To War, With Love

by Intreker05

Summary

Clarke Griffin is a reporter. In her career, she has excelled at making a powerful enemy. Now, kidnapped by him, forced to play a deadly game to survive, Clarke will have to rely on all of her skills to survive with the help of some friends she finds along the way.

This is an alternate universe story involving characters from The 100 and original characters created by me. Clarke Griffin is kidnapped by extremists and taken to a compound in Afghanistan. There, she learns more about the war she has become an unwilling participant in. It will take everything that she has to survive, escape, and get home.

Content warnings for individual chapters will be in Author's Notes at the start of each chapter. This story contains graphic depictions of violence, torture, and war. Eventually, it will contain graphic depictions of sex. This is not a story for the faint of heart, but is probably one of the works that I am most proud of. I hope that, even given the difficult content, you enjoy it.

Notes

Content warnings for this chapter:
Death, blood, kidnapping (including behind tied up and blindfolded), torture
Chapter 1


July 8, 2017

My name is Clarke Griffin. I’m twenty-seven years old. I’m a reporter for the Associate Press. I am also a prisoner of Islamic extremists in Afghanistan. If you’re reading this, there’s a very good chance that I have been killed. Because of that, I want to give you as much information as possible, not just to tell my own story, but to offer any help I can in bringing my kidnappers to justice. For that, I need to go back in time six weeks to the day I was captured.

It was the end of May. I remember that the weather was starting to get warm and we’d had a big rain the weekend before that made it hot and sticky. It was a Monday morning. I’d gotten back from Iraq the week before where I’d been on assignment for the AP, researching and reporting on several underground schools for young girls and women that had popped up recently, a possibly sign of regrowth and renewed motivation in a country devastated by war.

Niylah had picked me up from the airport on Thursday. We fought Friday. She was upset about my work that kept me away from home for so long, putting me in dangerous situations. I pushed back, throwing angry words at her. If I had known what was going to happen, I would have taken them all back in a heartbeat. By Monday morning, we’d gotten past everything and decided to go out to get breakfast. I remember that we were walking down Hedgeburn Road when the first shot rang out. It hit Niylah in the face, spinning her around. She hit the brick wall beside us and slid down, leaving a trail of thick, red blood behind.

The second shot hit my left shoulder. I could feel it burning, like a bad bee sting. It hurt less than I expected, though. It was the adrenaline. The pain would come later.

Two men came out of the alley nearby. I tried to fight them but it was hopeless. I was in too much pain, too much shock. I saw Niylah lying on the sidewalk, her blood leaking into the gutter. Her eyes were open but they were lifeless, dull. I tried to run. One of the men caught me. He slammed me into the wall and I was dazed. I don’t really know what happened next.

The next thing I remember, I was in a car. My shoulder was on fire. I could barely breathe because of the pain. It came in hisses through my teeth. There was something over my eyes, maybe over my whole head. A mask? A bag? I’m not sure. But there was just darkness. I knew I was in a car because I could feel the familiar bump of the road under tires, the “whirr-whirr” noise. Someone was sitting next to me. Occasionally they would bump into me when the car would go around a corner, right into my shoulder, and the pain would rise to a sickening peak and even in the dark everything would spin. I heard speaking, they were men. Two of them. Maybe the same two from before.

They were speaking in hushed tones. Arabic. For some reason, that made me feel better. I could understand them. I heard pieces of the conversation, between the pain in my shoulder and my fear, it was hard for me to focus on a language that wasn’t my own.

“Did you tell him we have the girl?” one asked.

The other barked something, guttural, that I didn’t understand.

“I’m asking because you have the phone, you idiot.”
“You’ve been with me the whole time. Did it look like I made a phone call?’’

“Just shut up and drive. I don’t have anything else to say to you.’’

“What about the girl?’’

With that, a hand pulled the cover off my head and I was blinded, sunlight streaming in through the window.

“Idiot, she’ll know where we’re going.’’

“We’ve been driving for three hours. She has no idea where we are.’’

He was right. Around us, farms and fields, corn and soybeans. Nothing to stand out. Not even a road sign with a number on it. I couldn’t even make an educated guess as to which direction we were going because I couldn’t find the sun. I shook my hair out of my face and the man beside me pushed me back into the seat, hitting my shoulder. I gasped in pain.

“Will you stop with that,’’ he growled in English. “Yes, you’ve been shot and it hurts. No reason to be so dramatic.’’

“Sure, I’ll see what I can do,’’ I said.

He struck me, almost lazily, with a backhand. It rocked me, making me see stars.

“I have questions and you will answer them. You will not talk unless I ask you a direct question and you won’t answer anything other than what I ask. Do you understand?’’

“Yes,’’ I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t always very good at controlling my mouth, but I knew my life depended on it.

“Do you know who we are?’’

“No.’’

“Do you know why we have taken you?’’

“No.’’

“Good, that makes things easier. That woman you were with. Who was she?’’

“A friend.’’

He paused for a second, questioning whether or not to accept that answer. I braced myself for another hit. Niylah had been much more than a friend. She had been my fiance. I could still feel the gold band with the clear stone on my left hand. She’d proposed six months ago. We were planning a fall wedding. I tried not to cry.

“It’s unfortunate that your friend had to die for you. That wasn’t planned.’’

I wanted to say something, but the reminder of the terms of our agreement still burned on my jaw. I was quiet. I took the opportunity to look around. I was in the back seat of a car. The seats were cloth. There was a rental sticker on the back window. That struck me as interesting. Who rented a car to go kidnap someone? The man sitting next to me was young, early twenties. He had thick black hair and a black beard covered the lower half of his face. He turned towards me and his dark brown eyes bore holes into me. There was hatred in his look. When the cruel smile split his lips, his teeth were straight
and white. I shuttered.

“I hope you do remember this face,” he said, still smiling. “I hope it’s the last thing you remember before you die.”

I felt his hand reach up behind me, tangle in my hair, yank my head back. It felt like my neck would break. He leaned close to me and I could smell him. Old tobacco, heavy cologne, minty chewing gum. I was drowning in him. I could barely breathe.

“One more question,” he growled. “Do you know why you’re here?”

I shook my head. He smiled again.

“I hope I’m there when you find out.”

“Yasin, enough,” the other man snapped. “We’re almost there.”

The hood was replaced, the face of the man still dancing in my vision even after I could no longer see anything. Almost was a relative term. It felt like we still drove for an hour before the car turned and I could hear the difference under the tires, from smooth asphalt to touch stone. The car drove for another few minutes, turned again. Asphalt again. It stopped and I was pulled roughly from the car.

The man in the backseat hadn’t looked large, but he drug me across the asphalt with ease. I was thrown around. My head hit something metal. I saw stars. Suddenly, I was sitting in a chair.


The other man paused a moment before answering. “Twenty minutes.”

“Time for some fun.”

“Don’t damage the goods, fool. Al-Sumdal won’t be happy if she’s dead before he gets the chance to see her.”

“I won’t touch her,” I could hear the smile in Yasin’s voice.

He pulled the hood off again. I was in some kind of hangar. There was a small airplane behind me. I could see the car out on the runway. It was dark. Yasin looked even more dangerous in the shadows. He leaned close to me and I could smell him again. He filled my nose. It made me want to gag.

“You’re friend,” he whispered, maneuvering around me so I couldn’t see him anymore, just hear him. “I think it was more than that. You stink of your sin.”

I heard him inhale.

“I hope you loved her. I really do. I wish I could feel what you’re going through right now. I relish your pain. That knowledge that the woman you loved is dead, her brains pouring out on the sidewalk, because of you. She had nothing to do with any of this. If not for you, she would have lived a long, happy life. She might have had children. She might have retired, grown old, had grandchildren and people who loved her. Because of you, she’s dead.”

This time I did gag. I turned my head and vomited onto the concrete floor. When I was done, I felt empty. My head drooped to my chest. My world narrowed. I don’t know what happened next.

But the next thing I remember, I was traveling again. This time, on an airplane. I could hear the roar of the engines. I could feel the sensation of flight in my head. I didn’t know how long we’d been in
the air but I’d been out long enough for them to load me into the plane and for us to get off the ground.

I must have moved, because suddenly, there was someone next to me. He had a different scent though, and when I heard his voice, I recognized him. The driver.

“Please, stop moving,” he whispered in English. “Yasin is up with the pilot but if he sees that you’re awake, he’ll come back here. Try to get some sleep. We have several more hours until we land.”

“How long have I been asleep?” I whispered back.

“Seven hours,” he replied.

“Where are we going?”

“Don’t worry about it, please. Just sleep.”

“Hey, is she awake?” I heard Yasin’s voice bark something from the front of the plane.

“No, I thought so but she is still unconscious.”

“Weak,” I heard his voice closer.

The blow, when it came, wasn’t as hard as his earlier strike. He caught me behind the ear with his fist. I was prepared for it and absorbed the blow without making a sound. I let it roll my head to the side and I heard him laugh.

I wish I’d known then what I know now. I would have fought. I would have done anything I possibly could have to crash that plane into the ocean. I wish I could have done something. Instead, I laid there until sleep came over me and I drifted into a world of nightmares that couldn’t come close to comparing to the new reality that I’d been drug into.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Content warning for this chapter:
Kidnapping (including blindfolding and bound hands), claustrophobia, implied threats of physical violence.

Chapter 2: Boredom - A Chance to Escape - A Chance Missed - Traveling in Dust - The Women

July 9, 2017

I’m trying to catch up quickly but there’s so much of my story to tell. Every chance that I get, I write, late into the night. But I’m afraid of being caught. I want to leave something behind. I’m afraid they’ll kill me soon and I want to leave behind some evidence. Proof that I existed. Maybe that’s all I can do.

I don’t know how long we flew but when we landed, I was drug out of the plane. The air was hot and dry. I could taste dirt and sand. From the plane, I was half-walked, half-dragged across the tarmac. I could hear other airplanes behind me, above me, around me. I was disoriented. Finally, I was shoved into a room, a door slammed behind me. With the hood still on, I couldn’t see so I tried to use my other senses. I could feel the doorknob with one of the hands tied behind my back. I moved around, reaching out with my hands, my shoulders, my feet, even my head. The room was small. So small that I couldn’t comfortably sit down. I was in a broom closet.

And they kept me there for hours, or maybe minutes. Weeks? I’m not sure. Time had no meaning. But being stuck with my thoughts, with my memories. It was torture. Finally, after an unknown amount of time had passed, someone pulled me out. I recognized Yasin’s voice, and the driver. It seemed that they would be with me until the end, whenever that was.

I asked to go to the bathroom. Yasin refused to take me. The driver argued in my favor. Finally, he was allowed to take me. He walked me back into the back of the building and opened a door. He took the hood off my head, untied my hands. I stood there, as unrestrained as I could possibly be. I looked over the driver’s shoulder. Yasin was standing in the background, smoking a cigarette near the door. There was another door on the other wall but I didn’t know if it was unlocked or not. For all I knew, it could lead to the closet where I’d been held earlier. Was it worth it?

Clearly, the driver saw what I was thinking. He stepped in front of me, shook his head.

“I wouldn’t fault you for trying, but I’d encourage you not to. I can protect you from Yasin unless you give me a reason not to and I have a job to do just as much as he does.”

“Why are you so kind while he’s so cruel?”

“Don’t judge either of us until you know more about us. I’m far from kind.”

He said this last part with an edge to his voice that scared me. I turned, entered the small bathroom, did what I needed to, and paused for a moment, looking at myself in the mirror. I looked like something out of a horror movie. My hair was dirty, tangled. There was blood on my face, under my
lip, dried. A cut on my head, dried blood down the side of my face. My shoulder was still on fire. The bullet was still in there, blood down my arm. I didn’t know if they planned on keeping it there forever but I wasn’t looking forward to anyone going in and digging it out.

I splashed water on my face, washed my hands, then opened the door. The driver was still there. He looked at me for a moment, at my shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do about that,” he said. “And let’s put your hands in front of you this time. I think it will be more comfortable.”

I almost cried with relief when he tied my hands in front of me this time. My shoulders burned and ached from having been wrenched behind my body for almost twenty-four hours. The feeling of blood rushing back into my limbs was excruciatingly painful, but I relished the chance to actually have my hands in front of me. I no longer felt like I was on the verge of falling.

The driver walked me back over to where Yasin was standing. There was a jeep sitting outside the door on a road that I hadn’t noticed earlier.

“Put the hood back on her,” Yasin snapped in Arabic.

“What’s the point? She doesn’t know where she is or where we’re going. No frame of reference.”

“I don’t care. We have orders.”

Yasin threw the butt of his cigarette into the ground, stomped it hard under the toe of his boot, and walked toward the jeep.

“Where are we?” I whispered, not expecting an answer but thinking it was worth a shot.

“Turkey,” he whispered back. “Now remain silent.”

I nearly gasped but was able to keep my composure. I wasn’t necessarily surprised. My life had become a whirlwind of absurdity. Maybe I was the one that had died. Maybe I’d also been shot, killed, and this was some fevered imagination of a dying brain. I suddenly felt exhausted. I was thousands of miles away from home, my fiancé was dead. I’d probably end up dying from this bullet in my shoulder. They loaded me into the back of the jeep. Yasin took the seat next to me and I was drowning again in the sharp tang of his tobacco. It even smelled like he’d reapplied his cologne, a whole bottle of it. I grimaced, leaned against the far door, and quickly fell asleep as the jeep rocked its way down the road.

We drove for hours, the dust and the dirt threatening to choke me inside my hood when I was awake. We stopped several times. Bathroom breaks on the side of the road. A stall somewhere in the middle of nowhere for food. Yasin wouldn’t let me eat but the driver convinced him to let me have some water. I sucked it down as quickly as I could before the straw was pulled from my mouth.

I don’t know exactly how long we drove. I know that day faded into night and then the sun rose again, all while we traveled along long stretches of highway and small bumpy roads, up hills and mountains, back down again into valleys. Drive, stop, pee, repeat. Yasin chain smoked with the window down. I don’t know if he ever slept. Finally, we stopped, and this time we didn’t get out.

I heard the driver speaking in Arabic.

“We have her.”

“Al-Sumdal is not here but he requested that you bring her inside. Dalla and Sahar are waiting inside for her.”
I heard a gate open. The jeep pulled forward, down a long driveway. We stopped, doors opened, and again, Yasin pulled me out roughly, dropping me hard on the concrete. My knee hit the ground, I felt my jeans rip, and my skin. I heard a woman’s voice, harsh, speaking to him.

“Yasin, enough.”

“Remember your place, woman.”

“And don’t forget yours. Al-Sumdal will not be happy if you kill her before he has the opportunity to do what he needs to.”

A hand pulled me up from the ground. Yasin. He wrenched my shoulder and I cried out in pain.

“You cow,” the woman growled. “I will take her. Now.”

Yasin pulled me close. “If you try to run, I will tear your apart with my bare hands.”

He pushed me forward, hard, and I fell into a pair of arms that caught me easily. The woman was large, taller than I was, and strong. I could feel the cloth of her robes. She put her mouth close to my ear and spoke quietly with accented English.

“You will find kindness in some places in this house, my child. Come.”

I felt another set of hands, smaller, another woman, and the pair of them guided me inside.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

No real content warnings for this chapter. There's some medical-related stuff and some pain in the latter half of the chapter due to Clarke's gunshot wound so if that kind of thing makes you queasy, you might want to skim it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 3: A Kitchen and a Library - A New Language - Anger - Pain - Sickness - The Kind Voice Returns - Prayers

July 10th, 2017

My first week in the compound was a blur. But if I leave it at that, I’ll get ahead of myself and leave out some important parts. Instead, let me start back at that night. The women, Dalla, the younger one, and Sahar, the older one who had spoken to Yasin, led me into the house. They kept the hood on as they walked me through the hallways. At the time, I never could have guessed how large the house actually was. It felt endless to me, but is even larger than that. Finally, though, we stopped. Sahar cut the cord off my wrists and pulled the hood off my head. We were in a kitchen. It surprised me that it looked like any other kitchen, like something out of a Better Homes and Gardens magazine. The stove, the fridge, everything was westernized. There was recessed lighting, an island with marble countertops.

Through an arched doorway behind Sahar I could see a library, with a heavy wooden desk and tall bookcases covering the walls. What surprised me was that most of the titles were in English. Even some books that I recognized. There was one bookcase where the volumes contained had Arabic titles, but these made up less than a fifth of all the books in the room. Sahar saw my confusion.

“Perhaps your questions will be answered when you meet Al-Sundal. For now, though, I cannot help you with much. Please understand that we are captive here just as much as you are. We have simply found a way to exist with as little pain as possible. I don’t know much, Clarke Griffin. But I do know that you were chosen for a reason. I hope that peace is possible for you as well.”

I nodded. Too shocked to do much. Sahar and Dalla both wore an abaya and a head scarf. Sahar’s was black, Dalla’s dark blue. Dalla had made herself busy in the kitchen and soon set a plate and a cup in front of me. The plate contained dates, a soft cheese, perhaps made out of goats milk, a piece of naan. The cup was steaming. Hot tea. I was familiar with the food. I’d spent a lot of time in the Middle East, reporting in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran. I wasn’t sure where I was now but it could be any of those places. Turkey offered a good hub to go anywhere. That was normally where I flew into.

I sat at the island, ate slowly, cautiously. I hadn’t eaten in 48 hours and my body ached for food, but I knew eating too much, too quickly, would do more damage than good. Dalla made herself busy in the background, Sahar focused on me.

“Dalla does not speak English and you will need to learn Arabic, or at least some. It will help you while you are here.”

I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to let on that I actually knew Arabic. I let Dalla and Sahar spend
the next half hour pointing to objects in the kitchen, telling me what they were called, repeating it in a stilted, halting voice. At one point, Sahar turned to Dalla and said, “This is going to take some time. She is not very bright.”

I had to stifle a laugh. I couldn’t let them know that I understood them. While they might also be captives, it didn’t change the fact that they were doing whatever they needed to survive. And if that meant my death, I didn’t think they would hesitate.

I tried to hide a yawn behind my hand but Sahar had a mother’s eyes. She smiled kindly at me. “You must be exhausted,” she said. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long few days of travel for you. Come, let me show you to your room. Now, I must encourage you not to move around the compound. The kitchen, the library, and your room, are available to you. Go nowhere else or you risk your life. And please, Clarke Griffin, trust me when I tell you that it would work in your favor to follow the rules for now. There are too many of them for you to fight. I have tried.”

I looked more closely at Sahar then. I wondered what kind of woman she had been. I tried to imagine her in Yasin’s hands, at the receiving end of his casual cruelty. It was hard to believe. But at the same time, I did believe her.

She walked me across the hallway to a small wooden door. She opened it, flipped on the light with a switch on the wall. It was little more than a cell but to someone who had been tied up for two days, it looked like heaven. There was a single bed against one wall with a hard mattress that looked to me like the softest pillow I’d ever seen. There were sheets on it, a blanket. There was a side table, a small lamp, a wardrobe. Dalla crossed to the wardrobe and opened it. Inside was an abaya and a scarf, both black.

“I would encourage you to wear this tomorrow,” Sahar said.

“Of course,” I agreed, deciding that I would go along with anything that they asked at that point until I had a better opportunity to escape.

Sahar and Dalla left me alone and I climbed into bed with my clothes on. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I don’t know how much later I woke up. But when I did, it was in excruciating pain. My shoulder hurt, my chest was on fire. Every breath felt like it was breaking, shattering my ribs into a million tiny pieces of glass. I could barely cry out, but thankfully, I did. I cried and screamed, in and out of consciousness.

Somewhere, on the thin knife’s edge of sanity that I hung onto, I heard voices. The light turned on. It was Sahar. She had thrown a scarf over her hair. She was wearing what looked like a nightgown. She touched my head, pulled her hand back with a hiss. “The doctor, now,” she snapped at Dalla who had been running down the hallway with her.

“It hurts,” I gasped.

I don’t know exactly what happened. I know the doctor was called. He was balding, with a thin blonde mustache. When he spoke, it was with a British accent. Nothing in this world made sense but it wasn’t time to think about those things. I was too busy trying not to die.

Within minutes, I was moved to another room, carried by two men that I hadn’t seen before. The room looked like a doctors office, with a counter on one side. The floor was concrete. There was a drain in the middle. I wondered what it was for until the doctor cut the bullet out of my arm and blood dripped onto it. Someone rinsed the blood later with a bucket of water that smelled like bleach.
I was given several injections. One was lidocaine. I didn’t feel him cutting the bullet out. Though, I was in so much pain, I’m not sure I would have felt it anyway.

There were stitches. He put an IV in my arm. Fluids, antibiotics. I heard him say that I needed blood but there was none and he instructed Sahar to bring bone broth and gave me a shot of B-12. I felt like I was living in an alternate reality. I was bleeding out and was about to drink bone broth. If William Shakespeare had walked in at that moment, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

I drank the broth as best I could. Then fell asleep.

I know I was sick for almost a week. I had a fever. I was in and out of consciousness, awake for moments, asleep for long stretches of time. Dreams assaulted me. Niylah, my mom, friends, Yasin, the driver.

It happened in the middle of the night. I could tell because the house was silent. I could see the stars through the high window in my room. I was starting to feel better. I had regained some strength. I had managed to walk from my bed to the door and back, a great accomplishment given that I was still as weak as a newborn and my legs felt like jelly, barely able to support my weight. The swelling around my stitches had decreased. My fever had broken. I was staring up at the stars. The door opened.

When I turned my head, I saw a dark-haired head poke in and my heart jumped into my throat. Yasin!

But it wasn’t him. It was the driver. He crept inside and I suddenly felt scared. I was still weak. I couldn’t fight him off. I wondered if I could yell. Sahar would hear me. But should I?

Instead, he shut the door behind him quietly, crossed to my bed, knelt beside me.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to scare you. I promise that I’m not here to hurt you. I was away. When I came back, I heard that you were ill. I just wanted to check on you. I know that I shouldn’t be here, and I’ll leave soon, but, I was wondering…”

He paused and I noticed that I was holding my breath.

“May I pray for you?”

The question shocked me. But I nodded. And he knelt there, beside my bed, quiet prayers falling from his lips in Arabic. When he finished, he stood and left, leaving me with my thoughts, my questions. I watched the stars until they disappeared and the sun rose.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, author here. Thanks for the great response. I’m really proud of this story and it’s been a ton of fun writing it for you. I’m hoping to release two chapters a week but I’ll warn you now that I won’t be posting from December 24 - January 6 because of a vacation. I’ll try to remember to remind you closer to the date but if I disappear, don’t worry, I’m coming back.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 4: Another Captive - News From the Outside World - In the Kitchen - Bits and Pieces - Zohar - The Jihad - A New Perspective

July 11th, 2017

My time here has passed quickly but I still don’t know anything more about why I am here. I’m writing on scraps of paper, napkins, anything I can get my hands on. I took a pencil from the library. I’m hiding my journal beneath my mattress. Today, though, something happened. It changed my world. Or, at least, the reality that has become my world.

I was up early this morning, like I am most mornings. I’ve fallen into a routine. I wake up early. Sahar and Dalla pray with the other women in the morning. There are fifteen of them. From what I have been able to figure, Al-Sumdal, whoever he is, has five wives including Sahar and Dalla. Sahar is the oldest of the women, Dalla the youngest. The other ten women here belong, in some form or fashion, to the men here. There are between twenty and thirty men here. I don’t have an exact number. They come and go, moving around parts of the house that I’m not allowed in.

There are three children. All of them Al-Sumdal’s. One daughter, the oldest child, is Sahar’s daughter. The two boys are the children of other wives. I don’t see them often. There are three main parts to the house. In the center of the compound, the living and worker quarters, where the kitchen and library and my room are. The doctor’s office where the bullet was removed from my shoulder is also here, as well as several sitting rooms, a study, larger than the library, Al-Sumdal’s office. The East wing is Al-Sumdal’s apartment. Dalla, Sahar, and the other wives live there, along with the children. The West wing is the quarters for the men and the other women.

The central compound is monitored at all times. There are cameras in the hallway, the kitchen and library, everywhere but the rooms. There were three rooms in the hallway. I think they all look like mine but I’m not sure. As far as I can tell, no one else is occupying them.

I have free reign of the kitchen, the library, my room, and now the back courtyard, which I generally stay out of because the guards around the compound like to come and leer, saying rude things in Arabic that they think I can’t understand. Occasionally, I’ll see Yasin out there, but I’d rather not run into him. I only go out if Sahar is with me.

So, this morning I was up with the sun, in the kitchen, preparing the tea while Dalla and Sahar prayed. By the time they came in, I’d set out three cups and saucers, tea still steaming inside. We sat and drank. I spoke in stilted Arabic around them. Simple phrases, interspersed with English when I pretended like I couldn’t think of a word. It was getting difficult to pretend like I didn’t know Arabic. I was having trouble remembering what I’d learned and what I hadn’t. I tried to keep it simple and ask when I thought I was trying to get more complicated.

Soon, after we’d finished our tea and were preparing breakfast, I heard a commotion in the
courtyard. Sahar and Dalla went to go see what was going on. I followed.

There was a man in the courtyard. He was young, with brown hair that fell down to his ears and a five-o’clock shadow. He looked rough. There was blood on his head. His hands were tied behind his back. I felt sick. He looked like I had, scared, no, terrified.

“Who is this?” Sahar demanded, walking out to the courtyard.

“His name is Finn,” one of the guards answered, pushing the young man so that he fell on his knees.

“And what does his name tell me?”

“Bari just brought him in. He’s a reporter.”

“Gah,” Sahar spat. “You idiots. Did Al-Sumdal tell you to do this thing?”

The guard looked down at the courtyard.

“You donkey,” Sahar shook her head. “Get him up and bring him inside.”

“But he is a man.”

“Then stay with him if you want to keep our modesty intact but I will not allow you to take him with you just to he can escape. You will already have to answer for this. You and Bari.”

I kept my eyes down and followed them inside the kitchen. Dalla caught my gaze and shook her head, a sharp movement. Don’t talk to him, it said. So I kept quiet.

I finished making breakfast while Sahar cleaned Finn up. She washed the blood off his head. She looked at the guard.

“Go get some bandages from the doctor. This wound is still bleeding and I won’t have him dripping on the floor.”

The guard hesitated for a moment but Sahar clicked her tongue at him and waved him away. As soon as he left, she turned toward the sink, ringing out the cloth that she had been using to clean his wound.

“You have a moment to speak to each other. But do it quickly and keep your heads down so the camera cannot see your mouths move.”

“Finn,” I said, his name sounding foreign in my mouth. “What happened?”

“You’re her, aren’t you? Clarke Griffin?”

I nodded.

“You’ve been all over the news. There’s a reward out for finding you. They said you were kidnapped by extremists. Everyone thought you were dead. Your fiancé, she was killed when they took you so they thought you were dead too.”

I felt the air leave my lungs like I’d been kicked in the stomach. Niylah was dead. I would grieve for her when I had the chance. But now was not that time.

“What are you doing here?”
“I was embedded with a group in Syria. They’re launching an attack against ISIS. I was captured, beaten. They brought me here. You?”

“I don’t know. I wish I could tell you.”

“They’re looking for you, Clarke. You need to stay strong.”

Dalla silenced us with a hiss. She had been watching down the hallway and when the guard reappeared, she sounded the warning.

Sahar finished tending to Finn’s wounds while Dalla and I finished making breakfast. Two of the women from Al-Sumdal’s apartment came down and got the food to take to the wives and children. Another two women came from the guards quarters to get their food. There was a small kitchen in their part of the compound but we made the naan and yoghurt in the main kitchen so they would visit, share their gossip, and leave. This morning, with the guard and Finn sitting in the kitchen, they stayed quiet.

Sahar gave Finn some food. Naan and yoghurt spiced with mint leaves. I gave him a cup of tea. The guard looked annoyed. Finally, he started questioning Finn. While I washed the dishes, I was able to listen to bits of their conversation without being too obvious.

“What were you doing in Syria?”

“I told you. I’m a reporter. I was embedded with a group fighting ISIS.”

“Lies, you’re a member of the military.”

“I’m not,” Finn insisted. “I had all my press credentials when you arrested me.”

The guard looked upset, though, at this point, I was wondering if he was more worried about what might happen once his boss found out he’d abducted a member of the press. I’m not sure that would matter, though. After all, that was pretty much me. I’d just been abducted from my home instead of a war zone in Syria.

Sahar was finally able to get the guard to let Finn go off to bed and with the cameras in the hallway, he was willing to leave. Sahar came back to the kitchen and let out a deep breath.

“These foolish men will be the death of us all,” she growled in Arabic.

I turned to her, trying to look curious. She waved me off. “Nothing, child. Don’t worry about it.”

I finished the dishes and then wandered into the library where I normally spent my afternoons. I had worked my way through one of the shelves. Many of the books were dull. Economics, politics, military strategy, history, but when you have a limited amount of entertainment, you make due. I pulled out a volume of horror stories by H.P. Lovecraft, trying to decide if horror was really the thing I wanted to read in this environment, when I heard someone clear their voice behind me.

It was the driver. I recognized him, even though he looked a little different. His hair had been cut recently, longer on top, short on the sides. His beard had grown out but it was neatly trimmed. He held up both hands, open and upward, a gesture that was meant to be calming. I hadn’t seen him since the night he prayed beside my bed and, strangely enough, his presence was calming.

“I’m sorry. I keep sneaking up on you.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” I said. “They’ll see you on the camera. You’ll get in trouble.”
“The man watching the cameras today happens to be my brother. I told him that I am interested in you and that I might make an appeal to Al-Sumdal for you. No one will bother us.”

“I don’t even know your name,” I said, sitting down on a window seat, the book held over my lap like some kind of shield.

“I am Zohar,” he said. “And I want to tell you about who Al-Sumdal is and why you are here.”

I nodded for him to continue. Zohar grabbed a seat near me.

“Al-Sumdal’s real name is Robert Beaucraft. He’s an American. He served in the United States Marine Corps for sixteen years. He joined on his eighteenth birthday. A real patriot. A good man, right?”

I didn’t answer so Zohar continued.

“Robert was medically discharged. It was something of a cover-up. People died. There were some indications that Robert did it, or was involved, whether directly or through negligence. He was a rising star. I think you would call it, a golden boy, right? Anyway, Robert went and signed up with a military contractor that was based in Iraq. He became a hired gun. And his loyalties went to the highest bidder.

“Apparently, though, he harbored resentment against America for his discharge. He believed that they had cheated him out of his career, out of a noble retirement, a hero’s life. He wanted to be someone with medals on his chest, stripes on his sleeve, and the stories to go with it. He ran into a man named Kane. A warlord, here, in Afghanistan, who made his living through cruelty. Heroin, slavery, murder, you name it, Kane was involved in it. Kane was born in Australia to a white mother and an Iranian father.

“He came back to Iran, got involved in the family business, which also happened to be drugs, slavery, and murder, and Robert found a new home. He renounced his citizenship, swore allegiance to extremist anti-American sentiments and movements wherever he could find them. He funded terrorist attacks. He declared a Jihad on all things American. Not because of some religious ideology but because of his own personal contempt and hatred of America. Al-Sumdal was born, rising from the ashes of a bitter, broken man and becoming a nightmare. Robert became the hero he always wanted to be, just to a different set of people.

“That’s one of the reasons he is so dangerous, Clarke. He has no loyalty to anything, and a deep hatred for everything that represents America. At some point, you did a story that got close to the truth. You interrupted several of his suppliers of weapons and disrupted a trafficking operation. You cost him millions. Your life is forfeit in his mind. I’m hoping that I can keep you alive.”

I listened to this in shock. My heart was beating in my chest.

“Zohar,” I breathed. “What can I do?”

“Play along,” he said, nearly begging. “Let Al-Sumdal believe that he is converting you. His ego will make him do it. He will probably hurt you. You must make him believe that he has control. Make him believe that he is changing you. Become useful to him in any way that you can.”

“Now, I have to leave. I’ve stayed too long as it is. But I’m offering you this proposition. When he comes to you, soon, and he will. Tell him that you have fallen in love. Tell him that here, your eyes have been opened to a new way of life where you can truly have peace and happiness and that you will do anything to help him because you know it is in his power to offer it.”
“Zohar?”

He nodded. “Tell Al-Sumdal that you are in love with me, Clarke. And I will keep you safe.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone,
I hope you're enjoying the story. I've gotten some great feedback and a wonderful response. Because of that, I'm going to try to get to Lexa's chapter before I go on vacation at the end of December. She'll make her appearance in the 16th chapter but in the meantime, Clarke will meet some more favorites from the 100, kick some serious ass, and fight to make a difference. But, you all have been amazing so you'll get your Lexa. I'm writing as quickly as I can without compromising the quality of the story so be prepared for at least 4 chapters a week for now. After vacation, I'll probably go back to my projected 2 a week but you all deserve the best that I can do right now for being so great.
Chapter 5

July 15, 2017

The night after Zohar and I spoke, I sat awake late into the night. I’d taken a book from the library into my room but it lay on the bed, discarded because I didn’t have the attention to spend on it. Instead, I thought about his offer. Zohar was offering me an opportunity to live. I didn’t know what it meant in the long run, but in my head, there was no long run to this. I was going to escape. I was going to get out. If Zohar kept me safe for a few months while I waited for the opportunity to present itself, then so be it.

The next morning, he came to me in the kitchen again. This time, he asked Sahar to stay.

“Al-Sumdal will be returning soon,” he said.

Sahar looked frightened. It made my stomach twist in fear. Sahar was strong, independent, the ruler of her own household even in a world where women had little power. For her to be afraid of something, it worried me.

“When?” Sahar asked.

“Within the week. I don’t know exactly when but we have been told to make things ready for his arrival. I have asked Clarke to claim her love for me, to protect her. We both know what he will try to do to her. We have to work together, Sahar. I don’t want to put your life at risk, but we need to keep Clarke safe.”

“Hang on,” I put my hands up, getting their attention. “I don’t want anyone else to die for me.”

I thought of Niylah. Her death was still a raw wound on my soul. It made me feel sick.

“If this is something that could harm either of you, then I don’t want a part in it. Let him kill me.”

Zohar shook his head hard. “Absolutely not.”

Sahar reached out and gently touched my hand. “I have to agree with him, Clarke. You know very little about what happens here, but you are our best chance.”

“Your best chance for what?” I was confused.

“For freedom,” Sahar sighed. “Al-Sumdal took me from my village when I was a young woman, married to another man. He killed him, right in front of me, and our child. I still remember his tiny, broken body on the street as he shoved me into his car and drove away with me. That was twenty
years ago. You are strong, intelligent. There is something about you, Clarke. I knew it from the moment I saw you, and so did Zohar. There are many people here who are loyal to Al-Sumdal, but not all. We need your help.”

I nodded. “What can I do?”

Sahar and Zohar spoke quickly and quietly in Arabic for several minutes. I could follow most of their conversation but I waited for them to talk to me. Even with our sudden alliance, I couldn’t totally trust them.

“You will profess your love for Zohar and I will confirm the story. He will begin to court you, now, before Al-Sumdal comes. I will watch over both of you during this process. We must make it look realistic. I will be your chaperone. And Zohar and I will both go to Al-Sumdal. Hopefully before he asks for you.”

“When we meet,” Zohar said, “I will try to tell you as much as I can about Al-Sumdal. About the compound. Everything that we can to make you more prepared to escape when the time comes. The more information we can give you, the more you can tell the authorities when you eventually get out.”

I nodded.

“Now, I must go. I will contact Sahar when I want to see you next. We must be more formal about this from here on.”

When he had left, I turned to Sahar. “This is going to get complicated, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “To some level, yes. But we must work together in this, Clarke. We will work together in this.”

I spent the morning in the library, reading The Invisible Man by H.G. Wells. It was a quick read and by the time lunch was ready, I was finished.

I walked into the kitchen and saw Sahar packing up a basket with food. She picked it up, put it over her arm, and motioned to me with a jerk of her head.

“Come with me,” she said. “I am taking you with me to deliver lunch to the other wives. I want you to see Al-Sumdal’s apartment. I have told them that Zohar will ask Al-Sumdal for your hand. This gives you an elevated place amongst them. You will no longer be a prisoner but a wife.”

I followed her, away from my room, from the kitchen and the library, away from the only world that I had known for the past two months. I felt surprisingly nervous. When we passed through a heavy wood door into Al-Sumdal’s wing of the house, we passed into a new world. His part of the compound was richly decorated; heavy, dark wood furniture, dark paint in burgundy, hunter green, navy blue on the walls, thick carpets that your feet sank into as you walked.

Sahar kept up a quiet, running monologue as we walked, pointing things out to me. “There are not cameras in this part of the house. Al-Sumdal’s ego is something that you will want to take advantage of. This is his study and library. It is very large. He does most of his work here, holds his meetings. His bedroom is off the back of the study. He sleeps alone most nights. While he has many wives, he does not take us often. His room resembles that of some king from the movies. He has a large four-poster bed, many pieces of heavy furniture. He keeps several guns in the wardrobe nearest to the bed. He wears the key around his neck on a chain when he is here.

“This is a smaller kitchen for the wives to use. This is Al-Sumdal’s bathroom. He has a large tub and
shower. No one is allowed in here except for him. He is also a very vain man and spends much time on his appearance. He is rarely ready for anything before 10am when he is here.”

She opened a back door and walked into another hallway. There was a door on the left that we went through and it opened to a large room. Inside were several beds, large couches, cushions on the floor, low tables. It looked like something out of an Arabian Nights harem. Sahar walked over to one of the low tables and put the basket of food on it.

“The other wives are out in the courtyard with the children now but they should return soon. I hope that this tour has given you a better idea of what kind of man Al-Sumdal is. Now please, stay, eat with us. I want you to know the other women. Many of them will help you when the time comes.”

I sat with them, eating chicken kabobs and naan and drinking tall glasses of goats milk that had been sweetened with honey and thickened with yogurt. The children ran around the room. Even the oldest girl was young, her ninth birthday was last week, and she showed me her dolls and even let me braid the yarn hair of a beautiful cloth one with bright green beads for eyes that Dalla had sewed by hand.

The boys found me entertaining for a few minutes. They asked me simple questions in Arabic and I answered them, as simply as possible. Eventually, they became bored and ran around, chasing each other under the beds and hiding in the wardrobes amongst the abayas inside.

One of the women gave me a beautiful, rich purple scarf that I put on, replacing the black one that had been given to me when I first arrived. It truly was the best afternoon that I had had in the compound. It almost let me forget that I was a prisoner.

Unfortunately, though, on the walk back to the kitchen, I was offered a painful reminder of my role in this game. We turned a corner and nearly ran into Yasin. I hadn’t been close to him since our ride from Turkey to the compound. Suddenly I was transported back to the backseat of the car, hood over my head, suffocated by his thick scent of cologne and tobacco. I could barely breathe. He glowered at me, pushed past Sahar and grabbed me by the front of my abaya. I hit the wall behind me with a thud.

“What are you doing here, whore?” he spat in my face.

I looked past him and saw Sahar. She was shocked but quickly recovered. She pushed at Yasin’s arm but he was strong and barely moved.

“How dare you, Yasin. I invited her here today, to help with lunch and to meet the wives.”

“You forget your place, woman,” he growled, shaking me and slamming me again against the wall. My head bounced and I saw stars.

“I forget nothing, Yasin. You’re becoming too comfortable here. Perhaps I will let Al-Sumdal know that you have taken it upon yourself to come into his apartment unannounced.”

A look of fear flitted across Yasin’s face. I hadn’t seen anything like that from him before. But it didn’t last long and once again, with a lazy hand, he struck me. I felt my lip split, tasted blood.

With that he turned and walked away. I was left in the hallway, a still-shocked Sahar by my side.

“You must be careful with that one.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I answered, wiping blood off my face with the old black scarf I had removed just minutes before.
Sahar walked me back to the kitchen and helped me clean up. That evening we worked together in the kitchen. I was cleaning pomegranates that had been brought in earlier in a large crate. I would take the fruit, split it open with a large kitchen knife, scoop out the seeds into a ceramic bowl, and toss the remains into a bucket on the floor. My arms ran red with the bloody juice but the fruit was sweet and Sahar and I would regularly grab fresh seeds out from the bowl, popping them into our mouths as we spoke.

I heard the sound of a car door shut. Sahar went to check and when she came back, she looked afraid. I was worried that I had seen that look on her face so often today.

“Al-Sumdal has returned,” she said. “Quickly, to your room. You must try to stay out of sight. Hope that he does not call for you tonight so that Zohar and I have a chance to speak with him first.”

I quickly washed my hands and shut myself in my room. I kept the lights off and stood on my bed. Like that, I could see the driveway. The car was large, black, with darkly tinted windows. A man climbed out of the back seat. He was wearing a dark suit. I couldn’t see him clearly but he was tall, he walked with a slight limp. It had to be him, Al-Sumdal, Robert Beaucraft. The guards ran around, hastily getting his luggage out of the trunk, answering his questions. The wives and children had assembled near the front door. He gave each of them a kiss. Patted the children on the head.

“Now is the time,” I heard the voice echo through my room and I turned.

“Finn?”

He was whispering through a metal grate between the rooms.

“The guards are distracted. If we’re going to leave, we need to leave now.”

He was right. Part of me knew it. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t leave Sahar and Zohar, the other women, the children. They were prisoners just as much as I was.

“I can’t,” I whispered back.

“Fucking idiot,” he swore.

I heard the bed creak as he jumped off it. I heard the door open, shut. He was gone. I sat on the bed, knees clutched against my chest. It wasn’t long before I heard the yelling. There were shouts from the driveway. I stood up again and looked out the window. Men were running around. Guards with guns. I saw Finn, standing in the middle of the driveway.

He didn’t know the house like I had. He’d gotten turned around. He’d come out the side entrance before he made it to Al-Sumdal’s apartment. He’d walked straight into the middle of them.

Suddenly, my door open. I turned. Zohar was standing there. When he saw me, his body went limp with relief.

“I was afraid you had gone with him,” he admitted.

I shook my head. “I can’t leave you all.”

“He will die tonight. You must stay here. I will lock the door, tell them you were still in your bed. Don’t watch, Clarke. Please.”

He shut the door and I heard the lock click into place. But I ignored him. I had to watch. In my time here, I had become complacent. I’d been lulled into a false sense of security by the kindness of
people like Zohar and Sahar. I couldn’t forget what I was and who I was, and what they were. I saw Yasin out in the driveway, circling Finn like a wolf who had found an injured rabbit. My mouth twisted into a glare.

“You’re first on my list you son of a bitch,” I whispered to myself.

I saw the man come out of the house. It was Al-Sumdal. He was still in his suit. He walked over to where the guards stood, where Finn was surrounded. He said nothing. I saw him reach under his suit jacket. He pulled out a pistol, fired a shot. It echoed around the compound, matching the rhythm of my heart beating hard in my chest. I noticed that I was breathing hard.

Finn dropped to the ground, his body heavy, lifeless. Al-Sumdal fired twice more. Finn’s body jerked with each shot. I felt bile in the back of my throat but I swallowed it down. I was clenching my fists so hard that in the morning I had blood on my pillow from half-a-dozen crescent-shaped cuts in my palm. Al-Sumdal barked something in Arabic, turned, and walked back into the house.

“Clean up this mess, you idiots. And if you disturb me again because you are incapable of doing your jobs, his won’t be the only body in the desert when the sun rises.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this chapter.

Chapter 6: Renewed Determination - In the Library - New Tools - Becoming Useful - Head Down - Chin Up - A Conversation

July 16, 2017

I’ve been kept in my room for the past four days. I’ve been allowed out to bathe, use the bathroom, take my tea in the morning with Sahar, even exchange one book for another in the library in the afternoon. Sahar barely speaks to me. She can’t. With Al-Sumdal home, they’re watching the cameras more closely. But she has told me that this is a good sign. She has spoken to him, as has Zohar. She continues to treat me with kindness. There is always something sweet on my plate when she passes me my meals. Sometimes a few dates, a fresh pomegranate, once she made thin cookies and gave me three.

And I remain determined. Each night, I stand on my bed and stare at the spot in the driveway where Finn was killed. His body was removed quickly that night. I have to remember that it could just as easily be me. That could have been my body on the concrete. That could have been me, dumped into the desert to disappear. I have to remember my mother, still at home, who doesn’t know what has happened to me. I have to remember that there are people out there looking for me. I have to remember what I need to do to get out of here. I’ll become whatever I need to so I can stay alive long enough. At the very least, Yasin’s life will be mine.

The time alone has also given me a chance to catch up my journal. I finally have paper now, and a real pen. And more than that. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I was in the library earlier today. Zohar came to me. Sahar sat on the window seat while Zohar stood nearby at a bookcase, speaking softly.

“All-Sumdal is still considering your fate but it is luck that he has not asked to see you. It means he hasn’t made a decision. We still have some time.”

I looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. I saw him pull something from his jacket and slide it into the bookcase. It was a book with a red spine. There was Arabic writing on it. I could barely read it but I think it said “An Introduction for Children” and I wondered why Zohar had been reading a book for children.

“You should read it next,” he said, even more quietly. “It was a good book.”

With that, Zohar turned and left. I saw Sahar watching me from her seat, ready to step in if I didn’t catch the hint, but I wasn’t stupid. I knew what Zohar wanted me to do. I browsed the shelves for several more moments, then pulled the read book out of the shelf. It felt heavy, solid in my hand. I turned to Sahar.

“I’m ready to go back.”
Sahar walked me back to my room. “I’ll come get you when it’s time for dinner,” she said, which was new to the routine that I had become used to.

But I didn’t say anything. I just nodded and allowed her to close the door behind me, sliding the lock into place.

In my room, I waited a few moments until I was sure that no one was near the door and then I sat on my bed, book in hand. I opened it and my heart jumped. It was a notebook, disguised as an introductory book on Arabic writing for children. There were a pair of pens tucked inside, and on the back page, taped to the back cover of the book, a razor blade. I swallowed hard.

On the last page, there was a message, scrawled in a hasty hand. “For others, not you. You’re not ready to leave this world yet.”

I closed the book, feeling more alive than I had in several months. I had a team, support, people who had my back. And I could get things from them. Maybe even the tools that I needed to escape. Or, more than that, to end Al-Sumdal and release Sahar, the women, Zohar, from their prison.

I spent most of the afternoon transcribing my journals in this new book. The old scraps under my bed were replaced and I’ll slowly destroy them, a little bit at a time. At dinner, Sahar came to get me. We made dinner together, standing in the kitchen. She began speaking to me. I noticed that Dalla wasn’t there which was unusual. She wanted privacy.

When she spoke, it was quiet.

“Al-Sumdal will call for you tonight. I believe that he has decided to let you live, Clarke, but you still must be careful. Appeal to his pride. It is his greatest downfall. Allow him to believe that he has the power. But, make yourself useful.”

“How do I do that?” I asked, curious. “I’m a prisoner. I don’t know how to do anything.”

“You have resources, right? An education, intelligence? I will teach you to milk the goats, make yogurt and cheese, sew, care for the children. I have already told Al-Sumdal that I will take you under my care to make you a good wife for Zohar.”

I listened to her words and could feel my heartbeat in my ears. The world I’m living in right now is so surreal. Just two months ago, I was a reporter, living in the US with my fiancé and we had friends and family and people who loved us. We would spend our weekends at the movies, going out to dinner and drinking wine late into the evening while Niylah listened to classic rock records and I curled on the couch and read. Just three months ago we went to Savannah, Georgia for a long weekend vacation and spent three days touring antebellum mansions. But that life was gone. I was something different now, someone different. And I wanted to survive. I wanted an opportunity to continue to live, to make it back home. So I listened.

Now, I’m back in my room, waiting for Al-Sumdal to summon me like some kind of servant. It makes my throat burn, the indignation of it all. In my head, he’s just some fucking man, puffed up like a strutting rooster. The reality of it is, he’s dangerous, and he holds my life in his hands.

Later:

Somehow, I’m still alive. It’s after midnight now. The compound is quiet, silent almost. With Al-Sumdal back, a thick tension hangs around the buildings, out in the yard. My hands are still shaking as I write this but I have to try to get everything down. It will be my last chance to write for a while.

I was called several hours after dinner. Sahar and Dalla both came to get me. They walked me to Al-
Sumdal’s apartment in silence. When we passed through the doorway, Sahar turned to me, an encouraging smile on her face.

“You will do well. Listen, watch. He gives himself away.”

This was the only advice she offered. Dalla gave me a reassuring squeeze on my arm and then they walked me the rest of the way to his office. Sahar knocked three times and waited to be called inside.

I don’t know what I expected when I walked inside. A part of me thought he might look like a Saudi prince with long flowing white robes with a traditional head covering. But part of me also remembered the man in the suit who walked, so calmly, up to Finn and shot him three times. I swallowed hard and the door closed behind me.

Al-Sumdal was sitting at his desk. He wore a black suit, quality fabric, and carefully tailored to his measurements. He stood when I entered and I could see that he was tall, over six feet, with short, graying hair that had once been dark brown. He had a short beard, equally scattered with gray, and his eyes were cold, hard steel. He had a scar near his left eye that ran, jagged, up and into his hair line. He was broad-shouldered and barrel chested with the thick look of a man who had once been in shape but had let himself go over the years. The jacket strained a little in the middle to keep him covered. When he walked around the desk, I noticed that his shoes were expensive, black leather, probably handmade. He motioned towards a pair of chairs in the corner.

“Please, Clarke, sit.”

I did so, keeping my mouth shut. He joined me. The chairs were also expensive, leather. There was a lot of show going on in this room tonight and that didn’t escape me. There was a teapot on the low side table and two painted cups. Al-Sumdal poured the tea and when I didn’t take mine, he took his cup, took a large gulp, swallowed.

“It’s not poisoned. I promise.”

“You’ll have to forgive my suspicion,” I said, picking up my own cup. “I can’t imagine any other reason you would have had me kidnapped other than killing me.”

“Maybe I wanted the reward.”

I looked around the room. “Compared to what you already have, I’m worthless.”

Al-Sumdal smiled.

“I disagree,” he said as I cautiously sipped the hot tea. It was delicious and I could recognize the hints of cinnamon, cardamom, and clove that Sahar used. “Besides, Zohar and Sahar have spent the last week trying to convince me of your worth.”

I ducked my head, trying to appear modest. “They have been very kind.”

“Do you know why you’re here?”

I shook my head.

“You’re a smart girl, Clarke. Don’t play dumb with me. I’m sure you can guess.”

“My entire career has been built around reporting on events in the Middle East. Recently, I’ve drawn the attention of extremist groups because of my criticism of Islamic extremism and its treatment of women and children. I’m assuming you were hired by someone. ISIS, perhaps.”
He smiled at me and I hoped that I’d done enough to make him believe that I had no idea. I’d included some of the truth but I didn’t want him to know what I knew. I didn’t want him to trace it back to Zohar.

“Interesting theory. And not entirely wrong. I was right, Clarke. You are smart. But in this case, no one hired me. And it wasn’t because of your stunning stories about abused women and children intended to make some rich donor in America feel bad for five minutes and write a check to some organization or politician or for your country to continue to funnel cash into a rusty war machine under the guise of protecting freedom.”

He spat the last word, a cruel twist of his lips exposing the real Robert Beaucraft under the carefully crafted facade. But he regained control quickly.

“Several years back, you wrote a story for the Associated Press that became very popular. It was really what got you on the map, as I recall. I think you won an award for it.”

He’d done his research. And he wanted me to know it.

“The story named an organization in Iran who was funded by the government and was involved in supporting weapons supply lines to ISIS in Syria. There was an international investigation. The organization went further and deeper than you could possibly imagine. Saudi princes lost their livelihood and their lives. Hundreds of millions of dollars were disrupted. Certain trades stopped. And several of my suppliers ended their business. You threw a very heavy, very expensive wrench in my operations, Clarke. I don’t like people who cost me money.”

“It seems to me like that might be a risk you take when you decide to break international law and chose to make your living supplying terrorists.”

I raised my head, looking him in the eyes. I saw the expression on his face, the anger, the rage. I might have made a mistake. I could see the outline of the pistol underneath his jacket and knew that he wouldn’t hesitate to use it on me, the same way he hadn’t hesitated to use it on Finn. I was no coward. I wanted my life, but not at the cost of my soul.

Robert surprised me by laughing, the anger quickly replaced by something else.

“You’re playing a very dangerous game, little girl. But I like your spirit. As long as you keep it restrained and you listen. Be open-minded in this moment. I might save your life.”

He paused and refilled his tea cup.

“You’re using a lot of fun buzzwords. Terrorism, international law. You don’t understand what any of those things mean. During the Revolutionary War in the United States, the colonists were labeled terrorists by the British because they wanted independence from an unjust British rule. They wanted the opportunity to rule themselves, to make their own decisions. Now, in the 230 years since then, we’ve done a piss-poor job at doing anything other than making foolish decisions. America has become weak, influenced more by politicians by the will of the people.

“The Middle East is no different. ISIS is no different. War is always the same, Clarke. It’s groups of people fighting against each other, each with their own ideology, their own sense of right and wrong, their own system of values and their own view about how they, and others, should live their lives. War will never end, it will never change, and ultimately, applying some kind of artificial morality to war does nothing more than create a series of losers. I am many things, but I do not lose. I could care less about women and children, about religious ideologies, about bullshit political propaganda spouted by men and women who will never hold a weapon, march across a desert, and go to war. I
care about myself and a very comfortable way of life that I have created here. And I care about my reputation.

“I am a man that people fear, that people respect, that people come to for solutions to difficult problems. You are a problem, Clarke. What is the solution?”

He paused, sipping his tea, watching me over the rim of his cup.

“If you wanted me dead, you would have shot me in the middle of the street in the US. You would have made an example of me if you wanted my life. You want something more. What is it, Al-Sumdal?”

He smiled, put the cup down.

“I want you, Clarke.”

I grimaced and he laughed.

“Not like that,” he said. “You have to much spirit and fire for me to make you one of my wives. I’d probably wake up in the middle of the night with a knife at my throat. I’m no fool.”

“But you do want to make an example of me, don’t you? You want to show people how much control you have. You want to turn someone, an idealistic journalist with a hero complex who joins you, who sees the truth in your words and gives up everything she believes in for you.”

Robert itched his beard with the back of one large hand. He thought for a moment. I waited.

“Now that,” he said, “is an excellent idea. Tell me about Zohar.”

“He has been very kind to me since I came here. He is professional, efficient, and he does not lose his composure. He is a good man and I won’t lie to you, I have developed feelings for him.”

“Feelings?”

“I think I’ve fallen in love with him. Which sounds insane, even to me, but shortly after I arrived, my shoulder got infected. I was shot and when the bullet wasn’t removed, I got sick. Zohar came to me. He prayed for me. I feel like I owe him my life, and more.”

“I never figured you one to adhere to silly superstitions.”

I shrugged, trying to look sincere. “There are a lot of things about this world that I find troubling, complicated. I won’t pretend like I know how everything works. I’ll do whatever you ask of me, Al-Sumdal, because I want to live. You value your reputation. I value my life, probably because I feel like I haven’t lived much of it. And, with your permission, I’d like to live it with Zohar.”

Robert sat back in his chair, thoughtful. We sat like that for several minutes, in a tense silence. I heard a clock on the wall behind me ticking and wondered if each click was closer to my inevitable death at the hands of this man. When Robert finally moved, I jumped. I saw the smile on his face. He was a fan of power and control.

“You owe me your life, Clarke. But maybe you’re worth more to me alive than dead. You’ll move into the women’s apartment with Sahar and my other wives. They will teach you the skills you need to survive as a woman and a wife in this world. Your relationship with Zohar is your own business and I don’t care what you eventually do or chose to do. I told you, I’m not a big fan of silly superstitions. However, you will also help me whenever I ask you to in whatever task I want you to
with no questions asked. If you refuse, you forfeit your life. Those are the terms and they’re not negotiable.”

I nodded, unable to speak. I was escaping with my life and that was enough for now. Al-Sumdal walked over to his desk and pushed a button. Several moments later, Sahar walked in. She seemed relieved to see that I was still in one piece.

“Tomorrow, Clarke will move into the apartment with you and my other wives. You will teach her everything she needs to know. If she wants to continue her relationship with Zohar, allow her to do so but I don’t care to know about it.”

Sahar nodded and walked me out of the room. Once the office door had closed behind us, she squeezed my hand in hers.

“I am glad you are still with us, Clarke. Get some rest tonight. You have a lot to learn.”

Moving into the women’s apartment will keep me from being able to write for a while, but I’m happy for the opportunity to live, to continue to fight. Part of me still wonders if this is a dream, but it’s one that I intend on waking up from. And I’ll do what I have to do.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Content warning for this chapter: Physical violence, threat of violence with a firearm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7: Eighteen Months Later - Kane and Abdel - A Warning - An Opportunity - In Front of the Camera - Codewords - A Beating

January 17, 2019

It’s been a year and a half. I’ve kept this journal under my mattress in the women’s apartment for that long, hidden. Just like I’ve been hidden for that long. I’ve been ignored, allowed to go about my duties and live my life. It’s become routine. Now, my body aches, I think I have a broken rib, my lip is bloody, there’s a jagged cut on my head. Everyone knows who I am now. They know what I’ve been hiding. I might have lost my only opportunity, my cover, my golden opportunity. But I did what I needed to do. The wounds are a reminder of who and what I am, of where I came from. I won’t stop fighting. But let me go back to the beginning.

I moved out of the tiny room across from the kitchen the next morning. In the women’s apartment, I was given space, a comfortable bed, a large wardrobe filled with abayas, some plain, some colorful, and some with beautiful embroidery. Dalla gave me another scarf, this one in emerald green. I was allowed to take several books from the library now, including some in Arabic as the women taught me to read, speak, and write it. I was able to rely more now on the knowledge that I already had, expanding it. Soon, I could speak and write and read like they could and I didn’t have to pretend anymore.

Sahar took me under her wing and taught me everything. I milked goats, I handled house finances, I learned to sew and cook and make cheese and yogurt, I took care of the children, learned how to use herbs and spices to treat illnesses and injuries. Zohar and I kept up our show, spending more and more time together. Occasionally, he would take me back to the other wing of the house, to his room. We would spend the night together, me sitting on his bed, him at his desk. He would talk to me about politics, about the social climate, about Islam, about Robert Beaucraft, his operations and interests in the area. He told me about ISIS troop movements, about the Kurdish rebels operating in Syria, about Western groups and organizations who were trying to support people in the area.

I could look at maps and know what I was seeing, where I was in reference to the world again. I knew what was happening in the outside world. And more importantly, as Zohar walked me through the building where the guards and the other women lived, he would tell me what was in each room. He would talk to me about the guards, their names, their personalities. He would tell me who lived where, where the video room was where a guard sat and watched all the cameras in the house, where the garage was with jeeps and cars, where the weapons were, firearms and grenades and explosives that were kept in a bunker that could be reached by a door in the floor of the guardroom, down a ladder.

And Al-Sumdal. He spent more time away than at the house, but when he came, he would always summon me. He would ask me questions, get my opinions on the political climate, on world events. He would ask about people that I knew or organizations I was familiar with. I tried to always tell a
version of the truth, with enough factual information that he knew I wasn’t lying and could verify the important stuff, but with just enough bullshit thrown in that it wasn’t very useful information.

For eighteen months, I mixed lies and truth. I learned everything that I could. Until all that changed. Al-Sumdal returned in the middle of the night three days ago. There was enough commotion outside, in the hallways, that it woke us up all the way in the back of the compound. I heard Al-Sumdal yelling in the hallway, the door of his study slamming. I stayed in bed, but Sahar jumped up, getting dressed quickly. She hurried out of the room and didn’t come back for several hours. When she did, she hurried over to my bed, knelt beside me, whispered in my ear in English.

“Things are going to change, Clarke. You will have to stay strong.”

I didn’t ask any questions. I knew she had information and I knew to take her warning to heart. I stayed awake that night, staring at the ceiling. The next morning, a hush had fallen over the compound. Near noon, three jeeps pulled up to the front of the compound. A dozen men poured out carrying rifles and wearing military-style fatigues. From inside the jeeps, two more men climbed out, both wearing suits, expensive ones, sunglasses, nice shoes. They walked inside and their men began to patrol, taking up positions around the outside wall, near the entrance to the compound, in the courtyard. I learned later that day that their names were Kane and Abdel. Kane. I knew that name. He was the man that Al-Sumdal worked for. He was the money, the power.

Zohar came to see me that afternoon. He took me to his room, quickly, walking so fast through the hallways that I nearly had to run to keep up.

“Things have changed,” he whispered as soon as the door shut.

“So I’ve been told,” I muttered.

“Kane is not happy with the way that Al-Sumdal has handled your presence. He believes that Al-Sumdal should have killed you to begin with, dropped your body into the middle of Washington DC from an airplane as a message to the West, stripped and beat you for the world to see. He believes that Al-Sumdal has become complacent and that the information you have given him has not been enough to keep you alive. This is a dangerous time, Clarke. You have to be careful.”

“I have to escape,” I growled, standing up. “I’ve been complacent, not Al-Sumdal. I got comfortable and I forgot who the enemy was.”

“But your standards, I’m your enemy,” Zohar growled. “And if you get foolish, if you get stupid, then you put my life at risk. You are useful, Clarke, but my life is of more value to me than yours.”

The words stung. Zohar had been my companion, and I thought, my friend. But I knew, then, in that moment, that I had no friends. Zohar, Sahar, Dalla, Al-Sumdal, had been using me for their own needs. But I ignored it, fixing Zohar with a stony glare.

“What about Abdel?”

“Kane’s right-hand man. Fiercely loyal and a true zealot. He’s the religious extremist that everyone should be afraid of. He truly believes that through his cruelty and his actions, he is doing Allah’s bidding. He twists belief to turn it into a weapon of his own will and he won’t stop at anything. He will kill indiscriminately, torture without a second thought, and believe that it is supported by the will of God. Kane is cruel, Abdel is something more.”

I swallowed hard, more nervous than I had been since being grabbed in the street nearly two years earlier. I jumped when I heard a knock on the door. Most people left us alone when we came to
Zohar’s room. They assumed we were sleeping together and didn’t want to interrupt. Zohar looked at me, curious. I shrugged. He opened the door and I was surprised to see Yasin standing there. I hadn’t seen much of him in the past year and a half. He had been little more than a piece of the background I had gotten used to in my new life. He was there, but faded. I’d had no reason to interact with him, to inspire his cruelty.

“Al-Sumdal wants to see you,” he said, looking over Zohar’s shoulder at me. “You should go quickly.”

I nodded and hurried out of the room. Neither man followed me. I knew my way by now and was allowed free reign of the grounds without question in most areas, though someone might have started paying attention if I’d gone somewhere like the garage or the guardroom. I hurried through the main part of the house and into Al-Sumdal’s apartments. I knocked on his door and it opened almost instantly.

I’d not seen Al-Sumdal since he’d come back the night before. He looked haggard, older. His hair was almost totally gray now and I thought about the difference between the vibrant, charismatic man that I had met one night that felt so long ago. He’d lost some weight, his skin had a gray pallor. I walked into his study and saw two other men sitting there. Kane and Abdel. They had to be.

Kane, I knew, had an Australian mother, which explained his more olive complexion. He had a full head of dark brown hair, short sideburns that ended at the base of his ears. He was clean shaved and had a young face for his age though the lines on his forehead pointed to an older man. His eyes were light brown, calculating, cold. The other was Abdel. His skin was dark, smooth. He looked older than Kane but it might have been because of his harsh manner, the feeling of hatred radiating off of him as I stepped into the room. He had black hair, a thick black beard but still trimmed and carefully maintained. His hands were large and he gripped his knee so hard that his knuckles turned white, but he said nothing.

Al-Sumdal glared at me. “Took you long enough,” he spat.

I was silent, averting my eyes to the floor. I felt sick. I knew that I had to be cautious.

“You’re going to do something for me,” Al-Sumdal said, pacing across the plush carpet. I could see his shoes, the same black leather. They were dusty. “You’ve spent too long in this house without giving anything back. Tomorrow, you’ll broadcast a video for us. You will say exactly what I tell you to say with no deviation in the script. If you chose to use this as an opportunity to make a statement, no one will ever find your body.”

He moved close to me then, his hand reaching out, catching me under the chin. He forced my face up so that I was looking him in the eyes. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Al-Sumdal,” I said, trying to sound meek, obedient. It made my stomach sour.

He let me go. My jaw hurt from the pressure of his thumbs. He turned to Kane and Abdel. “She’s nothing if not a good dog.”

“An obedient bitch,” Abdel spat.

I made myself look at the floor. My jaw was clenched tight.

“Go,” Al-Sumdal dismissed me.

I fled the room, back to the women’s quarters. I sat on my bed, taking deep breaths and trying to calm myself down. I felt rage burning in the back of my throat. Those pieces of shit. But I’d do what
they asked, with one slight variation. When I left for college, my mom and I had a code word that we’d made up together in case I ever got in to trouble. If I was on a date, over at a friend’s house, even at a party, I could call her and say “I love you more than chocolate.”

The truth was, I hated chocolate. Seriously. But no one hated chocolate, so no one would think anything of it. It was a sign between the two of us that something was wrong.

I stayed up the entire night, working myself into a frenzy of nerves and fear. But finally, just before dawn, I felt an eerie calm wash over me. Like an ocean transformed into the smooth surface of a lake. My breathing became more even, my heart rate slowed, my hands unclenched. I would do what I had to do. And damn the consequences.

Yasin came to fetch me early that morning. I had dressed and was sitting in the kitchen, leaning on the kitchen table, a book in front of me. He cleared his throat.

“Kane will see you now,” he said.

“So you’re doing his bidding now?” I said, again feeling the calm wash over me. I was resigned to my death, but I would go out with my head high, not on my knees.

“I work for whoever can keep me alive. You’d be smart to do the same.”

I laughed. “Yasin, not even you are stupid enough to believe that I have any control at this point over whether I live or die.”

The look he gave me was a strange one. There was almost, respect, admiration. I couldn’t read it. It looked foreign on his face. Either way, I didn’t worry much about it. I followed him out of the house and into the courtyard. A camera had been set up with several wires running into a computer that would be broadcasting the video. There was a chair sitting in front of the camera. Al-Sumdal stood outside, Kane and Abdel sat nearby. Yasin and two of Kane’s guards stayed close. There was another man running the computer and the camera. He had a pistol at his waist.

Al-Sumdal grabbed me as I walked out into the courtyard. Yasin stepped away so he couldn’t hear.

“You will say exactly what I tell you to. If you chose not to, the consequences will be severe.”

He looked different. Almost disheveled. There was a gleam of insanity in his eyes. His suit was wrinkled.

He handed me a note pad. Words had been scrawled in a loopy script and I had to read it several times to understand what it said even though it was written in English. Al-Sumdal made me repeat it to him twice. The first time I read it, I breathed a sigh of relief. My plan would work.

I sat in the chair. The man behind the camera gave me the signal and I glanced down at the pad, looked back up. I felt no fear. I just read.

“Good morning to all who might hear this message. Some of you will recognize me and some of you will not. My name is Clarke Griffin and I used to be a reporter. During my time as a reporter, I spent a lot of time in the Middle East. While there, I allowed myself to be used for a Western agenda, to spread propaganda about nonexistent people and events that would help the Americans continue to fund their illegal occupation of Afghanistan and their war against the Islamic forces attempting to regain their homeland. I was used. And for that, I am sorry. I am sorry to the people who were hurt and even killed by my words. I was wrong.

“While I was initially taken against my will, during my time here, I have been treated with kindness
and respect. I have seen a new way of life. One where I am honored, protected, and cared for. I have seen how I was used and I have seen the error of my ways. To the United States government, I am not a prisoner, and I am asking you to stop using me and my image to further your anti-Muslim agenda. To the people of the United States and other Western countries, I encourage you to question your government, to challenge them, to not accept their side as the accurate version of events. And to my mother,” I took a deep breath. “I am safe. Please know that you are in my heart even though I can’t come home, know that I love you more than chocolate.”

I felt the fist collide with the side of my head as soon as the camera turned off. Al-Sumdal was standing over me where he had knocked me out of the chair, onto the concrete. I felt him kick me in the ribs, flipping me onto my back. Another punch hit me in the jaw and I saw stars. I held my hands up, blocked one of his punches, grabbed his wrist and twisted. I heard him yelp.

Suddenly, he was pulled off of me. Abdel was holding Al-Sumdal back easily, his large arms wrapped around the other man. Kane was kneeling next to me. I felt the cold metal of something pressed against my forehead and when I looked up, I saw the barrel of a gun. My stomach dropped.

“Why did you say that?” he asked, his voice cool, calm.

“What?”

The gun bit into my head. “Don’t play dumb.”

“My mom and I always used to say that to each other, before bed every night. It was our thing. You asked me to say a whole bunch of bullshit that no one, not a fucking person, will actually believe. I don’t know if you came up with it or that raging idiot over there,” I jerked a thumb at Al-Sumdal who started struggling against Abdel, “but no one in a million years would believe that I was saying that of my own free will. I had to add something personal. I had to make them believe it.”

“And why should I believe you?”

“For the same reason that I’ve done everything that’s been asked of me for the past year and half. For the same reason that I’ve kept my mouth shut, my head down, and never tried to escape. Because I want to live.”

Kane paused for a moment, pondering. With a fluid motion, he holstered the pistol on his hip, nodded, stood up, and extended a hand to me. I took it and he easily pulled me off the concrete.

“You earned your beating, Clarke, but don’t make me regret keeping you alive. The next time you decide to deviate from any of my instructions, you will let me know. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

Tonight, I’m back in the small room across from the kitchen, locked inside. I haven’t seen Zohar in days. I should be scared. So why am I further from scared then I’ve ever been?

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone,

Thanks so much for all the comments. I’m trying to respond to all of them while also posting more chapters so if there’s a delay, I haven’t forgotten you. I totally understand
that a lot of you are in this for Lexa and I get it. I love her too! Lexa will show up in
Chapter 16 and I'll try to post it by next weekend. Lexa will be a major character in all
chapters from 16 on.
I totally get it if you're wanting to skim through to get to Lexa but there's definitely some
backstory that's important to how Clarke and Lexa interact when they meet and their
relationship. So, if you do skim, I encourage you to go back at some point and read the
whole story. It's worth it!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Content warning for this chapter: Graphic death of a character

Chapter 8: Another Video - Kitchen Conversations - Inside the Koran - A Change - Kindness from a Strange Place - Kane Takes Over - A New Cruelty

January 23, 2019

I’m a prisoner again. There’s no mistaking that. The kindness is gone. I haven’t seen Zohar since I left him in his room. I see Sahar when she brings me my meals, occasionally a new book, but she is careful not to speak to me or even look at me. I know that another video was filmed. I saw the man with the camera again. He was carrying things from the garage back to the courtyard. I don’t know who they filmed. Maybe Al-Sumdal, maybe Kane. It wasn’t me, thankfully. I don’t know what the reaction was to the video that was broadcast, worldwide last week. I hope my mom got the message. I hope she knows I love her. I hope they don’t think I’m an enemy. I hope they know it was all a lie.

But, even where I am now, I still can hear what’s going on. I hear Sahar and Dalla in the kitchen, speaking to each other. Sometimes I hear other voices. Once it was Al-Sumdal. He sounds tired now. His throat is raw. He was yelling at Sahar. I’ve never heard him do that before. He’s losing control.

“You bitch,” he raged, I heard something glass shatter against the floor. “Everything I’ve done for you, the kindness I’ve shown you, and you roll over to Kane like some dirty street whore.”

I felt my jaw ache, I was clenching my teeth together, fighting the urge to kick down the door. Sahar had been like my mother, showing me everything that I needed to, taking me under her wing. I wanted to help her, to protect her. But I knew there was nothing I could do. I sat, listened as he raged against her. He called her a traitor, a liar, a coward. And Sahar said nothing.

Later, the next day, a conversation between Yasin and Dalla.

“Kane knows he is losing it,” Yasin said.

Their voices were hushed.

“I still belong to Al-Sumdal.”

“For now, my love, but only for now. When Kane takes control, I’ll take you away from here. We can have a life together.”

I felt a strange sensation. I still hate Yasin. I remember what he did to me, what he said to me. What he did to Niylah. But knowing now what I do, his love for Dalla. He’s as much a prisoner as I am. When the time comes, I hope I’ll still be able to do what I need to.

Then, tonight, Sahar brought my food in, and a new book.

“You should read that soon,” she whispered. “I hope God will protect you, child.”
She left without another word and I sat on my bed, eating slowly, sipping the hot tea she brought me, and looked at the book. It was a worn copy of the Koran in Arabic. I could read it. I’d read it before. But I wondered why she brought it. I opened it, thumbed through it, my eyes scanning for anything that might be a clue to why she’d brought the book.

Finally, I found it. A code in the back. Random words and letters circled. I wrote them down.

“There will be a change in control. You must be prepared for it. We can do very little to help you at this point and I am sorry for that. I wish there was more that I could do and I feel like I have failed you. I have been moved to another compound. I leave tonight. I hope that when our paths cross again, it will not be at the end of a knife.”

On the last page, a name. “Zohar”.

A change in control. I sat, thought. Kane was already in control, but not of the house, not yet. I could feel it in the air. Al-Sumdal still health the compound, his sources, his networks, they were still in his hands. But not for long. More of Kane’s men were coming in every day. There had to be close to thirty of them now, in their gray fatigues, with their AK-47s and pistols at their hip. They were hard men, seasoned fighters. If Zohar had been transferred, who knew who else might be next. Soon, the women might go. If something happened to Al-Sumdal, what would happen to his wives, his children? What about me.

Later, the door opened. I was surprised to see Yasin standing there. I’d expected Sahar to get my plate. He looked awkward. He shoved his hands into his pockets, glared at me like it was my fault he was uncomfortable.

“I can’t stay long,” he growled, low in his throat.

“Why are you here at all, Yasin?” I asked.

He looked like he wasn’t sure himself. “You’ve shown the women kindness. Dalla…” He paused.

“I know how you feel about her,” I said.

He looked surprised, then mad, then uncomfortable, all in the span of a few seconds.

“I know you will try to escape, Clarke. I’ve come to know you well in the last year and a half you’ve been here. And I know, if you do try to escape, I’ll probably be the first on your list. What I did to you,” he shook his head. “What I said to you. I can’t apologize for it and I can’t take it back. I wish I could say I’m a different man and that I would do things differently today but you’d probably call me a liar.”

He sighed and it was my turn to be surprised.

“What are you asking, Yasin?”

“Keep her safe, please,” he said, almost pleading. “If I’m gone, if you kill me, please make sure she’s safe.”

With that, he turned and left, shutting and locking the door behind him. And here I am, stuck with my thoughts, not sure what to do. I know what I have to do, though. So why do I feel so conflicted?

Later:

Zohar was right. There’s been a change in control. Despite being a prisoner in my own room, I see
and hear everything through my little window. I was watching, earlier, waiting for it. I could feel it in
the air. I heard movement, shouting. I felt it in my chest the same way I did the night Finn died.
Except this time, it was Al-Sumdal. He stood in the driveway, shouting for one of his men to get his
Jeep. There was a bag at his feet. The man looked at him, sadness on his face. He shook his head,
turned, walked away.

Al-Sumdal yelled after him, swore, threatened his life and his family.

I heard footsteps down the hallway. They passed, a door opened. Kane stepped out onto the
driveway.

“You’re making enough noise to raise the dead, old friend,” he spoke softly, almost kindly, but his
eyes were hard, even at this distance.

“What have you done to me?”

“You’ve brought this on yourself, Robert,” Kane said.

“You son of a bitch. I’ve made you the man you are,” Robert hissed at the other man.

Kane smiled, the gentlest curve of his lips.

“Perhaps,” the other man admitted. “But you’ve grown soft, careless. You’ve let your ego get the
best of you. You’ve lost your control, your discipline. You might have made me the man I am, but
you’re not the man you were.”

“So you’re pushing me out? Is that it? Fine, Kane. But someday, you’ll need me and I won’t be there
for you.”

“I doubt I’ll need you again, Robert. What use would I have for a dead body?”

“You piece of shit,” Robert growled.

When Kane moved, it was like a snake. I hadn’t even seen him reach under his jacket. From where I
was standing, it looked like he raised his hand and dropped it in a single motion, half a second. And
then he stood there, watching the results of his work.

Robert clutched his throat. I saw the black blood flowing through his fingers. The skin of his neck
gaped open like a giant, lipless mouth. I could hear the gurgling and bubbling as air escaped through
his throat. Blood ran down his front, staining his white shirt red like a gruesome costume. He
dropped to his knees, fell forward, stopped moving. I watched, numb. And when he turned away
from the scene, I swear that Kane’s eyes found mine in the darkness before he walked away.
February 1, 2019

“Tell me about Niylah,” Abdel ordered.

I was sitting in a chair, in the garage, my hands bound behind my back. I struggled slightly against the rope. It was thick, which was an advantage. I could already feel it slipping around my sweaty wrists.

“Why do you want to know about her?”

“Because I asked you,” he growled.

Abdel and I were alone. One of the jeeps had been moved to give us space. I’d been taken from my room earlier this morning, led by two of Kane’s men. I’d expected to see Kane, but Abdel had been waiting for me. The men had been dismissed as soon as I’d been tied to the chair.

“She was a friend.”

A belt caught me in the side of the head. It was thick, leather, and it stung like a bitch. I gasped, tears springing into my eyes. Better then the stars I used to see when someone used their hands.

“I don’t care about your perversions,” Abdel said, calmly. “I just want to know about you.”

“Why?”

“That’s none of your concern. Now, back to Niylah.”

I grimaced against the sting of the belt that lingered on my skin. But it hurt even more to remember her. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, especially recently since I was alone again with nothing but my thoughts, I could feel her in my arms again. Even thinking about her now made my chest hurt.

“Go fuck yourself, Abdel,” I growled.

I braced myself for the impact of the belt again, or something worse this time. I was done cooperating, done being friendly. Fuck them all. Every last one of them. And their mothers.

Instead, Abdel paused. He was still holding the belt in his hand, but instead, he knelt beside my chair. In the right lighting, his face was almost kind and when he spoke to me, it was like a father speaking to his child.
“I know you are tired, Clarke. I understand, truly. I have been in this same situation that you have been. And I overcame. I overcame because I let go of my ego and I did what I needed to do to stay alive and to stay safe. You have control over this situation, Clarke. Just tell me what I need to know, and you’ll be spared any pain.”

I could feel the ache in my chest. It was a longing. I didn’t want to be in pain. I didn’t want to hurt anymore. What Abdel said sounded so good. It was hard for me to pull myself away from it. Even just the sound of his voice, so calming, so smooth. But then I thought about Niylah, I thought about her body in the street. I thought about all the death, the beatings and bruises, the nights I’d gone to bed afraid or in pain. In that moment, I welcomed death.

“I already told you, Abdel. Go fuck yourself.”

The belt came down across the top of my head, onto my ear, my jaw. The blows rained down on me with almost no delay between them. And then, there was nothing. I was floating on a dark cloud. There was no pain, no anger, just blackness. I could no longer feel the chair beneath me. I couldn’t see the garage or Abdel. I couldn’t feel the cold, dry air of the desert in winter. And I truly hoped that I had died. I hoped that I was done, forever. But, obviously, if I’m writing this, I wasn’t dead. I wasn’t done. And the world came back to me, crashing down onto my head.

A bucket of cold water splashed over me. I breathed it in, swallowed it down, choked on it. I coughed and spat. I noticed the water running away from me was tinged pink with by blood but my whole upper body, from my shoulders to the top of my head, was a mass of burning, aching pain. I couldn’t guess where it was coming from. For all I knew, the belt could have stripped off long pieces of flesh and I was flayed, exposed to the world, meat and muscle and bone laid bare.

Abdel looked bored. He reached down to his boot and pulled something out. I wasn’t certain what it was but my unasked question was answered a second later. I felt the cool, sharp edge of a knife against my neck.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you, right now.”

“I can’t,” I gasped, pulling harder at the rope that bound my wrist, trying to struggle against the cords without appearing to struggle. “But I’m sure there’s a reason you haven’t killed me yet. I’m guessing Kane doesn’t want me dead. Otherwise, I would be.”

Abdel glowered at me.

“You’re too intelligent for your own good, girl.”

“Not the first time I’ve been told that,” I said, trying to keep him distracted. “But you’re more then welcome to kill me if you’d like to. I’m sure he’d get over it.”

“I’d rather not. I’m not interested in making life harder for myself.”

“Then what if I give you a reason to?”

“What would that be?”

I grabbed for his wrist that held the blade. My hands were free, the rope discarded on the floor. I pushed off from the chair, slamming into him. He was much larger than I was but he’d been crouched on the floor in front of the chair and was off balance. My shoulder slammed into his chest, my knees into his stomach. He fell back. The knife clattered to the ground, skidded away. I was on top of him and for a few wonderful, blissful moments, I returned the favor.
I felt his nose break under my fist. I saw his lip split open. I heard him yell in pain. I hit him hard, right in the throat, and left him gasping and coughing beneath me. I could see fear in his eyes and it filled me up. I felt power, for the first time in a long time.

And then it was gone. Two pairs of hands grabbed me, pulled me off of him. The guards must have been just outside the garage, waiting. They’d heard the commotion and had come inside to see what had happened. I struggled against them, managing to get one arm free. I swung and kicked. I heard a curse, hissed, as my foot connected with a shin, my elbow with a stomach. Finally, they picked me up, slammed me on the ground. The breath was knocked out of me and with them on my back, I thought for sure that on the ground, on the floor of that dirty garage, the smell of dirt and gasoline and old oil filling my nose, is where I would die.

Abdel came over, adjusting his suit, wiping dirt off of his clothes. I twisted my head painfully to look up at him. There was blood running into his mouth, down into his beard, his nose was angled painfully to one side. I grinned.

His foot caught me on the side of the head and that’s the last thing I remembered until I woke up here, back in my room, a couple hours ago.

Getting out of bed was a slow process. My whole body hurts now. Abdel must have taken out his anger on me and I wasn’t entirely healed from the last beating Al-Sumdal gave me before he died. My ribs are burning again. My back and chest both ache. I’m covered in dark bruises from my hips to my shoulders. I was able to see my face in the reflection on the base of my lamp. I look like I’ve gone three rounds in a boxing ring. I have a black eye, a busted lip (again), and welts all over my face, head, and neck from that damn belt. But, again, I’m alive.

If I don’t escape soon, though, then I don’t think I’ll stay that way for long.
Chapter 10

February, 13, 2019

There’s blood on my hands and a thousand miles of desert stretches out before me. Neither of those things are an exaggeration. There is actually blood on my hands. It’s under my nails, in the lines of my palm, between my fingers. Even scrubbing my hands with sand and water won’t change that.

And the sand, the desert, it’s endless. But I am free. It’s night. I’ve taken refuge in an outcropping of rocks at the base of a hill. I’m probably ten miles away from the compound. I’ve been running most of the evening. I took supplies with me. Enough for a few weeks, I hope. Water will be the hardest part but if I’m careful, I should be able to survive for a while. Hopefully long enough to find more.

The last 24 hours have been surreal. I’m finally free. Freer than I’ve ever been. But at the same time, weighed down by the choices I’ve made. There will be consequences. People will be coming after me. I have to be careful so I don’t put anyone’s life at risk. I can’t go home yet, but I can go forward. Which is what I’ll do, once I tell you what happened.

I was up before dawn, which isn’t unusual. I hear Dalla and Sahar in the kitchen and I know that breakfast will be coming soon. And it does, just like every morning. Dalla smiled and nodded at me when she handed me the plate. She won’t risk talking to me, but there is kindness in her face. Today, Sahar gave me a large piece of roth, a sweet bread made with sugar and cardamom seeds. There was also a large glass of tea with goats milk, sweetened with honey. I ate quickly, happy for the sugar. It gave me some energy, made me feel more awake, and is a rare treat now.

I’ve heard Sahar and Dalla talking about how strict Abdel is, wanting only traditional foods, very little excess, very few indulgences. Kane left several days ago and Abdel was left in charge, in Al-Sumdal’s place. I’ve seen very little of him which I don’t mind. It’s given me a chance to heal. I can finally move without aching. The bruises on my face have healed, the welts have disappeared. I feel strong again.

When Sahar came and took the plate, she took a moment to speak to me. “They have brought back the man with the camera,” she said, quickly. “They are setting it up in the garage. I believe they mean to film your execution.”

I felt sick. I knew it was coming. Part of me was ready for it. But waiting for death, I don’t think anyone is ever comfortable with that. I went to my wardrobe and pulled out the journal. Still taped to the back cover, the razor blade. I tucked it carefully into the sleeve of my abaya, close enough to my hand that I can slide it out without great difficulty. If I cut myself in the process, so be it.

Minutes later, my door unlocked and two men came in. One was Yasin. He tried not to make eye
contact with me. They grabbed me, hard, nearly picking me up and carrying me through the house, out to the driveway, into the garage. I remember this place clearly. The same jeep is still gone, the chair looks like the same one I sat in when Abdel was asking me about Niylah. It made my stomach try to creep its way into my throat.

The men sat me down in the chair. Yasin crouched behind me, wrapping the rope tightly around my wrists, but as soon as he stood up, I noticed something. He hadn’t tied it. He looked at me, a knowing glance, and walked away. I fought to not act prematurely. Part of me wanted to rip the rope off, run out of the room, but there were too many people there. There was Yasin, the other guard, Abdel, and the cameraman. I knew Abdel had a gun under his jacket and there was a cruel looking knife sitting on a nearby table. The cameraman had an AK slung across his back just like Yasin and the other guard. So I waited.

Abdel turned to me with a smile. He looked happier than I had ever seen him. He walked over to me, close enough that I could smell him. He smelled of sweat. I cringed.

“Clarke, I’m very happy to see you. Other tasks have needed my attention recently but I’m glad to say that I finally have time for you. Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s in the way that you wanted. You’ve worn out your welcome but not your usefulness. I need you to send a message.”

“What message would that be, Abdel?”

“Not to fuck with me.”

He grinned again, an evil look on his face that didn’t reach his eyes. They were dead. This was a man that had no soul. I moved slowly, working my hands out of the rope, holding it carefully so that it wouldn’t drop to the ground. With both hands free, I was able to maneuver the razor blade out of my sleeve. I’d wrapped the tape around one end, making it a little easier to hold.

Abdel spoke quietly and quickly to the cameraman. A few minutes later, he gave him a thumbs-up. We were ready to go. Abdel picked the knife off the table. He moved near me, looking at the camera. He spoke quickly, and in Arabic. He wanted to get this over with. He wanted me dead.

“Nearly two years ago, a woman was taken from the United States by Al-Sumdal, a cowardly man who gave in to his baser instincts. An incompetent man, who couldn’t even do what needed to be done to this Western whore. Today, a reminder of what happens when you go against God. We are the right hand of Mohammad, peace be upon him. We are the sword and shield.”

Abdel moved, but I was faster. I pushed the chair aside, turned towards him, and with a single motion, drew the blade across his neck. He dropped the knife, tried to push me away, grabbing at his throat at the same time. The room was still, silent, stunned by what had just taken place. But I was ready. I’d been ready for years.

I pulled Abdel’s pistol out of his jacket, fired a round at the cameraman. It struck him in the shoulder, another hit him in the stomach. The last in the chest, right at the base of his neck, as he fell. The guard in the corner started to react. He pulled his rifle around from his back. As he aimed down the sights, I fired two rounds, quickly. He fell.

I turned toward Yasin. He hadn’t made a move. His hands were up at his head, steady. I had to give it to him, he was brave. He said nothing and I aimed the pistol at him. I wanted to kill him. Every bone in my body ached for retribution. I remembered Niylah, lying in a pool of her own blood, the life gone from her eyes. With a growl, I dropped the gun.

“Get Dalla out of here. And if I ever see you again, I’ll kill you.”
He turned and ran out of the building. Outside, I could hear the commotion. No one was sure where the shots were coming from. I moved in front of the camera again. It was still filming, streaming live to every corner of the world. I knelt in front of the camera. My hands were red with Abdel’s blood. The frame of his pistol was slick with it. I looked into the camera, my lip twitching into a snarl.

“You might be the sword and shield, but I’m the fucking rifle. And I’m taking you all to hell with me.”

I stood up and kicked the camera over. It clattered to the ground.

I knew I needed to move. I walked over to the camera man’s body, pulled his rifle off of him, unclasping the sling. The guard had two extra magazines in the pocket of his cargo pants. I pulled those out too. I took off my scarf, tied it around my waist, and tucked them into it. I moved toward the door of the garage and peered outside. It was chaos. People were running around, looking over the wall.

To hell it was. I fired at the closest guard. The weapon was on full-auto and even a quick pull of the trigger made it jump in my hands. But I hit him. I ducked back inside, pushed the selector lever to semi-auto, and leaned back around the wall.

Two guards stood nearby, trying to see where the shots had come from. I fired quickly, dropping both of them to the ground. A yell went up from somewhere nearby and I ducked back inside right as a bullet came screaming toward me. It hit the concrete wall of the garage, followed by three more. I quickly changed positions, skirting around the back of the garage.

There was a door in the side that led into the guard’s apartment. I took the door, shut it behind me. I was alone in the building. Everyone had run outside when they heard the shooting. I remembered the layout from the many times that Zohar brought me over here. I was on the first floor. The camera room was across the hall, probably deserted because of the shooting. The kitchen and bathroom were down the hall. The guardroom was behind me. I turned and ran towards it.

Inside, I could see evidence of the chaos. Hot drinks were sitting on the tables, still steaming. Several people had left their coats. I ignored it, throwing open the metal door on the floor. I raced down the ladder. I didn’t know what I’d find in the bunker beneath the floor. Zohar had given me a slight idea.

“Supplies,” he had said. “Al-Sumdal served in the military and he knew to be prepared.”

Zohar hadn’t been kidding. The bunker looked ready to outfit a small army. If Al-Sumdal had known that his position within ISIS had been this tenuous, then that’s probably exactly what it had been for. There were lockers around the room, crates, trunks. I opened each one in turn, taking my time. I’d replaced the metal door upstairs. No one would know I was even down here unless they reviewed the tapes and saw me enter the guardroom but never leave. And even if they did, there was enough supplies down here to keep me fed and happy for years. And anyone coming down the ladder, it’d be like shooting fish in a barrel.

I grabbed a set of fatigues from one of the lockers and changed into it. It felt strange to be wearing pants and a t-shirt after so long in an abaya. I pulled my hair back, tying it with a piece of cord I found, and tucked it under a black cap. I pulled on a heavy coat, tucked gloves and a scarf in my pocket.

I pulled a backpack off a hook on the wall. I filled it with emergency rations, a full hydration bladder and two backup water bottles, a handful of survival blankets, a long coil of rope, extra socks, a stocking cap, several more magazines of ammunition, two blocks of C4 with a timer detonator.
In my pockets, I stuck another pair of magazines. I put a pistol in the holster I strapped to my waist. I stuck two grenades in my other pocket. When I climbed back out of the bunker, I did so carefully, not wanting to stick my head up into the middle of a room full of guards. Thankfully, the room was still empty. I hurried out into the hallway, through the building, to the main part of the house. The kitchen and library were empty. I stopped in my room, grabbed the journal, my pen, and left. In Al-Sumdal’s apartment, or whatever I should call it now, I ran into Sahar.

She was standing outside the women’s room. She sighed when she saw me, relief on her face.

“Clarke, I’m so thankful it is you. Hurry, come inside.”

I stepped into the room. Inside, the other women were seated on their beds. They looked scared. I saw them visibly relax when I stepped in.

“Sahar, what’s been happening?”

“Yasin came here about twenty minutes ago. He took Dalla and left and told us to hide in here until it was over. Do you know what happened?”

“I killed Abdel,” I said, simply. The thought didn’t even bother me anymore. “Yasin is in love with Dalla. I let him live on the condition that he get her out of here and I never see him again. But what about the rest of you?”

“Don’t worry, Clarke,” Sahar smiled at me. “We are free. You should come with us. There’s a van, parked along the back wall, and a tunnel leads from this room to it. You must come with us.”

I shook my head.

“I can’t, Sahar. What I did, it was on camera, broadcast live for everyone to see. I’ll be hunted. You have to get away from me. You have to stay safe. And for that to happen, I have to stay here.”

“What will you do?”

I paused for a moment. “I’ll create a distraction so you can leave.”


“You kept me safe and alive, Sahar. I can never repay you for that. If you ever need me, get word to me. I’ll come to you.”

She nodded, then reached under her abaya and pulled out a key. She handed it to me.

“The gun case in Al-Sumdal’s bedroom. This is the key for it. There might be something in there of use. I took it off his body.”

I took the key. Sahar smiled at me, sadly, like it might be the last time she ever saw me alive, then turned. She ordered the women to gather their things and when I left them, they were all working quickly.

I left the women’s room and walked through the door into Al-Sumdal’s library. I walked through it to his bedroom. Thankfully, I’d never been in there before. The furniture was large and gaudy, there was artwork on the walls. But I ignored it all. I opened the wardrobe, unlocked the safe door with the key. Inside were several weapons. A pump shotgun, a hunting rifle with a scope, ammunition for both, a large knife, a hatchet, several flares. I packed everything that I could into the bag, strapped the guns onto the outside of it. I kept one of the flares in my pocket.
I hurried from the bedroom back to the kitchen in the main part of the house. I knew that I had a limited amount of time. When they didn’t find me hiding in the garage, they’d start searching the house, the courtyard. I didn’t want them to find the women.

I reached behind the stove to where the gas pipe was. With a knife, I pried it off carefully, not wanting to cause a spark and blow myself up. It came loose and I could smell propane filling the air. There were large tanks out back that fueled the water heaters and the stove. I knew they were at least half-full. I hurried out of the kitchen and once I was safely in the hallway, I pulled the top of the flare and tossed it back into the kitchen.

The fire roared into being at once and by the time I hit the front door, flames were licking at the sky from the back of the building. There were three guards in the driveway. I shot the first one easily, took cover behind a large planter near the entrance to the house to fire at the second once. I had to duck behind it as the third shot at me. I moved quickly, jumping over a low retaining wall, crouching close to the ground. I took off my backpack so he wouldn’t see me. Moved a few hundred feet on my belly. When I leaned up over the wall, the third guard was looking away, back where I’d jumped instead of where I was now. He fell to the ground, dead.

I heard more yells now, more people running and moving, toward the fire this time. Soon, the propane tanks would explode. The fire would be uncontrollable. Beyond the wall, just up a hill, I saw a white van driving away. Sahar, the women. I turned, and when I did, there was a man standing there. One of the guards. I tried to bring my gun up but he slammed his hand down on the top of it. It clattered to the ground.

He grabbed me by the throat, a cruel grimace on his face. He pressed me back, toward the wall, away from escape. At my waist, I fumbled with my belt, grabbed the hatchet, swung.

The blade hit his head with a heavy, wet thunk, like the sound a knife makes on a watermelon. Blood sprayed out from the wound, hitting me in the face. I wrenched the hatchet out of his head, hit again, this time, across the side of his face. He let me go, stumbled, fell. I watched him, watched the blood pouring out of him, into the stones of the sidewalk. I should have felt sick, or scared, or sad. I felt nothing. I had welcomed death for so long, I had become death. And I found no regret in taking the life of a person who wanted to harm me.

I left him there, blood steaming in the cold air, and turned, walking out the gate. When I stepped past the threshold, a sense of freedom, of possibility and opportunity, hit me in the chest. I took a deep breath, my first free lungful of air in twenty months, and walked into the desert.
A few days after I left the compound, I found a village. Timing was perfect because I was getting low on water and wanted a place to stay that wasn’t under a rock somewhere. The village was small, maybe four dozen houses, a small market in the middle with a few covered stalls. There were some fenced areas around the village held goats and sheep. I could hear chickens calling from inside the streets.

I waited until dark and crawled closer to the city, careful not to make too much noise. At one of the houses on the outskirts, I saw a door in the ground outside the house. A cellar. I opened it quietly and crawled inside. It was dark, a little damp, but it was warmer and more comfortable than sleeping outside. I used my coat as a pillow and slept with my hatchet and my AK nearby.

When I woke, it was way past morning. I knew that because the cellar door had been thrown wide open. There was a young woman standing in the middle of the floor, looking at me curiously. She had dark brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and smooth, dark skin that shone in the sunlight. She crouched, still looking at me curiously. I pushed myself up and back across the floor, grabbing at my hatchet. She stood quickly, holding her hands out.

“I’m unarmed,” she said in clear, perfect English. Then again in Arabic. “And I’m not going to hurt you.”

I was breathing hard. My chest was beating in my throat. But she wasn’t armed and I was. I took a deep breath and a second look. She wasn’t Middle Eastern. She was wearing cargo pants, a gray t-shirt, a heavy coat. She didn’t speak with an accent. A lot of things hadn’t made sense in my life, but this was a new one.

“Who are you?” I asked, still trying to catch my breath.

“Clarke,” I breathed. “Clarke Griffin.”

Her eyes widened. “Holy shit,” she said. “You’re that reporter that got kidnapped a couple years ago. Talk about the odds.”

“How did you know?”

Raven chuckled to herself.

“Grab your shit and come upstairs. No reason for you to sleep in my basement when I have a
perfectly good house.”

I grabbed my backpack and followed her out of the cellar. She shut the doors behind us and I was able to see that the sun was much higher than I’d expected. In fact, it wasn’t going up anymore, it was going down. I’d slept through the night and most of the next day. Raven led me around the house and through the front door. It was a small house, three rooms with a plaster floor. There was no running water but a pump in the kitchen helped. There was a small propane stove, a fireplace against one wall and a wood stove in the kitchen. There was a main room with some cushions on the floor, a low table, a small shelf on one wall lined with several books. Through the doorway I could see the kitchen with a small table, the stove, the sink with the water pump. There was a basket of vegetables, a bag of rice on the floor, a plate of fresh naan on the counter, and a newly plucked chicken hanging from the ceiling.

Through the other door, there was a bedroom. I could see the corner of a small bed, a dresser, some clothes hanging from a line on one wall. I sat my backpack down near the door, kept my rifle close. I still wasn’t sold that I’d found a new friend but I was willing to give it a try.

“Why don’t you grab a seat,” Raven suggested. “I’ll get some water and you can wash up and then I’ll make dinner. We can talk after you get something to eat.”

Raven gave me some privacy in her bedroom to wash up and let me borrow a pair of pants and an oversized red t-shirt while she washed my clothes. When I was putting on the shirt, I caught a glimpse of the tag. It was an American brand. Was I in the Matrix? I shook my head, pulled on the shirt, and walked back out. Raven was putting cups and plates on the low table in the middle of the room. She brought out a small, pottery crock, filled with a clear liquid. She poured a small taste of it into my cup.

“Be careful,” she said, handing me the cup. “A guy I know makes that in his basement. It’ll put hair on your chest.”

“Just what I need,” I joked, took a sip.

I coughed. It burned all the way down but the heady, light feeling it left behind was worth the work.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “What did I just drink?”

“A mixture of fermented goats milk and rice wine.”

“Goat milk sake?”

“Pretty much,” Raven laughed. “Guy might be a little off his rocker from drinking his own supply but he makes some good shit.”

“That’s one word for it.”

Raven sat the food down on the table, a plate of naan, some cooked vegetables, mint yogurt, and the chicken had been roasted with spices and smelled delicious. I leaned back against the cushions, pulled my feet up under me, and relaxed for the first time in a long time.

Raven let me eat for several minutes without interruption. Then, with a little more food and a couple more sips of alcohol in me, she started talking.

“So, what’s your story? I saw you on the news a while back, before I came to Afghanistan. I figured you were dead.”
I laughed mirthlessly. “I almost was.”

“So, what happened?”

“I escaped.”

I told her the whole story, glossing over some parts. We sat up, talking, late into the night. At one point, she got up, lit a fire that cast a warm, soft glow around the room. She settled back down on her cushion, poured herself another drink.

“You’re kind of a badass,” she said.

I laughed. “Not really. I just did what I had to do to escape. I don’t know if I’m a badass so much as I’m just scared to die.”

“But are you?”

I paused for a moment, thinking. “No, I don’t think so. Not really, anyway. I was ready to die. I think that helped me escape, actually. If I died, I wanted it to be on my terms.”

“So, where do you go from here?”

“I don’t know. But I want Kane dead. I’ve been told there are Kurdish forces fighting in Syria. I thought about seeing if I could meet up with them.”

Raven paused for a moment, chewing on her lower lip.

“I have a better idea.” She jumped up, grabbed a book off the shelf on the wall. She thumbed through it and I saw that most of the pages were hand-written. She stopped when she got to a map and opened the book wide on the table so we both could look at it.

“So, to give you a little background, I’m an engineer. I have a degree in robotics engineering and nanotechnology engineering, as well as certificates in geomatics and sustainability design. I came to Afghanistan a year and a half ago with a team of engineers from all over the world, the US, England, Australia, Germany, Japan. We were working with a company who wanted to develop low-cost, sustainable power systems for villages just like this one. My job was to work with three other people and survey the villages, talk to the people, figure out where their needs were, before we started development of an actual product.

“While we were doing this, we ran afoul of a local warlord by the name of Bin-Sal. Now, there are a lot of politics and cultural issues involved so I won’t bore you, but it didn’t end well. Two members of the team were killed. The other engineer and I, his name was Kurt, we were captured, tortured. Kurt was killed. I was rescued a month or two later.

“I was rescued by a local paramilitary organization. They’re rebels, here in Afghanistan. Just like the Kurdish forces, but their focus isn’t solely on Islamic extremism. They’ve recognized the real problem. Don’t get me wrong, groups like ISIS and other terrorist organizations are an issue, but the real problem is the funding sources. That’s where your Kane comes in.

“When you said his name, I knew I’d heard of him before. He’s responsible for funding most of the big players in this area. He gets guns, drugs, money, even imports fighters for some of the smaller organizations. You cut off one of these guys,” she pointed to the map and I saw outlines, different extremist groups that ran different parts of the country, “and it’s like cutting off a lizard’s tail. It’s just going to grow back. You have to go for the head.”
“And Kane is the head.”

Raven nodded.

“You need to meet Heda.”

“Who?”

“Heda. She’s the leader of the rebel group. I don’t know anything about her, to be honest. But I know she operates out of Mazari Sharif. If we can make it there, we can meet with her. I have some contacts in the city.”

“You have contacts? Who are you, Raven?”

She smiled at me, winked.

“Maybe someday I’ll tell you my story.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Content warning: Lots of blood and gore, gunfire including death by gunshot wound.

Chapter 12: Blood and Sand - Gunshots - Intelligence - Keeping Count - A New Lead

February 20, 2019

There was blood on the sand. Bodies were piled in the center of the town. I swallowed bile, trying not to vomit. Raven looked at the gory scene, a look of disgust and hatred on her face.

“What the fuck happened here?”

“What, War,” Raven spat.

I looked at her and we turned, walking away from the pile of bodies and back to the truck. Raven had bought it from a farmer before we left the village. She’d given him her house, her farm, in exchange. She had no intention of returning. She’d let me borrow some clothes so I didn’t look quite as noticeable in my military uniform, but I kept my hair piled under my hat and made sure not to let anyone see my face for too long. We’d driven through several small villages in the last two days but they had all been alive, vibrant.

We’d known there was something wrong as soon as we could see smoke on the horizon. The streets smelled like death.

“Most of the villages in the area owe protection money to someone or the other. It’s how smaller warlords make their money and a name for themselves before they get on the radar of someone like Kane. Most of them don’t last very long. They make a stupid move, or the villagers fight back, refuse to pay. If the head of a group can’t pay his people, they don’t stick around very long. But this, this is different.”

“This was a massacre,” I shook my head.

I heard the shot as I started to climb up into the truck. It was in the distance, but the crack, the echo, were unmistakable. I grabbed my rifle out of the truck. Raven glanced at me.

“You’re going to go see what that was, aren’t you?”

I grinned at her. “Be back in ten.”

I sprinted across the sand, through the winding, small streets of the village. There was a jeep parked in the back of one of the farms on the far side of town. A fence had been destroyed under its wheels. Goats were milling around, chewing on tough patches of dead winter grass. There were three men near the jeep. In the sand, I could see tracks from other vehicles. The rest of the war party had left. These three were finishing off the stragglers.

There was a man, on his knees in the dirt. His hands were raised above his head. He was shaking, praying for leniency. A woman’s body was on the ground beside him. That was the shot I’d heard.
The soldier had his gun pointed at the man’s head. At one point, he laughed. I felt my stomach burn with hatred. I took aim, fired. The soldier fell to the ground, dropping his weapon. The man dove to the ground. The other two soldiers started shooting on my position. I quickly moved, jumped through an open window in the house I was leaning near.

I could hear bullets hitting the side of the house. I kept low, moving to the next room, another window. I poked my head up, fired another pair of shots. I heard someone yell out. I moved again, this time out of the house, around the back side, flanking the soldiers. There was only one standing up and aiming. He was approaching the house and hadn’t even noticed me. The other one was on the ground, his weapon dropped nearby. He was clutching his leg, writing on the ground. I fired at the one still standing and he dropped.

I moved in, quickly checking to make sure the area was clear.

“Are you good?” Raven called.

She’d followed me part of the way, found cover behind a low stone wall a few houses down the street.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

She jogged up to join me. The man they’d had cowering in the dirt stood up. He was speaking quickly, thanking us for freeing him.

“You talk to him,” I told Raven. “See if you can calm him down, find anything out. I’ll talk to this guy.”

The soldier was still writhing in pain. He stopped when I stepped on his chest, my boot heavy. He was breathing hard. The sand around him was dark with blood and I knew I’d hit something major. He wouldn’t be around much longer. I took my boot off his chest, crouched next to him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“My job,” he gasped.

“Who do you work for?”

“Tawr,” he breathed, his eyes shut, he was unconscious now, probably dead soon.

He was of no use to me.

Raven was still talking to the man. He was sobbing. I caught the end of their conversation. The woman killed next to him was his daughter. The men had come into the town that morning. They’d rounded everyone up but he’d tried to hide in the cellar. They’d come searching and had found them both.

I waited while she finished talking to him. When they were done, she walked back to me and left the man sobbing quietly in the dust.

“Tawr,” I said as she walked over.

“The bull,” Raven nodded. “I got the same message from him.”

“Who’s the bull?”

“You don’t know? It’s your friend, Kane.”
I looked at her, surprised.

She walked over to the body of one of the soldiers, rolled him onto his back.

“Look,” she said.

I joined her and looked down at the man. On his chest, sewn onto the pocket of his fatigues, was a patch with the outline of a bull’s head in red.

“Most of the local militias and tribes, they don’t have uniforms. They look like Afghani farmers or locals. They’re not soldiers. They work for small-time warlords with few money and resources. This was something bigger. This was a message.”

“What kind of message?”

Raven shrugged. “He didn’t know. He’s just a small-time farmer. He’s lived here most of his life. But he has family a couple villages over. His son lives there. I told him we’d give him a ride if that’s ok.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I followed Raven back to the truck. She walked with the man, speaking to him quietly. She helped him up into the back of the truck, pulling a thick blanket over him so the dust and cold wouldn’t bother him. I climbed up into the cab, laid my gun across my lap and pulled my knife out of its sheath at my belt. Raven watched me out of the corner of her eye as she pulled back onto the road and out of the village.

“Um, Clarke, if you don’t mind me asking, what the hell are you doing?”

I laughed as she watched me. I carved a line into the wooden stock of the AK-47 rifle. “I’m keeping count.”

“Keeping count?”

I carved another one. “Ten at the compound, three here.”

“You’re keeping track of the number of people you kill.”

I nodded, finishing my last mark.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s important to me for some reason. Maybe it’s so that one day, I’ll be able to look back at what I’ve done and regret it.”

“Or be proud of it.”

I put the rifle off to the slide, slid my knife back into place. “Maybe.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Let’s take him home,” I said, jerking my thumb toward the back of the truck. “After that, we need to see if we can find any more information about what the Bull is doing out here. Something’s happened, Raven. Kane isn’t like this. He’s cruel, but something is making him act like this and do these things. We need to find out what it is.”
“That guy said that one of the soldiers said they came from a town up north. I wonder if it got the same treatment this place did.”

“I’m not sure,” I shrugged. “But it seems like a good place to start.”
We dropped the old man off at his son’s house. They offered us a place to stay for the night and a good meal in exchange for bringing him to them. We took them up on it, happy to not be sleeping in the truck for a change. The next morning, we started north, toward the town that the old man had mentioned. It took almost a full twenty-four hours. The road was horrible, full of potholes and cracks. We went over a hard bump just as I’d fallen asleep in the passenger seat and I jerked awake, reaching out toward some unknown assailant from my nightmares.

Raven reached out, gently touched my leg. “Hey, Clarke. It’s alright, you’re safe. Just this fucking bumpy ass road.”

I chuckled. She swore like a sailor and I loved her for it.

“I think this road is a metaphor for my life right now,” I shrugged my shoulders, trying to stretch my aching back. “You know, I just thought about something.”

“What?”

“I’m twenty-nine years old. My birthday was back in January. The last birthday I celebrated was my twenty-seventh. We had a big party. My fiancé was there, all my family. Even my dad showed up and he’s kind of a flake. And I can never go back to that life, no matter how hard I try. I don’t know if I’ll ever have another birthday party.”

“Goddamn, Griffin. Stop being so fucking depressing.”

I grinned at her. “Fine, you’re turn. Come on. I want to find out more about your life. You told me you’d tell me your story someday and today is a day.”

“That it is,” Raven sighed, cursed as she hit another rut. “Fine, but my story isn’t as interesting as yours is.”

“Bullshit.”

“Would you shut up and let me tell it?”

I mimed locking my lips, throwing away the key. Raven rolled her eyes at me.

“I grew up an all-American girl. My dad was in the Army, my mom was a nurse. I was born in the US but I lived in Germany for a while, Japan, Italy. When I was in high school, my dad took a job as
an ROTC instructor at University of Kentucky so I was able to stay in Lexington all four years of high school. I went to a good college, got a pretty nice job right out of it, but I got bored. I guess I spent so much time traveling as a kid that it sucked to just stay in once place all the time.

“I had a friend who was working for a military contractor at the time. He was installing power plants in Iraq and said he’d been offered a similar job in Afghanistan but that he’d declined the job because it was less salary than what he was making. It was still six figures, more than I’d made, for sure. So I took the job in Afghanistan. I told you about that, about being captured, but what I failed to left out is that Kurt, the German guy I was captured with, we were in love. We’d started dating about six months earlier. I was going to do home with him during our week off and meet his family.

“He had a little girl. She was six years old and he wanted to introduce me to her. Instead, he died, and I watched him die. The men who captured us, who killed him, they wore that same patch the soldier in the last village did. They were members of the Tawr too. I’ve spent the last eight months investigating them, trying to get close. But that’s hard to do when it’s just me, you know. And then I met you, realized we were working toward the same goal.

“I want Kane just as much as you do, even if your vendetta against him might be more personal than mine.”

“Yours sounds pretty fucking personal,” I said.

“I really didn’t mean to lie to you, Clarke.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t lie to me, Raven. You might have left some things out, but you didn’t lie to me. We’re in this together but you didn’t know me when we met, or anything about me. I don’t blame you for your secrets.”

“So this doesn’t change anything?”

“Not at all. Well, other than make me even more determined to find this son of a bitch.”

We settled into a companionable silence. I drifted back to sleep once the road finally smoothed out. We drove through the night and when Raven shook me awake, the sun was already coming up.

“You should have woken me up,” I scolded her.

“No way,” she said. “I was in the zone.”

We were topping a large hill at the end of a ridge getting ready to turn and head down into a valley. I could see the town down there. It was a little larger than the villages we had seen before. I was some homes with second stories and the roads were paved. I could see people milling around, no smoke, no fire. Overall, it looked peaceful.

Raven and I attracted some attention when we drove into the town. She stopped and asked someone where their governor was. When we were headed down the main street to the large, white house at the end of it, I realized that there was a long trail of people following behind us. Something was going on.

By the time Raven and I got out of the truck, most of the town had gathered in the square. Raven turned off the ignition, looked at me.

“I have a weird fucking feeling about this,” she said.

“Yep,” I nodded. “Me too.”
By the time we climbed out of the truck, the governor of the town was waiting for us on the front steps of his house. When he saw me, his eyes widened.

“Come, come,” he said. “You’ve gotten here just in time.”

Raven and I followed him into the house, confused. It didn’t take him long to hurry us into a sitting room. Raven and I found chairs near the fire, happy for some heat.

“Sir, I’m not sure who you think we are but we came here to find out some information. I’m not sure how we can help you.”

“Well maybe you can do both, yes. A week ago, we caught the attention of a local warlord and his tribe because we refused to feed his men as they came through the village. He threatened us that he would return. We’ve seen them gathering in the hills and we need your help. Please, they’re going to attack our village.”

The man looked scared, hopeful, pleased, he was almost begging at this point. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d gotten down on his knees in front of us.

“But, sir,” I said. “We’re just two people. What can we do?”

“But you’re her, aren’t you. You’re Wanheda.”

“Who?” I asked, just as Raven muttered, “Oh fuck.”

I turned to her. “Do you understand what he’s saying?”

“There’s a legend here, about a woman who will rise up, to free the villages and towns from war, from the pain, from the warlords who control them. She will fight the armies and bring peace back to the people, allowing them to rule themselves again. She is called Wanheda, the Commander of Death.”

I swallowed.

“Why do you think I’m her?”

“We’ve seen the video,” the governor said, grinning. “You are the rifle. You will kill them all.”

I groaned and sat back in the chair.

“Wait, what video?”

The governor smiled and ducked out of the room. When he came back, he was holding a small, portable DVD player.

“This was brought to me by my cousin in Kandahar. He told me that Wanheda had come.”

He opened the DVD player and turned it on. I saw myself, broken and battered, tied in front of the camera. I saw Abdel, alive and well, speaking to the camera. I didn’t need to see the video. I knew what had happened. I’d been there. But I still watched. I saw my hand move in a flash and Abdel’s throat open. I saw myself pull the gun out of his jacket, fire at people off the screen. I saw myself step around the camera, speak to Yasin, then back into the camera. When I spoke, when I made my warning, I barely recognized myself. There was cruelty in my voice, madness in my eyes. I’d made a promise, to take each and every one of these sons of bitches to hell with me. And the governor was hoping I’d honor my word.
When the video end, he closed it and smiled up at me. Raven turned and looked at me, a strange expression on her face.

“I had no idea,” she said.

I waved her off.

“What do you want us to do?” I asked.

We want your help, Wanheda. We need your help, or our village won’t survive the night. We have a small group of soldiers here in town but they’re untrained. Local policemen or old veterans from the war. But the siblings, they promised to help.”

“The siblings?”

“Bellamy and Octavia. They’re with the rest of our men, just outside of town,”

“Point us in the right direction.”

“Seriously?” Raven asked, standing up. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“What are we supposed to do, Raven? Just let this town die? Besides, apparently I made a promise. You can stay here if you want to.”

Raven sighed. “No, what would be the fun in that?”

I grabbed my bag out of the truck, Raven followed with her own rifle. We walked through town and found the group gathered near a shed. I looked up on the ridge above town and saw a couple jeeps, some men in fatigues milling around.

“Hey, who are you?” someone called from the group.

I looked up and saw a young man stand up. He had thick, curly black hair, olive skin. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a thick chest. Raven chose that moment to trip over her own feet and I tried not to laugh.

“I’m Clarke,” I answered. “This is Raven. We’ve come to help you.”

“Wait a minute,” a young woman walked out of the group, closer to me. She looked at me carefully. “You’re Wanheda. I’ve seen the video.”

The man looked at me again, more closely this time.

“You two must be the siblings,” Raven said, breaking the quiet tension.

The girl nodded. “That’s what the governor calls us. I’m Octavia, this is my brother, Bellamy.”

“You’re American?” I asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “My brother used to be in the Army. I’m a nurse. I was working in Afghanistan with the Red Cross when I was kidnapped. He came looking for me. We got caught up in this mess. Not much more to the story.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of kidnapping going on in this part of the world,” I muttered.

“I intend on doing something about it,” Bellamy said, still looking at me.
“Great plan, soldier boy,” I said. “But for the time being, I think we should worry more about those guys on the hill.”

“So, then,” he crossed his arms over his chest, biceps bulging. I heard Raven swallow hard behind me. “What’s your plan, Wanheda?”

“I plan to take my boom stick, point it at them, and pull the trigger. Were you thinking something different? Maybe charades?”

Octavia stifled a laugh and Bellamy turned to glare at her.

“Listen, this isn’t a fucking game,” he growled.

“Oh, I didn’t realize that. I thought I was just part of a Shades of Gray improv class gone wrong when I spent the past twenty months of my life imprisoned and tortured.”

Bellamy didn’t respond. He exhaled, dropped his arms, nodded.

“You’ll have to excuse my brother,” Octavia said, stepping between us. “He’s an asshole.”

“He’s not totally wrong though,” I said, looking up at the hill. “They have the position, and the numbers.”

“But they only have the position if we try to rush them,” Bellamy said, his ego obviously not too bruised. “They’re too far away right now to do any real damage. It’d be easy for us to dodge a few stray bullets in the houses. They’ll have to come down from the ridge to engage us but the problem is, there’s a road about a thousand meters across the ridge.”

He pointed and I followed his finger. I could see the road snaking down the side of the hill.

“They’ll try to drive down it which will keep us from doing much damage until they’re on top of us.”

“That might not be the case.”

I walked over to my backpack, grabbed out one of the blocks of C4 I’d taken from the compound.

“I took a little present for myself when I escaped. I’ve been holding onto it for the right time. What if we draw them down and have a little surprise waiting for them.”

Bellamy took the C4.

“Only problem is,” he said, “it’s on a timer.”

“Then I’ll just have to make sure it’s a short timer once they start coming down the hill.”

“You’re going to plant it?” Octavia looked shocked.

I nodded.

“I’m not sure I like this plan,” Bellamy said.

“Well, I think we’re out of time to come up with another one because the boss just got here.”

We all turned and looked up at the ridge. The warlord had gotten there. There was no mistaking him. He climbed out of a large, black pickup truck and he did look like something out of a storybook. He was wearing an immaculate military uniform with rows of medals on his chest. He was tall, broad,
and round, with a heavy beard and a sword tucked into the belt he wore around his waist. He barked something in Arabic that we couldn’t hear and the men moved.

“Well, hell,” Bellamy growled. “Let’s just get to it.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Content warning for this chapter: A bloody firefight at the beginning of the chapter with graphic descriptions of violence, blood, light gore, etc.

Chapter 14: River of Blood - A New Scar - Higher Count - Bellamy’s Judgment - A Winding Road - Good and Bad Attention

February 25, 2019

A large explosion has a devastating impact on a jeep racing down a rocky, winding path. It launched the jeep into the air, slamming it down on its side and sending it end over end down the side of the hill until it landed, upside down, at the base of it. The jeep behind it had also been damaged, though not enough and the four men inside had quickly hopped out and continued down the side of the mountain.

That was enough, though. With the path blocked and the remaining vehicles forced to stop, the winding road became a river of blood in seconds.

“Fish in a barrel,” Bellamy had growled when it was all over.

I had put the explosive on the road once I’d heard the roar of engines, with a thirty second timer. It was enough for me to get out of the way, crouch behind a nearby outcropping of tall rocks, and wait for the party to start. Bellamy, Octavia, Raven, and two of the villagers were waiting at the base of the road, just around the bend. The rest of the men were hiding in the houses at the edge of the field, a final defense in case anyone got through.

When the charge exploded it was loud enough to make my ears ring. The jeep slid by me, just missing my hiding spot. I leaned around the outcropping and fired, taking out two of the other soldiers from the second jeep as they tried to get out. I ducked back as the third soldier fired on me and swore as the bullet hit the rock I was hiding behind. A chunk of rock broke off, hit me in the forearm. I could feel the blood dripping off my wrist, the sting of sweat in the wound, but I kept shooting.

Raven and the others had come part of the way up the hill. They were able to take cover and fire on the soldiers as they came running down the road. I took out another one, then had to duck behind the rock and wipe my palm on my pants. The blood and sweat were making my hand slick.

Finally, the shooting ended. I cautiously stuck my head out. Everyone else was doing the same.

“Clear,” Bellamy called from where he was.

I heard Raven and Octavia echo him and added my voice to it. I didn’t see any movement, couldn’t hear anything other than a strange dripping sound that I soon realized was blood dripping from the head of the first man I’d shot before he’d managed to get all the way out of the jeep. He was hanging from the passenger seat, his head a foot off the ground, raining blood onto the sand.

“Oh shit,” I heard Raven swear as she walked up to me. “Clarke, are you alright?”
Octavia heard her, ran over to where we were standing.

“I’m fine,” I said, shaking them both off. “Just a piece of the rock. Most of it’s sweat anyway.”

Octavia was frowning at my arm.

“II’ll let you check it out when we get back to town if that’ll make you feel better.”

Octavia seemed relieved, as did Raven. We gathered up the rest of the men, checked to make sure the coast was clear. It looked like the warlord had driven away, probably when the explosion had gone off. Another jeep was missing but Bellamy had gone up to the top of the ridge with two of the villagers and hadn’t seen anyone or anything. For now, we were safe.

“Guess you’ve gotta add some more notches to that stock, huh?” Raven bumped my shoulder with hers and I smiled at her.

We walked back to the governor’s house together. Inside, Octavia made me sit in a chair and wait for her to get her supplies. So we sat. The governor insisted that we eat. His wife and daughter hurried around us, serving us plates and making sure our cups were full of tea and strong coffee.

“That went relatively well,” Bellamy sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“You sound surprised.”

“I don’t really like fighting with civilians. They tend to mess things up.”

“Pretty sure you’re a civilian now too, soldier boy,” I snapped back.

“I’m a veteran,” he growled.

“Oh, my bad. If we ever make it back to the states, I’ll buy you a t-shirt.”

“I just don’t like putting my sister’s life in the hands of amateurs.”

“Bellamy, stuff it,” Octavia said, coming back into the room with a backpack. She knelt beside me and started pulling out medical supplies. “He’s good at being a brother but kind of shit at being a decent human being so forgive him.”

“No harm done,” I said, wincing as Octavia began cleaning off my arm. “I just don’t like it when people who don’t know me want to make judgment calls on my ability. If I was an amateur, I wouldn’t be here right now, Bellamy.”

He cleared his throat. “Listen, I know you can hold your own. I get that. I saw the video, same as everyone else here. But you don’t know military tactics, you don’t know about military bearing, you don’t know about teamwork and self-discipline, you don’t know what it takes to win a war.”

“That’s bullshit,” I laughed. “And you should know it. No, I’ve never been trained in tactics, or military bearing. I’ve never gotten the pleasure of having a drill sergeant yell at me at four in the morning or gotten to do push-ups until I puked. I’d never shot someone before two weeks ago. But most of these villagers don’t have any formal training, you know, the men and women who have spent their entire lives fighting these people. But I know about teamwork and I sure as hell know about discipline. Self-discipline was living with the man who kidnapped me, killed my fiancé, and would have killed me in a heartbeat for almost two years while I waited to make my move and escape. And I sure as hell know what it takes to win this war, Bellamy.”
“We’ll see,” he said, a smile curving his lips.

“What does that mean?” Raven asked.

“I think you two are on the same path we are. It’s been a hell of a winding road for us. We’ve traveled from Kandahar to Mazari Sharif and everywhere in-between looking for some clue to take us in the right direction.”

“And what direction are you heading in, exactly?”

“The rebels,” Octavia said. “We’ve been trying to join up with them for the past six months but we haven’t had any luck, so we’ve gone where we were needed. Bellamy’s helped villages secure their borders and I’ve patched people up. But you all, you’re trying to find her, aren’t you?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Heda,” Bellamy said.

There was that name again. The mysterious commander.

Raven nodded. “We don’t really know where to go either, to be honest. I heard she was operating in Mazari Sharif but that was months ago.”

“Last I heard was Kabul, but that was also months ago.”

“So, it sounds to me like we’re not going to find her. She’s going to have to find us.”

“Ah,” the governor spoke up for the first time. He had been following our conversation from the head of the table, hands clasped over his large stomach. Now, he leaned forward. “I think you might find that in this world, there are two types of attention you can get.”

I listened carefully. His English was excellent but he had a thick accent and I had to pay attention to catch all of his words.

“There is bad attention, friends, like the attention that we caught last week and again today, when we finally decided to stand up for ourselves, and then there is good attention, like the attention we caught when we finally decided to stand up for ourselves.” He laughed, but the rest of us were confused.

“We caught the ire of a certain warlord when we refused to give his men food and supplies. He came back, and that was bad attention. But in standing up to him, we caught the attention of a certain rebel group, who is now willing to help us because we have shown a determination to fight against some of the old ways. You have given us courage, Wanheda.”

“The rebels,” I said. “They’ve been in contact with you.”

He nodded. “They have. And I believe they’ve been watching you for a while, now. Probably since your video became public.”

He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to me. The outside was addressed to Wanheda and The Raven, written in Arabic. Bellamy looked at it.

“Great, but we can’t read Arabic.”

“I can,” I said, opening the letter.

He looked surprised and I enjoyed the expression on his face for a moment.
Inside the envelope, there was a single sheet of paper. On the paper, an address, a date, a time. The address was in Sheberghān. The date said March 3, 2019, and the time said 1:00pm. There was nothing else written.

“Pretty sure we need to try to get to this place by this date and time,” I said, passing the card around to everyone at the table.

“Excellent,” the governor smiled. “You can stay with us for a few days and then go on your way. Sheberghān is only a twelve hour drive from here. And we have to thank you for all your help.”

I’m in a room now, on the second floor in the building next to the governor’s house. There’s a large bed, a dresser, a wardrobe, a lamp. I can look out the window and see almost the whole town and in the distance, the wreck of the jeep is still smoldering, sending up a column of fading gray-black smoke. Several men from the town have been tasked with moving the bodies out into the desert so they don’t bring disease or stink as they begin to rot. I can see them working in the distance.

It’s night and the sun is down, so they’ve built small fires in the field to give themselves light. Finally, I feel like I can rest, and even taking the time to finish this journal entry has made me exhausted. I’m actually looking for a few days to move a little more slowly. We have a goal now, a destination. It’s something tangible that I can set my sights on. And now, I’m going to climb into this bed and sleep for a week, because that’s also something tangible I can set my sights on.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for this chapter: Mentions of rape, threats of sexual assault, descriptions of physical assault and character death. All of these events are mentioned as having already occurred and characters are reflecting on them but they could be triggering for some people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 2, 2019

I woke up to screaming. I jumped out of bed, grabbed my rifle from where it was sitting by the door. I was out in the hallway before I even realized that the screaming was coming from inside the house, on the same floor, and not from outside. It was coming from Octavia’s room.

I flung open the door, expecting to see someone else in there with her. Octavia was alone. The sheets on her bed had been twisted around her legs. She was thrashing and swinging at an invisible monster. She was still screaming.

“Octavia,” I yelled, trying to wake her up. “Octavia, wake up. It’s a dream.”

I put down my rifle and walked closer to her bed.

“Clarke?” I heard her voice now, quiet. She was panting.

“Octavia, it’s me. I’m here.”

I sat down on her bed and scooped her into my arms. She was a little smaller than I was, thin-framed but still so strong. I could feel the chords of muscle in her arms and legs. Her long brown hair was stuck to her head with sweat. I helped her untangle the sheets from her legs and just held her until her breathing was back to normal. I helped her sit up in bed, grabbed a glass of water for her. Octavia gulped it down, sighed.

“Thanks,” she breathed. “Sorry about that.”

“No big deal,” I said, brushing hair out of her face. “I’m glad I was here to help. Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I will be.”

“The nightmares suck, huh?”

Octavia nodded.

“I get them too sometimes,” I admitted. “I got them a lot back when they were still holding me but I learned to be quiet about them because I was afraid someone might hear. I didn’t want to give anyone a reason to come check on me.”
“I was fine for a while,” Octavia admitted. “I had some pretty bad shit done to me when I was captured. I was only there for about a month before Bellamy rescued me but it was pretty rough. When I got out, it’s like I was so happy to be free, I didn’t think anything of it. They really crept up on me the past couple months.”

“Have you talked to Bellamy about it?”

“Psh,” Octavia laughed. “My brother. Listen, he’s great about some things, and he loves me. But I don’t think I’d really understand this.”

“You might be surprised. He’s been to war, seen some things.”

“Bellamy’s good at action. He wouldn’t know what to do because there’s no one to hurt, nothing to go after, nothing to do.”

“Fair enough.”

“Besides, I think he’s a little too enamored with your friend to really pay too much attention to me right now.”

It was my turn to chuckle. Bellamy and Raven had been attached at the hip the last few days. They spent a lot of their time together, talking, taking walks through the streets of the town together, laughing by the fireside at night. Octavia and I felt like third wheels whenever we were with them so we pretty much left them alone.

“True. So, talk to me. What do you see in your nightmares?”

“There was this guy who used to stay really close to me. He’d whisper things in my ear but they were in Arabic and I couldn’t understand them. His breath always smelled horrible, like a dead squirrel left out in the sun too long.”

“That’s vivid.”

“And every couple of nights, he’d come to me, put his hands all over me. He never raped me, but it’s like he wanted to prove to me that he could if he’d wanted to. And occasionally, he’d beat me. If I flinched or shied away from him, he’d hit me in the head, the stomach, the back. Finally, I just laid back and let him do whatever he wanted. It hurt less that way. And in the dreams, he’s back and he’s touching me and I’m drowning in the scent of death and I can’t escape.”

“Please tell me your brother killed that son of a bitch when he rescued you.”

Octavia nodded. “Shot him right in the head and I got to watch the whole thing.”

“So, remember that, Octavia. Remember that he’s dead. He can’t hurt you anymore. He can’t hurt anyone, anymore.”

Octavia nodded. “What about you? What do you see?”

“My fiancé,” I sighed, leaned back against the wall. “Her name was Niylah. When they kidnapped me in the US, we were walking together. I always remember that we’d been fighting recently. She thought my job was too dangerous. Guess she was right.”

Octavia reached out and put a gentle hand on my knee as my voice broke.

“Before they even tried to grab me, they shot her, right in the head. I saw her hit the ground. I’m
haunted by that memory, her blood, her eyes, already dead, wide open. But even more, I can’t remember the last thing I said to her. I can’t remember if I told her I loved her before she died. In my dreams, I see her and she’s alive again and I’m yelling. I’m screaming at her that I love her. But she can’t hear. I’m too far away. And before I get close enough so that she can hear me, she gets shot, falls, and she’s dead and she’ll never know it.”

“But you know that she knew, right. She knew you loved her.”

I breathed deeply, trying to get control of myself, trying not to let the tears fall.

“I hope so.”

Octavia and I sat there for a few moments, both of us lost in our thoughts.

“Well,” I said, moving to get up. “You need to get some sleep and so do I.”

“Will you stay with me tonight, Clarke. Listen, I’m not normally such a little bitch and if you ever tell anyone I asked you to sleep with me, I’ll kill you, but I really don’t want to sleep alone tonight.”

“Alright,” I sighed, actually kind of happy that she’d asked. “But scoot over. And I’m big spoon.”

Octavia laughed.

The next morning, we packed all our stuff up. The governor’s wife gave us some food for our trip, and we loaded up the truck. I took the first shift driving. Raven sat up front with me and I was surprised she’d left Bellamy’s side for more than a few minutes. I didn’t say anything, though. It was nice to have my friend back, even for just a day.

We stopped about four hours later to switch drivers. I ended up in the back seat with Octavia and we shared a knowing smile when Raven scooted closer to Bellamy.

“So,” Bellamy said. “What’s the plan for when we get to the city?”

I shrugged. “I’d like to take a look at the place where we’re meeting. Just in case it’s a trap.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Bellamy nodded.

“Holy shit,” Octavia gasped. “Bellamy, did you just give Clarke a compliment? Do you have a fever?”

“Clearly,” he growled, glaring at her in the rearview mirror.

I chuckled to myself but didn’t say anything.

“I might have had a change of heart,” he said. “And I apologize. I was being too hard on you. I forget that the real world doesn’t work the way the military does. Sometimes we get tossed into situations that we don’t have a lot of say in.”

“You’re telling me,” I snorted.

“Well, I know it doesn’t really mean anything coming from me,” Bellamy said, “but I think you’re doing one hell of a job.”

I nodded. “It does mean something, Bellamy. We might not have the same background but we’re both fighting the same war, whether we want to or not. I respect what you did for your sister, for those villagers back there. You didn’t really have to do any of that. We don’t have to always get
along. In fact, I tend to hate people I always get along with.”

Raven laughed. “Does that mean we’re due for a fight. Because we’ve gotten along pretty well.”

“The first time we met, I pointed a gun at you. I figure that makes us even for a while.”

“She pointed a gun at you,” Octavia sounded surprised.

Raven laughed and started telling everyone the story about how she found me sleeping in the cellar. We passed the time in companionable silence. Octavia took over the driving next, then Raven. She had the wheel when we got to Sheberghān. I was glad Raven was driving. I might have run off the road. It had been almost two years since I’d seen more than a hundred people in one place at the same time and the sight of a city that big was almost overwhelming.

There were tall buildings, domed structures, mosques and schools, hospitals and an airport. I felt the walls closing in on me. Octavia must have seen the panic in my eyes because she grabbed my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, bringing me back to reality.

We pulled up to a small hotel on the outskirts of town. Bellamy went inside and got us a room. He came back out and we carried our bags into the hotel, careful to make sure any weapons were covered. Upstairs in the small, plainly furnished room, we took some time to clean up and regroup.

“What’s the plan?” Bellamy asked, deferring to me.

“Let’s go check out this meeting spot. Then, we’ll try for a good night of sleep and be ready to go in the morning.”

Bellamy nodded. “Octavia and I will scout it. You’re starting to have a famous face and I’d hate to think that the rebels might spot you and think we’re up to something.”

I nodded, agreeing with his plan. I didn’t have to like it, but he was right. The video I’d made had created some complications. It remained to be seen whether or not the attention I was getting was, like the governor had said, the good kind or the bad kind.

Chapter End Notes

Are you all ready for some Lexa?

You’ll meet her in the next chapter which will be up tomorrow afternoon (I’m posting this at 9pm US Eastern Time).

Thank you all for the great feedback and comments and thank you for sticking with me through some tough content. I really appreciate it.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

No content warning for this chapter.

Since this is the first chapter with Lexa, and a lot of people are interested in the Clexa content for this story, I want to give a little recap of the past 15 chapters. I encourage you to check out the other chapters because they're pretty awesome but for those of you just joining us on this ride, here's the down and dirty:

Clarke is a journalist. She travels around the world but especially to Middle Eastern countries. She reports on crime, on extremist organizations, she spends a lot of time with different military organizations. And, she makes a lot of enemies. She's kidnapped in the US, her fiance, Niylah, is killed. She's taken to a compound in Afghanistan owned by a man named Al-Sumdal. There, she's befriended by two people, Zohar, a young guard working for Al-Sumdal, and Sahar, one of Al-Sumdal's wives. They are able to convince Al-Sumdal that Clarke is in love with Zohar. He lets her live. However, his boss, Marcus Kane (yep, that Kane) isn't happy about it. He thinks Clarke is too much of a liability. He kills Al-Sumdal and leaves Abdel, his second in command, behind at the compound. Abdel is going to film Clarke's execution but she escapes, kills Abdel, helps Sahar and the other women go free, and escapes into the desert.

In the desert, Clarke meets Raven, then Bellamy and Octavia, all of whom have been fighting the same war she's involved in, just in different ways. They meet up, defend a village, and decide they need to go meet Heda, the leader of a rebel organization that's trying to free Afghanistan from the Tawr, a paramilitary extremist organization run by, who else, Marcus Kane. It turns out that Clarke's escape and the death of Abdel were filmed and Clarke is now being called Wanheda, the Commander of Death, after a local legend of a woman who will rise out of the desert to free the people.

Heda has become aware of Clarke and her friends and has arranged a meeting.


March 3, 2019

I made a deal with the devil. But the devil is beautiful. I don’t mean the actual devil. I mean, she’s actually pretty amazing, to be honest. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Sorry. My heart’s still beating out of my chest. I’ll try to calm down, rewind, start at the beginning.

Bellamy and Octavia scouted the location where the meeting was supposed to happen while Raven and I tried to keep ourselves busy. They came back well after dark but with plenty of good information. The meeting was taking place in a hotel in the center of town. It was much nicer than this one and was probably regularly renting rooms to visiting diplomats and individuals whose monthly stock dividends rivaled my entire earnings estimate for the rest of my life. Though, if I kept heading in the direction I was going now, that wasn’t going to be very long.
Bellamy said the hotel had eight floors, a small restaurant attached to the lobby. It was the tallest building in the area, he said, which was good because that meant there couldn’t be anyone above us shooting down on us. I took his word for it. It still made me nervous. For all I knew, this Heda person could have me on the top of her most wanted list and I was walking into a trap. But I also had too much to lose. She could get me where I needed to be, give me the resources I needed. She could get me Kane.

“I went into the hotel,” Octavia said, pulling off the scarf she’d had covering her hair to walk through the streets. “It looks like a pretty normal set up. Front desk, no elevators but there are two sets of stairs, one in the back, one to the side by the restaurant. Nothing out of the ordinary. I didn’t see anyone else skulking around like they were getting into trouble.”

“Just you, huh?” Raven asked with a grin.

Octavia smiled back. “Exactly.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked Bellamy.

He shrugged. “Did that letter say anything else?”

I shook my head. “Just the address, date, and time. Not even a room number.”

“Then we’d better hope there’s someone to lead us in the right direction or it’ll be a short visit. We’ll drive the truck up. Octavia and Raven can stay in it with all the stuff, keep it running in case we need to make a quick getaway.”

I nodded.

We spent the rest of the evening talking, making plans. Octavia and Bellamy told us more about the area around the hotel, the things they’d seen. I barely slept that night. I was restless and even more so when the sun rose and we had hours to waste before it was time to go to the meeting.

We ate breakfast in a small cafe a few streets over from our hotel. It was situated close to the meeting place and gave us an opportunity to watch some of the nearby buildings. We ate slowly, sipping strong coffee out of small cups. I had to stop at three, though. I was feeling jumpy enough already. That afternoon, we drove around the streets. Raven and Octavia paid close attention to the main routes, exits away from the city, places we might need to go to hide or escape.

“What if we get separated?”

“Head back to the governor’s house at all costs. We’ll meet up there if we have to. Hell, ride a fucking goat if you don’t have any other option,” Bellamy said, glancing at his watch. “But right now, we have a meeting to get to.”

Bellamy and I left the truck. I felt naked without my rifle but I had my pistol tucked into the waistband of my pants and a knife in my boot. We walked into the hotel and looked around. I wasn’t sure where to go or what to do but the decision was made for us pretty quickly.

A woman walked over to us. She was tall and thin with long, dyed blonde hair and high cheekbones. She had a severe look on her face and she caught Bellamy with a deadly stare.

“He’s not welcome here,” she said.

“Where Clarke goes, I go,” he snapped back.
“Then she goes nowhere,” the woman turned to walk away.

“Wait,” I called.

She stopped. I turned to Bellamy.

“Go out, wait in the truck. If I’m not back in an hour then go without me.”

“Clarke,” he started to protest.

“Bellamy, we don’t have another option right now. Don’t be stubborn. Just go.”

Bellamy cast another withering look at the woman, then turned and walked out of the building. She watched him leave, then beckoned me to follow with a jerk of her head. We walked up six flights of stairs and then into a hallway. There were four doors and she led us to the last one, opened it, then shut the door. I realized quickly that she was still out in the hallway and I was alone in the room. Or so I thought.

The shades had been drawn so the room was shadowed but I saw someone sitting at the head of a long table in front of me. She looked up, I heard a quiet intake of breath. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out her face, her hair, her clothes. She leaned back in the chair.

“So, you’re the one who’s making so much noise out in the desert,” she said, a smile at the edge of her voice.

I tried to breathe. Her voice was thick, deep, like rich honey. Heda.

She leaned forward again. “Come, join me.”

I walked toward the table, sat down. The woman laughed.

“Relax, Clarke. I’m not going to hurt you. If I wanted to do that, it would have been done.”

“Well, you’ll have to excuse my caution. I haven’t exactly had a great vacation in Afghanistan.”

The woman nodded. “No, I suppose you haven’t. But you have made an excellent impression on some people, hell, on the whole world. Rebellion is brewing because of you, Wanheda.”

“You seem to know a lot about me but I don’t know anything about you.”

“Fair enough,” she said, standing up. “My name is Lexa and that’s all you really need to know right now. I’m the commander of a rebel group. The locals call us Trikru because most of us aren’t from the desert. Most of us are not locals. But we’ve been welcomed by the locals because our goal isn’t to take over. It’s to return control of the land, the government, to its people.”

She walked over to one of the windows and pushed the curtain aside. A beam of warm sunlight flooded in and I felt the air leave my lungs. She was beautiful. She had long brown hair she wore pulled back in a loose braid. She had a sharp jawline, thick lips, a young face. And when she turned, her green eyes pierced my soul. If she’d asked me to walk into a fire, I would have done it. The sincerity, the courage, the honor in her gaze. I knew why people would die for her, would fight for her. And I would have done the same without even being asked.

She walked back over to the table and sat down. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you my story, Clarke. But not today. Today, we need to talk business.”

“How did you find out so much about me?”
“I have contacts in most of the villages around the country. It’s how we find out about the movement of extremist organizations. I have a couple tech gurus working for me who found out how to repurpose old satellite phones and make them usable. My contacts call me if there’s anything I need to know. They found you particularly interesting. That’s how I saw the video. From there, it was a quick internet search. Your video became quite the viral sensation around the world. There were articles written. They talked about your history and really told me everything I needed to know up until the time you were kidnapped. And I don’t need to know anything about that until you’re ready to tell me.”

I nodded. “So what business do we need to discuss.”

Lexa smiled and leaned forward again, putting her elbows on the table. “I want you to come work for me. You’ve become a symbol, Clarke. I’m not going to lie to you. I could use someone like you on my side. You have made people challenge the established ways. You’ve made them start to fight back.”

I swallowed hard. “When I escaped, I found someone to come with me, Raven. We were riding through the desert and came across a village that had been destroyed, all the people killed, because they wouldn’t pay protection money to a warlord. Did they do that because of me?”

Lexa nodded sadly and I felt sick.

“Many will die in this war before we’re done, Clarke. I mourn the life of every single person killed but we have to continue this fight. With you by my side, we’ll be unstoppable.”

“So, what’s your offer?”

“I want Jalalabad. It’s the last major city we need. It’s the last stronghold of the Tawr.”

“I keep hearing that name.”

Lexa nodded again. “I’m not surprised. They’re the biggest extremist organization operating in Afghanistan. They control most of the smaller warlords. They’re paramilitary, an offshoot of ISIS. But more importantly, they’re a huge source of weapons to the smaller tribes. If we take them out, the warlords will have nothing to fight with and the smaller villages and towns will actually have a chance, especially with our rebels able to support them since we won’t have to worry about the Tawr.”

“You goals are noble,” I said, trying to pay attention and not stare at Lexa. “But I have a target of my own. You help me get to Kane, I’ll help you get the Tawr out of Jalalabad.”

“Marcus Kane,” Lexa said the name, rolling it around in her mouth for a moment. “You know you killed his second in command, right?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “But I knew he was important. Kane left him in charge of the compound when he left.”

Lexa thought for a moment, then smiled. I watched the curve of her lips, felt my palms start to sweat. Finally, she leaned back in her chair.

“You want Kane, I want Jalalabad.”

“Kane is the head of the Tawr. Shouldn’t we be able to get them both at the same time?”

Lexa shook her head. “Not necessarily. We’ll have to work to draw him out. Kane rarely stays in
Afghanistan. He spends most of his time in Saudi Arabia now. But with you.”

I smiled at her. “I might give you the edge. Make me bait if you have to. Give me Kane, I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

Lexa nodded. “We have a deal then.”

She extended her hand and I took it in mine. Her fingers were long and thin, her skin soft and warm. I felt goosebumps pop up on my arms and had to keep from showing the shiver that went down my spine.

Lexa released my hand and stood up.

“Come on, let’s get started.”
March 4, 2019

I followed Lexa down the stairs and out of the hotel. The woman who had walked me up to the hotel room earlier was standing by the truck talking to Raven, Octavia, and Bellamy. Lexa walked up to them.


Lexa smiled. “Lexa, actually. But yeah, supposedly I’m her. Is this your group?”

I nodded. “I made a deal with Lexa but I don’t expect you all to blindly follow me just because of my decisions. Lexa’s rebels are going to try to kick the Tawr out of Jalalabad and I’m going to do whatever I can to help her. Apparently the video that I made when I killed Abdel has made some of the local tribes and villages want to act. In return, she’s going to help me take out Kane. But I don’t expect you to put your lives on the line for me. So if you want to leave, I’ll do whatever I can to help get you to where you need to go.”

Raven grinned at me. “You know Kane’s at the top of my list. I’m in.”

Octavia leaned up from the back of the truck. “I can’t let you have all the fun. Besides, you’re a great big spoon.”

Raven looked at me curiously and I just laughed.

Bellamy looked over from where he was sitting in the driver’s seat. “If Octavia’s going with you, you know I am too.”

“Excellent,” Lexa said, looking impatient. “Now that we’ve got that figured out, follow me. Leave the truck. Someone else can use it.”

We left the truck in front of the hotel and followed Lexa and the other woman a few streets over. There was another truck parked there. It was a military truck, with a tan, boxy cab. The back was covered in a tan tarp and had benches lining both sides. Bellamy and I loaded all our gear in the back of the truck. I started to climb up when Lexa stopped me, calling my name.

“Come sit up here with me, Clarke. I want to talk to you about some things.”

I was surprised, but I also wasn’t an idiot. I tried not to run to the cab of the truck. The other woman climbed into the back with Bellamy, Raven, and Octavia. Three more soldiers joined us shortly and I scolded myself. I knew that Lexa wouldn’t have come into the city without a guard, but for some
reason I thought I would have seen them. Lexa must have seen the expression on my face.

“Don’t worry, Clarke. You’re still new to all of this. You haven’t been trained. That’s going to change though. You’re a soldier now.”

“One of your soldiers?”

Lexa nodded. “Is that alright?”

I thought for a few minutes. Lexa drove us out of the city and into the desert. I didn’t know where we were going, how long it would take us, but I trusted Lexa. Finally, I sighed.

“I guess so. To be honest, Lexa, I have no idea what I’m doing right now. I feel like a fraud. People are following me. They’re calling me the Commander of Death. I did what I had to do to escape, to keep myself safe and alive. I don’t really think I did anything special. Calling me a soldier. It feels wrong.”

“I get it,” Lexa nodded. “But that’s why we’re going to train you, Clarke. You and all your friends. I can take advantage of the position you’ve put yourself in but I don’t want to use you. My goal isn’t to get you hurt and just put your picture on a billboard somewhere.”

“So, what happens now?”

“I’m taking you to Camp Tango now. It’s our training camp. We regularly get people in from all over the world who want to fight but we have to train them first. It won’t be easy, though, Clarke.”

“That’s alright. I’ll do what I have to do.”

“That’s why I chose you, Clarke.”

I turned to look at Lexa. Her face had a hard look on it. She was serious. Her normally light humor was gone and I saw the warrior, the leader. When she turned and looked at me, her green eyes cut into me.

“I must have watched that video of you a hundred times. It kept me up at night, Clarke. Part of me wanted to protect you, save you,” she laughed. “But you were doing that fairly well on your own. But really, Clarke, I thought about all the people who had been in your same position, who didn’t have your determination, your fire, your desire to live. You give them that, though. You give them hope.”

I didn’t know what to say. We drove for a while in silence. I could hear the others in the back of the truck talking, laughing. I was too stuck in my own head.

We pulled up to Camp Tango a couple hours later. It was a large camp, surprisingly so. I realized that I had no real concept of how large this rebel group was. I wanted to ask Lexa about that but she was already out of the truck. I saw her walking around toward the back of it. She’d lengthened her stride, straightened her back. She was in work-mode now and there would be no talking to her for a while.

I climbed out of the cab, joined up with Raven, Octavia, and Bellamy at the back of the truck. Lexa was there, talking to the soldiers from the city. She turned toward the blonde woman.

“Anya,” she said, finally giving her a name. “Take them, get them outfitted and put them in the barracks. They can stay together if they want to. Then come find me. We’ll need to start their training right away.”
“Yes, Commander,” Anya said.

She struck her chest, just above her heart, with her closed right fist, a kind of salute, and turned toward us.

“Come on,” she said, jerking her head again.

We followed.

Anya led us to a small out building. Inside, she got us fitted into uniforms, khaki cargo pants, gray t-shirts, tan boots, khaki button-up shirts, and a dozen other little items that we’d need. Anya was helping us fill up the large, military surplus duffle bags. I turned and saw Bellamy grinning like a little kid at Christmas.

“What are you so happy about?” Raven asked.

“It reminds me of being back at reception at Ft. Benning. Except, you know, less screaming and yelling.”

“I can yell and scream at you if you want,” Anya volunteered.

After we had all our stuff, she took us to a tent at the end of a long row. Inside there were four beds, four trunks, and little else. She pulled aside the tarp that served as the doorway and let us inside.

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” Anya said.

“It’s perfect,” Octavia smiled, dropping her bag on the bed. “It’ll be nice to be somewhere that we don’t have to move every couple days. At least for a little while.”

Raven nodded. “How about pointing us in the direction of a shower though.”

Anya pulled the tarp aside again and pointed towards a green trailer. “Right there,” she said.

Raven and Octavia grabbed their stuff and headed toward the showers. Bellamy stuck around, loading his things into the trunk.

“Clarke, could you step outside with me for a minute,” Anya asked.

I was confused but I followed her out of the tent. She walked me a few yards away.

“Lexa has asked me to take you on as a bit of a special project,” she said, bluntly.

I was confused. “Am I a puppy that’s going to be housebroken?”

“Don’t be funny,” Anya snapped. “That’s not what I meant at all. I trained Lexa. The reason she has been able to survive, the reason that she is as capable as she is, is because of me.”

“So why didn’t you take over. Why aren’t you the commander?”

“Because I’m a bitch.”

Anya looked at me out of the corner of her eye, gauging my reaction.

“That’s the truth,” I nodded.

Anya barked a laugh and clapped me on the shoulder with a heavy hand. “I was born in Germany,”
she said. “I lived there for most of my life, became a soldier when I turned eighteen. I ended up working for some international peacekeeping forces, got some special operations training. I’ve done my tour and my time. I don’t have the desire or personality to want to lead another team. Especially not one that has to inspire the hearts and minds of people who have lived most of their life under oppressive tribal rule and laws. It’s not in my nature. But Lexa wants to make sure you come out of this on the other side in one piece. So that’s why you’ll be working with me.”

“What about the others?”

“They’ll be trained by some of our soldiers, all good men and women. But they won’t get some of the specialized training you will.”

“Don’t they deserve the same chances?”

“What they’re given will keep them alive. You don’t understand, Clarke, people will be coming for you and you specifically. They’ll target you with assassins, they’ll try to get to you on the battlefield. They will do everything they can to make sure you’re nothing but a smear on the sand. Right now, you need to worry about yourself instead of worrying about other people.”

I thought about it. It went against everything that I’d ever fought for. I was the person who did things for other people. I went into war zones without worrying about my own safety. I’d gone to Sahar and the other women in an attempt to keep them safe. But I knew Anya was right. Kane would be sending people after me. He’d wanted me dead to begin with and now he had an even better reason to get me out of the way. Finally, I nodded.

“All right, Anya. I’ll do it.”

“I’ll come to you tomorrow morning and we’ll get started. For now, I have to find the commander.”

When I returned to the tent, Bellamy was standing in the middle of it. His hair was wet from a shower. His shirt was off. I could see the muscles of his back rippling just under the skin. Raven wasn’t wrong, he was a good-looking guy. In another world, I might have even been willing to tolerate him being a pain in the ass for a couple nights of fun. But I shook my head and pushed the thought out of my head.

“Hey,” he said. “Sorry, let me grab a shirt.”

I waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before. And if you do, I’ll tell you about it because you should probably get it checked out.”

He chuckled, turned away from me to grab his towel again. When he did, I saw a long, snaking scar that ran from one hip, across his back and almost all the way to his opposite shoulder blade.

“Holy shit,” I said. “That looks like one hell of a war wound.”

Bellamy looked over his shoulder and saw me looking at his back. He grinned. “Yeah, tell me about it. I was on patrol in Iraq and we got hit by an IED. A piece of the humvee that got blown up hit me in the back. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. They thought it broke my spine, actually. Turns out, my spine was fine. I earned two hundred staples and a purple heart but overall, it was pretty anticlimactic.”

“Killer scar, though. Bet it’s one hell of a conversation piece.”

“You’re starting to get your own collection, huh?”
I grinned, showed him both of my wrists. “Got these from the ropes they tied me with when they kidnapped me.”

“Nice,” Bellamy turned around, pointed to a puckered piece of flesh on his chest. “22 long rifle. I wish I had a good story but it pretty much starts and ends with drunk soldiers being stupid.”

I pulled down my lip, showing a jagged white slice in it. “I had my lip busted a couple dozen times. Always seemed to be the same spot too.”

“See, you’re catching up. Now you just need something dramatic.”

I shook my head. “All this is really surreal, Bellamy.”

“You’ll get it, Clarke. You’re strong. Eventually you’ll develop a terribly dark sense of humor and an alcohol problem. It’ll be great.”

“Can’t wait.”

Raven and Octavia came back a couple minutes later. Raven made a show of tripping over her own feet and dropping her towel in the sand when she saw Bellamy without his shirt on.

“Put those things away,” Octavia scolded. “No one needs you showing off.”

“Speak for yourself,” Raven muttered under her breath.

Later that night, we ate dinner with the rest of the troops. There were about thirty of us, training at the rebel camp. Some were former soldiers from militaries around the world, others had worked with humanitarian organizations, some were locals who just wanted to make a difference. A few of them had been here for a few months and were getting ready to go join the rebels in the field. Others, like us, had just gotten there. But almost all of them had seen the video.

Because of that, I was a popular topic of conversation. Eventually, it got to be too much. I was tired of answering questions. Tired of being the center of attention. Tired of reliving the past. It made me feel sick. I excused myself, hurried away from the table. I heard Raven calling after me, asking if I was alright, but I ignored her.

Around the outskirts of the camp there were several small fires burning. I found refuge at one, sitting in the sand, feeling the warmth of the fire on my face. I brushed away tears. This was all so overwhelming. A whole war was on my shoulders now, the freedom of an entire group of people. They were fighting because of what I’d done.

I heard footsteps behind me and figured that Raven had followed me. I was surprised when I saw Lexa step into the firelight. She was carrying something. She sat down next to me, keeping her hand hidden.

“You alright, Clarke?”

“I don’t even know how to answer that question anymore, to be honest.”

Lexa nodded, staring into the fire. “I get it. In this role, you’ve got a lot of weight on your shoulders.”

I hugged my knees to my chest. “Of course you get it. I mean, look at you, you’re the commander of the entire rebel group. Now I kind of feel like an idiot and a jerk.”
“You’re neither,” Lexa said. “When you gain more confidence, more training, you’ll understand. No one really knows what it means to be a leader. We have all these fantasies from the movies, right? We’re the hero. In reality, there’s rarely anything heroic about it. We make decisions and sometimes we make the wrong ones. But a lot of it is mental. You have to take all the information you have, try to make good choices based on what you know. You’ll spend a lot less time on the battlefield than you know and more time sitting around thinking.”


“I don’t think that would be such a bad place to be,” Lexa said, quietly.

I turned to look at her but she was staring at the fire. I didn’t want to interrupt her. She looked like she was busy in her own head. Finally, she shook herself out of it, reached over to her other side and picked up the item she’d been carrying.

“Here,” she said, handing it to me. “I thought you might want this back.”

She handed me my rifle. I held it in my hands, feeling the weight of it in my hands. I felt the lines in the stock under my thumb. Lexa watched me.

“Each of your kills?” she asked.

I nodded. “I don’t know why, it just seems important for me to keep track.”

“368,” Lexa said.

“What?”

“368, give or take a couple. I keep count too, Clarke.”

“What does that say about us?”

“That we don’t take what we do lightly.”

And now, another sleepless night. I laid in bed for a few hours, then finally gave up, pulled out my journal. I keep running over Lexa’s words in my head. Now that she’s in there, I can’t seem to get her out.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

No Content Warnings for this Chapter.

Chapter 18: Acting on Information - A New Target - A Familiar Name - A Choice and A Decision

March 18, 2019

I was worried about how little I was sleeping a couple weeks ago. I shouldn’t have been. Now I’m exhausted all the time. Anya’s had me running drills, exercising, shooting, hand-to-hand combat, knife training, lifting weights. She’s woken me up several nights in the middle of the night to practice stealth techniques, forcing me to crawl slowly across the desert in front of a line of people to see if they can spot me and then, if they do, making me go back and try again.

I can feel my body getting stronger. I can run faster, lift more, push harder. I’m shooting better. And, even better than that, I haven’t had the time to focus on things I haven’t wanted to. I’m staying busy. I feel like I could actually make a difference. It’s starting to get warmer now. The afternoons are hot enough that I pull off my jacket and my breath no longer steams in the morning air. The heat saps your strength. It just reaches inside you and pulls it out, but with Anya watching me, she knows how to make me dig deeper, give just a little more. She’s become a true mentor and in working with her, even for just two weeks, I understand why Lexa is the woman she is.

Just after breakfast, Anya came to get me. Raven and I were sitting around cleaning our rifles from the range the day before. She walked up and crouched down next to us.

“No matter how well you clean it, Clarke, it won’t make you shoot straighter.”

Raven laughed.

“Hey,” I said, pretending to be hurt. “I was doing alright yesterday. I almost hit the broad side of a barn.”

Anya shook her head. “You did well. I might make a sniper out of you yet. Of course, you’ll only be able to shoot people who are taller than 6’5 and weigh more than 300 pounds but it still counts.”

“You both suck,” I growled as Anya grinned at me and Raven dissolved into a fit of laughter.

“Yes, well, that might be, but Heda wants to see you. All of you, actually.”

I hadn’t seen Lexa in the two weeks that I’d been training and my heart jumped a little. I was surprised. The commander was intelligent, strong, beautiful, sexy as hell, but we were also in a difficult situation in a difficult environment. I pushed the thoughts out of my mind.

Raven and I reassembled our rifles and hurried to catch up. Octavia and Bellamy were already inside Lexa’s tent when we got there. The commander’s tent was set up like a control center. There were multiple computers, a large radio, a cork board with a map spread across it. I saw green pins in some towns, red in others. Jalalabad was circled on the map in black marker.
There was a table in the middle of the tent scattered with papers, more maps, pens, a few soft drink and energy drink cans. Lexa looked tired but she didn’t let that bother her. When she spoke, it was with strength and determination. There was a fire in her that never burned out.

“Hey, sorry I had to pull you all away from training but you’re in a unique position that many of my other recruits aren’t. You’ve all spent a significant amount of time traveling around Afghanistan, meeting people, already being involved with the Tawr even if you didn’t realize it.”

Lexa leaned over a computer and started scrolling through some files. Finally, she found the one she wanted, clicked on it. A picture popped up on the screen, half-obscured by her body as she stood up and turned around.

“We’ve received word that Kane has replaced Abdel with a new second-in-command. He’s young but he’s crafty, intelligent, and cruel. We’ve discovered that he was responsible for wiping out the village that Raven and Clarke drove through. When the warlord in that area reported back that the village was refusing to pay protection money, he ordered them all killed. The problem is, we don’t know much else about him. He’s a mystery, an enigma. He doesn’t have much of an established history in any organization and that’s probably what Kane wanted.

“You all have traveled, you’ve met people, you’ve talked to people. I want to see if any of you recognize this man. We were able to get a blurry picture of him. One of our agents in Iran just sent it to me. It seems he’s been holed up there for a few weeks now. He’s going to be one of our primary targets before we get to Jalalabad. Killing him will disrupt the organization but we need to know who he is first.”

Lexa stepped aside and my heart dropped to my feet. I must have made a noise because suddenly everyone turned to look at me. Lexa took a step forward, concern on her face.

“Clarke, are you alright.”

No, I wanted to answer. I’m far from alright. But I looked at the picture on the screen. I knew that face, even though it was blurred. I knew the square jaw, the rounded cheeks, the thick hair. I knew what it looked like when he smiled, what it sounded like when he laughed. I remembered the way his hand felt in mine. Zohar. I felt sick.

I pushed my way out of the tent and into the air. Thankfully, it hadn’t gotten hot yet. I choked down deep lungfuls of air, walking quickly. I heard footsteps behind me.

“Clarke,” I heard Lexa’s voice calling to me.

She caught up. I felt her hand on my shoulder and she pulled me around so I could see her. She was close to me. I could smell coffee, sand, something sweet. I wanted to drown in her. Instead, I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

“I know that man,” I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

“Clarke, what did he do to you?” her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“He never touched me, Lexa. But he used me. He fucking used me for almost two years. He lied to me, manipulated me. He wanted me to take down Al-Sundal, to help him get closer to Kane. He’s in that job because of me. He slaughtered those people because of me. I got him his promotion.”

Lexa squeezed my shoulder roughly and she shook me slightly. I was surprised. I could see cold steel in her expression.
“Enough, Clarke. Stop taking responsibility for things you have no control over. You didn’t do this, he did. But you know enough about him that you can help us take him down. I need you, now, more than ever. You have to keep it together right now.”

I took another deep breath, then a third. I nodded.

“What’s his name?”

“Zohar,” I answered, spitting it out like a curse.

“I need to know everything you know about him, please.”

I looked at Lexa. She was a few inches taller than me so I had to look up to see into her eyes. They looked darker now, even in the sunlight. The deep green reminded me of a thick forest. It made me miss the trees. She met my eyes and I saw her throat move as she swallowed.

“I’ll tell you everything I can, Lexa. But the Zohar that I knew was not the man he is. I got flashes, but I didn’t think anything of them. He offered me safety, refuge, but only so he could use me.”

“Come on,” Lexa said, this time clapping her hand on my shoulder more gently, steering me back towards her tent. “The others are worried about you too.”

Back in the tent, I sat with Raven, Anya, Bellamy, Octavia, and Lexa at the table. I explained what had happened to me at the compound. I told everyone my story, and this time, I talked about Zohar.

“I always thought that Yasin was the one who killed Niylah, that he was the one who was in charge of the whole operation and that Zohar was just along for the ride. Now, looking back, I think Zohar was probably in charge.”

We talked for hours. Lexa sat at the head of the table, her hands clenched into such tight fists that her knuckles were right. She occasionally asked questions, her voice low, tense. Anya asked questions as well. I could tell she wanted to try to get into Zohar’s head, but I wasn’t sure I could offer much insight into that. Lexa had someone bring us lunch in the tent and we continued to talk over our food. Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven continued to listen. Bellamy’s brow was furrowed in a frown. Octavia kept chewing on her lower lip. Raven sat back, arms crossed over her chest, and scowled.

“Clarke,” Bellamy finally said when my story was finished and I was exhausted, my throat raw from talking for so long. “I had no idea. I don’t even know what to say.’

I shrugged. “There’s nothing to say, Bellamy. None of this is any of your faults. If you want to be mad for me, go for it. But don’t feel sorry for me. We’ve all been in shitty situations.”

“Yeah,” Octavia nodded, leaned forward, “but ours lasted for a month or two. You spent twenty months with those fuckers.”

“I’m not going to compare,” I snapped. “This is why I didn’t want to say anything.”

“Enough,” Raven growled, standing up. “Bellamy, Octavia, let’s go. It’ll give Lexa and Anya a chance to talk to Clarke without you all spilling your bullshit guilt all over the place. We all know how strong Clarke is. We all know how good she is under pressure. We all know that she’s the person you want in your corner in a shitty situation. That hasn’t changed. Now, come on. I’m sure we can find something better to do with our time.”

Octavia and Bellamy looked guilty as they left the tent. Octavia muttered a quiet apology in my direction. Anya quickly excused herself as well and left Lexa and I alone in the tent. Lexa was
leaning on the table, her head in her hands. I stayed quiet. Finally, she pushed her chair away from
the table with enough force that it nearly fell over. She got up quickly and went over to a trunk that
was sitting next to one of her computers. She opened it and rummaged around inside for a few
minutes.

I couldn’t see what she was doing but she pulled something out, walked over to me. She sat two shot
glasses down on the table and filled both of them with an amber-colored liquid.

“I don’t know about you,” she said, “but I could use a drink.”

“You read my mind.”

We picked up our glasses. Lexa tapped mine with hers, then downed the shot. I swallowed mine on
one gulp. It burned the whole way down and made me feel a little light headed but it was a welcome,
warm sensation that started in my stomach and spread out. It tasted like whisky, and burned like it
too. Lexa filled my glass a second time.

“Maybe sip that one,” she smiled. “I’m sure it’s been a while since you’ve had a drink and I don’t
want to have to take care of a sloppy Clarke.”

“Sloppy Clarke can be fun, I think. I’m not sure, it’s been a while.”

Lexa laughed. “Maybe I’ll get to find out someday. But for now, you have a choice to make. I can’t
give you Zohar or Kane right now, Clarke. We have to draw them out, cause them to make some
mistakes. From what you’ve told me, they’re intelligent men, calculated, careful. And they’re willing
to play the long game to get what they need. That means we’ll have to do the same. Zohar is in Iran
and we have intel that Kane is in Saudi Arabia right now. We can’t get to them. But there might be
some options to start some more targeted attacks.

“I’d like to bring you with me, Clarke. I’d like for you to fight by my side.”

“You think that will help draw out Kane and Zohar?”

Lexa thought for a moment. “Yes, I do. But that’s not the only reason, Clarke. I’ve talked to Anya.
You’re a natural. You’re a warrior. I want you by my side because I think together we can make a
difference in this world. But I also promised you Kane and now Zohar. I don’t want you to think that
I’m going back on my promise.”

I shook my head. “Lexa, I trust you. I’m not in this just for me anymore. Raven, Octavia, Bellamy,
Anya, you, you’re all my family. I’ll do whatever I need to do and whatever you need me to do.”

Lexa nodded. She fixed me with a strange look, like she wanted to say something else. Instead, she
shook her head, a rueful smile on her face like she was laughing at some inside joke.

“Get some rest this afternoon, Clarke. Things are going to get busier here soon.”

She stood up, stowed the bottle back in her trunk. I stood up too, turned to walk out of the tent. Then
stopped. When I turned back around, Lexa was watching me.

“Do you mind if I stay here? I’m kind of in the mood for company and you’re not going to look at
me like I’m broken.”

Lexa nodded, handed me a stack of papers. “I’ve gotten some e-mails from various agents around
Afghanistan. Read these for me, see if you find anything that sounds important and let me know.”
I sat back down at the table, sorting through the papers. Lexa went to one of her computers. I could hear her fingers flying across the keyboard. We sat, silently, but I felt at peace. The presence of the commander does something to me. I just haven’t figured out what it is yet.
March 24, 2019

I got the chance to talk to my mom today. I hadn’t said anything about it. Hadn’t even thought about it, really. I pushed my old life out of my mind a long time ago. But Anya came to me this morning, pulling me away from breakfast. “Hurry,” she scolded.

I jogged behind her all the way to Lexa’s tent. She pushed aside the flap and walked inside. Lexa was alone and Anya left shortly after, disappearing back into the camp. I was confused.

Lexa looked at me, unsure. I’d never seen any kind of hesitation or insecurity on her face before. It looked foreign. It made her look younger. When she spoke, her voice even betrayed her hesitance. It made me nervous.

“Clarke, listen. I have an opportunity for you. I don’t want you to be mad at me but I did this without your permission. I was talking to Raven and Octavia the other night and they bought it up. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do it so I wanted to try it without your permission. But I succeeded.”

“Lexa, what are you talking about? You’re really making me nervous.”

“I got your mom on the phone,” she blurted out. “I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about it. If you don’t want to talk to her, I understand, but I had to get several things into place and even then I didn’t know if it would work. I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

“My mom?”

Lexa nodded. She stepped aside. There was a satellite phone sitting on the desk behind her. She picked it up and handed it to me. I saw that the phone was muted.

“Isn’t this really expensive?” I asked, too shocked to say anything else.

“Um, not when you do it my way,” Lexa actually blushed then and it took me a moment to tear my eyes away from her.

She looked beautiful.

“Are you mad at me?”

I shook my head.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” she said, walking out of the tent.
My finger shook as I held it over the mute button. I took a deep breath, pushed the button, held the phone up to my ear.

“Mom?” I said, my voice trembling.

“Clarke?” I heard her breathe. “Oh thank God. I thought this might have been a trick but it really is you, isn’t it?”

Her voice was like a punch in the gut. I was transported back home, to the one-story house with the blue shutters we lived in near Boise when Dad died. I remembered us packing up all our stuff, moving to an apartment in Philadelphia where mom got a job at a local medical clinic that provided care to the homeless population. And later, when she became the chief medical officer at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children right before I went off to college.

We’d had our fights, our rough patches, but we’d gotten through a lot together. I’d forgotten how much I needed her. I’d been through so much on my own. Now I felt like a little kid again.

“It is me, Mom. I promise.”

“I wasn’t sure what had happened, Clarke. I saw that video. I heard what you said and I knew they were keeping you hostage. Are you safe, baby?”

“I’m ok. Well, as good as can be expected. I escaped.”

“I know,” I heard the smile in her voice, the pride. “I saw that video too. I knew you could do it. I knew you’d come home safe to me.”

“I’m going to try to, Mom. I really am.”

“When are you coming home, Clarke?”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know, Mom.”

“What do you mean? You don’t know.”

“I’ve gotten involved in something here, Mom. I have to finish what I started.”

“No, you don’t. It’s time to stop worrying about other people, Clarke. You need to come home, to your family. You need some time to heal.”

“Yes, I do. I need all of those things. But I can’t come home right now. I’m sorry. You know me, Mom. You know I can’t leave. People are dying here because of what I said on that video. I have to finish this. I have to bring the man who did this to me to justice.”

“It’s not your job to bring anyone to justice,” she was mad now, scared. I could hear it in her voice. “There are international courts, militaries, police forces, who do those things. You need to come home. Stop being ridiculous.”

“Enough,” I said, raising my voice. “I’ve been through hell and you don’t have any right to scold me like a child. Maybe someday you’ll be able to understand my decision, maybe even respect it. If not, frankly I don’t care at this point. I’m exactly where I need to be right now.”

I heard her take a deep breath, steady herself. “You’re right, Clarke. I’ve known you for too long to expect you to leave a situation where you’re needed. And I respect you for that, even if I don’t have to like it. At least tell me that you’re safe.”
“I am safe,” I lied easily, not wanting her to worry. “I’ve made friends. I have a family here. I can’t wait for you to meet them.”

“I can’t wait either, baby. Hopefully it’ll be soon.”

“I’ll call you back when I can, alright.”

“Clarke, I know it’s not my place to say anything, but if you get the chance to talk to Lexa again, tell her thank you for me. She really cares about you. She went through a lot of trouble to track you down.”

“I will.”

“I love you, Clarke. Come home safe to me.”

“I love you too,” my voice broke.

Mom hung up the phone first. I’m glad she did. I wouldn’t have been able to. I knelt in the sand, no longer able to support my own weight. I cradled the phone in my arms, like it was my mother. I wanted her there with me. I wanted her to hug me, kiss me on the forehead, tell me that everything would be alright. Even though I knew that it wouldn’t necessarily be alright. Tears rolled down my face, my chest heaved with each painful sob.

When I heard footsteps behind me, I didn’t even have to turn around to see who they belonged to. I had memorized the way her boots crunched in the sand. Lexa pried the phone out of my arms and I heard her set it on a table nearby. She sat in the sand next to me, wrapped her arms around me, and pulled me close to her.

I collapsed into her chest, gasping for breath as I cried. She sat there with me, holding me tightly, whispering quietly that everything was going to be alright and that she was here for me. Hearing my mom’s voice had made the floodgates release. It was almost two years of pain, two years of anger and hatred, of hurt and fear, spilling out into the desert.

And through it all, Lexa was there. I felt her warmth, her strength. Her arms stayed tight around me. I could hear her heartbeat, feel the rise and fall of her chest. I didn’t know if it had been hours or minutes by the time I finally regained control, but she still held me until I finally took a deep breath and pulled away. My throat was raw, my chest hurt, I felt weak. Lexa pulled a bandana out of her pocket and handed it to me so I could wipe the tears off my face. She looked worried.

“I’m alright,” I finally said, my voice coming out rough, scratchy. “And thank you, Lexa. That phone call meant everything to me.”

She was relieved. I saw her shoulders relax. “You’re welcome, Clarke. I should have told you, but I was worried that I might not be able to get ahold of her.”

I held up one hand. “It’s alright. I understand why you didn’t tell me. It still means the world to me.”

“Are you sure you’re fine?”

I nodded. “I just needed a good cry, I guess.”

Lexa smiled sadly. “I think we’ve all had those days.”

I was a little surprised. Lexa struck me as being so steady, so solid. She must have seen the confusion on my face. She settled back in the sand, sitting next to me. Her knees were pulled up towards her
chest and she rested one of her hands on them. I noticed that she was close enough to touch me, which she did, gently and cautiously, her little finger grazed my knee. When I didn’t move or object, she kept it there.

“I’ve been in Afghanistan for the past four years, but this isn’t my first visit here. I joined the Marine Corps right out of high school. Eventually, I was able to become a member of a female engagement team. We were assigned to work with women and children in Iraq and Afghanistan. We supported checkpoints, went into villages, helped establish schools, all kinds of things. I made the mistake of falling in love.”

Lexa hung her head, shook it ruefully. “I knew I shouldn’t have. I was a Marine in a war zone. There was a small village, south of Kabul. Her name was Kashm. Most of the men in the village had been killed, were old, were injured. And this woman, she was incredible. She was strong, brave, she took charge in a world that didn’t want her.

“We spent six months together in the village. Our FET was helping to provide medical care to some surrounding areas, we were helping women have babies, teaching children how to read. We were doing a little of everything and Kashm was right there with us, learning, helping. We grew very close, friends at first, then more. We were able to keep our relationship a secret. But Kashm’s reputation was growing. More women were coming to her, asking her for help. A lot of villages were being threatened by a new organization that was starting to grow out of the chaos.”

“The Tawr,” I guessed.

Lexa nodded.

“Kashm was taken from the village one night. She was kidnapped. A month later, they sent her head back in a box to the village.”

I reached out then, took Lexa’s hand in mine. “Lexa, I—”

She interrupted me. “I’ve gotten over it, Clarke. The best that I can. Love is a weakness in war,” she gave me a knowing look and I released her hand. I felt like I was blushing.

“But it’s a weakness that might sometimes be worth it to make us more human, to remind us of what we’re fighting for,” she said, so quietly I barely heard. When she spoke again, it was louder. “It took a long time, though, for me to get past it. Maybe, I haven’t really. That’s why I’m back here. It started with me looking for revenge, wanting to get back at the Tawr for what they did to Kashm. Now, it’s become so much more than that. I want to make sure that this never happens to another person. I don’t want anyone to suffer because of the cruelty of the Bull.

“But I spent a lot of time, after Kashm’s death, in tears. It doesn’t make you weak, Clarke. It makes you stronger, because you care about something.”

I nodded. Part of me still felt like crying, but at the same time, I felt better, cleansed. I felt a new resolve after hearing my mom’s voice to get home in one piece so I could see her again. I didn’t want her to have to worry about me.

“Now,” Lexa pushed herself off the ground, “we have something we need to do.”

She reached down and I put my hand in hers. She pulled me off the ground and when I stood, we were close together. Her eyes had me trapped again, drowning in deep green pools. She bit her lower lip, looked down, her lips curving in a small smile, she took a step backwards and the moment was gone but the spell was far from broking. I was starting to be a mess about this girl.
“The Tawr have moved into a town near the Amu Darya river. This is further North than they’ve ever been, right on the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The town has asked for our help. The Tawr are ransacking the town, taking supplies, hunkering in for the long haul. We think they might be trying to find out where we’re located and might be planning to use the town to launch an attack. We plan on keeping them from it.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“We’ll mount up and go hunting,” Lexa smiled at me.

Mount up we did. There were fifty of us, most seasoned soldiers. Some of the recruits were allowed to come, as well as Octavia, Raven, and Bellamy. I sat with the four of them in the back of one of the trucks, my rifle held between my legs as we rocked back and forth every time the truck hit a bump. Bellamy scowled.

“My butt’s numb,” he complained.

Octavia laughed. “After everything you’ve been through, you’re going to complain about numb butt?”

“It’s a soldier’s duty to bitch and moan,” he growled. “We’re trained to do it.”

“If you were as good at shooting as you are at complaining, I’d train you to be a sniper,” Anya said, leaning toward him.

Bellamy shook his head. “I don’t have the patience to be a sniper. Besides, I’ve always enjoyed putting as many rounds towards the enemy as possible. It’s more fun.”

“That is true,” Anya nodded.

We drove close enough that we could see the town. There was no smoke on the horizon, which was good. The town was intact. Lexa grabbed three of her scouts and had them get closer so they could see where the Tawr were inside. We were closer to the camp than I’d expected. We’d only been driving for about four hours. I was sore, tired, and dusty, happy for the chance to stretch my legs, but I kept my eyes open and stayed alert. I watched shadows in the dirt, remembering the training that Anya had given me, wondering if anyone was creeping closer.

Anya was doing the same thing. Her eyes darted back and forth across the sand. And we waited. It was an hour later when we saw the scouts walking back to the ring of trucks and jeeps. They looked confused. One of the scouts pulled Lexa aside and started speaking to her in a low voice. She looked pissed. She motioned for him to follow her and they got into Lexa’s jeep together and drove closer to the town. Anya looked worried but she instructed us to get back in the vehicles and be ready to move.

We heard Lexa’s jeep coming back about ten minutes later. She called to Anya, they spoke for a moment, then Anya hopped in the cab of the truck and we drove to the city. The back of the truck was covered with an arched green tarp so we couldn’t see. Soon, though, I realized that we were actually in the town when I started seeing houses out of the back of the truck. We stopped near the center of down and all got out.

Anya quickly grouped us into teams of five and told us to spread out, look through the buildings. “The town seems to be deserted,” she said. “The scouts didn’t see anything and no one’s tried to shoot us yet, but don’t let your guard down.”

Bellamy, Octavia, Raven and I were kept in the center of town near the trucks. Lexa pulled us over.
“Have you ever seen the Tawr do this before?” she asked.

“What?” Bellamy asked.

“This town is completely deserted,” Lexa said. “Two days ago it had a population of nearly one thousand. I received a call from one of my contacts that said that the Tawr had moved in in the middle of the night and were digging in, setting up defenses, bringing in more troops. Now, suddenly, there’s nothing. No people, no soldiers, and no sign that anyone was ever here. There’s no sign of a struggle. I don’t like being played with.”

She wasn’t kidding either. There was a dangerous look on Lexa’s face that I hadn’t seen before. Her voice was low, thick. She looked at Bellamy.

He shook his head. “Whenever Octavia and I ended up in a town where the Tawr had been in, there were signs of a struggle, people died. This isn’t a shadow organization or some secret society. They operate with force, with a shock and awe style of warfare. They want people to know who’s in charge.”

Lexa’s face was dark. “Octavia, Clarke, head up to the roof of that building over there,” she pointed. “It’s the tallest one in town. See if you can see anything.”

“Bellamy, Raven, I want you to check some of the cellars in town. See if there are tunnels, bodies, anything. We need to find out what happened to these people. Anya, come with me. We’ll meet back here in an hour. If you find anything, radio.”

Octavia and I hurried to the tall building, climbed three flights of stairs and a ladder to the roof. Octavia covered her eyes when we pushed aside the wooden door and climbed out onto the roof. The sun was bright. It would be hard for us to see anything with that glare, but we tried anyway. Octavia and I walked slowly around the roof, looking out over the town, trying to spot signs of people on the roof. Occasionally, we would see movement, but in the end it was always our own people.

The sun was starting to go down, the hour was almost up. I could see teams coming back to the square to meet back up. Octavia sighed.

“I don’t see anything,” she said.


“No clue. I wonder if we’ll ever find out.”

Octavia turned to walk back to the door and I turned with her. I stopped, something had caught my eye. I walked over to the edge of the roof and gasped. Octavia joined me, her jaw dropping.

“Clarke to Lexa,” I said into the radio.

“Go ahead, Clarke.”

“Yeah, we’ve got something up here on the roof.”

“I’m heading your way now. What have you got?”

“Tracks, Lexa. Hundreds of them.”

There was a line of them, on the opposite side of the town from where we’d come in. Footprints, tire
tracks, stretching out until they disappeared into the horizon. Octavia turned to me, astonishment on her face.

“So what does this mean?”

I shook my head. “No fucking clue.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone,
thanks for taking time to read my story. I hope you're all enjoying it. This will probably be my last chapter before the end of the year. With the holidays and a vacation coming up, I'd like to spend time with my family and friends so I don't have quite as much time to write. I'll be back at it soon after the New Year, though. Much love to all of you!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

No Content Warning for this chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20: Weeks Pass - Hot and Tired - Bellamy’s Rage - Lexa Teaches a Lesson - Raven Makes a Choice - To the Front Line

May 1, 2019

It’s been weeks. Time is crawling and flying by at the same time. I’ve barely seen Lexa and when I do, she’s distant. Something has changed. I don’t know if it’s my fault or our string of back luck, or maybe the string of bad luck is all my fault. I don’t have a lot of time to think about it. Anya has been pushing me even harder. I’ve barely gotten to sleep the past week. She’s been working on night operations, using night-vision equipment, shooting in low-light conditions. My body aches, but it helps my brain shut down when I do finally get a chance to rest. The nightmares are going away. I feel useful.

Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven are in the same boat. They’re exhausted too. Bellamy has been promoted in a fashion and is helping to train a new group of recruits that just arrived. He has a hard, sharp way about him but he’s also kind when he needs to be. I don’t think he wants anyone to know that but I saw him giving a pep talk to a young man who seemed overwhelmed by everything going on. It made me smile.

I need to back up, though. I’m leaving out a lot. That happens when I don’t get the chance to write for a while. I have to play catch up.

Lexa ordered most of us back to camp, including me. I was frustrated but one look at her face changed my mind. She was worried that this was a trap and that the Tawr would be attacking the camp. We raced back across the desert, making the trip in half the time. When we got there, the camp was intact but we set up a wide perimeter and kept watch 24/7 for a while. There was a lot more security now. Lexa was worried that our location was compromised and even considered moving the camp. Anya had been able to talk her out of it.

Lexa had gotten back three days later. She was tired, covered in sand and dust, and pissed. Her jeep skidded to a stop by the makeshift garage and she hopped out with the other three soldiers that had stayed behind with her. She stalked into her tent, telling for Anya, and neither of them emerged until the next morning. I found out later what had happened.

Lexa and the soldiers had followed the trail through the desert. It hadn’t taken long. They ran into the entire town returning, nearly a thousand people walking back across the desert. The townspeople were upset. They said that the Tawr had come into town two days earlier. That’s when Lexa’s contact had gotten in touch with her and told her that they were there. They stayed for a day, then talked to the governor and the local council and told them that they had learned of a contamination in the water source and that there was a Red Cross tent set up nearby. They all had to leave, quickly, to
get treated for the illness.

The Tawr had helped evacuate the entire town just hours before we had arrived, then left them stranded fifteen miles out of town. Lexa had spent hours trying to track the Tawr, talking to her local contact, trying to figure out why they had wanted to move an entire town out of their homes. She and Anya had considered every possibility and still, almost five weeks later, were no closer to the truth.

Lexa was spending most of her days and nights now in her tent. She was constantly on the phone, trying to talk to members of Trikru who were stationed around the country, trying to figure out the Tawr’s movements, trying to learn anything she could. I went to her tent one evening. She had called me but by the time I got there, I think she’d forgotten why she wanted to talk to me.

“I don’t care, Harper. I know we’re following ghosts but I don’t have any other options right now. Between Kane and Zohar, we’re playing with a new enemy. They want us confused, scattered. I’m not willing to commit until we have a legitimate target. Get that for me. That’s why I put you in charge of recon. If you can’t do it, I’ll find someone who can.”

She ended the call, slammed the phone down on the table with enough force that when she pulled her hand away I was surprised it was still in one piece. She looked up at me and for a moment, surprise crossed her face.

“Clarke?” she seemed confused that I was there.

“That bitch,” Lexa chuckled.

I was confused. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” Lexa shook her head. “I think Anya sent you to me because she thought it would pull me out of my own head.”

“Why?”

“It’s not important.”

“Lexa?”

“Fine,” she sounded exasperated. “I find your presence calming, Clarke. I feel like I can relax around you. I don’t have to be Heda. I can be Lexa. There aren’t very many people in the world I can do that with.”

“Why? Why do you feel like that around me?”

“I can’t explain it, Clarke. And I feel like it’s something we need to push to the side for the moment. I want to have this conversation at some point. Just not tonight, please.”

“Fine,” I nodded. “But we’re having it at some point and I’m holding you to it.”

She nodded.

I walked over to the table, leaned over it. It was scattered with papers, maps, books. None of it really made sense to me. Lexa walked up next to me. I could feel her shoulder against mine. She was right. She made me calm as well. I felt like a weight was dropping off of me and I could breathe again.

“What have we got?”
“A lot of dead ends,” Lexa sighed.

“So, let’s find one that leads to something. We know the Tawr were there, we know what they did. Maybe we’re reading too much into it. Maybe they wanted us to go on a wild goose chase and start questioning ourselves. Where have we been looking for the Tawr?”

“All over Afghanistan,” Lexa said, pulling the map closer.

“What if they’ve never been in Afghanistan. You said the town was close to Turkmenistan. What if they went right over the border?”

Lexa looked over at me. I couldn’t read her expression but she looked impressed. I was uncomfortable under her gaze so I looked away. “What?”

“You’re fucking brilliant, Clarke Griffin,” Lexa breathed.

Lexa changed her entire focus, sending people into surrounding countries, trying to find out where the Tawr were operating from outside of Afghanistan. And the rest of us waited. It was hot in the desert. Winter disappears quickly and gives way to scorching afternoons. The heat, the dust, was almost suffocating at times. The instructors were careful to make sure no one passed out from heat exhaustion or sun stroke. Anya kept me working hard but she made sure I always had water.

One night, Bellamy came storming into the tent. He stripped off his utility belt and tossed it on his bed.

“What’s your malfunction,” Octavia asked, looking up from the book she was reading.

Bellamy growled at her. “None of your fucking business.”

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are but you sure as hell aren’t going to talk to me like that,” she snapped back.

“Sorry,” he shook his head. “I’m just pissed. We’re sitting around here doing nothing, just waiting around with our thumbs up our asses. It’s ridiculous. I don’t think the great Heda has a fucking clue what she’s doing.”

“Watch your mouth, Bellamy. You have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, standing up.

“Well, sorry Clarke. She’s not my fuck buddy so I guess I’m not as intimately acquainted with her as you are.”

I shook my head, laughing. “Now I really know you’re full of shit, Bellamy. But go ahead, whine like a little bitch. It’s a great look on you.”

“She’s worthless, incompetent, and a fucking idiot,” he growled. “And we’re idiots for sticking around while she sticks her head in the sand.”

I fought to not react. My hand balled into a fist. I wanted to hit him. Instead, the decision was made for me. The tarp on our tent was pushed aside and Anya walked in. A thick silence fell in the tent. Bellamy looked nervous.

“Lexa wants to speak to you,” she said, looking past me and right at Bellamy.

“I don’t take orders from her,” he snapped.

“Yes,” she said. “You do. This isn’t a time for your ego to get in the way, Bellamy. Come with me.”
He debated again. I could see it in his eyes. Finally, I saw his shoulders drop. He walked toward Anya.

“Wait,” Octavia said, “I’m going with him.”

“Me too,” Raven piped up.

“What the hell is this,” Anya growled, “a convention of idiots?”

“He’s my brother,” Octavia said.

I looked at Anya. “He might be a piece of shit, but he’s our piece of shit. Let us go with him.”

She nodded and we walked together past Lexa’s tent. I was surprised when Anya led us to the garage. Lexa was standing there with a few other soldiers behind her. She truly looked the part this time. She was wearing black fatigues, shiny black boots, her thick brown hair was pulled back in a tight braid, she had streaks of black facepaint around her eyes. There was a gun on her hip and her rifle was slung across her back. She looked up as Bellamy and the rest of us walked closer.

“Imagine my surprise when I’m getting ready to leave for Kabul and I hear that one of my soldiers is throwing a temper tantrum like an overgrown toddler.”

“I —” Bellamy started to protest but Lexa stopped him, raising one hand.

“Enough, Bellamy. I think everyone in the camp has heard enough from you tonight. I’m beginning to think that you don’t quite have what it takes to fight with us. From your experience in the army, I figure you’d be well prepared for the hurry up and wait mentality.”

“Lexa, I—”

Lexa took a step forward, cutting him off. “Shut the fuck up,” she hissed. “You’ve talked enough tonight and made it clear that you don’t have anything important to say. I don’t take treason lightly, Bellamy. So tell me why I shouldn’t kill you.”

“No,” Octavia and Raven spoke at the same time, stepping forward toward Bellamy.

Lexa stopped them too. There was a heavy silence around the garage. Lexa looked at Bellamy. “You wanted the opportunity to speak, Bellamy. Make a case for yourself.”

“I can’t,” Bellamy said, his shoulders sagging.

“So in other words, you have no redeeming qualities, am I to understand that? There is literally nothing about you that should be a reason for your existence?”

Bellamy nodded. He looked sad, defeated, like a puppy who had been kicked one too many times.

“He might not,” I said, taking a step forward, “but I do.”

Lexa looked at me, nodded for me to continue. “Bellamy’s an asshole, I think we can all agree with that. But he’s also a good man. He didn’t have to help us, but he did. He and Octavia joined us and helped keep us safe. He scouted the hotel before our meeting, he wanted to come up with me to help keep me safe. He didn’t have to do any of those things. There’s something in there that’s worth keeping around.”

Lexa looked at me for a moment then nodded. “Get your things, Bellamy. You’re coming with me to Kabul.”
Bellamy looked nervous, but he quickly went and came back a few minutes later with a backpack slung over his shoulder and his rifle. He climbed into Lexa’s jeep along with two other soldiers. Lexa walked over to me and leaned close so no one else could hear her.

“You saved his life, Clarke. I hope you don’t end up regretting that decision.”

I looked up at her, trapping her eyes with mine. “I won’t,” I assured her.

Lexa nodded. “I want to talk when I get back, Clarke. Just the two of us.”

She turned and walked away, leaving me to watch her. She climbed into the jeep and met my eyes through the window before she pulled away. I felt butterflies in my stomach. When I turned back around, Octavia and Raven were still waiting for me. We got back to the tent, turned off the light, but even in the darkness, we were wide awake.

“That was wild,” Raven breathed. “I think your brother needs to learn to keep his mouth shut.”

“He’s thirty-three. I doubt he’ll ever learn that.”

“I don’t want him to get the rest of us screwed over because he’s a hot head.”

“I thought you were the one who was all in love with him,” Octavia teased.

“I like your brother, don’t get me wrong. But I’m definitely not in love with him. Besides, Bellamy has a lot to learn. He gets angry too quickly and he wants to be in control of everything but he’s not level-headed enough to actually be in control.”

“I think he can still learn,” I said, staring up at the roof of the tent. “But that’s up to him.”

“So,” Octavia chuckled in the darkness. “I guess that means your mind is made up, huh. You won’t be making babies with my brother.”

“I mean, he’s hot. We could still practice.”

“Ugh,” Octavia made a disgusted noise and chucked her pillow at Raven.

For a moment, life felt normal again. We were just three girls, talking about a cute boy, ignoring the desert, the war zone, all the death.

I haven’t gotten the chance to talk to Lexa, though. She came back with Bellamy and the other soldiers a few days later. They found out that, sure enough, the company of Tawr who manipulated the nearby town had escaped across the river into Turkmenistan. And now, they were getting ready to cross back over. Lexa believed they were going to try it again with another town down the river, except this time there was a good chance that they would walk the people to their death, further out into the desert. The Tawr were upset that Lexa had encountered the returning citizens in the desert.

I didn’t even get to see Lexa. Bellamy walked into the tent, turned on the light. He looked different, older, more mature, part of him was broken. It felt strange.

“Grab your stuff,” he said, waking us all up.

“What?” Octavia asked, sleepily. “What’s going on?”

“We’re taking the fight to the Tawr,” Bellamy said, pulling off his shirt and changing into another one. “We mount up in an hour.”
He ducked back out of the tent and left the rest of us to get ready.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, everyone. I hope you all had a great holiday season with friends, families, loved ones, or yourself.

I'm back in the writing game and am hoping to get out a chapter or two a week from here on out. Right now I've mapped out the rest of the story and it looks like it's going to be 35 chapters but there's a good possibility of a sequel because you all seem to love it an I enjoy writing it.

That being said, I'm also batting around a new Clarke/Lexa storyline that I might start on but I'd like to finish this one first. I think you all deserve it!
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Content warnings for this chapter: Firefight, descriptions of a gun battle, secondary character death

Chapter 21: Sniper - This is my Rifle - Anya’s Last Stand - Engagement - Advancement - A Lull in the Action

May 2, 2019

We drove through the day and into the night, across the desert until we hit a main road. We made good time, switching drivers as we needed to, stopping for gas twice and eating our meals wherever we were sitting. Lexa’s jeep led the way. I was stuck in a truck in the back of the long convoy. Around 2am we met up with a second convoy. It was a company who had been stationed outside of Mazar-i-Sharif, nearly 250 rebels. I knew Lexa was running a large organization but looking at the cloud of dust we left in our wake, the 15 trucks, half a dozen jeeps, a fuel tanker truck, eight pickup trucks. We looked massive. We looked like an army.

We reached the city around dawn. It was large. Dozens of houses, tall buildings, winding streets.

“It’s a death trap,” Bellamy breathed, looking at the scene.

Lexa was nearby. She nodded. “We’ll get bogged down in those streets. If they get the high ground, we’re done for.”

“Lexa, what’s going on?”

“We’re going to war, Clarke,” she turned to look at me and in the dim light of dawn, her eyes looked black.

“Any,” Lexa called.

Her second-in-command hurried over to her. “They’re not here yet, Heda, but scouts have reported seeing dust in the sky about three miles out. They’ll be here in minutes.”

“And the people?”

“Hunkered down in their homes. Most of them are in cellars. If they don’t have one, they’ve boarded up their windows and doors. The town is as secure as it can get.”

Lexa nodded. “Take your snipers up to the rooftops. We have to maintain the high ground any way that we can. It will give us the advantage. I’ll take Alpha and Bravo into the city to hit them as they come in from behind. Charlie and Delta will cover our flanks while Echo and the recruits provide covering fire from second and third story windows in the city.”

Any hurried off. Lexa gathered up a few people that I hadn’t seen before, obviously the squad leaders. Things were moving fast. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned, it was Anya.
“Come with me, Clarke. I need your aim.”

I met Lexa’s eyes through the chaos. She was seeking me out. When she saw me, her lips curved, she nodded. We would meet again.

I followed Anya. She had about twenty other rebels with her, each carrying a long rifle with a scope on it. She handed me a rifle as well, similar to the ones that I had been practicing with at the camp. She divided us into groups of four and sent us up to different rooftops. I was in a group with two men and another woman, none of whom I had ever met before.

“Clarke, this is Monroe, Miller, and Bryan. They’re my A-team. The best of the best. And you’re with us.”

I felt nervous. I’d done little more than practice and while I was good, I’d still never gone after any living targets other than the occasional snake. But I swallowed it down and followed them to the roof of the highest building in the city. The sun was rising, peaking over the horizon now, casting fingers of pink and gold light toward the city. In the distance, I could see the dust that Anya had mentioned before. I looked down the scope of my rifle and saw jeeps, trucks, another army, coming to meet ours.

Anya walked over to me, put a box of ammunition down near me. She clapped a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve fought hard, Clarke, and trained well. I know you can do this.”

She stepped away and I let her words fill me. I could do this. I had already been doing it. I’d fought this war when I was a prisoner of Al-Sumdal and later Abdel, when I’d escaped into the desert, when I’d worked with Octavia and Bellamy and Raven to save the village from the Tawr. I could do this. I was a soldier, just as much as any of the others were. I loaded ammunition into the magazine of my rifle, slid the bolt back, chambered a round. My safety was still on but as I crouched at the edge of the roof, I pushed it forward.

I looked down my scope and waited. I remembered the lessons that Anya had taught me. I took deep breaths, slowing my heart rate, making my breathing more even. For a moment, I thought about Lexa, I wondered where she was. And then I pushed her back, out of my mind. I had more important things to think about.

Anya was standing in the middle of the roof, looking through binoculars at the approaching vehicles. “Be careful,” she said. “There are three jeeps that just stopped behind the main line of vehicles. Looks like they’re getting out. I’m not sure why but —”

I heard the echo of the shot a full second after the bullet hit Anya. It was a large round. It spun her around and she fell, hard, onto the roof. I crawled across the roof towards her, making sure my head was below the edge. The other snipers were returning fire. I heard gunshots around me, some fired from our weapons, some coming from other roofs, some coming from the desert. A large chunk of plaster fell off the side of the roof ledge as it was struck by a bullet.

I pushed Anya over so she was on her back. There was blood on her lips, her shirt was covered in it. I cradled her head in my lap. She reached up toward me with blood-stained hands and gently touched my chin. I could feel the wet mark she left behind.

“Take care of her, Clarke. She’ll need you.”

Her body relaxed, she exhaled a deep, final breath. I didn’t need her to tell me who she was talking about. Silent tears fell off my chin, dropping onto Anya’s face. I gently leaned over, kissed her
I fired one shot into one of the snipers next to the parked jeeps. He fell. I chambered another round, found another target. This one was further back. He was pinned behind the back of the jeep, taking fire from both sides. I waited until he peaked his head around, fired, watching him drop into the sand through my scope.

The snipers from the roof continued to fire. There were fewer shots hitting us now. At least seven of the Tawr snipers were dead. There was another one who was running across the desert, trying to retreat. Monroe shot him once in the hip and brought him down. Another sniper from another rooftop finished him off.

“We need to change position,” I called, looking at the others. “The Tawr are going to get too close to the city and we won’t have a good vantage point. We need to get closer.”

I pointed and Bryan came over. He looked, nodded. “We need to get closer to the edge of town, onto some of those roofs. We can try to funnel them in through the center of our people, push them away from the outside edges. I’ll radio the other teams. Let’s move.”

We hurried off the rooftop, rendezvoused with the rest of the snipers in the street. Another team had lost one of their people but otherwise, we were intact. The fact that Anya had been killed circulated quickly. I could see the defeat, the fear, the anger.

“Come on,” I said, taking the lead. “We have to get out there and keep our people safe. If we’re not doing it for them, then do it for Anya.”

We advanced through the streets quickly. We reached our troops a few streets over and hurried into the buildings. I saw Lexa looking at me, curiously, but I didn’t have time to say anything. I took the steps up to the roof three at a time in great leaping bounds. I dropped my ammo box, refilled my magazine, and began firing over the edge of the roof.

I was starting to hear more gunfire. And not just sniper rifles. Small arms, automatic weapons. The Tawr were starting to get out of their vehicles, starting to engage our soldiers on the ground. Somehow, even with all the noise and distance between us, I heard Lexa, her voice loud and strong.

“To war, Trikru,” she shouted.

A roar went up from the streets below us. Monroe turned to me, a crooked smile on her face. “She does have a way of inspiring people.”

I shook my head and chuckled darkly. To war it was.

I don’t know how long we fought. When there was finally a break in the actions, when the Tawr had retreated into the desert to lick their wounds, the sun was high in the sky. The four of us on the rooftop were exhausted, tired, covered in sweat, sunburned, raw, but we cheered with the best of them when we watched the Tawr running away, dozens of them streaming out of the town, back to their vehicles.

We climbed out of the building slowly and met with the other sniper teams. We were down another one, and one of the men had a large, bloody wound in his shoulder. It was a win, but we’d lost people. Was it really a victory?

We moved slowly back to our original position at the rear of the town, back where the vehicles were. People were there handing out food and water, giving medical attention to the wounded. I looked
through the crowd for Bellamy, Octavia, Raven. They were all there, looking a little rough, a little dirty. Raven came over to me and threw her arms around me.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” she said, hugging me tightly.

“I’m fine, Raven. I’m in one piece. But I have to find Lexa. Anya, she didn’t make it.”

Raven pulled away from me, shock on her face. “Anya?” she breathed.

I nodded, sadly.

Raven looked through the crowd and finally located her, standing at the back of a truck, talking to an older man who must have lived in the city. She pointed me in her direction and gave me a reassuring hug.

“I’ll be with Bellamy and Octavia by the truck,” she said. “When you need us, we’ll be waiting for you.”

I walked toward Lexa, my stomach in knots. I saw her through the crowd of people and when she saw me, relief filled her face, her shoulders sagged. She excused herself from the man and pushed through the crowd to get to me.

“Clarke,” she breathed.

I silenced her with a look, took her hand in mine, and pulled her away from everyone.

“Lexa, I have something to tell you.”

She looked at me intently. I noticed that she looked tired, there was dirt streaking her face, her clothes were dirty, there was a tear in her pants above the knee. I saw blood on the skin that occasionally peaked out.

“Lexa,” I took a deep breath, steeling myself. “Anya didn’t make it. She got hit by a sniper’s bullet on the rooftop. She died in my arms.”

I saw Lexa’s face change. She looked down, took a deep breath. When she looked back up, there were tears in her eyes but she was holding them back with all the force she could.

“Take me to her body,” she said, her voice steady.

I led Lexa to the building, up to the roof. We took the stairs in silence and I stepped out of the door with her. Anya’s body was still there, where she had fallen. Lexa walked over to her, knelt down beside her. Part of me wanted to look away. It was an intimate moment and I didn’t know if Lexa even really wanted me there. But at the same time, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Lexa put her hand on Anya’s head, brushed away a lock of blonde hair.

“It shouldn’t have ended like this, old friend,” she said, quietly. “Your fight is over. I’ll carry on for now until we meet again.”

Lexa stayed like that for several minutes. When she rose, her eyes were dry, her face set in a look of steely resolve.

“The Tawr have retreated but they’ll be back, Clarke. We need to get Anya off this roof and we need to be prepared to fight again.”
I looked at her, standing strong and tall under the unforgiving sun. I saw the commander. I saw Heda. And I knew, in that moment, I would follow her into hell if she asked.

May 3, 2019

The lull in the fighting lasted all day and well into the night. It was after midnight when we started hearing gunshots again. We were taking four hour shifts at a series of checkpoints Lexa had set up around the city. I’d just gotten back from a shift, laid down in the sand to try and get some rest, when we heard it. Octavia, Raven and I jumped up, grabbing our weapons. Bellamy was stationed at a checkpoint on the Northeast corner of town. I’d passed him when I was heading back to the staging area.

“Where’s it coming from?” Octavia asked as we ran with the rest of the rebels through the street.

Our questions was answered quickly by a burst of gunfire. I ducked, skidding around a corner as plaster rained down above my head. Raven skidded on the rocky street and I reached down, pulling her back to her feet.

“Everyone, take cover,” I yelled.

There were fifteen of us, including me, Octavia, and Raven. We all quickly took cover, most of us inside the first floors of surrounding buildings. It was the best we could do but it certainly wasn’t ideal. Most of the windows were boarded up and we had to worry about shootouts in the city streets when people were hunkered down in some of the surrounding buildings.

“You two,” I said, turning to a pair of women who were ducking behind the door of the building across the street, “go up to the roof. See if you can find out where the shooting is coming from. Find us some targets. Octavia, make sure this house doesn’t have a backdoor they can get in through, you all do the same.”

I leaned out of the door and had to duck back in quickly as a bullet hit the door by my head.

“Well, fuck that idea,” I growled to myself.

“How did they get into the city so quickly?” Raven asked, trying to pry a board off the window so she could return fire.

“There aren’t many of them,” I said, using the lull in the shooting to listen to the other sounds of the city. “Most of the shooting is still coming from the outside of the city. What if these Tawr were already here.”

“They expected us to occupy the town after we pushed them out the first time. They thought it would be a blood bath inside the streets.”
“Hey, Clarke,” someone called across the street.

I looked up to see one of the women I sent to the roof.

“What’d you find?”

“There are twelve of them. Two are hanging out at the end of the road firing on our position, four at the alley behind your house, the other six are in the square at the end of the street.”

“Can you get to any of them from the roof?”

“Maybe half we have clear shots on.”

“Raven, Octavia, get to the house across the street. Octavia, take half up to the roof and try to pin them down. Raven, we’re going to hang out down here until the shooting starts. When they’re taking cover, we’ll go hunting.”

Raven and Octavia dashed across the narrow alley. They moved so quickly that the Tawr soldiers in the streets didn’t realize what was happening until they were safely inside and bullets uselessly peppered the door frame long after they were gone.

Raven watched me from inside the house, a safe distance away from the harmless bullets. We both waited. I heard the gunshots start from the roof. I heard cries from the street. Our eyes met across the alley and we nodded.

I was the first out into the street. The two soldiers who had been shooting at us were now aiming up at the roof. I could see the barrels of rifles over the edge but nothing more. They couldn’t get a good shot, but it was a great distraction. I fired on both of them, hitting them easily. They had no cover, they weren’t looking at me, it almost felt wrong. But I took the win, waited for Raven to catch up to me. She was just a few steps behind, the rest of the rebels at her back. We hurried down the alley. I pulled two of the rebels off the main group with me. Raven continued towards the square, I looped around to the alley.

The four Tawr were positioned behind a low stone wall, shooting up at the rooftop. We shot at them and were able to hit two of them before they realized what was happening. The other two started to run. They split off where the alley hit the road.

“Go right, I’ll take the one on the left and meet you all in the square.”

“Yes, Wanheda,” one of the rebels that was with me said, running right down the street.

The name still shook me when I heard it. It had been weeks since anyone had called me that. I was a myth, a legend, but in reality I was just a woman in a shitty situation trying to survive. I wasn’t special. But if I needed to be the Commander of Death, fuck it, I would be.

The Tawr soldier that had run to the left was only a few feet in front of me. He skidded on the rocks in the road as he tried to turn again, this time down another alley. His stumble gave me the chance to catch up with him. I grabbed him by the collar of his uniform, tossed him toward a wall. He dropped his rifle and it clattered into the dirt with a heavy sound. He tried to spin around, tried to get away, but I held on tight, slammed him into the wall again.

“How many of you are there in the city?” I yelled, pushing him up against the wall, my body tight against his so he couldn’t move.

“I don’t know,” he gasped.
“Bullshit, start talking.”

“We were told to come here a week ago. There were maybe a dozen of us. Maybe a few more. We’ve been staying here, waiting for the attack.”

“Why?”

“We were supposed to attack the camp in the middle of the night.”

“Who was your target?”

“You, Wanheda. And Lexa.”

“So why didn’t it work?”

“The other soldiers came back too early. They started attacking the perimeter before we could move on the camp. We thought we might catch someone moving through the streets. Looks like we were right. I didn’t expect it to be you, though.”

“So now what should I do with you?”

“Whatever you want,” he gasped. “If I go back to the Tawr with you and Lexa still alive, I’m a dead man anyway.”

I growled, pushed him against the wall, hard. His lip hit the edge of the plaster and left behind a smear of blood.

“You might be dead but not by my hand. I don’t kill people who are unarmed. Either pick up your gun so I can shoot you or walk away.”

He turned towards me, hesitating. He wasn’t sure if I was serious or not. He looked at his gun, looked back at me, then started walking the other direction. A shot rang out in the alley, struck the soldier in the back of the head, he fell. I turned quickly, pulling my rifle up to fire. I felt my heart stop beating.

“I didn’t expect you to be so weak, Clarke. So forgiving. The rumors I’ve heard about Wanheda don’t quite live up to the reality.”

“Zohar,” I gasped.

It was him, in the flesh. He was standing in front of me in the alley. He wore a grey suit, a white shirt, a patterned tie. His shoes were black, dusty, his clothing slightly wrinkled. He wanted to give the illusion of being put together. It failed. His hair had grown out, his beard was full, longer, I could see flecks of gray scattered through it. He looked thinner, a little more washed out. But when he smiled, I was transported back to the compound, back to his bedroom.

He’d been helping me, taking care of me, keeping me safe. In reality, he’d been using me. I let out a cry and pulled my rifle back up, pointing it at him. He crossed the distance between us quickly, smacked down the barrel of my rifle. He grabbed me, wrapping his hand around my throat, and he pushed me back into the wall. My head hit the concrete. I saw stars. I felt sick.

“You were supposed to play nice like a good bitch,” Zohar spat, sending flecks of spittle across my cheek as he leaned in close to me. I could feel his hot breath on my skin. “You were supposed to let Abdel kill you and then the problem was solved. Instead, I have to hunt you down like a little errand boy.”
“You’re not as smart as you think you are, Zohar.”

“Why’s that?” he laughed.

“Because you forgot something about me.”

He looked up at me, grinned. “What’s that?”

“I’m hard to kill.”

I moved quickly, drawing my hand back. I slammed my flat palm into his elbow. Because he was holding me around the neck, and his arm was extended, I felt his elbow give, shatter, when I hit it with all my force. He shrieked in pain and it echoed through the streets. He crouched in the street, whimpering in pain, cradling his destroyed limb in his other arm.

I picked up my rifle, pointed at him, walked closer.

“I want to kill you, Zohar. I want to put a bullet through your scrawny little rat body and watch you bleed out into the dirt. But it’s going to be so much more satisfying to think of you crawling back to Kane and explaining what happened. But you can be a good delivery boy, make yourself useful in your last minutes. Tell him Wanheda can’t wait to see him again. Tell him I’m coming for him.”

I turned and walked toward the square where I’d be meeting Raven, Octavia and the others. I left Zohar, crouched in the dirt, sobbing, a broken man.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

No content warming for this chapter. Some frightening moments toward the end but nothing specifically damaging or triggering.

Chapter 23: Form Up - To the Center of Town - Unaccounted For - Lexa Lost - A Rescue

May 4, 2019

The fighting lasted most of the night. We’d taken out the Tawr in the middle of town and joined up with Bellamy and a few squads of rebels just outside of town. We helped them for a few hours and were able to push the Tawr back. Flares had been tossed out into the desert, trying to help light up our targets. We took cover in the houses, behind low walls, at one point I found myself crouched behind a barrel.

As the fighting died down and the rebels picked off their last few targets, a scout gave word that another group of Tawr were pushing into the city from the south side. We hurried back the way we had come, sprinting through the dark streets, trying not to get hung up on anything that would slow us down. The Tawr came out of the desert like a swarm of ants. This had to be their main force, their final push. They’d hoped to scatter us around the city and then attack from behind. The underestimated us.

By the time the sun rose, I was tired and dirty. They’d been able to push us back to the first two rows of houses just inside the city but we’d held them off. For every one of us they killed, we took ten of them with us. Bellamy was on the left side shouting orders, holding the flank. My snipers stuck with me, along with the soldiers from earlier, Octavia, Raven, and a few dozen others we’d picked up along the way. I sent the snipers up to the rooftops, divided the rebels into five squads. I used the first floor of a nearby house as a base of operations, allowing them to cycle through the fighting and retreat there if they needed ammo, water, a deep breath.

We held our line, making sure none of the Tawr got through on the right corner and were able to push deeper into the city. I could hear Lexa, in the center, right on the front lines. Eventually, her voice was lost in the chaos. My throat was burning with the hot sulfur of gunpowder. My mouth was dry, my tongue thick, my stomach churning. Where was she? I pushed it back, pushed it down. Those feelings were weakness right now. I needed to focus on where I was, what I was doing.

Finally, the fighting ended. It didn’t fizzle out like a dying candle wick. It came to a sharp, sudden end. The remaining Tawr must have been ordered to retreat because suddenly they turned and ran. Out of the hundreds they sent, maybe fifty ran back into the desert. The ground was littered with corpses amongst the jeeps and trucks. We looked like quite the rag-tag bunch, dirty, tired, but we won the day. A cheer went up from the crowd. Through the chaos, I saw Lexa, standing in front of her troops, arm raised in victory. I moved towards her, trailing my weary band of warriors behind me.

Lexa saw us coming and I saw the relief on her face.

“Clarke,” she breathed.
She looked behind me, saw the rebels following me. She nodded.

“You have a way about you on the battlefield, Clarke. Tell me,” she turned towards those following me, “you fought beside Clarke all night long, even with her lack of experience. Why?”

A man stepped forward. He was older, battle-hardened. There was a scar on his cheek, a streak of blood under his nose.

“I’ve fought with you for three years now, Heda. I’ve fought under different people. I’ve fired sniper rifles into trucks and fought hand-to-hand through the streets of cities, and I’ve never followed anyone like her. Wanheda knows the battlefield, she knows what to do, where to put people. She has a calm under fire that I’ve never seen before and a confidence that would make me follow her into anything. I’ll gladly fight beside her.”

A cheer went up from the crowd. I felt shocked. I didn’t feel like a leader, like I’d done anything special. These people chose to follow me, though. They fought at my side all night long. Lexa scanned the crowd.

“For your valiant effort, holding our flank during the darkest of battles, through the hardest conditions, I name you Nightblood Company, with Clarke as your leader, and my second.”

A cheer went up from the crowd again, this one longer and louder than any before it, joined by the hundreds of rebels that surrounded us. I was lost in the noise, lost in the feeling. My brain didn’t know how to comprehend it. A leader, and not just that, but Lexa’s second. I was being patted on the back, congratulated. I still felt dazed, but also proud, alive, invigorated.

Bellamy came over, gave me a hug. “Don’t expect me to salute you,” he joked.

“I don’t,” I said, playfully slapping me in the chest. I leaned close to him. “But I do expect you to call me out if I’m doing something stupid.”

“I’ve got your back, Clarke. And hers,” he nodded towards Lexa. “I was an idiot before. I’m sorry, for the things I said. They were uncalled for and really inappropriate and I didn’t mean it.”

“What did she do to you? Are you sure you’re the real Bellamy?”

He laughed. “We talked,” he said, suddenly serious. “And she’s the real deal.”

Octavia and Raven came over and joined us. Hugs were had all around.

“Listen,” I said, stepping back and looking at the three of them. “I need help. I can’t do this alone. I need platoon commanders. I need other people here to have my back. I can barely figure out how to lead myself, much less fifty other people.”

“We’ve got you,” Raven said, grinning at me. “We’ve been Nightbloods since the very beginning.”

“Yeah,” Octavia agreed. “We’ve always got your back, Clarke.”

Bellamy nodded. “Not a problem, but, just to let you know, there are about eighty people here.”

My eyes widened and he laughed.

“Everyone, to the center of town,” Lexa called. “We’ll meet back up in the town square. Get food, get water. We rendezvous in fifteen.”

I took her up on the offer, grabbing a canteen of water from the back of a supply truck, some food
from another one. I wet a bandanna and wiped my face, my neck, my hands. The cloth came away black.

“Why are we meeting up in the center of town?” I asked Bellamy when he came over to get a drink.

“So we can get a good count, see who’s not here.”

I nodded. Even in our victory, people had lost their lives today. Friends, lovers, family, they were gone. I started moving in that direction, keeping close to Raven. We’d been in this since the start, together. She was my family. She was a source of comfort for me in the chaos, and I needed her now since Lexa needed to be the commander and needed to worry about her troops. She didn’t have time to help me process anything.

When we got to the center of town, the square was packed with bodies. I wondered around for a while, talking to people, offering words of support, the occasional hand of comfort. I checked my watch. It had been almost half an hour, I couldn’t see Lexa. It wasn’t like her to be late. And we all knew it. I could feel the tone of the square change. I hopped up on the table of one of the markets so that my head was above the crowd. I scanned it, looking for her braid, the steady set of her shoulders, her trademark black fatigues. I saw nothing.

“Everyone, listen up,” I shouted. “Something must have gone wrong. Heda is missing. We all saw her at the front line which means between there and here, she went missing. Nightbloods, form a perimeter around the outside of the city, no one goes in or out. The rest of you, form up into pairs and search every inch of this place. I want every house covered from top to bottom. We’ll start with the Northwest corner and work our way Southeast to make sure we don’t miss anything. Octavia, you’ll stay here with the medical squadron. If any of you find Lexa and she’s injured, bring her here for treatment.”

We moved out as a group. The Nightbloods hurried to the outside of town, making sure what anyone who had taken Lexa couldn’t get her out of the city. I knew she hadn’t gone down without a fight so as I scoured the streets, I looked for any signs of a struggle. We all walked through the streets for hours, checking basements, even those where scared townspeople still huddled together. We checked under beds, in cabinets, on rooftops. I moved from house to house, team to team, making sure our people were alright. It was night and we’d barely covered half the city.

We were still tired and worn out from the fighting hours ago but we kept on. Suddenly, the monotony was broken.

“Clarke, we have a locked door,” a voice came through on my radio. “First one we’ve run into that seems to be locked from the inside.”

“What’s your location?”

She gave me her location and I sprinted through the streets, ignoring my fatigue. I turned a corner and saw the team crouched by the door. There was no bar on it so it had to have been locked from the inside like she said. The windows were boarded shut so there was no other way to see inside. I pulled them away from the door. Other teams were starting to stack up outside.

“All survey teams, continue what you’re doing. We don’t want to draw attention to the fact that we may have found her location. We have enough people to get into the building. Everyone else, business as usual.”

I pulled two other teams aside and the rest of them turned, getting back to the show of searching buildings. Also, I figured that would help just in case this was a decoy. The woman who had called
across the radio walked up to me.

“I thought I heard voices inside but I can’t confirm that, Wanheda. There’s a back door too but it’s locked.”

“Is there any other way for us to get into the house?”

“The roof, probably. Most of these buildings have roof access. But you’d have to jump across from the roof next to it and that would probably be loud enough to disturb anyone inside.”

“Not if we create a distraction.”

I put the plan into place then went into the house next door. I took the stairs up to the roof, waited until both teams were in position, then jumped. As soon as my feet left the roof, someone banged on the door of the house.

“Hey, anyone in there?” he yelled, his voice echoing in the streets. “It’s alright, the Tawr are gone. It’s safe.”

I hit the roof with both feet, rolled onto my shoulder to try to muffle any noise I might make. I didn’t want to stumble or trip and risk running into anything. The team down on the street kept talking in loud voices while I hurried into the house. The door in the roof led down a ladder and into a bedroom. I could hear the team on the street, trying to make noise, talking to each other, keeping up the ruse.

I snuck out of the bedroom and toward the stairs. I heard voices.

“They’re getting closer, you idiot. I think they know we have her.”

“They don’t know anything,” a second voice answered. “They still have half the city to cover.”

“Stop,” I whispered into my radio. “They’ve got her. Wait to break in on my signal from both sides, weapons hot. At least two targets.”

The team outside played their role perfectly. I heard the woman say, “I don’t think anyone’s in there. If there was, they would have heard us and come by now. It’s a waste of time, let’s get moving.”

The man agreed and I heard heavy footsteps walking away. I knew they’d creep back to the door a few seconds later. In my head, I made a mental note to give them some serious credit for what they’d done. I heard a sigh of relief from downstairs.

“See, I told you.”

The other man harrumphed.

I crept down the stairs until I could see into the main room of the house. Lexa was there. I recognized her boots, her uniform, her tanned skin. Her feet were bound at the ankle, her hands at the wrist. She had a cloth shoved in her mouth and tied tightly with another piece of cloth. She was glaring daggers at both of the men, struggling against the rope. I could hear the growl in the back of her throat as she fought to get to them.

“Imagine that,” one of the men turned to look at her. “The mighty Heda, brought down by two men. Looks like you’re just human after all.”

That confirmed it, there were only two in the house. I jumped the last three steps straight into the
living room.

“Breach the door, now,” I yelled, throwing my body across Lexa’s prone form.

Both doors slammed inward at the same time. The pair of rebels came in through the front door, fired quick shots, took out both of the Tawr soldiers at once. The other pair came in through the back door, clearing the kitchen before they got to us.

I pushed myself off Lexa, pulled my knife out, cut the rope off her wrists. She pulled the cloth away from her face while I cut her feet free. Lexa was breathing hard. She pushed herself off the ground, glaring at the two bodies on the floor.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They jumped out of an alleyway, killed two of our people with knives before I knew what was happening.”

“You’re hurt,” I said, finally seeing the long slash on her arm. It bled freely now that she was upright, dripping off her wrist.

“I tried to fight back but they had the element of surprise. And a lot of fucking rope.”

“You’re safe now, Heda. Let’s get you out of here,” one of the rebels said.

Lexa turned to look at me before she let herself be walked out of the house. Our eyes met and she nodded slightly, almost unnoticeably. What we needed to say didn’t need to be shared with others.

I stayed with the other team, making sure the rest of the house was cleared. My heart was still beating out of my chest, my hands were slick with sweat, but Lexa was safe now. I finished what I needed to do, ordered the other rebels over my radio to regroup by the vehicles. We were going home.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

No content warning for this chapter, just make sure you're well-hydrated and have some alone-time. You're going to need it ;-)
Unfortunately, my brain wouldn’t let me forget it. I don’t know how long I slept before the nightmares started. It was like my brain was a machine gun, shooting through terrible memories as quickly as possible. First I saw Niylah, dead on the sidewalk, Yasin, his face close to mine, Zohar’s cruel smile in the street, a pile of bodies, innocent people stacked in the middle of town like sacks of flour. Then Lexa. Only this time, I could hear her voice, hear her screaming in pain in the city somewhere. I kept running down streets, searching for her, hunting, trying to save her, but I could never find her. I’d turn down an alley and the voice would change directions. The screaming got louder. Then suddenly it stopped, a gunshot.

I jerked awake, blankets twisted around my feet, sweat covering my body. My hands were shaking, my breath coming in great panting gasps. I felt dizzy. I closed my eyes, steadied my breathing. The camp was quiet. Bellamy, Raven, and Octavia were still asleep in the beds around me, unaware of the war I’d been fighting in my dreams. I pushed the blanket off of me, slid my feet into my boots, and walked out of the tent.

In the open air of the desert, stars shining in the sky, gone was the oppressive weight of the dream.

“Just a dream, just a dream, just a dream,” I whispered to myself over and over.

I walked through the camp, trying to avoid the occasional guard that I saw. It wasn’t hard. Most of them were looking out at the desert. There was a fire lit at the back of camp and I walked towards it, letting my feet move wherever they wished without much direction from my brain. As I drew closer, I saw a shape next to the fire.

It was Lexa. She was staring into it, knees drawn up to her chest. She looked small, defeated. I walked over to her. When she heard my footsteps, she turned her head slightly towards the noise but she didn’t look at me. I sat down near her. And we sat that way for several minutes, silently listening to the crackling flames.

“I don’t know that I’m going to be very good company right now, Clarke,” Lexa said, her voice deep, thick with emotion.

“Me neither,” I admitted.

She glanced at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nightmares,” I admitted.

“Want to talk about them?”

I shook my head.

“So what do you want to do?” Lexa asked.

I thought for a moment. There was possibility in that question. A lot of space there that needed to be filled. I swallowed hard, pushed myself off the sand.

When I extended my hand to Lexa, she took it without hesitation. I pulled her off the dirt and kept her hand in mine as we walked back to camp together. If Lexa had any hesitation, she didn’t say anything. She let me lead her through camp, straight to her tent. I pulled her inside and she pulled the flap shut behind us.

When I looked at her, even in the darkness of her tent, her eyes were shining, an oasis in the desert. There was confusion, hope, determination, a million other emotions in a single glance. But I didn’t want to think about them. I didn’t want to think about anything. I just wanted to feel. I wanted to
I closed the distance between us and felt Lexa’s mouth under mine, warm and wet, her soft lips opening to me. The world disappeared, the desert was gone, the war had ended. In that moment it was just the two of us. I never wanted the moment to end.

My hands slid up her back, feeling the tight muscles under her shirt. She shifted, pulling me closer, and they rippled under my touch as if they had a mind of their own. The strength, the power. She was intoxicating. She pulled away from the kiss long enough to pull my t-shirt off. It lay discarded on the ground and hers soon followed. When she pulled me in again, I could feel her skin against mine. Her stomach was cool, her back hot. I pressed against her. I was stranded in the desert and she was a drink of water.

Lexa moved again, trailing light kisses along my jaw, down the side of my neck. She stopped to suck the skin of my collar bone and deftly pulled my bra off with one hand. Her hands replaced the cloth and she cupped my breasts, pinching, squeezing, her thumb grazing my nipples with expert precision even in the dark. I put my hand under her chin, pulled her face back up to mine, and kissed her hard, parting her lips with my tongue.

Lexa put her hands down, cupped my ass, and with a single motion, picked me up. I wrapped my legs around her waist, let her carry me through the darkness. She sat me down on the table in the middle of the room, pushing papers and maps out of the way. They fell, forgotten. I was the only thing on her mind right now.

She pulled off my boots, the rest of my clothes. Soon I was naked in the darkness with the warm night air on my skin. Goosebumps popped up on my arms and legs that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Lexa returned to me, standing between my bare thighs, kissing me lips hard, with an intensity that left them more sensitive to each kiss.

I unbuckled her belt, unbuttoned her pants, unzipped them. I slowly slid my hand down her stomach, my fingernails tracing a gentle line from her bellybutton. She gasped as my hand slid below her waistband.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," I whispered, grazing her ear with my lips.

"Please, Clarke," she whispered back, her voice still thick but this time with a new emotion. “Don’t ever stop.”

And I didn’t. My hand mover further down until it was between her legs. I could feel her, the wetness coating my fingers. She sighed, sagging against me for a moment. Her hand tightened where it was resting on the inside of my thigh. I gently rubbed her clit, separated her folds, slid a finger inside her. She was tight and hot and it was everything I could do to control myself, to keep my rhythm even instead of speeding up the process. I wanted to take her over the edge, but I also wanted this night to last forever.

With a growl, Lexa grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand out of her pants. She pushed me back with a strong hand, laying me out flat on the table. She pulled my hips closer to her, giving her better access, and in a single motion she knelt and her mouth was on me. I felt her tongue on me, inside me. I tangled my fingers in her hair, pulled her tighter in against me. She sucked me into her mouth, sliding one finger into me, then another. I gasped, wanting to shout her name, but I was also acutely aware of where we were. I kept quiet.

But I showed her, with my hands, the motions of my body, my bucking hips. She kept up, increasing her rhythm before I even had to beg for it. I came, hard, my body shuddering on the table, by fingers
trying to grip the hard surface. I panted into the darkness, gritted my teeth against the yells that wanted to burst out of my chest. She stayed between my legs, licking me clean, licking off her fingers. She wanted every drop of me and patiently took her time to make sure she got it.

When she stood again, pulled me up to her, kissed me hard, I could taste myself on her lips. She picked me up again, carried me to her bed and set me down on it, gently. It was little more than a cot, there was barely enough room for both of us, but I had a feeling that wouldn’t be a problem. She kicked off the rest of her clothes before she joined me and we tangled together, side by side, our bodies pressed against each other.

While we kissed, I returned my hand to its original position, the only place that it wanted to be. Between her legs. She’d definitely enjoyed her time between mine. I could feel it in the soaking wet heat. She bucked her hips against my fingers, begging. And I obliged. Tonight was not a night for games. She’d given me what I needed. I wanted to give her what she wanted. I pushed a finger inside her.

“More,” she gasped against my lips.

I added a second one and she bit down hard on my shoulder, muffling a cry of pleasure. I could feel the muscles of her arms wrapped around me, the skin of her chest pressing against mine. I curled my fingers, pulled them out, pushed them in, found all the right spots. Lexa’s breath was coming more erratically, the rhythm of her hips was more strained. I pushed my head up, trapping her lips with mine. She groaned into my mouth as she came, tightening around my fingers. I stayed inside her, riding the waves of her orgasm, waiting until she sagged into my arms, completely spent.

I wasn’t sure what to do at that moment, what to say. Would Lexa think we’d made a mistake. Had I taken advantage of her?

Instead she leaned down, kissed me again, hard, my already bruised lips begging for more.

“Please tell me that you wanted that,” she whispered, her voice trembling like she was carrying my unspoken fears as her own weight. “Please tell me that I didn’t take advantage of you and of a bad night.”

I shook my head and she could feel the motion of my head because my cheek was still cupped in her hand.

“I wanted this,” I said. “To be honest, I’ve wanted it since we first met. You enchanted me, Lexa. And then you made me fall for you.”

She kissed me again, softer this time. My body trembled against her and when she pulled away, she was smiling.

“I’d like to do this again sometime, if you’re up for it.”

“Definitely,” I gasped, sounding a bit too eager for my own liking.

Lexa chuckled against me. She reached down to the bottom of her bed and pulled the sheet over us. I turned over, pressing my back against Lexa’s chest, feeling her arm across my stomach, pulling me tight against her. I rested my head on her arm, relaxing, truly relaxing, for the first time in a long time.

“Get some sleep, Clarke,” she whispered, gently kissing my shoulder. “I’ll be right here if you have anymore nightmares.”

Sure enough, I didn’t. I slept better than I had in weeks. When I woke, the bed was cool, Lexa was
gone. I rolled onto my back, started up at the tent ceiling. The fact that I was in Lexa’s tent, in her bed, was the only lingering reminder of the night before. I heard a noise behind me and turned to see Lexa push aside the door to the tent. She smiled at me when she walked in. She was carrying two cups of coffee.

I noticed that my clothes had been folded and moved closer to the cot. I dressed, slowly, feeling Lexa’s eyes on me the whole time. Normally, I would be self-conscious, but something about her made me feel completely at ease. When I was done, I pulled on my boots and walked over to the table, grabbing my cup, feeling the warmth of the coffee against my hands.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Lexa said, breaking the silence.

“Sorry,” I smiled. “Making up for lost time.”

Lexa shook her head. “You don’t have to apologize, Clarke. You clearly needed it.”

I wasn’t totally sure at that point what we were talking about. Was she worried that I was apologizing for what happened last night? She must have read the expression on my face, the doubt and confusion. She stepped closer to me, taking the cup of coffee out of my hand and putting it back on the table. She wrapped an arm around my waist, pulled me in tight against her.

My body remembered the feel of her skin from the night before. I melted into her, adjusting my body so that it fit perfectly against hers. I couldn’t feel where I ended and she began. She was warm, strong. I felt safe in her arms. She reached her other hand up, cupped my chin, and bent down, kissing my lips that were still swollen and sensitive from the night before. Her kiss was soft, gentle, but there was an intensity behind it. I could feel the incredible control that she was exerting to not go further. I could feel it in the way that her mouth opened a little wide, her tongue gently flicked at my lower lip. I sighed, falling even further into her.

She pulled away before we got too lost in each other and she smiled down at me. “I don’t regret a single second of what happened last night,” she said. “Unless I made you uncomfortable in any way. If so, I apologize. I care more about you than I have cared for anyone in a long, long time, Clarke. And I would definitely like for last night to happen again, as many times as possible.”

I blushed, hiding my face in her neck. She pulled my chin up again. She wouldn’t let me hide.

“You don’t have anything to be ashamed of, Clarke. Last night was wonderful. It was what both of us wanted and needed.”

I nodded. “I’d like for it to happen again, Lexa.”

“We live in a world that demands much of us, but maybe, someday, when we no longer owe anything to anyone, it can just be the two of us, on our own time. Until then, we’ll take advantage of the moments we have together.”

“Why did you make me your second, Lexa?” I asked, suddenly.

“Are you afraid I chose you because I have feelings for you?”

I nodded.

Lexa sighed and stepped away, picking up her coffee cup. I did the same, taking a long drink of the strong, dark coffee.

“No,” she shook her head. “In fact, my feelings for you almost made me chose Bellamy. He has
experience, but he lacks the ability to inspire, to truly lead. No, Clarke, I chose you in spite of the way I feel about you. I wanted to keep you at arms length. Before last night, I wasn’t sure you felt the same way. But the way the Nightbloods looked up to you. The way they followed you into battle despite not knowing you. You can’t train someone to be that kind of leader. It’s something people are born with and you have it, Clarke.”

I sighed. “I don’t feel like a leader, Lexa. I feel like a kid wearing some kind of costume.”

“But you aren’t, Clarke. You’re a kind, intelligent, strong, beautiful, incredibly sexy woman,” she smiled at that last part. “And you’re a true leader. We can win this war, Clarke, because of you. Now, I want you to stop worrying about this. Come on, let’s get out of this tent and toast to a new beginning with your soldiers.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay between chapters. Sometimes life gets in the way. But I’m back now and working hard on finishing the story. I still have a few more chapters finished that I’ll try to get out in the next couple weeks while I write to the end. Hope all of you are enjoying the ride.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Content Warning for this chapter: This chapter contains graphic depictions of gore and death. The end of this chapter might be very difficult for some readers. Please read with caution.

You can avoid this content by stopping this chapter when Clarke starts going down the basement steps and picking up with Chapter 26. You will not lose any of the story and will be able to follow the narrative.

Chapter 25: A New Objective - A New Town - Something in the Air - Something in the Basement - Breakdown

May 22, 2019

I felt Lexa’s skin against mine, smooth and warm. The water dripped down both of our bodies, the soap made us slick, but we stayed close to each other. It wasn’t hard to get time alone in the middle of the night. Lexa was running all the troops through drills during the day. Nightblood Company was coming together. She’d had a new patch designed for us that we wore on our right shoulders, a black drop of blood on a red background. I’d divided the company into four squads. Monroe was in charge of my snipers, Raven lead my heavy gunners, training them in the use of explosives, mounted machine guns, grenade launchers, all the, as she called it, cool stuff. Octavia and Bellamy led the ground troops. Bellamy focused on small, fire team based tactics, moving through urban environments, clearing buildings, while Octavia’s squad was learning how to fight in an entrenched environment, taking advantage of cover, identifying targets across large battlefields, learning how to move and shoot under heavy fire.

I’d named each of them, wanting to give them all their own, individual identity, something to take pride in. Monroe led the Bows, Raven the Swords, Octavia the Shields, and Bellamy the Daggers. We ran through drills during the day, in the evening, Lexa and I poured over maps, documents, trying to find new leads, new targets. At night, our bodies tangled together in the bed, on the table, sometimes in the dust of the desert, unable to wait to reach a better surface before we needed each other. And now, when the camp was quiet and asleep, in the shower.

My fingers trailed slowly down the tattoo on Lexa’s back. Her muscles twitched under my finger and I grinned at her reaction. The idea that I could make the great Heda week under my hands made me feel strong, powerful. She turned towards me, catching the side of my face with the soft, smooth skin of her hand, cupping my chin. She leaned in, close, our lips almost touching.

“Tease,” she whispered.

Her voice was deep, thick, taunting me in the dim lights of the shower.

“You like it,” I said, up for the challenge.
Lexa grinned.

In those moments, just the two of us, alone, Lexa let down her guard. She let me see her, the young woman who used to binge watch Friends on Netflix, who had been to half-a-dozen Broadway shows, who drank her coffee on the back porch of her parent’s old house in Nebraska when she went back to visit on leave.

I felt Lexa’s finger under my chin. She tilted my head up so that my eyes met hers.

“Where did you just go, Clarke?” she asked, looking concerned.

“Do you think we’ll ever go back home?” I met her eyes, drowning in two deep green pools. “Do you think this will ever end and that our lives will go back to normal?”

Lexa sighed. “I have to believe that, Clarke. It’s the only thing that keeps me going.”

“And what happens to us when that day finally comes?”

“Are you asking me if there’s a place for you in my life?”

I nodded.

Lexa leaned down and kissed me deeply. I felt her tongue gently teasing my lips. Her mouth was soft and arm on mine. It took my breath away, made my knees weak, and I was happy when her arm wrapped around me and held me tightly against her. She finally pulled away, her lips parted slightly, breathing heavily.

“I have no life without you, Clarke Griffin. You’re just as much a part of me as I am a part of you. Wherever you go, I follow. And I hope the reverse is true as well.”

I nodded again, not sure what to say. It was as close to an admission of love as I thought I’d ever get, at least in this environment. We both knew what we felt. We knew the word for it too. We just couldn’t say it. Not yet. Everything was still too new, too fresh. Even though it felt like we had known each other forever, it hadn’t been that long. When every day can be your last, time has a funny way of playing tricks on you. It stretches out and then slams back together so that you lose track of everything.

The water was starting to cool. We quickly finished our shower, dried off, got dressed. Just outside the showers, Lexa turned to me.

“You should stay with me tonight, Clarke.”

I always waited for her invitation. It was an unspoken rule between us. Some nights, Lexa would be up all night, pacing in her tent, waiting for news from one of her teams, waiting for intel, pouring over maps. Even after we made love, sometimes I would go back to my tent. She wanted me to sleep. She wanted me to rest. But it was always better in her arms. The nightmares never came. I knew I was safe with her.

I followed Lexa back to her tent. We walked with some urgency, knowing what we wanted to do once the tent flap closed behind us. Lexa grinned at me and, again, we were just two people who cared deeply about each other, not two soldiers going to war. Reality had other plans.

Monroe had been stationed in the communications tent nearby for the evening. While Lexa received a lot of direct communications, there was also a general radio channel and email that teams used for communication. Monroe was standing near the entrance to Lexa’s tent, waiting for us. She looked up
as she heard us coming. Lexa slowed. Monroe’s face was serious.

“Hey, sorry to bug you, but something came across the wire. I think you should hear it.”

Lexa and I dropped our stuff in her tent and then followed Monroe. She sat down at the computer and pulled up a recording she’d made of the incoming broadcast. The voice was quiet, speaking quickly. Monroe couldn’t understand much of what he said. The Arabic was thickly accented and rushed, pressured. Lexa and I, thankfully, could.

“We think the Tawr are stepping up operations around Jawak. We’ve seen several vehicles in the area and have noticed an increase in traffic on the roads. We believe they might be planning an attack. We need help from the rebels. We don’t have the people or the tools to fight this war. Please, help us.”

“How far are we from Jawak?” Lexa asked Monroe who was already pulling out a map on the table behind us.

“Looks like we’re about 275km. Could be slow going, though. Not a lot of roads.”

“Get your company together, Wanheda. Form up at the garage and be ready to move in ten.”

“Monroe, get your snipers up. They have five minutes to get to the garage with their gear.”

I sprinted towards my tent, flicking on the light. “Everyone up,” I called. “Get your teams together and form up at the garage. You have four minutes.”

Bellamy, Raven, and Octavia leapt out of bed. At this point, they didn’t know if it was a drill or the real thing but they treated it like we were going to war. By the time I’d grabbed my weapons and put on a real set of fatigues, most of Nightblood Company was assembled in front of the garage. A few stragglers were running up as I arrived, most of them loaded down with extra supplies, ammo cans, boxes of food and jugs of water to load into the trucks. Assembled, we looked like one hell of a team. I just hoped that out in the field we’d look as good.

Lexa walked up a few minutes later, her hair pulled back in a tight braid, her rifle slung across her back. She was beautiful, dangerous, I wanted her in that moment and wanted to be with her and would follow her into anything. I think all of us felt that way. And she knew it. Lexa had come to lead the rebel group for a reason. She was doing what she was born to do.

“Alright, Nightbloods, listen up. We’ve received a call for help from Jawak. They’re a small town about 250km Southeast of our current location. They’ve helped us out in the past so we’re going to return the favor. We expect opposition from the Tawr so be ready for anything. Clarke, command your troops.”

I stepped up. It felt a little daunting but I knew these people, I’d trained with them, I’d fought beside them. We were a family. I’d follow them to hell and they’d do the same for me.

“Monroe, I want you to take the Bows and load up the first truck. I need you all to be my eyes. When we get close to Jawak, keep a lookout for any signs of trouble. Raven, I need the Swords ready to go as soon as the Bows give us a target. We might have some vehicles waiting for us. We don’t want this to turn into an ambush so we’ll need to get rid of them as quickly as we can. Take out the vehicles before they get into the town if possible. We don’t want them dumping more troops into the streets. Octavia, you’ll pull up the Shield’s next. We might face some heavy fire from the edge of the town. We need to push them back so the Daggers can clear the town but you all will be responsible for that push.
“The Shields will hold the perimeter with the Bows while the Daggers push into the city. Swords will follow behind, mopping up any stragglers and keeping an eye on the flank. Once Dagger gets into the city, I want my Shields to cover the flanks while the Bows take the rear. We’ll probably get some Tawr streaming out of the city, trying to escape. Don’t let that happen. If they want a fight, let’s give them a massacre.”

A cheer went up from the crowd. I heard Monroe, Bellamy, Octavia, and Raven giving individual orders. Lexa slapped me on the shoulder, reassuringly, and went over to her jeep. This time, it was just the two of us riding in it. The squad leaders would be staying with their squads. I climbed into the jeep once everything else was stowed away.

We took off across the desert. Lexa was quiet, intense, drawn into herself thinking about the impending battle. I reached out, gently stroked the side of her arm with one hand. She barely acknowledged the gesture but I saw her visibly relax.

We drove through the rest of the night and into the next morning. Finally, on the horizon, I saw the tops of houses, shimmering in the already intense heat of the desert. I held my radio near my lips. “Monroe, get the Bows on their scopes. Let me know if you see anything. The rest of you, slow up a little, don’t let us get pulled in too close before we see what’s going on.”

The three trucks behind the lead vehicle slowed. Lexa drove towards the left flank, behind the lead truck but still in front of the other three. Out of the way but not out of the action. We watched and waited. I could see the glint of sunlight off sniper scopes as they stood on the benches in the back of the truck, watching the town carefully.

A few minutes later, Monroe’s voice came back across the radio.

“Clarke, I’ve got nothing on the scope and neither does anyone else. Looks like the town is deserted.”

“I’m really starting to get tired of these games,” Lexa growled.

“Be careful, everyone. It could still be a trap. Octavia, move your team up toward the edge of the town. Raven, go right, Bellamy, left. Let’s surround the town as best we can just in case they’re hiding somewhere else. Monroe, keep your Bows back. We may need them for cover.”

We all moved as one, a wave across the desert. We disembarked from our vehicles, cautiously moving toward the center of town. Sure enough, everything was deserted. There was silence in the air, a stillness. And something more, I sniffed.

“Looks like they cleared the town out, just like before,” Bellamy said. “I don’t understand why they’re doing this.”

I shook my head. “They didn’t clear out the town. There were no tracks.”

“Maybe they got smarter this time. Maybe they covered them, somehow.”

“No, do you smell that?”

Lexa looked at me. I saw her nose wrinkle as she inhaled. Everyone sniffed. Bellamy shrugged.

I knelt down. Nearby, there was a barrel. I pushed it aside and my stomach dropped. Beneath the barrel was older sand. The yellow-white layer of dirt and sand had been raked into the square recently. Under the barrel, the sand was wet, bloody, thick clotted rivulets of it had run under the obstacle instead of around it. But the soldiers, as they raked the fresh sand on top of the old, hadn’t
thought to move things.

“Oh fuck,” Lexa groaned.

“Did they leave them here or take them out with them?”

I shook my head.

“Everyone back to the vehicles, now. We’re getting out of there soon. Keep an eye out on the desert in case it’s a trap.”

The Nightbloods hurried back to the trucks. I stayed, Lexa was near me. I could feel her almost touching my shoulder.

“I have to know,” I whispered.

“You don’t want to do this, Clarke,” Lexa said, reaching out to me. “There’s nothing but pain and anger down this road.”

“How do you keep yourself from feeling responsible?”

“I’m not responsible. The Tawr are.”

“I have to know.”

Lexa nodded. “I’m here when you need me, Clarke.”

I scoured the buildings, checking for anyone who might have lived through the massacre, checking for bodies, for clues, for anything. The sun was rising higher in the sky. And still, Lexa stayed, standing in the center of town. Always nearby.

I knew that I had found it when I slipped on the top step, heading down to the basement. It was the only house in the town that had a basement. The steps were slick with blood, gore. I walked down them, carefully. Sunlight streamed in through the windows but the steps were dark, they smelled of iron and copper and a thick, heavy stench. It made me want to gag but I swallowed hard and kept walking.

I shouldn’t have. I should have turned right back around and walked back out. I didn’t need to know. But at the same time, I did. I opened the door. The world spun. I gripped the edge of the doorframe, nearly lurching into the bloody mud on the floor as my stomach heaved and I vomited over and over again until my throat was raw, my stomach empty, my body shaking.

I could see limbs, shiny muscles and guts, broken bones, slit throats, cracked skulls. There were piles of bodies filling the room from wall to wall and stacked high to the ceiling. The entire town. I swallowed hard against the bile that tried to climb out of my empty stomach. And there, on the floor, close to where the door had opened, a tiny hand. The world went black.
I don’t know where time went. It’s disappeared and I can’t get it back. I’m in a tunnel. A cave. I can barely see. When I open my eyes, the light hurts and I close them again and go back to the darkness and there is nothing and no one and I am gone again. I don’t know how long it’s been like this. Minutes? Hours? Months? Years? Am I dying?

But no, I’m not. Unfortunately, because eventually, I open my eyes again and I am still here.

And then she is there. She is there and her arms are around me, pulling me against her. She picks me up, cradling me like a child. I hold onto the front of her shirt, pulling at the cloth with both fists. My throat hurts, my stomach hurts, my hands shake. I don’t know why. It’s been years. Or has it been seconds?

Her face is serious. Her jaw is clenched so that her high-cheekbones look even more sharp. I’m looking up at her while she carries me, up the steps, out of the house. The light burns my eyes and I close them again. When I open them, she’s leaning over me. I’m lying on something hard. I don’t know what it is. She says my name again, over and over, five times? A hundred? A million?

My lips hurt. They’re dry. They feel cracked. I part them, whisper a single word. “Lexa.”

The darkness returns and the world disappears.
weeks.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Content warnings for this chapter: Contains some depictions of post-trauma reactions, including heavy drinking and flashbacks.

Chapter 27: Pull Out - To the City - A Hotel Room - Time Alone - All the Alcohol - All the Pain

May 29, 2019

It took me a while to catch back up to reality. When I woke up the first time, Lexa was carrying me out of the basement. She told me later that she had heard me scream. I don’t remember that. I remember the bodies. I’m trying to push them out of my brain but I still see them, smell them. I have to stop.

The second time I woke up, Lexa had placed me on a work table near the town square. She was checking me for wounds. She thought I’d been hurt. When she couldn’t find anything, she hurried me back to the jeep. She carried me the whole way. She isn’t that much bigger than I am but her strength, her determination, is unmatched. We drove out of the city. Lexa wouldn’t let anyone else see me. I was in shock. I was mumbling things. She was scared for me. She didn’t want anyone else to be.

She left Bellamy in charge, made everyone go back to the camp. We didn’t go back to the camp. We went to an airfield. It was an old military runway that had been converted for use by private contractors. Lexa knew a few of the men who worked there. I woke up as the plane was landing in Istanbul, Turkey.

I didn’t say anything. I was shaky. I felt sick. Lexa held me, tight, pulling me against her body, like she could pour herself into me, heal my wounds. I let her. Her presence was comforting, welcoming, but it did little to take away the images burned into my brain.

We made our way from the airport to a hotel by taxi. Everything sounded so loud to me. This was the largest city I’d been in in years. I heard voices, cars, squealing tires, rinding cell phones. I smelled tobacco smoke, cooking meat. I hadn’t been in Turkey since I was driven to Afghanistan by Zohar and Yasin. It was like coming into a new world. I laid my head against Lexa’s chest and fell asleep, unable to handle all the sights and smells. Soon, she was waking me up. The hotel was tall. It was nice, probably nicer than anything I’d stayed in before. She walked me inside, skirting the check in desk. I was curious. She pulled out a key from her pocket.

We took the elevator up to the top floor and she opened the room to a corner suite, looking out over the city. I walked inside, a little shocked. The room was nice. In fact, there were four rooms. A large bedroom with a tall, four-poster bed, a small kitchen, a large, open sitting area with a long couch and a TV and a small breakfast table near the kitchen. There was also a large bathroom with a huge shower, a jacuzzi tub. I looked at Lexa, the question plain on my face.

“I used to work with a lot of military contractors before the rebels were established. During an evacuation, I saved the life of a contractor by the name of Ben Wainwright. He was from England. Turns out daddy had a lot of money, a lot of connections. He owns this hotel and told me that if I
ever needed it for any reason, it would be free.”

“Those are some nice connections to have, but why did you pull me out, Lexa?”

“You’re no good to me right now, Clarke.”

I was hurt. Her words were like a slap in the face. She saw it and her face softened a little but her eyes were still hard, her voice sharp.

“Clarke, what happened to you back there, you broke down. You need some time, away from the fighting, away from the war. You’ve been through a lot. It’s time for you to take a break. I need my second back. I need Wanheda. But right now, you can’t be that.”

“You’re not staying with me, are you?”

“Not tonight,” Lexa said, sighing softly. “I left with very little notice. Bellamy and the others don’t know where we’ve gone or what happened. I need to go back and put some things in place before I can be here with you.”

“When will you be back.”

“Soon,” she promised.

She pulled an envelope out of her back pocket and set it on the table in the hallway. “Lira, for you to use if you want to buy anything. Room service here at the hotel will be free but I don’t want you to feel like you’re a prisoner, Clarke. I’ll be back as soon as I can be. I promise.”

I nodded.

Lexa moved closer to me and for some reason, I pulled back. I shied away. Lexa looked at me, sadness and pain on her face. She wondered if I would ever come back. She wondered if I would ever be the same. To be honest, I wondered that too.

With a last look, she turned and walked out the door. I could hear her heavy footsteps on the carpet in the hallway. The dinging of the elevator door. I heard it slide closed, and she was gone.

I sat down, in the middle of the room. I don’t know how long I sat there but by the time I stood up, my body was stiff, aching, and the sun had gone down. I didn’t have a watch so I looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was almost midnight. I hadn’t eaten anything in more than 24 hours, probably longer depending on the time difference. My stomach still ached, my throat still burned. I wasn’t hungry. But I picked up the phone anyway, ordering off the room service menu.

The food came about twenty minutes later. I opened the door and let them come in and put the tray on the breakfast table. The man left and again, I was alone. I ate slowly, each bite of food turning to ash in my mouth. I chewed, swallowed, took another bite. It was reflex more than anything. Years of my mom telling me that I needed to eat when I’d get too busy with school work, friends in the field telling me to grab a bite whenever I got the chance, eating with Sahar and Dalla in the kitchen of Al-Sundal’s compound. I finished the meal, placed the tray in the hallway outside my room.

I was still wearing the clothes from the desert. My fatigues were stiff with sand and sweat. I didn’t have anything to change into but I still stripped them off, climbed into the shower. I let the water run over my body, washing away everything. At first, the water was brown from all the dirt and sand that clung to me, but even when it ran clear, I stayed there. I don’t know how long I stood under the water but when I finally moved my body was stiff, like the motions were unfamiliar to it.
I toweled off, grabbed a robe that was hanging on the back of the door. I didn’t want to be alone in my head. I grabbed the room service menu again, flipped it over to the back. I picked up the phone, ordered two bottles of something that looked like it might be hard liquor. I wasn’t totally sure since it was in Turkish but it sounded right. The same man brought up the two bottles.

When I opened the door, I think he was surprised to see that it was still just me in the room. He sat the bottles down on the same table, turned and walked out. As strange as it sounds, even his presence, just for a moment or two, was comforting.

I was mad. Mad at Lexa for bringing me here to this strange place and then leaving me. Mad at Kane for the things he was doing, pulling me further and further into his web. Mad at the Tawr for the things they did to the men and women and children of that village just because of us. Mad at myself for not being able to keep my shit together. Mad at the world.

I walked over to the table, unscrewed the top of one of the bottles, and took a long gulp. The liquor burned its way down my throat, settling in a warm pool in my stomach. It didn’t take me long to get drunk. Less than halfway through the first bottle and I was more wasted than I’d been in a long time. Not since the crazy, liquor-filed parties of my college days had I felt the room dip and spin, every step I took feeling like I was on the deck of a lurching ship. And still, I kept drinking, long after the sun came up.

And finally, on the floor of the hotel bedroom, leaning up against the bed, watching the room lurch and spin around me, my heart shattered. Two years of pain and anger welling up inside me. I felt every blow of an unkind hand, saw every bullet that I’d fired into the bodies of soldiers. I saw Niylah, dead on the ground. Anya, dying in my arms. I saw Zohar, his body shattered by my hands. I saw the bodies in the basement, the sand thick with blood. I saw everything and felt everything and heard everything. I tasted blood and gunpowder. I smelled smoke and sulfur. And beneath it all, I felt Lexa, her hands and lips on my body, the taste of her, sharp and sweet in my mouth. And then me pulling away. In that moment, I wished she was there next to me. I wished I’d pulled her closer, asked her to stay. I knew she would have, for me.

I curled on the floor, deep, heaving sobs bursting out of my chest. I hugged my knees to my chest and cried until my whole body ached and finally, sleep came. And with it, peace.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

No content warnings for this chapter, just some pretty good make-up sex.

Chapter 28: The Next Morning - Pulled from Hell - Ink - A Conversation - A Kiss

May 30, 2019

I don’t know when Lexa got back. I’d woken up a few hours later, still curled up on the floor. All the alcohol in my body wanted out at that exact moment and I ran to the bathroom and was sick for at least an hour, pressing my face against the cool tiles of the bathroom floor and regretting every alcohol-related life decision I had made. I took another shower when the worst of it was over, this one cool instead of hot, and then stripped off my robe and lay on the clean bed, relishing the feeling of actual sheets and an actual mattress for the first time in a long time.

I slept again, a hard, deep sleep of total exhaustion. My body and mind were drained. They needed rest. My soul still ached though. When I would wake, which I did often in the evening and the middle of the night, it was always with a start. I’d drift back into oblivion, never able to pinpoint what had made me jump, but it would always happen again a few hours later.

The sun was up when I heard Lexa’s footsteps in the bedroom. It was high in the sky, pouring in through the windows. It bathed her in its glow and her eyes were cooler now, the lighter green of a meadow. She watched me open my eyes and smiled down at me.

“Hey beautiful,” she whispered.

“Take off your clothes,” I responded.

To be honest, I didn’t know what I was doing. My heart still ached, my head hurt, my body was on fire. But I knew that I needed her in that moment. She was my sanctuary and salvation. She was the one thing that could pull me away from the darkness and the hell. She was the bright light on the horizon.

Lexa did so, her eyes locked on mine while she undressed. She slid under the covers with me and I felt her warm, soft skin against mine. I pushed her back into the bed, straddled her hips with mine. I could feel her body beneath me. Normally, Lexa took control. She was the one who pushed me back, who pulled me close, who tangled her fingers in my hair, who moved my head and my hands where she wanted them to go, who used her fingers and her tongue to get me gasping and moaning beneath her. And I let her, finding comfort in her strength. This time, she laid back, she let me lead, she let me take over. She knew it was what I needed.

I leaned over her, pressing my chest against hers, straightening my body so that my thigh rested between her legs. I could feel the heat of her against me. I kissed her, hard, and Lexa opened her mouth to me. I felt her tongue against mine, her lips parting. I leaned into her and she breathed into me and it was hard to know where one of us stopped and the other began.

I pushed my thigh between her legs, spreading them further apart to give me better access. I reached
down with one hand, spreading her with my fingers. When I pushed one finger into her, she gasped into my mouth. Normally, even in our furious love-making when we only had a few spare minutes, we took as much time as we could, experience every inch of each other, expanding the moment as long as we could. This time, I didn’t want to. I needed to feel her tighten around my fingers. I needed to feel her wetness in my palm. I needed to know and feel what I did to her. I needed to hear her growls and moans.

I moved my mouth away from her lips and started trailing kisses down her neck. When I reached her collarbone, I used my teeth. She gasped, her breath catching in her lungs. I pushed myself up so that I was straddling her thigh and she was beneath me. She was beautiful, her brown hair spread across the pillows, her swollen lips parted. Her hands reached for my hips, fingertips digging into my skin.

I slid another finger inside her, then a third. She gasped, letting go of my hip with one hand and grasping for the headboard of the bed with it. Her hips bucked wildly, matching the rhythm of my fingers.

“Fuck, Clarke,” she groaned.

I leaned back over her, took her nipple between my teeth, biting gently at the sensitive purl of flesh. Lexa’s back arched. I felt her tightening around my fingers and this time, she moaned up toward the ceiling, louder than I’d ever heard her before, even when the shower was muffling the sounds of our cries and laughter.

When I started to pull my fingers away from her, Lexa grabbed my wrist and pulled them tight against her.

“No,” she said, through gritted teeth. “Don’t go yet, Clarke. I want to feel you inside me.”

I stayed where I was, gently kissing her neck, her chest, her breasts, eliciting quiet, breathless moans. Lexa dug her fingers into my back, pulling me close to her. We didn’t need to speak. I could feel it in her. I pushed myself up again, straddling her, looking down on her. My fingers curled, pressing all the right spots. She groaned, bucking her hips toward me.

Lexa reached between my legs slowly, almost hesitantly. She was afraid that I was going to stop her. She didn’t know what my mood was, what I wanted, what I was going to do. To be honest, I didn’t know either, but I knew that I wanted her. I let her reach and move, sliding her fingers between my legs, sliding two of them gently inside me. I pushed against her fingers, letting her know that she didn’t need to be too gentle.

We stayed like that for a few moments, Lexa letting me adjust to the feel of her. I rubbed my thumb against her clit and she gasped, already sensitive after her first orgasm. Lexa dug the nails of her other hand into my thigh.

“You ready?” I asked her.

She nodded.

I moved my hand, slowly at first, curling my fingers, pulling them out, pushing them back in. Her own hand kept pace with mine and I found it hard to concentrate, to focus on my own rhythm. But I tried to keep control, to keep her from falling over the edge too soon. Her nails dug into me deeper. I saw small pools of blood beneath her fingers from where her nails cut into my skin and I relished in the controlled pain of it. I knew Lexa wouldn’t hurt me, not really. But that pain was what I needed.

I saw Lexa struggling with her own control. Her breaths were coming in short gasps. She was
panting with each movement of my fingers. Her hips bucked and arched beneath me. Her own fingers inside me were erratic, moving with a mind of their own even as she tried to keep pace. I slowed down, helping Lexa regain what she needed. Her eyes met mine, our bodies matched the other’s rhythm, and we jumped over the edge together.

Our voices mingled in the hotel room, hers a low moan, mine a high cry. I collapsed onto her chest and Lexa pulled her fingers out of me, wrapping her arms tightly around me, pulling me even closer to her. I pulled own my fingers, wiping them clean on the sheet and then clutching at her. I didn’t want to cry. I’d cried enough the past two days. I felt cleansed. I felt like myself.

Lexa looked down at me while I laid against her chest, a little nervous. I raised my head and shook it.

“I’m fine.”

“I was worried about you, Clarke.”

“You didn’t seem to mind too much for the past ten minutes or so.”

Lexa grinned. “You have a way with your hands.”

“If you think my hands are impressive, you should feel my tongue.”

Lexa laughed. “Oh, I have. And I want to again. But first, there’s somewhere we need to go.”

“Go?”

“Yes, come on. Let’s take a quick shower and get changed. I brought you some clothes.”

We showered, and Lexa wasn’t lying, it was quick. She playfully smacked my hands away when I tried to run them across her body and even sticking out my lower lip didn’t work. We dried off. I pulled my hair back in a ponytail while Lexa braided hers, bending close to the mirror so she could see what she was doing. We got dressed. I was happy to see a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt with a faded band logo on the front. I hadn’t worn either in over two years. It felt amazing. Like putting on my own skin after wearing someone else’s for a long time.

Lexa took my hand in hers and pulled me out of the hotel room. We started kissing as soon as the elevator door shut and didn’t stop until the doors slid shut behind us and didn’t stop until we heard the next ding. The doors opened and we walked into the lobby. I followed Lexa. She knew where she was going, a determined spring in her steps. We walked out of the lobby, around the side of the hotel, down a couple blocks and then turned into an alley.

She stopped in front of an old wooden door, knocked twice, then three more times. The door creaked open slowly. Behind it stood a large man with a thick beard and dark eyes. His beard split, exposing a grin full of straight, white teeth.

“Lexa,” he said, his deep voice rumbling out of his chest. “It’s been too long my old friend.”

He and Lexa embraced. He clapped her on the chest so hard that I’m surprised he didn’t break anything. He looked past her at me.

“And you must be Clarke.”

I nodded and he reached out a giant hand to take mine. When I shook his hand, I was surprised at how soft his hold was, how gentle. He hurriedly pulled both of us inside and shut the door behind us.
We were in a small room, dim light casting shadows all around. There was a counter on one side of the room with a hot plate and a tea kettle. A low sofa and table at the back of the room. There was a small bookcase on one wall filled with battered paperbacks. The man walked over to the tea kettle and filled it from the tap. He turned on the hot plate, put the kettle back, and grabbed three mugs from the cabinet.

“Clarke, this is Gustus, a good friend of mine from a long time ago. He’s also the man who did my tattoo. I was hoping that he could do one for you.”

“A tattoo.”

I was surprised. I didn’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. Lexa led me to the couch and sat me down with her.

“I met Gustus when I was lost. When I was hurting, just like you are, Clarke. For me, I’d lost some very close friends. I’d lost Kashm. Every breath I took felt like glass in my lungs. I felt like I was going to shatter. Gustus brought me here one night when I’d had way too much to drink at a bar a few streets over. The next morning, he gave me my tattoo. We’d spent the night talking. For me, it was about being able to move past their deaths, to find purpose in them. I was afraid that moving past it meant forgetting about it. Gustus gave me a way to remember, to mourn, but to also move on.

“I want you to find that as well, Clarke. And I think this is a good start. If you don’t want to get one, that’s fine too. But I wanted to give you that opportunity.”

I thought about it. I had no tattoos. I’d never felt like there was anything I found important enough to get permanently etched on my skin. Now, I felt like there were a lot of things. And Lexa was right. I needed to move forward, without forgetting.

Gustus came over with the tea and handed us both glasses. He sat down on the low table and looked at me.

“Clarke, tell me your story. All of it. Leave nothing out. And I will paint it on your skin.”

“Trust me, Clarke. He knows what he’s doing and he’s very good at it.”

“Nothing but the best for you,” he reached out and patted my knee.

I smiled at him, then sighed. “I hope you’ve got more tea. This could take a while.”

I told Gustus my story, the whole thing, from the beginning. I told him things that I hadn’t even told Lexa and I felt her hand tighten on my thigh. He listened. He listened when I could barely keep going, tears falling off my chin, and when my voice became strong with rage and I slammed the arm of the sofa with my fist. I don’t know how much time passed but it was long enough that Lexa had refilled our tea glasses twice.

Gustus nodded. He didn’t say anything for a moment when I was finished with my story. I felt drained, empty, but somehow relieved as well. Gustus stood and he opened a small door in the back of the room that I hadn’t seen before. Inside was a tattoo studio, the chair, the set-up. It looked like something from back home.

“Do you trust me, Clarke?”

I nodded and Gustus stood aside so he could sit me in the chair.

“How’s your pain tolerance?” he asked.
“I don’t know that I feel pain anymore, to be honest.”

Gustus smiled, got everything ready. Lexa sat with me, her hand warm on the bare skin of my ankle. Gustus started the tattoo on my left side, just blow my shoulder on my chest, then curving up, over my shoulder and the top of my arm, and onto my back on my shoulder blade. I heard the whirr of the needle, felt the vibrations of the machine against my skin. It was a burning sensation, but it wasn’t painful. I felt like I’d been sitting out in the sun for too long.

Eventually, as he added some shading, a little color, it became more tender, but I relished the pain, just like I had when Lexa’s nails were digging into my leg. She stayed with me the entire time. We talked, we laughed. It was like a gathering of old friends. Gustus told me some of their best stories, and made Lexa blush when he told the one about Lexa leaving the bar they’d been spending the evening at with a pretty girl on both arms, stolen from under the nose of a local kingpin.

“In my defense,” Lexa said, sounding a little embarrassed, “they had a lot more fun with me than they would have with him.”

“She couldn’t come back to Istanbul for six months,” Gustus laughed.

“How often did you come here?”

“In the beginning, I was here a lot. I had a lot of contacts in the area. I was trying to gain experience, a reputation. I worked with a lot of contractors, doing jobs and running missions, until I got enough resources. I haven’t been back in what, two years?”

“Two and a half,” Gustus corrected her.

“Someone’s been counting.”

Gustus snorted a laugh and kept working.

Hours passed and then, finally, Gustus turned off the machine.

“Are you ready, Clarke?”

I nodded. I had butterflies in my stomach. I hoped he hadn’t put a giant Mickey Mouse on my shoulder. He grabbed a mirror off the counter and handed it to me. My jaw dropped. The tattoo looked like armor, bursting out of my skin. The grays and blacks and silvers looking like a piece of solid steel, red droplets of blood standing out on what looked like a metal background. There were lines, a patterned design on the armor that make it looked like it had been hammered and forged. Around the edge, red and tan lines made it look like the armor was ripping through my flesh. It was shocking and beautiful at the same time.

Lexa grinned, seeing the look on my face. Gustus smiled, like he already knew my reaction.

“You’re strong, Clarke. You’re just discovering your armor but it’s there. You don’t have to carry all the weight yourself, though.” He gestured toward Lexa. “I think you have someone to help you carry the burden.”

Gustus wrapped the fresh tattoo loosely. He instructed me not to shower for the next 24 hours and told me not to itch it. We shared another cup of tea before we left. Lexa walked me back to the hotel. The sun was down, the street lights were on, crowds of people walking around. It made me a little nervous. I wasn’t used to the crowds. We stopped at a little shop, picked up some food for the hotel room. Lexa asked if I wanted to grab a bottle of wine but the thought made my stomach twist and I shook my head.
We walked the rest of the way, arm in arm. I liked the feeling of Lexa’s body pressed close to mine. We took the elevator up to the hotel room and as soon as she shut the door behind us, Lexa dropped the bag of food on the floor and pulled me in, close, tight against her. She wrapped her arms around me and I looked up at her. Her eyes were warm, kind.

“I hope you don’t think I was too forward, Clarke. I should have told you where we were going.”

“Are you kidding? If you’d told me you were taking me to get a tattoo before I met Gustus, I probably would have refused. And now, I have a kick-ass tattoo.”

“That’s an understatement,” Lexa said, pushing up the edge of my sleeve so that the bandage peeked out.

“I’m glad you came back. I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I’ll always come back to you, Clarke.”

“Always?”

Lexa nodded.

I felt her finger come under my chin and tilt my head up. Our eyes met.

“I love you, Clarke. I started falling for you the moment you walked into that hotel room in Sheberghan and I haven’t hit the ground yet. I’ll do whatever I can to keep you safe, to get both of us through this. I want the happily ever after with you, Clarke.”

“I love you too, Lexa,” I said.

Her words washed over me, filling me up. I felt like my heart was going to explode but this time it wasn’t with pain or bad memories, it was with love and possibility, promises for a future that won’t be full of gunfire and death. And when she leaned forward and kissed me, I felt it in my toes.
Chapter 29: The Last Night - A Meeting - A Plan - A Joining

June 2, 2019

Lexa lifted me up onto the kitchen counter, her hand tangling in my hair. She pulled my head back and kissed my chest, nibbled at my collar bone. I gasped, pulling her head down against me. I could feel her lips bow into a smile as they trailed across my skin. Finally, she stood back up and it was hard to suppress my groan of disappointment.

“I’m putting the breaks on,” Lexa said, already sounding a little breathless.

“Why?”

“Because, tonight is our last night here and I want to do something special with you, in bed, completely naked. My goal is to get you to scream my name.”

I grinned. “We’ll see.”

“But, before we do that, we have to have a meeting with someone.”

I tilted my head, curious.

Lexa grinned and turned, walking toward the door.

“I’m not getting another tattoo, am I?”

“No,” she laughed. “We’re meeting with a woman named Indra. She’s a contractor, runs a multinational team out of Iraq. Her group is one of the main ones that took over when the Americans pulled out most of their troops. She’s been involved in a lot of training for local police forces, rebuilding infrastructure. She has a large force and plenty of supplies, vehicles, the works. And we’re going to ask her to help us take back Jalalabad. We’re going to take out Marcus Kane, smash the Tawr. Clarke, we’re going to end the war.”

I looked at her. The hope in her face. She really had faith that this was going to be the end, that we were going to make a final push. I followed her through the streets until we reached another hotel about a mile away. She walked through the lobby to a conference room in the back. Someone was already inside.

She was a small woman but she looked strong. She was older, with short black hair and black eyes and smooth dark skin. She looked up when we walked in and smiled at Lexa.

“Lexa,” she said, standing up and extending her hand in greeting. “It’s good to see you again.”
“You too, Indra. This is Clarke, my second and the head of our newest company, the Nightbloods.”

“Yes,” Indra nodded. “Wanheda. Rumors of your eventful career have proceeded you to Istanbul and have chased you through the desert. I’m glad to hear that you made your way to Lexa. There’s no better person to have your back.”

“I agree,” I said. “I couldn’t have found a better teacher.”

Indra nodded. We sat down with her at the table and Indra leaned back, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’ve been thinking, Lexa, about your proposition. There is a lot of risk, here. But there is also a lot of opportunity. Some of my scouts have said that Kane is back in Afghanistan. His apprentice, Zohar is dead, killed at his own hand.”

I took some comfort and pleasure in that. I knew that he had been killed because of his failure. I knew that he’d gone back to Kane, scared and in pain. I enjoyed the idea that I was probably the last name in his head and that he went to his death cursing my existence.

“That’s good for us,” Lexa said, looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

“I might have run into him,” I said. “You were captured soon after that and it must have slipped my mind.”

“Hmm,” Lexa cleared her throat. “Either way, with Zohar gone, Kane’s power is concentrated. There’s no one, right now, who can take over his business if he dies.”

“Exactly,” Indra grinned. “Now is the time to strike. But you’re asking me to risk a lot. Contractors don’t generally get involved in local conflict unless it involves our primary mission. How can I spin this? I have funding sources, suppliers, who will wonder why we’re going head to head against the Tawr with a local rebel group.”

“The Tawr are a threat to Iraq just as much as Afghanistan. It won’t quit. Kane will always seek out new opportunities. The same guns and drugs he’s buying, they don’t just stay in Afghanistan’s borders. What if I can find the supply lines that connect Kane’s activities in Afghanistan to ISIS in Iraq?”

“You can do that?”

“Sure, as long as they try not to look too deep into it. I can make the connections. They just might not hold up to very thorough scrutiny.”

The two women shared a knowing grin.

“You leave that part up to me. I’ll make the report stick.”

“I’ll e-mail the documents to you when I get back to camp tomorrow.”

Indra nodded.

“We’ll be ready to move out by the end of next week.”

We stood up, the meeting was done. Indra shook both our hands and we left the hotel. Out in the lobby, Lexa put her arm around my waist and pulled me close, whispering in my ear.

“There’s an end in sight, Clarke.”
“I guess you’ll have to start thinking about what you’re going to do next.”

Lexa smiled. “I have some funds saved up,” she said. “When you fight a war for years, you end up not using a lot of money on yourself so it hangs out in a bank and collects a little interest here and there. I’m thinking, maybe a vacation.”

“What’d you have in mind.”

“Somewhere in the middle of nowhere, actually. I want a cabin, somewhere green, where I don’t have to worry about bomb blasts and anyone shooting at me.”

“And then what?”

“Honestly, I’ve always wanted a farm.”

I looked at her sideways and Lexa grinned. “Seriously?” I asked.

Lexa nodded. “I’ve spent a lot of time at war, Clarke. I’d like something more stable, more peaceful. I’d like to see five in the morning because I’m up milking a cow, not because I haven’t slept from the night before.”

We walked through the streets back toward the hotel. Lexa held me around the waist, close to her in the crowded streets. About halfway back to the hotel, she pulled me into an alleyway and kissed me, hard. I felt my toes tingle and I reached up and rubbed my fingertips across her face. She trapped my hand with hers, kissed my fingertips. I felt my knees grow week.

I stood on my toes and whispered in her ear. “Get me back to the hotel, Lexa. Now.”

She grabbed my hand and we sprinted through the crowd, giggling and laughing like children. It was easy, in that moment, to forget who we were and what we were doing. We had one night left and were determined to make the most of it.

Inside the hotel room, Lexa wasted no time, pushing me up against the wall of the bedroom. Her body pressed against me, hard, driving me against the hard surface behind me. I grinned. I could feel her need, her desire, the heat radiating off her body. It made me hot, turned me on, and I was already more than ready for what came next.

Lexa pulled off my t-shirt and bra in a single motion, tossing them onto the floor. I pulled at the hem of her shirt, rubbing my fingers across her stomach. She pushed my hands away and with a rueful smile, knelt in front of me, sliding off my shoes, my jeans, my underwear. Still kneeling in front of me, she buried her face in me. I was glad in that moment that I was leaning against the wall. I gasped, reaching for anything that would help me stay upright as my knees buckled.

Lexa grinned up at me and wrapped her arms around me, placing both hands under my butt to help keep me upright. I could feel her tongue, finding just the right spots. After a few minutes, she was the only thing holding me up. She stopped before I crashed over the edge and stood, holding me tightly against her. She could tell that my legs were shaking.

I helped Lexa take off her clothes, leaving them in a pile with mine. She led me to the bed, pushed me down on top of it. She knelt at the side of the bed and pulled me closer to her so she had easy access and continued her activities between my legs. I felt her tongue finding all the right spots. She kissed me, sucked me into her mouth. I groaned, pulled her head closer into me.

Our movements were rougher tonight, harder, faster. Everything had energy to it. There was desperation in what we did. But also passion, fire. I tangled my hand in Lexa’s hair and pulled her
back up to my face, kissing her lips, tasting myself on her tongue. She kissed my shoulder, biting hard into the bare skin of my shoulder, drawing forth a yelp from me.

She grinned, kissing the spot where her teeth had been, cooling the ache of the bite. She kissed her way up my neck, my jaw, and then, when her lips touched mine, she plunged a finger deep inside me. I groaned up at the ceiling.

“Lexa,” I whispered.

She chuckled, a deep sound that made shivers go down my spine. “Not quite a scream,” she whispered in my ear. “You can do better than that.”

She knew exactly what to do. She disappeared from my face and was between my legs before I knew what was happening. Between her tongue and her fingers, I didn’t last long. I pulled her head against me as she curled her fingers and I came, yelling her name at the ceiling. I was panting for breath when she moved from between my legs and up to lay beside me. She kissed me and I could taste myself on her lips. She grinned.

“Told you,” she said.

I rolled my eyes at her and chuckled. Then I pressed a hand against her shoulder and flipped her onto her back.

“My turn,” I said, straddling her hips.

Lexa looked up at me, an excited look on her face. Her mouth was curled in a grin, her green eyes were dark and deep, her hair pooled around her on the pillow behind her head. Not for the first time, I wondered how I’d gotten lucky enough to meet someone like her. And not only meet her, but to love her and have her love me back.

I bent over and kissed her, hard. I felt her lips open to mine, her tongue slide between my lips. We kissed like that for a while, the heat building between us, until Lexa couldn’t stand it anymore. Lexa pulled away, her breathing quick and shallow. “If you’re not going to take care of me Clarke, then I am. I don’t think I can stand this anymore.”

I smiled, sliding off her so that I was resting next to her.

“Ok,” I agreed. “Take care of yourself then.”

She looked at me, cocking an eyebrow in surprise. But she was also curious. Her hand slowly slid down between her own legs. She gasped slightly as she rubbed her clit. I watched her hand, watched her face. I felt this incredible burning desire. It was so sexy, watching her. I licked the nipple that was closest to me, teasing it with my tongue, nibbling it gently with my teeth. She groaned, speeding up the motion of her hand.

Finally, when I could tell she was almost at the edge, I plunged two fingers inside her, helping her crash into her orgasm. Her hips bucked against my fingers, pushing them deep inside when I tried to draw them out. She dug the nails of one hand into my back and yelled loudly. Just hearing the sounds I could force out of her made my knees weak. I was glad I was lying down.

Lexa panted into the dark air of our hotel room. She chuckled, deep in her chest. “Jesus, Clarke. The things you do to me.”

“I hope that’s not a bad thing,” I grinned.
I could feel Lexa’s smile from where I was lying against her chest, her chin resting on the top of my head.

“Definitely not,” she sighed.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Content warnings for this chapter: some characters talk about prior trauma

Chapter 30: Fire Rekindled - Back to the Front Line - An Expanding Enemy - Raven’s Plea - Octavia’s Pledge - The Tent

June 3, 2019

The sun was high over the skyline of Istanbul when we finally untangled ourselves. Lexa went to make breakfast while I took a long, hot shower, working out the gentle aches and pains in my muscles that she’d left from the night before. I watched droplets of water race down the tan marble face of the shower and took a deep breath. Something had happened between the basement and this moment. The tattoo, the meeting with Indra, my time with Lexa. It had healed me, nourished me. I felt alive. I felt reborn. I felt ready to go to war. When I changed this time, it was back into my uniform, the black fatigues, the gray t-shirt, the Nightblood patch on my shoulder. I laced my boots tightly. When I got to the kitchen, Lexa raised her eyebrows at me.

"Someone’s ready to go back to the desert."

I walked over to her and kissed her, hard, pressing my lips against hers. “I want to get this done, Lexa. I want to end this war. Because I want the past few days to look like the next fifty years of our lives. Nothing but the two of us and nothing to get in the way of that."

She nodded, popping a grape into her mouth. “Then hurry up and eat. We’re wheels up in one hour.”

Sure enough, time passed quickly. A car was already waiting for us at the entrance to the hotel. We climbed in and made it to the airport in less than half an hour. By the time we climbed into the back of the cargo plane and strapped ourselves into the jump seats, the engines were already revving up. The flight took several hours and by the time we landed it was dark outside. We were at the same airfield. Lexa’s jeep was parked nearby. She took a few minutes to talk to some of the contractors, joking with a few of them that she knew by name. Then we drove through the night, back to the camp. Bellamy must have been awake, waiting for us. By the time we parked, he was standing there with Raven and Octavia.

Raven tackled me as soon as I climbed out of the jeep, nearly driving me to the ground. She threw her arms around my neck and buried her face in my neck.

“I was so worried about you,” she said. “You left and Lexa wouldn’t tell us anything and we were all scared that you were hurt. What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, peeling her off of me momentarily so that I could hug Octavia and Bellamy.

“Come on,” Lexa said. “Let’s have a chat.”

“Bellamy, go get Monroe too.”
Bellamy nodded and jogged across the camp. He returned a few moments later with Monroe jogging behind, wiping the sleep out of her eyes.

Together, the group walked to Lexa’s tent. She pulled up chairs around the table for everyone and let me sit at the head of it.

“Welcome back, Wanheda,” Monroe grinned. “We were worried about you.”

“I’m sorry,” Clarke shook her head. “And that doesn’t even begin to cut it. I found the bodies, in that city. I knew what had happened but part of me needed proof. I went down into a basement and they were all there. Men, women, children.”

My voice broke and I felt Lexa’s hand on my shoulder, steadying me. I took a deep breath.

“I just broke down. It was like everything hit me all at once. Lexa got me out of there, took me somewhere safe so I could heal for a few days.”

Raven nodded. “We’re just glad you’re alright, Clarke.”

“And that you’re back,” Bellamy said, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’ve taken on and dealt with a lot more than most of us have. I’m not sure any of us would have been upright this quickly.”

“I had some time to think, some time to work out some things, but I’m good now. I’m back in the saddle and ready for some action. And I think we’re going to get it.”

Lexa nodded, walking around to the other end of the table and sitting down. She pulled a map tube out of a milk crate at her feet and opened it, spreading the map across the table.

“If you look here, the green line represents the ground that the Tawr held six months ago. As you can see, there were a lot of small villages, outposts, even neighborhoods in some major cities. And, in the past six months, we’ve pushed them out of almost every single stronghold. Except for Jalalabad. There, they’ve concentrated their power and they’ve killed a lot of people to do it. The purple shading shows their expansion inside Jalalabad.

“As you can see, they’ve taken over most of the city. It’s giving them the staging ground they need to launch another offensive across Afghanistan and destroy a lot of the progress that we’ve worked toward. Because of that, we need to strike now.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Bellamy asked.

“A full-on offensive. Marcus Kane is our goal. Right now, the power for the Tawr is concentrated with him. He just lost his second-in-command. If we take him out, the Tawr fragment. They won’t know where to look for leadership. Most of them are commanded by small-time warlords just looking for a pay day. We take out the power, they lose their funding source, they disappear in the desert to be mopped up.”

“So why not a targeted strike?” Monroe asked. “I can get a few of my snipers, we go in, no one will see us.”

“I agree,” Bellamy said, leaning against the table. “Seems like that would help decrease casualties on our side.”

“Because the chance that the Tawr will fragment will be directly related to how dangerous we can make the situation for them. If we kill Kane but do nothing else, then the Tawr will continue to hold Jalalabad and milk it dry. We need to make the situation uncomfortable for them.”
“Fragmented power, combined with some shock and awe,” Bellamy leaned back, nodding. “That might just work.”

“But Jalalabad is a huge city,” Monroe said. “How do we take them out and not get massacred in the process?”

“We have some help.” Lexa ducked down below the table and emerged a few moments later with a notebook. “We have approximately 5,000 rebels if we bring all our troops together. We have another 800, plus some heavy weapons and vehicles from Indra’s contractors that she’ll be bringing in. I have another 1,500 from a few smaller rebel groups and another 500 from some independent contractors that I’ve worked with over the years. All together we’ll have around 8,000 troops, more than enough to take back the city as long as we’re smart about it.”

“How many do the Tawr have?” Raven asked.

“Around 10,000. They control Jalalabad for the most part by using fear and by manipulating and bribing the local police force. But the police won’t help them in an all-out war.”

“How do you know that?” Raven countered. “What if we get there and suddenly 10,000 troops becomes five times that because the police want to fight too?”

“I know the chief of police,” Lexa grinned. “I helped him out of a bind a couple years ago.”

“You have friends in all the right places,” Octavia laughed.

“I do. The Tawr have threatened his family, as well as the families of most of his officers. That’s why they look the other way in Jalalabad when the Tawr use the city as a base of operations. But they won’t fight for them. Quite the opposite, actually. If we get far enough into the city, we can likely count on them to help us turn the tide.”

“Sounds like a fairly solid plan,” Bellamy nodded.

Raven’s hand slapped against the table with a heavy sound. “I just want to make one thing certain. The Nightbloods are new and we’re not well-tested in battle. I don’t want to have to step aside because you called in the big guns. I’ve spent the past few years of my life watching Marcus Kane and the Tawr ripping apart this country. I’ve lost people to these mother fuckers and I don’t want to take a back seat.”

“You won’t.” Lexa assured her. “You’ll be going in on the front lines, all the Nightbloods will. You’re plenty battle tested and trained to work together like no other unit I have. But, for this battle, all your lives are at risk and you know that. Monroe’s been with me since the beginning but you four.”

Lexa even looked at me this time, including me as her gaze swept us. Bellamy, Octavia, Raven, and myself, four strangers thrown together by circumstances none of us could have imagined. I shook my head.

“You know I’m in this for the long haul,” I said.

I saw Lexa’s shoulders visibly relax. Even though she’d known I was, hearing it from me made it real.

“You know I’m up for it,” Bellamy said.

Raven just nodded.
Octavia crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll do whatever I need to go, go to the ends of the earth if I have to, to watch the Bull die. You have my gun, Lexa, and my life if you need it.”

Lexa nodded, pleased. It might not have been the team that she expected to have at the end of this thing, but it was the team she needed. And now, going in to fight the Tawr, she knew that they could come out of this on the other side raising a flag of victory.

“All right,” I leaned back in my chair, clasping my hands behind my head. “I’m tired and jet lagged, it’s late as shit, and I’m ready for bed. So head on back, we’ll get everyone formed up after lunch by the garage and we’ll brief them and start training hard. But for tonight, I’m going to go ahead and pretend like we’re not getting ready for war and I’m going to sleep like a baby.”

The others stood up, filed out of the tent. Raven gave me another hug and said she’d see me tomorrow, then winked at me and said she knew I wouldn’t be back to the tent tonight anyway. I pushed her out into the desert and let the canvas flap close behind her.

“Going to sleep like a baby, huh?”

I heard Lexa’s voice, deep in her chest. I turned around and she was sitting at the table, her boots kicked up, hands behind her head. I walked over to her, trailing my fingers across her pants from her ankle, up past her knee, to her thigh. I stopped when I got to the edge of her shirt.

“Maybe not that much sleep,” I grinned.

Lexa laughed, standing up and wrapping one arm around me while she turned off the light with the other hand.

“Come on, beautiful,” she whispered, carrying me towards the cot. “We might not be able to make as much noise here as we could in Istanbul but I think we can make this tent rock before the sun rises.”

I just grinned, happy to feel her lips on mine. It was like being home.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

No content warnings for this chapter.

Chapter 31: Recon - A Ghost - Spotted - Targeted Rage - A Risky Plan - Undercover

June 20, 2019

Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Population, 350,000. And here I am, sitting in 95 degree heat, sweat rolling down my face and into my eyes as I look through the sniper scope on my rifle. Fuck this shit.

Monroe nudged my shoulder.

“See anything?” she asked.

I shook my head. We’d been sitting out here since before dawn. Close to forty of us were spread out around Jalalabad conducting reconnaissance, looking for the Tawr. Half a dozen rebels had gone into the city to try to get a first-hand experience with what was going on. They were due back today and tomorrow, staggering their departure.

We’d been watching, waiting. In another two days the army would be assembled fifteen miles away in the desert, nestled near some hills and an outcropping of rocks. We knew that we couldn’t hide completely. If they came out from the city at all, they could see us. But it was a risk we were willing to take. When we were ready, we had to move fast. We couldn’t afford to cover hundreds of miles and then fight a war.

Lexa spent most of her time in the command tent, pouring over maps with Indra and some of the other commanders and leaders that had come in. We had a few armored vehicles from Indra’s contractors and some heavy weapons and explosives. Some of the explosives had already made their way into the city, ready to take out some bridges if things got hairy, to try to force the Tawr into a funnel.

So, here I was with Monroe and most of our snipers as well as a few others from other rebel groups, trying to figure out the Tawr’s movements, trying to find their strongholds, trying to spot Kane.

“I feel like I’ve lost twenty pounds out here this week,” Monroe groaned, blinking against her scope. “I’m sweating it all out.”

“Me too,” I agreed, leaning back onto my scope after I wiped it off with a tan bandanna I’d been carrying.

Through the scope, I could see a city street, a hotel, a few small shops, something that looked like a small restaurant. I saw people, so many people, going about their day. They were completely unaware that a war was brewing right on their front step. My ear piece crackled to life and I heard Bellamy’s voice in my head.

“Hey, Heda wants the Bows back to camp, ASAP.”
“Something up?” I whispered into the radio at my neck.

“Heda wants to switch out with some of the contract snipers. Apparently they have some fun and exciting infrared and night vision tech they want to try out tonight.”

“Sounds like fun.”

I switched the channel on my radio and clicked the switch three times, the signal for the team to fall out and meet up back at camp. Other than a slight shifting of sand, there was no movement. The horizon stayed clear, the red and brown sand even. Monroe’s squad was flawless and I knew why. She’d put me through the paces, taking no mercy on me, turning me into a well-honed machine in just a few days. Her skills were legendary and I was lucky that I was a fast learner or she’d have never have allowed me to go out into the field with her. Make no mistake, I might be Lexa’s second, but Monroe was in charge of her snipers and their safety.

I took one last look through my scope, following a woman walking through the market. She turned and I saw her face under the dark blue scarf she wore. My breath caught in my throat, thick and dry. My jaw clenched and I pulled my eye away from the scope, blinked several times, and then looked through it again. It must have been a phantom, a mirage. A ghost. But it wasn’t. She was real.

Sahar. I recognized her, even after all this time. Her face was as familiar to me as my own. It had been my only comfort for two years in captivity. I watched her, followed her through the streets as she moved. For a moment, I thought she was alone. Then I realized that she was being watched by a man in a dark suit, his hands crossed in front of him, dark sunglasses on his face. He was a guard. He was following her every move. There were two other women in the market as well. Their movements were cautious, careful. I thought that they must be with Sahar as well. And sure enough, when they had finished with their purchases, they walked towards the man in the suit and he turned and led them deeper into the city.

My radio crackled back to life. This time it was Lexa.

“Clarke, what’s going on? Are you alright?”

“Far from it, Lexa.”

“I’m heading your way. What’s your location?”

“No,” I snapped, louder than I should have. I whispered the next time I spoke. “No, Lexa. I’m fine. I need help. Your people in the city. There are three women and a man in a dark suit. I need them tracked. Now.”

Lexa switched off my channel and a few minutes later was back.

“They’ve been acquired. They’re leaving the city, heading South. Apparently there’s a compound near here that one of my people think they’re heading toward.”

“Compound? What kind of compound?”

“Clarke, what’s going on.”

I shook my head, then realized that she couldn’t see me.

“I’ll tell you in a minute, Lexa. I’m coming in.”

I made my way carefully back to the camp, making sure that I didn’t leave any tracks in the dirt.
Lexa was waiting for me. She looked nervous and quickly led me back to her tent. I noticed that it had been cleared out. At the moment, I didn’t want to be alone with her. My hands were shaking on my rifle and I felt like I wanted to hit something. There were emotions running through my head and my body that I didn’t know how to deal with. It had been a long time since I felt like this.

Lexa pushed me into a chair and knelt in front of me. She took my hands in hers.

“Clarke, what happened out there?”

I told her, everything. About Sahar, about the escape from the compound in more detail than I ever had. “I didn’t know where I was held, Lexa. But I think it was nearby. And if that’s where Sahar was taken, if she was captured again, I guarantee that’s where Marcus Kane is right now, running the show.”

Lexa’s lips twisted in a snarl. I’d never seen that look on her face before. It was dangerous.

“They held you here, so close to Jalalabad. And I brought you back here, to all the pain and bullshit you’ve been through.”

“It’s not your fault, Lexa.” I stood up. “You don’t get to be angry on my behalf. This part of the fight is mine. You worry about your war, about Jalalabad and the people of Afghanistan. You worry about the army that’s waiting for you inside the city. Let me worry about Sahar.”

Lexa turned to look at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’m going to get her back, her and the other women.”

Lexa shook her head hard. “No, absolutely not.”

“I didn’t ask,” I snapped.

Lexa turned to me with a growl and it took everything in me not to take a step backwards. “I won’t risk your life like this, Clarke.”

“You never had a fucking say in it,” I shouted. “I’ve risked my life every step of this, from the moment I decided to fight back against Al-Sumdal in the compound to taking on Kane to every single battle that I have fought for you and with you. And every single moment of it has been my choice. I could have left. I could have left a million times. I could have stayed in Istanbul. This is my fight just as much as it is yours and I’m not fucking here for you, Lexa.”

She pulled back as if I’d slapped her, a pained look on her face like nothing I’d ever seen before.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice quiet, wounded. “I didn’t mean—”

My stomach clenched as I spoke but I pushed on. “Lexa, we both knew it might end like this. We both have our battles to fight. This is mine.”

She nodded, not able to meet my eyes.

We called in the rest of the team, including Indra who had arrived the day before. I spoke quickly, filling them in on what I had seen. Raven looked sick, Octavia looked nervous, Bellamy looked angry. They all objected when I told them my plan. I was going to allow myself to be captured again, outside the compound.

“And what happens,” Bellamy asked, “when they just kill you on sight? They know you’ve been
“I don’t think Kane will do that,” I shook my head. “I don’t think his ego will let him?”

“How much do you really know about him?” Octavia asked.

“Not much, but I’m the only one here that has had any actual contact with him. Kane believes that my instinct for self-preservation is stronger than anything else. I might be able to convince him that this is the case here. I’m not saying this is a good plan, but Sahar saved my life. She would never have gone back to the compound of her own free will. If she’s there, it’s because she was taken. I owe her my life and my sanity and I’ll do whatever I have to do. And if I get a chance to take out Kane in the process, then I’ll do that too.”

Lexa paced back and forth across the floor, wearing a path in the dirt as she moved. She didn’t say a word and the tension was palpable. Indra finally turned to her.

“Sit down, Lexa,” she snapped. “You’re making me tired.”

“I can’t believe you all are going along with this,” Lexa growled.

“You want to try to stop her?” Raven asked. “Because I’ve known Clarke longer than you have so I know exactly how impossible that is.”

“So what?” Lexa glared at Raven.

“So we fucking help her,” Bellamy snapped.

Lexa tossed up her hands in exasperation.

I tried to ignore her as best I could. She sat in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, glowering at the rest of us while we spoke quickly and quietly, our heads together, coming up with a plan.

“I want to get Sahar and the other women out of there, safely, but if Kane’s there, I won’t let the opportunity pass. I’ll do what I need to do.”

Bellamy nodded. “Try to let someone live, a messenger of sorts. If they can let the rest of the Tawr know that Kane is dead, it might dissolve their will to fight.”

“How long should we give you before we move?” Octavia asked.

“How long before the rest of the force is assembled?”

“Two days,” Indra said. “Three at most.”

“Give me five days, then. That’ll give you all two days to mobilize and get ready to go.”

“And what about the Nightbloods?”

I turned to Bellamy. “You lead them to battle with my name on your lips. Because if I’m not back in five days, I’m dead. We both know that.”

Bellamy nodded, solemnly.

We spoke for a few more hours, making plans. Monroe wanted to send some of her snipers with me, just in case Kane and his men tried to kill me on sight, but I wouldn’t let her. I made plans to meet Raven at the garage in an hour so she could drive me out toward the compound. And that left Lexa
and I alone in the tent. She stared down at her boots in the dust for a few minutes, like she was tracing the swirls of red and brown sand that were caked to them. When she looked up at me, there were tears in her eyes. It made my breath catch in my throat, made my stomach clench.

I knew this might be the last time that we saw each other. It might be the last moments we had together. When I stood, her motions mirrored mine, and we came together in the middle of the tent, her arms wrapping around me, holding me tight against her. I could feel the sobs in her chest, trying to force their way out. She took a deep breath to regain control of herself. I pressed my face against her neck, feeling her warm skin against mine. We stood there, together, clinging to each other. I don’t know how long we were there but when we finally moved, my muscles felt sore and tense.

Lexa looked down at me, raising my chin to meet her gaze with one finger.

“I won’t say Goodbye to you, Clarke. I refuse to believe that this is the end for us. We’re going to go on and have some fairytale romance where I get to wake up next to you for the rest of our lives.”

“May we meet again, Lexa,” I said.

When we kissed, our lips were salty with tears.

I’m leaving this journal behind. It’s the first time I’ll have been without it in the two years I’ve been in Afghanistan. But if this is the end for me, I don’t want to believe that no one will learn our story, my story. I’ve given to Octavia, along with my mom’s address back in the States so that she can send it to her.

Mom, if you get the chance to read this and I’m not there to show it to you, remember that I love you. And I hope, through all of this, you’ll see why I stayed, why I fought. Don’t blame Lexa. She was a wonderful part of my story but she isn’t the reason I didn’t come home. The same for Raven and Bellamy and Octavia. They’re amazing people and I love them like they were my own family. But I stayed for my reasons. I stayed because of my fight. I stayed because I needed to end this. And I hope I did, whatever way this ends up turning out.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

No content warnings for this chapter.

Chapter 32: Back to Captivity - The Woman and the Girl - A Return to the Library - Catching Up - An Offer

July 1, 2019

I’m catching up again. Seems like I’ve had to play that game a lot. This life can be hard to make sense of but I did it. Somehow, I survived. I’ll go back, start at the beginning, even though this is the end.

Raven drove me out toward the compound. She turned the lights off when we got closer since the desert had descended into darkness in the time that we had been driving. She stopped near an outcropping of rock and I looked out into the desert at the compound. When I’d left it, it had been burning, a wreckage. I could still see dark, charred black burn marks on some of the walls. A lot of it had been rebuilt, some of the gutted buildings remained. It was like everything had been shifted a little. Even some of the wall had been extended to wrap around some of the new structures. I could see lights on in the courtyard, soldiers milling around. I took a deep breath.

Raven reached over and took my hand in hers. “We started this together, and we’ll finish it together.”

I leaned over and gave her a tight hug, finding comfort in her arms. Raven was like my sister, my best friend. No matter what happened, she’d given me a fight, a reason to carry on, a second chance. I could never repay her for that.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said, her voice firm.

She let me go and I nodded, trying to hold back tears.

“Take care of the others for me,” I grinned. “Bellamy especially.”

Raven chuckled to herself. “Just for a few days until you’re back.”

I nodded, climbed out of the truck. Shut the door quietly behind me. I waited until she had driven away to start walking toward the compound. I kept my hands up. I was unarmed. It would take a single moment to end my life. A bullet, entering my chest, my head, ripping me apart. I could almost imagine what it might feel like and it made an acrid bile rise in the back of my throat. I swallowed hard.

I heard shouts from the courtyard as someone saw me and soon I was surrounded, half a dozen barrels pointed in my direction. I felt a hand on my shoulder, forcing me down to my knees. I put my hands on the back of my head.

“Who are you?” one of the men snapped.

“I am Wanheda,” I answered. “And I want to speak to Marcus Kane.”
There were gasps of surprise, shouts, lots of movement. I was picked up out of the dirt and marched
toward the main house. From what I picked up, Kane wasn’t there at the moment, but a young
soldier rushed toward the garage after receiving an order from an older man and I figured he had
been told to go get him. Sure enough, a few moments later a jeep tore out of the garage and raced out
into the desert.

I was walked into the main house, though it had been shifted several hundred feet from where the
original main house had been since the original had burned down. It was similar to the old one, more
spartan, but there was still a kitchen, still the small bedrooms for prisoners, and, as I walked down the
hallway, still a library.

The men unceremoniously threw me into one of the small bedrooms and locked the door behind me.
I noticed this time that there were heavy bars on the windows and the door clanged shut with a hard,
metallic sound. Someone had beefed up security. I’d like to think I was partially responsible for that
decision.

I don’t know how long I waited, no more than a couple hours since the sky was still dark outside. I
heard the lock click and I stood up, pushing my back against one wall to give myself more room to
move. The door opened and a shadowed figure stood in the doorway. Even in the darkness, I
recognized her.

She clapped a hand to her mouth, stifling a cry. “It is you,” she said.

I crossed the room and embraced Sahar in a tight hug. I gently kissed her wrinkled cheek and she
smiled when I pulled back.

“Why did you come here?” she scolded, smacking me lightly on the arm.

“To get you out of here,” I said. “I knew you’d never come back of your own free will.”

Sahar nodded. “That is true. I spent a lot of time in hiding. I thought I had escaped, but Marcus
Kane’s men tracked me down, and some of the other women.”

“Dalla?”

Sahar shook her head. “No, Yasin was good on his word. He got her out of the country several
months ago. The last I heard, they are expecting a baby girl.”

I smiled at her. “That’s wonderful.”

“It is. But it is not wonderful that you have come back here. You know Kane will kill you.”

“I know he will try,” I grinned. “I’m not the woman I was, Sahar.”

“I know, Wanheda,” she smiled back at me.

“I want you to be free, and if that means killing Kane, then I’ll do what I have to do.”

Sahar nodded. “We will help you in any way that we can. Most of us have been separated from our
children. Even the men, while they will fight for him, they are not loyal to him. There is a
desperation in him, a fear. I think they know that he will lose.”

“When the time comes, Sahar, I’ll accept all the help I can get. For now, I just need to stay alive.”

“Kane should be back within the hour. When he does, I’m sure he will want to speak to you. He is a
cruel man, but just like Al-Sumdal, he has the same weakness of ego. Make him believe you have something that he wants.”

I nodded.

Sahar shut the door, locking it as the left. I waited. I heard the jeep roll back into the courtyard, heard doors open and shut, heard Marcus Kane’s voice echoing around the buildings. He snapped orders and the men obeyed, but they did so slowly, with hesitance. I made a mental note of that. They weren’t as loyal as Al-Sumdal’s men had been. It was no longer me versus an army, it was just me versus Kane.

More time passed before the door unlocked. Two men came and got me out of the room, walking me toward the library. They weren’t rough or unkind, just efficient. Perhaps the enemy of my enemy could be my friend. Was it worth the risk?

Kane was standing in the middle of the library. It had been built nearly identical to the old one. I felt like it was so familiar. I had been transported back in time.

Kane looked different from the last time I saw him. He’d lost some weight, his hair was more gray, his suit looked disheveled. He wore his failure like a coat. It hung off him, heavy. I relished in the feeling of it. This was a failing man, a weak man. A losing man.

“Wanheda,” his voice was a sneer.

“Kane,” I nodded at him, keeping my voice steady, even.

“You’ve been causing a lot of problems for me. You and your little friends.”

“It didn’t take much,” I said.

One of the guards near me shifted. I glanced at him and saw a grin. I’d been right.

“Enough,” he snapped. “Why shouldn’t I kill you right now?”

“I have two good reasons. The first is that you’re curious. You want to know why I’m here. The second is that I have something you want and need. Go ahead if you want to. You haven’t been known for making great decisions recently. But what if I told you I could change the tide of your war?”

“Go on,” Kane nodded.

“You know what I’m about, Kane. I care about my survival, that’s it. I chose the winning side, I thought. Until they wanted to put me on the front line. I care about my neck more than their little moral victory. I don’t care which side wins, as long as I go home in one piece.”

Kane grinned at me. “That sounds about right. I always knew your values were flexible. Fine, I offer you protection for what?”

“Detailed plans and locations of the rebel troops. I can tell you how many and I can tell you where they’re camped. In exchange, you let me use the airfield in Jalalabad and one of your planes to get somewhere that can take me home.”

Kane looked at me. I could feel his eyes, studying me. There was hatred in them, anger. But there was also curiosity and, fascinatingly enough, hope. He might actually believe that I was his one way out of a bad situation. He glanced at me and then waved me off with a hand.
“Take her back to her room,” he snapped. “I need to think about this offer.”

The two soldiers escorted me back to my room but I noticed this time, they let me lead.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Content warning: violence and blood, use of weapons.

Chapter 33: An Exchange of Messages - Kitchen Conversation - In The News - A Decision - The Feel of the Knife

July 2, 2018

Sahar came early in the morning to wake me. Kane had left at some point in the early morning but was supposed to be back soon. She had orders to keep me locked up, as did the rest of the soldiers. However, the head of the guards told her that I was allowed out of the room as long as I was back in there when Kane came back. I got the message. Kane was not in charge here.

“So what are you going to do?” Sahar asked, leading me back to the kitchen.

“Kane isn’t in charge here, is he?” I asked.

Sahar turned and smiled at me. “No, he is not.”

“You are.”

Sahar tapped her nose with her index finger. “Very good.”

“How?”

“The head of the guard is my son,” she grinned at me. “From another lifetime, Clarke. I’m telling you the truth. Kane tracked me down, and all of the women, after we escaped. It became an obsession for him. His ego would not let him live it down. My son was able to infiltrate the Tawr. He’s a good man, and he’s been helping some of the rebel groups, including your Lexa.”

“Really?”

“Where do you think she gets a lot of her information? Insiders, Clarke. Infiltrators, spies, people like my son, like me.”

“So why did your son not kill Kane?”

“Because, for a long time, killing Kane would have been cutting off one head of a serpent and having two grow back. The Tawr were too strong, there was too much power in other places. And then we started hearing the news.”

“What news?”

“News of you, Wanheda. News of the rebels, making progress. When Zohar was killed, that was the beginning of the end. We need you though, Clarke. We need you to be the one to kill Kane.”

“Me?” I was shocked.
I hadn’t expected any of this conversation. The idea that Sahar was involved in espionage, that she
had allowed herself to be captured. I was having a hard time taking it all in.

“We didn’t expect you to come here, Clarke. Honestly. We figured one of the rebels would take out
Kane in the battle, or that he would escape with his tail between his legs. But you coming here has
presented us with a unique opportunity. You’re already a figurehead, behind which so many people
have united. To do this, to destroy Marcus Kane, would fragment the Tawr and end this war behind
the banner of Wanheda.”

I thought for a few minutes. I’d taken life. The stock of my rifle was pitted with marks now, each and
every kill. But this was premeditated, planned. I knew, though, deep down, this is what I had come
here for. And I’d do anything to end this war, to keep my family safe, to keep Lexa safe. To make it
back to her.

I nodded.

“What do we do?”

Sahar called her son, Mohammad, into the kitchen. He was a kind man, tall with large hands and a
booming voice that became a low rumble when he tried to speak softly. He told me about his young
daughter who had been killed by the Tawr a year ago when his mother was being held captive by
Al-Sumdal. He had infiltrated the Tawr then, under the guise of a warlord from his local village
along with fifteen of his close friends. They had risen through the ranks of the Tawr by working with
local villages and towns instead of against them, making it seem like they were recruiting more and
more to the Tawr when they were in fact creating an underground network of information that he
then funneled straight to Lexa.

He told me that Kane would be coming back in a few hours. He gave me a knife, a cruel curved
blade with jagged teeth that I tucked into the waistband of my pants. He said that when Kane called
for me, he and his closest friend would escort me to Kane and they would wait outside until the job
was done. I nodded while he spoke.

“There are cameras in the library,” Mohammad said. “Part of this means that we will broadcast his
killing publicly. You need to be aware of that.”

I understood what he was telling me. I couldn’t just lunge at Kane. I needed to draw him to me. To
make him attack first. And I knew, deep down, that luring a broken man into a battle would be the
easiest thing I’d ever done.

Sure enough, little time had passed before I was being ushered back into my room, my stomach full
of one of Sahar’s home cooked meals. Kane had returned. I watched him walk into the house
through the window of my room and noticed that he was wearing the same suit from the night
before. For a moment, I almost felt pity. How could this broken, beaten man possibly pose a threat to
anyone?

In the end, though, he was a symbol to the Tawr because of his past strength, just like I was a symbol
to the rebels because of mine. It didn’t matter who we became, but who we were when people
started taking notice. Even if I disappeared, left Afghanistan, parents would still tell their children
about me. Not who I will be, but about Wanheda, the commander of death.

I touched the knife at my waist to reassure myself that it was there and then sat down on the bed to
wait. Mohammad and the other man came to get me as the sun was starting to set. Mohammad
nodded at me and I set my jaw, nodding back. We walked together to the library and Mohammad
shut the door behind us.
Kane sat in a chair near the back wall, a glass of amber liquid in one hand. He took a sip of it when I walked in and grimaced at the burn. I noticed that his shoes were dirty. He hadn’t even bothered to clean them when he got back from the desert. He motioned to another chair nearby but I shook my head. I stood in the center of the room, in front of him, hands clasped behind my back.

“I’ve been thinking about your offer,” he said, taking another drink.

“So have I.”

He looked up at me, curious. “How so?”

“I’m not sure you can hold up your end of the bargain.”

He scowled at me. “And why’s that?”

“When I came here, I expected to meet Marcus Kane, the great behemoth of a man. The bull. The same man who put a gun to my head months ago and told me that he’d kill me without hesitation and I believed him. The man who united warlords and led them across Afghanistan with a single purpose and mission. A man with power. You aren’t that man anymore, are you Kane?”

He set the glass down on the table next to him with a sharp crack.

“How dare you,” he spat. “You don’t know who you’re talking to.”

“I know exactly who I’m talking to,” I growled. “I’ve gotten the chance to observe this little operation. You’ve fallen apart. You’re not half the man you used to be, not by far.”

He stood up and took a step toward me. I was ready when his hand struck me across the face. It was a hard blow and I saw stars and tasted the familiar copper of blood as my lip ground across my teeth.

“I thought you could get me out of Afghanistan,” I continued, grinning at him. “The truth is that this desert will be your grave. The rebels will wash across Jalalabad and destroy everything you have built because the foundation has cracked. You’re pathetic.”

He struck again, this time with a closed fist. I felt it hit just below my eye and the blow was hard enough to drive me to the ground. He kicked me then, right in the ribs, and I yelped in pain, rolling across the floor. As I rolled, I reached for the knife at my waist, pulling it from its sheath.

He made his way across the library to where I lay.

Kane reached down and grabbed the collar of my shirt, pulling me up off the ground. It hurt, mingling with the other aches and pains that his beating had caused. But I stifled a groan and forced myself up off the ground. Kane reached out to strike me again, and this time I blocked it. I grabbed his fist, twisting his wrist painfully. I used my leg and hip to push him off balance, dropping him to his knees on the carpet. He looked up at me, surprise in his eyes.

“Pathetic,” I shrugged, kicking him hard with my heel in his ribs.

Kane tried to grab for me, tried to reach out, but I walked around behind him, bent over him, wrapped my arm around his chest and pulled him close to me so that his back was pressed against my body, like a hug. My mouth was close to his ear. My final words were just for us.

“You should have shot me when you had the chance.”

I slid the blade of the knife across his throat. It was so sharp that it split the skin with very little pressure. I could feel blood running across my arm and soon, I was holding his entire weight. i
waited until I was certain that he was gone and then I gently set his body back on the floor.

I was breathing heavily, partially because of the exertion from our fight, partially because of what I had just done. I wiped Kane’s blood off of my arm with a bandana in my pocket. Look at the man, dead on the floor, I wondered at the destruction he had caused, at the death. I felt no satisfaction. It wasn’t really even a fight in the end. Even if he had pulled out a gun and shot me, right there in the library, he would have lost the war in the end. The bull was dead. I stood and opened the library door.

Mohammad looked inside, saw Kane’s body.

“You took a few punches,” he said, motioning towards my swelling eye and my bloody lip.

“Just to make sure the cameras got what they needed. It shouldn’t be hard to make Kane’s death look like self-defense. It’ll protect the rebels from premeditated murder in the end, and should protect you from too many questions.”

Mohammad nodded.

“Now, you need to send some men to the army in Jalalabad. Spread the word that Kane is dead, make it sound like others are abandoning their posts, like the rebels will wash over the city like a flood.”

“Some of them may stay and fight.”

“Some is still better than all.”

Mohammad nodded.

“And I need one more favor.”

“Anything,” he said.

“I need to get home.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

No Content Warnings for this Chapter

Chapter 34: Family Reunited - A Night to Heal - Bloody Sunrise - Into the Street - Taking Back the City

July 3, 2019

Mohammad had one of his most trusted men drive me back to the rebel camp. I made him let me out of the jeep a couple miles away anyway and he did so with a wry smile. I walked back to the rebel camp. It had spread out quite a bit in the two days I’d been gone. The rest of the rebels had arrived, along with several more contract soldiers. Someone spotted me and I was reminded of the same scene at Kane’s compound. The yelling and shouting, the movement. Only this time, instead of guns, there were cheers. They followed me through the camp as I walked. Clearly, people had heard about my mission. Despite the fact that it was close to midnight, most of the camp was up and waiting. I could feel the crackle of energy in the air. It felt good to be home.

Raven made it to me first. She wrapped me up in a big hug only for both of us to be tackled to the ground by Octavia’s wiry frame shooting out of the darkness. I laughed and tried to squeeze both of them at the same time, ignoring the pain in my ribs. Raven and Octavia finally let me stand. Raven caught my chin in her hand and looked at me. I knew my face looked like hell. My cheekbone right below my eye was black and blue, though, thankfully, it didn’t feel broken. My lip was also swollen. I shook my head.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” I said, leaning in close so she could hear me.

I was starting to feel smothered by the cheers. Most of the camp had to be up by now and I felt like they were all crowding around me.

“Enough,” a voice echoed through the camp.

It sent chills down my spine to hear her. It echoed through the rebels and there was silence. Everyone turned to see Lexa who had jumped up on top of a nearby truck so everyone could see her. Our eyes met across the darkness.

“I’m sure each and every one of you would like to hear from Wanheda but I think that at this time we should give her the opportunity to relax and recover. Go back to your units and I’ll brief your commanders once we’ve had a chance to talk.”

There were disappointed sounds as people moved away from me but no one argued. I was glad when the crowd thinned. I felt like I could breathe again.

Octavia and Raven led me back to the command tent in the middle of camp. Monroe and Bellamy were there as well. I hugged them, feeling the weight roll off my shoulders. I was with my family once more.

“Is it done?” Bellamy asked, getting straight to the point.
I nodded. “Kane is dead, and by morning all the Tawr will know.”

“That might not make all of them leave,” Octavia said. “But it will definitely help.”

“It should get most of them out of the city. They’ve been questioning Kane’s leadership for some time now, apparently.”

Bellamy looked at me curiously and I shook my head. “Later,” I said. “What I really want now is a shower and some sleep.”

“I think we can arrange that,” Lexa’s voice spoke up from the entrance to the tent.

I hadn’t seen her standing there but now she was all I could look at.

Raven grinned and bumped me with her shoulder. “I think we can give you two some privacy. We’ll come back later and talk.”

They walked away. I heard them laughing, talking behind me. It felt so familiar, so good. I soaked it up and basked in Lexa’s glow. She reached her hand out to me and I took it. She pulled me into the tent, let the cloth flap close behind us, and I was in her arms.

“You came back to me,” she breathed.

“Every time.”

Lexa pushed me back across the tent until we hit the corner of the folding table she’d set up in the middle of the room. She lifted me onto it so that I could wrap my legs around her waist. I felt her lips against my neck, sending shivers down my spine. She unbuttoned my jacket, pushed it off my shoulders, pulled off my shirt in a single motion. I did the same, needing to feel her skin against mine. Soon we were both naked from the waist up. I pulled her close to me and she did the same, pressing against each other. She kissed my lips softly but the intensity behind it let me know that she wanted more. I moaned quietly into her mouth and that was enough.

She lifted me off the table and carried me to the cot on the far side of the room. I dug my fingers into the soft, warm skin of her back, leaving red ribbons of pain along her spine. She gasped and then kissed me harder, bruising my already wounded lip. I pulled away and she set me down on the ground, running her thumb across my lip.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I was so happy to have you back, I didn’t even notice you’d been hurt.”

I pushed her hand away from my face, entwining her fingers with mine. “Don’t apologize,” I said. “I’m fine. Just watch my left side a little.”

She took a step back and looked down at the dark black bruise that had spread across my rib cage.

“Kane?” she asked.

I nodded. “He’s dead now, Lexa.”

“Good.”

She kissed me again, her lips softer this time. I wrapped my hand around the back of her head and pulled her harder against me, letting her know that she didn’t need to be too gentle.

I reached my hands down between us, unbuttoned her pants, unzipped them, slid my hand down. I could feel her heat, her wetness. She gasped, leaning her forehead against mine. Her eyes were
clenched shut, focusing on the sensation between us. She was trying to maintain her control, but I didn’t want her in control. I pushed her back so that she was sitting on the cot and knelt in front of her to pull off her boots and pants. She watched every movement that I made.

When I sank between her legs, her hands wrapped around my head, pulling me into her. I licked and sucked and pushed against her, tasting every drop of her as she gritted her teeth and tried not to cry out. I pulled back, wiping off my mouth on my arms and grinned up at her.

“Bet you wish we were back in that hotel in Istanbul, huh?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Shut the fuck up and get back to business,” she ordered.

I chuckled as I put my lips against her again, flicked her with my tongue. I dug my fingers into her thighs. Lexa grabbed the pillow off her cot and pressed it against her mouth as she came.

I expected Lexa to wait, to ride out her orgasm, to bask in the glow for a few seconds. Instead, with a growl, she tossed the pillow aside and pulled me against her, flipping me onto my back on the cot. She stripped my pants off me before I could blink and she knelt between my legs, lifting my hips up so that they were resting on her thighs. She smiled, leaning down to kiss me.

I felt her hands teasing me, her fingers lingering in all the right places. She pushed one into me, then a second one. I pulled her lower lip into my mouth and bit it gently. She curled her fingers, tangling her other hand in my hair as she kissed me.

“Where’s that pillow,” I whispered. “I think I’m going to need it.”

“Just use me,” she grinned and plunged her fingers in deeper, hitting all the right spots.

I dug my fingers into her back and Lexa arched her body against mine. She sped up, keeping a steady rhythm. I was losing control. I bit her shoulder as she pushed me over the edge, taking every ounce of control that I had not to cry out. We collapsed together on the cot. Lexa finally retrieved the pillow from where it had fallen into the sand. She slapped it with her hand a few times to dust it off and then arranged it under our heads.

I turned toward her and saw the purple bruise I’d left on her shoulder. I ran my thumb across it and Lexa twitched.

“I didn’t think you’d come back,” she said, trapping my eyes with hers.

“Why not?”

Lexa shrugged. “Honestly, there’s a piece of me that doesn’t think I’m meant to be happy. Things will go well for a while and something messes it up. I’ve never been happier than I am now, with you. So I figured it was time for something to go wrong.”

“Well,” I gently kissed her chin. “I’m a badass. You should have trusted me.”

“I should have,” she nodded.

“Listen,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not that easy to get rid of. Especially when it means coming back to your side. I love you, Lexa.’

“I love you too, Clarke.”

She kissed me again, wrapping her arms around me, and together, sinking into her warmth, fitting
tightly against her body, I felt myself starting to heal.

The next morning I was up with the sun, as soon as it started to creep through the edges of the tent. Lexa still slept and I moved carefully, collecting my clothes from the floor. I thought to myself that I hadn’t actually gotten that shower I wanted but there’d be plenty of time for that later. I stomped into my boots and walked out of the tent. The air was cool, at least compared to the heat of the desert once the sun rose. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, casting bright red fingers across the sky.

I took a deep breath of morning air, filling my lungs with it. There was something in my chest, in my shoulders, that felt looser, more relaxed than it had in a long time. It wasn’t the sex. Or just that, anyway. It was the knowledge that this was coming to an end. It was knowing that my life was about to change in a very drastic way. Raven met me as she was walking out of her tent on the way to get breakfast.

“Hey, you look spry this morning. Guess Lexa got you back on your feet pretty well last night.”

I shook my head and grinned at her. “A lady never kisses and tells.”

“That pillow only does so much to muffle sounds, Clarke. I know you did more than kiss.”

I think I blushed but Raven just laughed at me.

“Anyway,” she said, “I’m on my way to eat. Wanna come with?”

“Sure,” I followed her to the mess tent that had been set up in the middle of the camp.

We grabbed a couple plates and took a seat at the end of a long table.

“So what now?” Raven asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The Tawr, Jalalabad, now that Kane’s dead, what happens next?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” I said, taking a bite of rubbery powdered eggs. “But I’m pretty certain that Lexa and Indra have been working together on a plan. I honestly don’t know what I expected to happen.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed and leaned back in my chair. “I expected something to be different, after I killed Kane. But it feels pretty similar. We’re still getting ready to go to war and it’s very possible that in the end, people are still going to die. Maybe everything I did was for nothing.”

“You know that’s not true,” Octavia piped up from behind us where she was loading a stack of waffles on her plate.

“You have really good ears,” Raven commented.

Octavia smiled and sat down next to us. “Listen, Clarke. The truth is that by killing Kane, you’ve given people hope, a reason to fight, and you’ve taken out the Tawr’s confidence. I talked to a few of the recon guys this morning when they came into camp. They said there was a steady stream of Tawr leaving the city for most of the night, they’re guessing that at least two-thirds of them just dropped their weapons and walked out. They wouldn’t have done that if Kane was still alive.”
“Seriously?” I was surprised.

I knew what our assumptions had been, what Lexa and Bellamy had thought might happen once Kane was killed, what I had hoped had happened. But the truth was that none of us really knew for sure.

“Hey,” Bellamy stuck his head into the mess tent. “Lexa needs us in the command tent.”

We quickly finished our breakfast and then went back to where everyone else was gathered. Lexa and Indra were there, along with a man I hadn’t seen before who was leading the rest of the contract soldiers that had come in after I’d left. He’d been doing the night recon and he had a lot of good information to report. Turns out, Octavia had been right.

“We’re guessing there are only a thousand Tawr in the city, maybe less. But even more importantly, there are people in the city, police officers, even civilians, who are rising up to fight them.”

“Then we need to get in there,” Lexa said. “I won’t have civilians die for us. It’s time to fight our war. Clarke, get the Nightbloods formed up, Indra, get your troops in on the East, Nightbloods from the South, I’ll get other squads in from the North and West. Funnel them in toward the center of town and our snipers can knock them out in the streets. Anyone who runs, let them run.”

It didn’t take long for me to get the Nightbloods together. They were itching for a fight. We’d trained together, lived together, grown together, now it was time to go to war together. It felt good to have on a new uniform. Raven had brought one for me, along with my rifle. Before we left, I took out my knife, dug a new groove in the stock. This one was deeper than all the others, a prominent position right in the center. Deep down, I knew this was the last notch I’d make in my rifle. There was no reason to count anymore.

“Nightbloods,” I yelled and the group of people grew silent.

I walked up and down the rows, watching them, their faces serious, their eyes sharp. They would not hesitate, they would not waver. I smiled at the group of them.

“We’ve been through hell, each and every single one of us. It’s led us to this moment. It’s time to take back the city. It’s time to end this. Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.”

A cheer went up from the group. We loaded into trucks and jeeps and drove out toward the city. It was like a wave, vehicle after vehicle crossing the desert. Some broke off, preparing an attack from another angle. We unloaded at the entrance to the city just off a main road.

I’d like to regale you with stories of heroism and bravery. About how we took back the city at the end of a barrel. Honestly, though, we flooded the streets like locusts, going house to house, clearing every alley. But the reality was, most of the Tawr were already gone.

One of my squads had to engage a pair of Tawr soldiers who were firing down into a road from the roof of a building. The firefight lasted less than thirty seconds and none of my people were injured. One of Octavia’s squad was hurt when a Tawr soldier threw a large rock down an alley. It struck him in the side of the head, cutting him badly but not doing any permanent damage. We managed to comb our section of the city in less than two hours, pushing the remaining Tawr into the center of the city where the ones who wanted to stand and fight were mopped up quickly by Indra and her soldiers waiting nearby.

By the time the sun had reached its peak, we’d taken back the city.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

No Content Warning for this Chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 35: Victory - Back to Base - An Option to Leave - Entwined - A New Life

July 25, 2019

It’s been almost three weeks since we declared victory in Jalalabad. That night, in the camp, we celebrated the end of a long, bloody war. We toasted to friends we’d lost and lives that had changed. I drank way too much homemade moonshine, or at least the Afghan version of basement liquor. I hadn’t seen Lexa in a while. She’d disappeared with Indra a few hours after we’d come back to camp and when the drinking and victory dances started, I’d not been able to find her.

Finally, she made her way through the crowd, throwing her arm over my shoulder. The weight of her against me let me know that she’d already been imbibing on her way.

“Where were you?” I scolded her.

“I was making the plans I needed to for the morning because I know we won’t be in any condition to do any work until at least noon.”

“ Noon?” I nudged her in the stomach with my elbow. “Lightweight.”

She grabbed a pair of glasses from a passing soldier and handed one to me. “Show me your ways then.”

I laughed, took the drink, and pulled Lexa toward a group of people that were dancing and cheering and playing loud music. I didn’t expect Lexa to dance. She was the strong, silent type. But when I pulled her into the crowd of music, she pushed her body against mine and we swayed with the rhythm of the beat until our bodies were slick with sweat. Lexa pulled me away from the crowd sometime near 2am and we made love in the back of a truck that had been parked near the garage, not worrying about the noise we made since the sound of the music and the sounds of voices were louder than either of us could be.

Morning came early, and with it the heat of the day. I pulled my sweat-soaked and hungover body out of the back of the truck and half walked, half limped my way to Lexa’s tent to inhale a couple bottles of water. She drug herself through the door about ten minutes later, using one hand to shield her eyes from the glaring sunlight.

“Fuck,” she moaned as I handed her a bottle of water.

“Yeah, but it was fun.”

Lexus chuckled then winced at the pain.
“Looks like you need a couple aspirin.”

“Just some water and breakfast.”

“Oh no,” I groaned. “Don’t mention breakfast. How can you eat right now?”

“It’s either going to soak up the alcohol or make it come back up. Either way, I’ll feel better.”

“You are so fucking weird.”

She winked at me. “You love it.”

The camp was slow to wake up. Everyone was working off a hangover from the night before. I found Raven and Bellamy twisted up near the showers and saw a lot more of Bellamy than I ever wanted to see. Octavia was throwing up behind the mess tent, thankfully far enough away that she wasn’t ruining everyone’s breakfast. She scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hand and shook her head when she saw me.

“That burned coming back up,” she gasped.

“It burned going down too,” I said.

Octavia nodded. “I haven’t had that much to drink since I nearly got alcohol poisoning my freshman year of college.”

“But this was more fun.”

“Hell yes it was.”

Later that afternoon, I made my way back to the command tent. Lexa had clearly pushed off her hangover and was moving around the tent with Indra, finalizing some plans. I didn’t know what they were talking about and I didn’t want to interrupt them. Indra left about half an hour later and Lexa joined me on the cot.

“Time to go back to base,” she said. “Not going to lie, I'll be happy to head back. That place has become like home.”

“So where do we go from here?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“We go back to base, but the war’s over.”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

It took almost two days for us to load up all the gear into the trucks and head back across the desert. The drive took a full day and night. We switched drivers every four hours to keep people fresh. There was a strange feeling in the group. A feeling of finality, of an ending. I knew, when we got back to base, things would change.

And I was right. Most of the rebels had families, friends, they had places to go back to. The thinning out started as soon as we got back. I was approached by a half-dozen Nightbloods who wanted to leave, to head back home. I worked with Lexa almost nonstop for the next week to arrange transportation, to get people back to their families. Soon, the camp felt almost empty. There were a few hundred rebels who wanted to stick around, to help the villages and towns that had been nearly destroyed by the Tawr rebuild. But the rest of us had decisions to make.
One night, Lexa came into the tent before she got ready to take a group of rebels to the airport.

“You should pack up. This plane’s for you too.”

I turned to look at her, a little shocked.

“What are you talking about?”

“This plane’s heading to the US, and there’s an extra seat on it if you need it. Military transport, it’ll bypass most of the airports so you won’t need a passport and when you get to the US you can just tell them who you are. I’m sure they’ll want to talk to you about your escapades, but they’ll get you home, Clarke.”

“And what about you?”

“I have a few more things to do, then I’ll follow you. Maybe another month or two. But this is a great opportunity for you. You can be back with your family, with your mom.”

“Don’t you think you should have asked me about this first?”

“I thought if I gave you a chance to think about it you’d say no.”

I chuckled. “You’re probably right.”

I reached over and took Lexa’s hand in mine.

“Wherever you go, I follow. And wherever you are is where I want to be, Lexa. Our present and our futures are all tangled up together now. I’ll go back when you go back. We’ll get our little house together, a farm somewhere in the middle of nowhere. We’ll never have to fight another war. We’ll heal, together.”

Lexa lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

Now, time has almost come. Most of the camp is gone. Octavia, Raven, and Bellamy left on the last plane. Lexa and I are going to Istanbul for a few days and then we’ll be meeting up with the three of them in Denver for a couple weeks of rest and relaxation. A chance for us to unwind, together, to share our stories.

After that, I’m taking Lexa to meet my mom. We’ll stay there for a couple weeks, and then we’ll set out on our own, find our little paradise. I can’t change the things that happened to me. I can’t pretend like they never happened. Even with Lexa in my life, I can’t say that I’m glad they happened. I lost people that I loved, people that I care about, even myself for a while. In the end, I found a new me, a stronger me. I fell in love, I made a new family. I started a new life. I don’t know what the future holds, but for the first time in a long time, I’m looking forward to it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to each and every one of you for the feedback and support. I hope that you all have enjoyed reading this story as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. Be sure to check in soon because I’ll be back with more work soon. Thank you for joining me, and Clarke, and Lexa, on this journey.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!