and she turns to the sound, a ringing echoing through her mind.

And she sees Bellamy, gun held in his hands, the barrel smoking briefly before he fires another shot into the reapers.

And then Trikru burst from the trees, their eyes glinting, their tattooed faces snarling as they engage the reapers.

And she is sure her eyes roll, and she is sure she hears Ontari swearing angrily as the able bodied Azgeda once more join the fight.

“Where the fuck did you go?” Clarke hisses into Anya’s face, the blue of her eyes an icy stare that holds the other woman’s gaze.

And she sees the Trikru woman’s own eyes harden for a moment, “we saw you needed help, so we got Skaikru and their guns,” she shrugs as she gestures to Bellamy and other guards that stand amongst the Trikru.

“You could have told us,” she continues, anger building in her chest.

“It would have wasted time,” Anya answers coolly, “we captured three reapers,” she finishes before turning away, already walking back to where Octavia and Lincoln stand, their own chest rising
heavily from the fight.

“Trikru bitch,” Ontari says as she comes to stand next to her.

“Did we lose anyone?” Clarke asks, her gazing turning to the Azgeda that rest on the ground.

“No, but many are wounded, some severely,” Ontari says and it comes out tight, a quiet rage living within her words.

The ride to Arkadia is tense, the Trikru and Azgeda forces keeping to themselves, the Skaikru trapped between them in an awkward dance.

But Clarke’s eyes widen and she is sure she even hears Azgeda whisper words of wonder briefly as her eyes fall upon the Ark.

And it’s a twisted thing, jagged metal reaching up into the sky, the blackened charred surface contrasting with the cool polished metal that survived reentry. Her eyes follow the Ark as it splits and spreads out across the open field, and she sees people moving about, buildings dotting the space between the main structure and the large walls that surround it. She sees guard towers spread out across the wall too, figures standing guard. And she thinks her eyes widen further when she realises that the light comes from flood lights, and she thinks she smiles for a moment as she realises that electricity must power them.

And maybe she feels just a touch of happiness, somewhere deep in her mind, that Skaikru are surviving.

“You lived here?” Ontari says, her horse coming up next to Clarke’s.

“Yeah,” she says.

“It is ugly,” Ontari finishes, her eyes guarded as she gazes across to Arkadia.

“Yeah,” she laughs, “I guess it is.”

She paces back and forth in the med bay, the reapers already strapped to hospital beds, and her mother working over them, a chart in her hand. She passes Ontari then, and the woman reaches out quickly, her hand snagging on the furs around her shoulders.

“Stop moving,” she says as their eyes meet for a moment, “you are annoying me.”

And so Clarke sighs, her gaze turning back to Abby as she draws a sample of blood.

“The first samples came back positive,” Abby says as she meets Clarke’s eyes, “there’s a drug in their system. I’m taking another one to run some test on,” she finishes, her eyes turning back to her work.
“Will it work?” Clarke asks as she worries her lip.

“We’ll know in a few days, Clarke,” Abby says, “but for now there’s no point worrying. It’ll happen when it does.”

“Yeah, I know,” she pauses, a hand coming to rub against her face for a moment but she winces, the pain Quint inflicted much too fresh still. “Thanks,” she says finally.

“Your warriors won’t be able to go back yet,” Abby says after a moment, “the ones who were wounded more seriously, at least.”

And Clarke feels Ontari bristle slightly at that and so she reaches up, a hand moving to rest across the other woman’s back for a moment to steady her.

“I agree with her, Ontari,” Clarke says and she sees Abby’s eyes narrow at the closeness they share. “We’ll let the other less seriously wounded stay here and guard them until we can send others,” she finishes.

“If they die,” Ontari says, her chin lifting as she takes a step towards Abby, “you die.”

But Abby snorts once, her arms coming to fold in front of her, an eyebrow raising in challenge.

“Noted.”

And so Ontari casts one last look at the reapers and then the wounded Azgeda that also lie in the med bay before she turns and exits through the doors.

“She’s nice,” Abby says, her eyes following Ontari’s retreating figure.

“Ontari’s just…” she trails off for a moment, “she’s just stubborn,” she says, “and a bit aggressive, that’s all. She won’t do anything.”

And Abby smiles for a moment, “I’m happy for you, Clarke,” she whispers, “I’m happy you found people. I’m happy you’ve got someone to support you,” and Abby brings a gloved hand up to her eyes gently.

“Hey…” Clarke trails off as she moves closer, but as her hand reaches out she finds that words leave her speechless for a moment. But she thinks repeating what she has said wouldn’t hurt and so she smiles at Abby. “I meant it when I said we can talk more, figure out what to do when this whole thing with the Mountain is over, ok?” and she makes sure she meets her mother’s eyes, “but for now we have to focus on what’s in front of us.”

“I know, Clarke,” and Abby smiles, “I know. I’m just—” and she pauses, looks away for a moment in thought. “I’m just sorry for a lot of things that have happened,” she finishes quietly.

“Me too.”

Clarke finds the rest of her afternoon spent in the med bay helping the wounded Azgeda, moving from injured to injured as she resets broken bones, stitches wounds and checks for concussions. And she grimaces as Abby passes, pushing a female warrior sedated on a operating bed, her leg too damaged to repair, a line marked on her leg where its to be amputated. And Entani stays close to
Clarke, her own healer curiosities piqued by the different methods and materials the Skaikru use in fixing wounds sustained from battle.

Ontari stays by the door, her eyes following Clarke’s motions carefully, often glaring at Abby as the older woman leans over Azgeda, her fingers nimble and quick in their motions as she bandages and stitches her own fair share of wounds. Torvun stays close by the now sedated reapers too, three other Azgeda warriors and two skaikru guards, their hands resting against weapons, all surrounding the beds in case one breaks free.

She’s in the middle of finishing suturing a wound slashed across a warrior’s cheek when the med bay doors slide open and so she looks up to find Lexa walking in, closely followed by Anya and Gustus. And so her eyes narrow as she follows the trio move towards Abby, a hushed conversation passed between them.

And it’s just a short while but Lexa moves towards Clarke then, her gaze sweeping over the wounded Azgeda that lie on the beds.

“You did well, Clarke,” she begins, “Abby says the reapers may be cured.”

“Yeah, well, no thanks to your Trikru,” Clarke answers, her jaw clenching for a moment, “we’d have less injured if they hadn’t run off before the fight even started.”

And Clarke is sure she sees just a moment’s twitching of Lexa’s cheek before Anya grunts out a quiet curse.

“Peace, Anya,” Lexa says, her hands clasping behind her back, “we return to Ton DC, Clarke. You are finished here?”

“Yeah, I’m finished,” she sighs in answer, her eyes turning back to the Azgeda for a moment.

The walk out the med bay is tense, Gustus standing much closer to Lexa than even Clarke is sure she appreciates but she can’t help but to share in her annoyance, if only because Torvun does the same, his eyes trained on Gustus as they follow behind the Commander as she leads them out of the metal walls.

“I am glad to be free of that place,” Ontari sighs as the last of the doors open for them, the setting of the sun casting long shadows against the ground.

And Clarke smiles when she hears Entani agree, and so they follow Lexa and the other Trikru towards the stables and where the rest of the uninjured Azgeda rest.
The ride back to Ton DC isn’t far, but it’s long enough that Clarke finds her thoughts drifting and wandering without much care. And so she casts her gaze up to the sky briefly as she gauges how much light is left before dark sets in.

“We are half way there,” she turns quickly to find Lexa eyeing her from where she rides besides her at the head of the procession of Trikru and Azgeda and so she nods for a moment.

They fall into a quiet then, the sounds of the birds a comfort that soothes her mind, if only because it must mean reapers do not lurk near. And so she stretches her shoulders, winces briefly at the pull in her ribs and the stinging in her face and she turns back, her gaze falling to the Azgeda that ride behind her, their eyes careful as they peer out into the forest around them.

She stifles a yawn then, her hand tentative in its pressure across her mouth.

And it’s quiet at first, just a slight shifting in the air, but she thinks she senses it. And she knows she senses something when others around her stiffen in their saddles. And so she glances at Lexa, and she sees her hand coming to rest atop her sword, her eyes turning left and right as she gazes out around them.

And she hears the forest quiet, she feels the air deaden around them and she shivers.

And then the air explodes with a rush of birds and birdsong, and she jolts her head up as she sees hundreds of birds flying away, all fleeing from the same direction and so she turns back toLexa before looking at Ontari, her own eyes widened in shock.

“Acid fog!”

And they flee.

A horn is echoed through the forest and the Trikru and Azgeda forces flee. They turn their horses and they fly the direction of the birds. But she feels the prickling of her skin and the stinging in the air and so she glances behind her as the horse gallops beneath her body and she sees the orange of the fog descending upon the forest and the trees and she is sure her eyes widen in fright as it swallows the landscape behind her.

Her horse rears up then, a bird flashing past it and Clarke curses, she holds on and she cries out in shock as she is thrown from her mount.

She lands with a painful thud, her ribs screaming out in pain and so she scrambled desperately to her feet, her eyes already stinging in the orange that nears.

Fuck.

She searches for the direction of the forces that flee and she thinks she sees movement ahead and so she runs. She runs and she curses her horse and she curses the Mountain and she curses her ribs as they throb painfully, her breaths coming in ragged, broken gasps.

“Ontari!” she yells, but the sound is swallowed by the screaming of the wind and the breaking of branches overhead.

And she knows.

She knows she is lost.

Fuck.
She starts running, she starts moving *somewhere*.

And it’s her luck, it’s her wretched timing and her miserable life that she trips. She trips and lands face first into the ground, her cheek once more opening up, blood smearing across her face.

But she gasps as she feels strong hands reach for her, she gasps as she feels herself pulled to her feet and she gasps as she feels the press of a body against her. And so she runs, she runs where the person takes her.

“In here!” comes the shout, and maybe she’ll thank her saviour in a moment. But for now she dives headfirst into the hole in the ground. And she curses as she lands onto hard ground.

And she feels the other person drop down, and she hears the frantic scrambling and the loud thud as *something* is closed with a harsh jerk and she hears the coughs and the curses as the light from the fading sun deadens.

Clarke struggles to her feet then, her eyes watering and her bones aching from the exertion. And so she wipes a hand across her bloodied cheek.

“Thanks,” she gasps out as she turns to face the other person.

“You are welcome, Clarke,” Lexa replies.
It’s an awkward dance that both women play as they stand facing each other, the light that seeps in through a faded window casting the room in a bloodied orange glow. The air’s stale too, there’s a bite to it that burns her nose just a bit when she breathes in, when she lets it fill her lungs and so Clarke coughs awkwardly, a hand coming up to touch her cheek for a moment as she feels the drip of blood once more spread out across it.

And so she sighs. If only because she thinks the reopened cut will ruin the scars she wears. She looks back to Lexa for a moment, the other woman resting against the ladder that leads up to the hatch that is now closed. And Clarke takes in her appearance. Gone is her long coat, her under armour flexible, more leather than metal. She notices that Lexa breathes just a bit harder, her chest rising and falling to the rapid expansion of her lungs and she eyes the way Lexa holds her arm close to her chest, her free arm resting against the knife on her hip.

“Thanks,” Clarke says again, her eyes moving to meet Lexa’s gaze once more.

Clarke hears her offer a murmur of acknowledgement and so she turns her eyes to the room she finds herself in. A table sits in a corner, small candles sitting atop it, the wax melting them into the worn and dusty wood, furs lie on the floor too, old and faded in colour.

“Where are we?” she asks as she turns back to Lexa, herself already moving to sit in an old chair by the ladder.

“Trikru have places to stay if the acid fog comes,” Lexa replies, her arm still held against her chest as she leans back tentatively in the chair.

“Ah,” Clarke says, her eyes following the movement for a moment before she sighs once, tucks a loose braid behind her ear and moves forward. “Let me look at that,” and she comes to a stop before Lexa, their eyes meeting in a quiet battle of stubbornness as the other woman raises her chin.

“It is fine.”

“it’s not,” and she pauses for a moment, “I’m a healer. We’re stuck here together so you might as well let me look at it.”

And so Lexa nods once, her eyes careful as Clarke moves to kneel besides her.

“Can I?” Clarke asks, her fingers coming to a halt at Lexa’s collar.

And so she nods, her head leaning away from Clarke’s fingers as she begins to pull away the leathers. She finds a bruise already beginning to spread, the deep purple running underneath the skin an angry red that seeps into the flesh around Lexa’s shoulder, spreading out to her neck and so Clarke can’t help but to sigh, can’t help but to roll her eyes as Lexa’s refusal to admit her pain. If only because it must hurt.

“How’d this even happen?” she asks, her eyes turning briefly up to the ladder.

“I fell,” and she meets Lexa’s gaze.

“You fell?”

“Yes, my horse was startled,” she finishes, her eyes peering somewhere past Clarke.
“Oh, well… It’s not dislocated,” she says, her words coming out stilted for a moment, before her fingers turn tentative as she exposes the shoulder, her hand ghosting over the joint briefly, “which is good,” she adds in the silence that follows, her hands probing around the joint for a moment as she eyes the spreading bruise. “But I think you’ve bruised it pretty severely,” and she pauses, looks up at Lexa, “you going to talk?”

“What is there to say?” Lexa replies coolly.

And so Clarke rolls her eyes.

“Never mind,” she says, already searching around for fabric she can use to wrap the shoulder.

Lexa must notice her eyes wandering though because she draws her knife, already cutting a long strip of fabric from the hem of her shirt, the tearing noise drawing Clarke’s attention quickly.

“This might hurt,” she says as she takes the strip of fabric, and so Lexa sighs once more, the silence that follows an annoyance that lingers within Clarke’s mind. “I have to wrap it,” she begins, fingers nimble in their motions, “and I don’t want you to move your arm for a while, ok?” and she looks up quickly, her eyes meeting Lexa’s for long enough that the words are acknowledged, “or you’ll make it worse,” she finishes, a knot tied quickly.

And so she leans back on her heels, her eyes quick in their appraisal of the wrapping around Lexa’s shoulder.

“So…” she trails off, her eyes moving around the room once more, “how long are we going to be here?” and she looks back to Lexa, shoulder now firmly wrapped, arm still held to her chest.

“A while,” and she shrugs with her uninjured shoulder, “there will be a horn when the acid fog clears.”

Clarke lets the silence hang between them both again and she finds herself moving around the room, her fingers trailing over the dust that sits heavily on the table, her mind tracing the patterns she imagines forming before her. As she pads across the room she still feels the burn in her nose and the gentle itch against her skin and so she shrugs off her furs, her nose wrinkling at the clothes she now wears, the softness chased away, a coarse, rough feeling left behind by the acid fog.

And so she continues to pace around the room slowly, her mind content to just wander, but as she comes to a wall, as her fingers brush against the rough of it, cold to the touch, she can’t help but to grimace, the steps she now takes a familiar thing that ushers in memories of a time trapped in the cold of an empty room, the cool of metal all she had for company. And so she pauses. She stops and closes her eyes for a moment, her hand coming to rest against the watch she still wears around her wrist, her finger brushing against the leather straps and she lets a breath settle quietly before she breathes in deeply, her mind stilling and her thoughts twisting painfully.

“You do not like being trapped,” and she looks up at the words, her eyes finding Lexa’s from across the small room, the faint light of the outside word a careful curtain that bleeds into the space between them.

“Bad memories,” she shrugs.

“Rest, Clarke,” Lexa says then, her eyes just a quiet shining in the light. “You do yourself no good pacing.”

“I’m surprised you care, you seem content to let me and the other Azgeda die,” Clarke retorts, frustrations from earlier rearing once more.
“I do care, Clarke.”

And so Clarke snorts at the words, her chin coming to rise in challenge.

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” and she turns to face Lexa fully, “you tell Trikru to help attack the reapers, yet they don’t. And you don’t punish them,” she takes a step forward, her eyes holding Lexa’s gaze. “Quint attacks me, yet you seem content to let it happen,” she finishes, her eyes burning just a tone warmer than before.

But Lexa stands then, barely a wince at the motion as her shoulder is jostled slightly.

“Azgeda is foolish,” she begins, her eyes hard in their gaze. “You attacked the reapers without waiting for Trikru to meet with you,” she takes a step forward, the orange light of the fog casting a dark shadow across her face. “You provoked Quint, even after I told you to not do so,” she comes to a stop before Clarke.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” and Clarke knows she is angry now, and she feels her fingers curl into fists by her side. “You’re a hypocrite, Lexa. You think Azgeda is cruel? Unthinking? But you send us to do your dirty work while the other clans do what? Sit at the camp? What do you expect us to do when you say go kill reapers? Wait? Sit by and twiddle our thumbs while others bleed?” and she sees Lexa’s jaw clench for a moment, she sees her eyes narrow. “What if an Azgeda warrior had attacked Quint? Or Anya, Gustus or even Indra? Would you allow that to go unpunished?” and her voice comes out quiet now, a small burning that finds its way into the timbre of her voice.

“So yeah, maybe you aren’t evil, but you don’t care. You just use people. You think we’re all pieces on a chest board for you to move and command. And you know what’s funny? At least Nia has the decency to tell people to their face that she’s using them. Unlike you. And what was it? I’m a weapon to be wielded? I’m not a fool, Lexa. You’ll try and get rid of me as soon as my use is finished,” and she finishes, her voice harder, her gaze steely and her breaths coming rapid and angry. “You think you’re so different than Nia?”

“I am not like Nia.”

And the words come out seething, they come out cold and angry.

“You’ve done little to prove me wrong,” Clarke answers.

Lexa holds her gaze for a long moment, the silence stretching out painfully between them then. And maybe it’s only seconds, maybe it’s not even a minute, but Clarke thinks their words have ceased, their exchange has ended and so she goes to turn, goes to move away from Lexa but she hears it quietly. She hears it gently. And so she pauses.

“You do not know everything, Clarke.”

And she meets Lexa’s gaze once more.

“I know enough,” Clarke says. “You only see people as tools. You don’t care about them regardless of what you say.”

And as the words leave her mouth she sees Lexa turn thoughtful for just a moment, she sees her eyes move across her face, and she is sure they trace the scar that sits across her forehead, that slash down her cheeks and that mark her as Azgeda, and then she sees them meet her own eyes again.

“It is weakness, Clarke,” and it comes out just a bit more quiet, just a bit gentler than she has heard before.
“What is? Caring for people?” she questions, her hands coming to rest on her hips.

“To be Commander is to be alone. To make sacrifices for the betterment of your people, even if you care for them.”

But Clarke snorts, her eyes looking upwards briefly.

“But that doesn’t excuse using people. It doesn’t excuse ignoring and using Azgeda when it suits you.”

“That is what it means to be a leader, Clarke,” and Lexa holds their gaze for a long moment, she lets the words sit heavily in the air and her eyes move slowly across her face. “To lead well you must look into the eyes of your warriors and say *go die for me*.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that would work if Azgeda actually liked you, yet you give us no reason to want to die for you.”

“What we want is not important.”

“I disagree. What we want is important. Who we care for is important,” and she holds Lexa’s gaze, her own jaw clenching painfully and her cheek stinging, blood slowly drying over the cut. “Azgeda wants to live the way we want. So we care. We fight for it. We don’t roll over and show the other clans our bellies. So if that makes us cruel, if that makes us unkind so be it. And you know what? I care. I care about my friends. I care about my clan and the warriors I fight with. It makes us stronger,” and as Clarke finishes she finds her feet having carried her closer to Lexa, only a small space between them now.

“You keep saying these things, Lexa, but you’re a hypocrite. You say you care but you say it’s weakness. You say that what we want isn’t important, but it’s clear you want something. Why would you have created the Coalition if you didn’t want it? Isn’t that important? Do you even believe what you’re saying? Or do you just say what you think needs to be said to get your way?”

And Clarke pauses for only a moment to collect her thoughts and to take steadying breath before she pushes forward.

“I think you’re afraid, Lexa. I think you’re afraid to let people see past this image you think everyone has of you. I think you want people to think you’re more than you really are.”

“And what am I?” Lexa says, her eyes a cold stare that drills into Clarke and burns across her face.

“I think you’re just a girl who’s afraid.”

They must sit in silence for long moments then, Lexa back in the chair and Clarke on the table, her legs swinging lazily back and forth. And she’s angry, she’s frustrated. She hates being stuck in this room. But she casts her eyes towards Lexa then, if only for something other than drab walls to look at, and she lets her gaze wander over the woman who sits in the chair, her eyes focused on the knife she twirls slowly in her free hand, and if only because she is a healer, if only because she has a patient she calls out gently.

“How’s the shoulder?” the silence falls too heavily around her.
But Lexa looks up, her eyes snapping to Clarke’s quickly, a moment’s thought flashing across her face.

“Hurts,” she shrugs once.

And Clarke once more lets the silence hang between them, once more lets their eyes meet.

“We should try and get along.” Clarke says then. “At least until the Mountain is dealt with, and then you can go back to hating me.”

“I do not hate you, Clarke,” Lexa replies.

“But you hate Azgeda,” she answers, “don’t even bother denying it. I can see it in the way you look at my scars and the way you let others disrespect us.”

And Lexa falls quiet, her eyes thoughtful, her knife stilling in its movements.

“Why?” Clarke asks, her voice carrying through the space between them. “I’m not stupid. Something had to happen. And I can tell Trikru hates Azgeda as much as Azgeda hates Trikru.”

Lexa lets a quiet sigh fall from her lips then, a heavy breath finding its way into her lungs.

“The clans were at war,” she begins. “Clan killed clan, warrior killed warrior,” and she tilts her head briefly. “Azgeda and Trikru have waged war for generations. And would have continued to do so if the Coalition had not been formed.”

And Lexa once more turns thoughtful in her silence, a finger tapping slowly against the wood of the chair.

“It is true, Clarke, that I wish to use you,” and Clarke’s eyes roll. “But to bridge the divide between clans. You are part Skaikru because you were born in the stars. Would I not be a fool then, to ignore that fact? To ignore that Skaikru has tech, has weapons that can destroy a clan. Would I not be a fool to waste what you are? So yes. I will use you so that Skaikru will not be a threat. And Azgeda? I will use you to bridge the divide between Azgeda and the Coalition. Is Nia not doing the same?” she says, an eyebrow raising in challenge. “Tell me, Clarke, did Nia not instruct you to weaken the Coalition some how? To use what you know to bring Azgeda strength?”

“You’re no different then her,” Clarke replies, “you just made my point.”

“But I am,” and Lexa lets a small smile linger across her lips, “Nia wishes to weaken all but Azgeda, Nia wishes to promote Azgeda strength and to sacrifice those not worthy. Tell me, is that not true, Clarke?” and she pauses for a moment, lets the words sit in the space between them. “Perhaps Azgeda is treated unfairly. But I wish for all clans to prosper. I wish for all clans to succeed.”

“Wishing and doing are two different things,” Clarke responds, her ire, though reduced, still burns just a bit.

“Then perhaps we can make a deal, Clarke,” and Lexa stands carefully. “I will ensure that Trikru and the other clans respect Azgeda and in turn I expect the same from you and Azgeda.”

And Clarke stands too, she brings herself to meet Lexa in the space between them and so she eyes her for a long moment, lets her gaze trail over her face briefly, her eyes flicking down to her shoulder before meeting her eyes.

“You might be heartless, Lexa,” and she worries her lip for a moment. “But you aren’t stupid. So
yeah, if we can get along then we won’t have any problems.”

And so they share a small smile, just a small quirking of lips and a small twitching of cheeks. But perhaps it’s enough for now.

But as Lexa once again turns to rest in the chair Clarke lets her mind wander, lets her thoughts turn back to earlier in the conversation.

“Hey,” and she calls it out quietly, “you never said why you don’t like Azgeda so much.” and she lets her eyes follow the retreating back, and she thinks she sees the stiffening of shoulders and the tensing of muscles. “It’s personal, isn’t it?”

And so Lexa turns for a moment, and maybe if Clarke looks hard enough, maybe if she ignores the frustrations that still linger, maybe she can see just a moment’s sadness wash over Lexa.

“It does not matter, Clarke.”

It’s her sleeping moments when her mind wanders freely, when her thoughts turn to times long gone or to places that no longer exist that she can find a comfort. But she wakes with a start, she wakes to the gentle squeezing of a hand on her shoulder and the dark of a quiet room.

“Wake, Clarke,” and her eyes focus on Lexa’s face hovering over her, “the acid fog has lifted. We must return.”

And so she rises stiffly, her face still a painful thing that she is sure is bruised and swollen. And she grimaces when her eyes fall to her furs, the soft of them no longer present, all but replaced by the burnt, molten, charred remains left by the acid fog.

Exiting the room is a difficult task, Lexa’s arm leaving her with the awkward task of having Clarke push her up from underneath. But as they exit Clarke lets a small smile fall across her lips at the fresh air and the quiet of a slowly rising run.

“When did the horn sound?” Clarke asks as she looks around.

“Before sunrise,” Lexa replies, and so Clarke turns to face her, confusion flashing across her eyes. “You were tired,” Lexa continues, a small shrug lifting her shoulders. “Come.”

And so Clarke sighs heavily as she begins following Lexa, the swaying of her hair and the gentle breeze and rustling of the leaves the only movement around them.

They must walk for a long while, the slowly rising sun gradually sitting higher in the sky, the dark purple of the night replaced by the brighter, happier blue of a cloudless sky. And it’s a colder morning, something that should bring a chill to her bones but Clarke thinks she likes it, she thinks she’s missed the freeze of Azgeda, the constant chill of the ice and the careful buffeting of the wind that pushes against her furs. And so she lets a smile live and she lets her arms swing just a bit more
Lexa stops quickly, her free hand coming to rest against the knife by her hip and her eyes scan around them. And Clarke hears it too. It’s quiet, it’s a rough groan, a pained whimper and a broken plea that reaches her ears. And so their eyes meet once before they begin moving towards the sound, Clarke’s own knife coming to rest in her hand.

The smell hits her first. It’s a foul thing, a burnt thing that assaults her nose, that brings bile to her lips and makes her stomach clench painfully. But she sees the figure lying on the ground, she sees the figure writhe and twitch against the hard cold of the dirt and she sees the figure still at the sound of them approach.

And a person lies on the ground, their skin a burnt, twisted, bloodied mess that melts and slips from their body. It horrifies Clarke, and it makes her rage and seethe and hurt at the person that lies before her.

“It is an Azgeda warrior,” Lexa whispers quietly, her eyes following the furs that line the person’s body.

And so Clarke reaches out tentatively, her hand coming to rest against the ragged rising of the person’s chest.

“It’s Clarke,” she whispers, her eyes unable to discern a gender, the skin rotting and peeling. “The healer,” she says, and she knows she feels a wetness cling to the corner of her eyes. “It will be over soon,” she finishing quietly as she brings her knife to the person’s throat.

And so she lets her hand slip forward, she lets the knife slice through the person’s throat and sever the artery. And she follows the gruesome trail of blood that gurgles through the cut and wash over her fingers.

The sun sits high by the time they arrive back at Ton DC, and so she smiles when she enters the Azgeda war camp, and she smiles as she nears her tent. Torvun looks up from where he paces before the entrance, his knuckles white around the hilt of his knife.

“Hi,” she says in greeting, her voice just a bit rougher. And she smiles as their eyes meet, as his body relaxes and as he sighs loudly, his eyes turning upwards.

“We thought you perished in the acid fog,” he says, “Ontari is angry,” he finishes.

“I almost did,” she shrugs, her conversation with Lexa coming to the forefront of her mind, “but I managed to find somewhere to hide. Where is Ontari?”

“Training grounds,” Torvun says.

The walk to the training grounds isn’t far, and Clarke lets a smile linger across her lips when she
hears Ontari’s voice carry over the sounds of metal crashing against metal, and perhaps she feels just a moment sorry for whoever is at the receiving end of her tirade.

She comes to a rest by the edge of the training grounds then, her eyes quickly finding Ontari as she throws a warrior over her shoulder, her furs wrapped around her waist and her hair clinging messily to her forehead. She finds Entani there too, the healer crouched over a warrior, bandage in hand as she wraps a bloodied thigh.

Ontari sees her then, their eyes meet across the distance and Clarke winces as a warrior's fist collides with Ontari’s nose in her moment’s distraction. And Ontari swears loudly, her foot coming up to collide with his groin before he drops, pain etched across his face. And then Ontari moves towards her, a smile lingering across her face and despite the blood that already drips over lips Clarke can’t help but to think her vibrant in the morning light.

Ontari comes to a breathless stop before Clarke, her hands twitching out in front of her for a moment as if to embrace her before they still, her hands fisting painfully by her sides.

“I thought you were caught in the acid fog,” she whispers, her chest rising rapidly. “I thought you died,” she says, her eyes turning darker.

“I’m ok,” Clarke answers, her own smile finding its way across her lips. “Let me look at that,” she says as she gestures for Ontari to follow her away from the training grounds.

They find themselves back in the tent, the cool of the day a welcome comfort. A candle burns brightly nearby giving light to Ontari’s face as Clarke brings a damp cloth to the blood that dries slowly across her lips.

“We lost a few Azgeda,” Ontari whispers, a small wince finding its way into her voice as Clarke dabs her nose.

“I know,” Clarke replies, the events of earlier still leaving her stomach a sickened churn.

“How did you survive?” Ontari asks, her eyes steady as they look at Clarke.

“The Commander,” she replies and she sees Ontari’s eyes narrow for a moment. “Trikru have places they use if the acid fog comes. We got stuck in there for the night.”

“I was hoping she had perished,” she sighs, just a bit of remorse colouring her tone and so Clarke laughs briefly.

“We’ve come to an agreement,” she says, “Trikru will work with us now. But we have to stop disrespecting the Commander during the war meetings,” and she smiles at the huff of annoyance that escapes Ontari’s lips. “At least until the Mountain is dealt with, then we can go back to normal, ok?”

And Ontari shrugs, her hand coming to rest around Clarke’s wrist, the damp cloth still held up to her nose.

And so they share a quiet smile before Ontari’s eye move to her cheek, worry gracing her expression.
“Does it hurt?” Ontari asks, her hand pulling Clarke’s away from her own face.

“No, not really. I’ve had worse,” and she shrugs briefly, “the swelling makes it look worse.”

And so Ontari lets the silence linger between them, her fingers warm against Clarke’s skin.

“I am happy you are not dead,” she whispers, the words resting comfortably between them both.

“Yeah,” Clarke smiles. “Me too.”
Lexa sits back in her throne, her thoughts turning over the conversation she had had with Clarke the previous night. And she sighs, the light of the moon streaming in from the sheer fabric of her tent that hangs above her head. She turns to face Gustus then, his eyes careful as he takes in her appearance.

“It is not severe,” she says as she sees his eyes move to her shoulder.

“It was a risk, Heda,” he answers. “You do not know if Clarke is loyal to the Coalition or Nia. Yet you risk your own life to save her from the acid fog.”

“Clarke is loyal to Azgeda,” she says, her finger tapping lightly against the handle of her knife. “I do not think Nia holds her loyalty.”

“You are sure of it?” Gustus questions as he moves to stand in front of her, his arms coming to fold across his chest.

“I am sure Azgeda holds her loyalty but perhaps not Nia,” she begins. “I do not know if she meant to, but Clarke revealed that Nia uses her for something.”

“We assumed that was so, Heda. But you do not know for what,” comes the answer. “Nia would not have known of Skaikru, Heda. Rumours spread, but the Azgeda Capital is far from where Skaikru fell. And you have kept knowledge of Skaikru limited to the area.”

“Yes,” she agrees, “but Nia is smart, she is cunning, she has spies, even here in Trikru lands, I am sure of it,” she muses, her gaze falling to the model of the Mountain that sits atop her war table.

“You think Nia wishes to use Clarke in our fight against the Mountain? To gain the Mountain’s tech? To have Azgeda take control of it when the Mountain falls?”

And so Lexa lets her mind wander for just a moment, lets her thoughts sift and coalesce into a more concrete image before she brings her eyes back to Gustus.

“It would explain why Nia sent so many warriors,” she says.

“Then why not kill Clarke? The Mountain falling under control of Azgeda would bring chaos to the Coalition. The clans would not stand for it.”

“Yes, Gustus. That is true. But if she is not loyal to Nia, but to the clan then her death would be a waste,” and she pauses as she thinks over the young Azgeda woman. “And I wish to avoid that unless it is necessary.”

“But you think Clarke can help the Coalition? I do not think Azgeda will change, Heda. I do not think Clarke can change Azgeda. No single person could,” Gustus adds, “Trikru and Azgeda have waged war for generations. The hate runs deep,” and he pauses, his eyes careful as he eyes her, the unspoken words easy for her to read.

She sighs quietly, “Trikru learn to hate Azgeda from birth, Azgeda learn to hate us in turn. So yes, Trikru and Azgeda will continue to hate each other even if the Coalition continues to exist for generations more. But for now,” and she pauses, turns her eyes to the knife she now spins through her fingers. “For now we shall continue to watch Clarke. She handles these war meetings well so I
will continue to let them spiral and force Clarke to act in them unless I must intervene. And we will wait. We will wait until Clarke makes the first move."

"And that will tell us where her loyalties lie?" Gustus says, a hand coming to comb through his beard for a moment.

"Yes, Gustus. If she defends Skaikru or if she defends Azgeda it may reveal where her loyalties lie. And if she defends Nia if clans question the Kwin, then that too will shed some light on whether she lives or dies."

And Gustus nods for a moment, his eyes thoughtful as he turns to face the war table, his eyes moving over the model of the Mountain. But he turns back to her after a short while, his hand coming to rest against the knife at his hip, his thumb worrying the leather wrapping out of habit.

"And Anya, Heda?" and he pauses, an uncertainty living in his eyes briefly. "She does you no good disobeying your orders so blatantly. Will that not antagonise Clarke further? Perhaps she is not the best to lead Trikru forces that work with Azgeda. Not with her past experience."

"Anya went too far," she agrees, but maybe she can empathise, maybe she can relate and understand. If only because she shares in the other woman’s fury. "I will have Indra work with Azgeda."

It’s still dark when Clarke ducks out of the tent, her eyes adjusting briefly to the quiet that sits lowly over the Azgeda war camp and so she tugs on the new furs she wears around her shoulders carefully. And she pauses for just a moment, a dry stick underfoot that she applies a small amount of pressure to before it cracks, the sound deadened by her fur wrapped boots. She lets her eyes meet Torvun’s then, his furs soft and dark.

"I do not think Ontari will appreciate being left behind," he whispers quietly as he falls besides Clarke.

"She’d mess it up," she whispers, her eyes careful as she peers around herself.

And so they move from the tent, a quiet nod sent to the Azgeda on watch as they leave the camp. They pass into the trees then, the quiet rustling of the leaves a gentle noise that helps to mask their movements as they move deeper and deeper through the forest.

Torvun reaches out then, his fingers a quick squeeze against her shoulder and so they pause, his eyes careful as he peers out around himself, his finger hooked and his thumb pointing up quickly.

Trikru.

And so Clarke crouches low and she waits. And she thinks she hears the barely there movements of feet through the forest, roughing against the cool of the ground and she thinks she hears the quiet sighs of a tired warrior as they make their way towards Ton DC. And so they wait until the person passes, until they are sure they are alone once more. And then she smiles for a moment as Torvun rises, his eyes ever careful around him. And maybe she’ll have to test just how good his hearing is after the Mountain. If only because she thinks he hears everything.
They near Ton DC then and so they pause behind a tree, low bushes at its base, and they let their eyes follow the guard that moves before the gate, the lone torch that burns all the light that gives the Trikru guard warmth.

Their eyes meet then, a quick nod all she sends to Torvun before he grips her shoulder with a firm squeeze before he rises, before he stumbles forward and before he groans out in pain, a hand coming to wrap around his groin.

And so Clarke watches for a moment longer as the Trikru guard reacts quickly, an arrow already notched, his bow aimed at Torvun.

“Help,” and it comes out gruff, pained and pathetic as Torvun falls to the ground quickly, “I was bitten,” he continues, his speech slurring.

“What are you doing?” the guard snarls, his eyes peering out behind Torvun.

“I was relieving myself,” and he coughs roughly, “but I was bitten,” and he lifts his hand, his palm coming away reddened and dripping.

“And you came here? To Ton DC?” and guard asks, a hint of derision colouring his tone.

“I did not want to show my own healers,” Torvun whimpers. “You must understand,” he pleads.

And so Clarke smirks briefly in the dark, the Guard coming to kneel before Torvun, his eyes careful as Torvun begins removing his pants. She sneaks out of the bushes then, her eyes careful as she peers around her. And it only takes her a moment but she reaches the gates and she slips through, Torvun’s pained explanation of what had bitten him all she hears.

She moves through the village quickly, her destination already planned. But she hears steps approaching and so she presses herself against a building, a villager walking past, a tired yawn leaving the woman’s lips.

Clarke waits for a moment before continuing and It doesn’t take her long to avoid the few that move through the village, the dark of the night keeping her hidden. And she comes to her destination, a number of tents and smaller buildings close together that house the many Trikru warriors that stay temporarily in Ton DC. And she knows which one she searches for. The biggest tent, she thinks. And so she slinks forward, the furs on her feet dampening her movements, the brashness of her actions not expected, allowing her to move through the sleeping warriors quickly.

She finds it in the centre of the tents, and it’s large. A lone torch burning at the entrance and so she rolls her eyes once more, the lack of guards an arrogance she thinks a foolish thing. And so she walks forward carefully, her body a low crouch that keeps her within the shadows, and her hand reaches out tentatively, just a small pressure against the tent flap as she pauses and waits for a moment and she waits for a sound to be heard. But the careful breathing from inside remains even and steady so she peels the tent flap open, slipping through it quickly. And she pauses. She lets her eyes adjust once more, she lets her eyes search the interior of the tent and she finds a table, armour and weapons resting lazily across the surface, a fur and leather coat draped across the back of a chair and a bed in the far corner, furs and a sleeping body resting in it.

And maybe it’s a foolishendeavour she has found herself on, despite the conversation she shared with the Commander. But perhaps she doesn’t like being messed with and she doesn’t like being left to fight more reapers than intended. And so she pulls the rolled piece of paper from her sleeve, her feet carrying her towards the table quietly. And she unrolls it swiftly, her eyes catching the white of the hand painted in its centre. And so she smiles as she places it against the sword and armour. And
she smiles, just a quick turn to the sleeping woman before she ducks out of the tent.

Fuck you Anya.

“I still don’t know how you made it look like it was bleeding,” she laughs as they walk through the Azgeda camp, the weight on her shoulders a little less now that she is surrounded by her own people once more.

“It is simple,” Torvun shrugs, his eyes a quiet light in the glinting of the moon that shines in the sky. She snorts at his response though and she turns to face him, “what did the Trikru guard say?”

“He told me I was weak, that all Azgeda was weak, and that I should bed an animal,” and he laughs, his voice a soft baritone that carries around him gently. “But yes, I think Ontari would have attacked him if she were present, if only to defend Azgeda honour,” he finishes with a small smile.

She wakes slowly, her mind content to sift through her early morning thoughts for moments longer. But she feels the pressure of Entani as the other woman rolls into her, a yawn escaping the healer’s lips as she stretches.

And she hears Ontari grumble and wake at the sounds of Entani rising from the bed. And so Clarke takes one last breath and she holds it for a long moment before she sits up and throws the furs from them.

“I do not like these war meetings,” Ontari mutters as she rolls off her sleep shorts, her hair a braided mess that falls across her shoulder. “We get little done. All we do is discuss nothing. And we wait for Skaikru to remove the acid fog.”

“That is why I do not go,” Entani snorts, her own fingers quickly working through her hair as she moves across the tent.

“I don’t think Trikru will be a problem anymore and the other clans will follow suit,” Clarke adds, a small smile finding its way across her lips at last night’s mission.

“We shall see,” Ontari mutters as she stands, her skin glowing in the soft light of an early morning as she moves towards her leathers and furs, her chest binding unwrapping before it drops to the ground.

The walk up to Lexa’s tent is quiet, Ontari’s eyes ever careful as she eyes the Trikru they pass, but Clarke can’t help but to let a smile linger across her lips as she images the greeting Anya will give her. And perhaps she even feels Torvun move just a bit more enthusiastically next to her.
They come to Lexa’s tent, a guard holding up a hand briefly as he ducks through the entrance to announce them before he exits again, a wave of his hand showing them in. And so she follows Ontari, her eyes adjusting to the dark of the tent for only a moment before she finds Anya staring at her, fingers tight around her the knife at her hip, a scowl resting firmly in place.

And Clarke meets Anya’s stare with her own smirk, a small shrug lifting her shoulder for a moment.

“Sleep well, Anya?” she asks as she moves to the side of the war table where Kane, Raven and Bellamy stand, her eyes already falling to the models that sit on the map and she smiles again as she hears Torvun snort by her side.

“And Clarke meets Anya’s stare with her own smirk, a small shrug lifting her shoulder for a moment.

“Who are we waiting for?” Clarke asks then, her eyes scanning the warriors already assembled.

“Lake clan,” someone mutters and she looks up to see a warrior, the muddy red of his clothes casting a gentle shadow over the table.

The tent flap opens then, Jomm and two others walking in, their arms swinging lazily as they move to stand by the table. And Clarke smiles when she hears the same warrior mutter under his breath, annoyance colouring his tone at having to wait for Jomm to arrive.

“Skaikru,” Lexa begins, her voice quickly silencing those around the table, “how does progress go with the Mountain?”

And Kane motions for Raven to step forward, her eyes just a bit careful as she looks around her before they settle on Lexa.

“We think we know how the Mountain gets its power. Our guy found blueprints, so it looks like the dam,” and she points to the map on the table, “it powers the whole Mountain, like I said, but it looks like they’ve got back up power. So it needs to be timed right,” and she looks back to Lexa briefly, “we can’t take it out until we’re ready to storm the Mountain. So…” and she swallows again, “so we still can’t make a move until the acid fog is down.”

And Clarke’s eyes roll when she hears Jomm curse loudly, when he swears and slams his fist down on the table.

“I am tired of waiting!” and his eyes move from warrior to warrior. “Skaikru offers us nothing but talk and promises of soon,” and his eyes narrow, his finger coming to point at Kane, “Skaikru’s leader does not even speak for the clan. You are worthless.”

Clarke looks around the war table quickly, her eyes coming to find a few other clans in agreement, but she thinks most eye Lexa carefully, most wait to see which way the Commander will lean before committing themselves to an argument, but as her eyes fall on Lexa’s she finds the woman eyeing her steadily, a careful glint living with the green gaze that holds her own.

Her eyes turn back to Jomm, his body having moved into Kane’s space, his finger pressed against man’s chest. And she finds Bellamy standing tense, his fingers gripping his rifle firmly, his eyes moving from Lexa to Jomm to Kane.

“Enough!”

Jomm turns at the sound, his eyes widening for a moment.

“I’ve had enough of you, Jomm,” Clarke says, her chin lifting as she steps towards him, Ontari and Torvun moving close by her side. “We’re all in this together,” her hand comes to rest against her knife, her fingers tapping against the blade noisily. “So,” and she comes between the Lake clan
warrior and Kane, “you will shut up. And wait until the acid fog is destroyed.”

“Back off Azgeda,” he hisses, his fingers coming to grip the handle of his own knife.

“Or what? You’ll attack me? You’ll kill me?” and she smirks, her chin lifting in defiance as Torvun growls deeply, “Did you forget what happened to Quint?” and she presses forward, crowds his space and forces him to take a step back. “Skaikru is under my protection. And you know what that means? Skaikru is under Azgeda protection. So you better think twice before threatening them,” and she pauses, lets her gaze hold his for a long moment. “We all want the same thing,” she looks around the table, “we want the Mountain destroyed, we want to cure the reapers, we want to live without the shadow of the Mountain,” and her eyes turn back to Jomm, “so we will get along. We all put our difference aside and we all work together.”

Clarke steps back then, her eyes still holding Jomm’s gaze, if only to ensure he doesn’t attack, but she finds herself back besides Kane, Jomm’s jaw clenched painfully, but thankfully silent.

The rest of the war meeting goes by as smoothly as can be expected, the occasional shouting match springing up as to which clan will be working with which, whose responsibility it is to ensure supplies are shared and who will have the honour of storming the Mountain first when the main entrance is breached. But Clarke finds herself content to sit by and watch for now. But the Commander’s words cut through her thoughts, and so she looks up in the silence that follows.

“We come to an agreement,” Lexa begins, “we focus on the reapers for now,” and she looks around the room, a number of heads nodding in agreement. “Good,” she says, “we will meet again tomorrow.”

And so the warriors begin to file out, Jomm sending one last glare towards Clarke and the Azgeda and Skaikru that stand near her before he ducks out the tent.

“Thanks, Clarke,” Raven says then, a smile rising her lips, “Jomm’s a dick.”

And she hears Bellamy snort and Kane sigh tiredly, “his attitude — and other’s — will change once we cure the reapers. They’ll see that Skaikru has more to offer, medicine, technology that can help.” Clarke says, her own smiling returned. “But yeah, ignore him. He won’t do anything now, not when Azgeda stands with you,” and she nods her head once more as the Skaikru say their goodbyes before ducking out of the tent.

And so Clarke, Ontari and Torvun go to follow but she hears Lexa call out to her.

“Clarke, remain,” and it’s just a quick glance and nod to the other two Azgeda before she turns to face Lexa.

She finds Lexa still standing by the table, Gustus and Anya by her side and she lets a small smile finds its way across her lips once more as she meets Anya’s gaze.

“Leave us,” Lexa says then, her eyes flicking to Gustus and Anya for just a moment.

“Anyta tells me you left a message in her tent,” Lexa says once they find themselves alone, her eyes curious as they scan across her face.
“Yeah,” she shrugs, “maybe I did.”

And perhaps Clarke sees just a ghost of a smile live within Lexa’s eyes, “I am sending Trikru out to capture a reaper,” she says, “they will work with you. Indra is leading them,” Lexa finishes.

“That’s good to hear.”

And there’s a pause, something that lingers and builds between them as Lexa looks at her from across the table and Clarke finds her fingers come to rest by the knife on her thigh, her thumb worrying it as she holds Lexa’s gaze, her lip coming to worry between her teeth.

“I apologise,” and Clarke is sure her eyebrows shoot up rapidly. “Perhaps I have allowed myself to overlook clan behaviour towards Azgeda,” she continues, her eyes a calculated gaze that holds steady.

“I—” and Clarke pauses for a moment, “look, we want the same things. Well, some of the same things. For now we just get along, ok? Deal with the Mountain, work together. Go back to our clans,” she finishes.

And Lexa lets the silence hang between them for another long moment as her eyes move to the wound across her cheek.

“Does it hurt?” she asks.

“Not really,” and Clarke shrugs once, “I’ve had worse,” she finishes.

And she thinks a small twitching of Lexa’s lips flashes across her face before the Commander schools her expression, her hands coming to rest by the edge of the table, her eyes gazing towards the model of the Mountain.

“Tell me, Clarke,” and she looks up to hold Clarke’s gaze, “how would you attack the Mountain?” she asks, her eyes steady.

And the question throws Clarke for a moment, her eyes turning to the map and she takes in what she sees, the dam that powers the Mountain, Ton DC that sits in its shadow and even the Ark and the forests that they all find themselves in.

“We’re going to lose a lot of people,” she says then, and she is sure of it. If only because the Mountain now has half of Skaikru on their side. “But we have to have more people. More warriors. Thousands here, right?” she asks as she looks up to Lexa.

“Yes, many thousands from the clans are here in Ton DC and the surrounding forests.”

And Clarke turns her gaze back to the model of the Mountain, her lip held between her teeth for a moment in thought as her brows furrow.

“I’d send a small force in first,” she begins, “I’d attack from the front. Make as much noise as possible, make them waste as much time and effort trying to keep us from the main entrance. But if there was a way inside…” and she trails off, her mind moving through what she knows. “The dam,” and she meets Lexa’s eyes. “If the Mountain is using it then that must mean they have a way of getting to it.”

And Lexa nods, a small smile falling across her lips.

“I’d get inside the Mountain though, even a small force could do damage, could give those at the
main entrance enough time to blow the doors and get inside.”

And she holds Lexa’s gaze for a moment, their eyes meeting across the map and she sees the fire of a burning candle dance in her gaze and cast a lazy shadow over the curve of her cheek.

“You handled Jomm well, Clarke,” Lexa says then, and Clarke snorts at the words she hears.

“He’s an idiot.”

“Yes, he is,” and again a small smile finds its way across Lexa’s lips for a moment before she speaks once more. “Skaikru look to you for guidance,” and Clarke’s eyes turn disbelieving and so Lexa pushes forward with her words. “It is true. Perhaps you do not see, but Bellamy, Kane, they both looked to you when Raven was interrupted. They waited for your reaction.”

“I’m not trying to be a leader,” Clarke replies, her eyes turning down to the map, “I’m just trying to make sure everyone gets along.”

“You were born for this, Clarke,” and she looks back at Lexa. “Same as me.”

And Clarke lets the silence hang between them and she traces the shadows that fall over the map, she follows the finger Lexa brings up and down against the wood of the table and she follows the light that dances across the face before her.

And maybe it’s curiosity, maybe’s its foolishness, maybe it’s just her inquisitive nature, but she looks up again, lets her eyes meet Lexa’s once more. She lets her eyes follow the movements Lexa’s own eyes trace as they ghost over the scars on her face, as they fall to the furs across her shoulders and as they take in the white that clings to her clothes. And maybe she sees the small tensing of her body, the small flinching away from the Azgeda before her.

“Azgeda killed someone you loved.”

And maybe it’s more of a statement, maybe it’s more of a guess, more of a hand reaching out in the dark. If only to hold onto words that they shared perviously, if only to understand the person who stands before her. If only so that she may one day use what she knows to benefit Azgeda.

But maybe she’s a fool. And maybe she’s just trying to survive life on the ground without fumbling around blindly.

But Lexa’s eyes snap up to hers. They pierce into her and they— And they what? There’s a moment’s anger, a simmering of a snarl that flashes across her cheeks, a burning hatred that lives within the green eyes that look back at her and a hardening of her features. All for just a beat of her heart.

But the green eyes close for a moment. She sees the chin rise and the jaw clench and the fingers fisting painfully by the woman’s side.

“You don’t have to answer,” Clarke says then. “I get it. None of my business.”

But Lexa opens her eyes slowly, she lets the light dance across her face as she sighs just once before she leans over the table, her eyes moving to trace the map before her.

And she lets the silence hang between them once more. And maybe it’s only seconds, only a few short breaths but for Clarke it feels an age. It feels a long moment that stretches and pulls.

“We all make sacrifices, Clarke,” and Lexa meets her gaze. “We do what we must to survive.”
She ducks quickly, air rushing over her head and so she dives, she rolls and she comes to her feet, an arrow flying forward, and she smiles as the reaper drops to the ground, her arrow embedded in its stomach. And it’s only a moment before three Azgeda jump onto it, as they smash their fists into its face until it’s a bloodied mess.

But Clarke only spares it a second, only enough time to ensure that they have it under control, and then she’s running, she fires another arrow, this one striking a reaper locked in combat with a Trikru warrior and so she smiles just once before Torvun brushes past her, his sword swinging easily through the air as he disarms his own reaper before Ontari rushes forward in the opening he creates, her sword quickly embedded into its chest.

“We need them alive!” Clarke hisses, exasperation colouring her tone as Ontari merely shrugs, her lips pulling into a smile far from appropriate for such a bloody moment.

“We have two—” and she glances past her shoulder, “three already, Clarke.”

“That’s not the point,” and Clarke fires another arrow, this one striking a reaper in the back, and she smiles as she meets Lincoln’s gaze from across the raging battle between them. And maybe, despite the short moment’s she has shared with him, she thinks the quiet man the most likeable of the Trikru she has met.

And Clarke turns, another smile finding its way across her face as she hears Entani berate the three Azgeda subduing the reaper she had wounded.

“What good is healing a reaper if they can not talk afterwards!” she shouts at them as they sheepishly move to protect her as she kneels, already wrapping a clearly broken jaw.

She turns back then to see Torvun throw a reaper over his shoulder before he drops his knee into its throat, his fist colliding with its chin forcefully, the reaper going limp as consciousness is smashed from it.

A shadow falls across her then and she ducks as she hears the growl, and she drops her bow, the notched arrow thrown at the reaper that attacks her and she reaches for her knife, her feet already back peddling. A sword swings at her then, and she brings her knife up across her body, the jolt of the blades that collide stinging her wrist but she ignores it and rolls, her free hand throwing up dirt as she comes to her feet. And as the reaper lunges once more she sees a flash of brown rush at the reaper from the corner of her eyes before the reaper is smashed aside. And she smiles as Octavia looks up, her lips pulled up into a grimace of her own as she removes her sword from its chest.

“We’re even now,” she says, a quick smirk sent Clarke’s way before she rushes off, sword already swinging through the air.

The fight comes to a swift end, the Trikru and Azgeda standing amongst a number of dead and subdued reapers with only a few wounded of their own.
Clarke catches Indra’s eyes then, a quick nod passed between them and she finds the older Trikru warriors much more likeable too. And so she turns, helping a wounded Azgeda to her feet as they begin the quick march back to their horses.

The ride to Arkadia takes just a bit longer than usual, the bound reapers slowing their progress, but they arrive at the gates, the sun still sitting high in the afternoon sky. They drag the reapers to the med bay then, Ark guards following, their rifles held tensely in their hands as the combined Azgeda and Trikru warriors move through the halls of the Ark.

And it’s a tense thing as they come to a stop, the med bay doors sliding open slowly, hardly a word exchanged between both clans. But the doors open and they file in, the snarling of the reapers all they hear.

It’s not long until the reapers are subdued, the guard’s shock sticks enough to reduce the reapers to a whimpering mess for long enough that Jackson can inject them with a sedative, something stronger that allows the reapers to be strapped into beds.

And so Clarke steps back, a hand coming to swipe over her forehead as she looks for Abby in the med bay. Her eyes move from person to person then, her gaze falling to the Azgeda that had remained behind the first time she had been to Arkadia only a few days prior.

“Where’s Abby?” she asks Jackson, her gaze coming back to where he stands over a reaper, a chart held in his hands.

“She’s coming now,” he says, his eyes gazing up for a moment in thought.

“Thanks,” she says as she turns to help Entani with the wounded Azgeda.

It isn’t long until Abby enters the med bay and so she smiles when she sees Clarke, just a quick wave exchanged between them both before Abby moves to the reapers, Jackson already in tow.

“Most should be able to return now,” Entani says as Clarke comes up besides her, the warrior whose leg was amputated the most seriously hurt. “But she will have to remain,” and Clarke takes her in then, eyes closed, her chest rising slowly, her breathing a laboured, pained thing as she sleeps, the drugs in her system still keeping her from the waking world.

They arrive back at the war camp late in the afternoon, their numbers just a few less, the wounded Azgeda and Trikru too injured to travel having stayed behind at Arkadia. And so she moves to her tent, her mind too tired for much more in the waning light.

And so she pulls the furs from her body, she peels the leathers from her tired limbs and she climbs
It’s quiet. It’s a comfortable warmth that rests over her. And she knows it must be late. Or early. If only because the outside world is quiet, just a quiet hooting of a bird and the careful steps of warriors stumbling through the camp in the dark, their attempts not to wake others an appreciated thought. Clarke takes the time to let her thoughts settle then, the raid on the reaper camp of the previous morning sift through her mind for only a moment before she rolls further into Ontari, the woman’s arm held comfortably around her.

And so her eyes begin to flutter closed once more. She thinks she feels sleep calling to her, pulling her back into a peaceful slumber. But she feels it gently.

It’s a quiet thing. A tentative thing. Something careful and unfamiliar. And so she stiffens. She pauses in her movement and she listens. And she is sure there is someone else in the tent.

And so her eyes roll.

If only because she thinks it must be Anya. And so she brings a hand up to her eyes and she sits.

Her eyes move to where she feels the other person and her eyes fall onto a figure.

And it takes her only a moment to recognise that the person is not Anya. And it takes her a moment to register that an intruder lingers in her tent. And then she yells out, and it’s a quick, frantic scramble out of the furs, and Entani rolls out of the bed with a pained curse as Clarke comes to a stand on the bed and Ontari sits up too, her eyes falling onto the figure for only a moment before she lunges.

And it’s a painful few seconds that follow.

Ontari lunges for the figure, a curse falling from her lips as she swings, her fist whistling through the air before her strike is blocked, her arm is bent at an odd angle and she curses out in pain and she is thrown to the ground before a foot collides with her face. Clarke trips on the furs around her feet, her face coming to crash against Entani’s head as the other woman rises from the side of the bed. And it’s an angry swearing that leaves Entani’s mouth before she launches herself at the intruder, and Entani ducks a swing, brings her leg up and kicks hard into the person’s stomach. But the kick is blocked, it’s thrown to the side and a hand comes up to bloody Entani’s nose before she is kicked harshly in the groin and a punch is thrown into her breast, a pained grunt all Entani can voice before a fist collides with her chin and she drops to the ground unconscious.

Clarke throws the furs around her at the figure, and she launches herself forward. And the cool air pricks her skin as she catches a glimpse of Ontari’s bloodied face, cradling her arm to her chest before Clarke collisions with the intruder. And she reaches out quickly in the dark, her fingers snaking for the person’s throat, but the shadow twists, snakes their head back briefly before bringing it forward with a sharp snap, their skull colliding once more with Clarke’s cheek. And maybe for just a second she takes the time to again curse her wretched cheek before pain explodes across her stomach, a knee bringing her to her knees before she is kicked swiftly in the ribs.

And she falls to her back, the figure coming to loom over her before the person settles themselves over her chest.

And it’s a woman, Clarke realises, as a face hovers over her. And the features are proud, her face
sharp and her gaze cunning, the dark of her hair braided back out of her eyes.

“Who are you,” Clarke hisses as a hand comes around her throat.

And a smile graces the woman’s lips, her eyes moving across Clarke’s face for only a moment.

“I am Echo,” she says. “Kwin Nia sends her regards.”
Echo gentles her fingers around Clarke’s throat for a moment longer, her grip lessening into a tender caress as an eyebrow arches in question and so Clarke grimaces once before she nods her head in acquiescence, the motion stymied by Echo’s grip. And so Clarke gasps out quietly as the fingers release her, as they retreat and as Echo takes a measured step back, her eyes only briefly coming to look at Ontari before turning once more to Clarke.

And it’s a rough cough that leaves her lips as Clarke struggles to her feet, a hand held to her ribs and another coming to wipe away the blood that drips down her cheek before she turns to Entani, whose groaning moans of pain waft through the tent.

“How—” and she cough again, “how’d you get past Torvun,” Clarke breathes out, her hands coming to rest against Entani’s shoulder as consciousness creeps back into the other woman.

And Echo smirks for a moment before standing over Ontari as she looks over her shoulder at Clarke.

“He will wake soon,” and then she reaches out, a hand offered to Ontari who merely glares at her through the blood that drips from her eyebrow, arm still cradled to her chest.

And so Echo shrugs before turning back and sitting in the chair, her legs crossing slowly as she takes in the women before her. And as Echo reclines, as she smirks at Entani’s confused daze and Ontari’s continued glare, Clarke eyes the angle of her jaw, the lack of scars and the dark black of her leathers, the usual greys and whites of Azgeda absent from her body.

“I don’t even know if you’re Azgeda,” Clarke hisses, her fingers itching for her knife, the weight absent against her thigh.

But Echo eyes her carefully, her head tilting for a moment as a slow smile saunters across her lips.

“You were taken to Ronto,” she begins, her fingers coming to tap against an armrest, “Ontari was the first person you spoke to,” she turns to Ontari, her eyes a quiet glow as mirth flits across her face, “Kwin Nia had her beaten for her behaviour,” and she turns back to Clarke, an eyebrow raised in challenge.

“Ok…” Clarke says. “What do you want?”

“What I want is not important,” Echo shrugs, “Kwin Nia merely wishes to know how you are.”

“We are fine,” Ontari mutters as she rises to her feet.

“Kwin Nia wishes to know how you plan to destroy the Mountain,” Echo says, her eyes still trained on Clarke.

“We have a plan. Skaikru will help,” Clarke says as Entani sits up, her eyes still somewhat dazed. “Nia knows about Skaikru, right?”

“Yes,” Echo says, “she has known about Skaikru for some time,” she finishes as her eyes turn thoughtful for just a moment. “How do you plan to destroy the Mountain?” she repeats.

“We think there’s a way inside that isn’t the main entrance. If we can get a small group of warriors into the Mountain then it should be enough to distract them from the army coming from the front long enough for the main doors to be blown open,” Clarke answers as she moves to Ontari, her
hands coming to guide her to the bedside. “Or at least cause enough confusion to give us time.”

“And who will be this small force of warriors?” Echo asks.

“We haven’t got that far yet,” Clarke shrugs, “I assumed it’d be a mixture of Skaikru and the other clans.”

And so Echo turns quiet for a moment, a finger coming to pick against the wood of the chair she sits in.

“You will ensure that a large number of Azgeda forces are amongst those that enter the Mountain first, Clarke,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s obvious I thought,” and she pauses, “Why wouldn’t Azgeda be involved in the fighting?”

And Echo pauses once more, “When the time comes, you will select only those that volunteer to go.”

“Why?” but Clarke thinks she knows the answer.

“Not of your concern for now,” Echo replies coolly. “I will be back soon,” she says as she rises from the chair, “I am here to aid you in the fight against the Mountain.”

“Fuck Echo,” Ontari hisses from where she lies back on the bed, the subject of her fury having ducked out soon after her words had finished.

“Do you know her?” Clarke asks as she wipes away dried blood from Ontari’s eyebrow.

“No,” and she winces as Clarke grips her arm, Entani already by her other side, “she had no scars, so she is either an assassin or a spy.”

“Or both,” Entani shrugs.

“This will hurt,” Clarke says quietly, as she begins to rotate Ontari’s arm.

And so Ontari merely mutters curses under her breath as her shoulder is slowly rotated, a satisfying click quickly running through her arm as her shoulder resets. Entani hands her bandages then, some already being laid out as she begins cleaning Ontari’s brow, bloodied bandages covering her own nose as the blood drips slowly.

“I don’t want you moving your arm at all, ok?” Clarke says as she begins wrapping it, “And I know you won’t listen to me, but try and use your left arm,” she finishes, the bandages ending in a firm knot as she prods gently at the shoulder for a moment.

“I agree with Clarke, Ontari. You should not move it or it will only get worse,” Entani adds, her eyes smiling up at Clarke for a moment.

And so Ontari grunts her acceptance before she turns to the entrance.

“You should probably check on Torvun,” Ontari says, her uninjured arm coming to wave towards
the exit.

And so Clarke rises, her feet padding over the furs that line the flooring of the tent as she pokes her head outside, the dark of the night and the moon still shining in the sky. She finds Torvun slumped over in his chair, whetstone and sword resting in his lap, his chest rising and falling slowly. And so she moves to his side, her fingers coming to rest against the pulse in his neck for a moment.

“Is he ok?” Entani asks as she exits the tent.

“Yeah, I think he’s just drugged,” and Clarke worries her lip for a bit, “what do we do?” she finishes, her eyes scanning around in search of Echo, if only so that she can ask how long Torvun may be unconscious for.

“I do not know,” Entani shrugs. “I would let the poison leave his system,” she shrugs, a hand coming to pat his broad shoulder before she turns back into the tent.

And so Clarke sighs once more as she reaches out and takes the sword in his lap and moves to return it to its sheath. And she sighs briefly at the realisation that she is once more the pawn in a game played by others. And her mind wanders too, she thinks over what Echo had said. And she knows Nia had chosen her to help in the fight against the Mountain, and she had thought it was to show Azgeda strength, to show that Azgeda had more than the other clans could offer in her presence and the larger number of Azgeda warriors. But now? Now she thinks Nia wishes to use the Mountain somehow. She thinks that much, and wouldn’t Nia be a fool to not even consider using the Mountain? Wouldn’t Lexa herself be planning the same thing? Isn’t that why Lexa wants her to work with Skaikru? Perhaps Lexa and Nia aren’t so different after all.

But as she ducks back into the tent, her fingers coming to swipe at the drying blood against her cheek she thinks over what Echo had said, and as she considers the words, she thinks that maybe using her knowledge to help destroy an enemy of the Coalition is much more different than having it fall into Nia’s hands. But isn’t that good for Azgeda? And for the Coalition?

Maybe she isn’t so sure.

But for now she’ll play the game.

The walk up to the Commander’s tent is quiet, Ontari still nursing her injured shoulder and Torvun somewhat angry in his steps, his eyes moving much more rapidly around them as he stares down any that move too close towards their group.

They find Kane, Bellamy and Finn walking up the winding trail of torches too, and so Clarke nods in greeting as their groups merge, Bellamy eyeing Torvun carefully as Finn smiles happily at Clarke and Ontari.

“Training accident?” Finn asks then, his eyes moving between the swelling and cuts that both Clarke and Ontari sport, and then down to Ontari’s shoulder.

“Something like that,” Clarke says, her mind briefly turning to Echo. “How are those radios going?” she asks then, her thoughts turning to Raven.

“Not good,” Kane sighs, a hand scratching through his beard. “Raven has them working, but range
is an issue. She’s heading back to Arkadia at the moment to see if she can boost the signal or something,” he shrugs apologetically, “you’d have to ask her for specifics.”

They fall into a small silence then as they continue up the path. But Clarke once more turns to Kane, a thought coming to mind.

“Hey,” and he pauses and turns to her, “Who’s our inside man?” she asks.

And he gazes at her for a moment, a thought living within his eyes.

“Well,” and she thinks she blinks for a long while, the revelation, however small, leaving her just a moment speechless.

“Oh,” is all she says, before Kane grips her shoulder with a friendly squeeze. “I guess it makes sense,” she says then. “They trust him, right? That’s how he’s getting all this information. Because he’s Thelonious’ son?”

“We think so,” Kane replies.

“Why’s he helping now?” she asks.

“He said something didn’t feel right about the Mountain,” Kane answers, “and then he realised they were taking grounders and turning them into reapers.”

“So now he’s trying to help.”

“Yeah,” Kane sighs, dejection colouring the sound.

The war meeting goes by as well as can be expected, but maybe it ends sooner, the captured reapers doing much to reduce clan animosity towards Skaikru. And she smiles at Kane briefly as he explains that Abby works hard to find a cure, that she is sure she knows what to do, and that now it is only trial and error and time that delays a cure.

And so Clarke’s head turns to Lexa when she hears her name.

“Clarke,” and she meets the gentle shade of green that glimmers in the candle light. “How would you attack the Mountain?”

And so she pauses for a moment, lets her mind think back to yesterday’s conversation with Lexa.

“The Mountain uses the dam,” she begins, her eyes turning to the warriors around her. “That means they must have access to it from the Mountain. If we can find how they get there then we can use that—”

And she turns to Kane as he clears his throat quietly, and so she nods her head for him to add to the conversation.

“Our inside man says there’s access tunnels. He’s working on sending plans to us at the moment.”

“So now we rely on one man to do two things?” a warriors asks, confusion creeping into her voice.
“Yes,” Kane responds.

“And he can be trusted?” the same warriors asks once more, her eyes turning briefly to Clarke.

“Yes,” Kane says more strongly. “We trust him. There’s a few other’s with him now.”

“Thanks,” Clarke says quietly to Kane before she turns her attention back to the grouped warriors. “Everyone satisfied?” and she holds the gaze of the warriors that shift uncomfortably where they stand.

“Continue, Clarke,” Lexa says gently, her eyes still focused on Clarke.

“So, once the acid fog comes down we destroy the dam. Our main army attacks the front of the Mountain as a distraction while the inside man lets us into the Mountain. Once inside we cause confusion, long enough so that the main entrance can be taken down. And then we’re in,” and she finishes, her eyes moving from face to face.

“And who is we?” Jomm asks, his eyes narrowed at Clarke from across the table.

“Azgeda,” she says simply. And Clarke thinks she sees Lexa’s eyes narrow for just a moment. “This is an Azgeda plan. So Azgeda will lead it. Skaikru will obviously be coming as we’d need their help destroying the dam, but other clans are welcome to join us,” and she shrugs a moment, “but we’ve got more warriors then other clans so it makes sense for us to split and for some of us to go into the Mountain first.”

And there’s a quiet pause as the plan sinks in, and some warriors eye her carefully, some murmur between themselves and some stay silent, their eyes moving from Clarke to Lexa.

“I agree with the plan,” a man says, and Clarke turns to find the same warrior who spoke to her yesterday, his leathers a rusted red-brown. “Azgeda is accused of being violent and eager to fight, but now we flinch at their plan? When they offer to go in first? To attack the Mountain without reinforcements?” and he turns to Jomm and he holds the Lake clan warrior’s gaze. “Plains Riders stand with Azgeda in this plan, Heda,” and he bows his head slightly towards Lexa.

“Are there any other objections?” Lexa calls out, her eyes turning to the model of the Mountain briefly before casting them in a long arc around the table. And she pauses, the silence heavy for a moment longer.

And Clarke sees two women lean into each other, the hushed conversation between them rapid and prompt.

“Glowing Forest and Broad Leaf stand with Azgeda as well, Heda,” one of them says after one last exchange of glances. “It is a sensible plan. Clarke would lead this force well I believe, Heda,” and she nods firmly at Clarke before continuing, “she would be able to lead both Azgeda and Skaikru.”

“Then it is settled,” Lexa calls out. “If no other plan can be settled upon before the fall of the acid fog then we move forward with this. We will meet tomorrow,” she finishes.

And so the number of warriors around the table bow their heads, murmured words of farewell passing lips before they duck out of the tent.

And perhaps it’s because of pattern and repetition, or perhaps Clarke can feel it in Lexa’s posture, but she remains by the table, her eyes catching Torvun and Ontari briefly before they duck out leaving her to watch as Lexa moves to study the model of the Mountain.
“Clarke, rema—”

“I know,” she rolls her eyes as Lexa turns, just a flash of surprise finding its way into her eyes.

Clarke moves around the table too, her eyes falling to where the dam is drawn for a moment before she comes to stand on the same side as Lexa.

“It is a good plan,” Lexa begins as she looks up at Clarke and so she shrugs in answer, a shoulder coming up slowly.

“It’ll work,” she says. “I have faith in Skaikru,” but maybe it’s more hope than faith, at least for now.

And Lexa must read her expression, must read the doubt that lingers in the corners of her mind because she comes to stand by Clarke’s side, her gaze firm, a hand resting against the edge of the table.

“The Mountain will fall, Clarke.”

And Clarke nods, but her thoughts turn to Echo, they turn to Nia and to the plan she assumes must be brewing.

“Why are you letting me make all the decisions?” she asks, her mind turning back to the conversation they had had in the bunker. “What’s your game, Lexa?” and it comes out curious, less bite than she had intended. If only because she is curious, and so she turns, rests a hip against the edge of the table as her arms come to cross over her chest. “I know you don’t trust Azgeda.”

“You are a leader, Clarke,” Lexa answers, “would it not be foolish for me to ignore you? To ignore the benefit of having an Azgeda warrior who can lead Skaikru in a war? And the clans agree, Clarke. Your plan is sound. I am not so foolish as to reject a plan merely based on who thinks of it.”

“So you wouldn’t back me if the plan bad?” she questions.

“I do not think you would make a bad plan,” Lexa answers.

“That’s a lot of faith you have in someone from a clan you hate,” Clarke says, an eyebrow raising in challenge.

But Lexa ignores her jibe and her eyes turn thoughtful as she gazes upon her. And Clarke sees her eyes move slowly, she sees them flick up to her forehead then move down to her cheeks tracing the scars that mark her as Azgeda. And they move lower yet, rest just below her eyes before they flick up once more.

“I do not hate Azgeda,” and it comes out steady.

And so Clarke returns her gaze, and she lets her eyes trail over the braids Lexa wears in her hair, the way the collar of her coat hangs open and the way Lexa’s own eyes peer back at her.

“But you hate Nia,” and it comes out a statement, it comes out a surety and a fumbling hand in the dark. But Clarke thinks she is right, she thinks herself correct, and she knows she is when Lexa’s jaw clenches just a bit, when her chin rises just a bit and when her eyes look away for barely a moment’s breath.

“She’s the one who killed whoever it was that you loved, wasn’t she?” and perhaps Clarke isn’t sure why she wants to know, perhaps she isn’t certain why she pushes this topic, why she challenges Lexa’s refusal to answer.
But maybe she does.

And so Lexa closes her eyes for only a moment and she takes a breath, and it’s a steady thing, a small thing that is held in her chest for a long moment. But then she breathes out and her eyes open.

“Yes,” and Lexa lets her gaze wander, lets her mind drift back into a time that Clarke thinks floats often through her mind, to memories long gone. “Her name was Costia,” and she is sure Lexa swallows painfully for a short while. “Nia captured her. Tortured her. Cut off her head. Because she was mine,” and the words come pained, they come clipped and forced past tired lips and Lexa’s gaze hardens as she once more looks to Clarke’s scars.

And it’s a revelation that Clarke had expected. It’s something she had assumed. Perhaps not the who of the death, but the importance of the person that Lexa had lost.

And so Clarke speaks out to Lexa quietly.

“I’m sorry,” but she thinks the words not enough, she thinks they come out useless, come out too late for any comfort to be gained for a wound lost to the past.

So Lexa lets her eyes wander for a moment as the light of a candle sways lazily, and as a shadow falls lonely and quietly across her face before it settles somewhere between them.

“You accuse me of being unkind, Clarke,” and Lexa softens her gaze for just a moment, “You accuse me of not caring,” and she shrugs once as she begins to move slowly around the table. “I do care. But it is important to recognise weakness when it is present,” she says. “To know it. To understand it.”


“No,” and Lexa lets a barely there breath leave her lips. “Not those things.”

“Then what?” and Clarke follows Lexa’s gaze as it drifts and recalls pages of a memory, as it turns to the map spread across the war table and as it wanders over the rivers and the forests that are drawn across the surface. “Love?”

And so Lexa looks up.

“We all must make sacrifices in order to survive, Clarke.”

“I don’t agree with that, Lexa,” and she leans forward, the table now between them. “There’s always another option. Always another way,” and maybe she pleads quietly, maybe she wishes desperately, maybe she tries uselessly. “You say you and Nia are different? Then trust me, Lexa,” and she places her hands against the edge of the table, lets her fingers rough against the worn wood. “If you don’t trust Nia, then trust me. We can work together. Azgeda and Trikru don’t have to be in conflict forever. Isn’t that why the Coalition was formed? No relationship is perfect, but they have to start somewhere.”

And Lexa looks up as a shadow wraps itself across her for a moment.

“Trust me,” Clarke says, “show me that you’re different than Nia,” and Clarke lets a small smile lift her lips. “Show me that you’re better than Nia.”
Clarke finds Torvun waiting for her outside Lexa’s tent and so they begin making their way back to the Azgeda war camp, a tired yawn escaping her lips, the early morning intrusion and the war meeting leaving her a bit more drained than usual.

As she ducks into it she finds Echo resting comfortably in the same chair, her fingers tapping leisurely against her thigh as her head comes to turn around at her entrance.

“You’re here,” Clarke mumbles, Torvun eyeing Echo for an angry moment before he takes his place besides the entrance as the tent flaps close behind Clarke.

“Yes,” Echo says, her eyes even in their appraisal of Clarke.

“I assume you want to know how the war meeting went?” Clarke says as she sits on the edge of the bed, her thoughts already turning back to the conversations she had had.

“Yes,” Echo says again.

“The Commander and the clans agreed with the plan,” she begins and she sighs as she recalls Lexa’s guarded demeanour. “I think the Commander is suspicious,” she continues with a shrug. “She doesn’t trust Azgeda much. She doesn’t trust Nia,” and Clarke eyes Echo carefully for a reaction.

“Why?”

And Echo’s fingers still in their tapping, her eyes locking onto Clarke’s quickly as her face smooths and blanks evenly.

And as Clarke takes in the woman before her, she knows that the line she walks is dangerous, is wrought with a danger that she need not introduce into her life. But maybe she’s curious, maybe she’s tired of being a pawn, and perhaps she wants a change.

“The Commander said that Nia killed someone she loved,” and Echo’s eyes move slowly, they glance to the scars on her forehead and cheeks before turning to the furs she wears across her shoulders. And maybe Clarke sees a memory, sees a time once lived move through Echo’s expression, if only slightly.

“Yes,” Echo begins. “Nia’s revenge,” she shrugs.

“For?”

“When the coalition formed Azgeda was resistant,” and her words come measured, they come careful. “The King of Azgeda lead our forces into battle. He fell to the Commander’s blade,” she finishes.

“So Nia killed Costia,” Clarke says and as the name reaches Echo’s ears the other woman moves her fingers lightly to the blade against her thigh.

“Yes,” Echo says.

“And then Roan was taken prisoner in revenge? To make sure Azgeda would fall in line?” she asks.

“Yes,” Echo says, and Clarke is sure Echo studies her, studies her face, studies her reactions to the words she hears so she steadies her own face, she calms the thoughts that race through her mind.

And then Echo stands, her eyes turning to the tent’s entrance briefly before she looks back at Clarke.
“You would be wise to guard your thoughts,” Echo says. “What you question may have you killed.”

And then she leaves, her words ringing lowly through Clarke’s mind.

A sigh lets its way past her lips as she stretches her legs out, the afternoon sun resting in the sky a hot heat against her skin. And so she looks up as a figure sits before her. And she smiles briefly at Octavia, the Trikru warrior’s own brow sweaty, her sword bloodied and held comfortably in her hands.

“You think the reapers can be healed?” she asks, her eyes turning back to the three reapers that lie unconscious and tied together, a number of Azgeda and Trikru warriors guarding them.

“I think so. Maybe we’ll find out tonight,” Clarke answers, a shrug lifting her shoulders as she brings the waterskin to her lips.

“Anya hates you,” Octavia says then, her lips turning into a small smile as Clarke meets her gaze. “Not you specifically, but Azgeda,” she continues, “I don’t know if she was more angry or relieved when the Commander replaced her with Indra,” and her eyes turn to Indra, the older Trikru leader’s hand still resting against her sword as she walks between the resting Azgeda and Trikru forces, her gaze careful as she meets the eyes of those that look at her.

“And Indra doesn’t hate Azgeda?” Clarke asks.

“Not as much as she hates the Mountain,” Octavia shrugs. “Her son was turned into a reaper years ago,” she finishes as she follows Indra’s movements, the warrior coming to a stop by the captured reapers. “It’s a shame, Clarke.”

“What is?” Clarke asks, her eyes meeting a smile on Octavia’s face.

“That you’re Azgeda, we could have been friends if you were Trikru.”

“I guess so,” Clarke chuckles quietly in reply.

The ride to Arkadia goes by swiftly, the reapers they had captured closer to Arkadia than pervious incursions. And so they come to a stop by the gates as they open before them, the guards that stand duty in the guard towers thumbing their weapons cautiously as they peer at the mixture of Trikru and Azgeda, a clear divide running through their ranks. They take the reapers to the med bay, the halls of the Ark clearing as the large number of warriors carry the unconscious reapers forward.

As they enter the med bay Clarke finds Abby standing over an unconscious reaper still strapped into the bed and so she walks to her, Torvun still by her side.

“Clarke,” Abby says as she looks up, their eyes meeting briefly.

And Clarke smiles at her mother as she comes to stand besides her.
“How’s progress?” Clarke asks quietly, her eyes falling to the reaper strapped to the bed.

“It’s a drug,” Abby begins, “and they’re all showing signs of withdrawal, and I’m hoping that given enough time and medical attention they’ll recover,” she says.

“Do you think it’ll work?” Clarke asks, her voice lowering as she glances around them briefly.

“Their withdrawal symptoms are severe,” Abby says. “I’m afraid that they might actually die without the drug. Which I’m sure is purposeful,” and a dark shadow falls across her face. “Whoever created the drug is sick,” she says, her voice hardening. “I can’t understand how someone—how our own people could go along with this,” she finishes.

“Yeah, me too m—”

And it’s sudden. The reaper before them stills for a moment in her unconscious twitching. And then her body arcs, it’s twists and contorts before her lips part in a pained wail, the tendons in her neck stretching as her body convulses and her eyes open and her fingers claw at the restraints.

And her mouth begins to froth as she contorts before Abby is shouting out instructions, Jackson rushing over from where he had been seeing to injured warriors. And silence falls around the med bay, widened eyes turning to the screaming reaper as hands come to hold her down.

“Get the sedative!” Abby shouts, as she begins wiping away at the reaper’s neck with a swab.

And Clarke’s hands come to push the reaper down.

“Torvun!” she yells and he comes rushing to her side. “Help hold the reaper!” she says, her eyes turning quickly in search of whoever brings the sedative, and her gaze falls briefly to Ontari where she sits, her shoulder exposed from her furs, Entani’s hand stilling in her motions of bandaging as their eyes stare at the commotion in front of them.

And it’s only a moment longer. But the reaper stills, her eyes beginning to roll back into her skull and her fingers slacken. And then an uneven, broken beep begins to echo through the med bay.

No.

Clarke isn’t so sure whether she utters the words aloud, or whether she merely thinks them but she stares at the monitor for only a moment as her eyes turn frantically back to the reaper. Her eyes follow the broken beep for one more long second before she curses aloud, before her eyes fall to the reaper.

“Take her shirt off Torvun!” and he only pauses for a moment before he pulls out his knife, the blade slicing through the fabric the reaper wears.

And Clarke’s eyes search for what she needs, and it only takes her a moment before her gaze falls onto a guard who stands close by.

“Give me your shock baton,” she says, her hand already reaching out for it. And so he stutters in his movements for only a second before handing it over.

And Clarke turns back to the reaper, and her eyes meet Abby’s, a syringe held in her hands and Clarke sees the realisation dawn upon Abby’s face before she sends a nod to Clarke.

“Stand back,” Abby shouts then, her eyes glancing around the table before Clarke thumbs the shock baton.
And Clarke only spares those around her one brief glance to make sure they stand back before she drives the baton into the reapers chest.

She hears the crackle of electricity and the flow of power as the energy tears through the reapers chest. And she sees the slight shock energy as it sparks across the reaper. And she pulls away the baton, her eyes turning back to the monitor.

“Hit her again Clarke,” Abby says her own eyes following the uneven beat that still lingers on the monitor, the strength of it fading.

And she does. She brings the baton to the reaper’s chest and she lets the baton shock the reaper’s heart. And she does it again. And for a third time her eyes turn to the monitor. And she waits. And she thinks it feels like an age between the beats she sees. But she stares, and she is sure her eyes burn. But she sees the line move and she sees the beat of the reaper’s heart steady and she sees it move once more.

And so her eyes turn back to the reaper before them, she stares for only a moment. But the reaper gasps. Her mouth opens and a pained, wretched breath escapes past her lips. And then her eyes open. Her eyes stare, confused, dazed and uncertain as she takes in what she sees. And her eyes fall to Abby, white medical coat over her shoulders, and the woman must see the sterile white light of the lights overhead and the metal of the Ark because she gasps, she screams out for a moment before she begins thrashing.

And Clarke only looks up once, realisation dawning on her as to what the woman must be thinking.

“Stand back,” she cries out, her hands pushing away Abby and Jackson before she leans over the woman, her fingers gripping the closest Trikru warrior she can as she drags the man forward, his tattooed face coming to loom over the woman.

“You’re safe,” Clarke says, bringing a hand up to brush against the braids in her hair, “you’re safe,” she repeats as she lifts the furs on her shoulders. “You’re ok, you’re ok,” she says again as she pushes the Trikru warrior closer.

And it takes a long moment, but the woman’s eyes focus on Clarke, they focus on the scars that mark her as Azgeda and the furs that line her shoulders, and the woman’s eyes turn to the Trikru warrior, his eyes kind and wide in wonder, the tattoo winding down his neck.

And she must realise. Or at least believe in something. In the words Clarke says, in the things her eyes see because her eyes close for a moment, they close firmly and she holds them shut as tightly as she can. And then they open and she peers around her at the other warriors, Trikru and Azgeda standing around awkwardly, the Skaikru present having drifted to the back of those gathered.

And then the woman breaks. She cries and tears begin to flow down her cheeks as pained sobs leave her a shaking mess of emotion.

And so Clarke’s hand comes to brush against the woman’s head, her fingers carding through the dirty clumps of hair and a small smile falls across Clarke’s lips.

“You’re safe,” Clarke whispers once more.
The sun sits lowly in the darkening sky, the light of the day steadily retreating into a quiet night. And Clarke feels drained. Her body aches and her mind longs for sleep. But she thinks a smile must still linger across her lips as she walks along the perimeter of Arkadia. She had seen to the other reapers, another had died from the withdrawal of whatever sickening drug had been used to turn them into reapers, but much like the first woman, this one had been brought back to life too. And maybe it was coincidence that reapers had to die for the drug to wear off, or maybe it was by evil design. But for now she is content knowing that two lives have been saved. And so she had left the med bay with a need for fresh air and time away from the frantic chaos.

Her mind continues to wander as she moves along the wall, her eyes passing over the metal, burns marks from reentry scorched against the surface and so she brings a hand up to the wall, her fingers running along the rough that she feels.

She rounds a corner then and she finds a small fire burning, logs scattered around it large enough for people to sit on and she finds Raven, the dark haired woman’s brows furrowed in concentration as she messes with a radio, parts scattered on a sheet before her.

Raven looks up as Clarke approaches, her eyes reflecting the light of the fire for a moment before Clarke gestures to one of the logs.

“Can I sit?”

“Yeah,” Raven smiles, “I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on with the radios.”

“Is it complicated?” Clarke asks, but as she eyes the pieces that lie before her she thinks the answer is an obvious one.

“Sorta,” Raven says. “There’s only so much you can do with hardware,” she shrugs. “I think the Mountain’s jamming the signal, stopping us from talking over long distances,” she finishes with a sigh. “It’s got to be the reason because our guy can talk to us from the Mountain, but we can’t talk to him,” she adds with a sigh. “I heard about the reapers,” she finishes, a gentle smile sent Clarke’s way.

And Clarke smiles back.

“At least we’ve solved that problem,” she says, her mind already turning to the dam and the acid fog.

“The other stuff’ll be easy,” Raven shrugs, “I can blow up the dam no problem, and Wells will take out the acid fog, send us the blueprints and then we can kick their asses,” she finishes.

And Clarke hopes it will be that simple, but she thinks that Raven knows it won’t be that easy by the small glint in her eyes. And Clarke knows so, too.

“It’ll be over soon,” Clarke hopes, her mind just a bit more tired than before.

“Yeah,” Raven says, “I hope so.”

And they fall into a quiet silence then, Clarke happy to watch as Raven continues to tinker with the radio, small curses falling from Raven as things presumably go wrong.

But a faint crackle comes from Raven’s hip and Clarke looks on as Raven starts for a second before she places the radio pieces down messily.

“Our inside guy,” Raven says quickly as she fishes out another radio.
“Wells, what’s up?” Raven says.

“Raven,” and Clarke smiles at the familiar voice despite the urgency. “They’re planning to bomb Ton DC,” and Raven’s eyes widen. “They’re doing it now. You need to warn the others,” and then the radio goes silent.

_Shit._
It’s a steady, frantic pace that her horse moves, and the world flashes past in blurs of greens and browns that bleed into each other, that sway in the wind and stream past her, ribbons of frantic noise. And her breaths come pained, they come desperate and they come hopeless. And she curses the Mountain, she curses whoever lives in it, whoever steals her people, whoever kills them and turns them into reapers. And she screams out her frustration at those from the sky that had joined them, that seem content to stand by and to let life be brutalised for their own survival.

Her eyes turn upwards, the darkening sky barely breaking through the canopy of branches and leaves that block out the setting sun. And she thinks she spies the faint wisps of clouds that linger, that dance lazily through the sky without a care or a thought to what must soon be coming.

And it isn’t until her horse breathes raggedly under her that she realises that she has left the other Azgeda and Trikru at Arkadia, that she hasn’t even told them of what Wells had warned. But she continues to ride, she continues to push the horse forward all in the hopes of warning Ton DC, of warning the warriors that linger in destruction’s path.

And she knows she is almost there when the sun lowers over the horizon, when the light bleeds into the sky in one last defiant flash of colour. And she knows, and she hopes that she won’t be too late. And perhaps she thinks she has time, if only because the land around her still breathes listlessly.

She thinks she hears the nearing of noises, the clanging of people moving and of life still living. But she doesn’t slow and she doesn’t pause and she doesn’t stop. She thinks she spies the eyes of a Trikru scout in the trees, or maybe she feels the eyes watch her carefully. Or maybe she imagines it the eyes of the Mountain, lingering, waiting for the destruction that will soon settle around her.

And she nears the war camp. She thinks she sees the fires and the people and the warriors that linger. And she comes to the camp’s edge.

“Where’s the Commander?” she calls out to the first scout she finds, the woman’s soft yellow clothing a gentle colour in the waning light.

“Ton DC,” the woman replies with a shrug.

And so Clarke curses her luck, curses her arrival and she turns her horse to the left as she urges it forward.

The trees begin to group together just a moment too close, too crowded and so she curses her horse as she leaps from the saddle, and a wince finds its way across her lips for just a moment as her feet hit the ground and so she rolls with the fall before she rises, her feet already taking her forward, already pushing her further.

She breaks through the trees then, Trikru guards already eyeing her, their hands on their weapons.

“Where’s the Commander?” she gasps out, her hands coming to rest against her knees as her chest heaves.

And she is pointed in the direction, their eyes following her as she once more starts her tired pace. And it isn’t long until she spots Gustus outside a building, his gaze ever constant as he eyes those that pass and she sees his head turn quickly at her approach.

“I need to see the Commander,” and she goes to push past him, goes to barge her way through but
his hand comes out, it grabs her around the shoulder and hurls her back.

“Step. Back,” he says, his eyes narrowing as his free hand comes to rest against his knife.

And so Clarke growls, her frustrations beginning to boil over.

“Commander! I know you’re in there, I need to see you,” she calls out through the door.

And so she glares up Gustus in anger.

“It’s urgent,” Clarke says again.

And it’s only a moment but it feels an age, and at every moment she thinks she feels the approaching missile that must be coming, that must be nearing the village.

“Enter, Clarke.”

And so she pushes past Gustus, and she rushes into the building. And she takes it in for only a moment, and she sees candles burning against the walls, rolls and parchments in shelves, and a large table sitting in the centre. And her eyes fall upon Lexa who looks up at her entrance from across the table.

“There’s a missile coming. We need to tell everyone to get out. Now,” and it comes rushed and breathless.

And Lexa eyes her for only a second. For only long enough that the words reach her ears.

“No,” and Lexa’s eyes harden, her eyes turn to the table just once.

“What do you mean no, Lexa?” and the words leave Clarke surprised and they give her pause.

“If we warn anyone, if we evacuate Ton DC or the war camp then the Mountain will know we have someone inside,” she says as she begins moving away, as her fingers grasp around a cloth that rests across the back of a chair.

“What’s the point of having an inside man if we can’t act on what he tells us?” Clarke gapes at her, disbelief colouring her tone.

“Is the acid fog disabled? Is the map of the Mountain in our possession?” Lexa challenges, her chin rising in defiance as she steps into a ray of light.

And Clarke looks away for just a moment, the truth of Lexa’s words sinking in slowly, cruelly.

“Then our inside man’s job is not done,” Lexa continues. “Without him we can’t win this war,” and she holds Clarke’s gaze, her eyes hardening.

“So what are you saying? We just do nothing?” and as the words leave her mouth, as they cross the distance between them, perhaps Clarke already knows the answer, perhaps she already feels the actions she will allow to take place. “Let them bomb us?”

“It will be a blow. But our army will be safe inside the woods,” Lexa counters, her eyes turning back to the table briefly in thought. “It will inspire them.”

And Clarke hates the way her heart beats and the way her mind screams out at her in this moment.

“And what about us?” Clarke asks. But maybe she already knows.
“We slip away. Right now,” and Lexa looks down at the cloth in her hands for only a short moment. “Put this on.”

And so Clarke takes the fabric and she lets her mind hate her actions and she lets the fabric burn against her skin. And so she meets Lexa’s gaze once more.

“This is wrong,” and the words come out quiet, they come out defeated.

“It is also our only choice,” and Lexa steps closer, close enough that Clarke feels the air sway against her, close enough for Lexa’s whispered words to brush against her cheek. “And you know it,” Lexa finishes, her hands pulling her own loose fabric over her head.

And then she turns.

It’s quiet and it’s a cold chill that runs through her body, the cloak she holds around herself dark and warm to the cool of the night’s air. And she follows Lexa through the trees as she leads them further and further from Ton Dc. And she isn’t sure how long it’s been. She isn’t sure how long they have. But she knows it must be soon, must be any moment.

And she hears it faintly at first. Perhaps it sounds like thunder that rolls across the land, that rocks through the trees. But she thinks it nears, she thinks it grows louder, stronger and more determined as the seconds tick by.

And she sees it.

It’s a streak of brilliant light through the night’s sky that illuminates a path, a smoking trail billowing out behind it. And it’s loud, it’s certain and sure and it’s deafening. And she thinks she hears Lexa gasp just slightly as the missile flies overhead. And she knows she stares horrified as the missile slips over the trees, as it angles down and then there’s only a moment’s silence when Ton DC lights up, when there’s a fireball of reds that explode out an angry scream, and she stares as oranges and yellows paint the sky an ugly bleeding mess. And then the sound hits her. And it’s suffocating and deafening and it shakes her bones and rattles her mind.

And she knows.

The explosion rips through the air, debris is thrown, carried by a wave of air that crushes against her chest and that throws Clarke back, that lifts her off her feet and smashes her into the ground.

And she gasps and chokes and coughs as her lungs wheeze painfully for long moments.

And it takes her a moment, her ears still ringing, her eyes tearing up from the burn of smoke that begins to billow up into the night’s sky, but she feels hands grip her shoulders, she feels a presence loom over her and she thinks she hears the muffled words of someone shouting her name through the ringing in her ears.

She blinks for a long moment, her eyes slowly focusing on the person in front of her.

And she sees Lexa crouching low in the forest, her fingers gripping her shoulders tightly.

“Clarke,” Lexa says. “Clarke,” she repeats, “Clarke, you need to listen to me. We have to move. We
have to stay hidden.”

“Wh—” and she brings a hand to her cheek and she is sure it begins bleeding anew. “We— I. We need to go back,” she stammers out. “The danger’s over,” and she looks around herself. “I need to help the injured,” she begins and she thinks she hears the sounds of voices, screaming and crying and shouting out into the night as her ears clear slowly. “We need to go back,” she repeats.

“No, Clarke,” and Lexa grips her shoulders again, shakes her roughly. “We must remain hidden. That missile was aimed at killing the important people there, if we are seen, if the Mountain knows either one of us still lives they will use another missile. They will bomb us again,” and Lexa’s eyes turn pleading, they turn just a moment desperate in the light of a raging fire.

“We can not go back, Clarke,” Lexa says. “Not yet.”

They walk for an age, long enough that her mind ceases its frantic turmoil, long enough that her eyes burn from sleep and the smoke that still lingers in the air even this far from Ton DC. But Lexa stops in her walking, she pauses and looks around her for just a moment before she takes a seat on the ground, the green of the moss coating the fallen tree trunks and branches that litter the small clearing they find themselves in.

“What are you doing?” Clarke asks as her eyes follow Lexa’s movements.

“We must remain in the forest until daybreak, Clarke,” she says. “We will return in time. But for now we must let the Mountain think we have died.”

“So what? We’re just going to camp here for the night?”

“Yes,” Lexa replies.

They build a fire quickly, and despite the events Clarke can’t help but to enjoy the warmth the open flame brings her and so she raises her hands, lets the heat seep into her fingers and warm her tired body.

And she thinks over what has happened. She thinks over the people who have surely died, who must now still be suffering, who must be trapped under rubble, crushed to death by the buildings that have collapsed on them.

And she thinks of Azgeda. She thinks of any of her people who may have been too close to Ton DC, who may have been in the healer’s building. Who may have died.

And so her eyes turn up and she looks across the flame to Lexa, and her eyes trace the way the fire dances against her skin, the way her hair glows dimly in the dark of the night and the way the green of her eyes linger and swim with the moss that surrounds them.

“It was our only choice,” Lexa say, her eyes seeing the emotions that must live freely across Clarke’s
face. “You know it, Clarke.”

And Clarke looks away, and she knows a glare lingers across her face when Lexa continues her words.

“You could have warned everyone out there, but you didn’t. You said nothing. Not even to your own people,” she finishes, her eyes hard in the fire light. “This is war, Clarke. People die,” and Lexa lets the words sink in, she lets them linger and she lets them find a hold within Clarke’s mind. “You showed true strength today, Clarke,” she says it softly, gently. “Don’t let your emotions stop you now,” and Clarke thinks she hears just a hint of supplication in her tone.

But she knows she hates it. She knows she hates that maybe, even just for a moment, she can understand what Lexa is saying.

And as the words wind their way through her mind, as she thinks them over and as she considers what Lexa says, Clarke can’t help but to think them true. If only because they are at war. If only because she can understand Lexa’s reasoning. But maybe she’s a fool. Maybe she thinks herself a fool to think she could survive this war without losing herself.

“Sleep, Clarke,” Lexa finishes, her eyes closing slowly as she lets her own mind wander.

Sleep clings to her fitfully, she is sure she turns and shifts as her mind wanders and her body aches. But she wakes with a start, and she sits up, her eyes coming to scan around her for a moment.

“You’re safe,” and she turns to find Lexa eyeing her carefully before she peers out around them, the dark of a sunless sky giving way to the rising of a fresh morning.

And so Clarke nods just once, a slow thing, a confused thing as their eyes meet across the burning embers of the dying flame.

But Clarke’s head turns again at the sound that must have woken her.

And she hears the crack that rolls off the trees. And she knows it to be a gunshot.

“Sniper,” she whispers as the realisation dawns on her that the Mountain still terrorises those at Ton DC. “We have to stop him.”

She follows the sounds of the gunfire, the occasional shot echoing out around them. And she pauses at the edge of a clearing that rises up into a rolling hill before her. And she thinks she even sees movement ahead as the sniper takes another shot down into the ruins of Ton DC. She feels Lexa crouch down next to her, and so she eyes her carefully.

“We do this my way,” Clarke whispers, a challenge in her eyes and so Lexa merely nods once, her hand coming to rest against her own knife.

And so they creep forward, it’s a low crouch that carries them through the tall vegetation. Another
loud shot echoes around them and Clarke can’t help but to wince as her ears ring from the gunshot.

And she pauses, she waits until another shot echoes around them and then she sneaks forward, the furs on her boots muffling the steps she makes and she spares Lexa only a second’s glance over her shoulder before she moves forward. She hears another shot ring out and she sees the dirt kick up from where the sniper lies and so she pauses, lets her eyes find what she thinks must be the Mountain Man and then she takes a deep breath.

And she waits. She waits until one last shot rings out, and she sees his fingers move as he cycles the bolt.

And then she lunges. And it’s a quick, powerful lunge, her legs driving her forward. But her enemy hears the movements, hears her approach and so the barrel of the rifle swings in a long arc and just before it levels out at Clarke’s chest she collides with him. She feels the impact of it crashing against her ribs before she rolls, her elbow coming up and smashing against his face. And then she feels his rifle smash into her knee, the pain splintering down her leg enough for him to drive a hand out and bring it against her throat painfully and so she topples back with a choked wretched gasp, far enough that he can once more bring the rifle to point at her face. And she sees the sneer on the man’s lips.

But Lexa rushes forward then, a snarl coming from her as her knife slashes out, as it catches him across the arm, his shot passing Clarke’s face by a mere breath, the bullet zipping past her, and she blinks painfully, the flash of the shot blinding her for a long moment. But she hears Lexa engage with the man, she hears his cursed cry of pain and she hears the scrape of metal against metal and so she struggles to her feet, a hand coming to rub against her eyes painfully for just a moment.

And she turns to Lexa, sees the man kick out, his foot colliding with Lexa’s thigh painfully, but she grimaces just once, her body already moving with the force of the blow before she spins, her heel coming out with a sharp snap as it collides with the man’s chin and it connects. It crashes against his face and he grunts out painfully before Lexa pounces, her knee driving into his sternum, a whoosh of air forced from his lungs all Clarke hears before Lexa drives her fist into his nose, a sickening crunch echoing out in the space around them before the man topples back, Lexa coming to straddle his torso with her knife poised at his throat.

“How do you breathe the air, Mountain Man?” Lexa hisses into his face, her knife digging into the flesh of his neck.

But he grimaces just briefly, the blood from his nose spilling over his lips.

“Answer me,” she snarls once more.

But Clarke sees a smile form across his lips, his eyes only briefly turning to Clarke’s before he holds Lexa’s gaze once more.

“Answer me and I will grant you a painless death,” Lexa continues, her tone dripping into an icy contempt.

But he only sneers, his lips lifting into a bloodied smirk before he spits out the blood in his mouth, some of it flecking across Lexa’s cheek.


And so Lexa growls out once more before she brings her blade across his throat and all Clarke hears is the pained gurgle of blood that spills over the slit Lexa cleaves, his muscles twitching for a long moment as life bleeds from his body.
“We could have questioned him,” Clarke hisses as she struggles to her feet, a hand coming to tender the sore flesh of her throat.

“He would not have answered, Clarke,” Lexa shrugs, her knife wiping across the man’s clothes before she returns it to her sheath.

“You don’t know that,” Clarke replies, her eyes falling to the lifeless Mountain Man.

“But I do.”

And so Clarke sighs angrily, a cough passing her lips as she turns back to face down the hill, the smouldering remains of Ton DC and the smoke and fires that still burn easy for her to see. Lexa comes to stand by Clarke’s side then, her eyes also turning to Ton DC and so Clarke eyes her carefully, and she sees Lexa’s gaze soften, she thinks she even sees a regret, or at least an emotion more than cool detachment live for a short moment in the Commander’s eyes.

“We should return, Clarke,” Lexa says, her eyes turning to meet her gaze for a moment before they flit over her face, glancing down to her throat before lingering in the space between her bruised neck and her eyes.

The walk back to Ton DC is tense, her eyes always moving, always constant in search of danger. But they near Ton DC and they hear the commotion of people yelling, of pained whimpers and frantic pleas for help and so, as they break through the foliage and the trees Clarke can’t help but feel a cruel tugging in the back of her mind and a heaviness in the pit of her stomach as she sees what Ton DC has become.

Buildings that once existed lie flattened, their walls rubble, houses now ruins of broken, splintered wood. And she sees villagers and warriors alike moving through the rubble, dust coating their bodies, many bleeding from wounds. She sees a woman helping carry a man, his arm a broken, bloodied mess, and she sees others carrying wounded on stretchers, their wounds too severe for them to walk on their own.

And so she spares Lexa one last glance, her mind an angry, bitter thing as their eyes meet.

“Is this what you wanted?” Clarke asks. But maybe she isn’t asking Lexa, and maybe she doesn’t need an answer.

And so she turns, Lexa’s answer fading away into the chaos that Clarke now finds herself in. And so she follows the trail of wounded.

And maybe she can lessen their suffering.

Because she is a healer.

Because she is responsible.
A number of warriors come from the war camp to help in rescuing those still trapped by the rubble, many others spreading out into the surrounding forest in case of reaper attack and so Clarke loses herself to the work in the healer’s building. She finds her day spent bloodied and surrounded by pain and suffering but as she works, as she continues to suture, bandage, set arms and splint broken bones she can’t help but avoid their eyes, can’t help but to avert her gaze and to let her eyes lose themselves in the work she does.

The other Trikru and Skaikru from Arkadia arrive sometime at mid day and so Clarke smiles for a moment as Entani kneels down besides her, the other healer’s own fingers taking over the motions of bandaging, whispered words for Clarke to take a break reaching her ears.

And so she rises with a quiet word of thanks before she passes the many rows of beds, all occupied by wounded villagers and warriors, the stench of death and blood seeping into her nose and resting in her furs.

But she exits into a cloudless, blue afternoon, the sun hanging dutifully in the sky and Torvun resting against the side of the entrance, a pile of bandages at his feet that he folds.

“Where’s Ontari?” Clarke asks as their eyes meet.

“She is helping find those still trapped,” Torvun replies with a quiet sigh.

And so Clarke begins the slow walk back to the most destroyed area of Ton DC, her feet tired and her mind reeling.

It’s late, the sun having already set by the time she finds herself back in the war camp, and so her feet take her through the ranks of Azgeda still milling about, her thoughts elsewhere, her eyes perhaps just a moment more dazed, more anguished that earlier. But she feels the guilt that lingers within her mind. And she feels the burn of Lexa’s eyes as they stare at her, as they look at her and she feels the words Lexa had said. But most of all, she thinks the thing that ruins her the most, through all this suffering is that she is responsible.

And so she kicks forcefully at a stick that lies in her path, just a whispered apology falling from her lips as it skitters into the path of a warrior resting against a supply chest.

She comes to her tent then, Torvun her ever present shadow coming to sit by the entrance as she ducks through.

She finds Ontari sitting in the tent, Entani already packing another supply bag.

“Rest, Clarke,” Entani says as she catches her gaze. “I will continue to work but you look tired,” she finishes.

And so Clarke nods just once as she pulls the furs from her shoulders and she loosens the leathers around her collar.

“Need a hand with that?” Clarke asks then as she turns to find Ontari struggling to remove her own top, her shoulder still a painful nuisance.

And Ontari looks up, light from a candle that burns on the table enough to glow against her cheek for
a moment as it flickers quietly. And so she shrugs once in answer before wincing painfully.

“You shouldn’t have been using it today,” Clarke says as she moves to sit besides Ontari on the bed, her fingers coming to pull away the furs around the woman’s shoulders.

“I wished to help” Ontari replies softly and Clarke smiles at that. But her fingers still in their motions as her mind turns back to her involvement.

“Even help the Trikru?” Clarke tries to joke, but maybe her words come out tainted, tinged with a slight sickening of thought.

“It was not your fault, Clarke,” Ontari says as she faces her. “The Skaikru woman said that a missile was coming and that you came as fast as you could,” Ontari continues. “You tried to warn them. It is not your fault you could not make it in time,” she finishes quietly.

And it hurts. The words bleed into her mind and they crash against her thoughts. And so she closes her eyes and she holds them tight for a long moment.

“I’m still responsible though, Ontari,” Clarke whispers out. But maybe what anguishes her most, more than being responsible for the deaths that now weigh upon her shoulders, is that she understands why Lexa made the decision—why they made the decision.

And Lexa’s words echo in her mind softly. They ring out and they taunt her from afar.

*We all must make sacrifices in order to survive.*

And maybe her words are true.

“Turn around,” she says then, her mind shaking Lexa’s words away forcefully.

And so Ontari turns, her back coming to face Clarke where they sit on the bed.

“This might hurt a bit,” Clarke whispers as her fingers go to Ontari’s collar before she begins peeling it down to expose her shoulder.

Her fingers move carefully as she traces the bandage for a moment as she searches for the knot that is tucked away. And so she lets her fingers ghost over the edge as she pulls gently, the knot unravelling in a slow, careful unfurling.

“Does it hurt?” she asks, her eyes peering at Ontari’s shoulder, the swelling just a little less than days prior, the bruising still lingering.

“No much,” Ontari answers.

They fall into a quiet silence then, Clarke’s fingers remain steady as she re-bandages Ontari’s shoulder. And she lets her fingers slow, lets the warmth of the tent comfort her tired mind and she lets her eyes fall to the braids that spread messily through Ontari’s hair.

And it’s only a quiet breath she takes before she reaches up, her fingers moving through Ontari’s hair for a moment before she begins unbraiding. And so she lets a smile linger across her lips as Ontari sighs, as she relaxes and as she settles for the long moment that it will take for her braids to be mended.

And maybe it’s tentative at first, maybe it’s just a small uncertainty that lingers. Maybe it’s a small moment of calm, or a stronger moment of thought that lingers, but as Clarke brushes Ontari’s hair
over a shoulder, as she traces the scars that litter her body, small ones that glow quietly in the candle light, she can’t help but to lean forward, can’t help but to rest her head against Ontari’s shoulder.

And maybe she isn’t quite sure what she does in this moment.

“Is this alright?” she asks, her heart beating gently in her chest.

And Ontari hums a response, and it’s careful, it’s sure, and maybe it’s a moment’s hesitation.

And so Clarke lets her breath ghost against Ontari’s neck as she leans closer.

“Is this ok?” she whispers into Ontari’s ear and she feels Ontari nod for a moment, and it’s just a small thing, just a quiet thing that lingers in the space around them.

And so Clarke lets her lips brush against Ontari’s neck.

“Is this ok?” she whispers again, and she smiles for a moment as Ontari lets a small breath escape her.

And so Clarke lets her lips linger, and she presses a kiss to Ontari’s neck. And she whispers Ontari’s name once more as her lips wander, as they rise slowly, lazily until they brush against the shell of her ear.

“Tell me what you want,” she whispers it to Ontari, her legs coming to rest on either side of her as she brushes a hand against the side of Ontari’s neck.

And she thinks she feels Ontari smile for a moment, she thinks she feels her relax into her for a while. And then Ontari turns carefully, her arm held to her chest for a moment before she brings it away with a wince, her shoulder still a moment too raw. But as her arm settles by her side her top falls to her waist, her chest binding all she wears underneath.

And Ontari leans forward, a hand coming to card through Clarke’s own hair before she presses herself to her, rests their foreheads together and places a delicate kiss to her cheek. And Ontari lets her lips linger, she lets them brush against Clarke’s scars before she kisses up along the length of them. Her lips begin brushing against the side of her face before coming to rest against her forehead. And it’s a tender motion, a careful motion. Something that might seem out of place, might seem strange, perverted or abstracted in some odd, ritualised manner. But Clarke thinks it quiet and careful. And so she smiles as Ontari’s lips move along the scar etched against her forehead before moving to her other cheek, and Clarke leans into it as Ontari’s lips press against the two scars that rest there.

And then Ontari smiles just once more as her lips meet Clarke’s. And it’s a soft push from Ontari, a careful pressure, something that lingers and hesitates for a long moment that quiets for too short a time.

But then Ontari breaks the quiet silence that sits around them.

“Clarke,” and Ontari whispers her name, her uninjured arm coming to rest against the beating of Clarke’s chest. “We can not, Clarke,” Ontari whispers once more, her eyes opening to gaze steadily into Clarke’s own.

But Clarke holds her gaze. And maybe it’s her anger at the day’s event. Maybe it’s her guilt that still lingers in the back of her mind. Maybe it’s the thrill of Ontari’s body pressed against hers and the rise of her bosom and the beat Clarke can feel in Ontari’s own chest.

And so she smiles a small thing.
“Just for tonight,” and it comes out quiet, but it carries in the space between them. “Tomorrow we can go back to being just Azgeda. To not being distracted,” and it comes out a promise.

Ontari eyes her carefully, and it’s a small moment that she pauses, an uncertainty living within her gaze. But she smiles, and it’s small, it’s gentle and it dances in the softening of the candle light.

“Oh.”

And so Clarke lets a smile live freely across her face as Ontari brings their lips together once more, and Clarke finds a whimper escaping her lips as Ontari’s hand gentles downwards, as it wanders and as it settles within her.

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Her feet take her forward, the moon lingering lonesome in the night’s sky, and her eyes trace a barely there wisp of a cloud dancing with the breeze as it wanders across the blackness that rests over the war camp.

She feels Torvun quietly pad his way besides her, the torches that wind up the hill giving light to where her feet take her. And she eyes the few Trikru that still linger, she eyes those that meet her gaze, that hold it, and within some she thinks she sees something else. And maybe it takes her a moment to recognise the now quiet awe that sits upon their faces. And maybe she can’t quite place the feeling that lingers within her mind.

But maybe they stare, maybe their eyes linger because she wears the white of Azgeda war paint, maybe it is because the furs she wears shine brightly in the light of the flames that flicker and flow around her.

And so she comes to a stop before Lexa’s war tent, Gustus standing guard outside.

“I want to see the Commander,” she says, her eyes meeting his, and she sees them move from her to Torvun before settling back on her with a guarded narrowing.

“Wait here,” he says before ducking inside.

And it only takes a moment, but in the time that she stands by the entrance she thinks of what she is about to do, she thinks of the things she is about to say. And maybe she’ll regret them, maybe she’ll wish she never even thought of this idea. But just for tonight she feels a little less like being a pawn.

Gustus ducks out the tent then, his eyes shifting to Torvun briefly.

“You may enter, Clarke Kom Azgeda. Torvun must remain,” and so Clarke nods her acceptance before she ducks through the entrance.

She finds Lexa standing by her throne, her clothes a softer thing that clings to her just a little less. The heavier leathers gone, replaced by gentler cloth and lighter leathers that breathe more easily in the night’s air.

“You say you are different than Nia,” Clarke begins. “You say you care about those under your command,” and she pauses to let the words reach Lexa.

“What I’ve seen these last few days?” Clarke continues and she sees Lexa’s eyes narrow. “We do
things my way now,” and she pauses once more, lets the words settle within Lexa’s mind. “I will tell Nia that you knew about the missile.”

And she sees Lexa’s fingers twitch to the knife by her thigh and she sees Lexa’s eye flash to the stark white of the paint that clings to her face.

“Unless?” Lexa questions.

“Unless you give me Prince Roan.”
Chapter 17

His steps echo through the halls, the concrete beneath his feet a cool blanket that settles around him and so he meets the eyes of a man who walks past, a smile shared between them before he continues forward.

It doesn’t take him long, just a short walk down a hall, two flights of stairs and then he turns down a corridor, a few others he passes nodding in greeting.

He enters the lift then and smiles to the man he finds, his finger pressing against a button as the doors slide shut.

“Did you hear about Emerson?” the other man asks then, his eyes just a bit mournful in the light.

“Yeah,” he says, a small sadness colouring his tone, and despite Emerson’s actions he thinks the sadness just a bit truthful, if only because Emerson’s son has lost a father.

He exits the lift as the doors slide open, a quiet goodbye sent to the other man before he makes his way down the corridor. He comes to the doors then and he lets his fingers brush against the small lump in his pocket, a careful pat to reassure his frantic mind before his knuckles knock against the door.

And it opens quickly, and he meets the quiet smile he sees with his own before stepping inside, just one last look behind himself.

“ Took your time,” the person says then, the door locking behind him quietly.

“I had to be careful,” he shrugs before handing over a small computer ship. “You think you can send it?” he asks.

“Yeah, Wells,” comes the shrug. “We don’t really have a choice,” and he trails off in thought.

And so Wells reaches out, squeezes the boy’s shoulder, a reassuring smile across his lips as their eyes meet.

“Thanks, Monty.”

It’s a long pause as Lexa holds her gaze, as her demand is thought through, and as her words are pondered. And Clarke is sure Lexa considers her options. And maybe Clarke isn’t so sure she made the right choice, maybe she made a mistake, maybe she made an error in judgement. But perhaps, as Lexa’s fingers still in their motions to reach her knife, as Lexa steps from her throne and as she crosses the space between them, she thinks she doesn’t care for the consequences. Not now. Not when being a pawn to a game played by others is all she has been for the last two years.

And so she steps forward, meets Lexa half way and levels her chin. And maybe for a moment she curses the realisation that Lexa stands just a breath taller, forcing her to look up into Lexa’s gaze. And she knows Lexa sees it too. If only by the twitching of an eye, by the small rising of an eyebrow and a quiet lifting of a lip.
“What if I kill you, Clarke? What if I take your life. Right now?” but as Clarke hears the words she doesn’t think them a threat, not fully.

“You need me,” she counters. “If you kill me Azgeda will revolt. You know that.”

And she pauses and she watches as Lexa considers her words.

“You will lose Skaikru support too,” she continues. “Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But in a year from now? In two? In ten? They won’t ever trust you without me. You need me to smooth things over between Skaikru and the Coalition.”

And she sees Lexa’s eyes roam her face, she sees the white of her warpaint reflected against the bronzed skin upon Lexa’s face.

“But most of all, Lexa?” Clarke pushes. “You need me. Right now,” and she smirks as she echoes Lexa’s own words. “You need me to destroy the Mountain. You need me to lead Azgeda and Skaikru.”

“So you would use Roan to gain support in Azgeda? To gain power?” Lexa says, her eyes ghosting across Clarke’s scars.

“I don’t care about that,” and she pauses, she thinks of how much she wishes to reveal, how much she wishes to share. “I don’t like being lied to. I don’t like being a pawn in someone else’s game.”

And Lexa’s eyes roll for just a moment, for just enough that Clarke can’t help but to feel a small tingling of frustration creep into her mind.

“I don’t care what vendetta Nia has against you. I don’t care what vendetta you have against her. All I want is Roan.”

“And if I don’t give you Roan? And if you tell Nia?” Lexa asks, but from her tone, from the way her eyes soften just a bit Clarke thinks that maybe Lexa sees her plan, sees her wish. Maybe.

“We can work together, Lexa. I’m offering you the chance to work with me. But it doesn’t really matter who I work with,” Clarke shrugs. “I tell Nia? That weakens you, that gives Nia leverage. That’s good for Azgeda. That’s good for my people and I can work with that. But if you give me Roan? That’s good for my people and for you,” Clarke says. “But I’d rather work with you, Lexa. I know where Nia stands. And I think you know where she stands too. And you say you’re different than her, you say you care for your people, for the Coalition…This is your chance to prove it to me,” and Clarke trails off, her words lingering between both of them for a long moment. “You aren’t stupid, Lexa,” she finishes quietly.

Clarke steps forward again, her eyes beseeching in the dark of Lexa’s tent as their bodies near. And so Clarke takes another steadying breath. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, Lexa.”

And she meets Lexa’s gaze for a long moment.

“And are you enemy or friend?” Lexa challenges quietly.

Clarke shrugs once, her gaze turning to the map and the model of the Mountain that rests atop Lexa’s war table.

“That’s for you to decide,” she finishes with a shrug, her eyes turning back to Lexa.
And so she watches as thoughts wage a quiet battle within the Commander’s mind. And she thinks she sees them linger and flash and sift in her eyes.

But Lexa looks up, her head tilts just a bit. Just enough that it falls into a shadow that lingers somewhere over her shoulder.

“You will have Prince Roan.”

The walk back to the war camp is a quiet moment and Clarke finds her thoughts moving quickly as she thinks over the conversation and the threats she had issued Lexa. And maybe she’s isn’t even really sure why she wants Roan. Perhaps she’s made an error. If only because she knows not what Roan is like. But she thinks it will at least be good to have an ally. Or at least someone who owes her his freedom.

And so a sigh leaves lips as she continues forward, her mind happy to wander for the short walk back to where Azgeda has made camp. And her feet take her forward, Torvun ever present by her side, his eyes careful in the still dark of the night as he watches her curiously.

She eyes Entani moving to the tent then, a messy bag slung over her shoulder and her hair a frayed mess but the healer waves at Clarke before ducking into the tent, sleep her clear wish.

It’s not long until Clarke ducks through as well, Torvun taking his usual place by the entrance, and so Clarke wipes away the face paint she had applied, the damp cloth being discarded into the pile by the table. Her eyes meet Entani’s then, the other woman already shrugging off her clothes before slipping into the furs.

“I had to speak to the Commander,” Clarke offers, a small smile finding its way onto her lips as Entani mimes a gag.

Clarke slips out of her own clothes as she eases her way into the bed, Entani happy to roll into her side as Ontari moves closer in her own sleep. And so Clarke lets sleep take hold as her breaths even out and as her mind settles for what remains of her night.

The following daybreak brings with it a gentle warmth that lingers around them and settles upon her shoulders and so Clarke groans for only a short moment before her eyes open to the wisps of daylight creeping in through the tent. And as she rises, as she casts her gaze around the tent she finds Entani already gone, her usual healer’s pack missing and so Clarke stifles a yawn as she stretches out for a moment.

Her hand brushes against Ontari then, and her eyes turn to find the woman waking slowly too, her hair a braided mess that fans out around the furs her head lies on.

And their eyes meet for only a moment before they share a smile. And it’s just a flash that lingers in Ontari’s eyes that Clarke sees, but she lets it linger in her mind. And so she smiles just once more, and it’s a happy thing, a content thing.
It’s not long before Clarke ducks out of the tent with Ontari, the sun shining against the ground in its blinding intensity for a moment before her hand comes to shade her gaze.

And she finds Echo staring coolly at Torvun, her eyes careful as she takes in his figure, as she eyes the way he stands between her and Clarke. But her eyes flit past him then and they hold Clarke’s own gaze for just a short moment.

“I wish to talk with you,” is all Echo says.

And so it’s a sigh that leaves her lips before she grumbles her assent, a quick nod sent to Ontari as she begins ducking back into the tent, Torvun’s gaze trailing after Echo suspiciously.

Clarke makes her way through the tent before coming to a stop by the side of the bed and so she turns, her eyes following the movements the spy takes. Echo pauses at the small table, her fingers trailing over the edge before she turns back to Clarke, her face falling into a shadow as she leans back against the table edge.

“You spoke with the Commander last night,” Echo begins, her words coming out measured and careful.

And so Clarke shrugs once, her eyes still keeping Echo’s gaze.

“Yeah.”

And Echo holds her gaze, she lets the silence linger for a long moment as she measures Clarke, as she takes her in and as she lets thoughts live behind her eyes.

“What did you discuss?” Echo questions then, her arms coming to fold in front of her.

And so Clarke stills her face, and she thinks back to the interactions she has had of Nia, of Echo. And she thinks back to when Nia had told her that she would be accompanying the warriors in the fight against the Mountain. She thinks back to the threat that she is sure had lingered in Nia’s words.

*And you will return to Azgeda.*

And she thinks of what Nia has reveals to her. And she thinks it not much, she thinks it little. She thinks it nothing.

And she thinks of what Echo has told her. She thinks of the things Echo has revealed of Nia, of Costia, of Nia’s plan. And she thinks it too much.

And so she lets her gaze narrow, she lets her hand relax against her side and she lets her fingers edge just a bit to the knife against her thigh.

“Who sent you?” Clarke asks carefully, her tone just a quiet whisper, her eyes gazing briefly towards the entrance where she is sure Torvun waits fretfully.

“Nia,” Echo says again, her eyes hardening in the light.

But Clarke thinks that a lie.
Or a half truth.

“I don’t believe you,” she says gently.

And so Echo’s hands come away, and one comes to rest against her hip, her fingers just a breath away from the hilt of her knife.

“And why would you not?” Echo says, and Clarke is sure her next few words will be a shifting of the scale that is her life and she thinks it will be a saving grace or a mistimed stab in the dark.

“You say Nia is cunning,” Clarke begins carefully. “That is true,” she shrugs for a moment, Echo’s eyes following the rising of her shoulder. “You say Nia sent you here,” and Clarke lets her voice turn up at the words, just a small hint of mistrust colouring her tone. “You say you are here to help in the fight against the Mountain.”

“Yes,” Echo replies coolly.

“You serve Azgeda,” Clarke continues, her eyes pointedly holding Echo’s gaze.

And Echo’s eyebrow raises for a moment in thought.

“Yes.”

And it’s a single word that leaves her lips. But as Clarke thinks them over, as she eyes the woman before her and as she recalls the exchanges they have shared, she thinks that perhaps Echo is not so dissimilar to herself.

And so Clarke says carefully. “I serve Azgeda as well,” and she lets her words linger on the statement.

And Echo once more lets the silence linger as she considers Clarke’s words. And perhaps from the silence, perhaps from the careful tilting of Echo’s head or the way her eyes shift slightly, Clarke thinks there is a more to what they discuss.

“I served Prince Roan during the forming of the Coalition,” Echo begins, her hand coming to rest against the knife at her hip.

And so Clarke finds her own fingers brushing against the hilt of her blade.

“I look forward to meeting Prince Roan,” and she takes a measured breath as Echo’s eyes follow her movements.

“And you expect to meet Prince Roan one day?” she questions.

“Yes,” Clarke answers.

The day is perhaps warmer than usual, and she thinks that summer must soon be upon these lands fully. And so she lets a sigh fall from her lips as she tugs at the furs around her shoulders and as she brings a space between her collar and her neck, the cool air biting into her exposed chest for a moment.
And as she casts her gaze around herself lazily she finds Ontari eyeing her for a long moment and so she smiles as their eyes meet, and she smirks and rolls her eyes as she sees Ontari glance lower briefly before her eyes snap back up to Clarke’s, a smile upon the other woman’s lips.

And Clarke thinks herself happy. She thinks herself content, if only because there is no awkward lingering moments between them both. But perhaps she lets a smile spread just a bit more freely across her lips at the memories of the night together. Only because they were interesting. And she thinks it good that she knows where Ontari and her stand now, and so she lets a quiet exhale leave her as she focuses back on the path her horse winds, the swaying of it a soothing rhythm to her thoughts.

Her eyes flick ahead then, her gaze falling on the steady trot of Lexa’s own horse, the swaying of her coat and the flowing of her braided hair a shining beacon in the late morning sun.

Much work still remains to be done at Ton DC, the missile having landed 3 days prior. And she lets a grimace fall across her lips at the recollection of the pyres that still burn dully, that still smoke and bring forth a sadness from within. And as her eyes continue to follow Lexa’s swaying form she can’t help but think that the other woman calculating, too easily able to hide away what thoughts and wants and wishes she must have. If only because… If only because what? And so Clarke shakes her head, a scowl falling across her lips at the direction in which her thoughts travel.

She casts her gaze away from Lexa then, her mind pushing to the trees that stand around them, the green moss a soft thing that blankets the trunks, and the bark and wood a calming tone of vibrant life.

She turns to Torvun briefly, his horse riding besides her and as she meets his eyes she can’t help but to think he eyes her carefully, she can’t help but to think he gazes upon her with a scrutiny that speaks of something more than a desire to protect from harm. And so she smiles gently, and he nods his head in return.

They stop for midday, the sun hanging high in the blue of the sky above their heads and so Clarke stretches for a moment as her feet touch the ground.

“We stop for only enough time to eat and feed our horses,” Lexa calls out, the many warriors fanning out quickly.

And so Clarke moves to the bag tied to her saddle, her mind turning to the cured reapers at Arkadia and she finds herself hoping that more have been cured, that more have been saved.

And she looks up as a shadow falls across her to find Torvun standing close, his eyes turning around them quickly.

“You play a dangerous game, Clarke,” he says then, his voice low as his eyes gaze steadily upon her.

She looks up at his words, surprise flitting across her face for only one beat of her heart before she schools her expression.

“I don’t know what you’re talking of,” she answers carefully, but she curses herself for failing to recall Torvun’s hearing.
“Do not lie,” he sighs before shrugging briefly. “I have good hearing,” he continues, his eyes careful in their reproach.

And so her fingers still in their motions and her body tenses for what she thinks will come next.

“Peace, Clarke,” Torvun says as her hand comes to rest against the knife on her thigh. “I will not harm you,” he says it quietly, his eyes shining as the sun falls across his face for a moment.

“Why?” she whispers it out, as her feet widen beneath her, eyes careful as she eyes the towering man.

And Torvun shrugs once.

“I am a Royal Guard. I serve the throne,” he says, his eyes careful as he takes in her stance. “And you have not betrayed the throne. Yet.”

And so Clarke stills in her movements, her eyes careful as she looks up at Torvun.

“What are you going to do?” she says, her eyes glancing behind him for a moment.

He gazes at her for a long moment then, his eyes thoughtful and probing.

“You wish for Prince Roan to be free,” he starts, “all Azgeda would wish it,” he continues. “Kwin Nia is cunning but she can be cruel. She does what she thinks is best for Azgeda,” and again he pauses for a long moment. “Kwin Nia wishes to use you in the fight against the Mountain to give Azgeda an advantage, but there are many things that can give Azgeda an advantage,” and he pauses, his eyes careful as he looks at her.

“What are you going to do?” Clarke says again.

“Nothing yet, Clarke,” Torvun replies. “I will wait. My orders are to protect you. To keep you alive. You play a dangerous game and you speak ill of Kwin Nia. But for now you do not betray the throne,” he pauses. “So I will continue to do as I have been told until I am instructed otherwise by a member of the royal family.”

And his words aren’t lost on Clarke.

“I have no intention of betraying the throne,” Clarke replies, her words coming out hushed as she glances around them once more.

“Many people do not intend to do things that they eventually find themselves doing,” Torvun replies cooly. “You would be wise to guard your actions.”

It still feels unusual and strange to walk the halls of what was once the Ark, the metal plating echoing their footsteps as they make their way to the med bay. Clarke follows close behind Lexa, Torvun ever present by her side, their shared conversation weighing down her thoughts as her feet take her forward. More healers have come this time too, a number from Azgeda, Trikru and the other clans, word of the reapers having been cured spreading quickly. And maybe Clarke thinks she feels the lingering looks some healers give her too, even some of the warriors that accompany them let their eyes linger upon her.
They arrive at the med bay, Ark guards standing outside the sliding doors who send a careful nod their way before Lexa steps inside, her eyes turning in a long arc as she takes in those that have been cured, and the injured Trikru and Azgeda that still remain.

“See to the injured,” Lexa says then, her voice carrying out to the healers behind her before she makes her way to Abby, the doctor looking up from where she inspects the Azgeda warrior who had lost her leg.

“Commander,” Abby greets then, a small nod of her head all she sends before she begins detailing the progress of the cured reapers.

And so Clarke moves to the injured Azgeda, her healer’s bag already being unslung from her shoulders as she goes to inspect the progress they have made.

She walks the perimeter of Arkadia’s walls, her shoulders just a small ache from the hours she spent hunched over patients and so she cranes her head back, rolls her shoulders and swings her arms out for a while as she lets her mind wander.

She comes to a small clearing then, a few logs spread around a campfire, similar to the one she had rested at when word of the missile had reached her and so she grimaces for only a moment before sitting against a log, her legs stretched out before her as her fingers come to loosen the furs around her collar. She feels Torvun’s gaze and presence too, his constant lingering never too far, his watchful eyes always a small comfort ever since Quint’s attack.

And she hear’s the call then, a quiet hooting that lingers for a quick moment and she knows what Torvun announces and so she doesn’t turn at the presence she feels closing with her and she doesn’t shift her gaze from where it lingers on the clouds that drift overhead.

“You have cured the reapers,” Lexa says from where she stands a short distance from Clarke.

And so she shrugs once, her eyes turning to the woman who stands away from her.

“It was a group effort,” she replies, her eyes squinting for a moment as the sun touches her gaze.

“The healers say you alone brought life back to the reaper,” Lexa counters, her eyebrow lifting pointedly. “The warriors who were there say the same,” she finishes.

And so Clarke shrugs again and she takes Lexa in, and she eyes the lack of the red sash and the lack of the large pauldron that usually sits atop her shoulder.

“What do we do now?” Clarke asks. “We just wait until the acid fog goes down?” and her mind turns to Wells, and she thinks they both will have many things to discuss once this war has ended.

“Yes, Clarke,” Lexa says from where she stands. “Now we wait. The reapers can be cured, the Mountain thinks us weakened. The Mountain thinks us leaderless,” Lexa finishes as she follows Clarke’s gaze across her figure.

“What if it fails?” Clarke muses quietly, her thoughts turning worried for only a moment.

“You should rest your mind, Clarke,” Lexa says then as she moves to stand in front of Clarke.
“Tiring yourself with questions out of your control is a waste of energy.”

Clarke snorts quietly in response, her eyes following Lexa’s movements.

“What’s it like?” she asks and she sees Lexa’s eyebrow rise in question. “Being able to not worry? To shut off whatever part of your brain that lets you feel?” and maybe she means for it to come out biting, maybe she means for it to come out cold and uncaring. But she thinks the words more quiet than intended, more muted, more soft. More caring.

Lexa pauses for a long moment then, her eyes careful as she studies Clarke.

“You could be a leader, Clarke,” and she looks away in thought for just a moment, a conversation warring in her mind that Clarke thinks she sees for just a moment as it lingers in Lexa’s eyes.

“You could be a leader your people look to, Clarke,” Lexa finishes.

And so Clarke thinks the words over, she thinks over who her people really are. She doesn’t realise she traces the scars along her cheek until she feels the smooth edges against her finger tips and so she stills her movements and she casts her gaze to the wall that sits not far from where she sits.

“I never asked for that,” she says it quietly, her mind turning to her life in space. “I’m just trying to keep everyone alive,” she finishes.

“There are many things we never ask for,” Lexa counters. “But there are all things we must do to survive,” and she shrugs her answer.

“Like not caring? Like recognising love is weakness?” Clarke challenges, but she knows it comes out just a small moment less mocking and with less bite than she had intended.

“Yes,” Lexa once more replies, her gaze shifting in the sunlight for a short while.

“Heda!” and their heads turn to find Octavia walking towards them, her gaze flicking only for a moment to Torvun who stands not far from Gustus, their own eyes moving from Lexa and Clarke back to Octavia as she approaches.

“Word comes from the Mountain,” Octavia finishes from across the distance.

“Well, just sent a message,” Raven begins from where she eyes the computer screen, her fingers moving over the keys quickly.

“Do you know what it says?” Clarke asks as her eyes move from the screen to Raven.

“Hold on.”

And Clarke looks up to see Abby standing close, her hands balled into fists by her sides as worry lives openly across her face. Lexa stands close too, Gustus by her side as Octavia hangs back by the door, her arms folded across her chest as she takes in the tense moment in the room the group of people find themselves in.

“It’s schematics,” Raven begins as the image on the screen flickers and changes. “Blueprints, a map” she finishes with a smile as she turns to face those gathered behind her.
“You are sure?” Lexa asks as her eyes focus on the blueprints.

“Yes,” Raven replies as the light of the screen reflects against her face.

“Good,” Lexa says before she turns to those present in the room. “We return to Ton DC,” she finishes.

“All we’re waiting on is the acid fog to be destroyed,” Clarke says to Ontari who rides besides her.

“Then the Mountain will fall,” Ontari smiles, a thrill running through her as Clarke is sure her thoughts turn violent.

“Yeah,” she laughs quietly.

“You are too eager, Ontari,” and Clarke turns at Entani’s words, the other healer rolling her eyes at Ontari’s scoff of annoyance.

“It is not my fault I am eager to be rid of the Mountain,” Ontari replies as she turns in her saddle to face Entani.

And so Clarke follows the back and forth of the two women, but as their conversation spirals she finds her thoughts turning to what she hopes will happen in the days to come and so a sigh leaves her lips and as she looks up she meets Torvun’s gaze as he eyes her carefully from where he rides.

It’s a warm night, the furs around her just a touch too warm for her body and so she rolls away from Entani, the other healer’s leg already hanging over the side of the bed in search of the cool of the night air. She finds herself against Ontari then, the sleeping woman’s breath brushing against her face, her hair fanning out messily on the pillow they share and so Clarke sighs quietly as she pulls the furs from her waist.

She loosens the collar of her sleep shirt then, the air breathing through it a moment nicer, and she welcomes the cool of the air that lingers against her skin, but she finds herself cursing Trikru lands and she finds herself missing the cool bite of Azgeda winds, and maybe she even wishes she had the carefully controlled climate that she lived in on the Ark, if only because days were never too hot.

And so a sigh leaves her lips once more and she resigns herself to a sleepless night.

But she stills at the careful breath she hears in the tent. And she listens for only a moment longer to confirm that another lingers near her and so her eyes roll again, thoughts turning to Echo who she thinks must be sitting in the chair and so she sits up, her eyes opening to the shadows of a tent and the night still much too dark for her eyes.

And it only takes her a moment to find the figure that lounges in the chair, the barely there glow of the moon shining dully upon a shoulder before Echo’s body fades back into the shadows.

“You get used to the heat.”
She hears the voice.

But it comes out deeper.

It comes out rougher, a gravel to it that sends a chill down her spine.

And she knows it isn’t Echo.
Chapter 18

You will have Prince Roan

She watches Clarke pause and blink a few short times at the acceptance of her demands. And maybe it’s just a little humorous, just a little funny, if only because the light dances through the shades of Clarke’s hair, if only by the way her lips worry and her eyes turn guarded as she contemplates the decisions they both make. And Lexa is sure Clarke juggles her words, juggles her expression and the way she moves through the tent and so she lets the moment linger between them, and she thinks it only a short few seconds, perhaps not even five, but still, she lets the time tick by slowly.

But Clarke finds her gaze once more, her eyes hardening in the candle light and the white of her warpaint reflecting against the furs across her shoulders. And maybe Lexa can be forgiven for noticing the dancing light that shimmers through the tent as it bends through Clarke’s hair. And so Clarke nods once, her teeth worrying her lip for only a moment before she smiles tentatively.

“We have a deal, Lexa,” and she takes a measured step forward, her hand coming out to hang between them both.

And so Lexa thinks her cheeks twitch for a moment as she flicks her gaze towards the outstretched limb before she meets it, her fingers curling around Clarke’s forearm. And it’s a quick shake, a firm grasp and then Clarke nods once more to herself before she turns and heads to the exit.

She watches Clarke move out the tent then, the blonde of her hair swaying with her movements as the light from a nearby candle shines against it. And as Lexa finds herself back in her throne, as she finds her fingers coming to twirl her knife between them she is perhaps just a moment surprised at the images that shift and turn and wend their way behind her eyes.

And so a small laugh escapes her lips as she realises Clarke has blackmailed her. A small mirth finds its way into her mind as she realises Clarke now plays the game of leaders and she finds her cheeks twitching a moment too much as she settles back in her throne, the blade between her fingers whistling as it sings through the cool of the night’s air. But maybe she doesn’t mind. Not so much anyway.

There’s a roughness to the words she hears, but as they sink in Ontari stirs for only a moment before she too sits up quickly, a knife held in her hands as her eyes search for the man who intrudes. Entani wakes too, her body tensing as she feels the new presence in their tent but as her eyes adjust to the dark and as she realises that Clarke and Ontari remain still she pauses in her motions and lets her eyes find the intruder.

The man stands then, his body moving quietly through the tent until he comes to stand by the entrance, his hand coming to pull the tent flap aside as he turns back to the women on the bed.

“You may both leave us,” he says as the moon’s light falls across his face.

And Ontari’s eyes widen when she sees the gentling of the moon as it shines upon his face and Clarke hears a gasp from Entani as her gaze falls onto the scars that begin on his forehead before curving towards his temple then coming to end across his cheeks.
“Prince Roan,” Entani whispers, her head turning to Clarke and Ontari then back to Roan as he stands by the entrance, his eyes flicking between the women.

And it takes him a moment longer before his head inclines once, his eyes hardening as they fall to Ontari, eyes still wide in shock, and Entani who gapes at the man before them. He clears his throat then, a gravel to it that reaches their ears and breaks them from the shock that they must be feeling and then both women are scampering out of the bed, hands grasping at furs before tugging them on, worried glances cast to Clarke before they murmur words of assent as they duck out the entrance.

Roan lets the flap fall shut then, the light quickly cutting out before he moves to the table. And it only takes him a moment but Clarke hears the scraping before a flame is lit, a candle illuminating the tent’s interior before Roan turns back to the chair. He settles into it with a quiet sigh, his fingers coming to grip the armrests lazily as he gazes at Clarke still seated on the bed.

“I have heard much about you,” he says, his voice carrying over the distance between them carefully.

And it’s an odd moment that Clarke finds herself in now as Roan lounges in the chair, the candle light burning gently besides him. And as her eyes ghost over him she isn’t entirely sure what she had expected. But he looks healthy, healthier than she had imagined a person would be after being kept prisoner. Her eyes trail over the scars that slash across his temples and the beard that rests across his face and she turns her gaze back to his eyes. And he continues to hold her own gaze, his features sharp, angled and cunning and she thinks him eagle-eyed, strong, proud and careful in his movements.

“Prince Roan,” she begins, perhaps now just a bit too uncertain in what she wishes to say.

And Roan inclines his head, his eyes hiding a mirth that she thinks flits across his face for a moment’s pause.

“You did not expect me here so soon?” he questions as his fingers ghost over the armrests of the chair. “You did not expect this…” he trails off, a hand coming to wave across his body as his lips smirk quietly. “Did you expect a shell of a man? Someone broken? Tortured?” he pushes quietly.

But as Clarke looks at him, as she takes in his clothes she thinks that perhaps she hadn’t really considered more than she had.

“No,” she answers with a tentative shrug. “I didn’t know what to expect,” she finishes.

“Here I am,” he says as he leans forward letting a shadow fall across his body. “What do you want?” and it comes out quiet with a roughness that wends its way through his words.

“I need your help,” and as the words leave Clarke’s mouth she thinks over the choices she is about to make, and she thinks over her actions that have led her to this moment, of the years she spent in service to Azgeda, to her people.

And so Roan lets the silence linger as he thinks over the words.

“And what is it that you think I can do for you?” he questions. “I am still a prisoner of the Commander despite being granted the honour of visiting you,” he says, just a little hint of derision colouring his tone.

Clarke lets her thoughts settle then and she thinks she even feels Roan’s eyes piercing her with his steady gaze. But maybe she thinks they want the same things. If only by his appearance, if only by his still lingering presence.
“I want the Mountain,” she begins quietly.

And Roan’s eyebrow raises in question, the candle light arcing over his brow.

“Not for Nia,” she continues carefully, and she doesn’t miss the way his eyes narrow for a fraction at the lack of her use of Kwin. “I want it for Azgeda,” and she leans forward, swinging her legs over the side of the bed as she comes to sit on it’s edge. “I want it for the Coalition,” she finishes carefully.

“Why?” he questions.

“I don’t trust Nia,” Clarke answers. “She would use it to benefit Azgeda alone,” she continues, her thoughts sifting through all she knows.

“Is that not best for our people,” Roan counters.

“Yes,” and Clarke trails off in thought. But as she holds his gaze she thinks Roan a pragmatic person, she thinks him careful in his actions and perhaps just a moment more open to change. “I don’t like being used,” Clarke says then. “Nia uses me to further her own goals. Lexa uses me to further her own goals too,” and she pauses once more. “I’m done being a pawn.”

“So you would use me?” Roan says, a small smile coming to lift the corner of his mouth.

“No,” and Clarke lifts her chin. “I need you,” she continues. “We can work together. Azgeda won’t fall in line without someone powerful. I’m not that person,” she says.

“But I am.”

“Yes,” Clarke answers. “You can control the Azgeda here. You can keep them in line and make sure Nia doesn’t do what she wants with the Mountain,” and Clarke lets a small moment’s urgency creep into her tone. “You know what Nia would do if the Mountain fell into her hands. Maybe Azgeda would have the power to defeat all the other clans. Or any that didn’t join with us. But it would kill thousands,” Clarke says. “I don’t want that, and I’m betting you don’t either.”

“And what makes you think I would be open to working with you? To helping the clans? To helping the Commander? Who imprisoned me?”

And so Clarke lets the words linger between them as she meets Roan’s gaze. And maybe it’s only a moment, maybe only a few short seconds but she lets her eyes take him in again.

He looks well. He looks certain in his actions, his fingers gently brushing against the armrest of the chair a careful motion that smooths over the weathered wood. And she takes in the clothes he wears, the dark fabric, the carefully lined fur of his collar that is less than that usually worn by Azgeda forces and she takes in the simple knot that ties his hair back from his face.

“You’ll work with me for one of two reasons,” Clarke says as her gaze snaps back to his.

“And they are?” he asks as a lip curves up slightly, a small breath of mirth lingering in his voice.

“It’s one of two reasons,” she repeats. “The first? You’ll work with me because Lexa treated you fairly. You’ll work with me because you know that Lexa understands that the sins of your mother aren’t your own sins. You will have seen the clans prosper. You would have seen them flourish under the Coalition. And yes, maybe the Coalition isn’t fair, maybe some clans feel forced to work hard to help others. But you would have seen the peace that has lingered, you would see that there’s the opportunity for things to get even better — given time,” and Clarke eyes him carefully before she
continues. “You can’t tell me that Nia in control of the clans would do the same. So you’ll work with me so that Nia can’t destroy that by taking control of the Mountain, because Nia controlling the Mountain isn’t what’s best for Azgeda.”

And so Roan inclines his head for a moment.

“Or,” Clarke says once more. “Or Lexa has treated you poorly. She has had you starved, has had you tortured, beaten. And she’s a cruel ruler, someone who dictates what others must do lest they fall victim to the Coalition and her might. Maybe you’ve seen Lexa be a brutal, violent ruler. And in that case? You’ll work with me. You’ll work with me to gain the power of the Mountain, to give Azgeda the chance to live without the shackles of the Coalition. You’ll work with me because you’d want revenge and you’d know that the Coalition isn’t what’s best for Azgeda,” Clarke finishes. “So which one is it?”

And so Roan leans back in the chair, and Clarke is sure he thinks over her words, she is sure he considers where her loyalties may lie. She even thinks he considers her.

“You’re smart,” he begins carefully. “Ambitious,” he shrugs for a moment. “Tell me,” he continues, “have you thought of killing my mother?”

And the question gives her pause, it halts her thoughts for a moment as she considers his words.

“I don’t want to rule Azgeda,” Clarke counters quietly, her eyes flicking to the tent entrance for just a moment.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Roan says.

“I don’t want to be a pawn in someone else’s game,” and she lets the truth of her words live freely, her eyes still holding Roan’s gaze.

And so he smirks for a moment, the light of the candle curving against his lip.

“You are smart not to answer that question, Clarke,” Roan says. “I’ll tell you why you won’t want to kill Nia,” he continues as he comes to stand, his feet carefully moving him forward. “If you kill her Azgeda will fall into chaos,” he begins, and as he nears her she finds her own body coming to stand in front of him. “Azgeda would fall into civil war,” Roan shrugs. “Many would disagree with your actions. Nia has ruled Azgeda well,” and his chin jerks towards the entrance of the tent. “Your friends would think you a traitor, they would think you in bed with Lexa.”

“I told you, I want what’s best for Azgeda,” Clarke says once more, her jaw clenching as her chin rises in challenge as he continues to near her. “Together we can be the change,” Clarke whispers. “I can’t do it alone. I need you.”

“You do not seek the throne? You do not wish for me to kill my mother and to take it for myself?” and now Roan comes to stand mere moments before her, his eyes hardening as he stares down at her.

“No,” Clarke answers.

And so Roan lets her answer linger between them. He lets the words settle within the small space between them and she thinks she even feels his chest rising and falling as his eyes study her and as his gaze probes her own.

“I will help you on one condition,” he says then. “You do not move on the throne. You do not try and remove my mother. If you do I will kill you. Because I want what’s best for Azgeda.”
Roan holds his hand out then and so she reaches her own out, grips his forearm and squeezes firmly.

“I want what’s best for my people too, Prince Roan,” she finishes quietly.

And so he smiles grimly, just a small thing as his eyes flit across her scars.

“There are guards outside. I must return to Lexa,” he says, a heaviness coming to rest atop his shoulders as the words leave his lips. “I am still a prisoner,” he finishes with a shrugging of his shoulders.

And so Clarke releases his arm, her eyes following his movements as he turns to the tent entrance but as he nears it a thought comes to her and so she furrows her brow in worry for only a short moment before calling out.

“Prince Roan?” and he pauses before looking over his shoulders. “Do you know someone called Echo?”

“Yes,” he says. “She served me well before I was taken prisoner.”

“She’s here, Nia sent her,” Clarke says, “Is she loyal to you?” she finishes.

And so Roan takes a moment to consider her words.

“Yes,” he answers simply, and by the way he stills in his movements Clarke thinks that she broaches on a sore topic, something not for her to know yet.

And so she accepts his answer, her thoughts turning to one more question that lingers in the back of her mind.

“How’d you become prisoner?” and she sees his eyes darken for just a short moment as a memory comes to live in the forefront of his mind.

“I delivered Lexa unfortunate news,” he shrugs before ducking out the tent.

The walk to Lexa’s tent is a quiet affair and Clarke can feel Ontari’s eyes drilling into her as they continue to pass the many tents that spread out through the war camp.

“How did you do it?” Ontari asks, her hand coming to grip Clarke by the elbow.

“it’s complicated,” Clarke replies as she comes to a stop, Torvun coming to rest by her side as Entani hangs back awkwardly.

“What have you done, Clarke?” Ontari says again as she eyes her carefully. “How is Prince Roan free?” she pushes.

Clarke worries her lip then, her eyes turning to Entani for a moment before coming to face Ontari once more.

“The Commander and I made a deal,” she begins carefully and Ontari’s eyebrow rises in question as her hands come to her hips.
“What deal?”

“Prince Roan will help with the Mountain,” Clarke begins carefully, and perhaps she can be forgiven for not revealing too much, perhaps she feels the words of warning Roan had said whisper in the back of her mind quietly.

“Peace, Ontari,” Torvun cuts in then, Ontari’s eyes flicking to his for a moment.

“You knew?” she questions and Clarke can feel the small moment of anger that Ontari lets seep into her words. “You knew Prince Roan was free?” she finishes as she stares up at Torvun. “Why did you not tell anyone?” Ontari adds as she turns to Clarke.

“I didn’t want to risk it,” she answers quietly. “Not yet, anyway,” and she pauses for a moment in thought. “What if I told Azgeda? What if I told you that Prince Roan was going to be freed, then it never happened?”

Ontari looks at her carefully then, her eyes narrowed for a moment as she thinks over Clarke’s words.

“See,” Clarke urges. “It would have caused chaos in the war camp, Ontari. You have to see that.”

Clarke casts her eyes around to Entani then, and she finds her eyeing them carefully, her gaze a curious light that shifts between the both of them.

“I had to be sure,” Clarke finishes as she turns back to Ontari.

“You made a deal?” Ontari questions, her eyes flicking between Clarke’s and Entani’s.

“Yes.”

“What does the Commander get from this?” she asks.

And so Clarke thinks over how much to reveal. And maybe half truths are best, maybe revealing too much too soon would be a mistake.

“He will help destroy the Mountain,” she says simply.

“What of Echo?” Ontari says again. “Is that why she was here?”

“I’m not sure,” Clarke answers, and her thoughts turn to the assassin then. “I don’t know,” Clarke finishes.

“Prince Roan will lead the warriors who attack the Mountain’s main entrance,” Torvun cuts in, his eyes staring firmly at Ontari. “While we attack from the rear with whatever forces decide to join us,” and he crosses his arms in front of him.

And his words must placate Ontari for now because she worries her lip for only a moment as her jaw clenches tightly.

“Ok,” she says, but Clarke is sure she feels the tension in Ontari’s words, she is sure she feels a frustration at the events that have occurred.

“Everything’s going to be fine, Ontari,” Clarke whispers to her with a smile as she begins walking towards Lexa’s tent.

And so they continue walking in a tense silence, Ontari lost in her thoughts as they wind their way
up the hill, the torches ever present and the heat ever annoying in its intensity. But as they take another bend Clarke turns to look at Entani who walks behind them casually, her head turning slowly as she takes in the Trikru warriors who linger close, the tents that spread out and the warriors that move about them.

“Why are you here?” Clarke asks then.

And Entani shrugs her shoulders broadly as her eyes meet Clarke’s gaze.

“Things are happening, Clarke,” Entani says. “I do not know how you freed Prince Roan but I will enjoy this war meeting I think,” she finishes with a smile.

And so Clarke rolls her eyes briefly, but she turns from Entani as a small burning guilt rises in the back of her mind, the missile an ever present shadow that lingers behind her.

Nearing Lexa’s tent is a bizarre thing, Clarke finds. As they approach she finds a small group of Trikru warriors standing guard, their hands on their weapons as they crowd by the entrance blocking Echo’s way as she stands before them, her eyes glaring at those before her. It takes Clarke a few more paces to recognise the darker fabric and the light furs but she recognises Roan who stands amidst them too, his hands clasped behind his back as he stands, his eyes moving lazily skyward as he traces the clouds overhead for a moment before coming to rest on Echo who gestures angrily at the Trikru in her way.

“What is Echo doing here?” Ontari asks, her eyes darting from Clarke to the group before them.

“I don’t know,” Clarke answers carefully as she approaches.

Roan sees her then and he smirks for a moment as their eyes meet and Echo turns briefly as she feels them approach, her eyes finding Clarke’s with a small smirk of her own before she turns her gaze to the others that approach.

And there’s a small shifting in the posture of the Trikru guards as the new Azgeda forces come to stand besides Echo, their numbers now nearing an equal footing.

“She’s with us,” Clarke says simply as she stares down the nearest Trikru, her eyes hardening as she sees his fingers tighten around his sword.

“We do not know who she is, Clarke Kom Azgeda,” the man says as he casts a gaze over the Azgeda in front of him before his eyes settle on Torvun.

“You will release Prince Roan now,” Ontari hisses as she steps forward, her hand coming to rest against her knife. “Or I wi—”

“Enough.” Clarke cuts in as she pushes forward, her arm coming to grip Ontari’s wrist before urging her back. “We’re here to work together,” she says, her eyes darting from face to face before her eyes settle once more on the curious smile that lingers across Roan’s lips.

“We have a war meeting to attend,” she continues with a gesture towards Lexa’s tent. “Everyone calm down,” and she holds the Trikru’s gaze as she takes a step forward again. “You will let us all through,” she challenges.
And she sees his eyes darken, she sees his jaw clench and she feels the shifting in bodies as they tense for a long moment. She moves her fingers to the knife then, and it’s slow, clear enough that the Trikru warrior can see her movements, can understand the threat that lingers in her motions.

And it’s a long moment’s silence that sits around them, the two sides glaring angrily at each other but Gustus emerges from the tent then, his eyes hardening as he sees the many warriors converged outside. He pushes through the Trikru, his eyes only briefly flicking to Roan before he comes to stand in front of Clarke.

“The Commander is waiting,” he calls out casting one last look at the Azgeda before ducking back inside.


There’s an audible shift that runs through the tent as the Azgeda enter the war tent, Roan entering first as Echo shadows his movements. And it takes Clarke only a moment for her eyes to adjust to the changing ambience but she finds a number of other clan’s warriors eyeing the Azgeda group as they make their way to the war table, their eyes narrowing as they recognise Roan and the larger group of Azgeda present.

“What is he doing here?” Jomm calls out, his voice a rough bark that creeps through the press of bodies.

“Prince Roan is here because I wish it,” Lexa answers sharply, her gaze snapping to Jomm’s from where she stands at the head of the table. “You will do well to not question my actions further Jomm,” she finishes with an inclining of her head.

Roan pushes through the throng of people then, Echo edging others too close away until a large space is cleared for the Azgeda to stand by the table.

“I am here,” Roan says gruffly as he casts his eyes in a wide arc around the table, his gaze falling onto Kane, Bellamy and Finn for only a moment before settling back on the other warriors. “To show Azgeda commitment to this fight,” he finishes.

“You question our commitment?” Jomm snarls out as he pushes forward, his fists coming to rest angrily against the table.

“I do no such thing,” Roan says as he meets the angry Lake clan warrior’s gaze. “I am here to fight because the Commander wishes it.”

“So you are her pet?” Jomm laughs, “not even free to do as you wish even in battle?” and he looks around him as his eyes shine in the candle light. “We all know you are still prisoner, Prince Roan,” he mocks.

“We are all here to work together,” Lexa snaps out once more, her eyes hardening as she stares down Jomm from across the table. “Prince Roan will do as I command. As shall you, Jomm. Or do you wish to continue to question my orders,” she finishes as her head tilts towards Gustus who stands by her side, his hand coming to rest firmly against the sword at his hip.

And so Jomm takes only a moment to glance between Roan and Lexa before he bows his head, a rough apology falling from his lips as he turns his gaze to the war table.
Lexa lets the silence linger for a moment longer before she turns to face Kane from where he stands near the Azgeda forces.

“I have a team of Trikru scouting the dam,” she begins, “the map we received will provide as with the knowledge of how to enter the Mountain and attack from within.”

“All we’re waiting for is the acid fog to come down, then we can attack,” Kane adds as he turns to the rest of the warriors present.

“And this will be soon?” another warrior asks, her clothing a dirty grey, dappled with a muddy yellow that shines dully.

“Our guy knows what he’s looking for,” Kane answers firmly, “so yes, it will be soon.”

And Clarke eyes Jomm grounding his teeth and so she pins him with a sharp glare.

“We wait,” she says to him and she holds his gaze as she leans forward. “We’ve already healed the reapers we captured and we will continue to do so,” and she turns to Indra who stands near Lexa, “and we’ll continue to care for the injured from the missile. We need everyone at their best.”

“Clarke is right,” Lexa adds. “We must be prepared to attack at a moment’s notice, but to be ill prepared would be a waste of this opportunity. So we will continue to train. We will continue to plan and when the time comes we will be ready,” she finishes.

The war meeting continues for most of the morning with details being drawn on which clans fighting styles would be most effective in an all out assault on the Mountain. And so it’s a happy sigh that leaves her lips when Lexa calls an end to the meeting. The other clans begin moving out then, grumbles falling from a few who feel spited in the rebuttals of their proposals.

“I take it back, Clarke,” Entani groans as she rolls her shoulders. “These war meetings are not interesting at all,” and she begins moving to the exit.

“Azgeda remain,” and Entani pauses halfway to the exit, her eyes widening as she turns to find Lexa already sitting in her throne.

Clarke takes one quick glance behind her as Entani moves back to the group before turning back to face Lexa. And as she feels the other’s come to rest next to her she finds a large number of Trikru warriors still lingering nearby, Gustus and Indra carefully standing besides Lexa.

“I expect Anya to return from the scouting mission soon,” Lexa begins as she looks to Roan and Clarke. “She will inform you of what she has found,” Lexa continues as she shifts her gaze to Ontari briefly before turning back to Clarke.

“Prince Roan,” Lexa continues, “will be leading the Azgeda forces that attack the Mountain with the rest of the armies,” and Lexa looks to Roan for a moment before he bows his head briefly in acceptance. “Clarke, you will be leading the Azgeda that attack the Mountain from behind. Trikru will accompany you,” Lexa finishes coolly as her eyes move to Echo’s, her brow furrowing for a moment as she takes in the Azgeda assassin, her eyes moving across the scarless face.

Lexus’s eyes move to Ontari and Entani then, both women shifting slightly as they glare at the Trikru
guards that watch them carefully. Clarke hears the approaching feet from outside though, and she sees Lexa’s eyes shift to the entrance for a moment as guards closest to the sound shift their posture too.

Clarke hears a guard from outside the tent call out before ducking her head through the entrance.

“Heda, Anya has returned.”

“Send her in,” Lexa answers with a lifting of a hand.

Clarke turns to the entrance to find Anya, scowl firmly in place stride through the entrance, blood smeared across the front of her clothing, Octavia and Lincoln close behind her, their own clothing still bloodied.

“We were attacked by reapers,” Anya says simply at the eyebrow Lexa raises at the sight of the blood as she stalks past the Azgeda towards her. “The map is accurate,” Anya finishes as she comes to a stop besides Lexa before she turns to face the Azgeda in front of them. “But the tunnels are infested with Reapers.”

And she turns, her arms coming to cross over her chest as Lincoln and Octavia join the guards that stand by the edges of the tent. Anya casts her gaze over the Azgeda then, her lips turning into a smirk as she meets Ontari’s gaze before shifting to Entani and Clarke, then to Torvun who stands behind Clarke, his body casting a heavy shadow across the furs on the floor. Anya eyes Roan for only a moment, before her gaze finally shifts to Echo.

And it’s only a short moment that their gazes meet. But Clarke thinks it an age as she watches the expressions that flash across Anya’s face.

She sees a confusion spread over her, she sees her eyes widen for just a moment before they narrow, her eyes dropping down to Echo’s feet for a moment before sliding up her body as Anya takes in the woman before her. Clarke sees Anya’s eyes snap back to Echo’s face and she sees her mouth open slightly as her lips turn up in anger, her teeth baring into a furious snarl.

And it’s only a few short seconds that follow but Clarke thinks she feels the air around her snap.

Anya’s hands move quickly, they unfold from across her chest as her left hand drops to a knife on her hip, her other coming to grip her sword. Echo sees the movements and Clarke feels the assassin move quickly, her own hand coming to grip her knife as her body moves to stand in front of Roan. The Trikru guards sense the shifting in the air too, their bodies moving towards the Azgeda, those closest to Lexa already moving to stand between her and the threat they sense. Ontari’s eyes flash to the guards closest to her as she moves closer to Clarke, her fingers already drawing her knife, Entani’s own body coming to rest behind them as she turns to guard their back and Torvun moves in closer too, his knife already drawn as he moves to step in front of Clarke.

Clarke thinks she senses Roan’s eyes flick from Echo to Anya for only a short moment before recognition dawns on his face, his lips parting in surprise.

And Anya lunges, her lips turning up furiously as she throws her knife at Echo, her sword already being drawn.

And as Echo slashes the knife from the air, and as Anya collides with her and as the Trikru guards move forward, the last thing Clarke hears before Trikru and Azgeda crash together is Anya’s raged voice carrying over the noise of metal crashing against metal.

“I will kill you for what you did.”
“How long’s it going to take?” he says as he sends his eyes down the hallway, the flickering of the light casting their shadows across the floor in a sickly haze.

“A minute,” Monty replies quietly, his fingers still tapping at the keyboard.

Wells looks at Monty then, his eyes squinting in the dark, before he turns back to the door.

“You sure it’s in here?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Monty shrugs, a furrow finding its way across his brows. “I think,” he finishes.

“And you think we can take it out?” he says.

And Monty takes a moment to think over his words as he continues typing before looking up at Wells.

“Murphy didn’t get locked up again just for us to fail,” he whispers. “It has to work.”

“Yeah,” and it comes quietly as Wells runs a finger over the welding torch. And, if he’s honest with himself, if he’s truthful. If what he’s seen is real. And it has to be, then he thinks it must be worth the risks. “We’ll get it done,” he finishes, a determined grimace coming to settle across his lips.

“I’ve got it,” Monty whispers as a click echoes across the walls.

“How long do we have?” Wells asks as he steps into the room while Monty quickly disconnects the keyboard and stashes it into the bag slung over his shoulder.

“We’ve got five minutes before the alarms go off,” Monty whispers, “… if I didn’t mess up.”

And so Wells nods as he comes face to face with the large room they find themselves in. It stretches out before him, vats lining one side that hum and whirr and fill the space with the quiet buzzing of machinery that breathes along quietly. Wells hears the sound of the door sliding shut as Monty comes to stand by his side.

“We’ve got this,” Wells says as their eyes meet.

It’s slow.

That’s the first thing Clarke notices.

She sees Echo slash the knife from the air, her own blade glinting in the candle light that flickers throughout the tent. Echo crouches low, her body snaking forward as her hand comes to slam down on Anya’s arm as the other woman moves to draw her sword. And it’s only a small second’s interruption, but it’s enough for Echo to drop to her knees under Anya and for Anya to roll over her.

At the same time she hears Ontari hiss out a curse as her arm punches out and strikes a Trikru guard that approaches, her still bandaged shoulder bringing pain across her face. Entani backs into Clarke
too, a shout of warning that other Trikru move to circle them and Torvun moves forward, his arms spreading as he moves to stand before Clarke, his knife whipping out quickly.

Indra’s eyes flash from Anya’s outburst to Echo before snapping to Lexa, all within the blink of an eye before her hand moves to her sword, orders barking as other Trikru guards begin moving forward. Octavia and Lincoln both stare wide eyed for a moment at Lexa as she begins rising from her throne, her hand coming to rest against her knife as Gustus reaches out to grip her arm, already beginning to pull her behind his bulk.

All these moments flash past Clarke in the time it takes her to turn her head once from Echo and Anya then back to Lexa and she thinks their eyes meet in the moment just before Gustus blocks her view.

Clarke thinks she sees surprise flash across Lexa’s eyes, she thinks she sees them widen for just a moment as Lexa’s gaze settles upon Echo who now comes to crouch facing Anya as the Trikru warrior spins around. But Clarke thinks she sees Lexa break.

And maybe it’s her imagination, maybe it’s the shock of Anya’s outburst or the dancing of the flames throughout the tent but Clarke thinks Lexa’s eyes shine for just a moment as a realisation dawns upon her face. And if she looks close enough perhaps she sees a pain find its way across Lexa’s eyes, a moment’s sadness that lives within her gaze and a memory settle atop her shoulders.

And then Clarke’s pushed back, Torvun’s body blocking her view as he stands in front of her, threats being shouted out at the approaching Trikru. Ontari also begins shouting out, Entani replying with who moves behind them. Clarke’s hand moves to her own knife, her fingers curling around the handle as her eyes flick to Echo and Anya as they eye each other for only a moment. And she sees Roan too, his eyes darting around him as his hands come to hover before him as he settles into a careful stance. Clarke’s knife whips out then, the blade whistling through the air as she brings it befo—

**Enough!**

The word carries through the tent. And it’s fierce. It’s deep and rich. It’s pained and tired. It comes with a timbre to it that breaks through the noise and the rustling of the air that fills the tent.

And the Trikru pause. Their eyes turning back to the voice. And Clarke follows the voice too, and her eyes settle on Lexa who stands upright, her eyes burning in the flickering of the orange of the candle light. Gustus stands by her side, his sword drawn as he stares down the Azgeda force before him.

“Enough,” Lexa says it again, her eyes snapping to the Trikru guards that remain transfixed. She moves forward, her feet a measured pace that takes her to where Anya and Echo remain locked in a furious tangle of limbs and teeth and braided hair and cold metal.

“Stand down, Anya,” Lexa says it as her eyes snap to Anya’s, her fingers gripping the knife on her hip before her eyes turn to Echo once before flicking to Roan who still stands settled in a defensive crouch.

Lexa turns to face Torvun before her eyes turn to the other three Azgeda women. And it’s only a moment where their eyes meet but Clarke thinks the pain she saw just moments past no longer lives freely, or perhaps, just maybe she imagined the pain. If only because all that remains is a cold, detached fury that settles around Lexa.

“The sins of the clans were abolished when the Coalition was formed,” and Lexa’s voice echoes.
throughout the tent, her gaze snapping to the Trikru guard Ontari had struck. “An unprovoked attack on one from another clan is punishable,” she continues as her eyes snap back to Anya’s. “You will be punished, Anya,” and the words come impassive.

Clarke turns briefly to face Anya then, the Trikru woman’s gaze cast downwards as she seethes quietly where she stands away from Echo. And as Anya hears the words Clarke thinks she sees just a small nod of her head as she accepts what will happen.

Lexa stalks forward, her coat undulating behind her as she moves through the tent. She comes to a stop before Echo. And it’s a long pause, and as their eyes meet and as their gazes hold Clarke thinks she feels a conversation flow between them, and she thinks it unspoken, she thinks it emotionless, she thinks it something personal and bittersweet. She sees Echo blink a few short moments before looking away, her body turning from Lexa just a bit, but enough to carry a message that Lexa must read because the Commander nods once, her eyes snapping to Roan as she levels her chin his way.

“She is no longer welcome in this tent,” and Clarke hears the coldness of Lexa’s words.

And she sees Roan cast his own eyes downwards as he nods once before relaxing his stance, his hand gripping Echo around the upper arm as he begins pulling her back. Lexa turns to Torvun then, her eyes holding his as she comes to face him.

“You will leave now,” is all Lexa says before turning to Ontari with a lifting of her chin.

And Clarke thinks she feels Ontari begin to stir, she thinks she feels Ontari’s body quiver in a silent rage as she holds the Commander’s eyes. But she remains silent and as Clarke reaches out with a hand and as she places it reassuringly upon Ontari’s shoulder Lexa follows the motion. And perhaps it isn’t so overt, isn’t so noticeable. But Clarke thinks she feels it, she thinks she sense the way Lexa’s eyes follow the gesture and the way Ontari relaxes into it.

But Lexa doesn’t linger, she casts just one quick snap of her eyes towards the exit of the tent before she turns, already moving to her throne. The Azgeda understand her message though, and so they begin to turn away carefully, their motions measured and careful as the Trikru guards watch. And as they reach the entrance Clarke looks back once at Lexa who follows them with her own gaze from where she sits, and maybe she thinks the Commander looks back impassively, detached.

A heavy sigh leaves her lips as she settles back down into her throne as her eyes follow the retreating figures of the Azgeda, the guards still in the tent following their motions carefully, hands still upon swords. Clarke looks back then, their eyes meeting for a short moment and perhaps its the memories that now stir within her, maybe it’s the memories that now surface, and maybe if she’s truthful, she thinks the memories feel too fresh, too raw. But perhaps she feels the tightening of her chest as the blue of Clarke’s eyes shines gently in the candle light. But she thinks it over before it even began, if only because Clarke turns, her eyes lingering for only a moment before she recedes from her view, the tent flap swishing shut behind her.

She turns her gaze towards the guards that line the edges of her tent then, her eyes falling upon Octavia and Lincoln who stand close to Anya, their eyes uncertain as their feet dance awkwardly where they stand, a desperate shuffle to their feet as the silence stretches and builds and tightens within the tent.
“Leave us, warriors,” Lexa calls out as she raises her fingers from where her hand rests upon the armrest of her throne.

The warriors murmur a soft *Heda* to her as they bow their heads before moving to the exit until all who remain are Anya, Octavia and Lincoln, still bloodied from the scouting of the tunnels and Gustus and Indra, ever present by her side.

“Anya,” Lexa begins as she turns her gaze to the older woman whose eyes remain cast downwards as she stands silently seething, her memories coming to reside in the forefront of her mind.

But Lexa lets her voice linger in the silence until the woman looks up, her eyes coming to rest painfully upon Lexa’s as her fingers clench tightly around the knife at her hip.

And it’s just a moment’s silence, but Lexa sees the break, sees the crumbling of Anya’s rage.

“I am sorry, Heda,” Anya whispers, her voice coming pained and broken.

It takes Lexa a long moment to find her voice, to settle her thoughts, but she swallows painfully before continuing.

“Tristan will command your warriors now,” Lexa begins and she sees Anya’s jaw clench painfully as she bites back her words. “Until you will learn to control your actions, Anya,” Lexa says once more. “You will remain in this war camp and you will aid Gustus in preparing those who are here,” Lexa finishes.

Anya bows her head then as her back straightens. And Lexa lets her gaze linger on her for a moment longer before turning to address Octavia and Lincoln.

“The tunnels,” she prompts with a raising of her eyebrow.

“We found the entrance,” Octavia begins, her eyes looking to Anya for only a moment. “We didn’t approach it because we weren’t sure if we’d be seen, but we saw it,” she finishes.

“The reapers live in the tunnels, Heda,” Lincoln adds. “There were many of them.”

“And we think the tunnels connect this entrance directly to the dam,” Octavia say again.

“Good,” Lexa says after a moment’s pause, her fingers coming to tap gently against the wood of her throne. “How many do you think would be able to move through the tunnels without being detected?”

Octavia pauses for a moment in thought as she looks upwards, her eyes shifting with her thoughts.

“Perhaps fifty,” Octavia answers as she looks to Lincoln.

“Or more, Heda,” Lincoln adds, “if they were well trained in stealth, if they could move quickly maybe almost a hundred.”

“Anya?” Lexa asks as her gaze turns to the other woman who remains silent.

“They are correct, Heda,” she answers. “If the army can hold the Mountain’s attention then perhaps a hundred well trained warriors may be able to move through the tunnels, but if they were discovered the fighting would be hard with those numbers in such close proximity,” and Anya pauses as she thinks over the problem for a moment. “I would not advise more than fifty. Too many and we risk losing the element of surprise. But too few and we will not be able to attack effectively once inside.”
And so Lexa thinks over the words she has heard. But she thinks with Skaikru on their side the numbers will not matter once inside the Mountain, not with the tech they bring to the war they fight.

And so her eyes flick up to Octavia and Lincoln before turning to Indra who remains ever quiet by her side.

“Leave us,” she says and so she meets Indra’s nod with her own before turning to see Octavia and Lincoln bowing their heads before turning to exit the tent.

The silence falls upon them once more as Anya comes to stand before Lexa.

“The unmarked Azgeda, she was the one?” Lexa asks quietly as her gaze finds Anya’s.

And Anya takes a moment to think, a moment to collect her thoughts and to control her breathing.

“Y—” and the word dies in Anya’s throat as she looks away, as she closes her eyes tightly and clenches her jaw painfully. “Yes,” she forces out in a broken breath.

“I absolved the wrongs of all clans, Anya,” Lexa says quietly, her finger nail coming to pick at the worn wood of her throne. “You must control yourself better. As you taught me,” Lexa finishes, but it doesn’t come out harsh, and perhaps it’s sad, perhaps it’s gentle, comforting, maybe an acceptance. Or a sadness. Lexa isn’t quite so sure anymore.

“How?” Anya asks as she looks back at Lexa. “How can you allow her to still live?”

And so Lexa lets the words linger within the tent, and she turns briefly to find Gustus standing quietly aside, his chest a quiet rumble to the memories that she is sure still linger within his own mind.

“The same way I allowed Nia and Azgeda into the Coalition without retaliation,” Lexa answers eventually. “We must recognise that love is weakness,” she adds, but as the words filter through her lips, as they sour her breath and poison the air between both women she thinks that maybe she wishes they weren’t true. And isn’t that why she repeats them now?

“It was my fault, Lexa,” Anya whispers it as her eyes hold Lexa’s gaze. “You should not forgive me so easily,” she finishes.

“We were all victims of Nia’s cruelty,” Lexa answers, her own words coming out a gentle waver that drifts towards her former mentor.

And again the silence lingers in the tent as the three occupants lose themselves to their thoughts for a short while, but Lexa finds her gaze drawn towards the model of the Mountain that sits atop her war table.

“After the fall of the Mountain Azgeda will be different,” she says aloud. “Clarke makes moves against Nia, even as we speak,” she continues as her thoughts turn to the blonde.

“You would work with Clarke?” Anya questions.

“She is special,” Lexa says. “I do not know her history with Nia, but I believe her when she says she wants Azgeda and the Coalition to exist together peacefully. That is why Roan is here. To help control Azgeda in this fight.”

And she pauses as Anya thinks over her words.
“She wishes to use the Mountain?” Anya says after a moment. “For the Coalition?”

“Yes,” and Lexa thinks ahead for a moment as she considers the actions and events she is sure will unfold in the days to come. “I believe she will try and control it peacefully. With the help of Skaikru and my support, and I believe she wishes for Roan to return to Azgeda. As a sign of good faith. But as a way for her to ensure Nia does not move to take control,” Lexa says. “Roan would promote Coalition values within Azgeda.”

“You think he will do so?” Gustus asks then.

“Clarke is persuasive,” Lexa shrugs, and maybe she doesn’t recognise the small smile that lingers within her eyes. And maybe she doesn’t notice the way Anya’s eyes narrow as she gazes upon her.

But Gustus grunts at her words, his arms coming to fold across his chest as a hand comes to scratch through his beard.

“I will watch her, Heda,” Gustus says. “I do not trust her still.”

“You do not trust anyone, Gustus,” Lexa answers as she leans towards him, her hand coming to rest against his forearm for a moment.

It’s not long until they make their way back to the Azgeda camp, Roan’s presence having quickly spread in the last few days resulting in a number of awed Azgeda warriors greeting him, heads bowed and murmured words coming from stunned warriors. And as they make their way through the camp Clarke finds a larger tent in the centre of it being erected, a mishmash of colours, leathers all greys and browns and whites that are tied together. And so Roan is led away, a number of warriors taking it upon themselves to become his guard as they spread out around him, but as they retreat and as Echo stays close by his side Clarke thinks she feels the eyes of a number of Azgeda peering at her too, and as she casts her gaze around, as she meets the inquisitive looks of those that look upon her she thinks their heads bow slightly too, she thinks she hears the words they whisper and the way they shift their posture just a bit when she passes. And maybe she ignores it. Maybe she tries to argue that their reactions are merely those of politeness.

But perhaps she’s lying to herself.

And so, as Ontari storms into their tent, her injured arm held close to her side as she kicks off her boots, Clarke herself ducks through and she finds an exhale leaving her lips as the eyes that follow her are cut off with a closing of the tent’s entrance.

“What is going on?” Ontari says as she rounds on her, a hand on her hip as Entani ducks through the tent.

Clarke sighs then, a hand coming to rub at the bridge of her nose for a moment as she shrugs off her furs before sitting in the chair by the table.

“It’s complicated,” she begins as Entani lounges back on the bed, her fingers tugging at her braids.

“Explain,” Ontari says, her eyes staring pointedly at Clarke.

And so Clarke takes a moment to think of her words, and as she looks away for a short while she
thinks over how much to reveal once more.

“T’m taking the Mountain for Azgeda,” she says eventually, and as she turns back to Ontari she holds her gaze, her own steady as the half truth sits comfortably around her. “T’m taking the Mountain for Azgeda. To help us,” she continues. “That is why Prince Roan is here.”

And as the words leave her mouth Entani sits up from the bed, her eyes darting to the entrance of the tent briefly.

“You would use it to attack the Coalition?” Entani whispers.

“No,” Clarke answers carefully, her eyes turning only briefly to the other healer before finding Ontari’s gaze again.

“What are you playing at, Clarke?” Ontari says, and the question comes quietly, it comes carefully.

“The Mountain will benefit us,” she answers as Ontari looks at her with a small lingering doubt, and so Clarke sighs again before continuing. “Look at it this way. Azgeda is treated unfairly, right?” and she looks between both women in front of her and she waits until they both nod in agreement. “We trade with the other clans. And some provide us things that are useful. Others don’t.”

“I do not see how controlling the Mountain is beneficial other than taking its power and destroying the lesser clans,” Ontari replies.

“It’ll make it easier for us to create things. If we have the Mountain then our own supplies won’t be so stretched. We won’t have to work as hard,” Clarke answers.

“I still do not understand why the Commander has freed Prince Roan,” Ontari again says.

Clarke takes another steadying breath then, her mind turning quickly as thoughts are considered and dismissed.

“I threatened her,” she begins after a moment, and Entani sits up fully from the bed, her fingers halfway through a messy braid.

“What?” and Ontari lets out a quiet gasp, her eyes narrowing carefully as she stares at Clarke from where she stands before her.

“I told her to give us Prince Roan or Azgeda would leave,” Clarke continues as she looks up at Ontari. “She needs us. She needs me, specifically. Without me she loses the certainty of Skaikru. And we need them to get into the Mountain. So if Azgeda leaves then the Mountain doesn’t fall.”

“But why would she even agre—”

“It makes sense, Ontari,” and Clarke’s eyes turn to Entani as she cuts off Ontari mid sentence. “The Commander must agree to free Prince Roan, she would not give up such an advantage. And she can not kill Clarke. Because Azgeda would revolt,” Entani finishes as she turns to Clarke. “But why did you even consider threatening the Commander?”

And so Clarke bites her lip for another moment in thought, her gaze turning to the furs under her feet as she thinks over Entani’s question. And she knows she can’t reveal the whole truth. She thinks Ontari would rage, she thinks the Coalition might even crumble if word were to spread.

And so Clarke settles for a half truth.
“I told her I didn’t like her using me. I told her that she gives me what I want, she stops making Azgeda do everything or we leave,” she finishes as she holds Ontari’s gaze. “Trikru have shown us nothing but contempt,” Clarke begins again, “they abandoned us when we first hunted reapers. They look at us like we are scum. And Anya attacks us just now,” and she takes a steadying breath, her eyes beseeching as Ontari takes in the words she says. “Azgeda is finished being a pawn.”

And so Ontari purses her lips for a moment as she considers the arguments Clarke has told her, the reasons for her actions.

“Ok,” she says after a moment.

And so Clarke smiles gently, a small relief flooding her that for now Entani agrees with her and that Ontari seems placated.

“Let me look at your shoulder,” Clarke says then as she rises from the chair, her hand lifting towards Ontari’s shoulder.

Her eyes follow the arrow as it whistles through the air, and she traces the way it twists and spins and hangs for a moment as the air brushes against it before it strikes the target, a low thump singing through the trees. And so she rises, her eyes glancing around her as she slings her bow, her feet already beginning to take her towards the deer that now lies in the clearing.

Lincoln falls into step besides her, his eyes careful as he gazes out into the trees, Torvun close behind her as he shadows her movements.

“Why’d Anya attack Echo,” Clarke asks as she reaches the deer, a roll of rope unwinding from her hip as she leans down.

“I do not know,” Lincoln shrugs as he glances behind him, Octavia and the other members of their hunting party spreading out in the clearing.

“Is she always so aggressive?” Clarke says as she begins binding the deer’s hind legs.

“Yes,” and Lincoln scratches his scalp for a moment in thought as he ties off a knot. “Tristan, another Trikru general, is now in command of the warriors who scout this area,” he continues with a grimace.

“I’m surprised,” and Clarke thinks back to Azgeda and Nia for a moment. “In Azgeda she’d be punished further if she attacked someone like that.

“Perhaps,” and Lincoln pauses again as he passes a wooden pole between the deers bound feet. “But she is the Commander’s former First,” and he shrugs once, “someone of her position losing command is more punishment than being beaten or imprisoned,” he finishes. “It shows others that she can not even lead.”

“Oh,” and Clarke winces briefly as she lifts her end of the pole onto her shoulders before rising with Lincoln’s movements. “Azgeda’s harsher,” she finishes lamely, her eyes flicking to Torvun for a moment as he grunts quietly, his eyes following their movements smoothly.
The walk back to the camp passes slowly, their ears ever tuned to the slight rustling of the trees and the wind that whispers past the trunks of the grand trees that spread out around them. The Trikru not with prey spread out too, their bows drawn halfway as they peer around the small hunting party, ever watchful of reapers that may attack. The Azgeda in turn stay close, their eyes ever careful of the Trikru and the surrounding forest. But Octavia moves towards them then, ignoring the small murmuring of the Azgeda as they part for her.

“We’re going into the tunnels with you,” Octavia begins quietly, her voice low as not to spread too far beyond the hunting party. “Lincoln and I, other Trikru, too,” she finishes, her fingers brushing against the handle of her knife.

“I’m not surprised,” Clarke answers. “I’m assuming you’re going because you’re Trikru’s version of me? Able to mesh with the Skaikru and Trikru?” she muses, her gaze turning to Octavia as she takes in the younger woman.

“Yeah,” Octavia shrugs. “I guess so,” and Octavia lets the silence linger then, her thoughts happy to take a hold within her mind as they continue forward, the sun an ever constant presence that heats Clarke’s shoulders too far for her comfort.

Octavia breaks the silence after a while again, her eyes peering cautiously at Clarke from where she walks.

“You aren’t so bad, Clarke,” she says with a small smile. “At least for Azgeda,” and Clarke smiles at the joke Octavia tries to say.

“We aren’t so different,” she answers with a shrug, her free hand waving up and down both their bodies.

“Yeah,” and Octavia pauses again in thought. “My friends call me O,” she finishes, the corner of her mouth lifting sheepishly.

And so Clarke meets it with her own small smile. And as their eyes meet she thinks what she does is worth it. She thinks what she wishes to use the Mountain for is worth it.

“Nice to meet you, O.”

They rest for midday, the sun hanging far too high in the blue above for Clarke’s comfort and so she grumbles quietly as Torvun comes to rest besides her, his frame casting a welcomed shadow upon her.

“They caught another deer,” he says as he pulls his knife free, a whetstone already in his other hand.

“That’s three now,” Clarke sighs as she brings a waterskin to her lips.

“Perhaps the reapers being captured and cured leaves more deer alive,” Torvun suggests after a moment, the gentle humming of the sharpening of his blade swimming around them.
“Yeah, maybe,” Clarke muses as she stretches her legs out.

And so she turns her gaze out to the Trikru that sit before her, their own hushed conversations barely carrying over the small distance between them and the Azgeda. But she turns back to Torvun, her eyes following the knife as it runs the length of the whetstone.

And she isn’t so sure how long she follows his motions, she isn’t so sure how long she lets her mind wander, but she finds herself thinking of Torvun, thinking of when she first met him at the Capital, of what Nia had said to her and of Torvun’s own instructions.

She doesn’t realise Torvun watches her too, and she doesn’t realise his knife stills in its motions until a finger pokes her firmly in the shoulder, his eyes peering at her and his lips turned up slightly through his beard.

“You think of something,” he says as he glances around them at the few Azgeda around, their own conversations occupying their attention.

“Yeah,” Clarke answers carefully, her eyes squinting up at him through the sun shining upon his head.

“You wonder where my loyalties lie, do you not, Clarke?” and so she takes the time to consider his words.

“You’re loyal to Azgeda,” she begins carefully, her voice dropping to a low breath. “You’re loyal to the royal family,” and her eyebrow raises in question.

Torvun hums an affirmative, a hand coming to swipe away a bead of sweat that trickles over his head.

“Kwin Nia does what she thinks is best for Azgeda,” he says, his eyes thoughtful as words come to him carefully. “But she can be cruel, and she is suspicious,” he says.

“Yeah,” and Clarke thinks she knew that much.

“What you plan doesn’t betray the throne,” Torvun replies. “Perhaps Prince Roan will be good for Azgeda,” he says.

“Why?”

And Torvun eyes her for a moment in thought.

“Why?” he parrots her question.

“Why do you even let me speak so openly? Why do you not say something to Kwin Nia, to Echo?”

And Torvun scratches a finger through his beard as he looks at her, his eyes moving across her face steadily.

“Azgeda prospered when I was a child, long before Kwin Nia,” he says. “Azgeda has prospered under Kwin Nia, and Azgeda has prospered under the Coalition,” and he pauses for a moment’s thought. “And Azgeda will continue to prosper in the Coalition if things do not change drastically, despite how unfair it may seem to others.”

“So you’d back Prince Roan? You back my plan?” Clarke asks.

“I am a royal guard, Clarke,” Torvun answers with a small shrug. “Guards do not like unknowns.
We watch and we follow patterns. We must always be ready in case of attack or a surprise or a changing in a pattern because that may suggest that an attempt on who we guard may be made.”

He pauses for Clarke to take in his words before continuing.

“We would prefer to disarm any who approach us, any who we think is a threat, or any who we know to be eager to violence. But if we cannot? If we cannot disarm those who approach us, if we cannot be certain of their future actions? Then we would ensure that a weapon is not within reach for them to take, for them to use,” and as he trails off for a moment Clarke recognises the words he doesn’t voice aloud.

“So,” he says once more. “It is true that Kwin Nia can be violent. It is true that Kwin Nia would be dangerous. And I think that the Mountain under her control would introduce an unknown,” he scratches his cheek for a moment. “I do not like unknowns,” he finishes.

“What about Echo?” Clarke asks, her thoughts turning to the assassin Nia had sent, but she thinks her actions strange, she thinks the assassin untrustworthy.

“I think she would believe much of what I do,” Torvun replies. “I think she was sent by Nia, but I think she also recognises the danger of the Mountain. I do not think she will ever reveal her intentions, but I suspect she wished for you to act to ensure that Nia did not succeed in the plan she had given Echo,” he shrugs. “It would explain why she was so obvious.”

And Clarke’s eyebrow raises in question, and she thinks a doubt must colour her expression because Torvun smiles briefly.

“Did she not warn you of questioning Kwin Nia’s actions further? Did she not threaten your death?” and he lets a small pause linger again. “I do not think Kwin Nia would have told her to be so obvious, and Echo herself would not have been so obvious if she did not wish for you to consider Kwin Nia’s intentions more…” and he trails off as he thinks for a short drop of time. “More carefully,” and he nods to himself. “You have considered Kwin Nia’s actions carefully. And I believe you have found an alternative that allows you to remain loyal to Azgeda, but act against the Kwin’s wishes.”

“That sounds like a conspiracy,” Clarke says as Torvun’s words sink in slowly.

But he merely shrugs again.

“Many who serve directly under Kwin Nia are witness to her brutality and violence,” he answers. “It is those that do not serve Kwin Nia so closely that are the most difficult to convince otherwise,” and, as he finishes, Clarke can’t help but to read into what he says, and she thinks she sees the small moment of sadness that lingers in his eyes.

And she thinks she knows he speaks of Entani, ever loyal to her duty as an Azgeda healer and warrior. And she thinks he speaks of Ontari, steadfast in her service to Kwin Nia.

The journey back to the war camp comes with a relief, the ache in her shoulder from the deer’s weight an annoyance that buries itself into her muscles as she walks towards where the hunted animals are prepared. And so she lets a sigh of relief leave her lips as she drops the deer at her feet, Lincoln’s half brought down more gingerly as he rolls his own shoulders as he comes to stand.
“I will see you next hunting trip,” he says as he nods to her, Octavia waving to her briefly before they move to join the other Trikru moving towards where their part of the war camp lies.

“Clarke,” and she turns at the calling of her name to find an Azgeda warrior jogging up to her, the warrior’s face a sweaty sheen and her bronzed braids an unfurling mess that whips out behind her. “The Commander wishes to see you,” she says as she comes to a stop, a hand coming to swipe away at her forehead. “Now,” she finishes with a roll of her eyes before gesturing behind her.

And so Clarke grumbles as the scents from the meats already being cooked reach her nose. And as she passes the other woman they share a small smile before Torvun catches up in a few long strides.

It’s not long until Clarke’s making her way up the winding path, the torches ever present and the heat ever bordering just past uncomfortable, and as she takes another bend she finds Roan walking her way, Echo by his side and three other Azgeda warriors trailing close behind, their eyes careful as they peer out around them at the Trikru that linger.

“You have been summoned?” Roan says as they approach, his eyes only briefly acknowledging Torvun before coming back to Clarke.

“Yes,” Clarke says, a hand coming to brush away a strand of hair. “I’m assuming you’ve just spoken with her?”

“Yes,” and Roan pauses in thought for a short moment. “Perhaps she will want to discuss the incident,” he finishes with a small quirking of his lips, his message clear for Clarke to understand.

And so Clarke nods once, her head bowing briefly before she continues her way up the winding path. It only takes her a few more quick turns before she comes to Lexa’s tent then, and she finds Gustus standing guard outside, his eyes focusing in on her and Torvun as they approach and so his head tilts to the side in greeting before a hand is held up in front of him.

“Wait here,” and it comes out gruffly as he ducks his head through the tent.

She turns to Torvun then, her eyes rolling as Gustus disappears inside the tent for a long while.

“Does Kwin Nia make people wait around this long?” and it comes out more of a joke but from the twitching of Torvun’s lips and the small shine in his eyes she thinks this happenstance something he must have experienced often.

“Yes,” he shrugs after a moment, his fingers resting evenly against his knife as his eyes move from face to face that moves around them.

Gustus ducks out the tent then, a nod sent Clarke’s way, “you may enter,” he finishes.

And so Clarke lets a sigh leave her lips, her hand coming up to pat Torvun’s arm gently as she pushes into the tent, her eyes squinting at the darker interior.

She finds Lexa standing by a table, papers and maps rolled in front of her, one in her hand that she wraps tightly as her eyes trail over another map of the surrounding area. It takes Clarke only a few short steps until she finds her way to Lexa’s side, her eyes trailing over the war paint that still lingers across Lexa’s face as her brows furrow in thought, her body shifting with Clarke’s presence that now
moves closer to her.

“You sent for me?” Clarke says then, a hand coming to rest against the table.

And so Lexa turns, her eyes trailing up Clarke’s body, settling upon her furs before lingering a level lower on her face before their eyes meet.

“Yes,” and Lexa holds her gaze carefully. “Azgeda has nothing to fear from Anya,” she continues with a swallow, her eyes careful as the candle light flickers against her cheek.

Lexa turns her gaze though, her eyes falling down to a place that lingers between her body and the table, and as Clarke eyes her, as she follows the braids that flow through Lexa’s hair she thinks she feels the thoughts that war within the other woman’s mind.

And it’s a small twitching of her muscles, a small clenching of her jaw, but Clarke thinks she feels Lexa’s body shift, she thinks she feels the tension build, and perhaps she recognises the turmoil that lingers within Lexa.

“I have been too lenient, I have allowed slights against Azgeda to go unpunished, Clarke,” and Lexa turns back to Clarke their eyes meeting once more.

And it’s not easy, Clarke thinks, for Lexa to admit her wrongs. But as she considers the woman before her she thinks the words she had said to her previously a truth, but also a difference. She thinks Lexa similar to Nia, she thinks them both ambitious, both proud and stubborn. But as Lexa’s eyes waver, as her lips purse slightly Clarke thinks them different. She thinks Lexa strives for a different world. Or maybe Clarke thinks herself foolish, perhaps she imagines the thoughts she sees Lexa ponder. And maybe she thinks she’s tired of games.

“I know how hard that is for you to admit,” and Clarke lets herself lean just a bit closer in the space between them.

But Lexa must have more words she wishes to voice, Lexa must have more thoughts that linger for long moments within her mind because she swallows once more, her jaw clenching tightly as her chin levels out.

“You think I am harsh?” and it’s a question Clarke feels Lexa need not answered. “You think I am unfeeling? That I do not care for those under my care? That I shut off my emotions?”

And Lexa trails off for a moment as she turns to face Clarke fully, her eyes glancing away briefly as she lets the next of her thoughts cement and clear in her mind.

And in the small silence that lingers, in the small moments where Lexa doesn’t meet Clarke’s eyes she thinks a moment is shared between them. A something that breathes through the space between them both and that lingers in the air.

“I know you felt something when the missile fell,” Clarke says quietly, and Lexa pulls her eyes back to Clarke. “And Costia...” and Clarke lets her thoughts turn to the woman she knows little about. “I don’t know much about her,” and she pauses, her mind turning to Anya’s reaction to Echo, to Echo’s reaction to Costia’s name. “I know it isn’t my place but I know you still feel something for her,” and Clarke pauses in thought, pauses long enough for Lexa to react, to end the conversation or to dismiss her entirely. “I think you do care,” and Clarke lets a small lifting of her lips find its way across her face. “Maybe you’re afraid to show it, maybe you believe that you need to hide it. But I know you care,” and Clarke lets her voice trail off quietly.

“That is how we survive,” and Lexa lets her eyes linger, lets her words drift freely between them.
But perhaps, after the years she’s spent on the ground, after the times she’s spent trying to survive the harshness of Azgeda, perhaps Clarke wishes for something different. And maybe she doesn’t wish to be a fool in another’s game any longer.

“Maybe life should be about more than just surviving.”

And she says it slowly, the words coming out carefully, quietly, but Clarke thinks she believes them, or maybe she wishes for them to be a truth. And maybe she hopes that her life, the loss of her father, the year spent pacing back and forth in a cell and pressing her face to the cold bite of the metal walls, was not just hopeless and a waste, was not just a careless endeavour or an unkind mistress. And maybe she hopes it was not just a fool’s errand.

And so she breathes quietly, her breath coming just a moment too uneven, just a moment too unsteady. And so the next words she voices give life to her worries.

“Don’t we deserve better than that?”

And as the confession leaves her lips Clarke looks away, she lets her eyes fall to the table and she traces the scratches and the life that has lived in the wood. But maybe if she’s truthful, if she’s honest, then perhaps she notices the way Lexa’s eyes follow her movements, maybe she feels the way Lexa shifts her body just a bit, just enough to be felt.

“Maybe we do.”

And she feels it. She feels the breath Lexa takes, she feels the screaming of Lexa’s mind as the woman’s eyes flicker just once, just enough to speak of an uncertainty, before they steady, before they come to gaze upon her. And then Lexa reaches forward, and it’s tentative, it’s quiet and unsure and it’s bold, it’s warm and it’s brazen. And maybe it’s a careful pressure that finds its way against Clarke’s neck as Lexa’s hand comes to brush against her, as her thumb brushes against the line of her jaw for just a moment as Lexa’s eyes glance just briefly to the scars that linger across Clarke’s cheek.

And it’s surprising, it’s sudden and firm. But maybe it’s not, maybe it’s the moments when Lexa’s gaze had lingered too long, the moment’s when Lexa had asked for Clarke to remain, the moment’s when Lexa had fought and killed and protected her.

And maybe it’s the thoughts that Clarke thinks da—

And it’s soft.

Lexa’s lips brush against hers.

And it’s a kiss.

It’s a shared breath and a gentle caress.

But Clarke feels Lexa’s lips linger as she pushes forward, just enough to speak of a want, of a wish, weak and unsteady enough for her to pull away, for her to retreat, to find safer ground and to flee. But she doesn’t, she holds her ground and she pushes forward kindly. And it’s a quiet push and pull, a gentle dance as Lexa’s forehead brushes against hers for a moment. And so Clarke’s hand comes up to steady herself, it comes up to hold Lexa firmly, and it comes up to rest at Lexa’s waist as the kiss lingers.

And it surprises her to realise her eyes have closed, that her breath stills and her lungs burn. And it surprises her when Lexa’s thumb brushes against the raised edges of her scars, as she softens them and smooths over them with a tenderness that quiets her racing heart. Lexa changes the angle then,
her nose gentling across her own as her lips urge forward tentatively, as her breath brushes against her lips and as h—

But Clarke pulls away.

Her eyes open and she feels the space widen between them as Lexa breaks the kiss, as her hand falls away and as her eyes linger for a long moment.

“I’m sorry, I’m—”


Her thoughts leave her a moment too quiet, a moment too uncertain.

“I’m not ready,” she finishes quietly as her eyes meet Lexa’s, as she wets her lips and as she steadies her heart.

*Not ready for what? To be with anyone? To be with Lexa? To feel? To deserve more than just surviving?*

“Not yet,” she finishes instead and she lets her eyes hold Lexa’s gaze, lets her thoughts linger openly within the blue as they meet the green. And as Lexa nods quietly, as Lexa steadies her breathing and as she levels her chin and holds her gaze, Clarke thinks Lexa understands.

And so Lexa nods, her eyes lowering for a moment before rising once more, her silence all the answer Clarke thinks she needs, and so she smiles quietly, and it’s just a small lifting of the corner of her lips but she thinks it enough.

And Lexa understands.
Chapter 20

Not yet.

The words echo in her mind quietly, they dance against her lips and burn gently in her chest. And it’s odd. It’s strange, and maybe, if she’s truthful with herself, if she’s honest, they’re a hope.

Or she’s merely a fool.

She’s not quite sure why she reached out, why she felt that desire, why she felt the need to do what she had done.

But it’s too late now.

And so she steps back carefully, her eyes lingering on Clarke’s lips as she steadies her breathing and tries to settle the racing beat of her heart. Her eyes find Clarke’s once more, and they glow softly in the candle light, they’re tentative in the way the woman who fell from the sky gazes upon her. They’re the blue of a quiet morning and the sharpness of an arrow finding its way through the wind. They’re the challenge of a quiet morning, the too cold bite of an empty bed and the warmth of a lonely body.

But above all?

They’re Clarke.

“I—”

What’s she to say?

“I’m—”

The words choke in her throat as her tongue wets her lips for a moment.

And she’s nervous.

And it surprises her, it shocks her.

It thrills her.

“Sorry,” and it comes out a whisper. A quiet exhale and a lonely hand.

And Clarke looks at her too, her eyes thoughtful as their gazes hold. And maybe it’s a small smile that spreads across the Azgeda woman’s lips, maybe it’s a gentle, rosy blush that colours her cheeks.

“It’s ok,” Clarke whispers as she worries her lip for a moment. “You just surprised me.”

And what’s Lexa supposed to say to that?

“Sorry,” perhaps an apology is best. Perhaps pretending it never happened is the most logical path forward, perhaps sweeping it under the furs is the most strategic manoeuvre left for her to take.

And is she not the Commander?

“It’s ok,” and it comes repeated, just a small thing as Clarke’s hand reaches out slowly, as her fingers
brush against her wrist for just a small time.
And maybe it is ok.
If only because Clarke doesn’t strike out at her, doesn’t reject her, doesn’t race from the tent.
“So…” and Clarke trails off, her eyes searching in their movements. “What do we do now?”
And as the words leave Clarke’s lips her head bobs slightly, her face moving into Lexa’s sight, a small smile spreading once more across her lips as Lexa’s eyes snap back up to Clarke’s.
“Anyah won’t attack any Azgeda again,” and maybe she’d grimace at the words she finds leaving her mouth.
And she thinks Clarke does so too, her face turning away for a breath as her cheek twitches slightly.
“You already said that,” she finishes as she turns back to face Lexa.
Clarke’s arms come to cross against her chest then, the furs rustling quietly atop her shoulders as she leans a hip against the edge of the table. And as she stretches just a bit, as she rolls her shoulders for a moment Lexa follows the motion, her eyes tracing the line of Clarke’s neck as it dips and as it—
She turns quickly, her eyes focusing somewhere on the maps that still lie rolled on the table, her mind a quiet thing that smoulders and burns softly.
“It would be best if we did not discuss this in public for now,” Lexa begins carefully, her finger coming to brush against the dried wax of a candle for a moment.
“Yeah,” Clarke says as she continues to peer at Lexa’s profile in thought. “I guess. Can’t have the Commander being seen to favour another clan,” she finishes with a small laugh.
“That is not what I inten—” and Lexa turns to her quickly, her eyes widening.
“Relax,” Clarke says, her hand coming to grip Lexa’s wrist. “It was a joke,” and she smiles for a moment as their eyes meet again.
And so she breaths out, her eyes closing for a long while as she steadies her mind.
“Hey,” the word reaches her ears carefully, and so she opens her eyes again to find Clarke eyeing her. “You don’t really have to tell me, you can even tell me it’s none of my business…” and she trails off for a moment as she considers her words.
But Lexa thinks she knows what Clarke will ask. And hasn’t she revealed too much already?
“Your assassin,” Lexa begins.
“Echo,” Clarke gives quietly.
“Echo,” and Lexa swallows thickly, her mind turning back the seasons. “She was involved in Costia’s death,” and she thinks it still hurts. “She is skilled at deception,” Lexa shrugs, her memories coming to surface slowly. “She had been with Anya for two seasons,” and her eyes harden slowly as Clarke shares her gaze. “She went by a different name. She was kind, friendly. She befriended Costia,” and Lexa thinks Clarke understands the rest, she thinks Clarke realises the actions Echo had taken.
“I’m sorry,” Clarke whispers and Lexa thinks she means it. “I can have her sent away,” Clarke
finishes awkwardly.

“No,” and the firmness of her response surprises her. “All wrongs have been absolved,” and maybe she believes it. “It is in the past,” and Lexa shrugs with a shoulder once. “Love is weakness, and we must be strong to survive,” she finishes.

“I don’t think you believe that, Lexa,” Clarke challenges as she leans forward a small space.

“Perhaps,” and maybe as Lexa meets Clarke’s eyes she feels a small smile find its way across her lips, and she thinks it just a small thing, a sad thing that lingers for a while. “But we all do what we must to survive,” and the echo of words from just moments ago cause Clarke’s eyes to roll.

“Life is about more than just surviving,” and she thinks she sees a smile live within Clarke’s gaze as the blonde repeats her words, and she knows what she will next say. “Don’t we deserve better than that?”

And do they?

“Y—“

“Heda!” Gustus shouts from outside before his head pushes through the tent’s entrance. “The acid fog is destroyed.”

And it’s only an instant that Clarke’s eyes lock with hers, as the words sink in and as her heart races. And then both women rush out the tent, Gustus moving out of the way quickly as they spring into the open air. And as Lexa squints in the sunlight she finds a lone shining flame burning in the sky, the trail rising from Arkadia the signal they had agreed to use. And as she stares for only a moment she finds the other Trikru around her looking up at the burning flame, their eyes wide in wonder, their grips around weapons whitened in anticipation.

And it’s only a quick shared glance with Clarke before she runs to the hill’s edge, the red of her sash flowing out behind her as she comes to a stop overlooking the war camp, and she finds the warriors below staring up at the flame and some staring up at her.

And it’s a silence, just a quiet moment before she feels her heart beat furiously, before she feels a smile spread across her lips and as she feels the rush of blood that crashes through her veins.

And she feels it.

Her lungs expand as she takes in the cool bite of the air, and her face warms as the sun graces it and her arm reaches up, her sword grasped firmly in her fist, the blade glinting in the sunlight.

And so she lets her voice be carried by the wind.

To war!

And the words leave her, they echo and roll across the war camp.

And she lets the smile hold across her lips as the cheers from the warriors below fill the air, as they roar through the trees and shake the ground.

And she knows.

The fight for the Mountain has begun.
It’s a rush and a scramble and a frantic stampede of controlled chaos that spreads through the war camp. And Clarke grits her teeth as her feet carry her down the winding path from Lexa’s tent, only a small glance cast over her shoulder and a small moment’s pause as she meets Lexa’s eyes before a bend takes her.

Torvun races next to her, his eyes ever careful as he watches those around them, and as they pass Trikru she finds their own attention focused on packing, focused on gathering weapons, medicines and foods and supplies.

It only takes them a short moment before they find Azgeda already gathering in their war parties, already passing weapons around and already lathering war paint across cheeks, scars and through tight braids.

She finds Ontari, slung arm being untied, an end of the bandage in her teeth as she smears war paint across her face with her free hand. Their eyes meet for a moment as Clarke approaches before Ontari passes over the jar, a smile being passed between them.

And as Clarke finishes with the war paint, and as she bends down, already reaching for her bow and quiver of arrows she feels the steadily increasing beat of her heart and she thinks her fingers tremble for just a moment.

“Steady, Clarke,” Ontari says as her fingers close over her hand, a smile spreading across the other woman’s lips. “We will win this battle.”

“You shouldn’t remove that bandage,” Clarke says with a smile though, her hand turning to hold Ontari’s hand as their eyes meet.

But Ontari shrugs once, only to wince just slightly at the motion.

“It would only get in the way,” she says.

And so Clarke’s eyes roll, but their heads turn at the sound of feet approaching, and she finds Echo standing close by, a knife strapped to each of her thighs, a bow and quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder.

“Prince Roan has sent me to accompany you,” she begins coolly, “I am to keep you alive,” she finishes.

“I have Torvun for that,” Clarke answers as she jerks her chin to Torvun as Entani smears paint across his head quickly.

“Prince Roan wishes to ensure you survive,” Echo says, an eyebrow raising as she lets the message linger. “I am sure you understand,” and so Clarke nods, her eyes turning to Ontari briefly.

“Ok,” Clarke says with a shrug.
It’s a quiet creep through the forest, just a small force of Azgeda, Trikru and Skaikru winding their way between the trees. Octavia and Lincoln walk besides them, their eyes careful as they peer out through the thick foliage. Ontari wanders near, her bow already half drawn, Entani and Torvun close behind Clarke.

As they move further and further through the trees she thinks she hears the low storming of the dam though, she thinks she can feel the steady tumble as the water cascades and churns. And so she holds up a hand as she comes to a stop. Raven slinks her way forward too, the bag over her shoulder a heavy weight that brings a scowl across her face.

“What are we waiting for?” she whispers, her eyes moving from Clarke to Octavia.

“Scout,” Octavia replies with a smile towards Raven. “Chill Raven, we don’t want to rush into this.”

“Whatever, O,” Raven whispers back, her eyes rolling for a moment as she shrugs the bag higher up on her shoulder. “You know, if I knew there was this much walking I wouldn’t have volunteered for this.”

Octavia snorts at Raven’s words though as she turns back with a smile. “Be glad reapers aren’t attacking us right now,” and she waggles her eyebrows for a moment. “Because you’d be running.”

“Pfft,” Raven answers, “I don’t run from any—”

A low hoot cuts Raven off as it echoes through the trees then, and Clarke turns her head slightly, her ears lingering on the sound as Ontari pauses, her bowstring pulling back fully as her eyes gaze into the trees.

The silence hangs around them for another moment until one last bird call sounds out before Echo slinks out of the trees in front of them.

“There are two guards outside,” she says lowly as she comes to meet the small group.

“Ok,” Clarke answers, quickly looking over her shoulder at the others behind her. “Skaikru,” and she looks to Bellamy and Finn, and two others who linger in the centre of the group, “stay off your guns for now. We’ll take out the guards, we want this to be as quiet as possible,” and as she finishes she meets their nods with her own.

It’s loud. Clarke can hear the water crashing and breaking as it runs through the dam. And so she comes to a careful stop at the edge of the forest, the trees giving way to a dirt clearing that leads to the dam’s entrance, metal doors recessed into it that she is sure lead down into the structure that powers the Mountain. Her eyes find the first guard quickly, his clothing dark black and familiar.

“From the sky?” Ontari asks as she eyes Bellamy who crouches close by, his own guard uniform matching the man who paces back and forth.

“Yeah,” Bellamy grunts, his eyes narrowing as he continues to follow the man’s lazy path. “I recognise him,” and he looks sideways to Octavia for a moment. “He was a dick,” he finishes with a shrug.
“Where’s the second one, Echo?” and Clarke turns to the assassin.

“I will find him. Wait until I signal,” she says before ducking out from the foliage.

“You know,” Raven begins quietly, her eyes following Echo as she disappears behind a small dirt outcrop. “Your friend Echo really creeps me out, Clarke,” and Raven waves over her face, “the whole white warpaint, the way too many knives, and all the rest I don’t know about,” she finishes.

“They’re all wearing white warpaint, Raven,” another Skaikru hisses from where she sits. “Besides the Trikru, of course;” she adds with a smile to Octavia.

“Look, Harper,” and Raven turns to face the dirty blonde haired woman, “I’m not saying it isn’t bad ass. But is white really the best camouflage when we’re surrounded by trees?”

“Shut it, guys,” and Bellamy gives them a stern look, his thumb brushing against the handle of his rifle nervously. “We can continue this discussion later.”

Clarke meets Entani’s eyes then, the other healer miming a gag as Ontari grumbles quietly under her breath at the quiet back and forth of the Skaikru.

But it only takes Echo another few minutes until they hear a birdcall, this time more faint, the sounds of the water drowning most of it out. But as it comes a second time Ontari draws her bow as she rises to a low crouch.

“I want three arrows on him,” Clarke whispers as she draws her own, Lincoln quickly taking aim besides her. “I don’t want to risk anything.”

And so she breathes out quietly, her eyes peering down the length of her arrow as she feels the gentle creaking of the bowstring against her fingers. And she waits. She waits until the air stills for a second, until it stills for one more. And until her heart beats.

And she releases.

Two other arrows sing forward with hers. And it’s fast, it’s rapid and violent. Her arrow strikes the guard in the chest with a satisfying thump, the second, white fletching quickly sprayed with a flash of blood as Ontari’s arrow smashes into his throat, and Lincoln’s strikes the already toppling man in the stomach.

“Go,” Clarke hisses as she bounds forward.

They find Echo already at the doors, a bloodied knife in her hands as she peers around a corner, her body tensing for a moment at the sound of their approaching feet.

“Get this door open, Raven,” Clarke says as she joins the other warriors pressing themselves into the shadows.

“On it, Clarke,” Raven smiles as she ducks down onto her knees, bag already opening as she begins to inspect the lock.

“The other guard wore clothing of the Mountain,” Echo says quietly as she turns back to Clarke. “He did not burn,” she says with a small frown.

And at that Clarke raises an eyebrow in question, a small confusion finding its way into her mind.

“What do you mean?” she questions.
“The Mountain Men must wear suits, Clarke,” Octavia says, as she peers at Echo for a moment.
“The air burns them.”

And the words bring forth a memory, of Lexa killing the sniper from the Mountain, of her raged questioning of how he did not burn. But she thinks that for now the detail unimportant, and so she shrugs once.

“We can worry about that later.”

The doors open quietly, the small group of Azgeda and Trikru spreading out as the Skaikru linger in the rear. They find the interior of the building dark, the sound of the generators groaning as they create the much needed energy that fuels the Mountain.

“There is no one else inside,” Echo says carefully, her eyes peering out from the shadows.

“Yeah,” and Clarke peers around for a moment before stepping out of the shadows. “They might have been called back once the army was spotted,” and she turns to find Torvun nodding his head thoughtfully, his sword held easily in his hand.

“Ok, Raven,” Bellamy says then, “let’s get these generators taken care of.”

To Clarke’s relief Raven works quickly, the bombs, Clarke is sure, Raven had enjoyed creating quickly set, one for each generator. And so she casts her eyes around her at the warriors that stand nearby, some at doors as they peer through the windows in watch of Mountain reinforcements.

“You’d think they’d have cameras or something,” Harper muses as she watches Raven setting the last bomb. “Or some kind of alarm,” she finishes as she peers up at the dark corners of the building in thought.

“Wells could have taken care of them,” Finn whispers from where he leans against a railing.

“They speak strange,” and Clarke turns at the whispered words to find Ontari peering from Skaikru to Skaikru. “You do not speak like them,” she finishes with a tilting of her head.

“I guess you rubbed off on me, Ontari,” Clarke shrugs, and she smirks as Ontari looks away for a moment at her words.

“All done,” Raven calls out, only to be met with Bellamy’s grimace as her voice echoes through the building. “Chill, Bell, no one’s here.”

“That’s not the p——”

“Ok,” Clarke cuts in as she strides up to Raven. “Let’s see those blueprints again, Raven.”

“Sure,” and she pulls out the map, the route from the dam through the tunnels and to the Mountain laid out over a satellite image of the surrounding area.
“How long until the Mountain knows the power’s out?” Clarke asks.

“Pretty much instantly,” comes the shrugged response. “But they’ll be blind for a minute. Enough time for the army to open the main doors. They’ll have back up generators though, so while they’re fighting at the front trying to get inside we can sneak in and take them out too.”

“Good,” and Clarke pauses for a moment as she eyes the bombs. “How far away do we need to be?”

“Yeah, I’d step back,” Raven smirks as she waves the detonator in her hand.

“Ready?” Raven smiles at the warriors that huddle together in a large group outside the generator room.

“Do it,” Clarke says grimly, her fingers coming up to plug her ears. “I’d do the same,” she whispers quietly as Entani eyes her oddly.

And maybe she’ll laugh tomorrow at this memory as Ontari merely rolls her eyes at what must seem a strange motion, and as Entani stuffs her thumbs into her ears and as Torvun claps his hands over both of his and as other warriors, Trikru and Azgeda alike mimic their actions.

“You’re going to regret not doing this, Onta—”

And generators explode.

“Jesus,” and he reaches out quickly to grab Monty by the elbow as the Mountain shakes. “What was that?”

“I’m not sure,” Wells whispers in response. “But I think it was the dam blowing,” and he glances around himself briefly as two Mount Weather guards rush past.

“This is it, then?” Monty whispers. “I guess the hack worked. They didn’t trip any alarms at the dam.”

“Yeah,” Wells says again as a hand comes to brush against his forehead. “We need to get to the back entrance, be ready to let them in.”

And as they begin moving away down the corridor the lights flicker, they brighten for only a moment. And then they go out.

The path through the tunnels is an anxious thing, the shadows the small group makes casting long
figures on the ground they walk on. And she thinks it her imagination, she thinks it her thoughts, but as they continue further into the tunnels she thinks she feels the quiet cracks in the distance, quiet booms echoing through the stone that signal the fight she is sure the army must be facing.

“How far?” she asks quietly, turning to Raven in the torchlight.

“Not far,” Raven says as she shows Clarke the map, “just another turn and it should be right in front of us,” Raven continues as she looks to Octavia. “Didn’t you say there were reapers in these tunnels, O?”

“They’re probably attacking the main army,” Harper replies from behind.

Clarke sighs once, her heart beating in her chest just a bit stronger as she feels the anticipation build. But, true to Raven’s words, as they round a corner they find a light that shines quietly at the end of the tunnel.

“Oh,” and Clarke looks around her. “We’ve had it easy so far. Don’t expect it to be this way once we’re inside, the army’s probably taking a lot of casualties right now so we need to be quick. We get inside. We take out the generators if we can and we cause as much chaos and confusion as possible, ok?”

And so it’s a quick dash down the tunnel and as they approach Clarke finds a door recessed into the stone, a small access panel glowing faintly to the right of it and a window that looks into the small entrance that awaits them.

“They’re not here,” Raven whispers as she peers through the small window, her eyes squinting in the dark.

“Wells won’t let us down,” Bellamy answers, his fingers tightening around his rifle. “Just wait.”

Clarke looks around her then, the Azgeda, white faced and heavy furs wrapped around their shoulders meeting her gaze with eager smiles, their blades glinting cruelly in the flickering of the light. She even eyes the Trikru for a moment, nodding at the few bows of heads she is sent, their own brown and green and black leathers and lighter furs clinging to their bodies dully.

“Raven,” Clarke whispers in the silence as she turns to the other woman. “Can you get this door open?”

“Yeah,” Raven shrugs, “but we’ll lose the element of surprise if I blow them,” and she peers back into the window.

“It’s taking too long, bl—”

“No need, Clarke,” and Raven turns back to face her with a smile. “Wells is here.”

It’s an odd moment then as Clarke eyes the window and sees a figure move in the room behind the door, the emergency light of the Mountain still flickering poorly. But the access panel turns green, a sharp click echoes through the tunnel and then the door swings open with a small swish.

“Hey Raven,” and Clarke’s eyes settle on a man.
She finds his eyes careful, kind and anxious in the light, but she sees the smile that lingers across his lips, she sees the light as it dances across his dark skin in a familiar pattern and she sees the close cut hair he wears.

“Hey Wells,” Raven smiles. “Glad you could make it to the party.”

“Yeah,” and Wells reaches out quickly, his arms wrapping around Raven for a moment.

“Enough with the pleasantries, Wells,” Bellamy hisses. “We need to get moving,” and Bellamy jerks his chin to the Azgeda and Trikru that watch Wells.

“Yeah, come on, let’s g—”

And he pauses. His eyes moving from face to face, a smile sent to Octavia, Harper and the few other Skaikru guards. His gaze travels over the Azgeda, narrowing for a moment at the scowl Ontari carries before they settle on Clarke.

And it’s a shocked pause. A narrowing of his eyes and a double take. But his mouth opens, his eyes waver for a moment as he looks at Clarke.

“Hi Wells,” and maybe it comes out quiet. Maybe it comes out broken and just a bit too choked.

But he hears her voice. He sees the broken smile that lingers across her lips and the blue of her eyes.

“Clarke?” and it’s disbelief that colours his voice, that brings shock and anguish across his face.

“It’s me,” she whispers, Ontari’s gaze narrowing suspiciously between them both.

“Look, I’m all for reunions but we’re in a hurry,” Raven cuts in quickly, just a small apologetic smile flashed towards Clarke before she grabs the nearest Trikru by the arm and drags the warrior, leathers first, into the Mountain.

Clarke can feel Wells’ eyes drilling into the back of her head as she rushes down the corridor, the flickering of the lights and distant shouts all she can hear as the back entrance fades behind them.

“Monty’s helping,” Wells hisses as he keeps pace, his words sent to Raven and Bellamy. “He’s further ahead, keeping watch,” he finishes.

And so the small war party moves forward swiftly. The corridor they travel through ends at another door, and Clarke finds another person crouching low against the panel, a small laptop propped up in his lap as he turns back to face them. His eyes widening for a moment as Torvun comes to a halt not far from him.

“Hey guys,” Monty waves sheepishly as he smiles at the Skaikru. “Long time no see,” he finishes with a small laugh.

“Yeah, Monty, nice to see you t—”

“We don’t have time,” Clarke hisses as she pushes past the gathering skaikru. “Monty, right?” and the boy looks up at her.
“That’s me,” and it comes out just a bit shaky as his eyes trace the scars across her face.

“The generators. Do you know where they are?” and Clarke pins him with a fierce gaze.

“Yeah,” Monty answers quickly.

“Good,” and she turns to Raven. “Raven. Your job is to take them out. We need to make as much noise as possible. Ok?” and she pauses as the other woman nods grimly. “Monty, you show her on the map we’ve got. We’re going to be splitting up.”

And Wells eyes widen for a moment as his head turns between Clarke and Raven and then to Monty.

“What’s your plan, Clarke?” and Wells looms closer.

“We’re splitting into three teams,” Clarke answers quickly as she turns to face the warriors behind her as she counts their numbers. “One team takes out the generators. One team goes through the Mountain and makes as much noise as possible. And the last team is going to take control.”

“How?” and Clarke turns to face Octavia.

“There’s a control centre, a central place where everything is controlled, right? Just like on the Ark?” and Monty’s eyes widen for a moment at her words as he turns to face Bellamy who whispers a quiet I’ll explain later.

“Yeah,” Wells answers. “I know where it is.”

“Ok,” and Clarke looks to Monty. “Monty, you’re coming with me, I need your help. You clearly know what you’re doing with computers. Octavia, you take the Trikru and Raven and get to those generators and destroy them.”

“I will lead the Azgeda,” Ontari says quickly. “We will destroy the Mountain Men and give you time,” she finishes with an eager smile, a number of Azgeda growling quietly with her.

And so Clarke nods her head firmly, her eyes settling upon Octavia who gives her a quick nod before she faces the Trikru, Lincoln by her side as she begins separating their numbers.

“Stay safe,” Ontari whispers as she moves closer to Clarke in the moment they find as the Azgeda and Trikru gather into three groups. “We will meet again after this fight,” and Ontari grips Clarke’s shoulder firmly, a small smile spreading across her lips.

“I will go with Ontari,” and Clarke peers over her shoulder as Entani pushes through two Azgeda warriors. “Someone needs to make sure she does not injure herself further,” the other healer finishes with a smile.

And so Clarke returns the smile with her own, her hand clasping Entani’s forearm as they share one last glance.

The shouting starts almost instantly. And as Clarke and her small force rushes through an empty corridor the first of the gunshots echo through the Mountain. And she only has time to cast a quick glance behind her before the shooting stops as suddenly as it began. She peers through the window
in the door then before she turns back to find Echo standing close to Torvun, Wells and Monty lingering close by and Bellamy picking up the rear, his rifle aimed down the way they came.

“Clarke,” Wells says as they come to a stop at another door. “There’s something you need to know.”

And she turns to face him, his eyes quickly glancing to her forehead before meeting her eyes.

“Mount Weather isn’t just creating reapers,” and he turns briefly to Monty before glancing at Echo and Torvun. “They’re using the grounders. They’re using them as blood bags.”

“What?” Clarke hisses.

“The radiation, what we expected the air to still be like,” and Wells worries his lip. “The people here never had a chance to adapt, never had a chance to become immune. They use grounder blood. They kill them, take their blood and use it.” he finishes with a grimace, Monty who stands close by also casting his eyes away. “I thought I could convince them that the grounders were friendly, that it was all just a misunderstanding. But when I found out they were bleeding the grounders I knew…” and he trails off, his brows furrowing painfully.

And it angers her. It makes her fist clench tightly as she grips her knife. And she feels the rage slowly build, her mind beginning to turn over what she must now consider, and as she thinks, as she ponders and as she assesses the problem—

“We must focus, Clarke,” and Torvun’s hand shakes her shoulder firmly. “We can not lose focus now,” and he comes to stand in front of her.

And she knows Torvun is correct.

“Ok,” and she breathes in deeply. “We get to the control centre. We take over the Mountain. We free the grounders after,” and she worries her lip for a moment. “Let’s go.”

They find their first guards as they rush to the stairwell, and so Echo flings her knife forward and it strikes the first guard in the throat, punching out his blood and spraying it across the walls as he falls to his knees, his fingers coming to clench at the blood that gurgles through the jagged tear. Bellamy shoots the second, and the guard drops to the ground with a crack, a hole smashed through his chest as blood pools beneath him.

“Level seven,” Monty whispers as Torvun pushes open the door.

Clarke nods her head in understanding, the sounds of gunfire once more echoing through the corridor as more guards find the other warriors who have infiltrated the Mountain.

Raven lets out another loud curse as she feels the hiss of the bullet and the snapping of air as it whips past her, and so she dives to the floor, an arrow being sent over her head and as she peers up from
where she lies she finds a Mountain Man toppling backwards, the arrow embedded in his forehead as blood sprays against the walls.

“Shit,” she curses as she rises, Lincoln’s firm grip lifting her to her feet. “Thanks,” and she wipes a hand across her face quickly.

“I guess they know we’re going for the generators,” Harper grits out from besides her, her rifle’s barrel smoking as she aims down the corridor.

She ducks once more, her braids whipping out around her as she spins, as she leaps through the air and as she imbeds her sword through another Mountain Man’s chest with a snarl. And she thinks she hears the muffled sounds of her name being called and so she turns, she spins and she feels the crash of a body against her waist as she’s tackled to the ground.

It’s a frantic scramble as she finds herself on the ground. She manages to plant her feet though, and so she raises her hips and snaps her body around with the momentum, the force of her movements shaking the man atop her enough, and so she snarls as she brings her head up and smashes it against his chin.

And as she rolls from under him she hears the dulled thump as a spear smashes into his chest.

Entani grabs her arm and lifts her to her feet with a laugh, her fist grasping her spear as she pulls it from the dying man’s body.

“You should have listened to Clarke,” Entani smirks. “You did not hear me shout your name.”

And so Ontari growls out once more, her eyes already searching for the next enemy to destroy.

“I can’t believe how good this plan is,” Raven says as she attaches one of her bombs to the generators. “They think we’re attacking from the front. Then we take out the dam. They think the front is a distraction so they focus on the dam. Then we get the doors open— which I’m sure has happened now, that’s why we aren’t getting attacked so bad, so they’re back to the front,” and she looks up to see Octavia eyeing her with a smile. “Anyway. Dam down, doors open, so we’re attacking from the front, right? But nope. We’re already inside suckers,” and she laughs as she sets the timer, her eyes glancing at her watch for a moment before checking the other bombs already planted.

It’s too quiet. And as Clarke creeps forward, she looks down the corridor carefully, the furs of her boots muffling her steps.

“We’re almost there,” Monty whispers from besides her. “Other end of the corridor and the two
double doors are it,” he finishes.

“What are you planning, Clarke?” Wells asks.

“If we get into the control room we can lock down the Mountain,” she says quietly. “We can reduce the number of people who have to die,” and she looks at Torvun for a moment, a small nod all he sends her way.

They continue forward quietly, and as they approach the bend she hears a rapid exchange of words and the crackle of a radio.

“…est chambers. We need it locked down.”

And so she shares just one quick glance with Echo and Bellamy before they both step out from around the corner, Echo’s knives flashing through the air and Bellamy’s rifle cracking as he fires it towards the guard outside the command centre.

They rush to the doors then, an access panel glowing red as the two guards slump over, one wearing the dark black of the Ark.

“Monty, I need this door open,” she hisses.

“On it,” he says.

Clarke watches as Monty plugs in his laptop, his fingers dancing over the keys as his eyes move from string of code to string of code.

“Almost got it,” he says with a glance up to Wells besides him.

“Be ready. We need to kill whoever’s in there as quickly as possible.”

The next few moments are tense. The distant echoing of gunfire that rumbles through the corridors and the faint thumping of explosions lingering in the space around them. Monty looks at Clarke then, a grim smile finding its way across his lips as his finger hovers over the spacebar.

And it’s a rush.

Clarke nods once, Monty presses the space bar and the doors click. Torvun smashes through them, his body crashing against the metal as his momentum carries him forward. They find the command centre to be full of computer screens with four men standing around. One man turns at the sound, his hand reaching for the gun at his belt as his eyes widen in surprise. Torvun crashes into him, his hand smashing against the guard’s nose and Clarke grimaces as blood smears across Torvun’s fist and as Torvun drives his sword through the man’s stomach. Echo leaps over the nearest table, a knife flinging from her as she already begins drawing the second, the second guard’s gun not even drawn as the knife plunges into his chest. Bellamy fires his rifle, the bullet tearing into another man’s shoulder, his hair dark and combed back and his eyes sharp in the dark of the command centre. The last man turns slowly, his hair a whitened grey, his features old and weathered.

“Clarke,” he says, his eyes flicking to her as she pulls the arrow in her bow back. “I’ve been waiting for you,” he finishes as his eyes flicker to the wounded man on the ground, Bellamy’s foot against his chest, rifle aimed at his face.

“I don’t really care,” Clarke says in answer as she feels the bowstring creak against her fingers.

Wells and Monty enter the room then, their eyes landing on the older man who eyes them
mournfully.

“Your father’s out there, Wells,” and he nods his head towards a computer screen. “You can end this.”

“It’s too late to end anything, Dante,” Wells answers back painfully. “It was too late when you started bleeding the grounders.”

“You have to understand, Wells,” and the man, Dante, looks at Wells for a quiet moment. “It would have meant the end of my people, Wells,” and his eyes move to Clarke.

“You didn’t have to fight them,” Wells answers back. “You could have asked. You could have tried something more than just killing.”

“You came to us,” the man on the ground hisses painfully. “Your father brought us together. To be stronger than these savages,” and he jerks his chin towards Clarke. “Look at them, they disfigure themselves, they kill each other over what? The scraps of the earth?”

“This ends one of two ways,” Clarke cuts in, a sneer finding its way across her lips as she eyes the wounded man before turning to the older. “I’m assuming you’re the leader,” and he nods his head.

“Dante Wallace. President of Mount Weather,” he says evenly, his voice a low tone.

“Ok, Dante,” and Clarke lifts an eyebrow slowly. “You surrender completely. Or you all die, it’s simple.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” and his eyes peer at her for a moment. “I have families to look after,” he continues. “There are people here, innocents, people who never hurt anyone,” and he turns to Wells and Monty. “What about Maya, Monty? Are you willing to sacrifice her life?”

“You talk to me,” and Clarke moves into his line of sight, her bow still aimed at him.

The lights flicker again, and as she glances around quickly she feels the floor beneath her shudder before the lights sputter once, then they cut out and the sound of a siren begins to flood through the corridors.

“You’ve lost,” Clarke smiles to Dante. “We just took out your generators——”

And her eyes catch movement on one of the computer screens, and as she peers at it for a moment she realises that it shows the main entrance of the Mountain, the door hanging wide open, smoke and gunfire flashing across the screen.

“And we’ve opened the main entrance,” and Dante glances at the screen. “And that siren?” Clarke continues. “I’m guessing that’s warning everyone inside that there’s a breach, that the air is already seeping in,” and she sees his eyes flash to Wells. “He told me you use my people as blood bags. So you aren’t really someone I care for.”

“My people— *Your* people, Clarke. They are safe for now. We’ve sealed them off,” Dante says.

“Then surrender,” Clarke says quietly. “Surrender and they’ll all still be alive. I don’t want to kill everyone.”

“Don’t do it, dad,” the man on the ground hisses, “don’t negotiate with these savages!”

And Bellamy’s fist crashes against his nose.
But as Clarke turns to face him she hears a radio click and crackle as it rests against a desk.

“I think you will want to answer that, Clarke,” and Dante tilts his head slowly to the table.

Clarke nods to Torvun then who walks up to Dante, his fist gripping him around his throat as he pushes him to his knees roughly.

Clarke reaches out as she snares the radio from the desk, her thumb brushing against the button.

“We’ve got them,” and the voice comes out loud, a crackle from the radio, but Clarke recognises the man who speaks. And Wells does, too, as his eyes widen and he stares at the radio in her hands.

“Dante, are you there?”

“Thelonious?” and the name leaves her mouth painfully, her eyes flicking to Wells.

“Clarke?”

“She’s still alive,” he says, her eyes snapping to the man still lying on the ground, a smirk beginning to spread across his lips.

“You’ve lost,” he splutters past the blood coating his lips.

“Shut it,” Bellamy snaps as he digs his foot into the man’s throat again.

“Surrender,” Clarke repeats. “I have Dante prisoner. Surrender and the army won’t kill everyone.”

“That’s not happening Clarke,” Thelonious answers carefully. “Turn on monitor three,” he finishes firmly.

“Monty?” Clarke asks as she turns to find Monty already seated at a computer.

“Already on it.”

Clarke’s eyes turn to the computer screens then, a number turned off, but it doesn’t take long until one splutters for a moment before the image snaps into focus.

And her eyes widen as she stares at the image before her. She finds rows and rows of cages, and in the distance she think she even sees them hanging from the roof, chains swaying quietly. But what horrifies her, what sickens her and makes her rage is the people she sees.

In each cage crouches grounder after grounder after grounder. Their bodies bruised, beaten and bloodied, their bones sickly and prominent and their limbs fragile and withered where they crouch, some on their knees, some curled into themselves, their bodies shaking in the cold, some motionless where they lie.

She finds people standing in the centre of the screen though, guns in their hands as they point them at some of the grounders in the cages. But her eyes widen even further, her mouth opens slowly in horror as she recognises the white of the war paint and the grey and white furs of Azgeda that a number of figures wear, their hands on their heads as they kneel facing away from those who stand, guns aimed at the captured warriors.

“Do you understand now?” Thelonious says as a figure on the screen moves forward, his face turning up to face the camera.

“Let them go,” Clarke hisses in to the radio.
“No, Clarke,” and Thelonious sighs heavily. “I know you. You’re smart, you could join us here. Mount Weather is everything we wanted. Everything that we deserve,” and he sweeps his arm towards the grounders, those caged and those kneeling. “We thought you died,” he continues. “But you survived. You know what they’re like. You could live just like you did on the Ark.”

“Let. Them. Go.”

And it comes out angry and furious and her fingers tighten around the radio as she stares at the screen.

“No,” and Thelonious sighs once more. “I have my own deal. If you won’t join us then walk away. Leave the Mountain. Or we kill everyone,” and he pauses as he approaches one of the kneeling Azgeda.

Clarke turns to Wells then, but she finds him staring at the screen, his own face horrified and pained as his eyes move from person to person that fills each cage.

And so she takes a steadying breath, her mind turning over what she faces. And as she eyes Thelonious who continues to stare up at the camera, and as she eyes the cages that fade back into the distance she thinks hundreds of grounders remain caged and trapped. She turns her gaze to the Azgeda that remain kneeling too, and as her eyes trace the furs they wear she thinks she recognises Ontari’s scowl, the way her braids fall across her shoulders and the furs she wears.

“You’re running out of time, Clarke,” and Thelonious reaches out, his free hand gripping Ontari by the throat as he drags her forward. “If you don’t surrender I will kill everyone. Beginning with the leader of this group,” and he shoves Ontari forward forcefully, her face coming to smash against the floor before her hands can break her fall. “And after her. I will kill every grounder kneeling before me. And then I will kill every grounder in these cages.”

Clarke’s gaze snaps from Ontari’s kneeling figure to another who reacts violently, her hands coming from her head as she lunges for Thelonious, but as she nears, as her hands snake out two guards rush forward and force her to the ground, their feet smashing into her ribs as they kick her, as they grip her hair and smash her face against a table edge until she falls to the ground. And Clarke sees Ontari react, too. She sees Ontari spin, her eyes wild with rage as she sees Entani’s bloodied body twitch on the ground. But Thelonious levels a handgun at her face, her gaze hardening as he stares her in the eyes.

And Clarke knows what she has to do.

“Listen to me very carefully.”

And it hurts, her mind screams out and her chest tightens. But she keeps her gaze focused on Ontari, nose bloodied, war paint smeared and ruined as it drips down her cheek.

“I will not stop until my people are free.”

And she stares at Entani, her body curling in on itself as she cradles her ribs painfully, as blood seeps from her face and pools around her.

“If you don’t let them go.”

And she turns to Torvun to see that from where he stands over Dante, his eyes are glued to the screen as he stares helplessly at Entani’s twitching body, at the Azgeda that remain kneeling and at Ontari who stares at Thelonious, gun still aimed at her head.
“I will irradiate the entire Mountain.”

And as the words leave her lips she hears Dante shudder, she hears Wells let out a pained sound and she hears the wounded man curse out at her.

But she ignores it. She switches off the radio for a moment and she turns to Monty.

“You bitch! You fucking bi—”

And her arrow snaps forward, her bow drawn and the bowstring released in a quick motion as she spins, as she aims and as she releases the arrow. And she watches as it smashes into the wounded man’s chest, his eyes widening in shock as blood bubbles past his lips and as his eyes begin to gloss and as blood pools from the wound.

“That is how serious I am,” Clarke says as she turns to face Dante. “Tell Thelonious to stop.”

“No,” and it comes out tired, it comes out broken and pained and his eyes close sadly as he breathes out. “I will not be responsible for my people’s destruction.”

“We can end this,” and she knows she begs now, she knows she fights against a known.

And it hurts.

“I don’t want to kill anyone,” and she whispers it quietly, brokenly and she lets her eyes hold Dante’s gaze. “Just let my people go,” but she thinks she knows his answers. “We just want to survive.”

And so Dante smiles wanly at her.

“Don’t we all?”

And as his words leave his lips Torvun drags his knife across the man’s throat, the blade glinting in the dark of the room as Dante’s blood bubbles and froths and gurgles across Torvun’s fingers.

And it hurts.

Clarke turns back to Monty, his fingers flowing over the keyboard, Wells resting a hand against his shoulder in support as his eyes remain transfixed on the screen.

“Clarke,” and she turns back to the screen to find Thelonious pressing the gun to Ontari’s head, his arm wrapped around her throat as he holds the radio to his lips. “I know you, Clarke.”

And she tears her eyes from his image, her fists close tightly and her breaths come pained and shallow and broken.

“I know you, Clarke,” and the voice echoes throughout the room. “You’ll do the right thing. For your people,” and Thelonious pulls Ontari closer to him as he stares into the camera.

Monty finds her gaze though, his hands stilling in their motions, and a sad smile finding its way across his lips.
“Just pull this,” and he motions to a lever by his side. “Hatches and vents will open, scrubbers will reverse pulling in outside air,” and he looks to Wells before finding Clarke’s gaze once more.

And it hurts.

Her eyes move slowly from the screen, from Ontari’s bloodied face as it’s held cruelly in Thelonious’ arm, then to Entani who still lies curled on the floor, her blood smeared against the harsh cold of the metal, her furs bloodied, her war paint a crimson red.

And her eyes turn to Echo who stares at the screen, her lips turned up into a ferocious snarl, fingers gripped painfully around a knife.

She finds Torvun moving slowly to her as well, his eyes careful as he peers from the lever to her face.

And she meets Bellamy’s gaze too, a grimace spread across his lips as his fingers whiten around his rifle.

And she knows.

“I have to save them.”

And it’s a quiet whisper, something that breathes past her lips, that burns against her tongue and scratches in her throat. The words drill into her mind, they tear into her lungs and leave her ragged and broken.

And so her fingers close around the lever, her eyes turn back to the screen and she stares into the image of Thelonious. And as she wraps her fingers around the lever she brings the radio to her lips.

“You don’t know me at all.”

And it’s slow. It’s quick and it’s too clean. Too simple. Too easy. The lever tugs against her hand for a moment before it rises, before it arcs through the air slowly. And then it settles. And Clarke leans into Torvun’s hand as he brings it to her shoulder quietly.

But her eyes focus on the screen.

She stares at the guards who stand behind the captured Azgeda and she sees the difference in uniforms. And it starts slowly. She sees a few begin to twitch where they stand, she sees a few begin to shift uncomfortably. And she knows. She feels her heart beat lonesome in her chest as one guard reaches for his face, his lips turning into an agonised scream as his body shakes, as his fingers clench at his flesh and as his skin begins to bubble and peel.

She sees an Ark guard step back in horror, his eyes widening as the woman next to him grips her throat, as her hand comes to her head and as she pulls out tuffs of her hair, her scalp coming away in chunks of boiling flesh that Clarke thinks she can hear rip, that she thinks she can smell and breathe in.

And it sickens her. It burns into her eyes and into her nose. And she hears it. She hears the bubbling and the cracking and she smells it. She smells the burning of flesh as it rips through her sense.

And she sees Dante’s body begin to bubble, she sees it begin to burn, begin to boil and froth and melt into the floor.

And it’s a scream. It’s a shout and an explosion of noise. Her eyes snap back to the screen and she
sees the Azgeda warriors react. She sees them lunge and she sees them crash against the Ark guards. She sees one take a bullet in the throat, her hands coming up to clutch at the wound as she topples to the ground and she sees two Azgeda smash into the man who killed her, she sees them rip the gun from his hand and smash him into the cage before beating into him.

But she stares. She stares and can’t turn her eyes away as she sees Ontari swivel, as she sees Ontari smash her forehead into Thelonious and as she lunges for him.

But she sees him raise the gun as he falls back. She sees the flash and she hears the crack as it rips through the radio.

And she sees Ontari drop.
Chapter 21

She eyes the entrance for a long, quiet moment, her gaze steady as she traces the cool bite of the metal that sits within the stone of the Mountain. Her fingers tap lightly against the sword at her hip as she flicks her eyes towards Kane who stands not far from her, his own gaze staring at the small box in his hand, the red light blinking lightly.

And she waits.

Her army spreads out around her, their eyes turned out into the trees, their eyes peering up at the Mountain, ever careful, ever watchful for attack. And she knows it will be soon. She knows the dam will fall in the next few moments and she knows the main entrance will open. And she knows her warriors will be slaughtered. She knows the Mountain will no doubt spit metal fire out of the entrance at the first wave she sends forward, perhaps even the second and third waves that follow. But she knows eventually they will enter. She knows eventually her sword will taste the blood of those that have taken her people, that have killed them, have tortured them and spit them back out of the Mountain, nothing more than a hollow, empty shell that kills, that slaughters and feasts on their own families.

And so she waits.

She hears a quiet hoot echo throughout the clearing, her hand coming up as she flicks her wrist, a number of Lake Clan warriors breaking off from her army as they go to investigate the scout’s call. It only takes a few short moments but she hears the horn echo through the trees and she hears the distant clanging of metal and the cries of battle.

And she knows.

She raises her hand again, her ears picking up the sound of Rock Line warriors breaking off from the army, she hears their feet rush over the ground and she hears the drawing of blades as they move to support the Lake Clan warriors in whatever battle they have found themselves in.

And she waits.

Her skin prickles, her skin itches and tenses and she knows what it means even before it happens, she thinks she even feels the thudding, she thinks she even feels the rush of air and the crushing of tech before she hears it. And it’s distant, it’s close, it’s too near and not soon enough. But she hears the echoing thunder, the explosion and the crashing. And it goes silent.

The quiet whirring of the Mountain as it breathes over the lands stills, it quiets and it halts. The warriors behind her hold, too. Their breathing slows, their eyes narrow at the entrance and their movements cease.

And she knows.

Her eyes glance to Kane and she sees his eyes glance to the box in his hand. And she watches. She sees the warriors surrounding him glance down to the box, she sees them tense and she sees them wait.

The light blinks once, the red a piercing glow that focuses her attention. It blinks once more, her eyes hardening to the movement of the light in his hand. And then it returns. And it holds. It’s steady, it’s constant, and it’s green.
Kane’s eyes snap up to her for only a moment, for long enough that they ask a question, that they reaffirm a plan. And so she nods. And his thumb presses against the button.

And it’s a quiet click, her eyes snapping to the entrance, the hole drilled into the door holding the small bomb that will gut the Mountain open now the focus of her attention.

And it explodes.

And she knows.

Her hand comes up, her fingers clenched into a tight fist. And so she smiles as her hand comes down, as her warriors rush forward, ropes slung over their shoulders.

And as the warriors race across the open ground, as they crouch low and as they begin to unfurl the ropes she hears the rustle, she hears the faint clicking and she hears the movements.

And it explodes, the air around her crackles, the air around her hisses and burns and whizzes, her hair flings up around her as the dirt kicks up at her feet and she spots the fire that flashes on the ridgeline above, signalling where the Mountain Men lie in ambush.

And she knows the battle for the Mountain has truly begun.

“With me!”

The words rip from her lips as she watches the warriors in the clearing race forward with the rope, and she sees some gunned down, some tripping as bullets rip into them, yet she sees them push forward, she sees one fall, her leg smashed backwards as a bullet pulverises her muscle and flesh, and so the wounded warrior cries out another’s name, her hands flinging the rope towards a warrior who turns in answer before a bullet silences her forever.

Warriors break off with her from the main army, a thundering roar of bullets ripping through the trees as she ducks, as she crouches low and as she races forward, her eyes snapping to a trail that leads up the Mountain towards where the first of her enemy lies. Anya races besides her, the Trikru warrior’s eyes glinting furiously in the waning light as she fires an arrow up towards where the flashes of flames spit out destruction upon her army. She hears the thundering of warriors as war cries explode from lips, as the first wave races forward and as the main doors are slowly pulled open, the rope straining and creaking under the weight.

Lexa feels the warriors at her back, the most fierce of her guard, their eyes snapping to every movement they hear, every sound they detect, their blades glinting cruelly in the setting of the sun, their leathers and furs a bloodied orange glow as the sun shines against them.

She rounds a corner, the trees thinning out behind her and she sees the Mountain Men. She sees them, back to her, their weapons firing down upon her warriors. And so she lunges, she snarls and she feels her lips pulling up into an eager smile as she pounces on the nearest figure, her sword piercing through his back as blood spills from the wound and as air hisses through the suit, and she hears the boil, she hears the crackle and she smells the burning of flesh.

And then it’s a crash of bodies, of metal against flesh and bullets ripping into warriors. Lexa rips her sword from the first, the Mountain Men turning at the noise, their eyes widening in shock for only a moment as they come to realise they are surrounded. Lexa throws her sword forward, the blade spinning through the air as another raises his gun, the barrel aimed at a warrior who throws her own spear forward. And so Lexa rolls, she hears the rip of a bullet over head and she feels the bite of the ground beneath her, and she comes to a running stand, her hand ripping the sword from the
Mountain Man’s chest as Anya fires an arrow past her shoulder, and Lexa watches as it strikes another enemy, as it smashes into his exposed face, his clothes the same as that of Skaikru, and she watches as he topples backwards, as he falls over the ridgeline and as he plummets down onto her rushing army.

There’s a shout, a loud growl and a fierce screaming of noise as she whips her head to the side, and she finds Gustus flinging a man over his shoulder, his sword cleaving another’s arm clean off as blood and boiling flesh spills from the gaping wound. She feels the cracking whip of a bullet as it whistles past her head and so she shifts her body, she falls to her knees and she lets her momentum carry her forward as she slides, and as she nears the next enemy she brings her sword forward, the edge piercing the man’s suit and she hears the hissing of air as it rushes out of the gaping slash.

She comes to her feet, her chest heaving and she eyes Anya ram an arrow into another Mountain Man, she sees Anya lash out with her foot sending the dying man toppling backwards only for another warrior to slam an axe into the Mountain Man’s chest.

Gustus shouts out a warning, his arm coming to shield Lexa’s shoulder before he moves fully into her vision, his eyes aflame as he snares a Mountain Man by the throat, as he pummels his fist into the face plate before he kicks harshly into the Mountain Man’s stomach, tossing him aside for another warrior to plunge a knife into the Mountain Man’s back.

She slices out once more, her blade sinking into another’s flesh as she meets the eyes of a wounded warrior, his hands clutching at his thigh as blood pours between his fingers. And it’s a quick nod, a quick acknowledgement before another Trikru races forward, grabbing the wounded man under the arms as he drags him backwards.

And it’s one last throw over her shoulder, one last slash of her sword and one last bubbling, thrashing mess of a body before the ridgeline stills, before the sounds of gunfire halt and her warriors pause in their motions as they search for the next enemy.

And before her lies the dead of the Mountain, their bodies still slowly bubbling as air rushes into opened suits, blood pooling against face plates. She casts her eyes quickly over her own warriors, some breathing hard, some with wounds dripping and some with wounded and dead slung over their shoulders.

“The ridgeline is secure, Heda,” and she turns to find Anya wrenching her sword from a dead Mountain Man’s chest, her eyes only briefly looking around her as she wipes her sword on the man’s suit, cleaning the blade of the dripping blood.

“Tristan,” and Lexa looks around her for the bald warrior. “Return the wounded and dead to the rear and then take the rest of your men and find the Lake and Rock Line clans. Support them if they need help and then return to the Mountain.”

And Tristan nods his head quickly before barking orders to those around him.

The rush back from the ridgeline lasts only a few pained breaths and then Lexa breaks free from the trees. She finds a number of Skaikru standing by the entrance to the Mountain, their weapons screaming down the gaping hole in the Mountain’s side as they fire at whoever defends the tunnel. The door lies opened, ropes tied to it that have pulled it open, the fibres straining and bloodied and
twisted.

She feels the crack of a bullet as it snaps overhead and so she ducks as she races to where her warriors lie in wait, where they pause in their advance until an opening or an order is given.

“Heda,” and Lexa turns to find Indra racing up to her, “we wait for your order. Those with the shields are preparing to advance with Skaikru.”

And so Lexa nods her head, her eyes briefly flicking to the spattering of blood that clings to Indra’s cheek.

“Send them in.”

There’s a stampede of feet and clanging metal as the first wave of warriors rushes forward, their shields held in front of them as Skaikru continues to fire down the entrance, the smoke and the fire of battle raging around them.

And Lexa watches.

She stays crouched low to the ground as warriors huddle around her, their hands gripping their weapons tightly as their eyes focus on the entrance, as they eye the retreating backs of the first wave of warriors that disappear into the depths of the Mountain. The gunfire echoes inside for a moment, she hears the shouting and the screaming and the clanging of metal for only one more breath. And then it stills, it quiets and it pauses.

Her eyes turn to Indra to find the older woman glancing around her briefly, her eyes scanning the trees and the ridgeline before falling back to her, an uncertainty in her eyes.

“Heda,” and Indra grips her sword tighter, her eyes snapping back to the entrance. “The first wave has fallen,” and Indra turns back to the warriors behind her, their eyes fierce and eager in the waning light. “I will lead the second.”

And so Lexa nods once, her hand clapping Indra across the shoulder.

“Go, Indra.”

And then Indra growls out orders, warriors, Trikru and other clans coming to rise with her as she rushes forward, her sword glinting in the burning of flames as she screams forward.

It lasts long moments, the second wave of warriors swallowed by the open maw that is the Mountain’s entrance, the massive door hanging open, blackened by smoke, reddened with blood. And so Lexa peers forward, her fingers gripped tightly around her sword as her breaths come full and slow, her mind focusing slowly, calmly, soothingly on what her next actions will be.

She feels Gustus near her, she feels Anya growl out quietly behind her and she knows who approaches. And it’s a careful gait, a quiet crunching of feet against ground and the low rustle of furs against furs.

“Heda,” and the voice comes gruff, low and cunning. “What are we waiting for?”

And so she turns to find Roan facing her, Azgeda warriors flowing behind him, their faces whitened
and deathly, their hair, braids and beards streaked with the white paint of Azgeda.

“We wait until the fighting silences, or until Indra calls for reinforcements,” comes the shrugged answer, her eyes peering out at the other warriors behind the Azgeda. “But it would seem that your Azgeda forces have done well inside the Mountain,” she continues as she turns back to peer into the Mountain. “There has not been as much fighting outside the Mountain as was expected.”

“They serve well,” Roan answers quietly, his own gaze turning towards the Mountain’s entrance. “I would expect nothing le—”

And a horn echoes out of the Mountain, it shakes and rattles against the stone and the ground and through the warriors waiting their turn. And Roan’s eyes snap to Lexa’s, his hand gripping his own sword firmly as the Azgeda around him begin to smile, their eyes eager and ready.

“Indra calls us,” and the words leave Lexa’s lips smoothly, and she finds them wending calm and quiet through her mind.

And so her hand raises, her fist clenched tightly as she begins to move forward, her breaths coming more rapid, her eyes darting left and right, and her muscles tensing, ready for whatever she will face.

And so Lexa races forward, the dark of the Mountain swallowing her as she descends into its depths with a scream upon her lips and an army by her side.

She ducks, the blade whistling over head and she rolls, she spins on her knees and she brings her knife into the reaper’s leg as she rises and then she darts left, her shoulder brushing against the smoothed wall of the Mountain’s corridor, and it’s just a quick glance behind her to see Gustus cleaving the reaper’s head from its shoulders before she finds Indra locked in fierce battle with her own foe. Indra flips her blade, the edge coming to rest against her forearm as she slashes out with her elbow, the end of her sword severing the reaper’s throat and spraying her face once more, a geyser of blood painting the wall behind her a sickly browned ruin.

Anya roars out, her fist colliding with the bleeding mess of a reaper’s throat as she, too, drives a sword through its stomach before rushing forward, her eyes searching for the next.

And so Lexa takes a moment to search the faces she sees. And it had been a rush, a frantic sprint through the entrance, she had seen Trikru warriors, some wounded, some dead, all lying before her, blood had dripped from the walls and pooled at her feet, bullet holes had buried themselves into the walls and flesh. The second corridor had been worse, Skaikru had lain dead there too, wounds left gaping and jagged upon their bodies. But she had found Indra, she had found the other Trikru, all locked in a deadly battle with reapers as they moved further and further into the Mountain.

And so Lexa turns at the calling of her name, her sword quickly disarming a lone reaper as it lunges for her before she spins out from its outstretched hand, the white feathered arrow of an Azgeda archer piercing it in the eye as it tumbles back.

“Heda,” and she comes face to face with Anya, the other woman’s face smeared and dripping. “We have secured the main entrance,” and it comes out victorious, it comes out vibrant and eager. And it comes out a smile.

“There were no Mountain Men, Heda,” and she turns to find Indra picking her way through the
dead, other warriors already beginning to move the wounded and their own dead back out of the Mountain. “Only reapers, Heda,” Indra finishes as she casts her eyes down the hallway until they land upon the sealed doors where Skaikru crouch.

“I believe Clarke and Octavia have done their part,” and Lexa thinks a small smile must flit across her lips, if only by the narrowing of Anya’s eyes. “The Mountain has had their forces divided. We will push this advantage.”

And so she moves down the corridor, her hand still holding her sword as she comes to a stop by Kane’s side, his eyes peering down at another Skaikru who inspects the glowing red light that sits within the wall.

“It’s almost open, Heda,” Kane says as he looks up at her, a cut running down his cheek, blood pooling across his knuckles. “How long, Sinclair?”

“Any moment now, Kane,” the man replies, his own hair singed and dirtied from the fighting.

And she feels the anticipation build as she stares at the sole guardian to what she has sought for lifetimes. The doors stand still, quiet and lonely before a sea of her warriors, their eyes trained on the small opening that will soon be granted them, and she feels the restlessness, she feels the anxious beat of their hearts and the eager breaths they find leaving their lips.

And she feels it too.

“We must be prepared for anything,” and her voice carries over the sounds of her warriors. “We must be ready to aid our allies who already fight the Mountain Men, who already bleed for us, and who may have already lost their fight,” and she lets her voice echo, she lets it linger and she lets it build.

Her legs tense, her body lowers as she moves into a crouch and her eyes narrow as she gazes once at Kane, and her eyes find Sinclair, the man giving her one last nod as his finger pauses over the flashing light that will be the gutting blow to the Mountain.

“I am with you, Heda,” and she turns at the quiet words she hears breathed besides her to find Anya by her side, bow and arrow in hand as she aims it squarely in front of her.

“I am with you, Anya,” and she thinks a small smile graces her lips as she holds Anya’s gaze.

And then the doors open.

It’s a roar that leaves her lips, it’s a thundering stampede as she crashes forward, Anya and Gustus shadowing her movements, Indra behind her crying out a battle cry of her own.

And it’s silent.

It’s too still.

It’s too dark.

It’s too damp.

It’s too wet.

Her feet come to a skidding stop, her eyes squinting in the harsh darkness she finds herself in. The Mountain’s hallways darken themselves, the shadows live long and cruelly against the floor and
walls and ceiling, the only light she finds the quietly burning flames of the torches carried by some of
her warriors and the flashing red of the lights that sit recessed within the ceiling of the Mountain.

And it’s a stench she thinks familiar.

Her feet take her further and further through the hallway, the only sound she hears the cruel wet step
of the warriors as they stalk forward, their own eyes searching wildly. She passes a door on her left,
the hinges charred and so she flicks her wrist sending a number of warriors through it, their weapons
readied. She passes a door to her right, more warriors peeling off from the army that snakes and
slithers forward.

And it’s a cross road she comes to, an intersection in the hallway. It’s a choice. It’s left or right, her
only two options. But that isn’t the thing that gives her pause, the choice isn’t the thing that makes
her still her steps.

It’s the burning, boiling, bubbled mess of stench that lies in the pooling red of a light overhead. And
as she nears, as she approaches it she smells it. She smells the roasting flesh, she feels her stomach
churn and she feels her feet continue to suck against the floor.

And she comes to a stop, between her and the pile mere paces, mere moments away, but enough to
turn the churning of her stomach into a heaving mess. But she bites her lip as her eyes settle on what
lies before her. And she hears a warrior gasp, she hears a warrior retch and gag behind her and she
hears a warrior empty her stomach.

It’s charred, yellow, it’s melted and broken and roiling and moist as it seeps into the floor. It’s flesh,
muscle, skin, blood and human. And it’s a body, it’s the burning, festering remains of a roasted
person. And as her eyes peer at it, as her gaze settles on the figure she realises she knows not what
she looks at. And perhaps it’s a head, perhaps it’s a face, perhaps it’s the roasting stump of a leg, the
lower half already melted off, already burnt and ruined.

Her eyes trail over the seeping liquid that pools around the body, and her eyes follow the blood and
the puss and the sickening green boiled flesh as it drips around it in larger and larger trails. And she
thinks she gasps. She thinks her eyes widen and her feet step back and her heel slips. And as she
raises her foot, as she brings it from the ground and as she moves it a sickly stringing mess comes
away, and she realises she stands in what was once a human.

Lexa sends her eyes down the left path then, her stomach clenching painfully as the smell lingers, as
it festers and builds and seeps into her nostrils. And maybe she thinks she will be sick, maybe she
thinks her stomach may never rest after today. Maybe she will never taste the roasting of a deer as it
turns slowly over a burning flame, as it’s charred flesh melts in her mouth and as the juices drip
between her lips. And there’s more. The hallway to her left carries others. Their bodies melted and
burnt and charred into the ground. And she turns to her right, and her eyes see a melted mess
scratched and boiled into a door, a pile reaching up to what she thinks is a handle, the legs having
melted off, both merely a mess that lingers a pace behind the melting body.

And she hears another warrior heave and retch and curse and splutter as their stomach empties.

“What happened here?” and it comes out sickened, it comes out shocked and quiet and broken.

“I don’t know,” someone answers quietly, their voice hoarse and broken and awed.

“What could have done such a thing?” and she thinks she hears disgust, she thinks she hears fear and
anger and remorse and hurt.
“Who did this?”

And the question lingers in her mind, it festers and grows and spreads and claws into her thoughts and into her heart.

But she knows what happened. She knows what could have done such a thing. And she knows who did this.

And so she turns to face her army, the words already on her lips.

“Wanheda has returned.”

Her feet take her faster and faster and further and further through the winding mess of the Mountain. The smell breaks against her nose and burns across her face, but she races forward. She ignores the calls of her name as Wells screams out to her, she ignores the pounding of Torvun’s feet as he runs behind her, and she ignores the heaving of Monty as he empties his stomach in the room she leaves, the smell and the stench and the crackling flesh leaving him weak and sickened.

She rounds a corner, her eyes meeting an Arker, his eyes widened in horror as he stares at another, a figure, a man, a woman, maybe even a child, but Clarke eyes him for only a moment as she sees him look at the writhing mess that twitches and contorts and convulses on the ground.

And she hates it. It makes her sick, it makes her angry and furious and it breaks her. And she is sure tears burn from her eyes, and she is sure the blood will stain her heart as she rips her knife through the Arker’s neck and she races onwards as blood sprays out across her face, as it drips into her hair and ruins her furs.

And her heart aches, it burns and it screams out at her.

I’m coming, Ontari.

She feels her feet slip under her, she feels her legs buckle and her balance run from her. And she feels the impact, she feels the softened blow as she falls forward, as her fingers slip into the burning flesh of a dying figure. And she screams out, she spits out a mouthful of whatever it was her face smashed into and she gags and retches as she comes to her feet, as she continues forward and as she rounds a corner.

A knife whips past her, the blade glinting in the burning red of the emergency lights as Echo throws a dagger forwards at another Arker, this one staring horrified at her hands as she looks at the slowly bubbling remains of a figure before her. And Clarke barely registers the pained thump, the quiet gasp, before she moves past the now dying Arker, the sound of a sword ripping through flesh all she hears before she comes to a heaving stop, her mind screaming out to her as her chest shakes, as her legs burn and her eyes sting and water and as her fists come crashing against the door.

She isn’t sure how long her fists slam against the metal, she isn’t sure how long she screams and cries out, but her fists ache and throb and burn with the repeated motions. And as she brings a fist back, as she readies it for one more slam forward the door creaks, it groans and it snaps open.

And she stares at the first person she sees. And her eyes flick over the white of their warpaint, her eyes focus on the furs that line the woman’s shoulders and the scars that linger down her chin.
“Clarke,” and it’s surprised, it’s awed and feared.

“Is everyone alright?” and Clarke snaps it out at the woman before her, the flame haired Azgeda stepping back as her eyes trace the blood and wet that lingers against Clarke’s heaving body.

“We have dead,” the woman replies, her eyes turning to the bodies that lie on the floor. “We captured Mountain Men that didn’t burn,” the woman continues quietly as she gestures to a number of Arkers, their hands tied, blindfolded and gagged, and Clarke’s eyes snap to Thelonious who thrashes against his bonds, his head swivelling left and right to any sound he hears. “We are trying to free the captured,” and the woman whispers these words out quietly too, her voice horrified and broken as her eyes fall to the captured grounders that still remain caged. “We can not open the cages,” she finishes mournfully.

But Clarke doesn’t hear her, or she ignores her, she discards the words the woman gives. And maybe it’s selfish, maybe it’s cruel, uncaring, unkind. But, as her eyes settle on the figure lying on the ground, she thinks she knows.

And it hurts.

It screams out at her and ruins her mind as she sees the blood that pools underneath.

And she knows.

Her eyes trace over the body, her eyes move to the woman who cradles the bloodied mess in her arms and her eyes meets Entani’s. And the other healer looks up at her, and it’s a quiet gaze they share, it’s a mournful thing and a desperate thing. And Entani’s nose is broken, it twists and bends and sits painfully across the healer’s face. Her eye remains swollen, bloodied and a mess of puss and drying blood.

And Clarke only meets her gaze for long enough to know she stills breathes, for long enough that she knows her attention isn’t needed. And then her eyes settle on the woman in Entani’s arms.

And it’s a choked, broken sound that breaks in her throat as she rushes forward, as her eyes find the blood that seeps through Entani’s fingers and that ruins the white furs that lie across the shoulders of the person in Entani’s arms.

And Clarke comes to a skidding halt by Entani, her eyes watering as she peers down and as she falls to her knees and as her hand comes out shakily.

“Ontari,” and it comes pained, whispered and broken as her fingers brush against Ontari’s cheek, the sweat and blood and white of her war paint coming away with Clarke’s fingers.

“Ontari,” and she whispers her name again, and her fingers brush against Ontari’s forehead before tucking a strand of her hair behind a too cold ear.

“Ontari,” and she is sure her lips tremble, she is sure her eyes water and burn and let the pain flow cruelly.

“You scared me, Ontari,” and she wipes a hand across her nose, the sound undignified, and broken. “You scared me, Ontari,” and she whispers it again as she settles next to Ontari.

“You scared me,” and Clarke says it again and she thinks her heart aches at the sight before her.

“I thought you died,” and she knows she cries, she knows she lets her shoulders shake and her heart heave painfully in her chest. “I thought I lost you,” and she smiles as Ontari reaches up tenderly, as a
shaky hand comes to lay atop Clarke’s own as it cards through the furs on her shoulder.

“I am hard to kill,” and the words come quiet, broken and full of pain, but Clarke smiles. She lets a laugh escape her lips as she gazes at Ontari, the woman’s face a pale white, even behind the smeared paint she still wears.

“Rest,” and Clarke whispers the words out as she casts her eyes to Entani’s hand as it still presses firmly to Ontari’s shoulder, the blood beginning to slow and steady between her fingers. “You’re going to make it, Ontari,” and Clarke brings her hands up to Ontari’s head as she moves it into her lap, a quiet sorry falling from her lips as Ontari winces, as she whimpers and as she clenches her jaw painfully.

“We won, Clarke,” and she looks up at Entani’s words, a smile, awed and unbelieving living in the healer’s eyes. “We defeated the Mountain,” and Clarke is sure a broken smile splits her lips.

And so she lets an ugly laugh rip through her chest, she lets a quiet sob break through her throat and she lets the cruel shaking of her shoulders bring her into a quiet turmoil as the stench of the burnt bodies reach her senses once more.

And they won.

And it hurts.

And so she turns carefully, her eyes falling onto the door she had come from as she hears the approaching footsteps, as she hears the clanging of metal as it brushes against metal. And her eyes fall on a figure that stands in the door way.

And it’s only a moment that their eyes meet, it’s only a quiet breath, only a moment’s beat of her heart.

But her eyes lock with the green that stares back.

And it’s a strange thing, she thinks, as she holds Lexa’s gaze, as she shares a moment that she thinks only for them. And it’s understanding. She thinks she sees an understanding that lives in Lexa’s eyes, that breathes on every exhale and every contraction of her lungs.

And maybe it’s an understanding of the choices Clarke has made.

And maybe it’s acceptance as Lexa’s gaze falls to Ontari, still cradled in Clarke’s arms,

And maybe it’s acceptance of the things Clarke has done, that Clarke has dared to do.

But maybe it’s an acceptance of the not yet that lingers somewhere between them. And maybe it’s a sadness, a guilt, a burden that Clarke thinks Lexa holds upon her shoulders. And maybe, if Clarke looks hard enough, if she lets her eyes linger for long enough, she thinks the sadness within Lexa’s gaze is for her. Is for the things Lexa must understand now torment Clarke’s mind— that will torment her waking thoughts.

And the words they shared echo in her mind.

*Maybe life should be about more than just surviving.*

*Don’t we deserve better than that?*

But perhaps surviving isn’t for her. Perhaps all she’s done is survive, all she’s done is wait for her
turn, for her moment. For the time when she’s flung from the Ark, for her time when she spins through space, for the long, painful moment when the oxygen she breathes is ripped from her lungs. Maybe all she’s done since coming to the ground is wait, is steal a breath not for her to have. Not for her to breathe.

And maybe she doesn’t deserve it. And maybe she thinks, and maybe she knows that she deserves nothing more than the hollow ache that spreads through her thoughts and whispers and taunts her mind. And she thinks these thoughts that she now thinks of are senseless, are pointless, she thinks them rambling and broken and disjointed.

But she thinks she knows the answer now.

She thinks she knows the outcome.

She thinks she knows the game.

And as her eyes fall to the bloodied strap around her wrist, as her eyes settle on her father’s watch, she hears the words more fully.

She hears the question more clearly.

And so that question?

What is survival?

And that answer?

Survival is a fool’s errand.
Chapter 22

Her feet take her down the corridors, her footfalls a quiet echo that lives somewhere in the space that breathes around her. Clarke’s fingers brush against the cool of the wall, her fingertips tracing the small cracks that wound their way lazily across the rough surface. And it’s cold and it’s quiet, it’s dark, and the shadows linger for too long, the shadows bend and twist and dance through her vision. And her feet take her as far as they can before she comes to a closed door.

Her eyes close slowly, she lets her mind wander and her thoughts drift for long enough that she thinks the wandering turmoil of her doubts lingers too close to the surface. And she feels the quiet press as she leans against the metal of the door, she feels the cold chill as it drips into her cheek as she presses her face forward.

And maybe she pretends she doesn’t walk the empty halls of a too quiet beast, maybe she pretends she doesn’t still feel the stickiness that clings to her fingertips.

Maybe she pretends.

Her eyes open, her fingers close against her knife’s handle as she steps back just once. And then she opens the door carefully, her eyes peering into the dark of the room she finds and she waits.

She waits for a reaper to lunge out at her, she waits for a demon to rise forth and steal her away and she waits for the times when her mind doesn’t live too conscious within her head.

Her eyes adjust to the darker room, and it feels an age, it feels a too long stretch of time, but then she steps forward slowly, her eyes moving for a moment over the bed she sees tucked against the wall.

Her eyes find the clothes strewn across it, a shirt, worn and weathered and old. Her eyes find the pants, dark and faded, a loose thread halfway free.

She sees the drawings then, she finds them stuck against the wall, a stick figure, the faded black of the pencil rough and shaky, full of love and energy as it runs over the blank paper with a smile and a laugh and a love that exists in times long gone. Her eyes trace the hand that reaches up, her eyes fall to the larger figure, a smile spreading across a face, a nose, lopsided, uneven and a cartoon.

And it hurts.

Her eyes move to the corner of the room. Her eyes settle on what lies there and she feels it. She feels the tears that begin to form, she feels the pain that screams into her mind and she feels the anguish as it shatters her heart and breaks her mind.

She feels the bile rise, she feels it spread and surge and so she turns quickly, her senses fouled as she doubles over, as she empties her stomach into the empty corridor she had stood in. And so she turns back quietly, a grimace open her lips as she wipes the back of her hand against her mouth before she steps into the room.

And it’s only a rough scratch of her knife, only a moment’s discomfort as she drags the point of her blade against the harsh bite of the metal door. And then she stills her beating heart, stills her frantic breathing and steadies her heaving chest.

And so she pulls a plastic sheet from her bag, she unrolls it next to the corner of the room and she takes one last steadying breath, her fingers gripping the shovel in her sweaty palms as she lets her tears fall.
It will all be over soon.

It’s a pained, heavy, broken whimper that leaves her lips as she backs out the door, her back protesting with the weight of what she pulls behind her. But the fresh air is welcomed, the stench and the rotting and the burning slips from her and she breathes in deeply as she swings the door shut behind her.

And so she eyes the two marks she etched into the metal for a long moment before she turns, before she picks up the ends of the plastic weight and before she begins the slow journey to the surface.

It’s a strange thing to find herself walking the hallways of the Mountain, it’s a strange thing to see the burning torches that flame and brighten the dark of the hallways, the lights not quite powerful enough to give light to the expanse of the winding paths underground. Not yet, anyway, not until Raven has time to repair the damage she had caused.

It’s a strange thing as she passes warriors, it’s a strange thing as she nears a group of Lake clan, their eyes peering at a map in their hands as they move through the hallway. And it’s strange when the first of the Lake clan raises a head at her footfalls, as his eyes settle on her and as his head bows lowly, a murmured breath leaving his lips.

And so she grimaces, if only by a twitching of a lip, if only by the twitching of a cheek as she nears and as she moves past Jomm who remains quiet.

And maybe she isn’t quite sure what to think anymore.

She rounds a corner, her footfalls heavy and tired and she comes to a large set of doors that remain standing open, furs draped over them as tree branches and greens litter the pathway into the next room.

And so she steps aside as a number of wounded warriors are helped through the doors, arms slung over those that support their weight, quick nods sent her way, some wary, some friendly, some more open, some more guarded.

She smiles as she meets the eyes of two Azgeda, their hands coming up briefly to grip her forearm in greeting as they pass her and then she ducks through the doors, her fingers pulling at the furs around her shoulders as the heat from the quietly burning flame lives freely in the centre of what was once the Mountain’s medical wing.
Clarke catches her mother’s eyes as she moves through the medical wing, her feet quiet as she steps across the furs that line the floor, and she sends a smile towards Abby and a small wave, her mother’s eyes smiling up at her for a moment before she turns back to the wounded warrior whose leg remains broken and bloodied.

Clarke passes rows of beds, many occupied by warriors, their bodies bloodied and broken, some with large gashes ripped through their flesh, some with bullet wounds, many with their own tales of strife that linger across tired bodies.

It only takes her a few short moments but she finds who she searches for near the end of the long room. And she smiles quietly as she comes to a pause by the end of the bed, her eyes falling to the sleeping woman who lies before her.

She meets Entani’s eyes in the next bed, the healer’s face still swollen, her nose still bloodied but set, a large number of bandages wrapped around her waist.

“She has been sleeping,” Entani whispers as her eyes fall to Ontari’s slumbering face, her chest rising slowly and an arm wrapped firmly against her side.

“She’s lucky,” and Clarke lets the smile live a bit more freely across her lips as she sits on the edge of the bed, a hand coming to brush away a loose strand of Ontari’s hair. “It missed anything important,” and Clarke finds a quiet laugh escaping Entani’s lips.

“You missed her say some interesting things,” and Entani whimpers and curses quietly as her laughter jostles her ribs. “What ever medicine the Skaikru healers gave her is interesting.”

And Clarke turns her eyes back to Ontari, her face peaceful in sleep.

“I’m just glad you’re both ok,” and she means it, and she thinks it hurts quietly, she thinks her mind an ever constant storm that writhes dully, that never settles and always broils within her.

“You did well, Clarke,” and Entani reaches over gingerly, her fingers coming to grip Clarke’s hand firmly for a moment before she settles back into her bed, her free hand coming to pull the furs over her exposed torso as she leans further into the pillows.

“I’ll visit again soon,” and Clarke rises, one last smile given to Entani before she turns, her feet already taking her past the rows of beds, her eyes focusing somewhere on the small space in front of her feet, her gaze turned away from the eyes that follow her movements and shadow her steps.

It’s a quiet chill that seeps into her bones, that settles itself around her shoulders and brings a small smile of familiarity to her lips. And it’s a cold she knows well, it’s a crisp bite to the air that she has woken to for days, for months. For years.

And so she pauses for just a moment as her fingers come to hold against the handle of the door, the lone candle burning quietly in the corner of the hallway, a small light all that is given to this lonely hallway of the Mountain.

She hears the warriors behind her shuffle, she feels them close around her and she hears the settling of furs and the creaking of leather for just one more moment. Torvun steps closer to her, his hand resting comfortably upon his knife.
Clarke turns around briefly, her eyes meeting the warriors that flank her, all tall, broad shouldered and barrel chested, their hair braided and fierce, their faces smeared the deathly white of Azgeda. Her eyes meet Echo’s for a moment too, the assassin staying back quietly, her eyes peering back down the hallway in habit before she meets their eyes once more.

And then Clarke turns, her fingers come to push against the door and it opens with a quiet swing. And so she walks forward, her eyes moving from door to door she passes in the hallway, the white of the walls too bright, the white of the ceiling too crisp, and the white of the floor too blinding. But it brings a smile to her lips, if only because it reminds her of Ronto, if only because it reminds her of Azgeda and the snow fields and the ice lakes and the blinding blizzards that she longs for.

Her feet carry her further and further down the long corridor, her eyes settling on the number of figures that stand a long space before her, their whispered words meeting her ears gently as she approaches. She passes a number of faces that peer out of the doors recessed into the walls, their eyes suspicious, their gazes fearful, angry, hateful. But she lets them pass, her warriors ignoring the shouted curses sent their way.

And she comes to a stop, her feet muffled by the fur wrapped boots she wears, and so the Skaikru in front of her turn quickly as she clears her throat. And she sees their eyes flick to the warriors behind her, she sees their eyes widen at the weapons that litter the bodies of her Azgeda and she sees their eyes caution in their movements as they take in the white of their war paint.

“Clarke,” and Abby steps forward nervously, “what are you doing here?” and Abby’s eyes move to Torvun briefly.

“I’m here to speak with the prisoner,” is all Clarke says, her eyes meeting Abby’s for a long moment.

“It’s ok, Abby,” and Kane pushes forward quickly, his gaze taking in the ferocity of the glares the Azgeda send their way.

And so Clarke sends him a wary smile, enough to speak of a thanks, before she steps forward, Kane and Abby making way for her, and she finds Wells present too, his shoulder leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest as he peers at the prisoner.

“Has he spoken?” and Clarke isn’t so sure to who her question is directed.

“No,” and Kane’s voice comes nervous, just a small waver to it as the Azgeda stand in front of the open door, their eyes falling to the man that sits in the centre, his own eyes moving slowly from person to person that stands before him.

“You’ve committed crimes against the coalition,” Clarke begins. “You allied with the enemy of my people,” and her chin lifts slowly as she peers down at the man.

“You are my people,” the man responds defiantly, his hands spreading out before him as he gestures to the Skaikru. “I’m still chancellor,” he says. “You chose to break from us.”

“You allied with the Mountain. You allied with a people that bled my own. You allied with a people who captured, tortured and killed.”

“A necessary evil,” he responds.

“Necessary?” and her eyebrow raises in challenge.

“Look at yourself, Clarke,” and his eyes hold her gaze. “They scarred you. They disfigured you. For what?” and his eyes snap to Torvun’s, a finger pointing at the large man. “And him? Your guard?
Look at his forehead,” and the man gestures to the two large scars slashed against Torvun’s forehead. “You tell me I’m evil, I’m cruel, that I’m brutal because I sided with the people most like us. Who have technology, who understand it? Who use it? Why should we throw it all away to live like savages?”

“These savages,” and Clarke lets the words linger for a long moment as her eyes move over the bruises that litter the dark skin that covers the man’s face. “These savages never stole your people, never took parents from children, never took sons and daughters from mothers and fathers. Never turned your people into monsters. Don’t tell me that we’re the savages.”

“Jake would be ashamed of you,” and his eyes burn angrily.

And it’s a sting across her face as the words find her ears. It’s a hurt that lingers in her chest at his words. But Abby is the one that reacts violently, and Clarke hears her mother shout out, hears her lunge forward, pain and hate and fury colouring her tone as her voice fills the small room.

And an Azgeda warrior reaches out quickly as he grabs Abby, as she tries to pull away and reach the prisoner. And so Clarke lets Abby’s voice quiet, lets her mother’s raging settle. And as she peers around her she finds Kane’s fists clenched tightly, his eyes downcast. She finds a Skaikru guard gripping his shock baton nervously, his eyes darting from the prisoner, to Abby, to the Azgeda warriors. And she finds Wells, his eyes staring blindly into a space by his feet, his lips pulled up into a pained grimace. And it’s a small lingering doubt that colours Clarke’s mind as she peers at her old friend, at his part in her father’s death. But for now she shakes the thoughts, her mind turning back to the prisoner before her.

“I think you know what I want, Thelonious,” and Clarke’s words carry into the room, her voice firm and steady once more. “Make it easy for us.”

And Thelonious meets her gaze with his own.

“I won’t betray my people,” he says firmly.

“Well, you already did,” and Clarke takes a step forward and she crouches so that she comes level with his face, and her ears pick up Torvun moving closely behind her, she feels the other Azgeda warriors moving into the room too, their movements silent and sure.

“Tell me, Thelonious. Tell me where the rest of the Arkers escaped to.”

And it’s an anger that burns in his eyes, it’s a decision she sees just moments before it happens and so she braces her self and she grimaces as Thelonious roars out, as he spits in her face and as he lunges for her. And so she slips back quickly, Torvun’s fist coming to strike the thrashing man across the face brutally as the Azgeda turn on the Skaikru, shouts of warning and threats ripping from their throats as they square off with the Skaikru guards.

“Enough!” and her voice carries over the explosion of noise, one of her warriors passing her a cloth as she wipes her cheek. “We’re on the same side. We’re done here,” she finishes as she moves to the doorway, her eyes meeting the Azgeda she passes quickly.

And it’s only a moment for the rest of the Skaikru to exit, only a moment for Torvun to ensure that Thelonious remains shackled and unconscious.

And then Clarke comes face to face with Kane and Abby, Wells still lingering in the background, his eyes unfocused.

“What are you going to do, Clarke?” and her eyes meet Kane’s as he looks at her carefully.
“We can’t let those who sided with Thelonious and the Mountain escape,” she begins with a shrug. “They’ll be hunted, they’ll be rounded up and taken prisoner so that they can be punished.”

“We don’t even know which way they went,” and Kane turns back to the now closed door. “Thelonious won’t tell us,” and he finishes with a quiet sigh.

“That won’t matter,” and Clarke turns to meet Echo’s eyes. “I already have people ready to track them. We’ll find them soon enough,” and she sees a small eagerness live within Echo’s quiet gaze.

She follows Roan’s movements quietly, her eyes tracing the steps he takes in the open, his own eyes quiet as he thinks over whatever thoughts come to linger within his mind. Roan comes to a stop in his pacing after a moment, his eyes finding hers, a squint to them as the sun shines upon his face.

“I don’t like the Mountain,” he begins with a smirk. “Too smothering,” he finishes with a shrug as he inhales deeply. “But you’d think I’d be used to being locked up,” and he jerks his head to the left, Clarke’s eyes following the motion as she eyes the large number of warriors that set up Lexa’s war tent not far from the Mountain’s opening.

“Things will change now, Clarke,” and he looks back at her carefully. “Azgeda will need someone to represent the clan here,” and he continues to hold her gaze.

“You want that to be me?” and she shifts her weight from foot to foot for a moment.

“Yes,” Roan shrugs. “I’m returning to Azgeda. I will need to make sure our Kwin does not make moves to control the Mountain,” and he sighs once more. “It would be best if we were both not in the same place,” and he swings his arms around him lazily, his shoulders rolling with the motion, a smile coming to find its way across his lips.

“What makes you think I’ll be listened to? Isn’t there a general or an official that would be better suited to the role?” and Clarke continues to eye Roan thoughtfully.

“Perhaps,” and he bends down and groans quietly at the stretch in his legs. “But you know what they call you now,” and he looks up briefly, a small shadow falling across his eyes as he peers at her shifting expression for a moment. “They will listen to you,” and she thinks him correct.

“The clans will fall in line,” Roan continues as he rises, “they won’t cross Azgeda for the moment. They won’t want to bring your wrath upon them.”

“It helps that the Mountain’s already being used for healing,” and she turns her gaze towards the open entrance, her eyes following the continuous line of warriors moving in and out, many wounded, many carrying supplies between the war camp and the gutted beast. And a smile finds her lips as she eyes a number of Trikru carrying a large tree between them as they head into the Mountain.

“It was a wise plan,” and Roan follows her gaze. “The Mountain will be a trading post, a place for all clans to meet,” and Roan’s voice turns darker for a moment as his thoughts move to a distant time. “Though I am sure some clans do not enjoy the power of the Mountain being so openly used.”

“They’ll get used to it,” Clarke answers coolly.
“Yes,” and Roan turns to her, his eyes a quiet glint in the sun light. “They will.”

They both fall into a quiet then, their eyes following the number of warriors that move provisions in and out of the Mountain, and she eyes a trail of Azgeda as they move past, their furs a quiet white in the warm breeze.

“Prince Roan,” and she turns to him cautiously. “Why is Echo helping?” and she thinks over her worries for a moment, she ponders over the actions she thinks Echo has taken in her past.

“You know of her involvement in the Commander’s past?” and Roan eyes her carefully, his gaze quiet.

“Yes,” she voices.

“Echo followed her orders. She found a weakness and delivered it to Azgeda,” and he shrugs. “Those who serve the Kwin directly are more prone to seeing her violence,” and Roan’s eyes turn mournful for a moment. “Befriending someone and then helping deliver their head to a loved one is not something Echo is proud of,” he finishes with a shrug. “And Echo had seen the clans prosper in her time at the Capital, she had seen the Coalition trade amongst themselves and had seen the way we could survive and live without the constant wars being fought,” and Roan’s voice turns quiet, a gravel to it that lingers for a long moment. “I was the one to deliver Costia to Lexa,” and he lets a sad light find its way into his eyes. “I did not know who it was at the time. And perhaps I was foolish not to…” and he trails off painfully.

“But then you realised?” and Clarke finds her mind turning back to the moments she had shared with Lexa.

“Yes,” and Roan shrugs. “Echo had been by my side too, as my guard. But we saw the reaction.” and he shrugs for a moment. “Any and Gustus wanted us both dead, but I made a deal,” and he meets Clarke’s gaze once more.

“You let yourself be prisoner so Echo could be let go?” and she sees him nod for a moment.

“Yes,” and he shrugs again. “A good ruler must be willing to make sacrifices for those under their care,” he finishes.

There’s a number of things in life that Clarke thinks she hates. She thinks she hates her feet after a day spent walking through the blizzards that spring up near Ronto, she thinks she hates the way the sun this far south feels against her body as she wears the heavy furs and leathers of Azgeda. She thinks she hates the ache in her bones, the chill in her flesh and the bite in her muscles as she forces herself awake some days.

But as she lets her gaze steady, as she lets her eyes burn and water and sting in the smoke, she thinks this not one of those things.

And it hurts.

The flaming pyres burn, they crackle and they scream into the dark of the sky. And it’s a sight she thinks won’t fade from her mind for a long time. And as she peers to her left, as she takes in the pyres that burn quietly in the distance she thinks it hurts. Her eyes follow the steady line of burning
flames as she looks to her right, and she lets the dancing fires burn into her mind as she stares for too long, as she holds her gaze steady and as the smoke seeps into her skin.

And it’s too many for her to count. It’s too many for her to even really consider. And maybe it’s a comfort, perhaps it’s a quiet reprieve that she can’t tell the difference between the pyres that hold those of the Coalition warriors, those who had fought and died and suffered. And she knows, as her eyes settle on a quietly crackling pyre, as a burnt log crumbles and breaks and falls, she knows she can’t tell if this pyre holds the bodies of those she had killed. Of those she had burnt alive, of those who she had sacrificed.

But she thinks it was worth it.

Or maybe she merely hopes it was.

And so she stares into the burning flames. She lets them dance into her mind and burn into her thoughts. And she lets the pain linger, she lets it fill her nostrils with the burning of wood and the burning of flesh and the searing heat of a flame as she stands too close.

And she feels it.

It’s a long walk down the hallways of the Mountain, her feet a quiet step as she treads upon the furs that now line the floor. She passes a number of tired warriors, some Trikru, some Lake clan, some Rock Line and some from clans she hardly recognises in her tired state. Torvun walks quietly behind her, his feet a steady thump that gives her mind a moment of ease, his presence a welcome thing, if only because she fears the times when she remains awake, the times when she lingers too long in her own mind.

And so she grits her teeth, she clenches her fists and she continues forward, the torches that burn against the walls of the Mountain the only light she see, her shadows a careful companion that follows her as she walks the quiet of the Mountain.

She walks for an age, her eyes scanning the doors she passes until she comes to a stop, her gaze turning down to the map in her hand for a moment before looking back at the writing on the door. And it’s a steady breath, and a shaky outreach of her hand as she pushes open the door and as she steps across the threshold.

And she pauses.

She looks down, the stairwell dipping down into the depths of the Mountain, and she looks up, the winding path reaching up into the heights of the Mountain and so she turns to meet Torvun’s eyes for a moment before she tucks the map into her sleeve, her feet already taking her up the stairs, already taking her on the long path upwards.

She comes to a heaving stop, her legs burning and her chest rising and falling rapidly, the climb a painful thing that leaves her breathless and a mess of sweaty hair and lazy braids. But she pushes
forward, her fingers splaying out on the door in front of her as she pushes it open and as she steps out into the dark of the night.

Torvun meets her eyes once more as he takes a stand by the door, a hand lingering near his knife as he casts his gaze in a careful arc around them before he settles against the opening in the side of the Mountain.

And it’s quiet.

Clarke turns away from Torvun and she lets her gaze take in what she sees.

She stands on the edge of a clearing, the grass dancing quietly in the night’s breeze and the trees that linger on the edge of the clearing huddled together for warmth as the cool of the wind rustles their leaves and sways their branches.

And it’s a tentative step forward that Clarke takes, her eyes moving over the grass, the occasional flower shining quietly in the gentle moonlight as it shines against the dark of an empty sky. Her feet take her into the centre of the clearing and so she comes to a quiet stop. And it’s a moment’s pause, a moment’s hesitation as she looks around her, as her eyes settle on a lone flower that stands quietly at the edge of the clearing. Her eyes settle on a young tree, a brave tree that sways defiantly, that lets its roots grow and spread, a tree that lets its branches reach up eagerly into the sky.

And so she lets her legs fold under her, she lets herself sit down into the soft of the grass and she lets her fingers splay out, she lets the grass soothe her tired mind and she lets her thoughts wander. And it’s a pained smile that lingers across her lips, it’s a pained grimace that winds its way across her face.

But perhaps she thinks herself used to it.

She leans back on her hands as her face turns up to the sky. And it’s a quiet night she finds herself in. The clouds, barely present, barely there, just a careful haze that clings dutifully in the depths of the dark overhead. Clarke traces the wisps of a cloud she finds, she traces the smudged edges and the careful sailing of it as it breathes through the night. Her eyes gaze at the moon, her eyes trace the curve and the shapes that dance upon its surface.

And she wonders.

She lets her mind turn back the days, turn back the months and years. And she wonders what life would be like. She thinks she feels the Ark’s air as it breathes through the hallways, she thinks she feels the steady hum of the air as it recycles and as it gives life to her lungs. And it surprises her when a finger brushes against her cheek, when a wetness clings to her finger tip and when she feels the raised edges of her scars.

And she wonders. She wonders what her father would think. But maybe she doesn’t, if only because he no longer lives, if only because he no longer breathes and laughs and smiles with her.

But maybe she embraces it. If only because times of distant memories have faded, have dulled and eased. But she hears the whispers. She hears the quiet words that linger on the wind and she thinks she even sees the dark wisps of smoke that flit just past her, that linger in the corners of her vision and that fade and recede from her searching gaze.

And it’s an odd thing now, as she lies back in the grass, as she lets it comfort her and soothe the turmoil of her mind. And as she thinks, as she ponders and questions, perhaps it’s a fear. Perhaps its a loss and a hurt.
And it’s a sigh. A quiet rebuttal of her thoughts, a quiet rebuke of her wandering mind. And maybe she shouldn’t be alone, not after the things she’s done, not after the things she dared to do. And yet…

She hears it quietly. She hears the careful call of a bird as it sings on the rustling of the wind. And she knows Torvun calls out to her, calls out that a person approaches. And so she sits up carefully, her eyes peering into the trees before her, her eyes peering up into the barely there clouds and the quiet of the shining light.

And she hears it. She hears the small groaning of the door and the whispered words and the careful step of feet.

And she feels the person approach quietly, she feels the unsteady gait of an unsteady mind. And she feels the strumming in her chest and the quiet pain that must always linger within her tired mind.

And the feet pause, they slow and they halt somewhere just behind her. And she thinks it a long moment that the silence lingers, she thinks it a quiet breath and a careful shuffle before the feet come to linger in the corner of her vision, her eyes still tracing a quiet star as it moves through the emptiness of the night’s sky.

And she thinks she shouldn’t welcome this, she thinks she shouldn’t deserve the company that is offered. And yet…

“Yes, you can sit,” and she isn’t sure why she voices the words, she isn’t sure why she doesn’t turn from the sky.

And maybe it’s a small twitching of her lips as she feels the person come to sit by her side, a space between them, enough for a not yet to still linger, to still take place.

“Prince Roan has requested that you stay here,” and the words bring a small smile to her lips, if only because they still speak of plans, still speak of deals and actions and things to accomplish. And yet…

“I know,” and she replies quietly, carefully, her eyes tracing the small cloud that begins to settle on the horizon. “He spoke to me earlier,” and she shrugs for a moment, the furs rustling against her cheek with the rising of her shoulder.

“Trikru scouts have not found a trail yet,” and she thinks she lets a smile live more freely upon her lips when she hears these words, too.

“We’ll find them,” Clarke says, and she lets her fingers dance against the breathing grass beneath her palm.

“I can send more,” and there’s a quiet pause as the person considers their words. “Perhaps if we combi—”

“Shhh…” and the sound comes whispered upon Clarke’s lips.

And she smiles as she turns to face her companion, her eyes careful in the quiet of the night.

“Can we talk about something else?” Clarke says before she lets her words linger for a moment between them.

And so Lexa nods quietly, a tentative furrow to her brow as she meets Clarke’s gaze.

“How is Ontari?” and the question gives her pause for a moment, her mind turning to her still injured friend.
“She’s ok,” and Clarke thinks she smiles at the stories Entani had told her of Ontari, and the words Ontari had said while drugged.

“You care for her,” and perhaps it comes out a question, an observation. An acceptance.

“Yes,” and Clarke shrugs carefully, an errant braid falling across her face.

And it’s a small sadness, just a barely there thing that lingers against Lexa’s face, but perhaps Clarke has always looked hard enough. And perhaps Clarke will always see the things Lexa doesn’t wish to be exposed.

“When I said not yet,” and Clarke holds Lexa’s gaze carefully. “I didn’t mean never,” and it’s a small beat she feels strumming in her chest as Lexa’s eyes move carefully, as they move surely and frightfully across her face. “You don’t have to worry about Ontari,” and it’s a small thrill that lingers in her mind as she glances down to her hand, as she finds it creeping slowly towards where Lexa keeps hers close to her side from where she sits in the grass besides Clarke.

And so the silence stretches out between them for a long moment, their gazes turned up into the sky, Clarke’s thoughts happy to wander as she follows the path a lone bird cuts through the empty dark.

But she hears Lexa inhale deeply, she hears Lexa’s thought linger openly for a moment and so she meets the other woman’s gaze.

“You could not sleep?” and it comes as a gentle prod, a careful hand reaching out in the quiet of the night.

And so Clarke lets the silence linger for just a small moment, a shrug finding its way across her shoulders.

“Was it worth it?” and she voices her doubts, voices her fears and her pain.

And she thinks Lexa understands the question, understands the plea and the hand she holds out. And maybe Clarke isn’t sure why she voices the question, why she feels the need to speak her thoughts. But maybe the presence besides her is reason enough, is cause enough for her to want to form the words, to bring life to the thoughts that burn cruelly in the corners of her mind.

“Sometimes…” and there’s just a moment’s pause, enough for Lexa to think over her words, to think over what she will say. “Sometimes we must sacrifice our own happiness for our people.”

And Clarke thinks the words she hears are pragmatic, are selfless and so very, very much what she expected to hear. But perhaps it brings a wetness to her eyes.

“Does it ever get better?” she thinks a traitorous tear must fall, lonesome and pathetic down her cheek. “Does it ever get easier?”

And she watches Lexa’s eyes turn thoughtful, her gaze following the tear that falls. Clarke even thinks she watches the gentle twitching of a finger, a motion that speaks of a desire and a wish, of wanting to reach out and wipe away the pain Lexa must see before her, but she doesn’t.

And so Lexa says instead, “you learn to live with the choices you make.”

And perhaps the words speak of a finality, speak of an understanding, of an acceptance, of years spent in service to a people, and to lives not her own.

And so Clarke lets the silence hang between them once more, their eyes turning to the forest that
stretches out below them. And as Clarke traces the drifting clouds and the solitary birds that fly through the night sky, she thinks a calm must settle over her. If only because she shares this moment with another, with someone who could perhaps understand the raging of her mind and the cracking of her heart.

And so she turns back to the quiet of Lexa beside her and she smiles for a moment, and she makes sure their gazes meet before she continues.

“Thank you. For being here.”

She whispers the words, and her hand reaches out quietly, carefully, her fingers tentative as they thread between Lexa’s own. And Clarke thinks she enjoys the way the pale of the moon shines gently in the green eyes that smile at her.

“You are welcome, Clarke.”

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