Except You Love

by theproseofnight

Summary

Dear heart,
please break gently,
I loved her then
but I’m afraid, ardently
I love her still.

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After four painful years and an ocean apart, Clarke gets a second chance at a first love with Lexa. (An intimate look inside of love, from Clarke’s perspective, now standing on the outside of it.)

OR that familiar trope: exes meeting again after some time and distance. The one that got away but came back.

Notes

Another contribution to the very niche genre of artist Clarke’s life being turned upside down with the unexpected return of Lexa after x amount of time/distance away.

Fluff, angst, pining and clichés abound. (In varying quantities and intensities chapter to chapter)
At the launch of her latest exhibition, emerging artist Clarke Griffin should be celebrating. Instead, she feels homesick for a future where the windows have been boarded and the porch light already turned off. Her night and world changes, however, when her former love reappears and illuminates a new path for them to follow.

“Lexa?”
A beat.
Two.
But no response.

Clarke had only just stepped into the smaller room off of the main gallery space when her past made the least likely but most heart-stopping of appearances.

On her third glass of wine, she was searching for a moment of quiet away from the din of conversation, the noise and excitement typical of opening exhibitions.

Outside, the flurries had picked up momentum, a biting cold had gripped the city with more teeth than usual for January, shuttering in most residents. But inside the brick building on West 20th St, the chilly night air is warmed with excited chatter. The Chelsea crowd, along with some of the more intrepid culture-chasers trekking from various corners of the city, all dressed smartly to impress, had huddled in to see the latest up-and-coming artists working in new media. Muffled voices and lively music can be heard through the glass doors, competing merrily against each other as they are carried by exposed brick from room to room.

Old hat by now, Clarke knew what to expect by the second hour once the nervous energy had settled, after the guests were plied with drinks and tiny plates of food. Visitors mingling with curators and critics, giving each other timely nods and approving smiles as they take in the artwork before them. Some staring intently at canvases, others taking careful steps around the floor pieces.

It was routine.

The nods would become more enthusiastic, the smiles wider as the minutes ticked by and the alcohol flowed.
Invariably the Times writer would get into a heated debate with the Post’s blogger over the intensity of a colour, the choice of hue, whether the marks left behind by the bristles had deeper meaning. (They did not. She had been too lazy to switch out brushes at that particular point.)

Invariably her best friends, Raven and Octavia, though her two biggest cheerleaders, would get bored and slip out to the bar next door to shamelessly flirt and fight over who gets the most numbers. (The final tally ultimately didn’t matter, there would never be any follow through since they both had very significant others waiting at home. The victor of the spirited competitions earned bragging rights. Clarke thought it was better anyways that they occupied each other’s time than instigate arguments with the serious connoisseurs over whether Raven’s “two-year old nephew could have done that with one eye closed and two hands tied.”)

Invariably the event’s gold sponsor would make a rousing speech about his company’s honour to support the development of the city’s creative capital, while making some ill-punned jokes about not knowing the difference between Manet and Monet (even if the Impressionists had absolutely nothing to do with the night’s art), before handing the mic over to the gallery owner Markus Kane who would lavish more astute praise, and fond over the bright futures of these rising stars.

Yet four years in, and the fledgling artist was still not accustomed to the way nights like these unfolded. Although during art school Clarke was identified early on by her professors as a promising student, she couldn’t produce anything at all, at least anything of consequence, in her first year after graduation. It took another year of false starts before she found her footing. So it came as a surprise when she was singled out in her inaugural group exhibition as the ‘one to watch’ with the most breakthrough potential.

“For someone so young, there is a world weariness to her work, a sombre depth belying her years. Palpable emotions fill up the cracks of surfaces but at the same time show uncharacteristic restraint, a departure from her selfie generation.

While her peers make earnest efforts to invent new palettes, Ms. Griffin’s ingenuity is to take existing ones and ascribe them unexpected emotional value. Who knew one could feel infinite sadness from looking at yellow ochre, cheekily entitled Midnight Blue in illuminated neon writing. Working mainly in acrylics punctuated by inventive use of neon light as a medium, horizons of colours — though not a single drop of blue — bleed into each other, immersing the viewer into a forlorn landscape that gets disrupted by a lonely, meandering line whose sculpted path never settles, always turning.

The theme of absence, and ironic names, is strikingly effective, and most arresting in her Verte piece, a wordplay on the French colour but that also poetically translates from Spanish as ‘to see you’. Without having drawn a single tree, or laid down a swatch of green, we are plunged into a deep forest and invited to get lost within lines that encircle but never converge. It is achingly beautiful and melancholic.

I can’t help but wonder, who broke her heart.”

Hyperallergic had praised her in their Weekend edition, the sentiment was then picked up and echoed by the Times and the Post in their fringe art online blogs. Word of an emerging talent out of Brooklyn had quickly spread. That first night’s success was a prelude. Every year and showing since, the interest grew, as did the invitations to be a part of this collective or that. The compliments more parabolic with each iteration.

As time passed, a direct causal relationship had materialised between her heartbreak and her progress in the contemporary art world. The worse the former, the better the latter. Her public visibility would proportionally increase by degrees of her personal turmoil.
It would seem Clarke was currently riding another peak. Tonight marked her final group showing before her debut solo exhibition was to be mounted at the New Museum in six months, where it would then travel to the Walker in St. Louis, the MOCA in Toronto, the Whitechapel in London, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, the KW in Berlin, and the MOCA in LA.

It was a dream come true. Or it should have been. Yet while many had speculated, few knew of the personal history that motivated Clarke, of the truth behind her work.

Despite the accolades and the early success, Clarke had envisioned this evening and many others with a different outcome than the one she had come to expect. Had the universe been more kind, Lexa would be by her side, proudly accompanying her as they would make their rounds, moving contently about the room arm in arm, disgustingly in love while she shared her ideas and inspiration, and returning home later to their studio apartment for an encore celebration.

In another version, Lexa would be hurrying into the gallery breathlessly at the last hour, after a late meeting at the office. She would catch Clarke’s eye, and swiftly close the distance between them, hug her tightly before apologising profusely and cursing the partner architect at her firm for keeping all the lead designers behind to meet a last-minute deadline. She would kiss Clarke deeply before pulling back and whispering, “I’m so proud of you babe. My blonde Basquiat.” Clarke would chuckle at Lexa’s widely inaccurate art reference, and her stubborn refusal to admit his was the only name she knew.

(“He was also from Brooklyn and a good drawer. I rest my case, Clarke.”)

Or, Clarke would skip her own exhibition entirely to attend the grand opening of a building that Lexa and her team had tirelessly worked on, the first she designed and saw through to its construction. Clarke would be the one hanging on Lexa’s arm, her turn to be the supportive partner beaming, “I’m so proud of you babe. My sexy Frank Lloyd Wright.” Clarke would hide her amusement in Lexa’s shoulder, knowing how ghastly offensive Lexa would find the mis-association.

(“Eww Clarke, no. He was really short with an ego bigger than his buildings. Just no.”)

These alternate scenarios had given Clarke pause, compelled her to retreat from the fray of the main exhibition space. She felt a homesickness for a future where the windows have been boarded and the porch light already turned off. Standing alone surrounded by people who admired her but without the one person who had set her on her current path, Clarke felt a longing so keen it needed its own cathedral to reverberate less it consumed her whole.

So amidst the clamouring and before the inevitable congratulatory speeches, before the turning point that would launch her career into the next stratosphere, Clarke needed a breather. She needed a moment to grieve another night lost to maybes and what ifs.

What she didn’t expect was to find the ‘what can never be’ standing several feet away.

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“Lexa?”

Clarke repeats, unsure and unmoored, her vocabulary narrowing rapidly down to a single word.

Dressed in tailored grey slacks covered by a long black coat that hangs gracefully off of an elegant frame, Lexa had lifted her head imperceptibly at the sound of the door opening. She turns to fully face Clarke on hearing her name.

The room is dim save for the overhead lighting strategically placed to highlight Midnight Blue, the
special retrospective piece the only art in the white space. The mural-size landscape takes up the entire west wall, floor to ceiling, and absorbs Lexa into its foreground. While endless sketchbooks are filled with the curves and lines, the dips and valleys, of the woman before her, Clarke has only ever been able to translate colour to canvas. She had found it too difficult to embody Lexa in paintings for public eyes. It would take a PhD level of scrutiny for anyone to uncover the correlation between the figure standing in front and the pigments of yellow behind. It is surreal then for Clarke to see the subject of her drawings (of her dreams) materialise just beyond the canvas.

Lexa looks as gorgeous as ever, as stunning as Clarke remembered. Statuesque would have been the right word had Clarke been in the right frame of mind to make a deeper aesthetic judgement. Black pumps give the brunette a few extra inches of height and gravitas to an already refined stature. (Lexa could look like nobility even in sweatpants and a college t-shirt.) Her hair sits loosely around the shoulders, largely held in place by a red scarf where one end trails mid-length down her back. Her makeup is simple, minimally applied to high cheekbones and lips that are still plump, emphasising a jaw still cutting; highlighting an effortless beauty.

But there is a hardness to her penetrating verdant gaze that Clarke has not once seen in the ten-plus years she had known Lexa. In the first two years, it was all soft words and shy smiles, which turned into soft touches and even softer looks in the following years when they became more than friends, that then settled into a warm softness of a blanket fort sheltering them from the world’s harshness as they built their lives together. There has always been an edge to Lexa, but while her sharp wit and unflinching glares could dismantle others, she was unreservedly gentle around Clarke. The contrast now is startling. Instead, an unreadable expression devoid of familiar affection has Clarke rooted in place and forgetting all her words.

“Hello Clarke,” Lexa finally breaks her silence.

Clarke didn’t miss the measured breath Lexa took to exhale her name, nor the tight smile that seemed to take a monumental feat to form. If it were not for the fidgeting thumbs around clasped hands resting guardedly in front of her—the only nervous tell that always betrayed Lexa’s composure—Clarke would think Lexa is greeting a colleague or consultant. Not a love that kissed for the first time under the stars; that held hands while sleeping; that slow-danced the night away to her father’s old record player; that was filled with laughter until bellies ached; that stayed vigil with noodle soup and 80s romcom when a persistent cold turned into the flu; that traded morning kisses in lieu of an alarm clock; that dreamt of a shared future together.

The difference is sobering. There is no broad smile or brilliant eyes that had greeted her in the visions of a moment ago. Certainly no kisses that had once stolen her breaths and promised the world.

The gravitational force of Lexa’s gaze anchors her from flinging herself into her orbit, to have those arms wrap around her again.

Nonetheless, Clarke feels the ground loosening beneath her feet, and plants her heels more firmly to the floor in an effort to remain vertical. She tightens her grip around the wine glass, her only seeming tether to something real. Ironic considering that tether used to be the person standing across from her staring silently. At Clarke’s slight sway, Lexa leans negligibly forward as if to steady her. An old habit perhaps. But Lexa must think better of it as she subtly retracts at the last minute and corrects her hand movements to rest her arms by her side.

Her eyes don’t break from Clarke’s.

The moment stretches before them, Lexa’s stare pulling Clarke apart seam by seam with each passing second. Clarke wanted to escape the cacophony of the large exhibition wing but this small
space here has reached a roaring volume with all the things that remain unsaid. Though a pin-drop can be heard, to her ears, and by the hammering of her heart, it is by far the loudest room in the tri-state area.

Until the door swiftly reopens and a flustered woman walks in.

“There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere.” The newest addition addresses Lexa, ignoring Clarke completely. “We have to get going or we’re going to be late.”

Clarke takes the interloper in. She has never seen her before. She’s beautiful too, though few hold a candle to Lexa. Where they differ in hair colour and height, they do however match in the formality of their attire. But given Clarke’s near catatonic state, she doesn’t have the faculty to adequately assess what this woman means to Lexa, whose body language remains stiff.

“I’m coming,” Lexa responds to her summoner, even as her eyes stay steadfastly on Clarke. Her voice sounds hollow but firm when she says, “I was just finishing up here.”

Without further warning, Lexa moves to the door and the pair empties out of the room, leaving Clarke to stare vacantly at Midnight Blue, neon sign flashing, the words hanging from her lips.

I’m sorry.

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After Lexa leaves, the rest of her night goes by in a blur. She doesn’t notice the worrying glances shared between Raven and Octavia when she exits the small room as they are returning to the gallery from the bar; doesn’t pay heed to the server’s inquisitive look when she requests a much stronger drink than the Riesling she had been nursing all night; and she barely acknowledges the Guardian critic who wants to write a feature for the London audiences eager for her introduction to Europe.

While the event closes out as usual, with cards exchanged and plans already set in motion for the next exhibition, Clarke declines to attend the invite-only afterparty hosted by Markus. She politely makes her excuses, citing an early morning meeting with a (made-up) curator, and calls an Uber as soon as the last major critic has left. While hurrying into the waiting car, she reassures her best friends that she’s fine, (“just tired, maybe it was something in the shrimp cocktail”) and will call them soon to schedule their next girls night.

Finally alone in her loft, Clarke takes a fortifying breath, her back against the front door, heels haphazardly kicked to the side, bag and coat dropped unceremoniously on the floor, her head tipped back and up to the ceiling. Though perhaps no more than several excruciating long seconds, the moment with Lexa replays on endless loop behind closed eyes.

It takes her a good fifteen minutes to peel herself off the door, and make her way to the couch. Clarke curls up on her side and drapes the throw blanket over her lower torso, unperturbed by the state of her now-disheveled dress.

She doesn’t know how long she lies there, unblinking, but it is while she is staring out impassively at the starless night that Clarke takes notice of the black frame leaning against the window.

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In her first year at the New School, Clarke was assigned to document street art around the city and had dragged Lexa along to make use of her dad’s vintage camera. Near dusk, grumpy from the miles they had walked, Clarke was ready to give up to go find real food instead of the over-processed hot
dogs they had been indulging all day.

“Lex, I can’t take another step,” Clarke whined, hands on hips, and pout in place, stopping indiscriminately in the middle of an alley at the last location of their itinerary.

Lexa retraced her steps back to Clarke and drew her closer by the waist, looping arms around her lower back. She booped her nose affectionately against Clarke’s.


“Ugh. Babe, it doesn’t work. You’re never going to make it happen like hangry.”

“You wait. Urban Dictionary will catch up one day. Then what, Clarke?” Lexa questioned pseudo-seriously.

“You’d still be ridiculous?”

“Hmm,” Lexa absently agreed, tucking Clarke’s head under her chin and dotingly kissing her temple.

They stayed like that, swaying quietly for an extended moment, until Lexa turned Clarke around in her arms, setting her front against Clarke’s back, and tightening her hold again, both now facing the end of the alley. “Look,” she said pointing ahead, chin on her shoulder.

Clarke scanned the scene for where Lexa wanted to direct her attention. It was a second before she saw the sign painting on the brick wall—an epigram by NY street artist Stephen Powers.

She couldn’t keep a smile from forming.

“You are ridiculous, you know that?”

“Yes. But you love me anyways,” Lexa murmured into her hair while one-handedly taking the photo of the art, the other hand unwilling to give up its valued position around Clarke’s waist.

“That I do.” Clarke tilted her head and placed a sweet kiss on the underside of Lexa’s jaw. “Let’s go home, love. I’m humpy.”

To which Lexa turned back around and bent her knees, gesturing silently for Clarke to hop on. Their laughter carried on for two blocks as Lexa hobbled along with a giggling Clarke bucking her forward.

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It was the end of term, and Clarke was beyond stressed with her final hand-in for the sculpture course. Her materials had arrived late, and then the lathe machine in the shop had decided to give up on life. On top of it all, she hadn’t seen Lexa for more than ten minutes at a time in a few days, who was busy with her own workload at Columbia.

She trudged into her studio space, dragging a bag of clay with her. Only after unloading her haul and plopping down on the stool did Clarke take notice of the black square frame sitting atop her workbench. There were two unsigned sticky notes tacked to it. The first simply read, “Humpy?”, which made Clarke laugh and promptly forget about her misery. The second stated a time and meeting place for lunch.
Clarke smiled fondly at the Stephen Powers print and its uplifting words, before propping the frame up and adjusting its placement for a better angled view. She grabbed her jacket and headed out to find her girlfriend.

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The memory washes over her, and Clarke finally breaks down. Her vision is wet, and increasingly spotty, but she can still make out the letters:

_Everything Is Shit, Except You Love._

—

“Clarke?”

Raven cautiously pokes her head through the door.

“I’m coming in.”

Invoking best friend privileges Raven is compelled to use her emergency key to check in on Clarke after her repeated knocks, and all of hers and Octavia’s morning texts, had went unanswered.

She is both relieved and sad to find the familiar lump on the couch, Clarke still in her dress from last night, makeup not yet removed, mascara smudged. It breaks her heart however when she goes to tug the blanket more tightly around her friend and finds that Clarke is clutching the familiar black frame closely to her chest. A commonplace sight that she is well-acquainted and had come across often enough in the first two years that Raven could add explosives disposal expertise to her engineer’s skillset. Especially in the early days, it had taken bomb-squad level tactics to disconnect Clarke from the live wires of her memories. It’s been awhile since it’s happened so it gives her pause as to what has jolted the artist’s troubled heart this time.

With a sigh and practised ease, Raven gingerly removes it from Clarke’s hold and resets it back in its rightful place on the ledge by the window where it would be visible from both the kitchen and living room.

Another forty-five minutes pass before Clarke comes to, awakening to the sight of her friend lounging on the two-seater with her legs dangling over one side, quietly chuckling at the TV.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Clarke groggily asks as she rearranges the blanket and herself into a sitting position.

“You know, just hanging.” Raven feigns nonchalance as her attention remains focused on her show, as if she hadn’t been worried whether her friend had spent the night drowning herself in 40oz of whiskey-enabled regret.

Clarke stretches into a yawn and looks around the loft to orient herself.

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Sophomore year, when they had first stumbled on the Bed-Stuy apartment during another one of Clarke’s neighbourhood artwalks, it was a gritty fixer-upper that needed serious TLC. Of course, Lexa would fall in love with the wreck immediately.
But Clarke, look at the potential. Original wood beams, orange iron spot bricks.” She had gleefully taken on the persona of a realtor. “You’ll art better surrounded by raw materials.”

Truthfully, it hadn’t taken much for Clarke to be charmed by the two-storey house in a residential row that the owners had converted into a rentable live-work space. She was already sold on the 12-foot ceilings and west light.

But she had enjoyed Lexa’s flailing hands and bright eyes too much as she talked about gutting and cross-sections and reveal joints to give in so easily, and so Clarke had exaggerated her skepticism just to gaud her girlfriend into making powerpoint presentations to her about the merits of getting in early on a hidden gem. They signed the lease a week later. And although a complete renovation was way outside of their budget (and tenancy agreement), it hadn’t stopped Lexa from envisioning how this space or that space could be changed, or drawing out plans of where to locate Clarke’s paints or Lexa’s built-in bookshelves. The inconsistent heating and peeling baseboards were inconsequential trade-offs.

As such, when money started to come in from her commissions, and Clarke could afford to move out to Park Slope or Prospect Heights, or even buy property in Manhattan, she couldn’t let go of the Bed-Stuy dream.

Not the work table that Lexa had handcrafted from the wood of two abandoned doors and assembled together with bike rack frames, turned upside down for use as legs. She had sized it to perfectly fit the width of the small den area (“It’s temporary until I can design you your own studio, love”).

Not the designer lamps they had bargain-hunted for on weekends or the Danish teak furniture that Lexa had found in the dumpster of an old office building clearing out their inventory (“I think it’s a Jacobsen, or a really good fake”).

Not the bedroom window nook where she would find Lexa curled up on chilly mornings with a book and chai tea, softly snoring and burrowed in her blankets, and be met with a disgruntled protest through half-lidded eyes when Clarke would try to remove the book (“I’m still reading”).

Not the hardwood floors where late night pizza and then slow lovemaking would fill the living room with different kinds of moans (“More, Clarke. Please, more”).

None of it she wanted to let go.

It was the easiest decision when the For Sale sign went up, Clarke had bought both the apartment and the studio space below the same day.

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“I’m ok, you know. You didn’t have to come,” Clarke speaks up after collecting herself, letting out a shudder to clear the fog of her reverie.

Really though, she is grateful for the companionship, and Raven’s perceptiveness, knowing it would have been a Sisyphean struggle to open her eyes and start this new day. Reaching a hand back to the armchair, she lightly squeezes Raven’s knee as she softens, “but I’m glad you’re here.”

At that Raven turns off the screen and moves to the kitchen to make two fresh cups of coffee, topping them off with a heavy-handed drop of Bailey’s knowing Clarke could use the extra pick-me-up.

“Thanks,” Clarke eagerly accepts the steaming mug when Raven returns to sit on the coffee table
across from her, “my hero.”

“So,” Raven tries to open up the conversation, after it becomes apparent that Clarke wouldn’t be volunteering anything of her accord. She takes a careful sip from her own mug, raising one eyebrow slightly, “rough night?”

“Hmm.”

“What happened?”

Clarke only acknowledges the question with a downturn of lips, but otherwise continues to sit listlessly in silence. Well-versed in Clarke-speak, Raven expertly plays the waiting game until Clarke finally manages to squeak out, “I saw Lexa.”

“She’s back!?” Raven asks wide-eyed.

“You saw Lexa?”

“You.”

“She was at the opening?”

“You.”

Clarke receives a lighthearted shove from Raven.

“Fucks sake. Could you please stop with the one-word answers?”

“Okay.”

Another shove as Clarke smiles into her coffee, both hands wrapped tightly around the mug.

They sit quietly, blowing on their drinks, both looking just as dumbfounded about the unexpected guest from last night, not knowing where to take the conversation.

“Are you really ok?” Raven asks intuitively after some time. It’s a moot question considering how unkempt Clarke’s hair is, the deep wrinkles in her blue dress, the deeper crinkle of her forehead, and that, had Raven not played maid earlier, her bag, boots and keys would still be in various states of disarray around Clarke’s front door.

“Do you think she … ? I mean, why would she … ? What if … ?” Clarke tries after awhile, but only splutters.

“Now that you’ve decided to use multiple words, it’d be great if you could finish your sentences. These mini cliff hangers are giving me palpitations.” Raven attempts to lighten the mood, but when Clarke doesn’t take the bait, she quickly changes tact to comfort, “Hey, whatever happens we’ll figure it out.”

“I … I just …”

Clarke can’t make heads or tails of her thoughts. She abandons her course completely after a minute, and with a puff of breath, settles on, “She looked beautiful.”

“Well, Woods never lacked in the looks department. So no surprise there,” Raven acquiesces. She
leans back on the coffee table, her palms extended out behind her, one finger tapping mindlessly against the wooden top. “I can’t believe I missed seeing her. Shouldn’t have listened to Octavia, I really didn’t need those extra shots.” She rubs her temples in sympathy to emphasise her point.

Raven then furrows her brow for a moment in deep contemplation, before mumbling absently, “I didn’t know she was back already.”

Several seconds past before the words finally register. Clarke suddenly jerks in her seat, bolting upright and causing half the blanket to pool to the ground.

“Wait, what??”

“What?” Raven startles, then blinks in panic when she realises her slip, and tries uselessly to gloss over it, “Um, uh … nothing?”

“What do you mean already? You knew she was coming back?”

Clarke is standing by now, having blindly placed her mug on the coffee table. (Raven wordlessly pushes it away from the edge towards safety.) Her voice has taken on a pitch coloured by desperation and perceived betrayal.

“No. No,” Raven rises to her feet too, slowly putting her arms out and up in supplication to subdue a pacing lion Clarke, and says more firmly, “of course not.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I … Anya …” Raven stops and starts a few times before sitting back down, this time taking Clarke’s previous spot on the couch. The name gets Clarke’s full attention.

“Anya?” Clarke questions, her eyes beseeching Raven to elaborate.

Raven tries again, “I overheard Anya the other day on the phone. I didn’t catch much, most likely the tail end of her conversation. But of what I could piece together, it must have been something about Lexa coming back.”

Clarke lets it sink in before she asks again, “Anya?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Clarke stops her pacing to sit next to Raven.

“Clarke,” Raven admonishes, just as Clarke guiltily dips her head, “you know why. This is your rule.”

“It’s a stupid rule,” Clarke mutters.

She holds her head in her hands, elbows on her knees, annoyed at feeling cornered by her own coping mechanism.

It was for self-preservation that she had instituted her unique brand of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ after one particularly drunken night, three months into their separation and on the night of Lexa’s departure, when the pain was especially unbearable and she had drunk-dialed Lexa’s mobile leaving a lengthy voicemail. The evening out did the opposite of her friends’ mission to keep her distracted while the love of her life was leaving the country. Even in her inebriated state, and despite her phone being confiscated by Raven and Octavia to prevent her from tracking Lexa’s flight status, somehow she
had managed to dial Lexa’s number from a stranger’s phone that she sneakily swiped from coat check. An hour later, high on Jameson-induced self-pity, she had forced her circle of friends to pinky-swear to a Lexa-free zone.

Though the cloudiness had dissipated by morning, to be replaced by a deserving hangover, the pain had persisted long after so Clarke remained resolute to never discuss or hear about Lexa again, at the very least until the name didn’t cause irregular breathing or general despair.

She throws her head back against the couch, “Ugh.”

“Look, Clarke. You know Anya doesn’t outright tell me anything about Lexa, and even if she did, I’m under your explicit instructions not to share it. But for what it’s worth, Anya did seem upset and said something about ‘it not being fair, you can’t just come here.’ Mind you, I don’t have any context for what I overheard and I didn’t hear the rest. So it could really be nothing. It might not even have been Lexa. I just assumed it was because she usually calls Sunday mornings. Do with that what you will.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for over-reacting.”

Clarke pulls Raven into an awkward side hug, not without taking mental note of the timing of Lexa’s weekly communication.

(But that was a thought to be tucked away for another day. Her head and heart currently didn’t have room to process anything else.)

Raven pats her on the back, “It’s going to be okay.”

“Easy for you to say. You ended up with a Woods sister.” Tears unexpectedly well up as Clarke considers how she could have been in Raven’s shoes. “How is Mrs. Reyes-Woods anyways?”

“She’s good. We’re good.” Raven pulls back from their embrace, and smiles widely at the mention of her wife.

Clarke just nods, discreetly wiping her eyes, bittersweetly happy for her friend.

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The no Lexa rule had also meant minimal contact with Anya. With Raven as the common denominator, Anya had remained present on some level in Clarke’s life, but Clarke could easily count on one hand the number of encounters she has had with Anya in the past four years.

The first year had been difficult to navigate her friendships and untangle her Lexa-entangled relationships. After more than a decade, Clarke suddenly found herself as an unwitting third wheel. As a quattro, she and Lexa had often done couple things together with Raven and Anya, and she had relied on Lexa’s calmness to balance out Raven’s restless energy, and on her ease and affability to disarm Anya’s stoicism. Without Lexa, the dynamic was off. Clarke had felt like the short leg of an unstable tripod. Then it became too difficult to look at Anya, and be around Anya, without acknowledging the Lexa-sized elephant in the room. So they had mutually ghosted each other out, maintaining a safe distance unless it was a very special occasion or holiday.

But Clarke does miss her almost-sister, of the fun and adventures they enjoyed together, albeit begrudgingly on Anya’s half. She misses the mischievous sense of humour that bubbled under her unmoving surface, the one that made Anya and Raven such a kinetic match. A ghost of a smile appears as she thinks that latent mischief must be a dominant Woods gene, how their quiet ways disguised a fierce intellect that could be turned to exact havoc on others when crossed. Clarke had so
often had to dig Lexa (and Anya) out of trouble that one year her girlfriend shyly gifted her with an oversized shovel for Christmas, simply signed in sharpie on the back, *I’m sorry. LW.* (“It’s still not big enough babe,” was Clarke’s reply as she kissed the apple of Lexa’s cheek and enjoyed watching her blush deepen.)

Yet, while it had its drawbacks for the unsuspecting, Anya’s unpredictability turned out to have an unanticipated benefit for Clarke in the Lexa-aftermath. Two years prior Raven and Anya had surprised everyone upon returning from their Asia trip to announce their elopement overseas. At the same time many of their friends were complaining about missing out on the big day, Clarke was silently thankful not to have to ride the emotional roller coaster of seeing Lexa at their wedding.

(She didn’t want to think of what it would mean to be bridesmaids, but not brides.)

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Before she could tumble further down that rabbit hole, Clarke feels a slight vibration underneath her, followed by a faint dinging. It’s a muffled sound decidedly coming from the couch. Clarke assumes her mobile must have gotten lodged into the cushions sometime last night.

“That’s probably Octavia,” Raven foretells without looking up, busy checking her own phone, “she’s been messaging me all morning for regular updates on you. Please answer, so she can annoy you instead of me.”

Clarke opens her messages and sure enough, sees the long thread of missed texts from Octavia, each more colourfully expressing her concern over Clarke’s health and safety, while equally threatening it.

(“Could you kindly let me know you’re alive so I could fucking kill you for not answering your phone?”)

(“Your battery better be dead or you will be when I get there.”)

(“Clarke, my Google history lists the proper uses of a katana sword as the top recent search, followed closely by axe throwing. Just saying. Please call me back. I’m worried.”)

She quickly types out a response to calm her friend.

*(Clarke) 09:40*

I’m alive O. Raven is helping me work on the well part.

Her other best friend seems momentarily satisfied with the amended report, though she makes Clarke promise a full in-person account soon. Clarke returns to her notifications list to see if she’s missed any other pressing messages. She’s scrolling past Raven and Lincoln, a few work-related ones from Markus and her agent, when she spots two unread texts from an unknown number.

*(Unknown number) 01:12*

Clarke, can we talk?

*(Unknown number) 01:14*

This is Lexa. Anya gave me your number.

___

Clarke might have stopped breathing, she’s not sure. Raven hasn’t clued in yet to her silent distress, furiously typing away, probably to Anya and Octavia simultaneously.
She scarcely has a handle on her bearings from seeing Lexa at the gallery. Until last night, the razor thin margin of being in the same room as her ex-girlfriend was sharp enough to cut paper. Now, not only with the exponential probability of it happening again, but that they might say more than two words to each other, Clarke is precariously closed to losing the plot and not just the wheel.

She mutely hands her phone over to Raven.

“Shit,” Raven blurts out after reading the texts, “what are you going to do?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Clarke admits. She ponders for a moment then gestures to Raven’s phone, “Anya didn’t mention anything?”

Raven shakes her head and resumes typing, her fingers making more forceful taps this time. When she gets a timely response, Raven raises her phone for Clarke to read.

(Anya) 09:47
Lexa came by last night. A bit tipsy. Didn’t say more than two words. Then asked me for Clarke’s number. I gave it to her. Didn’t think she would use it.

“Shit,” Clarke parrots. “God, these Woods like to keep things short and vague.”

“O and I left the after-party early around midnight. Lexa must’ve dropped by my place just before.” Raven surmises, and then asks, “So, you going to respond to her?”

Clarke thinks it over. It had been so long since she heard Lexa’s voice, and despite the brevity of last night’s interaction, she was reminded of its soft timbre, the faint lilt, and the way it wraps around vowels or clicks particular consonants. She keenly misses it. How it can act like a hushed veil against the morning light, and take on a tangible warmth by dusk; how it can be brutally precise when she’s upset only to completely lose all its edges as soon as Clarke folds her up in a hug and tangles her fingers through Lexa’s hair. Her favourite sound though is Lexa at night, after bodies have been sated and she’s curled around Clarke’s back, skin to skin, her head cradled into the curve of Clarke’s neck, and her lips grazing Clarke’s ears, whispering complete nonsense that has them both in stitches.

(“What do you call a boomerang that doesn’t come back?”

“I don’t know, what?”

“A stick, Clarke.”)

Lexa would frequently change her voicemail greeting, after she caught on to Clarke routinely calling her phone, when knowing Lexa was busy—their iCalendars were synced—and wouldn’t pick up, all for the sake of hearing her voice. For those not in Lexa’s inner circle, they must have been stumped whenever they tried to reach her only to be greeted with random animal facts or a personal message for Clarke. One time, Clarke was treated to a dramatic reading of the Central Park Zoo’s long list of baby names for the newest addition to the polar bear family. That day, Lexa’s voicemail quickly filled up with bouts of Clarke’s laughter.

She wants to hear that voice again, even if it is now tinged with indifference and detachment. After so long in her self-imposed embargo on all things Lexa, seeing her at the gallery was like letting a ship slip in through the night. It’s not enough. She wants the whole fleet to drop anchor in her abandoned harbour. She needs to know why Lexa was at the opening, where she is living now, if she’s just visiting or for how long.

If she’s happy.
Clarke nods to Raven, more-so to brace herself than anything.

(Clarke) 09:56
If the offer still stands, yes I would like to talk.

(Lexa) 10:02
I’m free today. When can you meet?

Comes the instant reply.

_Huh. She’s not wasting any time_, Clarke thinks. She ignores the little voice that’s telling her such swiftness can only be a harbinger of terrible news, but without much to lose, Clarke decides she might as well speed up the process.

(Clarke) 10:03
12:30pm?

Clarke watches the dots appear then disappear several times before Lexa commits.

(Lexa) 10:05
Great. How about The Standard on Wilmington?

(Clarke) 10:06
Perfect. See you then.

Clarke throws her phone on the couch. Despite their text exchange having all the enthusiasm of watching paint dry, she feels a thrum of excitement, if not nerves, course through her body that she gets to see Lexa again so soon.

“Done,” she informs Raven, who had been anxiously awaiting the plot development, “we’re meeting at the Standard at half past noon.”

“Really?” Raven gapes disbelievingly.

“Yup.”

“As in today, like in about two hours?” Raven clarifies, looking down at her wrist to a non-existent watch.

“Yup.”

“With Lexa?”

“Yup.”

Clarke pre-emptively moves out of Raven’s reach anticipating her swatting hand.

“Ok, well,” Raven finally accepts and then urges, “you need to shower. I know this is Lexa you’re meeting, who thinks you in a sack of potatoes smelling like a spud factory is on the same plane as a Victoria Secret model emerging from a vanilla-infused bath covered in rose petals, BUT everyone else,” she points to herself, “has standards. Go Griffin, you reek.”

“Thanks for the visuals,” Clarke supplies as she retreats to her bedroom, but tosses out before closing the door, “I doubt she thinks that anymore.”
“Hello. You’ve reached Lexa Woods. Option one: if I know you and like you, note the and is important, please leave a message at the tone. Option two: if I don’t know you, or if I know you but don’t like you, hang up.

If this is Clarke, babe! I’m glad you finally came up for air from the studio. I’m probably on my way to you, but as per option one, you can definitely leave a message anyways. I like your voice too. Talk soon. I love you.”

BEEP

“Lexa, I …” A large hiccup interrupted her, followed by two smaller ones. “Your instructions are very clear. But also confusing? This is your Clarke. I mean, this is Clarke. I don’t know if I still meet criteria one.”

Clarke’s voice lowered with the last sentence. The silence prickled as she considered the dilemma for a second, but eventually lost focus of her task and pushed forward nonetheless, “You’re probably boarding soon. I just wanted to say hi.”

There’s a long pause before Clarke followed up with, “Hi.” Then some giggling as she continued, undeterred, “there, mission accomplished. Gold star for Clarke.”

More giggling.

“I haven’t gotten many of those lately, so that was a good one to get.

I tried painting but it gets too wet. The yellow gets wet Lexa, and it turns into a disfigured Sponge Bob. I don’t wanna paint Sponge Bob, his limbs are weirdly skinny. Like, why does he even have arms and legs? He’s a sponge!

I just want to paint yellow, Lex.

Why is it so hard?” She asked sombrelly.

But then as if struck by a sudden clarity, Clarke’s voice perked up to lucidly recount,

“Remember that trip we took to Spain? We were waiting to enter the museum when a group of kindergarteners joined the line. They were so cute. There was one little guy who kept bouncing around. Do you remember him? His teacher was really mad at him for always running off. She kept shouting after him, ‘Amarillo! Amarillo!’

You turned to me with, god, the biggest smile, and said, ‘that’s brilliant, such a great name: amarillo, yellow!’ And then made me promise we would name all our kids after the rainbow.”

Another pause as Clarke made a face at the prospect of shouting, ‘Purple! Purple!’ in the supermarket. The same reaction she had while in Barcelona, despite being generally on board with the concept.

“Anyways, it’s … it’s hard.

I can’t … I miss …

I hope you have a safe flight.

I just wanted you to know that I …”
The sentence hung incomplete as Lexa’s voicemail cut out.

The Standard, 12:30 pm.

Maybe this is Clarke’s second chance to complete it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: There’s Standard and Then There’s You. Lexa’s presence in New York is explained during an encounter that has Clarke rethinking her past and present. Things get heated.

(Building on the amazing scaffolding laid down by Lovers in Low Light and It Takes As Long As It Takes, this story is my attempt at a nuanced interpretation of the-one-that-got-away.)

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Lexa’s presence in New York is explained during an encounter that has Clarke rethinking her past and present. Things get heated.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all who gave this story an initial vote of confidence. Here is my ~11K gratitude.

For those who celebrate it, Happy Valentine's Day! I hope your day/date involves less floundering than Clarke's. For those who do not, Happy Wednesday!

For all of us, may love always prevail ... (as it inevitably will in this story)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“\textit{You have been in every line I have ever read.}”

Philip Pirrip

It’s part library, part café.

Bookshelves line one side of the wall, and a coffee bar on the opposite. In the centre, rows of square tables anchor a mostly white setting, whose neutral palette is enlivened by colours coming from the paperback spines and the Paul Smith edition Anglepoise desk lamps.

Polite servers dressed in all black round out the minimalist effect. They bustle about discreetly pouring drinks, setting plates, and taking orders to keep up with the brunch rush hour. Smiles and happy chatter exchange between couples while parents try valiantly to keep their young in tow. New Yorkers and the visiting weekend crowds blend together in the busy scene.

The Standard is unassuming and would escape most people’s attention, were it not for the monochrome Albers prints on the walls, the Eames shell chair Clarke is currently sitting on, the Wegner loungers a few feet away, and the Stelton ceramic coffee pot and creamer set on her table.

Clarke only knows this, and can identify the brands, as a by-product of years of living with an architect, conditioning her awareness of her environment and attuning her to the material goods that proliferated their everyday.

Observation skills she had picked up from Lexa’s habit of looking up and around whenever she stepped foot in a new space. Their late-night conversations would then revisit the things they saw.
during the day, the surfaces and textures and colours that she knows Lexa was meticulously cataloguing away in that immense visual library in her head.

She was always surprised, but not, when Lexa referenced something much later on that had only been a passing image seen in one of the many design publications they perused together during coffee breaks.

(Lexa never said but Clarke is fairly certain she was world building an entire metropolis—a better built future for humankind—with all the tabulating and indexing and bookmarking and clipping that was happening on her side of their shared workspace in the den. She received a withering glare once for joking about Lexa’s fancy degree going towards becoming a professional scrapbooker.)

As Clarke looks around, and takes note of how the wood grain of the floor subtly picks up on the lines of the wall art, she realises the depth of Lexa’s influence in how she sees the world, how it became another filter that her appreciation of beauty passed through.

Somewhere along the way, Lexa had taught her to pay closer attention to her surroundings, to have a closer connection to the ground, when Clarke’s artistic tendency was to look skywards.

She wonders what old Clarke and Lexa would have to jointly say about The Standard, if they would zone in on the same details or come to similar conclusions about the aesthetic choices.

Generally, it’s a bit more upscale than what she’s accustomed to from their past Sunday routines. Maybe this was grown-up working girl Lexa versus stressed-out postgrad intern Lexa. Or perhaps Lexa had picked it subconsciously for its reminder of her adopted continent.

Regardless, she’s glad the slight air of pretension falls short of crossing over onto the douche side of things, that the marked European influence hasn’t tipped the scale towards asshole territory—always a risk in lower Manhattan.

Instead, The Standard is attentive to detail, well-appointed but understated, reflecting what Clarke can only assume is Lexa’s matured discerning taste.

(She remembers an afternoon spent watching a bottom lip worrying under teeth as Lexa self-debated herringbone or houndstooth as the better textile pattern for the cushion cover of their new sofa.)

Whatever awaits Clarke’s fate, she has to give kudos to Lexa the tactician for picking a casual and comfortable enough place, with the right degree of cautious restraint, for a mid-day appointment with one’s ex.

—

Clarke had arrived twenty minutes early, giving herself the extra time to slow her racing heart and set her bearings. She was also too nervous to wait in her apartment with Raven still hovering. While the shower had been a quick affair, the wardrobe selection was a battle of wills as Raven pulled out every low-cut top Clarke owned.

(“Raven, I’m not wearing that. It’s like –8 F out.”

“But it’s Lexa’s kryptonite.”

“It’ll already be an uphill climb trying to hold my shit together. I can’t be worried about killing her too.”)

After another hour of cajoling (and some pointed under-breath comments from Raven about working
with one’s best assets), Clarke had compromised on skinny black jeans and a blue fitted top, still flattering but with adequate coverage to not be mission-distracting.

Her wardrobe choice didn’t matter in the end as the frigid subzero wind chills outside ensured that Clarke kept her parka on inside. Normally her internal temperature runs like a furnace but even her body can admit defeat under icy conditions the weather forecast had called an eyelash-freezing hell.

Happy to have snatched one of the last remaining tables by the fireplace, Clarke is currently cozied in her seat, onto her second cup of coffee and perusing a Penguin classics that was left behind by one of the last patrons.

(*Great Expectations. She doesn’t appreciate the universe’s sense of humour.*

Though curiously the book isn’t actually Charles Dickens’s 544-page tome. More like a collection of only the first page of *Great Expectations*—seventy different design layout versions of the same introductory text. As an opponent of long-form reading and a proponent of all forms of creativity, Clarke likes the unusual typographic experiment and the visual treatment of the narrative.)

The book and lively atmosphere are a good distraction. It keeps Clarke’s thoughts from circling around why Lexa wants to meet, tempering any gnawing feelings that more devastation awaits her. Surely, bad news wouldn’t be delivered in such a public setting. And really, she tries to comfort herself, how much worse can it get? They’re already broken up, her life a thinner version of the fullness it used to be—it would take another monumentally cruel twist of fate for things to bottom out further.

Then again, Clarke is all too familiar with how swiftly things can get upended, when everything had been good and steady. Implosions tend to be the most effective on the least suspecting, the shrapnel most cutting when the world collapses violently inwards while one isn’t looking.

But watching the little girl a few tables away spilling the yolk of her sunny-side-up on her pretty dress, to her mother’s dismay, Clarke places her faith at the altar of Sunday brunch that nothing bad could possibly happen.

—

She’s engrossed in her paperback, nibbling on sourdough bread, and enjoying the many creative ways the name Pirrip (Pip) has been written, when she hears a throat clearing, and looks up to find Lexa gesturing to the empty chair across from her.

“Is this seat taken?”

Clarke shakes her head, too jarred again by the vision of a Lexa in the flesh to string together sentences.

While the gears of her brain are over-running, trying to process that Lexa is actually speaking to her, she takes a moment to observe the brunette as she settles in.

L lexa is swallowed in her own oversized parka, a dusting of snow on her shoulders and a beanie that she’s taken off to shake out. Chestnut hair tumble forth, a few strands going rogue from the static of her hat. Though gone is the wool coat of last night, the red scarf still wraps prettily around her neck. Her cheeks are flushed pink, and her green eyes have taken on an entrancing lustre from the cold.

Clarke can’t look away. She remembers crisp mornings where the only motivation to open her eyes was so that she can look into Lexa’s.
Lexa takes Clarke’s cue and keeps her outerwear on. So it’s an equal mystery as to what Lexa’s wearing underneath, but noticeably absent is the formality of last night. Her spine is less straight, shoulders lightly dropped, making her appear marginally more relaxed. The overnight drop in temperature had inversely, but welcomingly, led to a warmer reception today.

(If Clarke wasn’t so nervous, and on much better terms with Lexa, she would laugh at their tense reunion looking like a two-person lunch meeting of the Polar Bear Expedition team.)

Lexa takes a moment to survey the scene, as she warms herself up by blowing into her hands, her gaze lingering appreciatively over the walled-in gas burning fireplace, before landing back on Clarke, then onto the table.

“Are we waiting for someone else?”

Lexa quips to break the ice, as she tips her chin towards Clarke’s side of the table where it looks like she’s recently become a food hoarder: there are blueberry pancakes, two avocado toasts, a plate of assorted cheese, a walnut and watercress salad, a basket of the honey and fig sourdough bread, a basket of home fries drizzled in truffle oil, and a bowl of yam and roasted beetroot soup. (She had skipped breakfast.)

Clarke would blush in embarrassment if she wasn’t currently concerned with overheating ever since Lexa sat down. She’s rethinking her parka and the fireplace, whose earlier comforting crackling now seems taunting as the embers feel like a forest fire has erupted against her back.

But if Clarke is anything in life, it’s ridiculously loyal, and as in most cases would rather remain faithful to her life choices and suffer their consequences than to waver in judgment.

(She hopes Lexa doesn’t notice the moisture collecting in the space between her brows.)

“I wasn’t sure if you’d be hungry. I ordered extra.”

She pushes a plate of avocado toast infinitesimally over to Lexa’s half of the table. Clarke knows she’ll likely decline, sharing food with an ex is probably too intimate for a first second encounter after a four years absence, and too low on the totem pole of priorities of their still-hidden meeting agenda.

Before Lexa can voice any polite refusals the waiter appears to take her order. Clarke tries to hide her disappointment when she simply asks for oolong tea, probably to dampen any misguided interpretation that this was a lunch date.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Lexa says, ignoring the food prompt and thankfully too preoccupied with forming her next words to notice Clarke’s sweating.

“Yeah, of course. I’m glad you texted.” Clarke rushes to return, but then just as quickly deflates realising she might have sounded too eager. She decides to go for cordiality instead.

“How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“That’s good.”

“How are you?”

“I’m good too.”
“Good.”

*God, this is painful.* Clarke would bang her head against the table if it wasn’t covered in so much food. She’s had more invigorating conversations with her dentist, while her mouth was stuffed with cotton balls, than whatever this is.

Lexa must be feeling the same because she’s picked up her fork and has mindlessly started tapping the tines against the table. A nervous tick, or a Morse code cry for help, Clarke can’t be too sure.

“It’s cold outside,” Clarke tries. Despite Oscar Wilde deriding conversation about the weather as the last refuge of the unimaginative, she nevertheless resorts to meteorology, putting misplaced hope on climate talk to save them from themselves.

“It is.”

“It’s not cold inside.”

*Oh. my. god.*

Clarke had realised belatedly when she arrived at The Standard that she had forgotten her phone at home. Now she thinks she might have left her wits behind too.

“No, it’s not,” Lexa offers her a pitying half smile.

Fortunately, a minute later, the brunette soldiers on to a topic that might have better traction.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stay longer last night.”

“It was good to see you though, brief as it was.”

Lexa hums her acknowledgment but doesn’t say anything, concentrating instead on her tiny table concert. A few more rhythmic taps of her fork later, she finally puts the utensil down and looks up at Clarke.

“I was hoping we could talk. It’s been a while.”

The reaction is immediate. While Clarke’s eyes widen in disbelief, Lexa grimaces at her own gross underestimation as soon as the statement leaves her mouth, lowering her gaze to rest back on her cutlery set.

*Three years, three hundred and forty-six days to be exact.*

Clarke can’t help but correct in her head.

She almost scoffs loudly at Lexa’s economic summation of their time apart, as if they’re work acquaintances or bar buddies who haven’t seen each other after a long holiday (“It’s been a while. How’s it going? How are Judy and the kids?”).

Other than that regrettable voicemail the night of Lexa’s flight, Clarke hasn’t exchanged a single word with Lexa since the day she moved out. It has been complete silence on either side of the Atlantic. Certainly no more phone calls.

There have been many written and rewritten texts, deleted emails, innumerable tear-stained letters, but nothing has ever left the confines of Clarke’s keyboard or desk.

Although one time, Clarke did make it all the way to the post office, letter and determination in hand,
only to break down on the steps of the building, with a crumbled envelope and a more crumpling heart.

* * *

Dear Lexa,

This is the fifth letter I’ve written, and likely the fifth letter I won’t send. I came close on number four. I wonder where we would be had I posted it, where you would be when it reached you.

I wonder if you would be reading it in your ‘flat’, that’s what they call it over there, right? Or maybe you’d be on the tube, in a pub. I’m not sure, and out of ideas from my little knowledge of London and the English ways of things.

I’m imagining tea and biscuits next to my scrawling. Too cliché? Perhaps. But maybe the sense of decorum will give more seriousness to the loops of my l’s and k’s. You once told me they were too whimsical. You had traced the letters of my name with your finger on my back to prove your point.

“See Clarke, that’s how you write l and k.”

But I didn’t care then if they were straight lines or loops, I was just happy to be lying naked underneath you. To feel your breath against my neck as you mapped out my back with your gentle touch, as an invisible alphabet formed over slopes and valleys.

I would have carried the weight of the Alexandria Library, your namesake, if it meant you were the one writing out every letter of every book.

Sanskrit, Dutch, Kanji, it didn’t matter.

You held every cursive, and every prose and verse I could have ever wanted inscribed on my skin.

Falling asleep to the movement of your hands was a dream that I never wanted to wake from.

A beautiful dream I wish I could experience again. Just once.

It seems so fleeting now. The secret language spoken by your fingertips so out of reach.

And each day that you’re not here, I find my own words are slipping. I’ve never been good with them in the first place, at least not as clever as you are. Images have always been my vocabulary of choice. You know this.

But now, I have trouble with even the simplest of nouns.

Jar, rain, door. Home.

I don’t know what else to say other than that I wish you were here, sitting next to me as I write this, so that you could help me find the right words.

Or, better yet, I was there with you, so that no words were needed at all.

Missing you terribly …

Yours still,
Clarke

Enclosed in the envelope is a napkin drawing of Big Ben with two figures in the foreground.

Drawers in the corner of Clarke’s studio are overstuffed with similar doodles, created during coffee breaks from her studio, at night while idly watching Netflix, on weekends in the park while sat against a tree letting her mind drift along with the clouds.

Whether they are teared-out sheets from sketchbooks or napkins thieved from cafés, untold stories live on the edges of a line, within the drops of ink. The scenery changes, the activity might be different, but each one prominently features two figures.

Some are invented tales of a different life, in alternate universes, of a Clarke and a Lexa that are happy, that are in love. That are still together. Others are narrations documenting the everyday, a picnic, a Sunday morning, a swim at the lake, a cuddle by the campfire.

Mixed together and uncategorised, the drawers are a blurring of the imagined and the real, both a timestamp and an unrealised future. In them, twelve years of biography and four years of fiction collapsed onto themselves.

So no, Clarke notes contritely, it’s been more than a while. It has felt like forever.

There’s a sheen to her eyes that she tries to blink away while Lexa’s head is down in contemplation. She’s passably dried-eyed by the time the waiter returns with Lexa’s tea.

“Yeah, it has been a long time.”

Hoping to move the conversation along, Clarke takes the opening when Lexa goes to sip her cup.

“Speaking of tea. How is London?”

“Good. Wet.”

Lexa’s linguistic regression lands them two steps back to the earlier conversational strain. Her unhelpful reply plunges them into minutes of silence.

Despite being the one who called the meeting, she seems no more equipped than Clarke to navigate this unchartered territory. But Clarke supposes few people would know what actions and behaviours are acceptable when the once well-oiled mechanics of a couple irrevocably in love have been disassembled and rusted with disuse.

Considering that Lexa had walked herself back into Clarke’s life, it’s not a terrible start. But the tiny sighs, the stolen glances, the stilted conversation, the complete and utter lack of banter; are a cry so far from the Clarke and Lexa they used to be—or the ones they could be in Clarke’s sketches—that an ocean might as well exist between them.
Clarke is thankful for the accidental foresight to order half the menu so she can busy herself with cutting up the pancakes and chomping on the blueberries, hoping to eat her way out of the awkwardness.

Lexa in the meantime has put aside her one-woman orchestra and has taken up folding and unfolding her napkin into neat little triangles. A lightbulb goes off when Clarke catches on to nimble fingers recreating miniature paper versions of the Egyptian pyramids.

The difficulty lies in neither of them knowing what to do with their hands. They had been one of those exceedingly physical couples who communicated through constant touch, much to Anya’s annoyance.

(“Lexa, you can let go of Clarke’s hand, she’s not going to get lost on the way to her own bathroom.”)

When out, Lexa’s arm would be a fixture around Clarke’s waist, while Clarke’s head would take up residence on her shoulder. When not entangled in one another, hands would intermittently rub backs or caress necks or play with baby hairs. Leading such busy lives as a pair of aspiring artist and architect, they wanted to be as close as possible when the opportunity arose, to breathe each other in, to let the dust of a hectic day brush off against soft skin. To re-energise underneath gentle lips.

Classmates and colleagues learned to interact with them as a two-for-one deal, not batting an eye when Clarke would place a kiss to the corner of Lexa’s mouth after a well-delivered joke.

At home, they had a mutual habit of grazing each other in passing, a press of lips on a forehead, a shoulder brush here, a butt squeeze there, as a way to check in and affirm their co-presence. They developed almost a sixth sense for when the other was in the same room, never failing to reach out and find an awaiting warm body.

Talking was optional, but touch was needed and often sought out.

Lexa would be absorbed in the latest edition of National Geographic or Architectural Review, leaning back against the arm of the couch, occasionally murmuring her dis/agreement to what she was reading. Clarke would be focused on a drawing, sitting between Lexa’s legs, her left hand flying across the page of her sketchbook. And every few minutes there’d be a kiss to the crown of her head, slender fingers carding through her hair or a hand stroking her side. She in turn would massage Lexa’s leg or engage their hands in a silent game of push and pull.

Laced, entwined, or simply held, these tiny acts of intimacy, of tenderness, were the perfect seconds of an hour spent with not one word exchanged.

(“Gross,” Raven once walked out of dinner with them, drawing the line at their holding hands while eating.)

Their physical connection was one of the hallmarks of their relationship, even before accounting for the sexual intimacy that had Clarke’s heart rate at a near-constant risk of cardiac arrest.

(She quickly shuts the latter train of thought down. There is no way she would survive this non-lunch if she lets her mind wander to the whimpers and silent pleas that Lexa’s hips and abs could coax out of her with little effort.)

—

Between bites Clarke goes to unconsciously rub the cover of Great Expectations that’s since rested on her lap.
While waiting for Lexa to make the next move, she notices how every few minutes, Lexa’s gaze subtly shifts to the piece of avocado that had fallen off the toast on Clarke’s plate. It’s a coordinated sequence of eyes on her tea, then the plate before flickering up to Clarke’s eyes, and all again in reverse order.

But she knows Lexa won’t ask.

—

In all the years that she’s known her, Lexa has rarely ever asked for anything, at least not aloud. Their first kiss, the last bite, an extra blanket. Warmth and comfort and support were always freely given but not demanded in return.

Even when the want for something was plain in her eyes, she would not vocalise it. Lexa suffered through the terrible cold of 2002 because Clarke usually kept her childhood bedroom at near arctic conditions, her linen closet minimally stocked of wool coverings. Only when Lexa had started triple-layering her pjs and wearing a beanie to bed did it occur to Clarke that the goosebumps they shared during high school sleepovers weren’t for entirely the same reasons. She finally understood why Lexa would always end up physically closer to her by morning than where she had started at night, undoubtedly gravitating towards the space heater that was Clarke’s body.

When she had chastised Lexa for not saying anything, between sniffles from a very red nose and through watery eyes, Lexa had poorly defended, “I didn’t want to wake you.”

It equally frustrated and endeared her for Lexa to prioritise Clarke’s needs and well-being to the exclusion of her own. Her altruism sometimes being the source of their infrequent fights.

So Clarke had gotten exceptionally good at interpreting her non-verbal cues, at reading her microfacial expressions, the subtle shifts in body language. What each tell meant. A tight jaw, a crinkled nose, a raised chin—how the tips of her ears pink, thumbs becoming overactive, her spine straightening in incremental degrees.

All minute changes invisible to everyone else’s naked eye.

But for Clarke, out of necessity and honed through practice, she had become a behavioural and linguistic specialist in all things Lexa.

—

Her decade–plus tenure as a Lexaologist keys her in presently to the tacit want behind Lexa’s micro eye movements. And if that hadn’t clued her in enough, then the less than subtle licking of Lexa’s lips once or twice confirms it.

Unable to take the low-key pining any longer, Clarke pushes the plate closer to her. “Lexa, please have some. I won’t be able to finish all of it. There’s too much food. I might’ve been too trigger happy when I read the menu.” Clarke laughs self-consciously.

She sees the warring of emotions as Lexa weighs the pros and cons of the offer, seemingly assigning the same value to accepting toast as pressing a nuclear button. But then Lexa’s stomach grumbles loudly, deciding for her.

Clarke takes advantage and urges on, “it’s just avocado toast, Lexa.”

That might have been the exact wrong thing to say.
Lexa’s eyes flash dangerously at Clarke’s comment.

Though it’s too late to take back the words, she immediately retracts her arm that had been extended in offer, feeling the burning sting of Lexa’s glare on the back of her hand.

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“Is this seat taken?”

The girl looked up at Clarke’s question, her eyes opening slowly, and using her right hand as a visor to shield from the anticipated brightness.

She sent Clarke a curious look.

To the right and left of her the bleachers were completely empty. She was sitting with her legs stretched out before her, bum at the edge of a mid-level bench, upper body leaned back against the row behind her, and her chin tipped up to take in the afternoon sun. Wearing denim cutoffs, with sunglasses propped atop her head, and white sneakers half dangling off where her ankles cross, the high schooler was the embodiment of a carefree, disaffected teenager in a John Hughes movie.

Next to her was a flattened brown paper bag on which sat a half loaf of bread, one slice quarter-eaten, and an avocado. Beside it, an open book that Clarke thinks might be Catcher in the Rye dog-eared to where the name “Holden” can be made out.

Her prone figure and makeshift picnic were the only signs of life within view for a mile. Otherwise, it was a tumbleweed landscape absent of their peers or teachers.

While everyone else were currently holed up in the cafeteria expending the coiled energy present at the start of every new school year, Clarke wanted to enjoy the last of the late summer days. August’s humidity had given way to a cooler September, the balmy weather always making her hands itch for her pencils and a vista.

For an unfathomable reason, the bleachers called out to her, surprising given her usual lack of inclination to voluntarily be anywhere near a sports field. And despite no lack of choice spots to seat herself, something drew her to the only occupant.

At the silent head shake and the congenial wave of a hand, as if to say the seat is all yours, Clarke sat down, offering a grateful smile and leaving a comfortable gap between them.

“Do you mind?” She asked, pointing to the sketchbook she had pulled out of her bag and settled onto her lap.

Another curious look, followed by another head shake.

After a stretch of time, while Clarke was engrossed in tracing the contours of a few clouds that looked suspiciously like a pair of swans, her silent companion finally spoke up.

“Alligator pear.”

“What?”

“That was the English term for avocado back in the 17th century.”
“Really?”

“Either that. Or old Spanish for testicle.”

They both laughed. The girl sat up then, and offered her hand to shake, which Clarke happily obliged.

“Lexa.”

“Clarke.” She was warmed by the soft give of her grasp.

“I know,” Lexa said with a twitch to her lips that Clarke also returned knowingly, if not more timidly.

—

Of course Lexa knew her name. Likewise, Clarke was certainly aware of Lexa’s existence.

She had noticed Lexa on the first day of school for their freshman morning assembly, not hard for a lanky girl with a summer tan, green eyes, and impressive hair to stand out among the sweaty masses. But aside from the breath-stealing aesthetic, she had never seen such carriage and presence for someone their age, so disarmingly self-assured despite her slight frame. She made cutoff jean shorts and a racer back tank top look like the tailored garment sported by royals.

Clarke had to hide her pleased smile, on entering her last period class, when she spotted the familiar mass of curls sitting a few rows from the front. Their gazes met as Clarke stalled at the doorway, her breath caught in her throat at how arrestingly pretty the girl was up close. The freckles on her nose and sprinkled across exposed shoulders made Clarke think of sun lotion and white sandy beaches. She could almost smell the salt water.

Wow, was all Clarke could think, rooted in place as the latecomers brushed pass her into the classroom.

She must have had the same effect on the brunette. When their eyes locked she didn’t miss the shallow swallow. The tiny gasp.

Despite the instant connection, however, nothing more came of it after Clarke took her seat and they both focused on the lesson. A combination of nerves, an unfortunate incident in the art room, and Raven and Octavia’s distracting antics had kept Clarke from approaching her the rest of the week.

—

Had she known how much more mesmerising, and unexpectedly intimate, the hold of Lexa’s gaze would be during their first real one-on-one interaction, Clarke might have delayed their introductions even further.

“It’s nice to officially meet you.”

She’s glad Lexa doesn’t mention their previous silent encounter and whatever unconventional first impression she’d left behind.

To distract from those eyes and Lexa’s still lingering smile, she switched gear to bravely admit, “I’ve never had avocado before.”

“Goodbye, Clarke.” Lexa abruptly rose from her seat, and feigned gathering her things to leave. “It
was nice to meet you but we can’t be friends.”

“No, wait.” Clarke laughed, amusedly caught off-guard by the overdramatic performance. “Sue me, I’m sheltered,” she defended as she pulled the girl back down by her arm, “help un-shelter me.”

She stifled her chuckle when Lexa nodded with more seriousness than Clarke was anticipating.

As if tasked with the most important assignment in the history of the world, Lexa reached for her assortment of food and carefully placed it on her lap, using the brown bag as a placemat. She pulled a spoon from her pocket, and started to carve out small chunks of avocado that she skilfully placed in neat rows on a fresh slice of bread.

“Do you always carry a spoon with you?”

“Comes in handy,” Lexa shrugged off the tease, continuing their easy-going banter without skipping a beat, “you never know when you’ll come across soup in the wild.”

With her tongue adorably poked out in concentration, she expertly wielded the plastic instrument to cover the bread in a layer of green, and presented Clarke the assembled product with two hands, as if handing over a bar of gold.

“Keep in mind, it tastes way better when the bread is actually toasted and there’s proper sea salt and peppercorn.”

“Uh-huh.”

Clarke half listened as she eyed the open-faced sandwich and tried to strategise how best to get the thing in her mouth without losing the prized toppings. In the end, she decided to take the biggest bite she could, hoping for adequate coverage to minimise any loss.

“Mmmm, it’s good.” Clarke took another bite, wiping at the corners of her mouth, before asking, “but, why avocado?”

Lexa looked pleased that Clarke liked it, and didn’t hesitate to answer.

“I hated fruit as a kid. Apples, oranges, bananas especially. I wouldn’t touch any of them. One day my dad came home with a bag of avocados, convinced that he had found the exception to my rule. He said, ‘you’re going to love these berries.’”

Lexa dropped her voice to mimic what Clarke assumed was her father’s baritone voice.

“Berry?” Clarke asked around another mouthful, “I thought it was a pear?”

“I was confused too. But he told me that botanically it’s a large berry. I was still skeptical but humoured him anyways. When I didn’t hate it, he felt victorious.” Her face lit up as she said, “my dad is this huge tower of a man but I swear he actually squealed.”

Clarke mirrored her smile before taking more enthusiastic bites and then asking, “how’d it end up on bread?”

“One time we ran out of luncheon meat for my sandwich. The only thing we had in the house were avocados. So my mom cut some up and put it on top of toasted bread. She saw it on an Australian cooking show once. I loved it. Something about the softness of the avocado with the crunch that made it so much better than on its own.”
Lexa licked her lips, her eyes glazed over as if the sandwich had magically appeared before her. “It became my new lunch staple. Seeing how much I liked it, Mom got more adventurous, and started experimenting with adding other stuff. Arugula, sun-dried tomatoes, walnuts, cheese shavings. Even oatmeal because she thought that’d be a good way to sneak in my fibre.”

Lexa got lost for a moment down memory lane before she picked up her thread again. “One time she tried sardines. That didn’t go so well. Turns out I like my fruit to be fish free.”

Clarke chuckled when Lexa made a scrunching face as if this time the cold-blooded vertebrates had irrationally leaped out of the Hudson River and slapped her with their pungent smell.

Although Clarke was eager to hear more, enjoying the animated retelling, Lexa went quiet after that. She started to play with her hands that were now hanging from her knees, circling her thumbs while looking distantly towards the baseball diamond.

By the way her lips were pursed and a slight stiffness had crept into her shoulders, Clarke suspected that Lexa might have revealed more than she typically does. She was surprised she had opened up at all. From the short but thoughtful answers Lexa gave in English class, she got the impression the girl wasn’t much of a talker in general.

At Lexa’s long pause, Clarke turned fully to her and asked softly in concern. “Hey, you ok?”

“Yes,” Lexa said, then a moment later, added almost too-quietly. “She died a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok. I mean, it’s not. But she was sick for a while.”

They sit silently, letting the sadness settle until it naturally petered out.

Eventually Lexa resumed her story, a smile returning. “Anyways, my dad …” she chuckled, ”my dad is basically useless in the kitchen. Avocado toast was the only culinary legacy of my mom’s that he could do justice. So my sister and I, we basically survive on it now.”

Clarke rustled with her own bag then, and retrieved her pitiful peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and made to hand a triangle half to Lexa. “If it’s any consolation, here, this is part of my survival kit, courtesy of my WASP parents. Not as exotic but very dependable.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.” Lexa mocked a disgusted face at the banality of pb&j, but nevertheless gave Clarke an appreciative smile.

"Suit yourself," Clarke says, "it’s an American institution. You're missing out."

For how little they knew of each other, Clarke felt an odd sense of peace sitting there next to Lexa. Her initial physical attraction had been quickly sidelined for the promise of something different, more profound. There was something about the girl, and her earnestness and gentle demeanour, her quiet confidence and wry wit. Something that resonated with Clarke.

Where it should have been another awkward encounter of two near-strangers, she instead felt the spark of an already-formed connection, a tether to a deeper bond, a thrumming in her mind hinting at something familiar yet unnamed.

“Thank you for sharing. Your sandwich, and story.”

Clarke placed a gentle hand on Lexa’s knee, receiving a meaningful nod in kind.
Perhaps it was because Lexa had willingly opened up and let herself be vulnerable that Clarke felt an inexplicable need to protect her, to keep her heart safe.

A seed was sown that day that Clarke had subconsciously committed to watering.

The bleachers soon became their spot, even as it got more populated when the other kids discovered the appeal of the great outdoors versus the stale air of the school gym.

While the weather was still agreeable, Clarke would make her way out to an awaiting Lexa, sketchbook and a grocer’s bag in hand, to find two neatly portioned piles of avocado at the ready, and the spine of her book cracked further as she progressed through the novel.

Clarke would draw, and Lexa would read.

(One afternoon Lexa had interrupted Clarke’s drawing to wax on about her complicated relationship with Holden Caulfield. While in principle she embraced his independence and ‘fuck-you’ attitude, she found his relationships with the female characters, and they themselves, troubling, and was supremely frustrated that Jane didn’t have more agency in her happiness. Clarke didn’t have an answer to Lexa’s feminist quandary, too busy gapping like a fish at a fourteen year-old using the word agency.)

Even when November clouds had forced them to find a more suitably dry spot for their now-daily meet ups, the avocado toast remained a constant. No matter if it was the cafeteria, the library, the art room, or the landing of the north stairwell, staked out in whatever corner they could find, Lexa would provide the base ingredients and Clarke would surprise her with her creative selection of add-ons.

(Their daughter’s spiked interest in grocery shopping didn’t go unnoticed by Jake and Abby Griffin.)

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The waiter’s dutiful reappearance to check in on them pulls Clarke out of the memory, and by the startled jump from across the table, it looks like Lexa had too been temporally displaced from their present location in The Standard.

Kenneth, the name tag reads, departs hastily on Lexa’s polite but curt concession that everything is good.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke capitulates.

Lexa waves her hand to shrug off Clarke’s apology, and offers a white flag in return. “No, I’m sorry. It’s very kind of you. Thank you.”

She delicately places one half of the avocado toast on her napkin, and begins to dig into it contently.

Once they’ve both recovered from Clarke’s mis-step, the conversation resumes in earnest, though it’s mostly Clarke making small talk. She manages to steer clear of any more emotional landmines, focusing on Raven’s progress as a mechanical engineer completing a postdoctoral fellowship at MIT in her spare time; Octavia’s recent promotion at the police academy; and Lincoln’s latest heroics over at the fire station. Nothing that Lexa probably doesn’t already know through Anya.
(She omits information about her art, not yet ready to unpack that TSA over-regulation baggage.)

Not paying heed to Clarke’s newfound posting as her friends’ career biographers, Lexa hums and nods at the appropriate intervals, even as she remains visibly faraway with her own thoughts. It’s a strange situation Clarke finds herself in, to be politely engaging in inconsequential chitchat when the big questions hang over them like a guillotine.

But she’s glad for the temporary detente, if only so she can muster up enough courage to finally address the subject. When Lexa has completed eating, Clarke treads lightly as if approaching a grazing doe.

“What were you doing at the gallery last night?”

“To see art.”

Lexa stalls as she swallows her last bite prematurely, and goes to wipe her mouth with her overly-creased napkin.

“Lexa.”

“I wanted to see your art.”

“Why?” Clarke asks. “How did you even know I had an exhibition?”

Were you thinking of me? Did you seek me out? are the follow-ups that Clarke keeps to herself.

Lexa smoothly overlooks the first question and addresses the second one, “Anya had mentioned it. And my office was having a dinner party in the neighbourhood. I figured since I’d be in the area—”

“Wait, your office?” Clarke cuts her off when the middle part of Lexa’s rambling catches up to her.

Lexa nods. “Yes, to welcome new hires and transfers.” She pauses to take a sip from her tea, looks down at her hands that are now neatly folded on the table, and then sheepishly admits, “I started three weeks ago.”

Clarke leans back in her chair, somewhat stunned. The collar of her down puffer suddenly feels too tight. She doesn’t know where to start, her mind reeling from the information overload: that Lexa has an office, that she’s just started a new job, that she’s in New York, permanently perhaps.

Yet for some reason, it’s learning that Lexa has been within physical proximity for close to a month that Clarke finds the most unsettling.

“My office is actually just around the corner. I pop into here for lunch sometimes. They make a nice pomegranate salad, and I like their selection of fiction.”

Clarke’s tuned out by now as Lexa prattles on about the culinary and literary merits of The Standard.

A burning sensation is building behind her eyes, and she isn’t sure why.

It’s understandable that Lexa would have a life that Clarke is no longer privy to.

It’s understandable that Lexa would land a well-to-do job that’s reflected in the well-to-do neighbourhood in which they’re currently dining.

It’s understandable that the new office would want to celebrate a hiring catch like Lexa, she was always ahead of her peers in architecture school, a visionary and natural leader who could rebuild
civilisation out of ruins if she wanted to.

But it’s knowing that she and Lexa have been in the same city, maybe even on the same block, for three weeks before Lexa reached out, that hits the hardest.

It is the three weeks that gets lodged in her throat.

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“Three weeks?!”

Clarke exclaimed in a fit of despair as if she had just been told of the death of her beloved pet turtle rather than being informed of a planned family vacation.

“It’s just three weeks, honey.”

Her dad countered in a measured tone, hoping to deescalate her rising panic. He received a harrumph and look of betrayal for his attempt at casualness, and failure to see the monumentality of such a timeframe.

“That’s two weeks and six days too long!” Clarke protested and couldn’t help deepening her frown thinking of being separated from her new best friend for more than twenty-four hours. Let alone 3,000 miles between them.

“Your grandmother has been looking forward to seeing you again this summer. You love going there. It’ll be good,” he tried to reason, but knowing what truly motivated his daughter’s emotional state these days, he quickly added, “and you can write to Lexa every day.”

“It’s not the same,” she argued, posture rigid as if in a Mexican standoff outside the saloon and not a father-daughter conversation in her bedroom.

“I know. But she’ll be here when you get back. She’s not going anywhere. Plus, they have that new video thing. What’s it called again? Skip?”

“Skype, Dad.” Clarke exasperatedly corrected.

“That’s right, Skype. You can videochat at night.”

The promise of continuing to see Lexa seemed to placate Clarke a bit. Ever since the day on the bleachers they had been nearly inseparable. Classes, study sessions, sleepovers, weekend trips to Clarke’s favourite art museums, to Lexa’s natural museums, late night food runs, early morning runs (well, Lexa ending her jogs at Clarke’s house for breakfast)—all ensured that the new friends were in each other’s constellations weekly, if not daily.

They took teenage co-dependence to a new level, but Lexa’s intimidating scowl and Clarke’s protective instincts prevented anyone from judging them for it. (Though it didn’t safeguard them from their friends mocking.)

“Fine,” Clarke surrendered, “I will go to California. I will have fun, and genuinely love every minute I get to spend with Grandma. We will do Sudoku puzzles together, and spend our nights on her porch, wrapped snuggly in her handmade-for-me oh-so-soft afghan while happily listening to stories about Grandpa.”
“That’s my girl,” Jake smiled.

“But know this,” Clarke puffed her chest, pointing an accusing finger at her father before she crossed her arms, jutted a hip out and levelled him a glare with the intensity of a thousand suns, “any other time not spent with Grandma, I will be wallowing in misery and completely blaming you for it, and will refuse to acknowledge your existence in public for an indeterminable time.”

“As long as I can still be your dad in private.” Jake snickered and drew his hand out. “Your conditions are harsh, but acceptable. Do we have a deal?”

“Ok.”

Clarke went to shake his hand and couldn’t help but smile when he pulled her into a hug instead and kissed the top of her head.

That afternoon, after the news bomb, she had biked over to Lexa’s to commiserate in the impending doom. Lexa endured an hour of Clarke’s dramatics before calmly setting them up on a Skype schedule with military precision. She marked on their shared calendar Clarke’s anticipated whereabouts calculated as a function of weather forecasts, local events, and her grandmother’s habits, and identified gaps for when Clarke could text or call Lexa. It turned out to be astonishingly accurate, save for a few adjustments to accommodate unaccounted-for visits by the neighbourhood kids wanting to hang out with Clarke.

So they did end up Skyping every night they were apart, and Clarke did text her at every opportune moment during the day.

—

Yet still, despite the sustained communication while she was away, Clarke felt the palpable distance when she returned three weeks later, a never-before shyness and hesitation to Lexa’s affection. She was more careful with her words and her touch.

One particularly fraught evening, they had been sitting on Clarke’s couch, each at either ends, with her parallel and Lexa perpendicular. There was a gulf between them when normally they’d be side by side brushed against one another, snugly sharing a blanket.

On the fifth time she caught Lexa’s flitting looks, Clarke had enough.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Lexa,” she chided.

“Really, it’s nothing.”

“Lex, come on.”

Clarke nudged her toe against the side of Lexa’s thigh, and gestured to the bowl of M&M’s in the middle of the coffee table, trying to lighten the mood.

“You haven’t even touched the red ones. I know something must be wrong.”

“You asked me out.”

Clarke stilled her movements.
She didn’t know what a sucker punch was until those words ringed in the air. She wanted to immediately rescind her prodding, the sharp pain not worth sating her need to fix things. Her hands were suddenly clammy, and she could feel the colour draining from her face. She couldn’t understand the sensation, but there was a tightness in her throat and stomach.

“When?” She asked quietly.

“The second week you were at your grandma’s,” Lexa said without looking at her.

“Oh.”

Clarke’s loudly hammering heart must have drowned out her next question, “what did you say?,” or maybe the words got stuck in her mouth and never came out, because Lexa stayed mute for a long time after.

The living room suddenly felt too open, the atmosphere too thick. She pulled her legs in that had been stretched out on the couch, bringing her knees to her chest, as she turned her body to face the TV more directly, pretending to be absorbed by the turn of event in the movie they were supposed to be watching.

Her thoughts whirled, while her breathing slowed.

She knew that Lexa attracted a lot of attention. They both did. Clarke wasn’t oblivious to other girls’ crushes by the more than friendly glances they gave Lexa, and the less than friendly ones they gave her. But any jealousy was completely stymied by how much Lexa doted on her, to the exclusion of everyone else. (“Like white on rice” was how Octavia once described their conjoined existence.) So it never occurred to Clarke that Lexa might reciprocate others’ feelings. Now, blindsided by the possibility that she could, with Luna, the gut-wrenching thought had Clarke closing her eyes and willing the tears not to fall.

She wrapped her arms around her legs, and placed her chin on her knees, hoping the firm surface would help to keep her lower lip from trembling. She was trying to make herself as small as possible so the pain had no room to grow.

“Clarke?” Lexa must have moved closer while Clarke was deep in thought because she was now within arm’s reach to gently shake her shoulder.

“I leave for three weeks and you get a girlfriend,” Clarke tried to joke, discreetly wiping a wet cheek against her sleeve, and missing Lexa’s pleading look to meet her eyes.

“Clarke, I didn’t say yes.”

She snapped her eyes up at that, finally tuning in to what Lexa must have been trying to tell her all along.

But the immense relief she should have felt was swiftly replaced with unqualified worry that perhaps Lexa was holding herself back, on account of Clarke; that in some way, she was Lexa’s inadvertent gatekeeper.

She turned her head, to lay it in the crook of her elbow, and looked at Lexa with all the softness in the world.

“You could, you know. If you wanted to.”

The words felt like sandpaper against her tongue but she wanted Lexa to know she prioritised her
happiness, even if it meant sacrificing her own sometimes.

“I know. She’s really nice,” Lexa nodded. If she noticed the crack in Clarke’s voice she didn’t mention it. She raised her hand to move several loose strands of hair behind Clarke’s ear before she whispered, with all the gentleness in the world, “but then there’s you.”

Clarke lifted her head up in silent ask, what about me?.

At her imploring, expectant expression, Lexa’s momentary bravery precipitously ended. “You’re too high-maintenance. I don’t have time for anything else.”

Lexa’s deflection unwittingly gave credence to Clarke’s earlier concern about her complicity in Lexa’s non-relationship status. Though if Clarke had given it more thought before she went into panic mode earlier, she’d realised there was some truth to it. She was too demanding of her quality time with her best friend that if anyone stood a chance with Lexa they’d have to do so under subterfuge or when Clarke was busy playing bridge with her grandma.

“I’m never going away again,” Clarke puffed and half-joked once the dust settled.

“That would be best,” Lexa murmured her assent.

Although pleased with their progressive return to a state of equilibrium, the question still gnawed at Clarke minutes later.

“If it wasn’t Luna, then why have you been distant all week?”

Clarke could see the hinge of jaw working back and forth minutely as Lexa weighed her answer and gathered herself.

“It made me think that, maybe,” Lexa gulped before finishing, “there was someone else.” She was fiddling with the hem of her sweater, eyes downcast, when she reluctantly added, “someone else for you.”

Taken aback by the confession, and the unanticipated role reversal from consolee to consoler, Clarke scrambled to unwrap herself from her cocoon position and straightened up to directly face Lexa. She moved to lift Lexa’s chin then brought a hand up to weave through her hair before cupping her neck, thumb gently swiping across where ear and jaw met.

She waited until their eyes were fully locked before she spoke.

“There is no one else, Lexa.”

The reassurance was like an injection of oxygen into the room, lungs inflating, hearts restarting. Lexa released a shuddering breath that Clarke felt its reverberations tingle through to the tips of her fingers, followed by a small nod then an absent kiss on her forehead.

She pulled Lexa closer into a hug, their upper bodies flushed. The closer proximity helped to recalibrate their breaths to a steadier rhythm. With relieved hearts, they finally moved to recreate their habitual two-person blanket fort on the couch, more together than when they had started the movie.

It had taken three weeks for the first naming aloud of the bond they shared, for Clarke to realise that perhaps what they had started eight months earlier was always something more than friends.

A something that became completely untenable to ignore by the next summer when Clarke returned for another three-week visit to her grandmother’s.
A something that transformed into an everything the following year when Lexa accompanied her on the annual trip as her girlfriend.

But on that particular day, hours later when Lexa was softly curled in front of her, chest rising steadily, as Clarke was also losing herself to sleep, she let the words fall out into the dark for the first time.

“No one. Just you.”

“Clarke?”

She hears faintly, but the sound is too distant for her to hold onto as an anchor while her vision blurs.

“Clarke, are you ok?”

She feels hot. Too hot.

The images of their younger selves are swimming around and Clarke has to close her eyes to keep her body from swaying with the visuals. But it must’ve been for longer than she thought because when she opens them, she’s surprised to see Lexa kneeled down in front of her, one hand lowering the zipper of her parka, the other tentatively on Clarke’s thigh.

Kenneth their waiter is standing a few steps back, concern etched across his face that’s triply present on Lexa’s.

“Could you please get her some water?” Lexa sternly instructs more than asks the waiter who scurries away immediately to oblige, picking up on the obvious edge of irritation in her tone. She then turns back to the subject of her worry, and more softly implores, “breathe, Clarke.”

Clarke takes a deep breath and then a long drink from the glass of water that appears seconds later. She wipes the excess fluid from her lips with the back of her hand, and reassures a still on-edge Lexa, “I’m ok, Lex.”

The nickname slips but Clarke is too busy fanning herself and trying to regulate her internal temperature to see that it didn’t go unnoticed or how the hand that had been lightly rubbing her thigh had haltingly gone rigid.

At the return of Clarke’s cheeks to an acceptable level of rosiness, Lexa seems to register her unintended breach into Clarke’s personal space. She brushes the non-existent lint off of Clarke’s lap, and makes her way back to her seat.

Clarke fully unzips her parka and steps clumsily out of it, roughly discarding the human duvet cover onto the backside of a nearby armchair.

“Sorry, it was just getting too hot in here.”

Lexa must agree because she’s staring at Clarke’s top, which is currently clinging tighter to her chest aided by the accumulated sweat. Lexa snaps her eyes away with a self-chastising shake of the head but not quickly enough for Clarke to miss the flattering gawk.
Clarke hides her smirk behind the paperback she’s been using to fan herself and takes another greedy gulp of her water, as she re-situates herself and their tableau resets.

In an effort to distract with some levity, Lexa leans in to say, with a glint in her eyes and a double-meaning in play, “I know you think you’re hot, and I’ve never disagreed, but you didn’t have to go into systems shutdown to remind me.”

It’s the first genuine laugh they share, one that floods Clarke’s body with a different warmth. God, she’s missed that sound.

“You were always burning up,”Lexa says, “it’s a wonder you own a parka in the first place.” She smiles over the rim of her mug she’s picked up to sip.

That smile, the first that’s fully reached her eyes, isn’t helpful to Clarke’s overheating problem. Feeling an uptick of her heartbeat, she has to valiantly fight the tinge of pink wanting to colour her cheeks.

“It is really good to see you,”Clarke asserts instead, riding the high of their light moment.

Her emotions have yo-yoed so much within the last hour that she’s relieved for some respite from her fraying nerves, a sentiment that seems to be shared by the soft look she receives across the table.

—

A time later, with most of her meal completed, Clarke knows they’ve circled around the issue long enough. Were it up to her, she’d be happy to just stare at Lexa all day. To memorise the new lines that have formed on her face, to capture the dance of light across supple skin and reflected in clear eyes, to trace the petal shape of slightly chapped lips.

But the need to break the tension of her nervous anticipation outweighs any desire to soak in as much of Lexa as possible. Even her beauty has a limit when it comes to Clarke’s shattered nerves. She needs to find out why Lexa had requested this meeting as much as she needed to remind herself to breathe throughout the past hour.

She needs to be put out of her misery for all the wild theories that have run through her head so far. She can’t fathom any reason why Lexa would want to see her again unless she was sick or getting married, which would be two sides of the same coin of painful news for Clarke. Though rationally speaking, Lexa is under no obligation to inform her whether she’s suffering from an illness or have met someone else. Yet, Clarke still holds out hope that today’s purpose has no remote connection to death or marriage.

She doesn’t think it’s possible for a heart to break into any smaller pieces.

On the exhale of a shaky breath, Clarke buttresses her fortress to finally ask, “Lexa, why are we here?”

Lexa looks up from the crumbs on the table she had been picking at, startled somewhat by Clarke’s directness. She shifts her gaze away for a moment, over Clarke’s shoulder towards the fireplace, as if drawing up invisible courage from the heat of its slow burn.

“I want to give it another try.”

It’s a good thing Clarke had already finished her water or Lexa would have had to rescue her from a second medical emergency. The butterflies that had been keeping her company throughout this lunch could have easily escaped through her slackened jaw if they wanted to take a break from all their
afternoon fluttering.

At her widened eyes and skyrocketed eyebrows, Lexa swiftly corrects. “Friendship, I mean.”

“Oh.”

Lexa fiddles with a piece of crust before she launches into making her case.

“Since I’m back in New York, I didn’t want it to be like those awkward exes that need to geographically divide the city and their friend groups into yours and mine.”

Clarke internally winces. The word ex will never not sting but she lets Lexa continue uninterrupted at her turbo clip. Her words are rushing out like she’s afraid they wouldn’t form in the first place if delivered at a slower pace.

“Our friends are friends. My sister is married to our best friend. Our circles overlap. I know it’s a big city but we’re bound to run into each other.”

Overlap? She balks. More like a contorted Venn diagram.

Give it to Lexa to take such a rational approach to navigating emotional upheavals. Where Clarke would often flounder, Lexa would formulate a ten thousand-word dissertation and bullet-point out ways to circumvent the vagaries of love.

Not able to do much at this point but absorb Lexa’s words, Clarke simply nods her quasi-understanding. She is fully aware of the delicate partisanship manoeuvring inherent to breakups, and is fairly certain Anya wouldn’t even speak to her if it weren’t for Raven. She feels fortunate for Octavia and Lincoln’s maturity that they hadn’t taken sides, not many adults have the emotional fortitude to remain Switzerland when mutual friends go painful, separate ways.

“Youre exhibition … your art …” Lexa stammers, struggling to finish her thought, and instead redirects when the right words don’t come. “After seeing it last night, I realised there are things about you that I don’t know. That I want to know. I thought we could go on some dates. Ease back into it.”

That finally gets Clarke to speak up.

“Dates?” She all but chokes out.

“Yes, friend dates.”

Oh.

Despite the Internet’s advice to avoid at all costs, and just general common sense, Lexa ploughs forward with her social enlightenment that former lovers can retain a degree of conviviality, heedless of a tectonic-plate-shifting breakup like theirs.

“We were always really good friends before anything.” Lexa takes a moment to finally breathe. “You were my best friend. I’ve missed that.”

Clarke notes Lexa’s word choice with interest—the word that instead of you—but nonetheless allows herself to admit the same.

“I’ve missed it too, Lexa.”

“So, friends?”
For all the bluster and hurriedness of her speech, Lexa ends it on a hushed note, letting her eyes communicate the rest silently.

—

The proposal throws Clarke for a loop.

She had come prepared to atone for every slight and cut and injury, ready to ask for forgiveness.

She wasn’t expecting Lexa to skip right over forgiveness and onto friendship instead.

Given how things had ended between them, Clarke is taken aback that Lexa would want anything to do with her.

But where there should be anger and resentment, she sees only the undercurrent of resigned sorrow borne out of heartbreaking loss. It sits in the corner of Lexa’s eyes, at the dull edge of a once unfettered smile. It had sat underneath the surface of her steel impassivity at the gallery.

Behind her steady gaze is a murmur of disquiet. Lexa looks unsure and scared, burdened by the weight of her ask, as if she had cracked her chest open and entrusted Clarke with a scalpel, waiting to see if she’ll use it to heal or to hurt.

Clarke’s not sure her trembling hands is up for the task, though she’ll aim for the former, she’s scared she might inadvertently cause more of the latter.

And she can’t bear to inflict any more suffering on Lexa than she already has.

—

Clarke is broken out of her rueful thoughts when in a further bid of courage Lexa sticks her hand out across the table to finalise her offer. Clarke’s silence must have unnerved her into action.

The gesture refocuses Clarke to consider what accepting means for herself.

It doesn’t feel real. That Lexa is volunteering a do-over that Clarke had shed tears for during sleepless nights but had never imagined in a million years would be possible.

She thought the ship had long sailed, that the train had left the station, the plane had taken off. Whatever the transport analogy, in all scenarios Clarke is the one still standing on the platform clutching her carry-on to her chest, out of breath and inconsolable for arriving too late.

She had dreamt of swimming across the ocean, running after the steamer, or hiring her own pilot, but never had she considered Lexa herself would steer the ship around, reverse the train, or reroute the plane.

Clarke must still be suffering from a heat-induced delirium, or the effects of global warming is personally singling her out, because the outstretched hand looks to her like the recent snowfall covering the dunes of the Sahara desert.

An unexpected but bright sighting.

It’s sublimely beautiful, if not majestic in its deception.

The precarity of the situation notwithstanding, she finds herself willing to accept what’s being presented before her at face value. The risk that it turns out to be a mirage, signposting that either the
world has indeed ended or that she has succumbed to heat stroke, she’ll file away for processing at a later time when there isn’t a slight tremor to Lexa’s hand and Lexa isn’t looking at her with muted hope.

Never mind the alarm bells ringing off in her head that Lincoln must be able to hear from his station miles away and across Brooklyn Bridge, or the out-of-the-blueness with which Lexa had appeared, or the scotch tape that’s still barely holding her own torn-open heart together.

Clarke can not deny the permanent ache that sits lowly in her chest easing just a little at the thought of being friends with Lexa again.

The empty space that Lexa had left behind was so vast that she needed canvases larger than the combined landmasses of Russia, China and Australia to fill, deserts and sand dunes included. Lexa’s proposal feels like a heavy-duty woven cloth where Clarke had previously been using filo-thin pastry sheets to cover her painting surfaces.

Surreal or not, she is grateful for the fearless hand that’s reached out to pull her from the depth of her regret.

She feels a little less hollow for the extra help to refill the cavern of her heart. To start mending it.

If this is the end of the world, and the beginning of her unravelling, she doesn’t care. She’ll gladly go down in spectacular flames, and lead the charge out of the apocalypse, if it means having Lexa back in her life—and she gets one more chance at cosmic bliss.

Against reason, and in favour of hope, Clarke will save rationality for another day.

She shakes her agreement.

“Friends.”

——

_The order of the day_
Is mend the falling out
And let guilt fade away
Refinement bring about

Then we can begin
Then my heart can beat
And underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it

_Underneath It_ by Ásgeir

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: Clarke and Lexa reconnect, part one. Old is new again as they go on their first “date.”

Something extra: Kismet, a deleted flashback scene of their first meeting. Posted for Clexa Week 2018 — Meet Ugly. It was cut out of this chapter because of length and tonal differences. Much fluff but does offer a glimpse into Lexa's pov. :)
Batter One

Chapter Summary

Clarke and Lexa reconnect, part one. Old is new again as they go on their first “date.”

Chapter Notes

Like a leaky faucet, a little more of their backstory drips through as they get to know each other again. A slow but steady drip burn until their past catches up to their present. (And then, not so slow? Or not so steady?)

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(Lexa) 4:56 pm
Hi Clarke, it was good to see you again.

(Lexa) 4:57 pm
I hope you’ve had a good rest of week.

(Lexa) 4:57 pm
I know this is short notice, but are you free tomorrow afternoon? It’d be good to …

(Lexa) 4:58 pm
If I stop using the word good, do you think you’d be more free?

These are the four texts that await Clarke on Thursday evening, and has her grinning at her screen after locking up her studio and making her way upstairs to the loft.

The messages on her phone show incontrovertible proof that the previous Sunday at the Standard happened, and of the earnestness of Lexa’s desire to renew their friendship.

They hadn’t talked more after the lunch, Clarke leaving it in Lexa’s court to follow up, but also giving her some space to understandably have a change of heart. Room for second thoughts that she herself hadn’t had time to consider because of the flurry of typical post-opening activities.

Leaving on niceties and the open-ended ‘let’s stay in touch,’ Clarke was happy to let things steep longer. But while Lexa was never far from her mind, she hadn’t expected to hear from her again so soon. It’s still an adjustment that they are now a tap and a swipe within reach of one another as they inch closer towards the precipice of their newly renegotiated alliance.

She smiles at Lexa’s repeated word use and can’t resist mirroring it as she types out her availability.
(Clarke) 8:02 pm
I should be good for tomorrow.

It’s a tonal shift from last Sunday, but Clarke embraces the lightness of the texts as they chart this new territory. Maybe they can do this after all.

While waiting for the reply, she heats up her dinner and scrolls through her social media and news feeds. Several retweets, likes, and favourites later, the ding comes as she’s spooning out her chicken risotto.

(Lexa) 8:18 pm
That’s great! Grounders in Williamsburg at 3pm okay?

*More than,* Clarke thinks, biting her lip. Old Lexa was not usually one for exclamation points in texting, a general opponent of over-enthusiastic punctuation. She’s curious then what’s motivating the break from norm but gladly welcomes filling her social calendar with another Lexa-requested event.

Clarke hasn’t heard of Grounders but she isn’t opposed to discovering new places with Lexa, even if it’s oddly another café. It does make her wonder if there’s a handbook on Friendship & Frappuccino that Lexa is consulting for tips on how to stay gal pals with your ex, the caffeine edition.

She chuckles at the thought of Lexa sporting her tortoise-rimmed glasses as she thumbs through and tabs the more salient points in the chapter on Ladies & Lattes.

(Clarke) 8:20 pm
Sounds good.

—

Grounders is not a coffee shop. At all.

When she had read Grounders and Williamsburg in the same sentence, her mind automatically went to overpriced home brews and cheekily-named scones served by skinny jeans and overgrown facial hair while obscure bands play through vintage speakers. She had imagined a shop front with a vintage bicycle leaned against the flower-pot window sill, and inside, posters of vintage bicycles. Moustaches everywhere.

Clarke was expecting something akin to the dozen or so cafés she had passed along the way here, Handlebar, Hip-Stir. Even Cofvefe would have made more sense.

Instead, when she entered the building, Clarke was handed a baseball helmet and asked her shoe size. She was beyond confused.

A hipster place this was not.

Grounders is a batting cage. An indoor baseball training centre. There’s real dirt a few feet from her. There are balls flying everywhere.

She isn’t sure what to think of Lexa taking her where projectiles are hurtling in every direction at an alarming velocity. Though they’ve reached a tentative treaty with Lexa’s olive branch to start anew as friends, Clarke is still weary that all of this has been a ruse. She can feel the blisters already forming from how tightly she’s choking her baseball bat, fearful of letting go of her only weapon against unwelcoming spheres.
Putting her apprehension aside, she overlooks the whiteness of her knuckles in favour of observing the puzzling but cute scene in front of her. Lexa’s preoccupied with tying her shoelaces and tightening her batting gloves, sporting a level of concentration fit for the World Series (according to high school Lexa that was the name of the really important baseball championship that, perplexedly to Clarke, only involved two countries).

“Thanks for coming. I had a booking here with Trikru that I couldn’t get out of.” A shy smile accompanies the explanation.

Clarke has no clue who or what Trikru is, or why she’s here if Lexa couldn’t cancel today. Her presence feels unnecessary when she could be somewhere safer, with fewer moving threats.

As if reading her mind, Lexa continues, “Indra had called in sick and Quint couldn’t come last-minute and wanted to cancel. But apparently, if you don’t give them 24-hour notice, you’re in their black books. Aden loves Grounders. I didn’t want a mark on his or Trikru’s name because of Quint’s delinquency.”

“I see.”

Clarke does not, unfortunately. She’s still at a lost for her involvement in this scenario, let alone trying to figure out who Indra or Quint or Aden are.

What makes even less sense, however, is the image before her, a far cry from the first one at the gallery, or even the one at The Standard.

Nowhere in sight is the impeccably-dressed, stoic woman. In her place is Geena Davis from A League of Their Own (the movie that high school Lexa made her watch because it was supposedly a rite of passage; to what, at the time, she hadn’t specified).

Clarke had given herself whiplash when she dismissed a tall brunette walking towards her, wearing a cute snapback and red jersey, only to turn back around when she realised a second later that it was Lexa, who had also fully committed to the role with white form-fitting pants, red knee-high socks, and to complete the colour trifecta, red cleats.

It has been one surprise after another since the exhibition opening, but it would seem Lexa’s latest strategy is to keep Clarke on her toes via inexplicable wardrobe changes. She hasn’t seen this Lexa in awhile, and is wondering if she had somehow stepped into a time machine somewhere between Lexington St and Mulberry Ave.

Clocking Clarke’s darting eyes, Lexa mistakes her confusion for regret. She looks around contritely, brows furrowed, seemingly clicking into the volatility of the situation she has put them in.

“I’m sorry. We were down one adult, and the kids really like it here. You were the only one I could think of who had a flexible schedule. I thought it’d be a good first crack at bat at this friendship thing.”

Lexa ends on a shaky chuckle. She’s rambling. Terrible puns come out when she’s nervous. Clarke would usually find it cute. But she is too busy with her own apprehension to respond, too intently focused on trying to understand what’s going on, an especially arduous task when it involves sports, of all things incomprehensible.

Before she can parse Lexa’s words, an excited squeal diverts their attention, followed by a blurring of motion that comes careening towards them. On the meteor’s collision into Lexa’s leg, Clarke had reflexively shut her eyes and blindly lifted her bat ready to strike.
When she opens them, her heart swells at the image of a mini version of Lexa identically dressed in uniform, save for a mop of blonde hair on a head that comes up to just about Lexa’s hip.

“Hi, buddy.”

Lexa bends down to scoop the little guy up in her arms, causing a fit of giggles.

“No, it tickles!” His protests contradict his bubbling laughter, holding on tighter as she lifts him higher in the air. She skilfully dodges his kicking feet and bony elbows.

When she has him safely returned to the ground, Lexa is bent down by his side, resting on one knee with an arm around his shoulder. He steps closer into her hold, however, when he notices Clarke looking curiously at them.

“Aden, this is my friend, Clarke,” Lexa makes the introduction. “Clarke, this is Aden.”

Contrary to his shyness, he boldly—and adorably—extends his arm out completely perpendicular to his body in a bid to shake Clarke’s hand. She lowers herself to oblige, only to have Aden grasp her forearm instead.

“Nice to meet you, Aden,” Clarke greets, amused by the awkward arm shake.

“Hi.” He smiles looking up from under his lashes.

“Aden is Trikru’s best second baseman. Right, buddy?”

Aden beams proudly at the compliment but then bashfully hides his head into Lexa’s shoulder and doesn’t move to say anything more.

Clarke looks the pair over, and though her lips want to curl at seeing their closeness, she feels a seed of anxiety growing with not knowing the exact nature of their relationship. The familiarity with which Lexa is now rubbing his back, and how wholly safe he looks tucked into her side, is giving Clarke pause.

Her pulse quickens, wondering if this is Lexa’s son, if she has a wife or if Aden has an other mother who means something to her. The resemblance is minimal. Sandy blonde instead of auburn whisky; baby blue for forest green; rounder features over sculpted bone structure.

Or maybe he’s adopted, or shares those traits with mamma instead mommy. Maybe mamma was the woman that came to collect Lexa at the gallery. Maybe there’s a second bedroom somewhere in Park Slope with a twin bed, dolls and Legos on the floor and Captain America and Wonder Woman on the walls.

Maybe there is a master bedroom where two moms spoon each other, stretching out the morning before Aden and the husky puppy he had begged for and had received as a birthday gift come pounding in to wake them, pleading to go to the park. Maybe mamma is busy today so it’s bonding time for mommy and son at baseball practice.

Because Aden can’t possibly be a stranger to Lexa. She’s only been in town for a little over a month, she couldn’t have bonded with someone that quickly for him to be a new addition to her life.

Yet, Clarke’s own experience with the gravitational force of Lexa’s pull tells her otherwise; the immediacy of their connection, and the speed of its development, reminds Clarke of the ease of charting a course within Lexa’s orbit.
Lexa is an all-in type of girl, selective of the company she keeps but offers full access to anyone who figures out the secret knock. No key is needed then. Every door and window wide open.

Clarke’s hoping this might be the case, that Aden has just taken an extreme liking to Lexa, and she had unconditionally let him in. Because Clarke may not be able to survive the impact on her frangible heart if it were the Park Slope option instead.

Before her irrational brain has time to spiral further, she’s snapped out of it when Aden shifts in Lexa’s hold, stealing another curious look at her. It would seem she’s not the only one playing guess who.

Picking up on the crease of Clarke’s forehead, and intuitively easing her imminent panic, Lexa goes on to explain that her office is a sponsor of a Little Little League team, Aden one of its stars, and that they’re here to work on swings and batting stances today.

(P Clarke learns later, when Aden’s out of earshot, that a few of the players come from a nearby children’s group home, and that the shy 4 year-old boy had taken to Lexa because of her history with the sport. He had come out of his shell when she started talking about the Tigers, his favourite team and animal.

Finding out about Aden’s adoption status, Clarke feels conflicted relief, a guilt for wishing he didn’t belong to Lexa, and now a wistful pang that he did. She has to resist from reimagining the earlier scenario with herself inserted as the second mom.)

“When I told Aden that I was bringing a friend, he very nicely asked if you could come help him practice.” Lexa ruffles his hair affectionately.

He brightens at the word ‘practice’, and gives her a starry-eyed, toothy grin that would have Clarke believe Lexa had invented the sport.

Clarke wouldn’t know a bunt from a banjo, and how useful she’d be to Aden, but congenially accepts nonetheless. “Of course.” She grips her bat tighter out of solidarity.

“Hey bud, where’s the rest of our kru?” Lexa asks looking around, like she suddenly remembered the task at hand.

Aden turns in Lexa’s embrace to look over her shoulder. When Clarke follows the direction of his little pointed finger, she is gobsmacked to find an army of Lexas behind them. A dozen or so boys and girls, aged between 4 and 6, and similarly dressed in red, are wiggling about in various positions between bending over, lying down and general bored repose. Standing next to them are two overwhelmed adults, one of whom waves beseechingly at Lexa to come rescue them.

Seeing the rag tag group, only then does Clarke notice the insignia of their uniforms, the words Warriors emblazoned across large and tiny chests alike. It must be a reverse-psychology ploy because each warrior looks less like a fearsome fighter readying for battle, and more like a kindergartener ready for an afternoon nap.

She chuckles at the few yawns released, as if on cue, that don’t support their brand identity.

“Ok, let’s go play!” Lexa rises, as Aden excitedly follows her over to the group, Clarke trailing nervously behind.

—

Thankfully, they retreat to a play area that’s safety-appropriate for Aden and his teammates’ pint size,
and manageable for Clarke’s anxiety.

The large bullpen is covered overhead by protective netting all around to keep the big kids’ hits from reaching them. The swoosh of balls travelling at 90 mph and the colliding cracks with metal are still audible, and really scary (Clarke hasn’t stopped flinching every time she sees one headed their way), but at least they won’t actually cause any physical harm.

Apparently the Little Brooklyn Baseball Association takes their baseball very seriously, offering an indoor programme that starts in January. While everyone else is still enjoying their off-season rest before regular play resumes in the spring, LBBA teams squeeze in an extra three months of practice. Clarke wouldn’t know what’s in season or not, but she does appreciate when Lexa tells her the extended period is an economic alternative for lower-income families who can’t afford the more expensive ice-related activities.

Normally the outdoors is needed to give a wider berth for exerting bundled energy, but with the frigid weather conditions, Lexa explains, they come to Grounders to work on specific skills within a more climatically controlled environment. By the squeals of excitement, the kids don’t seem to care where they go as long as there is a ball and bat involved.

Trikru is split into three groups and set up at different batting stations, each player taking turns. Given their limited range of motion and attention spans, it’s more tee-ball than baseball. There are varying degrees of concentration and patience as each Warrior tries to knock the ball off the tee. Often than not it’s a smacking of the pole holding up the ball than contact made with the ball itself.

To Clarke’s relief, as the spare adult with little knowledge of the game or proper technique, she isn’t assigned a station, tasked instead to keep an eye out for scrapped knees and weak bladders, overseeing first aid and counter-productively administering both fluids and bathroom breaks.

In her designated role, she’s free to observe the adorable furrows of brow from a nearby bench. And must work hard to hide her amusement at seeing the three adults spending most of their time on their knees, crouched to match the average height of 3’-6” and under.

She tries to distribute her attention fairly across all stations, but her eyes invariably stray to Lexa’s corner.

The brunette coaches each batter with all the focus and seriousness of advising an elite athlete. Despite overall coordination being a general challenge for four year-olds, Lexa goes into detail about feet and hand positions, batting stances, weight balance and distribution, grip best practices, swing mechanics. Aden, in particular, hangs on to Lexa’s every word.

A hip gets adjusted, a shoulder tweaked, an elbow tucked in, knees bent, feet kicked farther apart; each followed by motivating words of encouragement. She works them through dexterity exercises and drills of separation, slot, impact, extension; all completely foreign concepts to Clarke but embraced eagerly by Lexa’s flock.

Her attentiveness is rewarded with joyful smiles and jumping cheers whenever a ball is successfully hit (whacked, really, despite their best efforts). Though sometimes the ball doesn’t travel farther than five feet in front of the pair, it’s regardlessly celebrated with the same verve as a home run over the tree lines of Central Park.

Something tugs at Clarke watching Lexa in her element. She is visibly more relaxed than she was at The Standard, smiling and having genuine fun as she shares hearty laughter and pats-on-backs with her motley crew of baby warriors.
Clarke has always felt that pull towards her, but none more so than when Lexa gives herself completely over to others, the supportive branch from which flowers bloom. The type that attracts birds and butterflies.

She feels a fluttering in her stomach that she has to forcefully temper down, the same flutter that started during spring of freshman year.

“Are you lost?”

Clarke ignored Lexa’s teasing question, and asked her own.

“How did I not know about this?”

She swept her eyes across Lexa’s attire that has her decked out in black from head to toe. Her best friend was almost unrecognisable wearing a short sleeve top with Badgers written in white across the chest and the animal itself underneath, the jersey neatly tucked into pants so tight that Clarke felt her cheeks pink in second-hand embarrassment.

“I’m not just a pretty face, Clarke,” Lexa says.

Though a fact that Clarke can’t deny, it doesn’t alleviate her confusion.

“Yes, apparently also a spandex collector.”

“I’m a lesbian, Clarke,” Lexa said nonchalantly as she adjusted the velcro on her batting gloves, “they would revoke my card if I didn’t engage in some form of group-organised physical activity.”

Despite the revelation, Clarke breezed pass it like they were discussing the weather.

“Well I’m a half-member of the club but you don’t see me owning half of one of those.” She pointed uselessly to the bat Lexa is holding between her knees, not knowing what it’s called.

Lexa’s lips quirked in response to Clarke’s subtle admission, but she dipped her head trying to hide her smile by focusing more intently on her task.

That was how Clarke and Lexa came out to each other, during the most inane argument over athletic wear and equipment. It wasn’t exactly news to either of them, considering the rainbow flag pinned to Lexa’s bag from that first afternoon they met six months ago, or their many conversations about and mutual appreciation for so-and-so lips and eyes. But Clarke was never one to assume, and glad to have it confirmed out loud. If only so that lingering gazes now had a name to them.

(Although to be fair, she might’ve had arrived at a conclusion of Lexa’s sexuality sooner had those gazes been directed at a general gender than a singular recipient. Then again, introspection is difficult when flecks of green and gold and grey are so effectively distracting.)

In the moment, Clarke was more concerned with Lexa’s coming out as an athletic person, than a gay one.

“Are you any good?”

“At being a lesbian?” Lexa laughed at Clarke’s displeased look, and then answered her intentionally
misinterpreted question with an equally purposeful deflection. “You’ll just have to find out. But seriously, what are you doing here? Did you get lost on your way to the art room?”

Clarke didn’t dignify that with an answer. She was in fact in the art room when Octavia had dragged her to the fields to scope out the football tryouts.

Knowing her friend’s ulterior motive, she had purposely complained every step of the way about not caring for pigskin, and that the only ‘pig’ that interested her was getting just the right pigment. If Octavia was going to make her suffer than it was only fair she did the same, going into excruciating detail on the nuances of azure and the associated difficulties of achieving the perfect mix of brilliance and clarity.

Fed up with the unsolicited art lesson, Octavia finally shut Clarke up by admitting to being more invested in the new running back than anything related to the sport.

When they arrived on the field, she had promptly abandoned Clarke to get a good seat from the sidelines. Clarke was about to reluctantly join her friend when she eyed WOODS adorning the back of a familiar brunette, standing a few yards away the next field over. Clarke had come stomping towards Lexa as she was stretching her arms.

“Why didn’t you tell me you played football?” Clarke demanded, so confused at seeing her best friend in anything other than denim, cotton, or plaid.

“Because I don’t,” Lexa deadpanned. At Clarke’s even deep crease of brow, she clarified with a glint of endearment in her eye. “Clarke, this is baseball.”

“I know that.” Clarke crossed her arms, utterly dissatisfied with the complete lack of progress of this conversation. “Is this a frequent thing? Like, more than once?”

“Yes, pretty likely, considering I’m the captain.”

“What?!”

“Clarke, I told you like two weeks ago that I made the roster, and last month, that I’m a pitcher.”

“I thought you were referring to going out drinking. How was I to know it meant … this.” She emphasised the last word by looking up and down Lexa’s body, and gesticulating her hand inarticulately.

“We first met near a baseball diamond.”

When Clarke only gave a shrug in reply, Lexa looked at her with exasperated adoration.

”If you’d stop inhaling paint fumes, you might discover a whole wide world out there.”

She moved closer to Clarke to uncross her arms from her chest, and took an orange and red-stained palm into her hand to prove her point. Lexa traced the blotches of paint with her gloved finger, following an invisible path with such softness that Clarke had to suck in a breath to keep the butterflies from taking flight.

(The winged creatures had started showing up in recent weeks, catching Clarke off guard as to her body’s sudden interest in lepidopterology. She couldn’t pinpoint when she had become an unwitting collector.)

As Lexa held one hand, Clarke decided to return the favour, moving her other to draw the stitching
outline of the cute furry creature on Lexa’s jersey. She missed the tiny gasp from Lexa when her gentle exploration bordered dangerously too close to a sensitive area.

“I didn’t think freshmen could be captains.”

“A lot of last year’s team were seniors who graduated. Three of us are the most experienced players, everyone else has only played recreationally. But neither of the Juniors seemed to care for the captainship. Clarke, we had a forty-five minute conversation about this.”

They likely did. Clarke couldn’t deny the conversation happened, knowing how her eyes usually glaze over, and her ears suddenly stuffed with cotton balls, when any form of competitive movement got mentioned.

“This is a spectator sport, isn’t it?” Clarke asked in consternation after some thought.

“Yes.”

“And cheering is typically involved?”

Clarke’s nose scrunched up at the idea of adding baseball cheer to her extracurriculars. It had been a monumental undertaking to even learn a minuscule of the rules of soccer. Attending all of Octavia’s home matches hadn’t help her to better understand offside or diving or why after 90 minutes there was no score.

(Octavia ultimately gave up trying to teach her, and was just happy when she knew which side to root for when the ball did finally go into the net.)

“Clarke, what sport doesn’t involve cheering?” Lexa laughed, squeezing her hand and then linking their fingers. “But you’re not obligated to attend my games. I know how busy you are.”

“Of course I’d want to come and cheer for you, Lex. I just can’t guarantee I’ll know what or when to cheer.”

Clarke stopped her ministration on the jersey to pick up Lexa’s other hand as well, swinging their arms back and forth in between them. This too had been a new development in the last few weeks. Under the auspices of deepening friendship, they had taken to hand-holding more frequently. In a chicken-and-egg situation, Clarke can’t pinpoint if the butterflies showed up because of the hand-holding or the other way around. Even with Lexa’s batting gloves on, she could still feel the flap of their wings.

She asked, a moment later, “do you score goals too?”

Lexa laughed again, realising what a mountain climb this might be. “If you mean, do I throw a ball at a target, then yes, I also score goals.”

“Oh.”

That day forward Clarke spent her springs and summers as a fixture in the Badgers dugout, occupying her reserved spot at the end of the players bench and wearing a batter’s helmet for protection (by Lexa’s insistence and to her great amusement), to watch a sport she did not understand one bit despite every inclination (and a brunette motivation) to try, just so she could catch the gleam in her best friend’s eye when she scored a goal.

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Clarke is broken out of her memory when a little girl, maybe a year older than Aden, approaches her and reaches up to pat her hair, unencumbered by the social oddity of her gesture.

“It’s yellow,” the 5 year-old states, after she’s completed her unbidden assessment.

“Yes, it is,” Clarke bemusedly agrees to the obvious, entertained to see where this would go.

She feels small hands move to her cheeks as her head is turned from side to side for a more thorough appraisal. “It’s pretty. And soft. I like it.”

“Thank you. I like yours too.”

Honey brown eyes light up as the little girl retracts one hand to touch her own light brown hair, only to frown when fingers get momentarily tangled in a damp patch that was a result of earlier exertion. Clarke wordlessly helps smooth out the unruly clump, and finger-comb it back to a more presentable state.

“What’s your name?”

“Madi.”

Clarke chuckles when Madi broadly smiles and goes to stick her hand out without hesitation, in the same spirited manner as Aden. It must be a Warrior thing.

“Nice to meet you, Madi. I’m Clarke.” She isn’t surprised when Madi’s hand extends past her hand to grip her forearm.

Clarke is barely given time to return the peculiar arm shake before Madi abruptly changes the objective of their interaction.

“Did you see me before? I hit the ball really far!” Her round face beams with both pride and hope that someone else was witness to her achievement.

“I did!” Clarke hadn’t, but she doesn’t want to disappoint the Warrior by admitting that she was too busy spying on her coach to take notice. “You did really well.”

Madi goes on to detail the measures she took that led to her success, how she concentrated really really hard, and held the bat a little higher just like Coach Lexa had instructed, and then visualised where she wanted the ball to go before she swung with all her strength.

Clarke is so immersed in the story, trying to keep up with the step-by-step reenactment that accompanied it, she almost doesn’t catch Lexa looking their way, a quiet smile in her eyes and a small curl to her lips. When they lock gazes for a moment, Clarke quickly loses the thread of Madi’s narration, and only picks it up again after Lexa gives her a bashful nod with a hint of a blush before returning attention to her own little Warrior.

“Isn’t she great?” Madi asks.

Clarke hasn’t caught up to Madi’s speech timeline early enough to know to whom she’s referring, but is saved from having to scramble for a cover when the little girl answers her own question. “Coach Lexa is the best! And she’s really pretty too. I love her hair.” The last part is loudly whispered in Clarke’s ears.
Clarke laughs brightly at their full-circle return to the girl’s obsession. She steals another glance to the object of their mutual affection.

“Yeah. Yeah she is.” She agrees. On both accounts.

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Sometime later, during a much-needed break, the Trikru are contently drinking from their juice boxes and munching on chips. While they lively babble amongst themselves about their recent feats, Clarke and Lexa finally have the chance to chat one-on-one.

“Is this ok?” Lexa asks, looking about, as she hands a juice box to Clarke, and sits down astride on the wooden bench.

Though her suggestive gaze refers to their general vicinity, she leaves it unclear whether she also means her specific proximity to Clarke. There’s still a measurable gap between them that can easily fit three Warriors, but it’s physically the closest they’ve been all afternoon.

“Thanks,” Clarke takes the proffered drink and pops the straw into the aluminium foil slot, as she replies genuinely, “yeah, it’s great.”

With her feet dangling off the bench, she sips happily and feels like she’s back in primary school. She hasn’t really lifted a finger in the past hour but nonetheless feels sympathy fatigue for all the sweating and grunting, and is happy for a moment of rest.

The conversation is easier this time, when there’s something to talk about that’s not them. There are less stop gaps and more hidden smiles.

Lexa offers insights into some of the Warriors backstories and gamely answers Clarke’s questions about particular baseball terms and techniques. Clarke enjoys the hand gesturing that articulates each point.

Nervousness still bubbles under the surface but is offset by the distraction of kids doing adorably kid things. The flow of their chitchat often interrupted to observe the Warriors’ complete lack of care for social decorum. Clarke wishes, that as an adult, when she’s tired or grumpy, she can just stop whatever she’s doing and lie down on the floor in protest—especially if it’s in the middle of an exhibition.

During a lull in the conversation, they let several minutes of comfortable silence pass between them, as Lexa crunches her way through her snack-size bag of blue corn tortilla chips while Clarke focuses on her pomegranate punch.

She tries not to let her gaze linger on the slight sheen of sweat that’s deepening the crimson tint of Lexa’s lips. When their plumpness presses around the straw of her guava juice box and makes a light sucking sound, Clarke has to avert her eyes completely. The jerky movement of her head almost dislodges her straw further up than it needs to go.

“Blue corn, pomegranate, guava?”

She asks, breaking the silence after recovering from her near choke. At Lexa’s confused look, she tips her head to the juice box, teasing. “Whatever happened to the classics, apple and orange? This was your doing wasn’t it?”

“As a former fruitarian, I feel duty-bound to ensure their sugar intake is of high nutritive value. If they’re going to be hyped up on it, might as well be good for them,” Lexa defends good-naturedly,
taking on a PSA tone.

Clarke laughs at the prompted memory. It’s a similar argument that had Clarke on a food cleanse for a too-long period of only liquified-fruit after Lexa had won a blender at Columbia’s Christmas raffle. They had mutually suffered through the impromptu detox not out of any misguided dietary concerns but because Lexa felt she had to make the most of her prize.

(“Clarke, I want to taste the difference between chopped, crushed, and puree.”)

Three days in, and Clarke’s incessant complaints about melting away later, they were sat at the nearest fast food joint gorging on cheese dogs, bacon burgers, and salted caramel milkshakes. Though they would regret that impulsive decision as well, since then, and every time they were near the fruit aisle of the market, Clarke would never let Lexa forget about her temporary foray into juicery. Her one earnest effort at mastering a small kitchen appliance.

“No avocado?” Clarke persists with her ribbing, earning a smile this time.

While old Lexa’s familiar refrain, *mockery is not the product of a strong mind*, pops in her head, she’s relieved for a better reaction than the last time the tropical fruit came up.

“No,” Lexa says slowly, then turns her head to ascertain no one’s listening before she leans back in and whispers, “the good stuff is still in the trunk of my car.”

Clarke laughs again, knowing how much of a hoarder Lexa is when it comes to her beloved berry—and that she is most likely not kidding.

They’re both smiling when Lexa further clarifies. “Actually, Madi’s mom works for Whole Foods. This is the overstock they can’t sell. I guess anything that’s called *Guava Gomega Goodness* doesn’t really fly off the shelves. But the kids don’t seem to mind.”

Looking over Lexa’s shoulder, Clarke can see that indeed the healthy drinks and snacks are consumed like it’s their last chance for sustenance before embarking on Noah’s Ark. Though, after the active morning they’ve had, Clarke suspects the Warriors would down anything that doesn’t taste like burnt tires. Anything with sugar content for a much-needed pick-me-up.

She smiles fondly when she spots a few heavy lidded eyes and little bear-sized yawns that support her case.

“Thanks for having me along,” Clarke says as she turns her attention back to Lexa a moment later.

She receives an appreciative but contemplative nod in return.

“Yeah, no, thank you for coming on such short notice. I wasn’t sure about this.”

Again it’s unclear what *this* Lexa references, the batting cage and Grounders in particular, or their attempt at friendship in general. There’s a hint of uncertainty in Lexa’s tone that gets lost around the crunch of a chip. Clarke politely declines when Lexa offers her some.

Lexa meets her eyes when she quietly contends, “I know it might not be what you expected.”

Reading the unasked question underneath, Clarke’s not sure how to respond. She sucks more purposely, trying to drain out the bottom of her juice box, buying herself more time.

It definitely isn’t what she had in mind, but for a completely different reason than what she thinks Lexa might mean.
Two weeks ago, the idea of them playing baseball moms to a bunch of primary schoolers was most definitely out of the realm of possibility. But well over a decade ago, it could have been, and felt like, an inevitability.

The weekend crunch to get out the door to make Lexa’s early morning practices; the shuttling from one field to another, black coffee for Lexa and a triple triple with an extra dusting of sugar powder for Clarke; Lexa taking the mound and Clarke sketching her in action; Lexa’s excitement during October—and Clarke’s confusion—watching the playoff games on TV.

The routine of it all served as a blueprint for their future.

It seemed foreseeable that their mornings, evenings, and weekends would take a similar shape in some way, where older Clarke and Lexa would be helping tiny versions of themselves do the same things. They’d be baseball moms to various permutations of blonde or brown hair and blue or green eyes, with Lexa coaching and Clarke providing the moral support.

Lexa had even teased that hopefully by then Clarke would have figured out what the base in baseball means.

*****

“Are we winning?”

Clarke had tried fruitlessly for the last two and half hours to decode the mystery of the complex scoreboard. There were just too many numbers. She finally gave up and turned to her friends for rescue, glad to have opted for the stands during this playoff game instead of her usual perch in the dugout.

“Yes, but barely,” Octavia mumbled, leaned forward in her seat next to Clarke, elbows on knees, hands steepled, and biting her lip.

“Clarke, it’s basic math. I know you passed the 2nd grade, I was there.” Raven poked her teasingly from her other side.

Anya scoffed at her jibe, but otherwise stayed silent to her left. Too tired to pile on her own typically creative mockery of Clarke’s ignorance. She had made the three and a half hour drive in from Boston to watch her sister try to clench the last playoff spot for their team, and was reserving her energy for the expected after-game celebrations. (Her professors weren’t too happy that she had shirked first-year college responsibilities to go “see some ass getting kicked.”)

“I don’t even know what numbers I’m meant to be adding or subtracting!” Clarke pouted, unsure where to look.

Even if she did put her arithmetic skills to work, her confusion was compounded by the presence of letters beside the numbers. This was the second season now and she still had no idea what the acronym RHE stood for, even after Lexa’s numerous tutorials. (“No Clarke, it doesn’t mean Really Hot Exercising.”)

“Shhhhh, your girl’s up.”

Octavia hushed them, and tipped her body forward even further. She was a toe pivot away from launching herself into the next row in front of them.
“She’s not my girl.”

Clarke feebly protested under her breath even though she had perked up when Lexa came out onto the field to retake her place atop the tiny mountain.

She had watched entranced as Lexa performed her warm-up ritual, and though she couldn’t understand why the pitcher needed to raise her knee as part of her pitching, she held her tongue from posing the question to her friends. Her open mouth was too busy catching flies anyways as she secretly appreciated the emphasis to Lexa’s ass that the motion had caused.

“It’s the top of the ninth. There’s two on base, at second and third, and two outs. We’re ahead by a run. If Lexa can strike out the next batter, then she closes out the game and we don’t have to go to bat,” Raven whispered, trying to fill her in and effectively cutting off her daydream.

“I don’t know what you just said.”

“That’s exactly what Clarke did.

She cheered when the home crowd roared after the first pitch landed in the strike zone; gasped in unison when the second was hit high to the far right field, only to let out a collective breath when it changed course at the last second, landing just outside the foul line; booed the umpire when the next two were called balls, and followed Octavia’s example when she directed many not-so-nice words at him; and then at last, jumped to her feet, a millisecond behind, when everyone erupted out of their seats at the pounding sound of the fastball hitting the catcher’s mitt.

The ump’s redeeming cry of ’Strike Three!’ and the batter’s expletive at the tail end of his missed swing were both drowned out by the euphoria.

All throughout, Clarke couldn’t keep her eyes off of Lexa, who was the poster child of composed under pressure. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail through her cap, and though the bill shielded Clarke’s favourite pair of eyes, she could imagine their steely gaze, a darker shade of green whenever she concentrated.

She was mesmerised by Lexa’s perfect form. How her body was contorted into taut lines that would extend beautifully when she released the ball. That was what Clarke enjoyed most about baseball, watching Lexa was like watching charcoal in motion as it fluidly moved across the page. Like a life drawing unfurling before her eyes, muscle and tendons snapping into place as the kinetic energy gathered and then exploded to devastating effect. She didn’t envy anyone on the receiving end of that raw power.

Not caring that she had upended her nachos from her lap, she went to hug her friends and join in on the ecstatic shouting and jumping around them. But just as promptly, she left the trio hanging mid high-fives when she caught Lexa’s eye, her beaming smile widening impossibly more when her peering search into the stands landed on Clarke. When their gazes met Clarke could feel Lexa’s joy bubble in her own chest.

Her dork of a best friend made a fist pump in the air with her hand still in her mitt, imitating the iconic ending scene of The Breakfast Club they had watched two nights prior.

As screams of unchecked mirth fill her ears, calling for her to join in the celebration, Clarke only had one goal in mind. She didn’t need an invitation before she was scrambling down towards the diamond.
She had to weave through a sea of black and white before she was able to reset her sights on Lexa again. But when she was within striking distance, Clarke launched herself at the sweaty athlete, uncaring about the probability of moisture transfer.

Lexa effortlessly caught her running hug, laughing at her antics, and they embraced as if one of them had just returned overseas from an extended tour. As though they hadn’t just seen each other three hours before in the locker room when Clarke bid her good luck with a shy kiss to the cheek and almost hit the door on her way out in her haste to sprint out of there.

(Three heads had turned to question her deep blush when she joined her friends amongst the crowds.)

“You did it! You scored!!!” Clarke exclaimed in her ear.

“I did,” Lexa laughed beautifully.

Clarke could still sense Lexa’s adrenaline by the movement of her ribs against her. If their soft panting wasn’t from Clarke running into Lexa’s arms and from Lexa securing a quarter-final berth for the Badgers, she would find the quiet exchange of breaths a bit too intimate to publicly share in front of their high school classmates.

For the small visiting crowd, here to support the other team, the intimacy could be easily mistaken as a celebration between the winning captain and her girlfriend. Dressed in reverse colours, Clarke is wearing Lexa’s white alternate kit, the number nine on her front and the name Woods on her back.

The hug turned out short-lived, to her disappointment, when Lexa let go of her to bend down and pick up her baseball cap that had been knocked off by the force of Clarke’s enthusiasm. Before her heart could protest the loss of contact though, Lexa’s next actions had her breath hitch twice in succession. Both times causing goosebumps to create new landscapes across her body.

First, when she went to place the snapback on Clarke’s head, turning the bill to the back and then moving in close to gently sweep a few flyaway hairs away from her face and tuck them behind her ear. “There, now your outfit is complete.”

Second, when she wrapped her arms around Clarke again for an even tighter hug, burying her head in the crook of Clarke’s shoulder, and infusing her nose with the scent of vanilla and pine. She was the best smelling athlete ever, in Clarke’s limited experience with smelling athletes. (Clarke had never wondered whether Octavia or Lincoln also carried the scent of a spring in bloom after their games.)

Feeling Lexa’s smile against her skin did nothing to lessen the tingles. Her senses were overwhelmed in the best way, and had her wondering if she wasn’t the one who had thrown the winning pitch. She had to fight off shivers as shallow breaths hit her neck when Lexa exhaled, “thanks for coming.”

“Of course,” she said, her voice quieter this time.

They pulled back after a stretch of time, unmindful of the clamouring around them. When Lexa looked at her, the steely green from the game had been replaced by a saturated hue as when a forest canopy was covered in morning dew.

Rich, and full of life.

They were standing nearly nose to nose, with Lexa now holding the sides of Clarke’s waist, and
Clarke’s arms sitting atop her shoulders, hands criss-crossed behind her neck. She looked between Lexa’s eyes and mouth, torn as to where to rest her gaze, an indecision mirrored in the pitcher’s own flickering movements.

Eventually her divided attention gave way to a singular laser focus.

Even though Clarke didn’t subscribe to the typical high school conventions, she was not immune to the cliché of unspoken pining over your best friend for fear of losing that friendship over a silly thing as a love declaration. Ever since last summer, after her grandma’s, Clarke had been a walking advert of high school romantic complications.

But in the moment, she felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her best friend, cliché be damn. Whether it was from second-hand adrenaline or not, never in her life did lips look so inviting and achingly beautiful.

Only a few centimetres away, it wouldn’t take much for her to cross that deep canyon of want.

Clarke wasn’t the one who made the move, in the end. She felt Lexa leaning forward, and the grip of her shirt tightening, that had her rising on her toes and closing her eyes in anticipation.

The next thing she felt, however, weren’t soft, moist lips. Rather a wrong kind of wet sensation drowned her. Clarke realised belatedly that Lexa had poured a cooler of water and ice over her.

With her heart and thoughts still lagging behind from the near kiss, she was too shocked to immediately react. Lexa quietly, smartly, broke away from their hold to escape Clarke’s likely revenge.

When she finally gathered her wits, Clarke chased after her, upper body completely drenched, shouting promises of pain-appropriate retribution.

“That was really unsportswoman-like. Come back here, asshole!”

Lexa just laughed and easily stayed out of her reach. The other Badgers looked on, smiling broadly at the sight of their usually-serious Captain having unabashed fun. She seemed to enjoy being chased by her biggest fan almost more than winning the game.

It didn’t take long for Clarke’s heart rate to spike to an unsustainable level. Minutes later, she finally collapsed atop of home plate, unaware she had ran all three bases.

Lexa took pity on her then and plopped down too, star-fishing across rubber and dirt. Their friends joined them shortly thereafter, adding to the mass of limbs and laughter.

“Griffin, I don’t want to know why you’re wet.”

A disgruntled voice, likely Anya’s, could be faintly heard somewhere in the pile.

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“I honestly didn’t know what to expect. But, you were always good at surprising me.” She sends Lexa a meaningful smile, and then chuckles with a shake of the head as she follows up with, “though you must’ve been really desperate if you had to ask me to fill in.”
Lexa smiles softly in acknowledgement. A moment later, with a distant look she admits, “I miss it, you know. Baseball really isn’t a thing in England.”

Clarke stiffens at the unprompted allusion to their separation. They haven’t outright talked about Lexa’s time in London yet. By some silent agreement, they don’t mention it, neither appearing ready to chart those waters, a daunting task that is as precarious and unpredictable as swimming across the English Channel. An unforgiving current that threatens to tow them both under lest they tread carefully.

Luckily, Lexa steers the conversation away from crashing waves and back to safer shores.

“One of the things that drew me to this New York office was their charitable work, and how involved they are in the communities where they build. And when they mentioned tee-ball with tykes, I was sold.”

“You’re very good with them,” Clarke compliments, relieved for the evasion, “especially with Aden.”

They both look over to where the boy is ardently showing Madi his batting stance, oblivious to the two sets of smiles observing them. Seeing his animated posturing, Clarke thinks of how similar he and Lexa are, despite the lack of relation. Quiet and serious but when they open up, there’s a lightness there that you just want to be a part of whatever excites them.

Lexa studies her with a curious look, trying to read the intent behind her gaze. Clarke knows she’s probably projecting, not having known Aden long enough to make such precise observations. But she can’t help how the sight of blonde hair and blue eyes matched with Lexa’s mannerisms and demeanour has her stomach flipping; has her being speculative about unwritten futures. Of a different kind of Friday afternoon supervising their children hit balls.

“It’s easy when they’re good kids,” Lexa demurs.

After several minutes of quiet, Lexa tosses her finished drink and snack wrapper into a bin, and rises from the bench to pick up a bat that she hands to Clarke.

“C’mon, Griffin. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“What?” Clarke eyes the bat suspiciously. “Lexa, no.”

Lexa simply looks towards the peanut gallery for some back-up.

“Yay, Clarke!” Come the tiny shouts of support, accompanied by chants of her name.

“That’s not playing fair,” Clarke pouted, her protest falling on unsympathetic ears. “Alright, alright,” she relents after a second round of encouragement, “but I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

—

Her prediction hits the mark, seeing as her bat doesn’t. She’s no better than the kids, resorting to whacking as well. Clarke can see the appeal though; it is wholly satisfying to expel all her energy on an inanimate object.

It also helps to distract from Lexa’s near presence as she amusedly watches. Though there is no actual touching—the brunette is still a safe distance clear of Clarke’s wild swinging technique—Clarke can feel the hairs on her arm standing from memory of Lexa’s past proximity.
She can imagine a gentle hand on her waist and a soft voice in her ear, as it had happened dozens of times before when Lexa tried to show her proper stance and bat grip. The way Lexa would pull her closer against her pelvis, then lean over her back, and bracket her arms around Clarke’s, wrapping hands over her fingers.

“Loosen your hold on the handle, love, I’ve got you,” she’d hear before Lexa would slowly twist their torsos in unison, extending their arms and swinging the bat up and over their right shoulders, mimicking for Clarke the correct position her upper body and hands should end in.

It’s debatable whether Lexa’s hands-on approach and whispered instructions helped or hindered her performance, but the ghost of her lingers still from their numerous practice sessions. Clarke can feel the mould of Lexa’s body against hers.

The unique feeling gives Clarke pause to consider the peculiarity of palpably missing someone who is present in the same room.

This is the third time that they’ve met, and the third time without any direct bodily contact. Outside of their friendship-agreement handshake and Clarke’s overheating incident, there hasn’t been any physical exchanges. Hellos and good byes have been spoken through nods, conversations sustained through extended eye contact.

Yet it is not so much a physical distance she feels as a heightened awareness of each other’s closeness. An invisible bubble of near-touches and almost-grazes that wraps the two former loves together. Movements are considered and precise, careful not to burst it. Like they both know that once pierced, they may not be able to hold back.

For every non-touch there’s an echo of a past one. For every close-but-not-quite brush of a hand, Clarke feels a deep reverberation of its last imprint against her skin.

But although these insensate interactions is akin to trying to pick up grains of sand with a fork, if they can continue to have afternoons like these, Clarke has faith that they’ll eventually build a sandcastle together.

With the gorgeous laugh that she draws from Lexa when one hitting attempt sees the bat flying out of her hands as the ball remains stubbornly on the tee, she can already see the tower taking shape.

Despite the distinct lack of tactility, this first friendly date has left a more visceral mark than any romantic dates Clarke has been on in the last four years.

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“I feel like we’re in a parallel universe. I still can’t believe she’s back. And that you’re dating her again.”

“We’re not dating, O.”

“Fine, friendly dating.”

A week after Clarke’s time at Grounders, she makes good on her promise to give Octavia a play-by-play of the Lexa-sized developments in her life since the exhibition opening.

The two friends are catching up at the playground near Octavia’s house, bundled together on the park bench, arms linked, and keeping warm with hot chocolate. There was a blip in the weather that made it temporarily tolerable to be outdoors but chilly enough to still need steaming cocoa and a cozy best friend.
Beside them, sleeping contently in the stroller in his feather-down cocoon is Octavia’s toddler son, Tye. He’s tightly hugging the stuffed lion that Clarke had gifted him for Christmas, as small puffs of air emit from full, rosy cheeks.

His cub-like snores had fallen to the background as Clarke back-catalogues for Octavia the night she saw Lexa at the gallery, her embarrassing literal meltdown at the Standard, and the subsequent friendly arrangement.

Octavia couldn’t hold in her laughter at Clarke’s dramatic recount of her thermally-induced self-sabotage. Her disbelief that Clarke was nearly done for by a parka was only usurped by incredulity that Lexa had proposed to renew their friendship through dating.

“A friend date,” Clarke corrects, trying to put extra emphasis on the word. “And there’s only been one, I wouldn’t call it dating.”

Octavia eyes her skeptically but allows the point. “How’d it go?”

“It was good. I think,” Clarke answers honestly, not sure what sentiment would accurately or adequately articulate her overall experience so far, subconsciously picking up on the word that Lexa had used to ask her on the date.

“That sounded like a question.”

“I don’t know. We’re still finding our feet around each other, but I enjoyed it. It was a really nice time with the kids. She’s great with them.”

Clarke goes on to detail her afternoon, telling Octavia about their session at Grounders with Aden and the Trikru Warriors, leaving out anytime her heart sped up when Lexa mother-goosed them. She recounts the group outing for mac & cheese afterwards before parting ways, and how the whole event, though well out of her non-athletic comfort zone, had furthered their fledgling reconnection.

She doesn’t mention the things that she and Lexa have yet to say, happy for the moment to leave be the pink elephant wearing a tutu.

“Definitely not your everyday…” Octavia comes to an adjacent conclusion. Clarke is about to agree when she finishes her thought, “first date and kids already.”

Clarke glares at her.

A pregnant pause later, Octavia sets her face in her most serious look, before asking, “Clarke, do you even know what a grounder is?”

“Hmm,” Clarke blows on her hot chocolate, and unapologetically shrugs her shoulders. “No fucking clue.”

Octavia laughs. “You and sports, it’s like your arch-nemesis. Except when it comes to Lexa. I still remember having to scrape your jaw off the ground after that first time you saw her in her baseball uniform.”

Octavia shakes her head, smiling for that day she lost her wing woman to stretched polyester.

“I’m not even going to deny it. She was hot. I didn’t know I had a thing for uniforms until that moment.”

Clarke reminisces, a tilt to her lips thinking of how the cut of Lexa’s jersey revealed her lean cut
while doing justice to her subtle curves and not-so-subtle ones. Before she can think of running her fingers along a sinewed back, a tangent memory springs to mind.

“Wait, wasn’t that also the same day you finally had the balls to talk to Lincoln? It feels like ages ago.”

“Maybe there’s hope for you after all. One batting practice and now you’re making sport references!”

“Fuck off,” Clarke laughs, and then covers her mouth when she realises the language she’d used in front of Octavia’s child, only to sigh in relief when she sees he’s still blissfully snoring. His babbling had recently turned into semi-coherent speech. Tye was prone to repeating the wrong words. (Octavia had to keep a vigilant ear out whenever Raven was close by.)

“What I meant, smart ass, is that things have changed. Lincoln’s traded in his football helmet for a firemen’s hat. And you went from chasing Lincoln and a ball to chasing after Tye and bad guys.”

“Yeah, we’ve all come a long way.”

“Exactly. Raven’s married, you and Linc have a brownstone and a two year-old, and I just played baseball with the former love of my life who I haven’t seen in nearly four years.”

“Yup, unbelievable,” Octavia chimes in.

“I know, right?”

“No, I mean it’s unbelievable that you played baseball.”

Octavia’s joke earns an elbow into her side, forcing her to grip her cup tighter so as not to spill it. The abrupt movement startles Tye momentarily. Clarke mouths her apology as Octavia goes to smooth his cheek and readjust his baby beanie, cooing him back to sleep.

They are both weary of waking up the tiny monster who could be more than a handful to chase around now that he discovered the use of his legs beyond walking. It had taken a bit of coaxing when they first arrived at the park to get Tye down for his nap. Both she and Octavia had to take turns singing ‘My Heart Will Go On’ before he willingly conceded his battle to stay awake. (Raven played the long game when it came to her rivalry with Octavia, putting on Titanic whenever she babysat.)

It still amazes Clarke how her friend, a warrior by all accounts and a force to be reckoned with, could turn into goo around her son. That was something that Octavia shared with Lexa, the ability to unsheathe their armours at the drop of a hat when it came to those they love. Clarke can imagine Lexa being in a similarly helpless position at the mercy of a demanding little prince. Her interactions with Aden alluded to as much.

Clarke isn’t afforded any more time to ruminate on Lexa’s fictional parenting skills when Octavia returns her attention. There’s no longer a trace of the earlier levity in her expression. Maybe her short interaction with Tye sobered her to what’s at stake.

“I’m genuinely happy that Lexa is back. We’ve all missed her. God, I’ve missed her. But, I need to ask you something.” Octavia pauses to arrange her next words carefully, asking in a measured tone, “what do you hope to get out of this friendship?”

Clarke’s stomach sinks.
The mood immediately drops, both knowing what’s coming next. Of the three of them, Octavia had a knack for cutting to the chase. While Raven can be equally critical in her own creative ways, Octavia never failed to beat around the bush. There’s a swift change in the air, and by the steel blue that’s staring intently at her now, Clarke braces for the reality check that she’s undoubtedly about to receive.

“A friend?”

Octavia doesn’t even bother acknowledging her poor attempt to deflect with a joke.

“You’ve never gotten over her. We both know she isn’t the former love of your life. Are you sure this is a good idea? She turns up out of nowhere after four years, and wants to be friends? No questions asked? How is this going to work?”

Clarke feels her throat tightening, her hands subconsciously close into fists. She doesn’t have an answer to any of Octavia’s questions. Though her instinct is to refute the first point, they both know her denial would be a ridiculously futile lie.

“What happens when you want more and she doesn’t? When it’s not enough?”

“It has to be, O. You know I can’t go there.”

She can’t. Despite the butterflies that never go away when she’s anywhere near Lexa, Clarke needs them to stay in their conservatory. She’s happy to visit them in dreams but letting them escape isn’t an option if she wants to safeguard the glasshouse of her heart from shattering altogether.

“I’ll figure it out as I go. Three weeks ago I didn’t even think I’d ever see her again, let alone the possibility of friendship. I can’t ask for more.”

“But you want to.”

“I can’t. I lost that right.”

She shakes her head. Tears are starting to collect as she pays dues to her buried feelings that have risen in her chest in the last few minutes.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. All I know is that when I saw her at the gallery, it felt like I could breathe again. Since the day she left,” Clarke has to pause to swallow down a sob, “since the day I pushed her away, I have felt a constant ache. This phantom pressure, this fucking crushing weight, has been sitting on my chest.”

Clarke moves her hand to the weak spot as if to check that it’s still there, still tattered. Another swallow as her emotions swell, the lump in her throat growing.

She tells Octavia of how the pain never goes away.

Not when she has her morning coffee and can only stare at the set of lopsided mugs Lexa made for them with her horrible attempt at pottery, the one made during the couple’s ceramics course that she had gifted Clarke for her birthday.

Not when Lexa’s Badgers letterman still sits in her closet, along with a box of baseballs that she has absolutely no use for but can’t give away.

Not when she wants to paint blues and reds and all she can see through blurry eyes is green.
The ache is there when she tries to distract herself by going on a coffee date with someone who’s face and name she won’t and don’t want to remember. And it’s certainly still there when she returns to their bed at night, the one it took them months to pick out during grad school because Lexa needed the mattress to have the right spring to stiffness ratio. There when she tries in vain to sleep but can’t because the bed’s too fucking big for one person.

And she knows it’s crazy, Clarke does, but she swears to her best friend she can still make out a faint indent in the foam on her side of the bed.

Thinking of the empty space, the tears well over, its flow a late bid to keep pace with the outpouring of words.

Octavia pulls her in for a hug and rubs her back consolingly. Silent solace is rote by now, the comforting hand doing the talking. The soothing rocking motion the only balm she can offer.

“Do you know what one of the worst feelings in the world is?” Clarke asks brokenly, her voice unable to shake its tremble. “It isn’t being alone. It’s reaching out in the middle of the night, and expecting to find someone there. Thinking that you aren’t alone. Thinking that someone will take your hand and keep it safe in their warmth.”

Octavia would give her hand in empathy but knows it’s not the one Clarke aches for.

“I’m still reaching out, O. It took four thousand nights to form the habit. I don’t know how to break it.

I don’t know how to get over it, how to get over her.

I thought I was doing the right thing … I thought it was the right decision at the time. When I cut her out of my life, I didn’t think it’d be an incision so …

It still hurts, and I … I haven’t been able to breathe.”

Opposite to her worrisome confession, Clarke is heaving at this point.

“I know,” Octavia tightens her embrace, and presses firmer circles on her back, but doesn’t have any more reassuring words. “I know, I’m sorry.”

Octavia doesn’t know how to ease the guilt that her best friend still carries for breaking Lexa’s heart, knowing the hurt runs deeper for having broken her own in the process.

“God, I’m being melodramatic,” Clarke self-deprecates after her breathing calms, releasing an overcompensating laugh at her unnecessary mid-day hysterics as she wipes the tears that’ve tracked down her cheek. “Obviously I had to breathe to stay alive.”

She takes in a gulp of air at the reminder.

“That’s the thing, though. It’s only felt like I’ve been surviving. But seeing her at the gallery, for the first time the vice grip loosened. And every meeting since, it’s been a bit more bearable. I just … I just want to be around her. And if she’s offering that. If she wants to be friends again, then I want to take that chance.”

At Clarke’s pleading tone, Octavia pats her knee in understanding and brings her head in to rest on her shoulder.

They sit silently for a long while, letting the chill wind pick up Clarke’s words and carry them on
shaky leaves and across lunch-hour traffic. What is left of their hot liquids have since cooled. Tye remains oblivious to his aunt’s emotional turmoil and his mother’s deep concern.

“Do you know what she said to me after the ceramics class?” Clarke asks. “We’re not straight. Why should our mugs be?”

They laugh at Lexa’s staunch defence of her artistic license, and Clarke feels a little lighter for it, though the sorrow remains ever-present.

“I just don’t get it. She’s so good with her hands. I mean, you’ve seen the furniture pieces in our—” she quickly corrects, “in my apartment. She could whittle a block of wood to look like the statue of David by using just a butter knife if she wanted to. But for whatever reason, she’s completely dismantled by spinning clay.”

She smiles thinking of Lexa’s endearing contradictions, and fondly remembers the war fought between Lexa’s white shirt and the wet clumps of earth.

Yet, despite the obvious battles at the potter’s wheel, Lexa was secretive about her mission. It made Clarke laugh that her back was turned to the blonde throughout the hour and only the frequent grunts and under-breath curses alighted her to something happening in the neighbouring workstation.

It wasn’t until the end of the glazing class that Clarke was finally presented with two of the most hideous looking, nearly unusable mugs that she had ever seen. It sat somewhere aesthetically weird between Munch’s Scream and Picasso’s blue period, if Clarke’s critical eye were to attempt an artistic evaluation.

But Lexa had been so proud of making their first hers and hers set of anything—even undertaking the labour of monograming them—that Clarke didn’t have the heart to deflate her balloon.

(“It looks great, babe,” she had never told a bigger lie.)

“We had so much fun together,” Clarke tells Octavia, and then more softly as her smile spreads to her eyes, “I want that again.”

Her friend nods, knowing there’s not much that can stop this freight train now.

It’s not until they are packing up their things later that Octavia returns to the topic in a last ditch effort to safeguard Clarke’s heart. She turns to face Clarke and fixes a weighty look when she says, pouring as much care into her words as she can, “I just want you to be careful, is all.”

And then pointedly, but not unkindly,

“You and Lexa were never really friends to begin with.”

*****

Lexa wasn’t Clarke’s first kiss.

But by the way it started in the softness of her eyes before she leaned in, the way her mouth parted reverently and exchanged a breath for a sigh when lips finally touched, the way they explored
wantonly looking for landfall, and on finding it, didn’t stop searching for new places to leave their mark, by the press of a shy tongue that wanted more but didn’t demand, how fingers in her hair, tugging lightly, did the asking instead—she wished it was her first and wanted this kiss to be her last.

For a time, Clarke had thought that there was truth to the claim that the best kiss is the one that has been exchanged a thousand times between the eyes before it reaches the lips. If so, then she and Lexa have been having the best kiss for the last twenty months.

Yet, here now, lying under the night sky, being kissed for the first time by a pretty girl she’s been crushing on since they first met, she knew it to be untrue.

The best kiss is the one that’s a lifetime in the making, the one she didn’t know she was waiting for until it arrived, where the world didn’t fade away but sharpened in focus, where heartbeats don’t quicken but beat in time to the steady rhythm of another.

That was what kissing Lexa felt like.

A first kiss that didn’t expand the universe but tethered her to it, grounding her in softness and warmth and pure joy; that didn’t just make the stars explode but lifted her soul towards its constellations.

It felt like so much, and yet not enough—a feeling she wanted to capture on canvas but couldn’t even begin to know how to describe, until Lexa put the words together for her.

Love and adoration shone in Lexa’s eyes when she opened them to quietly profess, “I would lay down my sword and kingdom for the chance to rest forever on the brow and slope of your lips.”

Clarke would swoon if she weren’t already laid on the ground, weak-kneed from the swooping sensation in her stomach that hasn’t stopped since Lexa’s lips slid against hers. Her cheeks flushed deeply from the leftover tingles and the renewed eruption of butterflies.

“Uh-huh, yeah. Ditto,” she inarticulately reciprocated.

Practice had ended early, the team still too exhausted from going into extra innings of the semi-final the night before to put in full effort. But while the rest of the players had already vacated the premises, Clarke stayed behind with their team captain.

They were lying on top of Lexa’s letterman jacket, on their backs on the grass in left field. Close to the foul line and as close to each other as possible. The evening sun had recently dipped, the field lights and distant twinkles above now their only companions and source of illumination.

They were speaking of parallel universes and imagining versions of themselves where Clarke was a sky princess and Lexa a ground warrior, fingers entangled with one another, and looking at each other well past the intimacy boundaries of friendship, when the tension had finally snapped.

The entire left side of Clarke’s body had felt electrified from being pressed so closely to Lexa’s, the current running through every nerve and fibre. But the heat of that charge paled in comparison to the blaze Lexa ignited when she had turned on her side to face her, the intent clear in her eyes and alighting Clarke to how her world was about to change. Lexa paused for only a second, a silent ask for permission that was never needed, before moving in to give her the best kiss of her life.

“Why haven’t we done this before?”

Clarke rhetorically asked the question to Lexa’s parted lips, their softness giving under the gentle caress of a brushing thumb that moved in sync with each expel of warm breath. She moistened her
own lips in sympathy feeling the wetness of Lexa’s.

“You mean this?”

Lexa leaned in again, and realigned her mouth with Clarke’s, kissing her just as deeply, if not with more desperate need. With greater intent. Her heart almost stopped when Lexa licked into the roof of her mouth before she started to gently suck on her tongue. Clarke panted, and was glad for the slight breathing room a moment later when Lexa changed angle to take in her bottom lip. A moan escaped Lexa when Clarke’s tongue pushed back.

Her heart and lips swelled in equal measure with every stroke and touch and brush and skim of their mouths.

God, if this was heaven, why did she wait so long to get here.

She kept her eyes closed, unbothered by the likely smirk that Lexa sported when she finally pulled back to say, “I don’t know, you tell me.”

“I, uh, …”

Clarke started to answer but her mind was muddled by an intrepid hand that had made its way to the underside of her breast. She gave up finishing her sentence altogether when her train of thought got lost in Lexa’s other hand making circles on her stomach, feeling herself sinking further into their makeshift bed of green.

“If I had known this was the only way to get you out on the field, trust me, we would’ve been doing this a lot sooner.”

She shoved Lexa away in feigned offence, but gripped her waist tighter contradictorily, refusing to let go. This time it was Clarke who tilted her head up to resume her new favourite physical activity. Once the dam broke, she was a goner. Drunk on the heady wine of Lexa’s taste, she never wanted to stop kissing her.

After an immeasurable amount of time, and the air between them becoming more humid and thick than it should be for a cool night, Lexa finally lifted herself off of Clarke.

Looking torn, and the opposite of wanting to stop, she nonetheless plead they do so before things got out of hand.

“Clarke, as much as I love that we kissed for the first time on the same field where we met for the first time, I really don’t want our first time to be out here too.”

Laying there in the afterglow of their first kiss, with Lexa now hovering over her, hands on either side of her head, hair spilling down in pretty waves, pupils dilated and lips kiss-bruised, Clarke could easily find fault in Lexa’s case for discontinuing what they’re doing.

There was no other place she wanted to be in that moment than under the hush of night, underneath Lexa and the cover of their burgeoning love.

Clarke looked up to the night sky, and whispered her apologies to the stars.

“I don’t know. I think I like it on the ground.

I kinda want to stay here forever.”
A reason why we’re here
Reason can’t be far
and underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
underneath it
Hear the whispers of the restless brook
And while the shadows fall
We can find an answer
Getting closer by the hour
Closer than we have before

Underneath It by Ásgeir

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Clarke and Lexa reconnect, part two. Just a text and a touch closer.

Ps. Clexa Week was a lot of fun, and very distracting. Cheers to those who are reading this and also indulged my tangents into cherubs and destiny. :)

Pps. If there are mistakes in this chapter, I wouldn't know. 12.5K+ words later, and I'm too two typed out to see. Kindly let me know if there are any runaway prepositions or other errant grammar infractions. (Runaway sentences are a lost cause. But prepositions, I could fix!)
Of Mason Jars and Fireflies

Chapter Summary

A (relatively) short interlude. This is a callback to a part of Clarke's unsent letter in Chapter 2.

Chapter Notes

An extended insight into what touch means to Clarke and Lexa, a theme that will be picked up in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"But now, I have trouble with even the simplest of nouns. Jar, rain, door. Home."

****

It was the kind of summer night that would stay with Clarke, etched in her memory long after the crickets have stopped their songs, and her teenage heart recovered from its erratic beat.

The amphitheatre was filled with young faces full of wonder, all listening intently as the guide talked about the wildlife and night creatures of Bear Mountain. Tonight’s lecture was a special on birds and their prey. Expressions of awe reflected back at him across the flickering embers of the campfire as he described the array of waterfowl, warblers and shorebirds, and the various species of migrating hawks and raptors. Prolonged oohs and aahs came at the mention of the resident bald eagles that can be seen soaring above the highlands year round.

It’d all be fascinating if Clarke’s attention wasn’t on the hand on her thigh, and the press of warm skin where shorts-bare legs touched. A blanket is laid over their laps, and hot cider by their sides. It was debatable whether the source of heat she felt was from the cider, the blanket, or the hand. Most likely, the three conspired to produce the searing effect.

They were one of the oldest amongst the crowd of revellers but no one would know it by the look on Lexa’s face. The sophomore high schooler seemed just as enthralled as the eight to ten year-olds sitting around them on the log-cut benches.

Lexa had surprised her with a long-weekend camping trip to the State Park. She had wanted to share
her typical summer experience with Clarke, one she annually partook with Gustus and Anya. While Clarke would be knitting afghans with her grandmother in California, the longstanding Woods tradition involved hooking and angling of a different variety.

(After Lexa’s mother had passed away, it was one of the rare family activities that could draw his youngest daughter out of her shell. So, Gustus had continued the bonding time with his girls, despite the ache he felt at seeing the empty fourth camping chair. He tried to mend their broken hearts over swimming contests and s’mores and campfire stories. It soothed his pain a marginal amount to see the broad smile on Lexa’s face when she reached the top of a difficult climb, triumphant to have beaten her curmudgeon sister to its peak.)

At his daughter’s pleading, Gustus had pushed this year’s date back so that Clarke could join them for the four-day getaway.

Normally Clarke would protest scheduled physical activity, but after days spent paddling around the lake, fishing by the shore, swimming in the river, and enjoying the spectacular views of the Hudson Highlands from the perch of the Tower, following lunches under shaded picnic groves, she was ready to sign-up to be head of Girl Scouts.

Moreover, she loved every moment she got to see the giant of a man bending down to pick up flowers along the trails and later braiding them into unruly swim-drenched hair. Clarke understood where Lexa got her gentleness from when she watched his bulky form bent over in a too small lawn chair as his hands worked meticulously in practised, delicate movements of overs and unders. Even Anya became pliant under his touch.

A gentleness that she experienced first-hand when it was her turn, gaining primary knowledge of the latent softness under all the Woods’ tough exteriors.

As it turned out, Gustus had to leave a day earlier than expected when he received an emergency call from one of his contract jobs. Apparently the basement had flooded. Anya took the opportunity to head back to the city with her father, citing not wanting to be the third wheel to the grossness of Clexa as an excuse for her departure. Really, they all knew she was eager to return to the brunette who couldn’t make it on the trip.

That had left Clarke and Lexa to enjoy the last of their itinerary, the Trailside Zoo, on their own. Clarke didn’t mind, seeing as the light in Lexa’s eyes—that had been shining ever since they pulled off of the Interstate—brightened impossibly more when they visited the amphibians and reptiles exhibit.

With another full day behind them, she and her girlfriend—gawd, it was amazing to be able to finally call her that—were staked out in a prime spot of the amphitheatre so that Lexa could continue to get her nerd on, and Clarke can just smile dopily watching her eyes widen and eyebrows hit her hairline with every bird fact consumed.

Clarke found it difficult to pay attention to the guide because every time Lexa got excited, her left hand would unconsciously squeeze harder or move further up Clarke’s thigh, causing a different type of excitement that had Clarke flushed rose for most of the past hour.

Hearing about the courtship practices of birds did nothing to distract from the imprint of Lexa’s hand feeling like the intense afternoon sun still laid bare its burning gaze on her skin. It provided little relief from thinking about lakeside kisses, droplets of water and a burnt orange bikini. Clarke’s only consolation, she thought, was at least the itchy wool of the blanket provided a plausible explanation for the pronounced goosebumps.
After their first kiss two months ago, things had been ratcheting up steadily. Kissing had become almost as habitual as breathing, and often interfering with it. Lexa’s mouth and tongue were the mason jars, and Clarke’s lips, the fireflies, engaged in an endless game of catch and release. With how often their mouths and lips came together, they could light up the entire Brooklyn night sky by bioluminescence alone.

Lately, it seemed they communicated only through blinking codes and golden flight paths.

(Maybe Anya was onto something about their grossness.)

Their physical intimacy was reaching a point where Clarke was spending a lot more me time in the shower, and her father was wondering why there’d been an unusual hike in the Griffins’ energy and water bills. She had attributed it to the A/C constantly running because of the unseasonably hotter than usual summer, hoping he would buy the same rationale for why Clarke was blushing while telling him so.

Rose might as well become a permanent colour for her, when all their free time was spent with roaming hands sifting through soft hair and seeking out and sinking into smooth skin. Such was the effect Lexa had on Clarke, so conditioned was she to associate any body contact with laboured breaths, that even an innocent touch of thigh had Clarke flushing while hearing about the mating rituals of the yellow warbler.

—

They retreated back to their tent later that evening, high on Lexa’s breathless recounting of her favourite bits while Clarke tried to remember how walking worked now that her right leg was no longer on fire. The fifteen minute trek back to their campsite helped to refocus her attention away from the scorching sensation.

She hummed and nodded at the appropriate intervals as Lexa tried to ascribe bird characteristics to themselves.

“You’re definitely a chickadee. Sociable and can’t stand still,” Lexa concluded, though mostly to herself. “Small but bossy.”

“Hey!” Clarke protested, only having the wherewithal to counter, “Yeah, well, you’re a warbler. With your fancy colourful coat and extra-ness.”

Lexa laughed, kissing her chuckle into Clarke’s hair.

“True,” she said smiling, and then with a wiggle of her eyebrows asked, “how else am I supposed to attract the best chicks?”

“Not with puns like that,” Clarke replied before she quickened her pace and walked away, leaving her still-chuckling girlfriend behind.

She released her own chuckle as she heard mumbled in the distant, “We’ll see who’ll answer my bird calls later.”

—

The thing with physical exertion that no one had bothered to tell Clarke was the exhaustion that it produced. She was thinking this while lying face down on their shared sleeping bag, spread eagle and basically useless while her girlfriend puttered around on hands and knees in the confined space trying to change into her sleep clothes. After four days of non-stop movement, Clarke only had
enough energy herself to shuck off her jean shorts, and hastily throw on a tank top.

Minutes later, curious about the sudden quietness, Clarke turned her head at an unintentionally opportune moment and caught a glimpse of Lexa’s breasts just as her t-shirt got temporarily stuck around her head as it came down. The unexpected sight—deep pink peaks against tan skin—stuttered what little brain activity she had left, making Clarke blush and gracelessly scrambling to bury her face in her pillow.

It sent a shiver up her body and reignited the ache between her legs.

While touching and groping had become a regular occurrence, it had happened in the presence of layers of cotton or jersey or, like earlier that afternoon in the water, lycra. They had not seen each other topless to date. Clarke knew the weight and feel of Lexa’s breasts but had no visual to connect what her hands had experienced, relying on her active imagination to compensate where her eyes hadn’t yet the privilege.

(At the rate they were going though, that was likely to change soon and clothing probably wouldn’t be a barrier much longer.)

“Hi,” Lexa smiled at her, after she finally settled into the sleeping bag—actually two sleeping bags that Lexa had zipped together to make one larger one for better cuddling efficiency.

Clarke turned on her side to face her girlfriend fully, clearing her thoughts of her lustful vision in favour of taking in Lexa’s soft gaze. The tight quarters and closeness of their temporary bed arrangement narrowed Clarke’s world to the microcosm of Lexa’s eyelashes and the golden flecks they protected.

“Hi.” She cupped Lexa’s cheek, gently caressing it with her thumb, then tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and whispered, “Thank you for this weekend.”

Wordlessly, Lexa scooted forward to graze Clarke’s nose with hers before laying a gentle kiss on its tip, and then another to her forehead, two more to each apple of cheek, before a final one back down to the beauty mark above her lip. Like she was giving alms to an unseen deity, in gratitude for the richness of their day and the beauty before her. The silent task was followed by an arm wrapping around Clarke’s mid section and pulling her in closer.

The gestures were so intimate, reverent, and full of affection, if Clarke’s muscles—or her entire body for that matter—weren’t out of commission, she would return them with fervour which would undoubtedly lead to another one of their out-of-hand make-out sessions.

She opted for a short, sweet kiss instead, ending on a light moistening of Lexa’s lips with her tongue.

“Mhm, I’m definitely a fan of cider now,” Clarke hummed after one last stolen lick. “Goodnight, Warbler.”

“Goodnight, Chickadee.”

—

Sometime during the night, Clarke woke up to kisses on her bare shoulder.

At first, they felt like the gentle pattering of rain against a windowpane. A soothing if not distant sensation. Each drop was like a liquid pebble falling on the glass of her skin, looking for purchase to collect. Soon, they built toward a light summer shower that she wanted to soak in, to crack open the window and let the water seep through.
When her hearing caught up to her sense of touch, she realised that what she had subconsciously
perceived were the actual sounds of real rainfall, a shy downpour against the nylon fabric of their
tent. It must have started sometime after sleep had given way to dream, covering the forest, its critters
and campers alike in a peaceful wash.

Clarke cracked open her eyes to find an adoring pair staring back at her. Even in the dim light, and in
her foggy state, she could read fondness written across jade.

“What time is it?” She asked groggily, sleep laced in the low timbre of her voice, its rasp breaking
the rhythm of the rainfall.

“I don’t know,” Lexa answered quietly, sheepish. She stared longingly into Clarke’s eyes before her
gaze fell to lips. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t wait until morning to kiss you again.”

Clarke wasn’t fully awake yet but the tiny confession thinned the cloud enough to understand the
silent ask.

“Come here,” she whispered.

She blindly tugged at Lexa’s hip to close the negligible gap between their bodies, at the same time
tilting her head and parting her mouth in wait of the anticipated plumpness. The invitation was
readily accepted, less than a second later urgent lips pressed against hers.

To her surprise, despite the pressing need of the late-hour request, the kiss was soft and slow, the
kind that marked time in increments of sighs and degrees of tingles. Clarke sucked and pulled on a
bottom lip, in no hurry to let go, while Lexa replied with small, drawn out brushes of her tongue. The
slowness matched the rain’s streaming soundtrack, moving at the same languid pace as the rivulets
running down their tent. Bathed in stillness and calm, their mouths moved together in idle synchrony.

“Better?” Clarke asked when they pulled back after an indeterminate time and air became necessary.

Lexa didn’t answer immediately. Her eyes remained closed leaving the question hanging in the hazy
aftermath of their kiss while she looked to be committing the taste of Clarke to memory. Against the
faint moonlight, Clarke could make out a lopsided smile. She combed her hand through Lexa’s hair,
and nuzzled her nose into the crook of her neck to take in the scent of vanilla and pine. Mixed with
the smell of fresh rain, it was intoxicating.

“Much,” Lexa breathed out at last, releasing a contented sigh that Clarke felt against her cheek, and
expelled through her own lungs.

Clarke thought that would be the end of it, having fulfilled her girlfriend duty, and feeling incredibly
fortunate that middle-of-the-night kisses were part of the job description.

She rubbed Lexa’s back and was preparing to return to sleep when Lexa surprised her by shifting her
body to lie more fully on top, resting on her forearms and elbows by either side of Clarke’s head. On
instinct, Clarke wound her arms around Lexa’s waist and securely held her in place. The change
brought them chest to chest while bare legs slotted between each other.

She looked curiously into deep-forest eyes, trying to read intent behind the moss green but brooking
no argument against the new proximity. Clarke rubbed her hands up and down Lexa’s sides in
soothing patterns, happy to let the silence stretch out as the hidden romantic agenda suffused their
tent with quiescent anticipation.

Finding no objection to the new position, without preamble, Lexa dipped her head back in for a
second kiss.
As soon as their lips touched again, Lexa immediately deepened it, and Clarke didn’t hesitate to reciprocate.

There was nothing soft or slow about this go-round. Where the previous was all tenderness, this time was all intensity. Clarke felt the stroke of Lexa’s tongue as hot and insistent as the build-up that was restarting in her lower belly and aching between her legs. She volleyed back with equally firm presses of her mouth, and subconscious movements of her hips.

There was something more burning, keen and fervent, with the way their mouths slid against each other, sloting and nipping and tugging in ask and answer. The veil of sleep still clinging to her made it challenging for Clarke to decipher what Q&A they were engaged in, but she did her best to reply.

Several heavy breaths later, Lexa pulled away from Clarke’s lips and, before any protest could be made, went to place open-mouth kisses under the hinge of jaw and down the column of her neck. It made her toes curl, and her whole body want to sink into the down feathers of their sleeping bag.

Clarke moaned and moved one hand to cup her ass as encouragement, while the other hand slipped under her top and skated across her ribcage. The moan turned into an uncontrolled whimper when she realised that her girlfriend was wearing extremely short shorts, as her fingers brushed against flesh and felt the roundness, nearly bare and definitely full. She squeezed and pushed Lexa tighter against her pelvis, suddenly needing to feel closer—how that would be possible she currently didn’t have the faculty to know.

When a hot tongue laved over her pulse point, Clarke’s hand correspondingly slipped under Lexa’s shorts to continue its work skin-on-skin.

They lost themselves in the next few minutes in a sort of Newtonian negotiation of action and reaction, at the mercy of need and want as hands and lips were moved by an invisible force.

Clarke had completely forgotten about the rain, distracted by the thundering in her heart. The pitter-patter sounds flowed back in when they at last came up for air.

“I want you,” Lexa professed quietly between ragged breaths. Her cheeks were flushed and pupils dilated, but her gaze was earnest and filled with desire.

“I want you too, Lexa,” Clarke said, brushing her thumb across Lexa’s swollen lip. It was hard not to, when Lexa was looking at her like that, as if she had planted all the trees in the forest.

She wasn’t given much time to dwell on the sentiment, however, confused by Lexa’s next actions. The brunette shuffled off of her to grab something from their backpacks. Her intention became clear, and the cause for the rustling apparent, when the tent was illuminated in a soft glow minutes later. Clarke raised on her elbows to find that Lexa had placed LED tea candles around the perimeter.

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“Lex, I can’t believe—” Clarke started to say, breaking out into a grin, amused by how extra her girlfriend was. But her laughter was summarily cut off when Lexa moved back to straddle Clarke’s hips. Sitting upright, Lexa took a deep breath and then proceeded to removing her t-shirt, stealing whatever words Clarke had left.

The sight eliminated any sleepiness that was leftover. Clarke sputtered seeing Lexa topless, not knowing where to land her gaze. On creamy skin, sun-kissed with a tinge of burnt and a lot of freckles, or on the contours around the delicate but prominent collarbone, or on the curve of her breasts, where it dipped and smoothed out to firm abs. All of which was framed by auburn locks
Clarke’s view was spoiled for choice.

Jesus fuck, she was utterly gorgeous. Smaller and slighter than Clarke but alluring and insanely sexy all the same. Taking in the athletic body, Clarke could finally get behind the whole sports aesthetic. It took tremendous restraint for her not to reach out.

“I want all of you,” Lexa said, shy and small but entirely brave, “if you’ll have me.”

Beneath the bravery, Clarke saw the vulnerability behind Lexa’s expression as she watched Clarke for a reaction and waited on an answer. Clarke can understand the trepidation, this would be a turning page for both of them, and not just their relationship.

“Me too, and I do,” Clarke said, wanting to reassure, but then bashfully confessed, “but I’ve never …”

“Me neither,” Lexa was quick to echo, looking relieved to learn of their shared inexperience.

There were hints that neither had gone further with anyone but this was the first time it was admitted aloud.

“Maybe we can figure it out together.”

Clarke lifted herself up so that they were now sitting face to face, Lexa still cradled in her lap. She placed Lexa’s hands at the hem of her tank top, which her girlfriend had no trouble taking the hint and helping to take off for her. After the item was haphazardly tossed aside, their chests heaved in unison at their mutual state of undress.

It was Lexa’s turn to sputter. Clarke had to stifle her laugh seeing widened eyes, a slackened jaw, and the conflict of fisted hands willing themselves not to unfold and grab. She appeared to have the same trouble Clarke did of figuring out where best to rest her gaze.

“You’re so beautiful, Clarke.” The words spilled out with quiet reverence. Clarke was about to reply with, “So are you, Lexa,” when her girlfriend’s smile turned into a mischievous grin before she said, while looking at her chest, “They’re so beautiful. Congratulations.”

Clarke laughed and blushed simultaneously as she lightly pushed Lexa’s shoulder. She was glad for the humour to lessen feeling exposed and vulnerable.

“It’s really not fair. Do you know how many sit-ups I have to do, or baseballs I have to throw, and you just look like that?” Lexa waved her hand in general outline of Clarke’s body, mocking a face of disdain.

Blushing even more, Clarke didn’t know how to take the new compliment so instead she cupped the back of Lexa’s neck and pulled her in for a deep kiss.

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The tempo of the third go struck a balance between the slowness of the first and the intensity of the second. What distinguished it entirely from both, however, was the objective—drawing out pleasure to a degree they’ve never obtained before.

As tongues were re-introduced, Clarke dared to place her hand over Lexa’s uncovered breast. Fondling felt different this time without the interference of fabric, the feeling more heightened and connected somehow. Lexa seemed to equally appreciate the unobstructed pressure, almost mewling when Clarke rolled her nipple into a puckered state.
She released her own whimper when Lexa detached their lips only to redirect her sucking and licking efforts to Clarke’s breast instead. A loud moan followed as her tongue laved around Clarke’s nipple, flicking it to attention. Pouty lips then took over pinching and pulling before the pattern would restart. If Clarke didn’t already know that Lexa was a boob girl, this was proof aplenty.

Clarke sunk her unused hand into Lexa’s hair to hold her head close, aiding and encouraging the efforts through timely arching of her back while her other hand continued to squeeze and knead and rub Lexa’s breast.

They haven’t done anything below waist yet but she could already feel the tightness building to an unsustainable level, like crashing waves being held back by a foam levee. She felt mountains slide and fault lines moved with every touch and contact made.

Breathing was becoming more difficult.

Clarke knew she was getting wetter, and had to resist from comparing it to the amount of moisture collecting on their tent. Her arousal was reaching a breaking point that needed to be addressed soon before she comes on her first time with Lexa without any direct stimulation.

“Lex, I need …” Clarke tried to get out between pants.

Maybe it was the desperation in her voice, or likely the less-than-subtle bucking of her hips, but Lexa seemed to understand. She pulled back from Clarke’s chest and kissed her softly before she said, “I know, me too.”

The next thing she knew, Clarke felt herself being swiftly but gently lowered back onto the sleeping bag, and Lexa retaking her position hovering on top. She realised that some uncoordinated shuffling must have occurred as well during the descent that rid Lexa of her shorts because she could now feel her girlfriend’s wetness on her thigh. It worsened the sticky situation between her own legs, and all but broke the levee.

Clarke placed both hands on Lexa’s hips and guided her to start a slow grind, while they resumed kissing. She didn’t know how much of a turn-on it could be to have Lexa rocking against her while feeling the slide of her want soaking her skin. It felt amazing to be the cause of such a reaction, that every time their kisses deepened or their chests rubbed or her nails dug into soft flesh, more fluid would gush out of Lexa.

Their moans and panting would undoubtedly be heard had their campsite not been a good hearing distance away from the main campground. In the moment, Clarke was thankful that Anya’s general dislike of people meant she insisted they set up as far away from commoners as possible, forcing Gustus and Lexa to erect their makeshift home near the brook a half mile off the beaten path. In the moment, Clarke was extremely grateful that Gustus and Anya were not here to witness the consequence of her social elitism.

She was also appreciative of nature’s assistance, assured that the rain likely dampened any sounds of their whimpering from carrying across the forest floor.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she felt Lexa’s hand skim along the top of her underwear, leaving a trail of goosebumps across her ribs and stomach on its way there. She was glad for the disruption, not wanting to think of Lexa’s father and sister any longer while they were doing what they were doing, or about to do.

Lexa waited for permission to go further, her head laid on Clarke’s shoulder and taking a break from kissing to calibrate the rise and fall of their chests.
Clarke nodded her consent into the crook of Lexa’s neck, having only enough air to emit a feeble please. She tried her best to inhale and exhale away her nervousness when Lexa started pulling her underwear down and helped her to shimmy out of them.

All progress at regulating her breathing, however, were undone when she next felt tentative fingers stroke through her wet folds. She bit down onto Lexa’s neck to keep from breaking apart too early, and then latched on even more when a steady rhythm of soft presses and firm circles began.

“Fuck.”

She reflexively gripped Lexa’s back, clawing for anchor.

“Is this ok?” Lexa asked, a hint of uncertainty in her breathy voice.

“Yeah,” Clarke whispered into her ear, before managing to get the words out, “It … it feels good. Really good.”

Though the pressure was lighter than what she was used to with her own hand, it felt a million times better, more electric and pleasurable, because it was Lexa. The gentleness and care with which she moved had built a warmth inside Clarke’s chest that outmatched the fire between her legs.

“God, Clarke, you’re so wet,” Lexa said. “You feel amazing.”

“Lex, can you …” As much as she agreed about how amazing it was, she needed more when she felt a finger inadvertently dipping into her heat. “Can you try going inside?”

At the prompt, Lexa lifted her head from Clarke’s shoulder, and locked their gazes, a visual double-checking to confirm the verbal request. Clarke nodded again. Lexa intently maintained eye contact, looking out for signs of discomfort, as she slid the tip of one finger inside.

Clarke held her breath and hissed at the tight feeling. Lexa looked concerned for a moment but she kissed her worry away. “It’s ok, I … I just need a second.”

Another kiss and nod later, and then Clarke felt Lexa slowly pushing in until her index finger was completely enveloped by Clarke. Holy shit, was all she could think. Neither of them moved at first, each adjusting to the feel of being wrapped in and around the other.

After a few test pulls out and pushes back in, they were able to set a rhythm that restarted both their pantings. Clarke felt the small stretch as the initial slight pain turned into pleasure. She moaned her approval into Lexa’s open mouth, licking into its roof. Soon, a second finger joined and increased the tempo to a dizzying pace that fogged their tent with staggered cries.

Clarke couldn’t believe that she was having sex with Lexa, that she got to share this experience with her best friend. For her, it was all the more meaningful because deep, soulful intimacy was the last connecting thread that separated them. Where they had already met intellectually and emotionally, they could now express themselves physically.

Sometimes, her feelings for Lexa felt so large and immense, more expansive than she could comprehend at sixteen, that she didn’t know what to do with it, where to put it. Being able to release all that energy through touch, through the exalt of hands and the grace of lips, seemed like a starting point to understand the breadth and depth of what love could be—what they were well on their way to embodying.

“Can I touch you too?” She asked.
“If you wouldn’t mind,” Lexa replied between moans, “that would be much appreciated.”

Clarke laughed at her expedient humour and insistent politeness, even as Lexa lifted her hip to allow her hand to slip between them.

She cupped her at first, gently brushing, content to explore how warm and wet Lexa felt against her hand. The silky softness was different than her own, more addicting. Their combined scents more heady. Running fingers along Lexa’s folds was a new sensation she never wanted to go a day without. She couldn’t imagine being touch-starved of Lexa ever again.

When Clarke moved to enter her, taking the same care that Lexa had earlier, she realised that the caution was unwarranted. Lexa was more than prepped from working her up. She was able to penetrate with little resistance, earning a relieved moan in return, and encouraging her to push all the way in one fluid motion.

“Clarke,” was hotly said into her ear at the same time that Lexa’s pelvis pushed down, “Fuck.”

Clarke had concluded too soon, she immediately wanted to take back her previous statement. With the way Lexa’s muscles greedily contracted around her finger, she never wanted to live without this feeling, being sheathed inside of Lexa.

As Lexa continued to pump into her, Clarke sought to match the rhythm stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust, adding a second finger to level the playing field. Their bodies ground and pushed, slid and moved together as kisses and pants were exchanged. Intermittent cries of more and please and fuck hastened the meteoric rise towards their climax.

It didn’t take much after that. Faster and harder, their movements becoming entirely uncoordinated as they blindly chased their orgasms together.

Clarke felt the press of a thumb to her clit, accidental at first, and then a longer, more deliberate swipe followed, that had her gasping for air and stilling her movements. While her back arched, she had enough wits about her left to mirror the action.

“Lexa—”

“Clarke, I’m gonna …”

And then they were both toppling over the edge, coming onto each others hands. Clarke felt Lexa shake, while she shuddered, as they rode out their orgasms, hanging on tightly to each other waiting for the tremors to subside.

Lexa then collapsed on top of Clarke, their arhythmic breathing rising above the continued pattering of the rain.

—

“Was there a sale?” Clarke asked, once Lexa had rolled over to lie on her back beside her, both staring unseeingly at the ceiling of the tent.

“What?”

“The candles.”

“Is that what you really want to talk about after what we just did?” Lexa responded, laughing. She turned on her side, head held up by a hand while the other lightly traced invisible lines across
Clarke’s stomach that sent renewed shivers up her still-recovering body. “After our first kiss, I offered you my sword and kingdom. After this,” her eyes moved slowly, hungrily across Clarke’s naked torso to make her point, “you want to talk economics of battery-powered lighting?”

“I want to make sure you got a good deal.”

“I did. Used all my coupons.”

Lexa looked at her with amused adoration before she started to pepper kisses on Clarke’s shoulder.

“Stop it,” Clarke faux-protested the affection, even as her smile beamed to rival all the candles. “That’s how this all started.”

“Are you complaining?”

“No,” Clarke answered, looking at her with unfettered fondness. “But, is this why you like camping so much?”

She was expecting the banter to continue but was met by Lexa’s contemplative gaze instead as her hand patterns turned into soothing circles.

“My favourite thing used to be catching fireflies with mason jars,” Lexa said when she stopped her tracing to pick up Clarke’s hand and entwined them in a play of fingers. Her voice took on a hushed tone as she continued, “Mom and I would go down to the lake after dusk, while Dad and Anya worked on building the campfire. We would spend the hour chasing the lightning bugs. Sometimes we’d fill enough in a jar that when we got back to camp, it was brighter than the flimsy fire that the other two could barely manage to start because they couldn’t agree on the right kindling technique.”

Clarke smiled at Lexa’s chuckle. She could hear an undertone of sadness, but joy bubbled forth from the fond memory.

“While they continued to bicker, Mom and I would pull out our books and read by the light of the jars. The next morning, we’d wake up early, before dawn so it was still dark out, to release them. It was amazing watching them flutter out and dance and spreading their glow, like a preview to the sunrise that would come minutes later.”

“That sounds really nice,” Clarke said, squeezing her hand.

“It was,” Lexa breathed out.

They let their shared smiles stretch out the minute infinitely as fingers weaved in and out.

“But this, you,” Lexa kissed Clarke’s hand and then softly her lips, “is my new favourite thing about camping, and just life in general.”

Clarke answered her the only way she knew lately, through the glow of her own bright light, bringing her lips to graze Lexa’s and then kissing her deeply, soulfully. Like she never wanted to let go.

As the rain continued to fall lightly, as her heartbeats matched its lulling sounds, as the tendrils of early morning mist started to form beyond their temporary home, she wondered if it was too soon to be thinking, *I love you.*

If she was too young to want, *forever.*
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Clarke and Lexa reconnect, part two. Just a text and a touch closer.

This flashback forms part of the next chapter. It needed to be separated out because, well, 15K was just getting ridiculous. Even for me. The remaining 10K, aka Chapter Five, should be out by next Sunday. Thanks for reading!

(Ps. It's been awhile since I was sixteen. I wonder if sixteen-year-old me would be side-eyeing what I just wrote. Probably.)

(Pps. Inspiration for fireflies visual.)
Clarke and Lexa reconnect, part two. Just a text and a touch closer.

Clarke finds herself more attached to her phone as of late.

An incremental change in their dynamic had occurred in recent weeks, the rapport they had started to rebuild at Grounders having opened up the lines of communication. She feels the shift in atmosphere, even if it’s pixel-based and happening character by character.

(Lexa) 10:37
Ugh, client won’t budge.

(Clarke) 10:50
Couldn’t sway them with that fancy Ivy League degree?

As she stares at her impulsive tease, she realises some habits are hard to break.

It was a reflex for Clarke to rib Lexa about her alma mater. Though there was never any bite to it knowing how extremely hard the girl had worked to earn her scholarship and a coveted spot in both the Bachelor’s and Masters programs at Columbia. Architecture student Lexa would usually retort that art student Clarke was in no position to cast a stone about higher education elitism when she herself attended an upper echelon private art school.

Thankfully, architect Lexa seems unfazed by the return to form.

(Lexa) 10:51
No, I missed the intro course on Dealing with Clients Who Think They Can Design. I’ve spent my morning trying to convince him that gold-spotted bricks is a tad overkill.

(Clarke) 10:52
And the Woods charm didn’t work? I remember you could sell tissue paper as canvas to an artist.

Clarke worries her lip, another slip, hoping the banter doesn’t come across as too familiar or flirty. Engaging in conversation with Lexa has always caused a natural pull of her lips; she’s having a hard time remembering that this is 2018 Clarke texting 2018 Lexa, and not their 2014 counterparts.

(Lexa) 10:54
You were convinced you’d fail the final hand-in if you didn’t have the right stretched cotton. I was simply pointing out that if you only had a toothbrush and tissue paper it’d still be a masterpiece.

(Lexa) 10:55
Frustrating that I can’t change his mind. Apparently my range of effect is limited to blondes.
Clarke holds her breath seeing the dots appear and disappear in quick successions. Lexa likely realised, belatedly, the meaning of her text. Clarke has never known ellipses to be such a cliff-hanger.

She grins, amused, imagining the crease of brow on the other end of the line, chastising impulsive thumbs. It would seem she’s not the only one caught up in old habits. She wants to draw out the tease but then Lexa’s next message deflects.

(Lexa) 10:56
Wait, don’t you work for yourself?

(Clarke) 10:56
Yes?

(Lexa) 10:57
Sounds ideal. Right now, I’d rather work for you too.

Clarke couldn’t keep the blush off her cheeks and was glad Lexa couldn’t see it through her screen. Though she was sure nothing more was meant by the innocent comment, and was so far from where her imagination should have taken her, it nonetheless set her heart afire to think of Lexa in any position under her.

After Grounders, they started to text more frequently, testing the waters with a few stray ones, and then more filtered in as the weeks unfolded. Tiny humans worked well as ice-breakers. Clarke had kicked things off by inquiring after the Warriors well-being, and whether the gallons of ice cream had been counterproductive to the day’s fitness agenda.

Lexa had lobbied back about the elasticity of their bottomless stomachs and ridiculously high metabolism—and that besides, the aftermath of their indulgence was the worry for other adults. Clarke’s decry of it being a cruel punishment for their hard-working, unsuspecting parents and caregivers went unheard.

That had presented the perfect lead-in for Lexa to share her own work challenges, moving their conversation onto the unique ambivalence she feels towards her vocation: how rewarding it is to work on social housing projects, how soul-destroying it is to interface with property developers. The fulfilment of creating quality architecture to house low-income single families, versus the frustration and futility she feels when weeks of labouring over the design of a floor plan is met with a compassionless request to make the apartment units smaller.

Lexa’s gripe had opened the floodgates for more stories in subsequent text threads about the dubious honour of working for parasitic, heartless money-grabbers. Stories like how the utter lack of empathy had incensed Lexa to compose a strongly worded memo on company letterhead, “You try living in less than 300 square feet of space, you turd. I doubt your ego would even fit through the door,” that she ultimately didn’t send, because unlike the subject of her derision, she had a higher sense of common decency.

Clarke squirrelled away every story, every anecdote and morsel of info, even if the topics revolved around the breathtaking inanity of white corporate privilege. It was one of the things she admired most about Lexa: her unflinching commitment to fighting the good fight against humanity’s more baser instincts.

She guiltily looks forward to reading about the young architect’s misery, even if the grievances of Lexa’s work interrupted Clarke from completing her own. It was the highlight of her day, if only because the more egregious the client’s behaviour, the more frequently the messages would come.
While there was a residual stutter to their exchanges, it somehow felt easier to re-establish social intercourse over text. Not being distracted by Lexa’s green eyes probably helped. Getting reacquainted with how her usual insistence on proper punctuation and grammar gave way to colloquialisms and contractions when she was stress-texting, helped. As did finding herself in the unexpected role of confidante, that Lexa had unwittingly started to tie her workplace’s emotional health to Clarke’s smartphone.

By mid-February, they are on friendly enough terms again that has Clarke smiling, and butterflies fluttering, whenever a notification of a new message pops up. Her cheeks are sore from the near permanent grin on her face throughout this latest exchange.

(Lexa) 11:03
Ugh, why did I go into a service-based industry? And one overrun with old, fat men who wouldn’t recognise good design even if it was white paint thrown on their overpriced black suits.

(Clarke) 11:04
That bad, huh?

(Lexa) 11:04
I swear, the more money they have, the worst their taste. They really should teach a graduate course on How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Rich People’s Tackiness.

Clarke feels almost bad for enjoying Lexa’s suffering too much. She is in the middle of typing her next message when another text comes through.

(Lexa) 11:05
If drafting boards still exist, I would be banging my head on one this moment.

She deletes her inconsequential response and lets Lexa’s follow-up ruminate for a bit instead. Her smile widens into a full ear-to-ear grin at the prompted image of Lexa’s head lying atop her drafting board, a recurring sight throughout her Columbia years. As Lexa progressed through the curriculum, Clarke would find her in veritable states of contortion over the drawing surface.

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She looked out of the large windows onto the main quad from her fourth storey perch. The campus was quiet at this hour and this time of term, the grounds empty of its collegiate and the usual din of knowledge acquiring and exchanging. The flowering dogwood trees were free to stretch and shake their blossoms undisturbed. Their leaves had recently turned a brilliant scarlet that was still visible despite the low illumination of the night, and had momentarily captured Clarke’s artistic sensibility.

Reading Week unfailingly meant students were tucked inside of the libraries and burrowed in whatever available crook and cranny they could find. A collective agreed-upon silence blanketed the campus in a layer of hush. Everywhere was quiet, except for the historic building where Clarke was currently standing, inhabited by those committed to surviving the rigour of an architecture education. These afflicted souls could be found here at all hours of the day or year. Stalwart guardians of the night with extreme work ethics.

Clarke turned her gaze back onto the studio floor to survey the worker bees. Sounds of cutting and scratching and breaking filtered back to her ears.
While creative spaces for fine arts and architecture share an open, experimental spirit, they differ in arrangement and types of chaos. Clarke would consider Columbia’s to be ordered chaos against the free-for-all at Parsons.

Neat rows of tables line the length of the room, with wooden planks atop, inclined anywhere between 0–45 degrees, and accessorised with luxo lamps hanging precariously off their corners. However, it was the scatter of materials—wood, paper, plastic, styrofoam—in disarrayed states of assembly, and every surface overlaid with all sorts of linework drawings, that made for the frenzied atmosphere.

The overhead fluorescents, their brightness inconsistently somewhere between a stadium pitch, an anti-septic clinical room and a seedy motel, added to the visual noise.

Clarke looked down at the lovable lump before her, smiling at her disheveled girlfriend. She tucked down the part of Lexa’s shirt that had ridden up a little, hiding her amusement at the thought of the shock every Badger would experience to see their former commanding captain now looking like a kindergartener who’s just been put down for her afternoon nap.

“Lexa,” Clarke gently stroked Lexa’s hair, cooing into her ear.

She laughs hearing the faint, “S’nice,” as she deepens the head massage.

“Babe … time to get up so you can go to bed.”

“That makes no sense, Clarke,” came the muffled reply from under an unkempt mane of chestnut.

“You’re drooling over your mylar.”

At that, Lexa bolts her head up from where it was resting on her forearms, suddenly alert and looking alarmingly around for any unsightly spots soiling her pristine fine lines. When her search came up empty-handed, she wiped the saliva that she did find at the corner of her mouth, and asked through a sleepy voice, “What time is it?”

“Close to midnight.”

Clarke had moved her hand down to Lexa’s neck, rubbing out a known sore spot, and then continued her ministrations on her lower back, “I didn’t want you riding the train home alone.” She knew Lexa was beyond her exhaustion point when the future architect had failed to point out, as she usually does, that it was a silly argument given Clarke did just that to get here. “Besides, you know I can’t sleep when you’re not next to me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Lexa looked equally contrite about having bothered Clarke out of the warmth of their apartment, and not achieving enough progress on her drawing assignment.

When Lexa hadn’t come home for dinner, and had stopped answering Clarke’s texts after 10 pm, she knew her girlfriend must have fallen asleep on top of her work again. It had become a routine occurrence, forcing Clarke to take up post as her human alarm clock. Already in her pjs, she would throw on a coat, slip into her Uggs, and take the A train into Manhattan for the 45-minute commute.

After it had happened the first few times that Lexa had stayed pass a reasonable hour, Raven pitied her pacing and had shown up the next day with a keycard mysteriously produced to grant Clarke access to Avery Hall. Clarke had smothered her in a bear hug to show her appreciation, and had made good use of the borrowed privileges since.

Though she never found a permanent solution to replace the temporary holdover—she was making
almost daily trips by the time Lexa graduated—the ethics behind the security breach were never
given a second thought, not when the greater good meant Lexa would get a decent hour of sleep and,
out of self-interest, be her cuddle buddy.

At one point, after her trespassing had been nearly uncovered, Clarke had secretly stalked the weekly
ads for any listings near Morningside Heights so that Lexa could be closer to school, and she’d be
within walking distance to retrieve her girlfriend without incurring a felony charge. Aside from the
exorbitant rent prices not worth relocating to the area, ultimately she couldn’t give up their Brooklyn
loft because of how much Lexa loved it.

Lexa for her part, with her infinite patience and high tolerance for pain, never once complained about
the distance or the smells. (“Nothing builds character like enduring 90 minutes a day on the New
York transit system.”)

Fortunately, after repeated sightings, the campus police had just assumed Clarke was a member of
the student body, equally stricken to meet the high standards of the GSAPP department. For how
often she visited, Clarke should have gotten an honorary degree.

It wasn’t all bad though. Between term deadlines, the distance was tolerable because Lexa would
leave the studio at a decent hour and meet Clarke outside of Washington Square. They would sit at
the park and catch up on their day or grab a bite to eat in the village, before heading home.

On days when Clarke had more free time, waiting for her oils to dry, or when she just simply missed
Lexa too much, she would venture north to surprise her with lunch and they would stroll the hour
away along the paths of the meadow fields of Central Park. (Sometimes it was less strolling and more
heavy making out in the North Woods on the rocks by the stream.)

It was a rewarding compromise she was willing to make considering Clarke had started out her BFA
at RISD. Aside from the isolation of being in Providence, the 3-hour drive proved too difficult to
sustain her and Lexa’s need to be in constant physical touch. Though RISD’s fine arts programme
was her first choice, she transferred to the New School at the end of the first term without hesitation
—happy to return to the main island.

So Clarke didn’t mind making the trek from Bed-Stuy to Morningside. She learned to save her art
readings for the subway ride, and could easily complete each week’s core texts then.

It was also a bonus point that a sleepy Lexa was an extra affectionate and vulnerable Lexa. The
reverse trip home would involve unsuccessful attempts at getting her girlfriend to contain her PDA
and not use Clarke as a human pillow. Despite the upper body strength required to do so, she
couldn’t be miffed at the warmth of wandering hands and the open puppy look of adoration
underneath droopy eyelids.

It’s a blessing that New Yorkers were some of the most blasé people on the planet, and accustomed
to far more questionable social behaviour than two girls openly expressing their love. None of their
co-passengers ever paid heed to them, too concerned with their own plight to get back to their beds.

They made a secondary home out of that middle car, and on nights when she managed to coax Lexa
into a nap, Clarke would sketch the time away while light snores emanated from her lap. One hand
languorously combing through Lexa’s hair, the other doodling with purpose. The clacking of the
tracks kept her company as the contours of a detailely-drawn hand, eye or back emerge on the page.

And during the times when Lexa had a bit more energy in her reserve, they would be digging
contently into the street fries picked up from their favourite night vendor outside of 116th station, and
Clarke would get an earful of professor so-and-so’s terrible habits, or an animated retelling of her and
her studio-mates latest shenanigans.

It was quality time she would not trade for all the clam cakes and coffee milk in Rhode Island.

She was broken out of her thoughts by a blustered expulsion of air. Lexa released a bear yawn as she got to her feet and pulled Clarke into her arms, burying her head in her neck and inhaling the scent. Clarke felt the satisfied sigh more than heard it, accompanied by a low pulsing hum and the beginning of a pawing motion in her hair that the brunette would undertake under extreme fatigue. Lexa’s lowered defence mechanisms made this nightly ritual more like a negotiation with a giant teddy cub than a grizzly.

Clarke chuckled and gently pushed her girlfriend back before she could start kneading her breasts, Lexa’s next step in her wind-down bed routine. Even if Lexa’s classmates were either asleep or too deeply absorbed in their own projects to acknowledge the pair, accustomed to having Clarke around, she really didn’t want to give them a free show.

“Oh love, I know. Let’s go home.”

—

“Oh my god, this tastes so good,” Lexa garbled around a fry.

Despite her apparent earlier exhaustion, the architecture student came to life on the train when Clarke pulled out the newspaper cone of fries she had procured just outside the station. She chuckled seeing Lexa’s confusion that the late-night snack appeared out of nowhere, as if she hadn’t been clinging onto Clarke, staring wantonly at the grill while they waited for the vendor to fire up a fresh batch, before falling asleep upright.

“You didn’t have dinner, did you?” Clarke asked, feeding her girlfriend another fry. She felt a lazy shake of head under her chin, hair tickling her neck.

Lexa was still clinging on to Clarke, but in a sitting position this time, tucked into her side. Her arm was slung around Clarke’s abdomen while her head rested comfortably against her chest. (It was one of Lexa’s favourite positions for the vantage point. “The view is spectacular, Clarke.”)

Thankfully they were the only two occupants in the car. Lexa’s wandering hand caused Clarke’s breath to hitch several times when it moved lackadaisically upwards to softly sweep the under-curve of her breast. The fries made for a good distraction. Given the wetness building between her thighs every time a hot breath against her neck was met with a broad swipe of thumb, Clarke didn’t think she would object if Lexa took things further.

“Why can’t all food be double deep-fried?” Lexa’s question was nearly lost around the lick of her tongue on Clarke’s fingers as she took another bite. “Preferably high in starch and beer battered.”

“Lex, you can’t survive on a potato diet,” Clarke chided, to deflect from her growing arousal, even as she fed her another wedge of crispy and golden deliciousness.

Lexa pulled her head back and looked up at Clarke, as if her words had just kicked a puppy. Wide eyes and a jutted bottom lip were so adorably indignant that she was compelled to lean down and gently kiss the pout away. Her concession earned a deepening of the kiss with tongue, and a second-hand taste of the sweet, tangy mayo sauce.

“Fine, live a spud life,” Clarke yielded breathlessly when they pulled apart. She was impressed that the cone in her hand hadn’t toppled over during the negotiation. Lexa hummed her satisfaction at being the victor, and returned her head to its rightful place near Clarke’s breasts.
“Mmm, I like this pillow way better than the last.”

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(Lexa) 11:06
I used to equate my drafting board to a pillow. I got way more sleeping than drawing done on it.

Clarke smiles thinking Lexa might be recalling the same memory.

(Clarke) 11:07
I remembered.

(Lexa) 11:07
Maybe that’s why they don’t have them in offices anymore, too tempting for naps. But after that conference call, I could definitely find a very productive use for one right now.

(Clarke) 11:08
It’s probably a good thing for occupational health & safety that drafting boards are obsolete. There’d be a crisis in the profession with the amount of head injuries.

(Lexa) 11:09
But think of all the research subjects Abby is missing out on.

Clarke pauses at the unexpected mention of her neurosurgeon mother.

So far, their texting had been generic and light. They’d typically hit their stride when it’s easy-going and non-committal texts. Complaints about clients and neutral subjects like professional etiquette keep the conversation flowing. They enter into easy patterns of give and take idle chit-chat.

For awhile in the beginning, they were navigating an in-between place of knowing but not knowing each other, with blinders on about what has changed during their time apart, like driving on a foggy road with no side mirrors and the rearview one half-covered. They could see what’s immediately in front of them, but not much of what’s closely beside or behind them. With limited visibility, the open road was both exhilarating and scary.

Lexa hadn’t inquired into Clarke’s development during the missing years. Her messages never probed for more, and Clarke hadn’t voluntarily revealed herself beyond what’s asked. Similarly their personal histories were skimmed over, likely a subconscious self-monitoring on both their parts to keep the banter friendly.

But lately, facts from their past are slipping through, escaping the lid initially loosely kept on whatever pertained to their formative selves. As their conversations pick up steam, extraneous intimate details are making their way to the surface. It widens Clarke’s smile whenever Lexa makes allusions to something shared in their past, as if they’re in on a secret.

She’s stumped, however, by this particular mention of her mother. They hadn’t yet touched on family. Does she acknowledge it? Does she move pass it?

They’ve been riding such a high crest recently that she doesn’t want it to break.

She gnaws on her bottom lip as she considers what it’d mean to tell Lexa that it took her leaving for Clarke’s relationship with her mother to be repaired; that they had set aside their differences about
career choices as Clarke desperately sought and Abby unreservedly gave maternal comfort in the wake of her heartbreak; that if it weren’t for the weekend visits home or her mother’s sage and onion soup she might have withered away from dehydration caused by endless tears. And how, after Clarke had emotionally stabilised, they both made an effort to continue to check in on one another, successfully maintaining at least a bi-monthly visit schedule alternating between New York General and Clarke’s gallery.

She doesn’t know how or when is the right time to reveal that the loss of one love ameliorated another; that it took the pain of absence to compel Abby to be more present; and perhaps most guiltily, that although Clarke was deeply grateful to have her mother re-invested in all parts of her life, it wasn’t anywhere near an adequate enough consolation prize.

Clarke wants to tell her that even when she wasn’t around, Lexa was still the drawbridge between mother and daughter; that she had unknowingly continued her Nobel laureate-worthy peacekeeping mission while an ocean away.

Abby and Jake had both loved Lexa like a second child. All the Griffins shared an appreciation for the girl none more-so than for her extraordinary diplomacy skills to diffuse the tinderbox lit by Abby’s constant harping over why Clarke couldn’t go into a real profession, like architecture or medicine.

(“Clarke is going to be a professional dreamer. She’s going to make people feel things. I think that’s one of the most noble jobs in the world.”)

Lexa’s words rang true at Clarke’s inaugural group exhibition.

Abby finally began to grasp the depth of her daughter’s talent when her eyes set on Verte, Clarke’s first major painting. She was rendered speechless when she saw the way heartbreak seeped through fissures of acrylic, how emotion bled into and out of strokes of white and greys and blues.

Her mother had been transfixed by the way the cuts appeared up close as discrete incisions that seemingly don’t meet or mean much, yet from a distance, as an aggregate, looked like the markings of a birchwood forest, naked of its leaves, heaving its last breath. She felt air leaving her own lungs as her gaze followed the mist billowing up from a blue-stained ground and threatening to overtake the entire landscape, that if she squinted, could make out amber flecks of light reminding her of fireflies. A scene of ruin that was at once devastating and hopeful. It was left to the viewer which top or bottom half of the filled glass they wanted to see.

The elder Griffin didn’t quite understand what was in front of her but knew that it somehow connected to Lexa. She had pulled Clarke into a bone-crushing hug in the middle of the gallery, uncaring of the curious looks she had drawn with her tears, and whispered her apologies in her daughter’s ear as she cradled her head.

(“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry. It’s going to be okay. I promise.”)

It was the first cathartic release Clarke felt after months of crying. The painting sold two weeks after the opening. The only reason she was able to part with it was because it had served to retie her bond with her mother, and allowed her to let go of her pain, if just a little. Though months later she’d come to regret not keeping the painting, she was comforted that it would bring hope or peace to someone else.

That Lexa remained the glue binding her to unconditional love when she felt untethered and rudderless; Clarke is not sure she can say any of this. Someday soon, but not yet, and not over text.
Clarke decides, for now, she doesn’t want to prematurely curb their steady progress towards friendly normalcy. She tries for humour instead.

(Clarke) 11:13
Well, I’d pity anyone who has to go under the knife of Abby Griffin.

(Lexa) 11:14
Yeah. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere in the vicinity of your mother and sharp instruments.

Clarke is relieved that Lexa acquiesces to her tactical side-stepping, and lets out a laugh when she reads the next message.

(Lexa) 11:14
What do you think the ethics are of sending anonymous emails to clients with the subject line, You Suck, signed, Everyone?

(Clarke) 11:14
I would co-sign.

(Clarke) 11:15
One of my first commissions, I was so excited. Turns out, the socialite only wanted me to paint a rainbow mural for her spoiled kid’s bedroom. A BFA and an MFA to draw a multicoloured arc.

(Lexa) 11:16
Oh, right. I forgot about her. She was such a jerk, and cheap too. She only wanted to pay for five colours of the rainbow. You were a saint for doing it anyways, and throwing in the extra two.

(Clarke) 11:16
Children shouldn’t have to suffer for their parents’ shortcomings. Besides, my bi heart wouldn’t allow me in good conscience to paint an incomplete rainbow.

(Lexa) 11:17
It’s still the best rainbow I’ve ever seen, fwiw.

(Lexa) 11:17
Hey, sorry, I’ve got to go. Same client has just sent a follow-up email asking me to review his 50-slide powerpoint. Where did my life go wrong?

(Lexa) 11:17
Thanks for listening. You know, at least in London they were passive-aggressively polite about giving me ‘notes.’

Her sign-off draws another laugh from Clarke.

(Clarke) 11:18
Ok, stay safe. Keep your head away from hard surfaces.

(Lexa) 11:18
Ttyl :)

Clarke sets her phone aside, her brush too, though her smile remains. She goes in search of food, knowing well enough that little progress on her painting will be made now that Lexa’s on her brain.
It’s been like this since their messaging has gained momentum. There isn’t a consistency to when the exchanges would happen—a day or two, sometimes three spanning between them, and the messages would stop just as quickly as they start. And regardless if it is Lexa or Clarke who initiates, reliably each spurt would halt Clarke from whatever she is presently engaged in or planning to do, and derail her for the rest of the morning or afternoon.

Later in the week follows the same script. She is nearly done prepping a wooden frame—a test canvas to work out new colour mixes—when the incoming dings shift her focus.

At least this time the topic is marginally related to her task at hand. On her way to a meeting Lexa had noticed a poster walking past the Whitney that reminded her of another piece she saw at the Tate in London. Clarke spends the next twenty minutes, likely the length of Lexa’s walk, discussing the finer differences between American and British Pop Art.

She could imagine the clicking of Lexa’s heels against the concrete, the honks of cars and rings of bells of bike couriers in the background, her hurried steps to get out of the cold while her fingers furiously type out her surprise at discovering that it was a Brit who had coined the term for the art movement; that Richard Hamilton’s very English approach of using parody and self-deprecation had been the precursor to Warhol’s and Lichtenstein’s cheekiness.

Despite being the contemporary art expert and practitioner between the two of them, Clarke has a hard time keeping up with the flurries of texts. She’s admittedly distracted by the wiggling warmth of Lexa’s instinct to text her after seeing the ad for an upcoming Pop retrospective.

(She’s also distracted by visions of a leggy brunette wearing tailored slacks and a crisp, fitted white blouse underneath a slightly oversized blazer hanging off of her model frame, and how the whole monochrome set is punctuated by bright red luscious lips. If it’s anything like the aesthetic Clarke remembers, the people at Lexa’s meeting might not know what’ll hit them.)

Caught up in the excitement, she nearly suggests going to see the exhibition together, but thinks better of it at the last second and has to fight dwindling willpower to restrain her thumbs from extending the invitation. It’s always so easy with Lexa that she doesn’t realise how close and frequent their interactions of late tread into actual dating territory.

Instead she manages to squeeze in, between Lexa’s breathless texts, some tidbits about the female artists, British and American, working along the margins of the boys club. She lists off a few of the more egregious facts about inequality in the art world exposed by the Guerrilla Girls, who she has mentioned to Lexa in the past, admiring them for using their subversive wit to criticise the staggering under-representation of women at major and minor galleries across the world.

(Clarke) 09:58
I read a recent interview with them. In the 80s, galleries showed only 10% of women artists. No solo exhibitions. Today it’s 20%. I’m not sure if that’s progress or incredibly sad that it’s taken 30 years to get that extra 10. At that rate, it’s going to take close to another century before we reach parity.

(Lexa) 10:02
Guerrilla Girls are great! I love the absurdity of these women wearing gorilla masks and confronting the male curators asking where are all the women artists? I saw their posters at Tate.

(Clarke) 10:03
They’re awesome, right? My favourite poster is the one that asks if women have to be naked to get into the Met. Less than 5% of artists are women but 85% of the nudes are female!

Twenty minutes feels like it’s not enough time with Lexa. Clarke’s thumbs can’t seem to type fast
enough. Admittedly, it’d be faster if the conversation was over the phone where they can voice the mini treatises more expediently, but then again, Clarke thinks, there might be too many pregnant pauses and awkward *umms*. Despite the risk of carpal tunnel syndrome, she’s happy for the current mode of communication, as they feverishly trade facts and figures, and her smile gets wider. The topic of female oppression is a favourite of Lexa’s that they had often visited during their late night train rides home.

Really, if Clarke is being honest, she enjoyed hearing about Lexa’s disdain for the gross disparities in architecture as much as seeing the pretty scowl that would accompany each diatribe. Never had she seen a look of reproach *look* so attractive. Best of all, it gave her a reason to kiss the furrowed lines away. She can visualise the crease between Lexa’s brow right now as the next messages come through.

*Lexa* 10:12  
Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown have been work and life partners for decades. But unbelievably, *he* wins the Pritzker Prize for buildings that *they* designed together.

*Lexa* 10:12  
That’s ridiculous, Clarke. Simply unconscionable robbery.

Clarke has missed this. Being able to talk to, or in this case text, Lexa about their passions. With their mutual training in the creative industries, she could always find a sympathetic ear and an invested conversation partner about aesthetics and visual culture. Just as Clarke knows that the League NY is an association for young, emergent architects, and not a rag-tag group of skyscraper superheroes, Lexa is the rare one in her inner circle who is aware that Hyperallergic is an online art forum and nothing to do with heightened discomfort around cats or ragweed.

Whereas, Raven is only ever interested in talking about anything with a motor while Octavia’s attention span is short enough for a discussion on MMVA or the Die Hard trilogy, and little else. It’d have to be the apocalypse before either of them would listen to any sentences that include Rothko or Kahlo. Even Bob Ross would be too much of a stretch for them. Nevermind trying to tell them that Frieze isn’t a popsicle.

(“We get it, Clarke. Paint. Colours. Wow.”)

One time she was fooled into thinking her best friends were genuinely listening to her wax poetic about Josef Albers’ thesis on the interaction of colour, that was until they broke out into Cyndi Lauper’s True Colours. She walked away from them with a long-suffering sigh as they were hitting the high notes.)

With Lexa back in her life, and the redevelopment of their conversational dynamic, Clarke feels buoyed for the return of a kindred spirit who understands the complexities and toil and reward of careers steeped in creative processes—of what it means to see life through the lens of beauty and with an acute empathy for what the world is and can be; to create alternative imaginaries through brush and paint, bricks and mortar.

The buzz of her phone has become synonymous with the murmur of content her heart feels to have its signals answered once more.

( Maybe Raven and Octavia aren’t wrong. Maybe with Lexa, she can see true colours shining through. “Like a fucking giant gay rainbow, Clarke.” Just like the one she painted on the Upper East Side.)

When quiet followed the last text, Lexa presumably has reached her destination. Clarke thinks that’s
the end of this spurt, that they’ll leave it on an upbeat note about the need to expand art and architecture discourse with a feminist inflection. But then, ten minutes later, she is surprised to see one last message pop up.

(Lexa) 10:32
The exhibit will be on until May. Maybe we can go together.

Clarke’s thumbs are flying before she can stop herself.

(Clarke) 10:33
It’s a date.

—

After Lexa signs off, Clarke manages another half hour of work to finish applying gesso to the canvas surface. She decides to take an early lunch and let the morning’s back-and-forth carry her thoughts through preparing her Thai salad and enjoying it in the sun-filled living room.

As she crunches on the bowl mix of red cabbage, arugula, bell peppers and mango, relishing the creamy peanut dressing and the freshness of the mint and basil, she thinks of the pleasant thrum that’s left behind after every interaction with the brunette.

Besides the big picture significance of their digital reconnection, Clarke values it for the little things.

Though it is far from the stated purpose of their telecommunication, Clarke feels like half her age again, fourteen and waiting for the cute girl to call. The giddiness of seeing her phone light up after hours or days of willing it to life, the flutter from reading the name on the screen, the pressure to come up with witty remarks so she could prolong the conversation, the dread of saying goodbye. The countdown until the next time.

For her part, Clarke sends images of things that capture her attention throughout the day she thinks might interest Lexa. It becomes almost a game of what reaction she can pull from her, an aww or a whoa or the coveted lol. Pictures of cute puppies and unique flowers are interspersed with the strange or gross things New Yorkers get up to on the MTA. Sometimes she’d send a photo without words and Lexa would reply with her own witty caption of what she thinks might be going on.

While Clarke’s only ever had a perfunctory interest in technology, she feels a deepening dependency on her mobile provider after every repartee. Her phone has become her new lifeline.

Outside of Clarke’s photojournalism, predominantly the focus of their chit-chat is on the present, Lexa’s job, and sometimes their mutual friends or the latest binge-worthy thing on Netflix. But every so often, like this morning, she’s thrilled to get a sliver of insight into Lexa’s recent past, for the tiny flower or tuff of grass that grows through a crack of concrete in the pavement. George Carlin had it right when he referred to such sheer will of life as a fucking heroic effort, and whether Lexa is aware that she’s doing it, Clarke nonetheless appreciates the small gardens that are being planted around her heart again.

Tiny things, like that Lexa lived in the east end, that she liked riding the upper deck of the London buses to explore one part of the city to another on her days off, that she was on the fence about triangle sandwiches, that she hadn’t yet met Prince Harry. That the public concourse overlooking the Tate’s Turbine Hall was one of Lexa’s favourite places to eat her lunch whenever she was near the South Bank area.

Though the nuggets of info don’t substantially add to Clarke’s knowledge of what happened in the
past four years, they help to colour her view of Lexa’s everyday life—of what her new routines might have been like.

Learning that the Great British Bake Off is a religion of which Lexa had become a recent convert, she can picture a dust covered apron and an adorably confused face as Lexa attempts to replicate any of the baked goods from the show. The image makes her laugh because the girl was as terrible in the kitchen as at the potter’s wheel. Maybe motorised equipment is her Achilles heel. She was a good vegetable washer and chopper but that was the extent of her culinary participation and expertise.

Lexa had inherited Gustus’ disdain for small domestic appliances, and generally anything related to food preparation. Paradoxically, for both their gentle natures, neither father or daughter had the patience to figure out the controls of kitchen gadgets. The two of them would have starved had Anya not eventually, begrudgingly, picked up the slack. (“I can’t eat another fucking avocado sandwich, guys!” was the shouting that Clarke had walked in on one lunch hour.)

Seeing as cooking was already a Sisyphean task, Clarke’s stumped for how Lexa would undertake something as time-intensive and precise as baking. How far has Lexa come along that measuring teaspoons of vanilla extract might not give her palpitations the same way grocery shopping used to? The thought of a delicate hand holding a whisk gives rise to a disparate image of two different Lexas.

That is why Clarke’s phone has stayed within reach ever since their electronic communication proliferated.

She treasures the innocuous messages as though they’re the infrathin, what Duchamp conceptualises as the hard to define in-between state of being, like the warmth of a seat that has just been left behind. The passage of one thing into, and between, another. Lexa’s text slippages help her to reconcile the person she knew with the one she’s getting to know, the marrying of old and new Lexa.

Texting is a tightrope walk in general, to express and detect emotion through digital shorthand, to read intent or nuance behind a few characters, to separate serious from sarcasm, to not overly rely on emoticons and exclamation points.

(Clarke can appreciate the last point, she has to constantly check herself from answering everything Lexa writes with multiple heart emojis. Besides, the smiley emoticon is a pale substitute for how wide her actual smile usually is when they’re texting.)

Yet, while half her time is spent clutching her phone and the other half her heart whenever the three dots appear, she is glad for it. This satellite love, even if only known to one party, renews her, and keeps Clarke in Lexa’s orbit when she thought she had been flung far out of its reach.

They’ll eventually get past the difficult topics (Clarke hopes), but for now, despite the remote distance, she feels closer to Lexa than she has in years. Despite the stutters and the tiptoeing, she is grateful for every texting chance to re-learn Lexa. For the incremental degrees of intimacy they re-establish.

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That is how she and Lexa end up on this side of the East River waterfront, looking up at the blue sign, where two giant fishes encircle the words ‘The One That Cod Away.’

An animated regaling of a sea documentary that Lexa was watching had prompted some off-handed remarks about fishing and Bear Mountain, and how Clarke’s lack of coordination also extended to rod and reel. Clarke countered that her skills laid elsewhere. Happy to never have to cast a line again
after several frustrating fishless attempts, Clarke struck a deal with the Woods, while they lured in dinner, she would grill their catch over the fire pit—which had fortuitously turned out to be an untapped talent.

With Lexa salivating over her shoulder as she smoked the trout and bass to a nice charred texture, she had come to learn then that Lexa’s dislike of fish was only limited to its nearness to her beloved avocado, but that she didn’t mind at all when it was steamed or pan-fried or especially grilled, with a sprig of rosemary and a squeeze of lime.

Apparently, Lexa’s appreciation for the taste expanded during her time in England to include beer battered and coated in flour, deep fried in grease, and paired with fresh-cut fries.

Since finding that out, Clarke had been on a mission to track down the perfect chippy shop, what the Brits call it, a term she had picked up from trawling an ex-pat’s Tumblr. She found TOTCA in a subtweet of one of her art blogs.

Clarke is fairly pleased with herself for discovering this hideaway establishment near Pier 6 with views out to Staten Island Ferry. More-so because Lexa is laughing mirthfully at her choice for their second friend date.

(With Octavia’s words of caution still ringing in her ears, she’s scared to admit aloud just how many hours she’d actually spent online reading customer reviews and comparing notes about the best New York chippy.)

Clarke had been nervous that their slowly rebuilding online chemistry wouldn’t translate off-screen and in-person. But seeing the lightness in Lexa’s face and posture, she’s happy her worry is unfounded.

“Clarke, I didn’t need to cross the ocean to have fish and chips,” Lexa contests, even as her lips remain curled up unbidden. She looks cute with her beanie and parka, with her head tilted to the sign.

“I wanted to show you that we’re just as good stateside.” Clarke is grinning from ear to ear at her ingenuity.

“We’re in Brooklyn Heights. How authentic can it be?” Lexa challenges.

“Excuse you. We’ve got our own Queen here who gave her blessing,” Clarke defends, hand to chest taking mock offence. “Apparently Mr. and Mrs. Carter sat in a corner booth.”

“What, no Blue Ivy or the twins?” Lexa sarcastically replies, but lets go of her prejudice at Clarke’s pretend scowl. “Well, if it’s good enough for the Carters, it can’t be too terrible.” She shakes her head, laughing again.

Clarke ignores her, and excitedly makes her way to the door, holding it open for Lexa as she beckons, “Come on. I want to know why this is the national dish of Britain.”

—

The shop’s nautical theme continues inside. Blue leather banquettes offset white tiled walls that feature, on one side, a scuba diver graphic outlined in black vinyl, and on the other, three sets of net and fishing pole hanging off wall-hooks. Wooden tables are accentuated with fisherman’s lamps, while napkins and tablecloths feature an anchor pattern. Rubber rain boots lean against the back wall, though it may just be the owner’s personal pair, adding to the overall effect.
They stand underneath the massive overhead blackboard, heads tilted up in awe at what’s on offer on the menu, eyes flitting around to take in the elaborately-drawn white chalk illustrations of the sea creatures. Clarke didn’t know that this many varieties of fish existed besides trout and bass, let alone what they’d be called, if it weren’t for the equally fanciful chalk writing of their names. There’s flounder, pollock, sole, wild grouper, skate, whiting, tilapia, perch, and of course, cod, among others.

It’s sometime between analysing the fins of haddock and the gills of halibut that Clarke realises she and Lexa are standing close enough that their hands nearly graze. She’s now hyper-aware of how close the back of Lexa’s hand is to her right knuckles, and feels the tinges in her fingers all the way up her arm, echo down her spine and to her toes. For fear the electric surge might involuntary cause her to do something stupid like slip her fingers through Lexa’s, she moves her hand away under the pretence of pointing to the board and drawing Lexa’s attention to the intricacies of the grouper’s scale patterns.

“You should have gone into sea art,” Lexa utters semi-seriously, completely wide-eyed in awe as if absorbed in that one National Geographic documentary they had been discussing, “look at where you could be now.”

—

They’re currently tucked into a booth by the window that looks out onto the harbour. Ferries pass by unhurried while determined tourists stroll the pier despite the chill of the evening. They are sat across from each other, enjoying the view and the casual atmosphere.

Since neither of them could individually come to a decision about their meal, they opt to share the taster platter at the owner’s enthusiastic prompt, “Why not try it all?!”. Their medley choice has the grills fired up. Smells of beef dripping waft in the air amid sounds of sizzling as the batter is plunged into the high heat. Clarke’s stomach growls in sympathy of the sensory overload to her nose and ears.

As they wait for their fare, they chat aimlessly and amicably.

“I can’t believe there are over 10,000 fish and chip shops across the UK,” Clarke says, reciting a fact she gleaned in her research.

“Yep. While here you’re never far from a bagel, over there it’s batter. So, that’s pretty brave of you to take me to one this side of the Atlantic,” Lexa says with a playful raise of her eyebrow.

“I have faith in Tumblr.” Clarke doesn’t back down from the challenge. She has no clue if it’ll actually be good or not, and has no prior experience by which to measure TOTCA’s quality, but she’s not ashamed to put all her eggs into the basket of pre-teen microbloggers. “If this doesn’t work out, I’ll take you to Absolute for a bagel another day.”

While Clarke feels fluttering warmth at the thought of another outing before this one is even over, Lexa’s eyes light up at the offer and reminder of their old hunting ground in Morningside.

“It’s weird. We have Jewish immigrants to thank for both traditions, but the two imports don’t translate across coasts. Bagels aren’t popular in England. God, you don’t know how often I’ve dreamt of a New York bagel.”

Clarke’s chin is resting on the palm of her hand as she soaks in their conversation, trying not to stare dreamily and blurt out, *God, you don’t know how often I’ve dreamt of you.*

“What do they have there?” She asks instead.
“Nothing that qualifies as one. They’re soft and squishy and not at all chewy,” Lexa answers making a face. “And they don’t even spell it bagel. It’s b-e-i-g-e-l.”

Clarke laughs. “Sounds posh.”

“Trust me, it tastes far from it. I mean, how can they even call it a bagel if there’s no crust and only comes in flavours of plain and more plain? It’s false advertising to label it as anything other than holey bread.”

Clarke can only grin stupidly at the strength of Lexa’s conviction. It would seem she’s just as passionate about decrying dough oppression as female one.

“One time, I was desperate and picked up a bag of store-brand bagels from Sainsbury.” Lexa’s face completely sours recalling the memory. “One of the biggest regrets of my life. I felt my New York street cred dying a slow, moist death with each bite.”

“And yet, you kept eating it?” Clarke asks incredulously, amused. “I feel like you have no one else to blame here, Lex.”

If Lexa catches the nickname, or Clarke’s horrified micro expression from letting it slip, she doesn’t acknowledge it.

“I didn’t want my money to go to waste,” Lexa reasons, shaking her head. “I hadn’t adjusted to the exchange rate yet then, and felt bad to be throwing away a $10 bagel. I cried yeast tears as I was eating it.”

Clarke laughs again, though it’s filled with relief for overlooking the term of endearment as much as the humour of Lexa’s face journey as she describes her misadventures in under-boiled dough. Lexa wasn’t often one for hyperbole so she finds the exaggeration all the more entertaining.

“And now you have me curious. If I ever make it over there with you, you’ll have to take me to try one.”

There’s an extended pause as they both realise the significance of Clarke’s ask, what it means for her to be brought into Lexa’s world in London, let alone a shared future where they’re taking trips together. Clarke feels her cheeks warm and wants to retract her impulsivity but Lexa seems to have recovered faster. She gives her a gentle smile.

“I can definitely take you to Brick Lane where they’ve got a surplus of exactly two beigel shops, though that’s two more than most neighbourhoods elsewhere in London. But really, it’s only worth the pilgrimage there for the best Bangladeshi food, not for bagels.”

Before Clarke can inquire if the curries come in mild to accommodate her white aversion to hot spice, their food arrives.

The waiter sets the table with two large plates of various deep fried and beer-battered fish, in smaller portion sizes; three wicker baskets of double fried chips that they can taste the crispiness from just looking; and several tiny ramekins of condiments, including tartar sauce, tahini, sriracha, mixes of horseradish and caper, beetroot and bourbon, and Clarke’s newest addiction, kewpie, the Japanese mayo she favours to the American version for its rich and slightly sweet flavour.

Lexa turns her nose up eyeing Clarke’s bizarre choice of dips, and keeps her side of the table classic with malt vinegar and salt and a helping of mushed peas, having adopted the British tradition of what Clarke waves off as underwhelming restraint.

After a quick run-through of what’s in front of them, the waiter helpfully supplies cue cards that
boast mini illustrations of a fish on one side and an explanation of their origin and taste palate on the other.

It startles Clarke when Lexa gets up from the booth unannounced as soon as the waiter departs with an “Enjoy, and good luck!”. Her confusion morphs into surprise when Lexa comes around and sits next to her.

“It’s easier to compare notes like this,” Lexa says without making eye contact, hiding her shyness by turning her attention down to the cards, but Clarke doesn’t miss the dust of pink on her cheeks. “We can try each fish systematically one by one.”

Clarke can’t argue that logic nor does she want to protest the voluntary closeness, not when it feels like they’ve taken up sentry as their old selves, causing the fluttering in her stomach to increase.

While Lexa studies the cards, Clarke studies her.

With Lexa on her right side, nearer to the aisle, she smiles at their practised positioning. Clarke’s left-handedness and Lexa’s clumsiness prompted them to work out a system early on in their friendship to avoid clanking cutlery, tipped over water glasses, and Clarke’s elbows constantly being jabbed by passing servers. Once figured, they would slip into place like a seasoned pair of marionettes accustomed to particular strings being pulled; be it at the school cafeteria, restaurants, bars, or friend’s dining tables, their self-arrangement was an un-consulted, coordinated affair.

When she looks down to where their hands are both resting on the leather cushion of their seat, and finds that her right hand is a pinky away from touching Lexa’s left, Clarke feels tingles shoot up the length of her arm. She has to grip the banquette harder to keep from her heart’s desire to run a finger over the smooth skin and map out the rise and fall of knuckles. Her other hand itches for charcoal to trace the shadows of flesh wrapped over delicate bone.

It wouldn’t take much, just a lift of her pinky and a slight lateral movement and she’d be brushing against Lexa. Perhaps her deep want is sending airwaves out that Lexa’s nerves are picking up because for the breath of a second it looks like her hand is inching towards Clarke’s, making her heart clench in wait.

The moment is fleeting, however, and passes just as quickly as it came. She wonders if her eyes are playing tricks on her. When she looks up to shake off the vision, Clarke catches a pair of pensive green eyes casting an equally fleeting glance to her thigh before they meet her gaze with a timid smile.

For the other patrons in the chippy, static energy crackles from the old radio playing soft music in the background. For Clarke and Lexa, it vibrates through fingertips weighed down by superhuman efforts to remain unmoved. Before the tension could snap to untenable ends, they both jerk their heads back to the cue cards, as if 10 point type suddenly holds the answer to all of life’s questions.

The unbidden gazing reminds Clarke that their set chess pieces were optimal for leaving their unused hands to do other things. Their non-dominant hands would always be somehow physically engaged, for different reasons, whether innocently holding and reassuring or otherwise not-so-innocently moving across thigh or legs.

*****
“Fuck.”

The whimper escaped before she could stop it.

“Oh, god. Fuck.”

“Clarke, you have to be quiet,” Lexa whispered hotly in her ear, even as she thurst in deeper—as if she wasn’t the perpetrator of the wanton noise. The angle was awkward but no less hindered Clarke from feeling the force of long fingers reaching her inner walls. “Otherwise, we’re going to have to stop.”

“Don’t,” Clarke managed a breath, “you,” and then another longer one, “fucking dare.”

She sent her girlfriend an unimpressed glare while trying not to scream out her pleasure. Clarke turned her head to bite into Lexa’s shoulder hoping a mouthful of fabric would prevent any more sounds from escaping, but also adding a bit of teeth to express her disapproval at the teasing.

Another late-night fast food run to the local 24-hour diner, their third this week as term-end deadlines crept near, and Clarke was straining to keep her face and upper body composed while Lexa’s hand was treacherously moving under her skirt, hidden by the tablecloth.

She had a near death-grip on her fork from trying to keep her moans in while her girlfriend continued to calmly chew her food as she worked her up.

It had started out innocently enough, the hand on her knee. Something that’s happened a million times before that Clarke didn’t even take notice anymore, knowing she’d always find a comforting warmth there when they dine out together.

She’d only clued into something being amiss when Lexa started giving one word answers while her hand was precipitously moving higher up her thigh.

Every few seconds Clarke would catch her darting glances around the diner. She wasn’t sure why Lexa looked to be planning a heist of the joint. There wouldn’t be much to steal but flour and sugar.

Bright lights hummed above them and an old Blondie tune stuttered lowly out of the vintage jukebox. They were the sole patrons at the establishment. The only thing within their company this side of Queens were the pile high stacks of pancakes and generous portions of maple syrup, along with an assortment of banana, berry and chocolate toppings.

The waitress, Martha, a kind but tired looking woman in her 60s, had retreated to the opposite corner behind the counter after serving their meal, presumably working on a crossword.

Overall, a typical night for them and all students across college campuses fighting off sleep and looking to recharge for the next round of study cramming. Textbooks on the Modernists and the Abstract Impressionists were waiting for them at home.

So, Clarke was at a lost for Lexa’s paranoia or plotting.

“Lex, what are you doing?” Clarke asked but made no move to stop the hand, equally curious and slightly aroused from the built-up of warm passes along her thigh.

Another furtive look before Lexa leaned in, and whispered conspiratorially, “Item number four on the list.”

Clarke nearly choked mid-bite. “What?” She spat out as Lexa patted her back.
“Number four,” Lexa repeated, and said a little more loudly than they both preferred, “semi-public se —"

Finally cluing in, Clarke swiftly moved to cover Lexa’s mouth to stop her from finishing the word.

“Really? Here?” She whisper-shouted. It was Clarke’s turn to scan the place suspiciously. She caught the waitress’ eye and put on her best fake smile. Lexa ridiculously flashed Martha a thumbs up.

“What’s your fantasy to risk getting caught?”

“You can’t be seriously considering …” Clarke let her protest trail off. She couldn’t deny feeling a shiver of excitement for the thrill of taking their private activities public—even if public only meant Martha, and under the scrutiny of her owl reading glasses held in place by the necklace chain.

They had spent the other night enumerating their joint fantasy list. Clarke was initially confused why Lexa was supplying her with her favourite cocktails list when she read, *sex on the beach*. When the nature of the items became clear, with a flush of pink, Clarke made her own additions.

“I mean,” Lexa started to say as her hand lifted Clarke’s skirt and moved to rest under the fabric skin-on-skin, causing Clarke to expel a shuddered breath, “I’m not considering it. I’m doing it.”

Lexa waited for any objections to proceed. When none were raised, she skated over Clarke’s panty, and both of them bit back their moans when her hand brushed against the moist patch.

With her quickened heartbeat and the rising temperature between her thighs, Clarke was in no position to be a prude. “Fine, okay. But be quick.”

“That’s not up to me, babe,” Lexa said with a smirk before she started rubbing over the wet spot with purpose.

Clarke felt herself immediately sinking into the seat and rushed to ruffle the tablecloth overhang to hide their lower half more fully. *Be a duck, be a duck*, she tried to counsel herself to keep calm up top as Lexa’s hand started moving lower with fervour, and grazed her entrance.

By the time Lexa had pushed in two fingers, Clarke was grinding against her palm searching for friction, and biting into her shoulder to keep her enthusiasm silent. God, it felt amazing. They’ve had sex in more compromising positions at home, but something about the threat of being found out, the illicitness of their under the table activity, heightened the experience and accelerated her arousal.

“Fuck,” she garbled again into Lexa’s shoulder, “more, Lex.” She didn’t know what more she was asking for, with their positioning, it was a miracle that Lexa could squeeze in two fingers at all, and the heel of her hand was already doing god’s work on Clarke’s clit. Yet, she needed something more, she was so close.

 Abruptly Lexa’s movements stilled. Clarke was ready to yell at her when Martha’s voice broke through the rush of blood in her ears.

“She okay?” The waitress asked.

Clarke couldn’t see the woman but heard concern and confusion plainly in her voice. She was glad to have her back turned, face hidden in Lexa’s shoulder and concealing her red, and getting redder, cheeks. She was even more relieved that, for all appearances to Martha, she was napping off of Lexa.
“Uh, yeah. She’s fine. Just over-ate.” Clarke felt Lexa patting her head like a small child, and wanted to slap her hand away. “Carb overload. I tried to cut her off earlier but she kept asking for more.”

Clarke bit harder into Lexa’s shoulder in retaliation. Her girlfriend covered her yelp with a dry cough. There was an extended silence that frayed Clarke’s nerves, surely the seasoned waitress wasn’t buying what Lexa was selling.

“You’re so cute together. You remind me of my daughter and her girlfriend at your age.” If only Martha knew what they’d been up to, she wouldn’t be making the association. “Alright, sweetie. If you girls need anything else, just holler. I’m going to go do some inventory in the back.”

“We’re good, thank you. All our needs are being met.”

After the sounds of footsteps retreating, and then the swinging of the kitchen door, Clarke lifted her head up and swatted Lexa’s shoulder where it had just been while giving her another glare. She was met with pure mischief in Lexa’s eyes, and lips that struggled not to break out into laughter.

“Not funny.”

Clarke wanted to chide her more but then Lexa’s expression turned into the softest gaze. She cupped Clarke’s face with her free hand before giving her the sweetest kiss—literally, Clarke could taste the syrup on Lexa’s tongue.

“I love you, Clarke.”

Clarke would normally indulge her sappiness, but the dampness between her thighs and the throb of muscles still contracting around Lexa’s fingers prevented her from keeping her eye off the goal.

“That’s great. I’m happy for me. Now, focus.”

Lexa chuckled and didn’t hesitate to resume their prior activity, picking up her pace again with verve. Soon, she increased her speed, her fingers pumping with greater commitment that had Clarke releasing her fork and white-knuckled gripping onto the edge of the table instead. Then, with only a cocked eyebrow as warning, she timed Clarke’s climax perfectly moments before Martha returned from the back storage room.

Three deep thrusts and two hard presses of palm later, followed by a breathily whispered command of “Come, love,” Clarke came hard, shaking into Lexa’s side, and trying desperately to muffle her scream into Lexa’s overly-bruised shoulder. As she slumped unceremoniously into her seat, she was grateful no one else in the borough had a craving for all-you-can-eat pancakes at 2 am.

She was less grateful when they received their bill later and saw written on the back, in Martha’s neat scrawl,

*My eyesight may be poor but my hearing is still pitch perfect.*

*****

Clarke blushes deeply, drawn out of her memory by the rustling sound of newspaper as Lexa unwrapped the first fish. She has to take a swig of her IPA to hide her pinking, hoping the alcohol intake would explain away the rosiness of her neck.
Fortunately, Lexa is too concerned with the pollock to notice, seemingly unfazed by their familiar proximity, perhaps still subconsciously conditioned to having Clarke flanking her left.

Clarke puts her head back in the game. They quickly work out a system of divide and conquer, taking turns spearing and parceling each fish into manageable chunks. There’s a domestic intimacy to their endeavours, how Lexa saves the meatier portions for Clarke, how Clarke gives her more of the battered skin because she has a better appreciation for a good crispy coating. What starts out as clearly separate portions, with every swipe of sauce and bite into the delicate flavours and guzzle of beer to absorb the oil intake, the lines blur and hands criss cross to grab chips and flakes of fish from each other’s plate without knowing it.

For awhile, both heads are happily down as they tuck into their meal, emitting what would otherwise be extremely embarrassing sounds of approval. Every few minutes though, they come up for air to debate the merits of one fish over another; the moist flavour and meaty leanness of cod or the drier and flakier haddock or the nutty-like mildness of skate. Lexa prefers the first, Clarke the second, neither have the acquired taste to appreciate the last.

“How can you even tell the difference?” Lexa challenges when Clarke disagrees with her assessment of the soft and supleness of cod. “You’re basically using any fish as a vessel for kewpie.” She accuses, looking pointedly at the sorry state of the mayo-stained napkin and the utter decimation of the kewpie ramekin.

“I just think haddock packs more of a punch than cod,” Clarke shrugs, unbothered.

“Yeah, but then where would we be if this place was called, The One That Haddocked Away?” Lexa quips.

“I’m surprised you’re even into this grease in the first place.” Clarke remarks with an amused grin. She looks at the wreckage of their tablecloth that had the unfortunate duty of catching all the overflowing oil. The newspaper backings have taken on a sheen that Clarke shudders to think what the inside lining of her stomach looks like now.

“Why not?”

Toned abs and muscled thighs immediately come to mind. “Um, the whole eating healthy, working out thing you had going.” She waves her hand vaguely in the general direction of Lexa’s personhood as if to imply, all that.

Her tongue subliminally pokes out to moisten a suddenly dry bottom lip as she recalls a glistening Lexa returning from her morning runs, wearing a sports bra, criminally short shorts and little else that could shut off Clarke’s overactive imagination. It always caused wandering hands and intrepid lips to impede any of Lexa’s attempts at making a post-workout protein shake. “My turn for exercise” would be Clarke’s call sign before she’d urge Lexa into the shower for a different type of rehydration.

Not helping Clarke’s cause, Lexa’s working a soft piece of cod into her mouth between plump lips then licks her fingers when she answers, “My cheat days.”

“I didn’t think you had room anywhere to store it.” Clarke looks down appreciatively, and far from discreetly, at Lexa’s abdomen area. There’s next to nothing that’s visible under Lexa’s heavyset sweater but Clarke has a very good memory and Lexa is a creature of habit. She assumes not much has changed under the hood(ie). “I mean, maybe six fries can fit, but I doubt anything else.”

Lexa chuckles, and pats her stomach after downing her lager. She wipes a bit of the excess froth
from her mouth and says, “Believe me I’ve got room,” and then adds suggestively without thought, “and ways to expend the energy afterwards.”

Despite the charming smile, Lexa’s playful conceit doesn’t land as intended. Clarke no doubt believes her, having been on the receiving end of her high metabolism and incredible physique for years, but she doesn’t want to think about what that means in the context of the last four, if there was/is someone else or several someones with whom Lexa maintained her fitness.

She’s quickly losing her appetite and must compartmentalise the anxiety-inducing what-ifs to keep the atmosphere light. Memory of Marsha and the diner seem like a distant dream at the moment. They used to joke that if it weren’t for their mutually high sex drive, neither would graduate art and architecture school with their sanity in tact. While other students consumed red bull by the gallons, chasing that high, Clarke and Lexa consumed each other and chased endless orgasms.

Clarke has to shut down thoughts of Lexa whimpering and writhing under another’s touch—and how the intensity of green when she came might cause a different set of knees to buckle or stop the beat of some other heart altogether, one that hadn’t broken hers. She shakes it off, enjoying their time together too much to be self-sabotaging with deep dives into the unknown. (Though a niggling voice in her head tells her that she could simply ask Lexa. But god no, that’d be too fucking scary.)

“I’m sure you do.” She returns the smile though hers doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Anyways, this wasn’t too terrible. I wouldn’t be opposed to a repeat,” Lexa concedes amiably a moment later, her gaze softening further.

Clarke smiles more genuinely this time at Lexa’s reluctant admission.

“It’s better than terrible,” she says, as she breaks off a flaky piece of haddock and unapologetically swipes it through the kewpie. “It’s got Queen B’s seal of approval.”

She tips her chin to the framed picture of the famed singer and rapper, hanging off the far wall and adding an air of credibility and royalty to TOTCA’s nautical shabby-chic aesthetic.

Nevertheless, despite the diversion and Clarke’s attempt at an upbeat tone, Lexa must clock her shifted mood because she perceptively places the pollock onto her plate and gently urges, “Here, try this. It’s pretty good. That is if you can still taste anything past the coating of mayo on your tongue.”

—

“And then what did you do?”

“Nothing, I just walked away.” Lexa smiles while shrugging her shoulder.

Clarke laughs brightly at her nonchalance about being approached by enthusiastic fans, having been mistaken for that actress in the post-apocalyptic show that Lexa had never heard of.

Her good mood returned when conversation shifted to travel stories and unusual encounters. Lexa was on a business trip to Copenhagen to research some architecture for a building she was designing, and had inadvertently stayed at a nearby hotel close to where the Nordics’ largest pop culture event was taking place. Unaware that Comic Con was in town, she had been startled by teenage girls screaming at her, albeit not her name.

“And you kept the jacket?”

“I tried to say no but they insisted. I didn’t want to disappoint them,” Lexa feebly defends. “It’s nice
But you signed their fan art? You forged a celebrity’s signature?”

Lexa shakes her head to clarify, “I still had no idea who they thought I was. So I signed my name.”

“Wait, you signed Lexa Woods?”

Lexa shakes her head again.

“No, I went all in. Full first name.”

Clarke bursts out in laughter again, thinking of the poor teenagers’ disappointment when they realise they had accosted some random architect named Alexandria outside of the convention centre, with the wrong A name and the wrong ‘a’ letter profession.

“Maybe it’ll be worth something someday when you become famous for your tower designs.”

“Highly doubtful. But it was a beautifully drawn picture of two girls. I didn’t know the characters but, the way the art was coloured and detailed, they looked like they were made for each other. How could I not want to support that type of love?”

She looks at Clarke meaningfully, and they share a quiet, knowing smile. Clarke eventually breaks the tension, not wanting to read too much into it.

“Of course you’d be approached. I’m the famous artist, yet you’re the one signing autographs.”

—

“Wait, so Murphy and Bellamy??” Lexa asks in disbelief. “Any had mentioned something in passing but I thought she was just pulling my leg.”

“Yup,” Clarke nods, smiling widely. “They reconnected recently.”

“What about Echo and Emori?”

“I guess post-college life wasn’t working out. The rose-coloured glasses finally came off and they were tired of putting up with their boyfriends bullshit.” Clarke answers, before leaning in as if to disclose a secret, “they ditched them for each other. They basically did a swap.”

“Wait, what?? Echo and Emori too?” Lexa asks, both stunned and amused. “Gees, who knew our friend group was so gay.”

“Yeah, poor Octavia and Lincoln. Theirs is the only heteronormative relationship. I wonder what it’s like to be a straight minority. The struggle must be real.”

Clarke’s semi-serious speculation receives an answering hum.

“I’m not Blake’s biggest fan, but I’m happy for them,” Lexa says graciously. “Maybe this’ll keep him from causing unnecessary heartache.”

Bellamy had not so subtly expressed interest in Clarke during junior year of high school, while back for a home visit from college and completely oblivious to her recent romantic developments. The elder Blake had sent her flowers and showed up in front of her homeroom with a box of chocolates and a declaration. Not wanting to reject him in front of a crowd of high schoolers, Clarke had tried to diplomatically usher him away somewhere more private.
Unfortunately, Lexa had witnessed the hallway interaction from afar and misinterpreted Clarke’s non-answer and her arm around his elbow as acceptance. A silent few days, a near blow with a startled Bellamy, and several tears later, Clarke comforted her girlfriend she had nothing to worry about.

“He never stood a chance,” Clarke repeats the same reassurance a decade later.

Lexa gives her a shy smile, acknowledging the truth.

“So how’d Octavia take it?”

“No well,” Clarke laughs, “she walked in on them.”

“No way. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that.” But then Lexa scrunches her nose in thought at the visual, shudders and quickly retracts, “actually no, I never want to see their bare asses.”

“Exactly, O was so traumatised. It took several beers before Raven could make any sense of her babbling. She kept repeating, my eyes, my eyes, but then would also cover her ears, my ears, my ears.”

Clarke mimmicks the gestures. They both chuckle.

“I can just imagine.”

“Apparently it had been going on for months. After Octavia’s discovery, Murphy in his Murphy way sent out a group text to announce that he’s all about ringing Bellamy’s bell now.”

They both shudder this time. The smiles on their faces, however, remain and contradict the horror of the prompted images.

—

The conversation flits back and forth between past shenanigans and present developments in their friends lives, Clarke happily going into detail about what everyone is up to besides their day jobs. By the time she’s wrapping up an anecdote about Tye, they’ve made a substantial dent into their fare.

With each new tasting, gulp of beer, and crunch of fries, the gap between their bodies have gotten incrementally smaller, sitting closely enough for Lexa to know if Clarke had tried the dill pickle sauce. But neither one of them notices the almost non-existent space by the time they’ve moved on to the more delicate flavours of whiting. It’s supposedly the fish of choice in Australia, and Lexa unsurprisingly takes to it for its likeness to cod, though softer and moister. Clarke prefers its lighter nuttiness to skate.

“So good,” Lexa says between bites.

Clarke didn’t know what to expect when she planned the outing, but nerding out on fish with Lexa feels oddly like a success that she can confidently check off in the win column. Clarke smiles at the pile of flashcards that have been thoroughly thumbed through and sporting the marks of their enthusiastic comparative analysis.

“Excuse me.” A clearing throat breaks them out of their concentration.

Clarke looks up to see a bulky man in a trucker hat and dark coat looking curiously at them.
“Yes?”

At Lexa’s curt answer, he averts his gaze and looks searchingly down to the narrow space between them. He darts his eyes from Clarke’s body to Lexa’s then back again.

At the man’s continued staring and non-verbal response, Lexa’s guard comes up, her shoulders square. “Do we have a problem?”

“Um, yes?” He questions sheepishly, more than answers, but still hasn’t made eye contact, focused intently on where their bodies nearly meet. He starts to say, “Your seat—” before being cut off.

“What’s wrong with our sitting arrangement?” Lexa asks in a clipped tone, her hackles raised from his odd behaviour. “Or is it that we’re two girls?”

When he still doesn’t answer but continues to burn a hole between them, Clarke thinks he is either the most polite homophobe they have ever come across or an enthusiast of plush banquette furniture.

The stretched out minute has Lexa out of her seat before Clarke can stop her. She stands toe-to-toe with him. Though there’s a good eight inches in height difference, he seems to have shrunk under her challenging glare, and takes a half step back at the sight of clenching hands by her side.

Clarke rises too, not wanting things to escalate to an undesirable outcome from what has otherwise been an enjoyable evening. She stands next to Lexa. Unthinkingly, unknowingly, Clarke places a gentle hand on the small of her back, rubbing in a soothing motion, before she changes tact to brush her fingers gently across Lexa’s knuckles, both actions a subconscious habit that always worked to calm her.

Lexa must not realise it either, still glaring at the man, but the slight relaxing of her shoulders and untightening of her left hand signal that her body definitely registered the habitual touches.

Then, as if finally catching on to Clarke’s presence and remembering the conflict at hand, Lexa takes a measured step in front of Clarke to shield her, body angled to block the blonde from view. Clarke wants to both roll her eyes at Lexa’s misplaced chivalry and also melt into a puddle at the overture.

“Nothing’s wrong with it. I’m sorry to bother, but,” the man pauses to point behind them, “you were sitting on my scarf.”

Following the direction of his finger, they both whip their heads around to only just notice the piece of black fabric, that sure enough lies limply on top of the leather. In their haste to sit earlier, neither Clarke nor Lexa saw it.

The man goes on to explain, “I forgot it after we finished eating, and only remembered it when we were halfway home,” and with a hint of a smirk, he draws out the next part, “We swung back here so I could grab it. My husband is waiting in the car with our son.”

Clarke scrambles to retrieve it for him while Lexa tries unsuccessfully to keep the red in her chest and neck from engulfing her entire face.

“Here you go,” she says as she genially hands it over, “sorry about that.”

“Thanks.” He puts the scarf on and hurries to take his leave, but not before wishing them well with an amused smile. “You have a good day. Enjoy the rest of your meal. Sorry again, didn’t mean to interrupt you and your girlfriend.”

“Um, yeah. You too,” Lexa stammers out, as Clarke struggles to reign in her laughter after the door
nings shut following his exit.

They both ignore the last bit of his parting.

*****

“Lexa, let him go!”

“No.”

“Ow!” The scrawny teen squirmed some more as he felt his arm being twisted further behind his back, a knee digging deeper.

“No until he apologises.”

“It was an accident, Lexa,” Clarke tried to diffuse, “I’m okay.” The gym teacher had only just stepped out. It’d be bad form if she returned to find one of her top students in a scuffle.

Lexa softened her gaze when she looked at Clarke, but her temper flared again when she eyed the blossoming blue and purple of Clarke’s cheek.

“He hit you with the basketball,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I didn’t mean to. It slipped!” He pleaded.

He didn’t know Lexa well, only that she was good at throwing a baseball and also one of their school’s highest achieving students. She had a quiet and unaffected cool about her, seeming to stay away from most high school drama. She kept a mostly low profile unless it involved her best friend Clarke. And while it remained a topic of debate of the hallway rumour mill about the nature of their relationship, he learned the hard way that she was fiercely protective of anything involving Clarke.

He felt the pressure let up a moment later and turned around to see Lexa now standing a foot away, with Clarke’s face cradled in both of her hands, a thumb brushing lightly in a soothing circular motion around the apples of her cheeks. Clarke’s eyes were closed as Lexa played nurse to assess any other damage. The moment so small and intimate, only enough room for the space of their shared breaths, it seemed intrusive to be watching.

The intramural game had stopped and all eyes were on the three of them, but the two girls were only locked onto each other.

“It’s not that bad. I’m okay,” Clarke whispered her reassurance even as she winced when Lexa grazed the tender spot, “Murphy’s just a klutz. And I have terrible reflexes.”

“Yeah, sorry man.” He got up off of the gym floor, and while dusting his pants, mumbled, “if I had known the lesbian would go crazy—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence before he was socked in the groin. “Motherfu—“ John cried, and was back on the floor again, protectively covering the sensitive region from further siege. But when he looked up, he was surprised to see it was Clarke who was retracting her fist, and Lexa’s medical attention newly diverted to the injured knuckles.

“I’m going to assume you meant lesbian in the most flowery, puppy-running-in-a-field, and
happiness-embracing of terms, and not as any sort of disparaging remarks,” Clarke lectured him with a withering glare, as Lexa continued to absentely massage her left hand.

“Yeah, of course. I would never want to mess with your girlfriend.” He defended, still groaning.

At Clarke’s glare, Lexa stepped in as the arbiter this time. “Murphy, you better quit while you’re ahead.”

She then laced her fingers through Clarke’s hand and led her away.

He groaned some more, but didn’t move off the floor. As their steps retreated, he overhead, “Babe, next time use your non-painting hand,” followed by the faint reply, “This is why I don’t sport.”

****

“You were always quick on the draw,” Clarke says as she joins Lexa standing a few steps outside of the chippy.

“I just assumed he was going to say something not so nice.” Lexa mumbles into the collar of her scarf.

With her hands tucked into her pockets, she lifts her shoulders to burrow deeper into her parka. She waits patiently as Clarke dons her hat and gloves.

“He sure showed you.” Clarke's tease is met with a faux glare.

After Clarke had recovered from her laughter and Lexa from her embarrassment over the misunderstanding with the stranger, they polished off what little remained of their taster platters, and decided to end their date with a walk along the pier. Although the February air is nowhere near moderate enough for a leisurely stroll, neither seemed ready to call it a night yet. Lexa had smiled her agreement when Clarke made a hopeful bid to extend their companionship.

She is still chuckling quietly to herself while Lexa scowls adorably as they set off towards the boardwalk. Despite the carb-load that should be weighing them down, there’s a jaunt to both of their steps.

Few words are exchanged for a while as they take in the night. This area of the waterfront has seen significant redevelopment lately, so she knows the cranes and scaffolding must be a feast for the architect’s eyes. Clarke only opens her mouth to answer Lexa’s intermittent questions of when which building came up; otherwise she works hard to keep her attention forward and not on the small puffs of breaths coming out of lovely rosy cheeks.

They walk closely together though no parts of their body actually touch. Clarke feels the warmth nonetheless, her skin prickling from the buzz of having a good time with Lexa again. While Grounders was like a dip of her toes into familiar waters once more, tonight feels like she's waded into the shallow end of the ocean, after the sun had crested and was remaking its descent back towards the horizon, leaving behind a soft glow on the surface from its dying embers.

She basks in it, soaking in the feeling.

“Well, thank you for always having our backs.” Clarke revisits the topic after a long beat.
Lexa nods, and waves her hand to indicate that it’s nothing. “You would do the same.”

Clarke tips her head in acknowledgment though it’s not necessary. They both implicitly know that their mutual ferocity when it comes to protecting each other has never been a point of contention.

She remembers the rage she felt when Lexa was upset that a poorly-informed teacher had dismissed her arguments about gender and sexuality during a heated class discussion on reproduction rights. Clarke let her anger simmer and then used her creativity, recruiting a gleeful Raven, to egg Mr. Pike’s office in retribution.

After Raven had procured access to the staff-only area, the two of them had skipped class—the same period Lexa had with Pike—to painstakingly lay down six dozen eggs, some boiled, others not, on top of the carpet. They had spread them precariously around such that each one had to be individually picked up to make a clear walking path between desk and door. It was Russian roulette whether the egg was cooked or uncooked, whether it would break or not if mishandled.

“Wait, that was you and Raven?” Lexa asks, astonished and impressed, hearing the full story for the first time.

Clarke nods, chuckling at the memory of hiding around the corner as she and Raven tried valiantly to hold in their snickering laughter when they heard intermittent loud curses after Pike entered his office. Her stomach hurt from holding it in when he walked out with yolk all over his shoes and hands.

“I couldn’t let his small-mindedness stand. Raven was only happy to put her lock-picking skills to good use.”

“I had no idea.”

That was the intent. Lexa had plausible deniability when a seething Pike tried to confront her about the prank the next day. He hastily retreated when Lexa threatened to go to the Principal over his obsession with *her* eggs. Since then, other students would randomly leave an egg on top of his desk, and Clarke may or may not have graffitied his chalkboard with doodles of an ovoid-shaped nature.

The incident an hour ago in TOTCA underpins for Clarke the latent strength of their bond, the instinct to protect persisting despite the strain of the years that still lay between them. She finds comfort in knowing that their ingrained reflexivity to fight for the other’s well-being hasn’t lost its edges.

As they walk past Piers 4 and 5, Clarke is reminded of the public art project installed the summer after their senior year of high school, by one of her favourite artists, Olafur Eliasson.

“Hey, do you remember the waterfalls?” She asks.

Clarke doesn’t have to specify which waterfalls for the immediate recognition to cross Lexa’s face. At 90-120 feet high, the four man-made structures erected in the East River and New York Harbor were a sight hard to forget.

“How could I not? You made us cross the Brooklyn Bridge several times because you couldn’t decide which was the perfect vantage point to take in all four waterfalls.”

After exhausting themselves zig-zagging between Manhattan Greenway, Pier 1 and Pier 11, Lexa had finally caved to Clarke’s desire for a 360 degree experience, and shelled out for the water taxi
tour.

Clarke remembers being squeezed happily in between a Swedish couple and a young Japanese family as they all took in the multi-sensory experience: the mist and roaring movement of the water as it plunges into the river, the leftover smells of the morning’s merchant trade in the harbour, and the bright neon lights that came on when dusk neared, the falls washed in blues and pinks and illuminated against an orange sky.

She remembers standing on the upper deck with her front to the railing and Lexa’s chest against her back, feeling the security of arms around her waist and the tickle of hair against her neck. She remembers laughing heartily when her girlfriend procured a giant pretzel out of nowhere. Apparently Lexa had been stowing the emergency item in her tote in the likely event that a humpy Clarke made an appearance.

She remembers feeling so content in the moment, being tourists in their own city—another summer spent with her love, and enjoying the last vestiges of their adolescence as they transitioned out towards young adulthood with college looming around the corner—and thinking how spoilt she was if things were to get any better than this.

Lexa must remember it too because there’s an unabashed smile now gracing her face and shining through her eyes.

“I remember someone got handsy, and we lost track of time and ended up disembarking in Midtown.” Lexa jokes but then her eyes widen owlishly in poorly concealed horror when she realises those words were said aloud.

Though equally surprised, Clarke saves them from further awkwardness by delicately moving past the slip.

“It was a good day.”

—

A little while later, they stop to rest at a railing, leaning on their side to take in both the view and each other.

Clarke notices Lexa’s jaw hinge in concentration. The brunette seems to internally debate something and opens her mouth to speak but the words get lost to the wind. Their conversation loses momentum almost entirely then, neither knowing what else to say, and too individually absorbed in processing their memories and new time together.

The lights of Lower Manhattan can be seen across the harbour, prettily reflected in the water. Most tourists have shuffled back to their hotel. Only a few brave couples are still out, squeezing the last drip of romance out of this Valentine’s Day. It hadn’t even occurred to Clarke what exact day it was until she spotted a girl clutching her roses as she walked arm in arm with her boyfriend, their blissful smiles and passing chatter full of affection.

(Clarke had never cared for roses but was suddenly aching for one.)

Lexa’s eyes are soft, her smile small but undeniably there. She’s beautiful under the boardwalk’s lamp, a few strands of hair loosely moving in the breeze. All Clarke wants is to reach out and help put them back in place behind the small ear that’s currently tipped red by the cold. It closely matches the crimson of her lips from over-biting in thought.

“Today is another good day.” Lexa finally picks up on Clarke’s last words. “Thank you,” she says
the last part in a near reverent whisper that was only audible because of how attentive Clarke had been looking at her mouth.

They’re staring at each other intently when Clarke makes her decision. After weeks of texting, and sharing another meal together, she thinks they can graduate to the next level of intimacy. She doesn’t want this to be the fourth time that she sees Lexa and the fourth time that they don’t willingly touch.

As someone whose livelihood depends on feeling her way through the world, whose craft is centred on an embodied engagement with her surroundings, who interprets her heart through her hands, not being able to touch—and not being to touch Lexa—amounts to an amputated existence. It’s not one she wants to endure any longer, if it can be helped.

Clarke is rocking on her feet, her hands in her back pocket, when she plucks the courage to ask, “Do you think I can … ?”

She rises on her toes, leaning slightly into the taller girl’s space, and makes her intention clear, waiting for Lexa to object. Lexa does not. With a bite of her lip, she quietly nods her assent.

It nearly knocks them both over when Clarke springs to life, immediately swinging her arms out to wrap them around Lexa and bringing the former lovers chest to chest.

At first, Lexa doesn’t move her arms from her side, perhaps still recovering from the shock and force of Clarke’s enthusiasm. But then with the tiniest pull of breath comes the sound of shifting fabric before Lexa returns the hug.

Touching at last, they share relieved sighs that burn a warmth through layers of parka.

Clarke takes a few deeper breaths to savour the moment: the vanilla and pine scent that’s both foreign and somehow still familiar, the soft crinkle of lush curls against her neck, the even softer hand on her lower back that despite its lightness feels like an anchor, and perhaps, the most affecting sensation, an imperceptible dampness on her cheek. She doesn’t need to turn her head to know that the glisten of tears in her eyes will be mirrored in Lexa’s.

She chances moving one arm across Lexa’s shoulder to tighten the hold, her other hand coming up to grasp the back of Lexa’s neck and bring her closer. There’s a hitch of breath that she’s unsure if it’s hers or Lexa’s at the contact, but then they both settle into the embrace for a stretch of infinite time.

“I’ve missed you,” Lexa confesses softly into her hair.

A quiver of a breath leaves Clarke, surprised to hear those words. She didn’t know how much she needed to hear them. They feel like a balm to her battered heart.

“Me too.”

Though it’s nothing near what Clarke felt when they first kissed, an altogether different intensity and longing, the hug still feels like a sort of homecoming.

And for the briefest of a soul-renewing minute …

The world sharpens into focus.
Two hearts beat in rhythm.

Clarke never wants to let go again.
Chapter End Notes

A hug is progress, right? (I can assure you that present Clarke and Lexa will kiss long before women artists gain 50% representation in galleries.)

Next chapter: A group dinner, liquid courage, and Lexa’s first time back in the apartment bring about a few revelations.
A group dinner, some liquid courage, and Lexa’s first time back in the apartment bring about a few revelations.

I couldn't find a natural break point to split this instalment so here is two chapters in one, extra long for the long weekend. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_These arms of mine_
_They are yearning_
_Yearning from wanting you_
_Otis Redding_

A box of pizza was laid to waste atop of their makeshift cardboard dinning table. What was once a heaven of caramelised onions, basil and arugula, aioli truffle mushrooms, Spanish chorizo, bacon bits, and buffalo mozzarella on a thin crust of white pesto sauce goodness, was now only a collapsed empire of crumbs and grease stains.

The upside-down cardboard box—which Lexa had insisted on to make their first meal in their new apartment a more formal affair—had looked ready to buckle under the weight of wood-fired comfort and pie-ful indulgence.

The couple was left alone in their apartment after Lincoln finished helping to bring their stuff in. Though Clarke appreciated the extra muscles, they didn’t really need them considering the little that she and Lexa owned. The scant amount of furnishings, including a distinct lack of seating and dining surface options, made the move easily completed in less than an hour. That’s why Raven and Octavia hadn’t even bothered showing up. (“What for? To witness you and Lexa be gross about uhauling? We’re not into self-torture.”)

(Anyahad simply punched Clarke and Lexa each in the arm, looked at them unconcerned when they successively cried and glared at her, and said, “Oh good. You both felt it, that means your limbs are still working. You don’t need me.”)

Despite the reduced inventory, Clarke still found unpacking to be a daunting task and felt famished
from carrying in one box of brushes while the other two hauled the rest. Her defence for being useless—“bristles are really heavy”—was ignored by Lincoln and earned a kiss to her temple from Lexa. When they were done, she persuaded her girlfriend to call Luca’s for a 14-inch pie that would properly christen the place with good vibes.

Lincoln had declined their offer to stay for a slice, noting the need to go rescue tweedledee and tweedledum from themselves before whatever criminal activity they undoubtedly were up to escalated into another visit from campus police (at a university that neither attended).

Too many pizza slices later, Clarke and Lexa were laid on the hardwood floor, rolled over in submission, Clarke flat on her back and Lexa spread prone with her face buried in the crook of her elbow, the nearly empty pizza box looking now to be taunting rather than tantalising. Several beer-less bottles of Bells and Sixpoints were scattered next to them. At least the ales left behind a pleasant buzz.

Clarke’s left arm was covering her eyes, while Lexa’s right arm was stretched out to blindly rub her stomach, eyes also shuttered in regrettable but contented gluttony. A few minutes ago, their new neighbours couldn’t be faulted for mistaking their moans to be a different kind of christening happening.

“Next time, we need to take scheduled breaks,” Clarke plotted. She sensed the nod more than saw it. “We have to be more strategic. We can’t attack all at once.”

“I love when you talk war strategy.”

“I’m not going to last much longer in battle.” Clarke feebly raised her head to eye the 1.5 slice left over, and then promptly dropped it back down to the ground in defeat. “I can’t do it. Leave me.”

“Never.” Lexa played along, and then teased, “We need to work on your stamina. There’s this nice trail in Prospect—”

“Lex, it’s never going to happen. I thought you’d give up by now. Just because we’re newly co-habitants, don’t think we’re also going to be co-runners. You’re not going to get me to run unless a bear is chasing me. Even then, I’d rather just plate myself and hand him a fork.“

“One, never run in the presence of a bear,” Lexa corrected, “Two, you are delicious,” and then, “Thirdly but most importantly, sue me if I want a little more time with you in the morning.”

Clarke squinted open one eye and smiled at her sappiness.

“Counteroffer. Hear me out, I know this might sound ridiculous to you. How ‘bout, you don’t go jogging at 5am? We use the extra hour cuddling instead. And if you’re still keen on a workout, I can spike your heart rate and warm you up in other ways.” Clarke wished she had the strength to even wiggle her eyebrows to punctuate her point.

“Speaking of, we should look into the heating of this place.” Lexa said, releasing a full body shudder that Clarke felt from the hand on her stomach. “Maybe ask the super about double-glazing the windows and upping the insulation.”

“That was a lot of pretext, Lex,” Clarke said, chuckling at her accidental rhyme. “You only had to ask.”

“Huh?”

“Com’ere,” Clarke pawed a tugging motion for her to come nearer, “I’ll be your insulation.” She felt
the opposite of cold and was happy to share her warmth.

Drawing from deep reserves and with the concentration and then the explosive power of an Olympic weightlifter, Lexa rolled herself over towards Clarke’s body. Her overestimated momentum pulled air and an ‘Oomph’ out of Clarke when she landed into her side, half on top. She adjusted her arms and legs, and kissed Clarke’s chin in apology, ‘Sorry,’ then tucked her head atop Clarke’s chest. Her hand continued its patterns on Clarke’s stomach while her leg hooked around her pelvis and hip area. Clarke kissed the top of Lexa’s head in kind, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, her other hand coming up to lightly rub Lexa’s back.

They both sighed into the comfort.

“How have you survived nineteen East Coast winters?” Clarke asked.

“The last five, because of you. Before that, lots of sweaters.”

“We need to fatten you up.”

“Clarke, I weigh more than you.”

“All muscle weight. It doesn’t count.”

“Oh, it definitely counted last week when someone got off on riding my abs,” Lexa said. Clarke blushed and didn’t bother to look to know there’d be a smirk waiting below her chin.

“God, the ego of athletes—” She started to admonish but then cut herself off when an open mouth latched onto her throat and started sucking. Soft lips searched unseeingly, leisurely, up the column of her neck, then the ridge of jaw and chin before they found their target. The seam of Clarke’s mouth felt the gentle knock of a tongue seeking entrance.

Clarke turned her head to absorb the kiss more fully. They lazily nipped and bit, tucked and teased, in no hurry and with no real energy to take it anywhere.

Clarke licked her lips when they finally parted, tasting the blonde wheat of the ale mix with the spicy of the chorizo and the richness of the mozzarella. Before Lexa, her spice tolerance was nil. Years of conditioning helped her to acclimatise to the heat levels Lexa enjoyed with her food, the lower end anyways. Clarke could handle the tame fire of the smoked paprika of the Spanish sausage. She was more than willing to endure the heat if it was palliated by the taste of Lexa.

“Mmm. You’d be tasty for a bear too. Though on second thought you might be too lean. He’d probably take one look at you and scoff. Maybe you should have that last slice.”

“I have better use for my mouth,” Lexa countered, nibbling on her bottom lip, then kissed her again.

She kept the same languid pace but this time it turned the fluttering warmth in Clarke’s stomach into a low burning ache. As good as it felt, though, and as much as she wanted to test the acoustic absorbency of their new walls or the resiliency of the hardwood against their often enthusiastic lovemaking, Clarke thought she really didn’t have the muscle power to pay her arousal due attention.

“Ok, ok … if we’re ever going to get off this floor, I need your tender lips not to …”

Suddenly, those very tender lips were gone. From what Clarke could tell, without opening her eyes, Lexa had bolted up and scurried away. She heard ruffling in the far corner, likely Lexa rummaging through the unopened boxes.
“Ah-ha, found it!” was triumphantly declared a moment later. More shuffling sounds followed.

“C’mon,” Lexa beckoned excitedly, her presence closer again when the noise stopped.

Clarke was about to question what was so urgent when she heard the first two notes of the Otis Redding classic reverberate throughout the apartment, music replacing the previous commotion. Her lips pulled instantly into a wistful smile hearing the unguarded vulnerability of his weathered voice. She looks up to find Lexa wearing an equally warm, nostalgic expression, her hand outstretched and fingers wiggling in eager invitation.

Clarke didn’t hesitate to take the hand and be pulled to her feet, her fatigue completely forgotten. Lexa led her away from their dining spot and towards the centre of the room. Wordlessly, they took up their well-choreographed positions. Hands wrapped around waist, arms around neck, head on shoulder, their bodies falling effortlessly into old patterns.

They begin a gentle sway in a sequence of practised movements as Otis soulfully stretched out his yearning.

*These arms of mine*
*They are yearning*
*Yearning from wanting you*

The lyrics were simple but deeply affecting by the hurt that scratched their surface. His raw sound, both smooth and aching, emanated from the worn record.

The vintage record player was a housewarming gift from her dad, a legacy of his youth. The album, along with a milk-crate full of other gems, were on indefinite loan.

(“You’re moving to Brooklyn. I feel it my duty as a father to arm you with good music so you can fight off the hipsters and their confused tastes in bands named Bon Fire or Arcade Winter. Now, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, those are good names. Forget wifi, listen to real hi-fi.”

Clarke accepted the gift but didn’t have the heart to tell her father that his mid-century antique fell right into hipster territory.)

This was one of Clarke’s favourite tracks. Even coming from an album entitled *Pain in My Heart*, she had always interpreted the song to be a hopeful ballad. When she was younger, while other households played carols, the Griffins would survive the cold season on repeats of Otis’ emotional vocal narratives, alongside Sam’s elegant crooning. With how often the records spun, Jake was on a first name basis with them.

Clarke had particularly taken to *These Arms of Mine* watching her dad waltz her mom around their living room, still in her coat and scrubs. Her scowl at being accosted at the door before she could disrobe or say a proper hello melted away when he tightened his arms around her and moved them to the music.

Clarke had first learned from Otis Redding what happiness looked like.

A few years later, she’d pick up on her parents’ tradition and experienced the bliss for herself.

Clarke hadn’t known that the song featured in *Dirty Dancing* until she was watching its rerun on TV one sleepover with Lexa. She paused the scene in the movie where Baby entered Johnny’s room for the first time, leaving behind a perplexed Lexa while she went to retrieve her father’s record player and returned to put the record on for her.
Still new in their first year of friendship but the butterflies had already started to make themselves known enough that they had rashly compelled Clarke to invite herself into Lexa’s arms. It was more giggling than dancing, but since then the song had become a staple.

*These arms of mine*
*They are burning*
*Burning from wanting you*
*These arms of mine*
*They are wanting*
*Wanting to hold you*
*And if you would let them hold you*
*Oh how grateful I will be*

Full on good beer and good pizza, while being closely held by her love, Clarke was indeed grateful. She softly sang along as Lexa moved them to the rhythm, stroking the small of her back while Clarke carded fingers through her hair. Swathed in the glow of the streetlight pouring in, and as their feet drew invisible lines across the hardwood, it felt like the perfect way to end their night and start this new stage of their life together.

On cue, when the song neared its end, and not a second after the words *tender lips* faded to the warmth of the room, she felt Lexa’s press against hers. Clarke sunk into the feeling, the tenderness, just as hands sunk into her shirt and pulled her closer. She raised on her toes to lessen Lexa’s need to bend down, deepening the kiss and feeling the overwhelming sense of belonging settle deep in her bones.

“Thank you,” Lexa said after the kiss and song ended, continuing to sway them gently even as the next track, Otis’s cover of *Louie Louie*, picked up tempo.

“For what?”

“My birthday gift,” Lexa said as she slid her hands down to fit inside the back pockets of Clarke’s jeans.

“You like the back scratcher?” Clarke deflected, laughing when Lexa glared at her and squeezed her ass in reprimand.

“I liked the wrapping it came in.”

Clarke smiled shyly. “It’s just a piece of paper.”

She had rolled up the $2 wooden instrument inside of their lease agreement. It had been co-signed by Jake and Gustus, unbeknownst to Lexa, who had been convinced and disappointed that her sales pitch about the Bed-Stuy rental had fallen on Clarke’s paint-clogged ears.

Clarke had enjoyed watching the confusion—when she presented Lexa the odd-shaped gift along with a pen—turn into squealed elation after the piece of paper that was missing one final signature from the would-be tenants had been uncovered. Straight vertical lines were quickly inked next to swirly loops.

Clarke had patted herself on the back for the success of her surprise, having counted on Lexa’s anal-retentive predictability. (Lexa was meticulously careful at gift-unwrapping, being an insistent paper recycler and re-user.)

“You sure know a way to a girl’s heart,” Lexa gestured to the pizza and waved her hand generally at
the apartment, “bacon and bureaucracy.”

“Happy birthday, Lexa.”

“Welcome home, love.”

“Welcome home.”

*****

Clarke is frantic.

The more she sweeps, the more the dust just gets displaced and collects elsewhere. Every swipe forward, two swipes back.

Her eyes have been straining for the last however long—she has lost count—and now she’s starting to see motes of lint and air pockets of dirt where there probably are none.

Her home has never been cleaner.

“You missed a spot.”

Or so she thought.

“What?! Where?”

Clarke turns her head side-to-side, readying her duster towards whatever offending spot awaits. Not seeing anything, she turns to ask Raven to elaborate, only to find the girl not even looking up from her fiddling with whatever electronics of Clarke’s she’s found, lazing on the couch with a red vine hanging between her teeth.

Clarke goes to yank the licorice out of her mouth and proceed to swat her with it, provoking an indignant yelp. “Hey!”

Raven laughs and tries to fend off the light assault. At the retreat of the onslaught, she reaches for another candy but the bag of red vines is promptly snatched away as well.

“You’re not helping,” Clarke chastises, “and stop eating these, they’re for later.” She makes her way to the kitchen to put the bag back into the pantry, on a self cleared especially for today, adding it to an already overflowing pile of snacks. “There won’t be any left for Lexa if you keep pilfering them.”

“But I bought them,” comes the pout and protest, “why does your girlfriend get to benefit from my hard-earned dollar?”

“First of all, it was my money,” Clarke says but doesn’t get to her second point when Octavia emerges from the hallway.

“Lincoln’s on his way. He just settled Tye with the sitter.” Octavia announces as she enters the living room and plops herself on the loveseat, swinging her legs over the arm after pocketing her phone. “Where’d the vines go?”

“Sugar jail,” Raven answers looking forlornly towards the kitchen.
“And whose girlfriend now?” Octavia asks, trying to play catch-up following her call.

“No one’s.”

“Clarke’s.”

“She’s not my girlfriend, Rey.”

Clarke lets out a deep sigh, sitting down at the other end of the couch. She closes her eyes and rubs her temples, feeling the elastic band tightening with the afternoon’s efforts—and the strain to parry any misinterpretations of her evolving relationship with Lexa.

“We’re just friends.”

She doesn’t have to look up to see the unimpressed gapes of scepticism that are likely being thrown her way. She is surprised though to suddenly find Raven in front of her. Clarke is pulled to her feet and into a long hug. She pats Raven gingerly on the back, appreciative but confused by the unsolicited affection.

Clarke moves to sit back down as Raven returns to her spot but then Octavia rises as well and also mutely hugs her.

“Thanks?” Clarke hesitates to say. She and Octavia re-install themselves in their seats.

Clarke waits, knowing better than to give her best friends and their odd behaviour the benefit of doubt.

“Did that hug feel like the world stopped spinning?”

*There it is.*

“Were my arms an anchoring weight that took the load off your shoulders and caused a lightness in your heart?”

“Did your breath hitch when you smelled my Old Spice?”

“Assholes.”

Clarke throws her exasperation at the two comedians but neither pillow lands, Raven and Octavia easily dodging them as they laugh and high-five each other for their coordinated mocking.

“Points for creativity,” Clarke concedes but tries to hide her smile, not wanting to encourage them.

“How’s the dating going anyways? How many dates has it been now?” Octavia asks after they settle down.

Clarke sighs again.

“Once more for those in back, just friendly dates.”

“Stop stepping on my romantic daydreams with reality. Let me live vicariously through you,”

Octavia pleads, seemingly weighed down in the loveseat by the fatigue of new motherhood. “I don’t know the last time Linc and I have done anything that didn’t involve Tonka trucks and timeouts.”

“Ya, I don’t know dude. Whatever it is you’re doing with Lexa, I only do with Anya, and Octavia with Lincoln before Lincoln 2.0 came along.” Raven backs her up but then seems to think it over
and appends, “Actually what Octavia did with Lincoln to make Lincoln 2.0 happen.”

“We get coffee together, share meals, text. That’s no different than what the three of us do.”

“It is very different when accompanied by tingles and sexual tension.”

“Trust me, there isn’t anything sexual about what we’re doing.”

“But there are tingles?” Octavia asks, smirk in place.

Clarke groans under her breath for giving them the opening and walking right into that one. But like a champion pole vaulter, she catapults over the question. “We’re getting to know each other again. That’s all.”

Raven and Octavia hum in pretend acknowledgment and lets it go, but she can still hear the disbelief of their unspoken objections.

“Whatever it is, it looks to be going well,” Raven hedges, smiling gently at her, no longer a trace of her previous teasing.

Clarke can’t keep the smile from forming thinking about the hug on the pier, the one that did cause her world to stop spinning, her heart to lighten, and breath to hitch. It’s been a couple of weeks since but she’s still riding the high of its lingering warmth, and the subsequent ones thereafter.

She and Lexa have seen each other twice after TOTCA, both times at Prospect. They walked and talked absentmindedly, Clarke finding the small chill of the park outings bearable because each conversation felt like another log added to the wood-burning fire warming her chest. She can’t remember how many times they looped Bridle Trail, only recalling the tingles when they parted embracing again.

The texting has continued and even graduated to the occasional phone calls. If having Lexa by her fingertips is addicting, having Lexa in her ear again is intoxicating. Better than she remembered listening to her voicemails.

“Yeah, it’s been great,” she confirms, nodding her head dreamily, her smile widening unbidden to her eyes.

“O, do you smile like that when you’re thinking of me?”

“Of course. It’s how I survive until the next time I can look longingly into your eyes again.”

A dramatic pause so Octavia can do exactly that, while Raven bats her eyelashes ridiculously, crystal blue meeting wild chestnut.

“Rey, does your heart skip a beat when you see my name across your phone screen?”

“Of course not, I’m married.”

“Ugh,” Clarke laments when she realises she’s out of projectiles to launch at them, sinking back into the couch, as Raven and Octavia break out into giggles again.

“You’re just so easy to rile up these days.”

“But seriously, it is nice seeing that Griffin smile again,” Octavia tells her sincerely, kindness in her eyes. “It’s been too long.”
Three simultaneous nods of agreement before they fall into a stretch of quiet.

Raven and Octavia have been camped out at Clarke’s apartment for two hours, in advance of their partners, to help out, though neither had lifted a finger. Despite the relentless teasing, Clarke is thankful for their presence and their emotional support as she ping ponged across the room all afternoon.

Finally having a moment to rest, Clarke takes the opportunity to collect her thoughts.

She looks around the apartment and observes the pristine state it’s in. She had vacuumed, dusted, mopped, wiped, and then a second and third time again. She even pushed back the spines of books to dust the edges of her bookshelves, and emptied out the crumb tray of her toaster, neither of which anyone, least of all Lexa, will see. The apartment is ready and fit for a visit by the New York Health Inspection Bureau, or Abby Griffin.

The couch pillows were fluffed, the nicer, heavier-duty napkins were pulled out, the glass and silverware freed of spots. The table was set, six of everything neatly arranged, a tight fit on her small dining surface but she managed well enough that it would please Martha Stewart. White wine is chilling in the fridge, a red bottle is out on the counter, sitting next to a twelve-pack of pilsner she had picked up in Red Hook, just in case.

She had even laboured to string white Christmas lights over the windows, and strategically spread some tea garden lights across the busy dining table.

Food-wise, with half their dining party being former athletes, she had prepared a carb-heavy meal—a combination of everyone’s favourite baked pasta dish and the option of self-made personal pizzas—that smelled and looked mouth-watering.

Her place is more primed for a state dinner than a casual meal with friends.

“What am I doing?” Clarke mutters to herself before voicing her doubts more loudly, “Do you think it’s too much?”

At her uncertain tone, and the hint of panic, her friends are by her side in an instant. Raven scoots closer from her perch and Octavia hastens to kneel in front of her.

“Sweetie, the place looks great. It’s so clean, we can all eat off the kitchen floor,” Octavia says, though she makes a mom-face of disgust that belies her actual willingness to do it. “The lasagna’s almost ready. God, it smells so fucking amazing. You even went all out with the flatbread from Steinway’s, and cleaned out F&L’s fresh produce. Raven’s bought half of the store with all of Lexa’s favourite snacks. You’ve got this.”

“And most importantly, you look hot,” Raven adds, giving an appraising once-over at her outfit as she comfortingly rubs Clarke’s arm, “like domestic goddess level hot.”

“I’m wearing jeans and a t-shirt,” Clarke says sceptically, looking down at the modest combo of rolled-up denim and loose-fitted white top she had hastily thrown on half an hour earlier after popping the lasagna in the oven. Her hair was tied up in a bun, kept out of the way while she chopped and sautéed, cleaned and tidied.

“They make your ass look great. And the v-neck is a nice touch,” Raven compliments. “Though, um, maybe don’t lean forward too much tonight. I mean, unless you want to.”

“Should I change?” Clarke asks panicked, only now noticing the blue lace of her bra peeping through.
Raven shakes her head, smirking. “I don’t think Lexa’d mind the peep show.”

Octavia reaches out to stop Clarke mid-rise, and goes to finish the train of thought she had before they derailed her with their wardrobe debate, “No, you look fine. Everything’s set, why are you all flustered?”

“I don’t know,” Clarke says honestly, and then adds quietly after a long pause. “It’s not just that it’ll be her first time back here.” She sighs. “It’s also her birthday. The first one where we’d be in the same room again.”

Her friends nod their understanding, knowing the significance of Lexa’s birthday and how difficult the day had become for Clarke, one where she’d usually unplug and wasn’t reachable.

What they don’t know is that she spends it getting lost in the meadows and ravine of Prospect, curling up in her bed afterwards with a cupcake bought from a bakery they used to frequent, and whispering birthday wishes to an empty room through spotty vision; hoping the universe heard it and sent the message to the right tiny ears anyways; and then spend the night sobbing quietly into their sheets, wishing Lexa every happiness and regretting with every ounce of her being that she no longer partook in giving it.

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Clarke walked into her apartment, dropped the keys into the bowl while she toed off her shoes and then hooked her coat onto the rack. Each action, practised and worn, not needing any forethought.

Over three years ago, the same acts would have been followed by a lanky brunette padding barefoot across the hardwood towards her, a hand on her hip softly tugging her forward, and then an even softer kiss as greeting. Clarke’s mouth would yield to Lexa’s and let the gentle brushes and the contented sighs wash the dirt of the day away.

A hand would interlace with hers and lead them to the kitchen, where two glasses of wine and dinner were waiting. On days when Lexa was home early from work, washed and cut vegetables would lay on the counter ready for Clarke to cook and Lexa to help by staying out of the way. On busier days, it’d be Pho takeout—a beef broth with tender brisket for Clarke, and a chicken broth with Tiger prawns for Lexa.

They’d eat and chat animatedly, each smile and burst of laughter renewing Clarke. If not succumbed by exhaustion, the rest of the night would be spent naked, succumbing to pants of please and more and there, bodies sliding against each other, moans falling from kiss-bruised lips. Cries of pleasure would leave their evidence across scratched backs and purple skin and sating aches between thighs. They’d go to bed with a soft song between them, full stomachs and fuller hearts. Clarke more in love with her life than the day before, and happy knowing it’d still be less than the day after.

The difference now was a deafening, sobering absence of all that. After she hung her coat, Clarke was only greeted by memories and the ghost of a life that she had walked away from and only kept its walls to help her stay standing.

The difference now was the brown paper bag in her left hand, and the date on the calendar.

Three years and Clarke learned to accept that things were different after she hung up her coat. Life was steadily moving on even if her heart hadn’t. She painted during the day until her wrists were
sore, spent some nights out with Raven and Octavia until laughter and alcohol dulled the pain into a quiet murmur, and explored the streets of Brooklyn on the weekends until the blue sky turned black, living life as best as she could. Despite the empty apartment and the empty bed awaiting.

But for one day each year, during the first week of March, she allowed herself to feel the ache deep in her bones. To check in on fissures and fractures.

Clarke walked into the kitchen, took out the baked good and placed it on a plate. A simple chocolate hazelnut cupcake with some white chocolate shavings. A small smile slipped out thinking of the baker’s generosity to give her extra shavings, along with an unordered freshly baked chocolate chip cookie. She didn’t want to think how palpable her sadness must’ve been to earn such undeserved kindness.

The owner’s smile had become more gentle over the years each time she came into his shop alone and ordered only one cupcake when before it had always been two. He seemed to understand when sometimes she’d walk out empty-handed, just needing the familiarity of seeing red velvet and salted caramel and chocolate sprinkles. Other times, perhaps when the bags under her eyes were more visible than she had thought, he would catch her a few strides away from his door and breathlessly hand over a brown bag anyways. “Chocolat will make it better, non?” He would say in his thick French accent.

And it did, a little bit, Clarke thought as she grabbed a dessert fork. She pocketed a lighter and a single candle, then with the plate in hand made her way to the bedroom.

She settled herself on the bed, siting cross-legged and cradling the plate on her lap.

She took several deep breaths to settle her heart. Then a shake of the lighter fluid and two flicks of the spark wheel had the room illuminated in a soft orange. It was still light outside but Clarke had kept her curtain closed today, needing the cover of night to shut out the world, and relying instead on the warm glow radiating from the cupcake to provide momentary respite to her tired soul.

She pulled out the strip of photos from her side table and gently rubbed her thumb over its weathered surface. Her eyes glassed over looking at the joyful gazes reflecting back at her.

It was one of the few Lexa-things she still willingly had access to. Raven had scrubbed Lexa off of all her devices, as per Clarke’s insistence. But a couple of weeks ago Clarke had discovered a USB stick lodged in the far corner of her desk drawer when she was looking for a misplaced receipt. Curious about the contents, she had plugged the flash drive into her laptop. On it were mostly Lexa’s work files, pdfs of drawings and project references. Not wanting to snoop, she was about to eject the USB when she saw a folder simply named, Clarke.

Inside, she found images of herself, mostly portraits and selfies. Lexa had organised them into subfolders, indexed by apparent degrees of Clarke’s adorability, Cute, Super Cute, and Extremely. Clarke hadn’t known when Lexa had taken these or stolen them from her phone to make her own private photo album. She wasn’t surprised at discovering the duplicates. Lexa was weary of technology and unreasonably worried that her pictures and files would disappear into the ether if she didn’t religiously back them up. She was a prolific archivist.

Clarke was taken aback, however, to find in the main folder one image that was labelled favourite.jpg. She had to blink away her tears when the preview showed a strip of four black and white photos of herself and Lexa, smiling widely, eyes bright with laughter.

In the first one, they’re looking straight into the camera, faces cropped in with Lexa’s hand covering her forehead, a pretty flush of embarrassment on her cheeks. Clarke remembered the photobooth
session, this must’ve been snapped right after Lexa joked that she didn’t want her five-head to monopolise the frame. In the second photo, they each had a hand holding up the neck of their shirts pass their throats, mirth in the corner of their eyes with silly attempts to minimise any chance of double chins showing up. The third had Clarke feigning lack of amusement while Lexa whispered something in her ear, likely one of her usual lame puns.

Clarke’s gaze, however, had lingered most on the last photo. Both their eyes were closed, Clarke’s chin tilted up as if in prayer while Lexa’s head is tucked into the crook of her neck, mid-kissing the underside of her jaw. The smiles were more contained than in the other three but quiet happiness radiated so forcefully out from this grainy shot, it had her tears spilling over seeing the image of youthful bliss.

Closing out of it, Clarke was trying to rein in the unexpected tight emotion when she saw a word document that made it far worse. She didn’t open it, the filename alone would have her crumbled into a heap on her bed for the next few days.

*London — Things Clarke Might Like.doc*

Lexa was a list-maker, using bullet points to prioritise and plan and structure and manage her busy days, crafting her present and future in italics and bold and underlines. To-dos, goals, tasks, fantasies, dreams, they were all meticulously jotted down, edited and annotated.

Clarke naturally made fun of her for it. Lexa however would be smug when her enlightened organisation skill proved beneficial on their holiday trips. Clarke would unfailingly realise she’d forgotten this or that when they’d arrived at their destination but then it’d unfailingly turn out Lexa had already packed the thought-to-be-missing item because, *It was on the list, babe.*

Clarke knew, without reading the content, this particular document must’ve been a list containing itemised reasons that would help to convince Clarke to come to London with her.

She let out a shaky breath when the realisation dawned on her. Maybe that was why this USB had been abandoned and forgotten, because for once, Lexa’s sense of order couldn’t prevent Clarke from throwing their life into a tailspin.

Because, Clarke didn’t go to England when asked. Lexa hadn’t even the chance to vocalise the things Clarke might like about London before the offer was rejected.

The look of incredible hurt seared into her memory. The millisecond when the light was snuffed out of brilliant green eyes had stretched to a lost forever that she hadn’t been able to turn back the second hand’s spinning.

But Clarke had made her choice, and was now crying in the bed of her making, alone on Lexa’s birthday, and staring at the reason for her regret inside the margins of 6” x 2”’. The white border keeping her just outside the edge of heaven.

Clarke had lost the original strip and had reprinted this newly discovered digital copy. Through a sheen of tears, she silently apologised to the two happy girls in the photos, hoping one day one of them would forgive her, and the other would forgive herself.

“Happy birthday, Lexa,” she whispered and blew out the candle of the cupcake.

Managing to push the name out past the lump in her throat, she suddenly felt tired and without appetite. Clarke placed the dessert on the side table, leaving it uneaten while she curled on her side, hiding in safety under a fortress of blankets.
Cheeks wet and heart still broken, Clarke waited for sleep that wouldn’t come.

*Maybe next year it won’t hurt as much.*

*****

And it doesn’t. Not as she sits with Raven and Octavia waiting for Lexa to arrive.

This year, it doesn’t hurt to see the date on her calendar.

This year, her friends rallied around her when she had called them to make plans for Lexa’s birthday. She thinks they were just ecstatic that she wasn’t going to turtle into her feelings come March.

After it was immediately agreed that they wouldn’t be able to coax Lexa out on the town to a bar or restaurant, never one to turn attention on herself, they all decided an intimate dinner was the next best thing.

But with an overactive two year-old running around, Lincoln and Octavia’s place was out of the question, declaring their house unfit to accommodate anybody over a toddler age. Plus, the new parents needed a night where they weren’t in constant toe-stubbing and leg-tripping peril caused by errant Legos.

Raven also declined her apartment as the venue, saying that the last time she and Anya hosted something with her co-workers, guests left in near tears at her wife’s refusal to do anything that night but glare silently, and with unmasked contempt, at their pedestrian babbling, let alone play hostess. It also didn’t help that Anya begrudged dedicating a special night to feeding her sister when she’d been doing that since childhood.

(Though her argument, “I deserve a day off,” made absolutely no sense considering Clarke had taken over that duty when they moved in together in college, and Lexa has presumably been feeding herself in London.)

That left Clarke.

Child-free and judgment-free, her apartment was voted as the perfect venue, even as she cast doubt to her ex-girlfriend’s comfort to return to their once-shared home.

Her unscrupulous friends urged her to frame it as a group hang-out, and lie that this is a monthly dinner thing, and it’s Clarke’s turn to host, set for the Saturday date before Lexa’s actual birthday so she wouldn’t suspect the true motivation behind the get-together.

Clarke had extended the invitation to Lexa as casually and calmly as she could, hoping her carefully composed text didn’t give away her nerves or the over-significance she was attaching to the dinner or that it was the tenth time she had written and rewritten the opening, *Hey.*

It was a nerve-racking few hours before she got her reply. Lexa had been quite efficient at answering her texts lately so the unusual delay had caused Clarke anxiety. She worried that maybe she had scared her off with the location, *our* apartment, the possessive pronoun a minor slip too late to catch. She was preparing herself for the inevitable disappointing ‘no’ when the surprised acceptance came as she was getting ready for bed.

*(Lexa) 10:50 pm*
That sounds nice, I’d love to, Clarke. If you’re cooking, count me in.

Clarke burned a hole through her screen making sure Lexa’s acceptance wasn’t the malfunction of auto-correct. She had to restrain her fingers from replying with strings of the paper popper and red dancer emojis.

Lexa asked if she should bring anything or could help somehow. Clarke held back her tongue from saying, “just your pretty face.” She declined the offer, it was the hostess’s responsibility to provide all. Besides, it would be the opposite of helpful if she let Lexa anywhere near the kitchen. She received a sarcastic *haha* but felt the smile through her screen and relocate to her own lips.

This year, Clarke gets to text the girl in the photograph and share smiles with her.

“I’m just nervous, I guess,” Clarke finishes voicing her thought. “It’s been so good between us lately, I’m not sure what being back here would mean for her, for us.” She doesn’t say she’s scared that it might be a setback.

“Hey, it doesn’t have to mean anything more than good friends and good food,” Octavia reassures, patting her knee.

“Yeah, no worries Griffin,” Raven seconds. “It’s going to be a great night. We’ll make sure of it.”

“Thanks guys.”

“Look, even the weather’s got your back.”

They all look towards the windows. A heavy snowfall was originally forecasted for later in the evening, a last grandstanding from winter. But although a significant amount of flurries did start to come down earlier in the afternoon they seemed to have changed their minds and had been tapering off in the last hour.

“See? Mother Nature is rooting for Clexa too.”

Clarke narrows her eyes at Octavia, though appreciating the sentiment and pep talk nonetheless. She pulls her up to join her and Raven on the couch.

The three friends watch the light snow for some time, enjoying the white scene and the comfort of their steadfast friendship. Clarke’s nerves settle for the first time in hours.

“Anyas coming with Lexa, right?” Octavia asks awhile later.

“Yeah,” Clarke answers at the same time that Raven nods. “Lexa’s giving her a ride.”

Clarke blushes realising belatedly, when she receives two separately raised eyebrows, that Octavia was directing the question at Raven who would know better the whereabouts of her wife. It’s not Clarke’s fault she knows that Anya’s itinerary happens to overlap with Lexa’s. She avoids their knowing looks and peers down at her watch to check the time. It’s nearing six now and the *three partners* rest of the dinner party should be arriving shortly.

“They’re coming together after leaving Gustus’. ” Raven fills in further, sparing Clarke. “They went to shovel and salt his driveway for him this morning. Fucking softies.”

“I know, it’s all mush under those sharp jaws and killer cheekbones,” Clarke says with an adoring glint in her eye, completely discrediting her earlier statement that Lexa is just her friend.
As if summoned into existence, the doorbell rings.

Clarke is met with a bear of a man when she goes to open her door, his dark and handsome stature taking up most of the frame. Her disappointment at not seeing the guest of the hour must show because he’s smirking at her knowingly.

“Clarke, nice to see you too,” Lincoln teases when she doesn’t immediately greet him. He leans down to initiate a hug on her behalf and peck her on the cheek, ever the gentleman, picking up the slack of her ill manners. “I found these two loitering outside.”

Before Clarke can vocalise her confusion at his words, her lips curl and her breath hitches when his bent form provides a view of the Woods siblings standing behind him, like two runway models appearing out of thin air. Some high-fashion publication somewhere is missing its centrefold statues.

Clarke wonders if Lincoln had felt her gasp the moment she caught sight of Lexa’s sparkling green eyes, shadowed under a warm taupe tone that brings out the golden flecks in her irises. They’re offset by plump lips shaded in a pretty rose colour, and pulled together with loosely twisted hair that’s swept to one side over her shoulder.

Lexa gives Clarke a bashful smile as their gazes meet, looking so soft even as she stands, a bit fidgety, next to an unamused, harder edged Anya. Clarke turns her attention to the elder sister momentarily, taking in her equally on-point lowkey makeup that flatters her genetically unfair bone structure. She had always thought how unjust the world really is for that much beauty to be concentrated in one gene pool.

“Are we having dinner in the hallway?” Anya deadpans. “That really warm apartment behind you looks like it might be another good option.”

At her snark, Clarke finally registers the light snowflakes that’s covering all their coats, and the slight clatter of teeth.

“Sorry, come in, come in.” She ushers the trio pass the threshold.

When Clarke steps aside to let them in, Raven and Octavia immediately join the group by the door, both reaching out to embrace their respective significant others, leaving Clarke and Lexa alone.

An expectant stillness falls over them, a pregnant energy, low and thrumming. Neither hear the rustling of coats being taken off next to them, nor the brusque movements as the others settle in and make their way further into the living room. The background activity goes unheeded as the two former loves take the time to absorb in the moment of reuniting in their former home.

Clarke searches her face for a reaction, but only sees Lexa looking softly at her, a tender but timid expression likely reflected in Clarke’s eyes.

Perhaps Lexa has reached a higher plane of emotional maturity, and could stand to revisit the place that held so many memories without crumbling, or that they’ve rebuilt their friendship to such a degree that she doesn’t shirk from the intimacy of this encounter with Clarke in an enclosed space where they used to co-habitate.

Or perhaps she’s keeping her unwavering attention on Clarke, on depths of blue, as a grounding force to keep from unraveling.
Whatever the case, Lexa’s enlightened serenity seems to rub off. In spite of the day’s build-up to this moment, finally seeing Lexa on this side of the door does something to calm Clarke’s jitters. Her trepidatious heart feels settled knowing its mirror beats a few inches away.

Lexa’s gaze is steadying and steadfast on her, but Clarke is curious if her eyes itch to look around, to take stock of what’s changed, of what has remained the same.

Clarke wonders if she’ll notice that her handmade coat rack, assembled from fallen branches recovered from a weekend hike to Harriman, still stands sentinel, but that their old shoe rack is gone because Clarke doesn’t need all that extra shelving space. If she’ll register the missing picture frames, which Clarke had never had the heart to take down before yesterday but had relocated to the bedroom and stowed carefully away in her closet. If she’ll catch on that the walls remain curated with a mix of hers and Clarke’s drawings from school, while the potted plants, the cacti and succulents, are long gone because Clarke’s thumb is about as green as Lexa’s cooking skills.

“Hi.” Lexa is first to breach the silence.

Her softly expelled greeting breaks Clarke out of her thoughts. “Hi,” she is quick to reply, finally remembering her manners. “Here, let me take your coat.”

Lexa shuffles out of her parka, displacing a dust of snow onto the welcome mat, and mouths, sorry. As Clarke waves her off and reaches out for the coat, Lexa smiles her decline, “I’ve got it, thanks.”

Without fuss, she hangs it on an empty branch hook. Clarke observes her lightly brushing two long fingers along the lacquer of the wood, then take a small presumably fortifying breath before she bends down to remove her snow boots and gingerly place them at the foot of the rack. The entire wordless routine answers the first of her earlier pondering.

Lexa returns to stand in front of Clarke, who has to suck in a breath to hold in the sudden flight of butterflies in her stomach at seeing ripped, blue-washed jeans paired with red flannel, stunned by how attractive she finds the casual chic wilderness aesthetic. Lexa looks like she had been plucked out of a Norwegian forest, mid axe-swing while chopping firewood. With sleeves rolled half-way up her forearm, the collar of her top opened to reveal soft skin, and the front hem tucked into tight denim that emphasise alluring hips—Clarke wants to cancel dinner to curl up into Lexa’s side in front of a fireplace.

The brunette looks as cozy as a sheepskin blanket that Clarke wouldn’t mind spending the night wrapped in, discussing the proper technique of wood stacking, bark up or down, instead of serving the food that she’s laboured hours over.

“You look nice,” Clarke blurts out, causing Lexa to look down at herself confused.

“Sorry, I had to change after Anya pushed me into the snowbank and then forced me into a one-sided wrestling match,” Lexa explains, “This was all I could find at Dad’s.”

They both don’t hear the shout of “Kom war, Lexa! Don’t be a wuss,” behind them, nor the question, “Do you think they remember we’re still here?”

But Clarke does silently thank Anya in her head for her violent sibling ways since it led to this vision before her.

“You look nice too,” Lexa returns politely, though no less genuine.

Her eyes subtly sweep the length of Clarke’s body, resting an extended second on the dip of her v-neck. Clarke would be self-conscious of the difference in layers between them considering her
threadbare t-shirt, but all she can think about is the burning need to hug the lumberjack in front of her.

Wait, she can do that.

Clarke opens her arms and Lexa steps into them without hesitation. They both sigh into the hug, shoulders relaxing imperceptibly, as if this is the real moment they have been waiting for. The contact is as soothing as ever, the novelty having not worn off yet.

Before Clarke can sink further into the hold, however, there’s a strange crinkly sound when she goes to press their bodies closer.

“Here,” Lexa says, pulling back at the noisy reminder, as she lifts the hand that had been holding a plastic bag Clarke hadn’t been consciously aware of until they embraced.

“Lexa, I told you not to bring anything,” Clarke starts to reprimand but then laughs when she peeps inside the bag to find long, green stalks with white ends, “You bought me giant green onions?”

“British leeks to be precise,” Lexa clarifies and smiles self-satisfactorily at Clarke’s amusement, as Clarke takes the bag and pulls out a leek to inspect more closely. “It was on special at the grocers, and it didn’t feel right to come empty handed.”

Clarke raises an eyebrow, not sure how a price reduction makes it any less of an odd choice for a dinner guest to gift her hostess.

“This was what I ate when I first got to London because I didn’t recognise anything else,” Lexa elaborates further, and then more shyly admits, “I picked it up thinking it was green onions. I had wanted to try making, um, that French onion soup you always made for me.”

Clarke laughs again. “Lex, you do know there are no green onions in French onion soup, right?”

(Clarke has stopped censoring herself as of late and more freely shortens Lexa’s name when she’s endeared by what she says or does—which is often. A twinkling of eyes whenever it comes out lets Clarke know that there are no objections to the return to familiarity.)

A pretty blush pinks Lexa’s cheeks. “I know now.”

Clarke smiles thinking of Lexa’s special relationship to onions, all varieties. Her lack of general food knowledge and minimal cooking skills notwithstanding, she was unsurprisingly good with a knife. Likely a by-product of her athleticism, Lexa was an Olympic-level onion chopper and could mince, cube, or slice on command as required by Clarke, without so much as shedding a tear. A sharp knife and skilful fast hands apparently did the trick.

“Leeks are milder and sweeter than green onions.” As Lexa nervously babbles on about the humble vegetable and its national status in Wales, Clarke can only smile at her gesture of social good will to share the UK traditions she’s picked up. “They also wear them on March 1st— What?” Lexa asks, in the middle of retelling about St. David’s Day.

“Nothing, it’s great.” Clarke is quick to reassure, though leaves the thought You’re great unsaid.

A loud whispering of, “How long do you think they’ll stand there for? I’m hungry,” likely from Raven again, has Clarke realising they’re still standing at the door.

“I’m sure it’ll make a great topping,” Clarke says as she gestures Lexa to move deeper into the apartment, “I’ll wash them, you go ahead and make yourself at—” she leaves the last word hanging
while retreating to the kitchen.

“Smells amazing, what are we having?” Lexa asks, surprisingly following after her. Rather than join the rest of the group, she sits on a stool at the counter to watch.

Neither of them are aware that their friends have been giving each other looks observing the entire interaction from door to kitchen with sustained interest. Since the host is too busy with the special guest, they’ve taken it upon themselves to sit at the dining table and pour their own drinks. From the little attention that’s paid outside of locked gazes of green and blue, tonight might as well be a dinner party of two.

“Lasagna and flat-bread pizza.”

Clarke replies over her shoulder as she rinses the leeks under the faucet. A curve of lips greets her answer that bewilders her to see that smile in this place again. She shakes her head in contented disbelief and takes a little longer than necessary with the washing so that she can adjust her heartbeat to the reality that Lexa is back in Bed-Stuy, in their apartment, miles away from where the plant grows.

—

Clarke’s just turned off the running water and towelling her hands when Lexa says, tapping on her phone, “Here, maybe Siri will know what to do with leeks.”

Clarke chuckles to herself at the familiar sight of Lexa looking confusedly at her phone as she attempts to be helpful during meal prep. She goes to join by her side, standing and looking over her shoulder at the search results. This scene could be a page ripped from their mid-twenties chapter.

“Perfect, it’ll go well with mushroom and cheese.”

“This roasted chicken and leek looks mouth-watering too.”

Clarke brightens at Lexa’s excitement.

“Ok, I’ll cut them up now.”

She’s reaching for the knife when a hand gently covers hers, causing an uptick of her pulse. Clarke looks up as Lexa shyly volunteers, “I can do it.”

The next few minutes are spent in silence, as the roles are reversed, Lexa chops and Clarke watches. They chat and laugh, neither bothering to engage with the others in the room, only concerned with their one-person-audience cooking show. Clarke would feel bad for being rude to her other dinner guests but doesn’t care when she has a hot lumberjack as a sous-chef.

She thinks that Lexa’s focus in the kitchen could be a diversion tactic to keep from being overwhelmed by the rest of the apartment, so Clarke is happy to give her all the attention she wants.

They’re heatedly debating the practical value vs aesthetic quality of onion goggles—Clarke is for, Lexa against—when the oven timer chimes suddenly, startling them out of their bubble.

“Oh thank fuck. This Sappho youtube channel is excruciatingly painful to watch,” and “Painfully boring, what kind of foreplay is onions and eyewear,” are loudly whispered following the dings.

Clarke hears the grumblings filter through from the living room. She ignores the Greek chorus and goes to remove the casserole pan, setting it on the stovetop to cool.
She motions Lexa over, who promptly abides. It was tradition that she’d give Lexa a first test lick while they waited for the dish to be serving-ready. Usually, Lexa would taste it off of Clarke’s finger, but she adjusts to skim a piece of cheese off the top of the lasagnara, and offers the spatula to Lexa to try.

“It’s delicious, Clarke,” Lexa practically purrs her approval, sending Clarke’s butterflies into another fanciful flight.

“Oh, guys, lasagna’s ready!”

Clarke shouts ten minutes later, turning to the dining crowd, narrowly missing four heads abruptly whipped back into pretend conversation. “While I plate it, if you want a pizza after, come grab what you’d like on your flatbread, and we’ll pop them in the oven.”

Four sets of table legs scrape against the floor as they swarm to the island. There’s no want for toppings with the spread of tomato cubes and potato thins, arugula and spinach, gruyere and goat cheese, caramelised onions, olives and mushroom, chicken and chorizo slices, basil and sweet chilli, endives and, now, leeks. Hands criss-cross as varying portions of each get distributed.

Clarke smiles quietly when she catches Lexa avoid the olives but take extra helpings of the chorizo.

By the time everyone has spec’d their individual pizza, Clarke has set the lasagna on the table. While they settle back in their seats after, she places the pizzas into the still warm oven, three to a rack.

Once seated herself, Clarke gathers their attention and raises her glass. Five glasses mirror her action. She takes a moment to look at each of her friends. The two couples are sat next to each other while Clarke and Lexa take up either ends of the table. It warms her heart to see five faces again, instead of four. It feels like putting on a favourite vintage sweater after it had gone missing for awhile. Her gaze stays a little longer on Lexa before she makes her toast.

“To the warmth of old comforts.”

Her hidden message isn’t missed by perceptive green eyes as glasses clink amid cheers and shared smiles. (Except Anya. Who remains perennially expressionless and only bothers to tip her flute in Raven’s direction.)

“Oh, let’s eat!”

At her command, they dig in with fervour, the sound of clattering forks and knives ringing in the air. Conversation is temporarily set aside as the diners soak in the hearty flavours.

“This tastes amazing, Clarke,” Lincoln compliments a few minutes in.

“Yeah, awesome dude.” Raven gives her a thumbs up between mouthfuls, without making eye contact.

“What she said,” Octavia offers, vigorously nodding her head.

Anya doesn’t say anything but her silence speaks volume in itself, never failing to make her dislike known.

As Clarke cuts into her slice of lasagna, she sneaks a glance at the one person yet to voice her thoughts. She looks in time to catch Lexa finishing her first real bite, and then fixing a thoughtful gaze on her plate after the fork leaves her mouth.
A tongue pokes out to lick an errant string of cheese.

“Better than I remembered,” are the quiet words that come from across the table. It seems no one else but Clarke picked up on them, or perhaps they weren’t meant for anyone else’s ears, because while the others continue to make blissful headway into their portions, Lexa looks up to give her a meaningful look, eyes gone completely soft. There’s a rueful smile on her lips, small but definitely there, a semblance of the one that was reserved in the past for whenever Clarke cooked Lexa’s favourite dishes.

Clarke smiles her thanks before hiding her flushed cheeks by returning her attention to her own plate. She doesn’t need the fireplace after all, warmed enough by Lexa’s words and presence.

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“Lexa,” Clarke laughed into the kiss, “babe, dinner’s not going to cook itself if you keep at this.”

Despite her protest, her head remained tilted up, her mouth slanting against Lexa’s for better access, careless of the awkward angle. Clarke felt the heat of Lexa’s front flushed against her back, as her girlfriend continued her light assault of incorrigible pecks on neck, jaw, cheeks, any exposed skin really, before the roving lips reached their preferred destination again.

Clarke had finished putting down the last layer of spinach and ricotta and was in the process of cracking the black peppercorn when her assailant made the task impossible to finish. She had only heard their front door opening and closing and the sounds of a coat coming off before lips were on her.

As the kiss deepened, she felt the statement of intent of Lexa’s tongue that caused a full body tremor and forced her to let go of the pepper mill to grip blindly for purchase on the kitchen counter. The hold on her waist tightened, which should’ve been her clue that Lexa wasn’t listening and couldn’t be detracted from her mission. They adjusted angle for a moment, Lexa’s other hand coming up to cup her jaw, before persistent lips slid against hers again.

Need soon took over, labouring their breathing and intensifying the kissing. It was nearly Clarke’s undoing when her tongue was hungrily sucked on, and a thigh slipped between her legs. Her mind tried to refocus her on the lasagna but her body did a better job of persuading her to grind down on the toned muscle. Lexa was decidedly on Team Body and not helping the building pressure when both of her hands shifted to Clarke’s hips to direct her movements.

Once they found the right rhythm, Lexa moved one hand under her top to start palming Clarke’s breast while the other lowered into her sweatpants. As Lexa groped, Clarke’s legs parted instinctively and pushed down harder on Lexa’s thigh, seeking greater friction.

She felt the last shreds of self-restraint fraying when Lexa dipped into her underwear and was met with wet warmth. They both moaned and Clarke couldn’t remember why they were in the kitchen and not the bedroom, vertical and not horizontal. She rocked back into Lexa’s pelvis and wrapped a hand around her wrist to help guide the searching strokes. Lexa ground against her ass while making several obscene passes through her folds.

This must be a new record for Clarke with Lexa working feverishly to an unknown timer. It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes but Clarke felt ready to break, her body keening into the fast and rough touch, especially when each upstroke pushed Lexa’s palm against her clit and increased the
throbbing sensation to such intensity that she wanted Lexa to grab their strap-on and bend her over the kitchen table and take her from behind.

She had to break their kissing, which had gotten sloppy, to draw in much-needed air, letting the back of her head fall gracelessly against the top of Lexa’s shoulder. *Damn Lexa and her fast hands.*

Clarke really shouldn’t be complaining if this was revenge sex, Lexa returning the ill-timed favour from two nights ago when Clarke had sunk to her knees and distracted her from preparing for her big meeting. Her questing tongue between Lexa’s thighs—how it laved and flicked, circled and pushed for attention—made it impossible for the graduate architect to read her notes. Even with the pool of liquid evidence saying otherwise afterwards, Lexa had feigned her displeasure at the interruption and swore payback when Clarke least suspected. Clarke merely responded with, *You promise?*, and then sauntered away with a smirk, leaving Lexa panting and pantless in the den scrambling to pick up her loose papers.

Yet, despite looking forward to Lexa coming to collect her debt, she wanted the lasagna to have a fighting chance tonight. As much as she desired to sink into Lexa’s fingers, there was no hope of getting dinner timely on the table if she let Lexa finish. So when she felt the tips of Lexa’s fingers push into her entrance, Clarke didn’t know where she found the wherewithal but she made one last incoherent attempt to halt things before they got truly carried away.

“Italy … layers …” she croaked, the words sounding hazy from being on the cusp of her orgasm. She hoped Lexa can interpret her desperation and appreciate her martyrdom for the greater good of their stomachs.

Somehow the message was received.

“Sorry, sorry,” Lexa said but didn’t look apologetic at all when she finally pulled back, cheeks and lips rosy. They both shuddered when she withdrew her hand. When Clarke opened her eyes, her dilated pupils must have plainly communicated her intense arousal because Lexa looked like she wanted to abandon food altogether in favour of devouring her instead. “Sorry, you’re just irresistible.”

Lexa leaned in for another kiss to reiterate her point. Though she dutifully kept it chaste, Clarke surprised them both by being the one to deepen it. She should have realised sooner that it was futile resistance as soon as Lexa’s hand was inside of her pants. There was no way she’d be able to concentrate on anything now if the pulsing between her thighs wasn’t taken care of.

*Fuck it. Dinner will just have to be late.*

She grabbed Lexa’s hand and pulled her towards the living room. When they reached her destination, Clarke let go of a confused Lexa. Wordlessly, she stepped out of her sweatpants, along with her underwear, and bent herself over the back of the couch, resting her forearms on the top of the cushions.

Looking over her shoulder she would’ve laughed at the stunned expression on Lexa’s face if she weren’t in a hurry and on a schedule. Her girlfriend stood speechless behind her, jaw slacked, paralysed from action at the sight of a half naked Clarke, ass exposed and inner thighs glistening. She spread her legs and wiggled her ass in unsubtle invitation.

“Babe, are you going to finish what you started?”

“But, lasagna,” Lexa sputtered.
“I change my mind. It can wait another ten minutes. I can’t,” she said and started to stroke herself for emphasis, sighing at the temporary relief of ache.

The next thing Clarke heard was the scrambling sound of Lexa’s trousers dropping to the floor and then felt a warmth behind her as Lexa’s hand swatted hers away.

“I got it from here.”

Her authoritative tone turned Clarke on even more.

Lexa palmed her ass first, likely admiring the view. Clarke sucked in a breath when she felt a finger run the length of her and swipe through her folds. Lexa probed gently, coating herself in Clarke’s slick, her strokes measured and with only enough pressure to make Clarke’s toes curl and increase her ache but not alleviate it. She nearly wanted to scream—not the right kind—when Lexa made several teasing dips into her entrance but went no further.

She reached behind and grasped Lexa’s wrist, informing her over her shoulder of the agenda and timetable, “As nice as this feels, I need fast and hard, Lex. I’ve got things to bake.”

Lexa laughed.

Clarke moved Lexa’s hand in instructive, quick motions. She moaned at the better pace but before she could enjoy it, again, Lexa swatted her hand away, and frustratingly continued her slow exploration. Clarke could feel herself soaking from the protracted attentiveness, ready and needing to come any minute.

But before she could complain further about the unnecessary foreplay, with a hard squeeze of her ass as the only warning, Lexa entered her in one sudden motion all the way to the knuckle. She nearly came from the unexpected force. Lexa finally followed Clarke’s instructions in earnest, ardently picking up the pace and then increased the tempo of her strokes, adding a second finger.

It felt incredible with the way Lexa was pushing and curling while her other hand continued to palm her cheek.

Just as she was getting worked up, Lexa withdrew to Clarke’s consternation. But before Clarke could pout, she lightly kicked Clarke’s feet farther apart to have her spread wider. She wordlessly rolled Clarke’s shirt past her breasts, fingers grazing their sides. Guessing what Lexa might be up to, Clarke no longer minded the disruption, getting wetter at the quietly commanding actions, knowing it usually preceded something that would have her begging.

Lexa gave her breasts a soft squeeze, feeling their weight, and then left one hand in place to tweak and roll her nipples while the other moved to slowly trace a finger along her spine and over the curve of her ass and swipe through her swollen lips again to dip into her opening, causing Clarke to shiver and drip in anticipation.

“You’re beautiful, Clarke.”

“Lex,” Clarke whined, not appreciating in the moment how easily her girlfriend got distracted by her beauty. “Please.”

Lexa leaned over her back and positioned herself in such a way that she could grind against her ass to relieve her own arousal while still able to reach around front and tend to Clarke’s. The tracing finger relocated to between her thighs, gently brushing and circling over her mound before resting near her entrance. A pregnant pause and then Clarke’s walls contracted around nothing when Lexa whispered in her ear, “Hold tight, love,” and repeated Clarke’s earlier command as a question, “fast
and hard, right?”.

Without preamble and not waiting for the confirmation, she swiftly re-entered Clarke with two fingers at once, pushing air out of both their lungs at the tightening of Clarke’s muscles eager to receive them. Given the build-up, there was absolutely no resistance.

“Fuck, Lex,” Clarke grunted out as Lexa started thrusting at what felt like superhuman speed. Feeling her walls wrap around Lexa’s fingers, doing their best to keep them in despite their slide from how wet she was, her clit throbbed jealously, only catching intermittent contact.

Lexa panted as she pumped in and out of Clarke while sliding wetness against her ass. “God, Clarke. You feel amazing.”

Despite her intense focus on giving Clarke what she wanted, Lexa’s need was evident in the way she rocked searchingly into her ass. She kneaded Clarke’s breast, rolling and pinching her nipple in gratitude every time Clarke pushed back against her to help with the grinding.

They mewled and moaned around the slick of skin, the sounds a primal pitch of want from the fast and hard chase of their orgasms. It had none of the slowness of lovemaking where they’d take their time to revere bodies and draw out kisses. It was quick and dirty sex that had Lexa driving into her, panting out her efforts in hot breaths against her neck, in sucks of her throat, in bites of her shoulder, in pulls of her nipples. In the way she’d lick into Clarke’s mouth, hot and heavy and full of bad intent, how her tongue would press and push as if making up for what her fingers couldn’t do more.

“Is this what you want?” Lexa asked, licking into the shell of her ear, the question too innocent for how she was moving her fingers in punishing patterns of advance and retreat. Clarke thought she might have gasped out a ‘yes’ but couldn’t be sure, air and coherence compromised by the feeling of Lexa’s hardened clit rubbing against her, lips spreading stickiness across the expanse of damp skin. When she wasn’t dizzyingly overwhelmed by their combined heady scent and the heat of Lexa’s draped form over her, she remembered to be helpful and squeeze her glutes to give Lexa the necessary resistance.

It was a mad race to get each other off. Yet, Lexa was still as soft as ever, kissing the nape of her neck with tenderness between fevered strokes. Even when Clarke begged for more, “Baby, a third, please,” Lexa had complied, pushing in an additional finger, while affectionately kissing her temple to soothe her need. She considerately swept a piece of sweaty hair away from her forehead, the gesture so intimate relative to the pummelling Clarke was taking.

“Fuck, you’re so wet, Clarke,” Lexa exhaled her awe in Clarke’s ear. “Soaked. I can’t believe you still get this wet for me. I can come from just the feel of you around my fingers.”

Clarke wasn’t sure if Lexa knew her earnestness was inadvertent dirty talk that did things to her. Lexa wasn’t much of a talker in or out of bed so her sudden foray into narration pushed Clarke closer to the edge. It was the breathlessly exalted whisper of, “God, I wish I could live inside of you,” mixed with the blistering pace of fingers pounding into her and feeling full with Lexa that she finally came, loudly free falling.

But Lexa gave her no time to recover from her high.

A second orgasm came on its heel when Lexa continued to rub herself with abandon against her ass, bucking into her as if she was wearing a strap-on, her desire dripping down the back of Clarke’s thigh. It felt like Lexa was trying to fuck her into the couch.

Lexa kept her fingers rested inside, adding a fourth but not moving just cupping, as her focus shifted
to the hand that was palming and fondling and switching between Clarke’s breasts, matching the intensity of groping to the rhythm of her frantic thrusts. Every time Lexa would push into her ass, grunting and moaning, her breast was squeezed harder and she’d somehow feel Lexa’s fingers penetrate deeper, having the same reach and fullness of a dildo. The pressure on her nipples and between her thighs scaled intoxicating heights while straddling the line between pleasure and pain.

All Clarke could do was hold on and claw at the couch cushions as Lexa mercilessly rode her, feeling her arousal peaking again and her thighs clenching once more. After a particularly stimulating combo of thrust–palm–and–squeeze, Lexa intuitively moved her thumb, furiously rubbing her swollen bud until she gushed into Lexa’s hand, screaming her name. Unable to distinguish her heavy pants from Lexa’s, Clarke was surprised she hadn’t come with her and was still pursuing her first orgasm.

“Fuck, baby. I’m so close. I just need …”

Hearing the edge of frustration and desperation in Lexa’s voice, Clarke realised that with how wet and slippery her ass had become from Lexa’s fluids, the lack of adequate friction was keeping her girlfriend’s orgasm just out of reach.

Without a second thought, and in one surprisingly swift move, she turned them around, pushed Lexa against the back of the couch, and dropped to her knees, burying her face between Lexa’s thighs. Lexa’s wail of disappointment at losing contact turned into a wail of high-pitch pleasure when Clarke’s lips wrapped around her lower ones. She sucked on them greedily as Lexa’s hands reflexively sunk into her hair in encouragement and to keep herself standing. Clarke could see the flex of forearms straining not to hold her face and ride it.

Clarke was more than happy to do the work. She took the lips into her mouth and gathered the fluid on her tongue to lave a broad stroke from the base to the top of Lexa’s opening to then flick and suck on her engorged clit. She repeated the sweeping motion several times, feeling the grip of her head tightening until Lexa’s moans became broken pleas of, inside, please, inside. Clarke pushed her tongue in, then out, then in again, each thrust taking on renewed urgency matching the cries of Lexa’s fucks.

Her hands moved to palm Lexa’s generous ass as her jaw worked fervently to draw out as much pleasure as possible. The heady taste of Lexa on her tongue, her sweet musky scent, was rewarding incentive to push as far in and collect as much wetness as she could. Lexa would arch into Clarke’s mouth each time her tongue reached deeper than expected. Clarke lived for the whimpers emitted whenever she’d withdraw to the tip, give a soft kitten lick of her slit then her outer lips before plunging back in without warning, taking her cue from Lexa.

In pace and intensity, she tried to return the favour of what Lexa had given her minutes ago, stiffening her tongue where necessary and curling and flicking where desired.

By the fistfuls of hair and the soaked state of her chin, her efforts were beyond appreciated. Clarke knew that Lexa was more than close.

To help accelerate the process, she moved one hand out front and pulled back Lexa’s folds to gently rub the side of her lips with spread fingers while her tongue quickened its thrusting, knowing the asynchronous massage was typically Lexa’s undoing.

Hearing the hoarse chants of her name reignited her need. Clarke rubbed her thighs together, but when that wasn’t enough to ease the throbbing, she fingered herself in mirrored pumps with her probing tongue.
Lexa opened her eyes and looked down, nearly fainting at the sight of Clarke sucking on her clit, pupils overblown with only a trace of blue left, her cheeks red, shirt bunched up over her breasts that were bouncing uncontrolled from her left hand’s fevered movements. She slammed her eyes shut when Clarke’s tongue re-entered.

Then with several purposeful swipes of thumb across Lexa’s clit, followed by an extra firm press and a drawn-out pinch, their apartment erupted into a deafening silence just before Lexa climaxed, expelling out a barely audible Clarke. Broken cries filled the air after. The way her walls sucked in and trapped Clarke’s tongue for a suspended second then released and spilled Lexa all over her chin triggered Clarke’s third orgasm.

“Holy shit. That was incredible.”

Lexa slumped against the couch.

Clarke sat back on her calves and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She was going to say something smug but when she looked up to find one of the most beautiful sights she’d ever seen all her words left her. A flushed Lexa, wearing only her white button-down, bottom-half bare with the peek of a swollen pink bud protruding out of its hood and a wet trail down her inner thigh, holding herself up on noodle legs while her head was tipped back and eyes closed in reverent prayer. With her hair loose out of its bun and her chest prettily rising and falling, Clarke would be pressed to find a more stunning image.

Then Lexa opened her eyes and gave Clarke the softest look. She was wrong. Clarke couldn’t see the forest for the trees with how much green came into her field of vision, her pupils no longer dilated. Before she had the chance to get lost in its verdant spell, however, rose lips jutted out in a pout.

“I was supposed to ravish you,” Lexa complained as she stretched a hand out to pull Clarke to her feet, then circled her arms around her waist.

“Well, it serves you right for derailing our dinner plans.” Clarke smiled smugly playing with the collar of her shirt.

“I thought we’d start off with appetiser.”

Lexa leaned forward and kissed her, slowly and void of the frenetic hyperactivity of earlier. But when Clarke felt a tongue press against her lips, she immediately pulled back.

“Nuh-uh,” she said, putting a finger to Lexa’s lips, stoping any of their itinerant plans, “not this time, buddy.”

She stepped out of Lexa’s hold and laughed when the pout returned.

“We’re never going to get to the main course at this rate. I refuse to let these,” she pointed in the general direction of the pillow lips, “further prevent us from tending to other base needs.”

—

“Mmm, I see you already started on the Riesling,” Lexa said as she licked Clarke’s bottom lip for a second-hand taste of the white wine. Clarke sighed into the compromise, allowing the affection as long as the kissing stayed PG.

They returned to the kitchen after their sex interlude, Clarke eager to get dinner back on track. They’d pulled their underwear back on but decided to forgo pants. She ignored Lexa’s
recommendation to cook topless as well. (“You’re not deep-frying anything, it’s perfectly safe, Clarke.”)

Lexa had taken up a new position sitting on the countertop, in a bid at self-control to keep things innocent this time. Though she was no less in Clarke’s way, periodically leaning forward in silent ask for a kiss. Lexa took another sip from her glass while Clarke continued her seasoning. Seeing as Clarke was only mildly recovered from their impassioned activity, still lightly panting and hands shaky, there was a good chance the lasagna will turn out too salty.

“I take it the meeting went well?” Clarke asked after her heart rate returned somewhat to normal.

“I think so,” Lexa said, and then muttered more to herself, after a second sip, “Definitely not as good from the glass.”

“I wasn’t expecting you back for another half hour at least.”

She reached around Lexa for the rosemary. On days when Lexa was extra affectionate and happy, Clarke had to recalibrate her movements around the kitchen to accommodate the extra presence that took up precious counter real estate. She smiled to herself at the domestic routine, not minding at all the loss of space for the gain of Lexa.

“Fast Uber and traffic was light,” Lexa explained, pausing to swipe a finger through the leftover sauce and taste-testing it.

“I hope that was with your other hand,” Clarke scolded and looked at her judging.

“Wanna find out?” Lexa challenged, waggling her eyebrows, and licking her finger deliberately slowly. “Mmm, yummy,” she concluded protracting the word. At Clarke’s fake look of disgust, they both laughed before she continued with her report, “The meeting was good. It was down to another candidate but they seemed to like my portfolio.”

“Of course.”

“I think I got it,” Lexa breathed.

It took a second for Clarke to register the good news.

“Yeah?!” She exclaimed when the realisation dawned, dusting her hands, and launching herself into Lexa, who instinctively opened her legs to receive the awkward bear hug. “That’s great, babe!”

“I should hear officially on Monday,” Lexa chuckled into the energetic embrace, hooking her legs by the ankle around Clarke’s bum.

“My fancy architect.”

It was Clarke’s turn to assail the brunette. She raised on her toes and peppered her girlfriend with congratulatory kisses.

“It’s just a summer internship, Clarke.”

“Yeah, but you beat out how many applicants? I know how competitive these graduate placements can get. Plus, every architect started somewhere. When you win your Pulitzer—”

“Pritzker,” Lexa corrected without skipping a beat.

“Pritzker, you’ll remember this day as when it all began.”
“Yeah, I just wish my mom …”

“I know,” Clarke soothed, picking up the trail of thought when Lexa went quiet. “She would have been so proud of you. I’m so proud of you. We’ll celebrate, and drink a glass on her behalf.”

“Is that what all this is about?”

Lexa gestured to the stoneware next to her which was ready to be baked. That reminded Clarke of her interrupted task. She ignored the question for now, stepping out of Lexa’s embrace to put the lasagna into the oven.

After a quiet clearing of the counter, she returned to the comforting arms and pretended to remove some invisible lint on the sleeve of the now-wrinkled oxford shirt, avoiding the discerning gaze of her girlfriend who was still waiting on an answer.

“I had extra tomatoes lying around,” Clarke shrugged, downplaying her thoughtfulness to mark the occasion of Lexa following in her mom’s steps with an over-indulgence in the meaningful dish.

The spinach and ricotta lasagna with homemade meat sauce was a classic recipe of Alexandria Senior, one that her widower and daughters revered greatly. After finding the hand scribblings in one of her mother’s old cookbooks a few years back, Clarke had adapted the dish and reintroduced it to the Woods palate. Knowing she couldn’t replicate it exactly, they had appreciated her take with an infusion of sage and the substitution of Italian sausage for chorizo. It would become her go to dish for special occasions.

“Thank you,” Lexa said, her gaze full of affection. “I love you.”

“Me too.”

Lexa hopped down from the counter so that they were more levelled to kiss Clarke properly. Clarke melted into the kiss. It was gentle and slow, yet somehow retaining the same passion as earlier. Lexa wanted to live inside of her but she wanted to live inside these small moments.

“Go shower,” Clarke instructed in an effort to deflect after breaking the kiss, patting her hand on Lexa’s chest, “we can continue watching Love, Actually from last night while it bakes. Should be done in forty-five minutes.”

“Ok,” was all Clarke heard before she felt her feet suddenly lifting off the ground. She yelped her surprise but nonetheless instinctually wrapped her legs around Lexa’s waist and looped arms around her neck as Lexa’s hands came to cradle under her ass. “Let’s go make love for forty-five minutes in the shower.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Weird, that’s what I heard,” Lexa noted, turning and leading them out of the kitchen.

Clarke would protest her miscomprehension skills but Lexa’s option sounded like a much better use of their waiting time than cursing Snape for making Emma Thompson cry. Especially considering she was still sticky and wanting, and the feel of Lexa’s fingers nearing the continuing-to-throb area didn’t help.

“Haven’t you had enough?”

“Never,” Lexa replied, squeezing her butt and rolling Clarke against her abs, causing Clarke to blush when the patch of her leftover wetness painted over the exposed part where Lexa’s shirt was lifted.
“And apparently, neither have you.”

Clarke scowled at her but pressed herself harder against the taut muscles anyway. *Never enough*, she thought but refused to admit aloud, not wanting to further inflate that already huge ego.

“Shit, Clarke,” Lexa exaggeratedly panted out steps away from their bedroom. “Have you been eating pasta without me again?” She playfully accused as she adjusted to shift Clarke’s weight more evenly in her arms.

“You know what, I think that lasagna only serves one.”

“No, no, *you* misheard me this time,” Lexa immediately retreated, “I asked, when did you get so much more beautiful without me noticing?”

“Fine, maybe I’ll give you a bite.”

Clarke laughed fully when Lexa’s miscomprehension skills returned, feeling a hot mouth gnaw at her neck.

“Good, I’m famished.”

The lasagna turned out only slightly burnt, and a little salty.

*****

Clarke’s whole body flushes crimson at the memory. She’s relieved that everyone is too busy eating to notice it. Though maybe not, as she catches Lexa’s eyes, and for a fleeting moment, thought she saw her gaze flash to the couch.

The lasagna gets devoured in record time, to Clarke’s astonishment. The pizzas are thankfully handled with a bit more grace once everyone realised they’d be at risk of a carb coma if they kept going at the pace they were.

Conversation flows easily among the old friends. Between the din of forks scrapping and glasses clinking, there’s teasing and taunting, a comfortable back and forth only possible among those who’ve known each other over decades.

The group is in the middle of enjoying another one of Lincoln and Octavia’s stories about their hectic life as first responders and first-time parents, when Lexa interrupts them and laughs.

“Wait, one *g* wasn’t enough?” She asks incredulous.

Lincoln nods, “But we spell it with a *y* instead of an *i*.”

“I can’t believe you named your son after a Disney cartoon animal. I thought Tye was short for Titus or something.”

“As much as Titus Andromedon is my spirit animal, no. Tigger was my favourite, and his kindness and optimism reminded me of Linc. His round head definitely.” Octavia affectionately rubs the back of Lincoln’s head.

“More like, Tigger’s a reckless trouble-maker, which is all you, babe,” Lincoln supplies, without bite.
Octavia shrugs. “Yeah well, with the amount of moving and kicking I had to endure from your son for nine months, it seemed fitting.”

“He certainly lives up to his name. He’s one bouncy child. After the last time we babysat Anya refuses to be left alone in the same room with him,” Raven says.

She placatingly kisses her wife’s cheek as she scowls, first at her for the comment, and then at the parents for the offence of giving birth to such an overactive, restless child.

“I didn’t think it was possible for someone to have more energy than you, Blake. I was wrong.”

“He is a very happy kid,” Clarke affirms. “Though, it’s a good thing you didn’t marry one of the Woods, O. He’d have to answer a lot of questions about his golf swing on the first day of school.”

They all pause to visualise Octavia being with either Lexa or Anya. Everyone shudders.

“I think Tygger Blake-Forester has a nicer ring to it,” Octavia says and turns to sweetly kiss Lincoln.

“I’m a fan. I think it’s a great name,” Lincoln asserts.

“I disagree. I think we’ve got the better hyphen game going,” Raven disputes, her competitive spirit rearing for no reason. “Your four-syllables is a mouthful for a kindergartener. Now, Reyes-Woods. Sharp. Crisp. Distinguished,” she says with a terrible English accent while adjusting an invisible bow tie.

“Fuck off,” Octavia dismisses, laughing, “I’m not raising a butler.”

Clarke and Lexa remain quiet. At least for Clarke, she tries not to think of her English class notebooks filled with heart borders drawn around variations of their combined names. She had spent an entire period contemplating the grammatical and phonetic merits of a hyphen.

*Clarke Woods.*
*Clarke Griffin-Woods.*
*Lexa Griffin-Woods.*
*Lexa Griffin.*

Lexa looks thoughtful and gives her a gentle smile, then turns her attention back to the fledgling parents.

“I’d love to get to know the little gentleman more. I only got to meet him briefly last we met, O. I wouldn’t mind filling in the next time you need someone to watch.”

Octavia raises her eyebrow at Lexa’s offer, “You sure? Careful what you wish for.”

“What better way to spend my off hours than with a mini Lincoln. Maybe he’ll have better taste in basketball teams,” Lexa says, grinning.

Lincoln narrows his eyes at her.

Even though it’s not directed her way, the answering smile on Lexa’s face has reignited the fluttering in Clarke’s stomach. Their time with Aden and the Trikru Warriors gave her an insight to what Lexa might be like as a doting parent. Had things turned out differently, this conversation could well be about them trying to pawn their progeny off to their friends for a date night.

“Still in need of a viewing partner on Game Night, I see,” Raven notes.
Lexa nods, then looks directly at Clarke while making her next comment, “Yup, the one I had refused to stay in the room if anything resembling a circle shape started moving on the screen.”

“Do you know how *boring* it is to watch baseball on TV? The ball is the size of a speck,” Clarke protested.

“What about basketball?” Lincoln asks.

“Too fast.”

“Soccer?” Octavia throws in.

“Too slow.”

“Football?”

“Too violent.”

“Tennis?”

Clarke scrunches her nose trying to remember the particular sport. “Too many rules.”

“Hockey?”

“Which one is that again?”

“On ice, with sticks and a puck,” Lexa clarifies with an endearing smile.

“Hmm, I don’t know that one.” Her furrowed brows earn chuckles.

“Clarke, we went to a Rangers game once,” Lexa reminds her but Clarke’s confusion only deepens, vaguely remembering sitting somewhere cold and falling asleep against a chest while an arm wrapped around her shoulder. She recalled the distant sounds of banging against boards and enthusiastic shouting but nothing much outside the warm breaths hitting the top of her hair.

“Yeah, that was a good nap,” Clarke says, her face reddened. “It doesn’t matter anyway, I doubt Tye will let you watch anything that doesn’t involve a sinking ship. You’ll need to brush up on your Celine Dion classics.”

The table laughs at Clarke’s joke, while Lexa gives her an inquisitive look.

“Why’s that?” She asks, amused by the odd musical requirement and seemingly not minding being out of the loop.

Never one to miss an opening, Raven suggests, “Maybe Clarke can clue you in if you guys babysit together. Better start practicing your vocals.”

Surprisingly, Lexa doesn’t say no to the joint assignment. Instead, she just turns to the parents to say, “I’m not sure you’d want to subject your son to my singing so early in life,” before tipping her glass towards Clarke, “I think I’ll leave the serenading to you.”

Clarke knew she should’ve went with the rosé instead of the riesling, that way she’d have something to hide her almost-permanent blush behind right now. It’s their friends turn to be the ones on the outside of the joke, giving each other confused looks, clueless to Lexa’s private reference.

For Clarke, images immediately come to mind of a drowsy Lexa with her head in Clarke’s lap as she
fingers her hair and softly sings her to sleep. On the train or on their couch or in their bed, the usual
grit of her husky voice would give way to a smooth timbre and hushed tones that would easily
transport Lexa to dreamland. A restless night could always be assuaged in the early hours when
Clarke blindly adjusted their bodies in increments until they were spooning and sing her reassurances
in Lexa’s ear, letting the murmured melodies carry them both back to sleep.

Weekend naps were bookended by Clarke’s clear, soothing voice wafting through their apartment,
when it wasn’t Cooke or Redding. She had stopped mid-song once thinking Lexa had been lulled
under and no longer in need of the accompaniment. But when she went to tuck the blanket tighter
around her love and then leave her sleeping on the couch, Lexa gently begged Clarke, without
opening her eyes, “Don’t leave, don’t stop.”

Clarke hasn’t sung any ballads in awhile. She gives Lexa a significant look. They share a secret,
intimate smile. No hiding this time when both their gazes shift to the couch.

—

“So, Lexa. How does it feel to be thir—” Raven’s question abruptly gets cut off by a kick to her
shin. “Ow!” She glares at Clarke, before finishing her sentence, “I was going to say thirsty.”

Lexa looks between them confused, her eyes resting a little longer on Clarke, seeking reassurance
maybe.

“You’ll have to excuse her, the last few years MIT cheapened out on the ventilation in their
buildings,” Clarke says, with a twirl of her index finger near her temple, and receives an answering
kick to her shin. She doesn’t want Raven ruining the surprise just yet.

“Thank you for your concern about my hydration levels, Raven, but I’m fine,” Lexa says to Raven
and then smiles at Clarke before turning back to resume her chat with Lincoln.

“My bad. I asked the wrong person about their thirst level.” Raven makes an exaggerated gesture to
grab the wine bottle from the centre of the table and refill Clarke’s glass. “Now you, you look like
you need a top up.”

Clarke eyes her faux manners menacingly and ignores the scoff and snicker from Octavia and Anya,
who had paused their debate about the best Law & Order episode to give Raven’s punchline its due.
She’s glad at least Lexa had already started talking to Lincoln about the Knicks or the Mets or
whichever of the more than ten professional sports teams in New York that Clarke hadn’t bothered to
learn their names.

She can understand it’s been a challenge for Raven’s self-control not to tease with all the stolen
glances she’s thrown Lexa’s way throughout the meal. Lexa doesn’t help the situation herself by
sneaking a few smiles at Clarke when she thinks no one is looking.

It’s surreal to have Lexa seated at their dining table again, Clarke can’t help but want to soak up the
sight as much as the five layers of sauce and cheese. The buzz of the alcohol flows through her veins
as does the sound of merriment around the table. With Lexa’s laughter in the mix, and the joy of
rediscovering how well they all work as a set of six again, it feels like the alternative present or the
near future that she’s dreamt of is within Clarke’s grasp.

—

Sometime after the last of the pizza is polished off, Clarke disappears into the kitchen unnoticed
while Lexa’s engaged in a conversation with Octavia about joining in on her next Krav Maga class.
Ten minutes later, she walks back in, unseen by Lexa whose back is turned to her. At her nod to Raven, who suddenly leaves the table mid-sentence abandoning her conversation with Lincoln and Anya, the apartment darkens and is washed in an orange glow. Confused by the sudden smiles of their friends and the abrupt change in lighting, Lexa turns her head to find the source of illumination coming from the plate that Clarke’s carefully carrying towards the birthday girl.

Her eyes immediately glass over seeing the flickering candles from the six cupcakes and hearing the chorus singing of Happy Birthday as Clarke settles the plate in front of her.

“Guys …” is all Lexa manages to breathe out pass her surprise.

Clarke joins in on the singing, and her friends let her carry out the harmony of the last refrain. When the song ends, Lexa takes Clarke’s hand and squeezes it, looking up at her with such a deep well of emotion Clarke feels a prickling sensation at the corner of her own eyes.

“You didn’t have to,” Lexa whispers.

It must be the buzz of alcohol that prompts Clarke’s next action. She bends down to place a gentle kiss on Lexa’s cheek, pressing her lips against the soft skin, before she whispers, “Happy birthday, Lexa.”

It feels like a dream, her lips near Lexa’s again, that these words are said only a few breaths away from their recipient. The butterflies have completely migrated from her stomach to flap their presence in her chest and flame the fire in her heart. She blinks away the moisture in her eyes.

Clarke’s breath catches when she goes to pull back and feels a hand cup her neck to hold her there and keep the contact a little longer. There’s a perceptible returned press of lips against her cheek that takes a mountain of effort to keep her knees from buckling at the unexpected but deeply affecting touch. Clarke can barely make out the shakily uttered, Thank you, pass the rush of her quickened pulse.

Several clearing of throats break them out of their haze. They both release a wet chuckle when Anya says, “don’t expect a birthday greeting like that from me.”

“Thanks guys,” Lexa says waving off her sister and giving each of the friends a meaningful look.

She takes a measured breath and shifts her gaze to the customised birthday cake. Clarke feels another squeeze of her hand as Lexa closes her eyes and makes a birthday wish.

Against her heart’s protest, Clarke takes her hand back when Lexa opens her eyes again. She places the special chocolate hazelnut cupcake, with extra shavings, in front of her, earning a wide beaming smile. She then makes her rounds to distribute the rest, a different cupcake to suit each individual.

When Clarke settles back into her seat again, she can’t help the smile on her face thinking of the baker’s bright eyes when she had shyly asked for two of the chocolate hazelnuts. And when she went to pay for her half dozen, he unsolicitedly offered her an out-of-thin-air BOGOF discount, that had her walking away with a full dozen. (“Un acheté, un offert!”)

As she forks a decadent morsel into her mouth, she finds Lexa smiling at her from across the table and laughs seeing only crumbs left on her plate, unsurprised by the startling speed with which she consumed it. But Clarke takes her time with her own cupcake, wanting to savour the moment until the very last grain of brown sugar.
The rest of the evening goes by like old hat. After the desserts are inhaled, they clear the room for some vintage drinking fun.

An alcoholic version of Snakes and Ladders. (Every time someone lands on a snake they are doubly punished and forced to take a swig of Raven’s mysterious concoction.)

It’s the only game where no one has an unfair advantage. Pictionary is off the table because of Clarke and Lexa’s drawing abilities, as is cards or anything math related to prevent Raven from counting. Monopoly is too intense for how competitive Octavia would get, much to pacifist Lincoln’s consternation, especially when it pits her against Anya’s expertise in property law. Charades is too awkward when one of the three pairs is a non-couple (even if in the past Clarke and Lexa easily obliterated everyone with their eerie telepathic connection).

Better to leave it to chance with the roll of dice.

Perhaps it is only a function of bad luck and landing on a few too many snakes but Clarke doesn’t miss Lexa inching closer to her on the couch as the night wears on. Between ladder climbs, she summons up her own liquid courage to look more freely at Lexa and occasionally place a hand on her knee while they chat.

It makes her heart swell with a good ache for once. An evening of bright laughter without any of the heaviness or wallowing that have weighed down the walls of her apartment for too long. Instead they get to witness clear eyes and full hearts.

“Ugh, what the hell is even in this?” Lexa groans after another bad roll. “MIT should revoke your lab privileges. Do they know that their multi-million dollar equipment is being used for distilling the Raven Reyes Special?”

“Not my fault you’re not good with your hands.”

“I think Clarke would beg to differ.”

Clarke releases her own groan at Octavia immediately picking up what Raven dropped as if they had pre-planned the coordinated attack. Her suspicions aren’t allayed when they go to clumsily high five each other, their tipsiness fuelling the missed contact.

“Please refrain from any mentions of my sister’s hands and Clarke begging in the same sentence.”

Even quiet Lincoln lets out a chuckle at Anya’s quip.

Clarke is sure she looks like a tomato by now. She wants to reach across the coffee table to smack all of them for potentially scaring Lexa off but is stopped short of doing so when the brunette herself turns to give her a conspiratorial wink.

“I never heard any complaints.”

Seeing the mischievous smile again, the one that’s always been able to disarm her, Clarke abandons her chiding and can only join in on the good-natured fun.

“None.”

—

“Damnit.” Lexa lands on another snake.
“Lex, you don’t have to,” Clarke comes to her defence.

“‘Dems the rules.”

“That you just made up, Raven,” she glares at her friend.

“Kiss, Marry, or Punch,” Octavia sing-songs the amended version of the game. “You can have another go of the Reyes Special or give your liver a break and answer the question. Who in this room would you pick? And Anya is excluded from the first two options because, eww.”

“I think I know what Clarke would pick.”

Clarke does reach across this time and punches Raven in the upper arm. “There, now you don’t have to guess,” she says, feeling smug satisfaction. Though, she does silently curse the fit girl for the ache of her hand.

“Not the choice I had in mind,” Raven mutters as she rubs her arm.

“The tougher question is,” Octavia taps her chin in pseudo-serious contemplation, “would Lexa want to punch Clarke?”

“Guys, c’mon.” Clarke tries to regain control of the situation, knowing they’d risk going down a dangerous path. “This game is so stupid. Raven, you’re married, and Octavia, you’re practically married,” she chastises, pointing a finger at each of them. “This isn’t fun if we know who you’d pick to kiss and marry.”

“Yeah, Rey, you’re so heteronormative,” Octavia erroneously backs her, picking up on the wrong point of Clarke’s scolding.

“Excuse you. There’s nothing hetero or normal about me,” Raven says in askance. “You, on the other hand are like the edgy nuclear family, with your beautiful bi-racial child and two-storey brownstone, and … and your common-law enlightenment.” Raven makes sure to put air quotes around the marital status.

“Well I’m sure your children would be disgustingly pretty too if you and Anya were to procreate,” Octavia retorts as if it’s an insult.

Clarke looks up for reinforcement, her sigh not large enough to express her exasperation. Usually, she can count on Lincoln to keep the idiots in check but he has dozed off on the couch. Meanwhile Anya sits in silent amused judgement at the two friends’ descent into their alcohol-fuelled juvenile selves. Whenever Raven lands a salient point, she rubs her wife’s back in pride, but otherwise remains quiet.

Clarke realises then that Lexa has also gone quiet. She turns to find her playing with the label of her beer, her gaze distant.

“Hey, you ok?” Clarke asks gently, nudging her shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Lexa replies, a little too quickly. Clarke can see the strain in her attempted smile. Redirecting, Lexa nods towards Raven and Octavia bickering, “They haven’t changed much, have they?”

“Sorry about them. This is why we keep these gatherings indoors. They can’t be trusted in public.”

“It’s okay. They’re harmless,” Lexa brushes off, taking a swig of her beer. “It’s like watching koala
bears trying to out-hug each other.”

She’s quiet again for a few beats before turning to look at Clarke intently and says, “And the answer is no, I wouldn’t want to punch you.”

Although it’s a silly game and Clarke has never actually feared any physical harm from Lexa, she smiles her quiet gratitude. Lexa has been nothing but kindness and gentleness since they’ve reconnected, despite the hurt from the emotional gut-punch that Clarke had originally delivered.

Lexa doesn’t address the other two options but Clarke’s too caught up in her thoughts to notice eyes flickering down to her lips.

She lightly knocks Lexa’s knee with her own and stipulates, “If you were going to punch me, just not in the face.”

“Of course not,” Lexa says, her smile fuller this time and with a hint of teasing, “it’s all you’ve got going for you.”

Clarke presses a hand to her chest. “You wound me, Woods.” She looks at the rest of their friends, who are now in veritable states of rolled over, the carbs likely catching up. “I think it’s safe to say. I’ve also got lasagna going for me.”

“That you do.”

—

Eventually the night draws to a close.

Lincoln and Octavia are the first to take their leave, needing to relieve the sitter. Anya and Raven soon follow suit. To her surprise, Lexa declines to leave with her sister and sister-in-law, offering her car to them and saying she’d catch an Uber later, opting to stay behind and help Clarke clean up.

As Lexa washes and Clarke dries, they chat about their work week, picking up on the conversation threads from their texts and calls. The scene is domestic, so ordinary that it’s all the more amazing to Clarke that it’s happening.

While Clarke typically commanded the kitchen, it was Lexa who would restore it to its spotless condition after she finished. Clarke enjoyed cooking (for Lexa), but did not enjoy the aftermath of wielding all the pots and pans and plates. Lexa would happily serve as their human dishwasher, appeasing her innate need for order.

It isn’t until she takes note of Lexa’s subconscious movements—the ease with which she opens and closes cupboards and drawers when she goes to put the dishes away, how she reaches for and finds the dishcloth without looking—that Clarke thinks of the question that’s been gnawing at her all night. She’s noticed Lexa taking a few stolen glances around the apartment during the meal and after but didn’t say anything. She hadn’t wanted to put her on the spot in the presence of their friends.

Now that they’re alone, Clarke can no longer contain her curiosity.

“Is it weird to be back?” She asks.

“Here?” At her nod, Lexa finishes putting away the last plate. She doesn’t answer right away, and walks to the island to lean her elbows on it as she looks around, surveying the open plan apartment. Clarke joins beside her, and gazes about as well, trying to imagine what Lexa’s seeing. It’d be a
heady experience if she had to look at their place through distant eyes, to work out what’s familiar or no longer. The only discernible difference she perceives from her everyday is the flickering glow by the window. The Christmas lights blink lazily, nearing the end of their night shift, and yawning their exhaustion from reflecting the mirth of earlier.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watches Lexa scan the room, her gaze searching but not landing on anything for long. The bookshelves, the designer floor lamp, the Danish teak sideboard and her dad’s record player that sits atop, Clarke’s doodles pinned on the walls next to a few black and white photographs of building details—all get cursory glances. Lexa’s eyes drop to the Stephen Powers print for an extended second before she releases a deep breath and turns to face Clarke.

“Honestly,” Lexa starts to say slowly, “it’s a lot to take in.” Clarke nods in understanding but then is confused by her next statement, said hesitantly and with a rueful expression. “I don’t know. I didn’t think I would ever be back here.”

Clarke can’t tell if she means the probability of her return, or her desirability, neither sounding positive. On the quirk of a brow for elaboration, the admission is followed quietly by, “I mean, I didn’t think you’d keep the apartment.”

Why wouldn’t I?

Clarke is even more confused. It’s their home, of course she had kept it. It would have broken her to part ways with the palimpsest of their life and their story, to walk away from the walls that witnessed their love mature, to let go of the ephemera still bearing visible traces of their shared history. It was already gut-wrenching to watch Lexa leave—to push Lexa to go—she wouldn’t have survived the complete devastation that abandoning their home would bring.

“Why not?”

“I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with me anymore.”

Although Clarke’s insides feel immediately knocked-out by the punch of Lexa’s presumption—far worse than had she made actual physical contact—it is Lexa who looks like she’s the one that has been struck. She looks away as her quiet words hang in the air, and despite the downturned gaze, Clarke can see pain and sorrow and vulnerability.

Is that what Lexa had thought all this time? Is that the truth that she had interpreted and carried with her to London? That Clarke didn’t want her? That she was unwanted? Clarke knows that their ending wasn’t one that Lexa deserved, one that cut deeply and irreparably broke their hearts, but she hadn’t realised Lexa had seen it as a rejection of her as a person. Clarke had ghosted herself out of their relationship, without any real explanation, but it wasn’t for lack of wanting Lexa.

“No, Lexa.” Clarke reaches for her arm to get her attention, but doesn’t expect for it to sting when Lexa minutely shrinks from the touch, still not meeting her gaze. She persists to ask anyway, “Is that what you really think?”

“You said you didn’t want this life anymore,” Lexa says after a beat, unable to keep the emotion from her words, her voice cracking as a hand gestures limply to the apartment. She finally looks at Clarke who feels gutted when wet eyes meet her. “And you didn’t want London.” A long pause as Lexa tries to temper down what must be deep hurt resurfacing. “How else was I to interpret it? I’m the common denominator of the two.”

“That’s not … I never …” Clarke stammers to respond, feeling her own throat tightening and eyes moistening.
“It’s not you, it’s me, seems so trite and vacuous, utterly offensive to their history, Clarke has the decency to not even consider using it as a defence.)

“And you never wrote,” Lexa says when Clarke doesn’t know how to finish her sentence. The sadness of her eyes, the defeat there, stabs at Clarke’s heart.

Clarke wants to tell her that she did write, that there are drawers full of letters and sketches of her, but that she never had the courage to send; that there were countless emails composed and still lay waiting in her drafts folder; that her hand hovered over her phone so many times to ask for Lexa’s forgiveness, to beg her to come home.

She is still mulling over her reply when Lexa delivers her next punch, “You never wrote back.”

Unshed tears are brimming in Lexa’s eyes but Clarke is too busy questioning whether she heard right to give them their due.

“What do you mean back?”

Lexa’s hazy gaze turns curious but she goes to elaborate anyways, her voice taking on a brittle edge.

“That first week in London, I was checking my old voicemails before I switched over to a UK number. That’s when I realised you had left a message, probably after I’d already boarded the plane. I guess I didn’t pay attention to the original miss call because it wasn’t a number I recognised.”

Clarke blanches knowing the exact voicemail Lexa is referencing, the one she had left using a stranger’s phone.

“It took me awhile to figure out what to feel hearing it, what to even say. When I felt ready, I tried calling back but I couldn’t reach you then.”

She feels the blood drain from her. That voicemail was what had prompted her resolve the next morning to institute her Lexa-free rule, that Raven had partially made technologically possible by removing all her Lexa-related content off of her phone and onto some cloud, at the same time blocking any mentions, emails and apparently international calls.

“Something happened to my phone,” she offers lamely.

Lexa dips her chin in acknowledgement and then continues.

“I tried to email once, but that bounced back too.”

Clarke is too ashamed to even bother lying about IT problems.

“Eventually, after my attempts weren’t getting through, thinking it was my usual bad luck with technology, I sent a letter. By then, it’d been about two and half months after I arrived in London. Several months since we’d last spoke.”

Clarke can’t contain her shock, her mind reels. She’ll kick herself later again for the stupidity of her media blackout and self-imposed Lexile, but for now, she can’t believe that there’s an unaccounted-for letter. She wouldn’t have missed it for the world if an envelope had arrived with Lexa’s neat penmanship.

“I never received it,” Clarke breathes out.

“Oh.”
Lexa looks stricken, her expression flickers for a moment with a profound longing as the tears threaten to spill over.

It boggles Clarke to think where they might be now if postal service disruption wasn’t a factor. But she can’t in good conscience displace blame for their non-existent communication on the mailman or postal errors, when she didn’t send her own letters, didn’t email, didn’t press the call button. She hadn’t done any of it, to save herself from wallowing and spiralling, from double-guessing her decision, but also to give Lexa her space, room to grieve their relationship, to be angry and hurt and sad. To hate Clarke for making the choice for the both of them.

“I guess when I heard your voicemail,” Lexa confesses, her voice has gotten so soft that Clarke strains to hear it, “I let myself hope. You had completely shut me out before I left for London. I thought the phone call meant something.” She pauses as if reprimanding herself for falsely, stupidly hoping. She’s shaking her head, and there’s a tiny tremor to her hand when she goes to tuck hair behind her ear. “I thought you needed time, and that you’d finally called because—”

Clarke subconsciously leans in, holding her breath waiting, but Lexa seems to think better of what she is going to say, changing her mind about disclosing what her expectations might have been or what she wanted the phone call to mean.

“Anyways, I guess it doesn’t matter now why you called,” Lexa concludes, mostly to herself. Clarke knows she doesn’t mean it but the jabs keep coming, and her heart and lungs feel a little worse for wear with each insight into Lexa’s perspective. “When you didn’t answer my calls or my letter, I finally accepted that there was truly nothing left. That you had moved on, or even moved. I didn’t think you'd stay in the apartment if you wanted nothing to do with me.”

Clarke feels her heart splinter when Lexa stumbles over the word me, her voice breaking despite her best effort to steady it. She hurries to reassure Lexa, shaking her head vehemently, “That wasn’t the case. I didn’t—I hadn’t—”

But Clarke fumbles her sentences, unsure how to finish them. It’s Lexa’s turn to look at her expectantly but there are words and paragraphs and pages of regret stuck in her throat.

The air has become stifling and this is the setback that Clarke had feared. Though Clarke feels wholly unprepared in the moment to give Lexa the comfort she seeks, the truths she deserves, she is not ready to give up so easily this time, unwilling to undo all the progress of the last few months. Not when Lexa is still standing in front of her, wounded and trying to hold herself together, yet open and waiting and wanting.

So, she takes a deep breath, staring into pools of green that look adrift, and then says as sincerely as she can with as much conviction as she has of what she is sure of, “I would have written back.”

Lexa smiles weakly, giving a small nod, before turning her head to blink her tears away. Clarke also takes the opportunity to wipe her own. It’s a labour for both to pull in air as they try to pull themselves together.

As they compose themselves, she thinks about the missing letter, about the text that will remain unread, and wonders what it would have changed, how she would’ve responded. She thinks she would’ve been overjoyed even if it was a post-it note delivered by a carrier pigeon, as long as Lexa’s message reached her.

Clarke didn’t have the courage then, but she musters some up now to take Lexa’s hands in hers, entangling their fingers. She’s relieved there’s no rebuke this time.
Her breath catches and her stomach swoops seeing hazy green eyes reflect back at her, like blades of grass craning for sunlight past the heavy dew of a misty morning.

“I’m glad you came,” she whispers, “that you’re here tonight.”

Lexa looks at her, a delicate expression, fragile and searching. Clarke can see there are unsaid things and unasked questions on the tip of her tongue that dare not voice themselves yet. Instead, Lexa gives her a smile, tiny but genuine, almost reaching still wet eyes.

“Me too.”

“Maybe when we’re both ready, you can tell me what you wrote in the letter. And I’ll tell you what I would have written back.”

“Someday. I’d like that.”

Clarke doesn’t realise she’s still holding Lexa’s hand until she feels a small tug, and then arms encircling her. She doesn’t hesitate to settle into the much needed hug, especially when it’s initiated by Lexa.

Unsteady breaths hit her neck as their chests meet. The body contact is soothing to their injured souls. She hopes Lexa can feel her remorse seep through her pores.

Lexa must, because the next thing Clarke feels is Lexa’s chin resting on her shoulder, and a hand on the small of her back pressing more firmly, drawing her nearer. They stay still for a pocket of time. With each passing second, a bit of their shared pain chips away. Clarke knows that there is so much she still has to answer for, answers she owes Lexa, but in the moment, this feels enough. There’s reassurance in the small passes of their breaths—in the warmth and intimacy of their embrace—that somehow they’ll be okay.

The apartment has gone quiet save the syncopated rhythm of their heartbeats trying to adjust to an unknown but unbroken measure. If she listens closely enough though, Clarke can swear she hears Otis Redding singing, doing his part to make their hurt less palpable.

When they part, Lexa looks out the window to see the flurries have returned and in fact falling very heavily.

“I better get going, in case that snowstorm actually does pick up,” Lexa says with a scratch to her voice.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Clarke reluctantly agrees, not wanting their time to end but moving nonetheless to accompany Lexa to get her coat.

But before they’ve taken more than two steps towards the doorway, Clarke suddenly remembers what’s in her closet. She stops Lexa mid-stride by the arm, leaving her in the kitchen as she scrambles towards the bedroom.

“Wait! I’ve got something for you. Let me just grab it.”

—

Clarke is currently on her tippy toes angling for a box from the upper left topshelf of her closet. Too short to reach, her overcompensating jump causes her hands to unwittingly tip over a nearby cardboard box.
“Shit!”

She lets out something between a yelp and a scream as an avalanche of fuzz comes tumbling down. She reflexively ducks her head even though she knows the contents aren’t anything that would cause injury.

“Clarke?”

Lexa asks alarmed, running in to check on the racket.

“Are you ok? What happ—” Lexa starts to ask but then her concern morphs into confusion.

This is not how Clarke imagines Lexa setting foot into their bedroom again, that her first sight would be of Clarke bowled over on the floor surrounded by spun wool. Pooled at her feet, she estimates are upwards of twenty, maybe even thirty, balls of yarn of different sizes and colours. A few have rolled out in Lexa’s direction near the door.

“I … uh …”

Lexa picks up a ball in one hand, eyeing it suspiciously as though it were a grenade and not a grandmother’s favourite pastime.

“What is this?” She asks dumbstruck.

Clarke is sheepish to provide a non-weird answer, a light blush colouring her neck. “A really soft baseball?”

When Lexa predictably doesn’t take the bait, Clarke realises there’s no way getting around it. She bites the bullet to explain. “You know how some people eat when they’re stressed? Stress eaters?”

Lexa just stares at her, not sure where Clarke aims to land with this line of inquiry, but nods her head anyways.

“Well, um, I stress knit.”

*Crickets.*

“I’m a stress knitter.”

Clarke sighs, rises to her feet and reaches into the back of the closet for a different cardboard box, the one she’d originally intended to grab. She’s on her tippy toes again, angling for the box that’s now one third off the shelf, her shirt rising to reveal a peek of smooth skin.

In the past when Lexa would come across Clarke struggling with a height-related task, without prompt, she would grab whatever treasure for her, the extra three inches making all the difference. (Often the case, it would be gingersnap biscuits that Clarke had stowed away in a fit of self-restraint.) Lexa would receive a grateful peck on the cheek for her chivalry, that’d be acknowledged with the squeeze of Clarke’s hand, then both would continue on their separate ways, the entire exchange a perfectly sequenced event lasting no more than ten seconds.

Too absorbed in her task, Clarke doesn’t realise that Lexa had quietly approached her from behind. She startles at the feel of a hand on the small of her back, and the sight of an outstretched arm in her peripheral vision. Her breath hitches at how close Lexa is suddenly, and how warm her hand feels.

“Here, let me,” Lexa offers, and easily retrieves the box for her. If she’s surprised by its weight, she
doesn’t say as she hands it over to Clarke.

“Thanks,” Clarke says, bashful and still recovering from the heat of the handprint.

She sets the box down on the ground, sits cross-legged next to it and then pulls out knitted sweater after knitted sweater. A couple of scarves fall out with them.

Lexa lowers herself to join the mountain of handmade cozy goods, mirroring Clarke’s seated position. Her gaze is drawn to a blue cardigan and its off-white pullover sibling, both cabled in the same fisherman’s pattern. She picks up the pullover and eyes it carefully, pawing at the softness, it’s evident the sweater has been crafted by someone who works with their hands and knows how to manipulate tools and materials.

While Lexa examines the garment in detail, turning it over in her hands to look at the stitch pattern, the chunky cables, and deep welts more closely, Clarke takes the time to steel her nerves. She chews on her bottom lip, mentally preparing herself to answer questions she knows are coming about her newfound craft.

“At last?” Lexa asks, finally looking up. She’s sporting a thoughtful if not intrigued expression as if trying to reconcile a part of Clarke that she doesn’t know. “When did you start knitting?”

This is it.

As Lexa’s fingers run along the traditional rope weaves, Clarke feels the knots tighten in her stomach, unsure of how learning of the context and motivation for her sartorial undertaking will affect Lexa. Because, Clarke can’t truthfully answer the question without bringing up the elephant that’s been following them around since Lexa’s reappearance in her life. Her knitting is tied to events that led to Lexa’s departure and Clarke’s art crisis.

She hadn’t expected tonight to be so loaded. Maybe it’s the alcohol speaking, but after the revelation about Lexa’s letter, the bare preview into Lexa’s side of things, she owes it to them to be brave and forthcoming about the past—at least this part as a start—if they’re to stand any future chances of mending their hearts.

“During the hospital.”

She can see the wheels immediately turning in Lexa’s head, her brows furrow as her movements still and the lines on her face harden in concentration thinking back to that particularly emotionally fraught time.

“The nights when I was at the hospital by myself,” Clarke takes a breath to steady her shaky voice.

The crease in Lexa’s brows deepens but she stays mute to let Clarke continue.

“They have these yarn baskets in the waiting room. You can knit a square, or as many squares as you want, and it gets added later to other people’s squares to make afghans and blankets for the patients.”

“I never noticed them,” Lexa whispers, lest she breaks the quiet spell that’s suddenly overtaken them with the mention of patients and waiting rooms. Her eyes have moistened once more, likely matching the sheen of Clarke’s own. The small smile she gives does a poor job of covering up the ghost of pain they both felt then. Clarke hears the tiny crack in her voice return.

“Yeah, I think they get knitted mostly by overnighters, and nurses come to collect them in the morning. There were pictures of them on the, um, memorial walls,” she elaborates, filling in the gap
and trying to swallow down the small lump forming in her throat.

Lexa nods, absorbing the information. There are questions in her eyes but again she remains quiet.

“Anyways, there was a couple of nights you had to stay late at the office, it started then. I guess I never told you because it only happened a few times.”

Sitting in a worn upholstered chair, tolerating hospital standard-issue discomfort, on those nights Clarke felt useful being able to make something that would provide someone else warmth and comfort, where she felt none. She had watched helplessly while people were dying around her and loved ones grappled with grief.

For those few times, the knitting had kept her busy so she didn’t have to lock eyes with the devastation writ large in the hallways of the oncology ward, so she can give the bereft their private space to mourn—an inconsolable mother, an angry teenager, a stricken husband, an agonised family. But despite the productive distraction, her gaze would always end back onto the room where a father’s life was slowly slipping away, where her own and his daughters’ devastation awaited.

Where, unbeknownst to Lexa, with the hollow ache of lost hanging over her while waiting at the hospital, Clarke had made a decision that precipitated the dissolution of their relationship months later.

Although Gustus would come to make an unexpected full recovery afterwards, her time with him—when Lexa couldn’t be—had left a profound imprint that would change the trajectory of their love story. After the hospital, having faced death for the first time, young and scared and overwhelmed, Clarke started to slowly pull away from Lexa which led to an eventual separation and then ultimately a rejection of her offer to move to London.

She had blindsided Lexa with an unqualified, “I don’t want this.” Four words that rewrote their future, that tore pages and whole chapters out of the book they had been co-authoring for twelve years, abandoned decades short of an already-written epilogue.

Four words that snowballed into four months and then four years. Ones she hadn’t fully deliberated when delivered or come to understand until it was too late.

Clarke’s distancing after the hospital had hurt and confused Lexa, but she tried her best to give Clarke the space she needed, to let her work through whatever Lexa hadn’t been privy to. She was patient, more than Clarke deserved, more than she gave her reason to be. Lexa held on for the both of them—hands and heart bruised and calloused and bleeding from the strain of not wanting to let go. She had tried so hard to keep the spine of their love story in tact, but Clarke was already undoing the binding, pulling each seam apart thread by thread.

By the time Clarke had fully grasped the choice she made—and gutturally felt the impact of her decision—the loose leaves of their book were already scattered to the wind and carried across the ocean.

Perhaps that’s why knitting appealed to her—using needles and yarn to atone for and make new what her hands had destroyed. She traded saddle stitch for cable stitch. She could lose herself in repeated actions of slip, knit, and purl, casting on and casting off, creating meandering loops, courses and wales, lines and rows of stitches that could make textile reparation to their dismantled love.

She thought she could knit away her pain and regret.

“And after? How did you go from squares to sweaters?”
“It wasn’t until after you left that I started to pick it up again,” Clarke says and pauses before the next bit, knowing it’ll be news to Lexa, “when I stopped painting.”

Lexa’s eyes widen as expected.

“You stopped painting?” Lexa asks, disbelief and confusion in her voice. In all the years they had been together, Lexa had never known a Clarke without charcoal under her fingernails or paint stains on her clothing and skin. “Really? That’d be like you without blonde hair.”

Clarke nods, a broken smile to hide the defeating torment of creative depletion she endured that one year. “Actually, that’s not far from the truth. My hair was pink,” she says with a small chuckle. After one frustrating night of artist block, when she couldn’t mix the right brilliance of fuchsia, she had the brighter idea to dye the tips of her hair pink.

Lexa looks like she’s trying to solve calculus equations in her head from imagining a paint-less and blonde-less Clarke, her perplexed expression an accurate reflection of the confusion Clarke felt then too.

“When I couldn’t paint, or sleep, I knitted,” she continues.

Clarke tells her about returning to knitting as a way to keep her hands active when she first struggled to paint following Lexa’s move to London. She powers through to narrate how months later, knee deep in her art crisis, when the thought of touching a canvas was nausea-inducing, it became a habit to pick up her needles. And at night, the monotony of weaving in and weaving out would be a soother against fitful sleeps. While some people count sheep, Clarke found a better, more cathartic use for their wool comfort.

It was during one of those nights when she couldn’t see through the haze of her tears to make the next knit stitch that Clarke finally acknowledged that the only comfort she ever wanted, needed, yearned for in her life was 3,500 miles away—an unnecessary distance that she had put between them.

Clarke doesn’t realise she’s released a shuddering breath until she feels Lexa reaching out to put her hand on Clarke’s knee. A flicker of hesitation accompanies the gesture, but she commits anyways. It’s ironic that Lexa is the one offering to soothe when she’s the afflicted party. Clarke doesn’t think she has a right to her kindness but the sympathetic smile Clarke finds when she looks up anchors her. She welcomes the touch, allows herself the small comfort, and without overthinking it, squeezes the hand in turn. Lexa links their fingers.

“At first, I made simple scarves, which was easy enough because it’s basically knitting a square into a really long rectangle. And sweaters wasn’t a big leap after that, just different sized rectangles stitched together.”

When her skills and speed had improved, Clarke moved easily on to sweaters. She had found an old pattern book from the 90s one day in her parents garage while helping them clean out the cobwebs so her dad could turn the space into his workshop.

That afternoon was spent flipping through the yellowed pages which boasted easy-to-follow instructions supported by meticulous illustrations. It was the only thing she kept for herself from the day’s purging, along with some yearbooks, grade school art, and Lexa’s extra baseball mitt she’d kept there to play with Jake. Back at home, it became her new nighttime companion.

(Her new hobby had delighted her grandma and turned their Skype sessions into spirited chats about knitting techniques. It also served to minimise questions of, “When is Lexa coming back?”)
Though she prattles on, and Lexa stays mute, quietly processing, she can tell that Lexa’s mind is still stuck on the hospital, trying to work out its affect on everything that Clarke is telling her, likely revisiting the timeline of when things started falling apart for them.

“Anyways, I guess I’ve just sped up the process of turning into my grandma.”

“You are her spitting image,” Lexa grants, her voice taking on a little rasp from disuse.

They stay silent for a long time after, both lost in thought and each picking away at an unseen lint or a loose yarn in the sweater they are holding. Neither noticing their still intertwined hands.

Clarke wonders if Lexa has registered that she’s in their bedroom. Unlike the more public spaces of the apartment, this one remains almost identical to when Lexa left. Nothing much has changed other than there being only half the amount of clothes in the hamper, and one side of the bed always crisp and unwrinkled.

But maybe it’s one too many shocks to Lexa’s system for her to take notice of the loaded-ness of her present location. Emotionally exhausted herself, Clarke makes mental rain checks to bring up their bedroom and the hospital another time, once they’ve recovered from today’s roller coaster.

—

In a bid to move the passing clouds along, Clarke redirects Lexa’s attention to the sweater in her hands.

“Try it on,” she entreats.

Lexa cocks an eyebrow, surprised by the request, but humours her nonetheless. Clarke should have thought her ask through because Lexa takes her hand back and starts to take off her flannel shirt unprompted, revealing a fitted white tank top underneath that has Clarke blushing furiously and looking away. She only turns back when Lexa finishes pulling the sweater over her head.

“What’s the verdict?” Lexa asks, looking down to study herself.

“It looks good,” Clarke says more subdued than what she’s actually thinking. Lexa looks so disarmingly attractive, her hair a bit mussed from the static of the wool, while the pullover’s cream colour prettily brings out her skin tone. Clarke hasn’t seen anyone look this good in knitwear since Jane Seberg in Breathless. “See for yourself.”

Lexa rises and moves to take a look at the full-length mirror by the wardrobe. Clarke follows to stand behind her, and helps to adjust the sweater more squarely on her slender frame. They’re both staring at their own reflections, attention flitting between inspecting her handiwork and stealing glances at each other. Clarke spreads Lexa’s arms out to test the give, see if there’s enough movement in the cut, remembering the extra ball of yarn she’d appended to the pattern to accommodate Lexa’s long arms. It’s slightly loose around the shoulders, but the sleeves sit nicely at her wrists, a nearly perfect fit.

Clarke tries to hide her smile, biting her lip. The sweater looks like it was made to order for Lexa. Because it was.

Done with her appraisal, she nervously asks, “What do you think?”

Lexa turns around to answer, setting them a foot apart, almost chest to chest. The butterflies make themselves known again, encouraged all the more by a quickened pulse. The distracting closeness causes Clarke to absentmindedly move her hands to feel the yarn, clueless to Lexa’s breathing going
shallow at a particularly gentle brush around her midsection. It was nearly a déjà vu of the first time Clarke saw Lexa in her baseball uniform, now with jersey traded for worsted wool. Parted lips and a softened gaze meet her when she looks back up.

“I mean if I was into sweaters with holes,” Lexa tells her with a teasing smile and an underwhelmed shrug, pointing to the small opening at the underarm seam where Clarke had some trouble, “I guess it’s alright.”

“Hey!” Clarke laughs, not expecting the ribbing. With that, the mood shifts to lighter than before. “Consider it built-in ventilation.”

“It’s lovely, Clarke,” Lexa tells her more genuinely, matching her grin. They hold each other’s gaze for a stretched out moment until Lexa crosses her arms at the hem in a motion to take it off but Clarke stops her.

“Keep it. It’s yours.”

“What?” Lexa asks with the sweater already half way up her torso.

“You can have it,” Clarke tells her, reaching out to pull the hem back down. Her cheeks pink from hands nearly grazing Lexa’s stomach where the tank top had also risen up. Green eyes shine confusedly back at her.

“No, I can’t take it.”


“You made it for me?” Lexa repeats stupefied, letting go of the hem and looking down at the sweater anew, like it had grown extra sleeves or something suddenly.

“I … uh … still had your old Columbia pullover and used it as a model size for my first knit.” Clarke finds sudden interest in her feet, avoiding Lexa’s penetrating gaze. She fails to mention that the customised pattern was created partly based on a from-memory sketch of Lexa’s torso and empirical knowledge of her measurements.

(Lexa’s back is roughly two and half of Clarke’s spread hands, base of sternum to the dip of collarbone is about five kisses in distance, wrist to elbow is eight, her bust size a perfect fit of Clarke’s palm.)

Blushing, she distractedly fiddles with the hem of her own t-shirt, and mumbles after a clearing of her throat, “One sweater turned into two, and before I knew it, I was starting my own Etsy.”

Clarke wonders if Lexa has picked up yet that it’s a special knitwear collection which only comes in a one size fits 5’–7” brunette with green eyes.

“Seriously, if the whole artist thing doesn’t work out, I think you have a legitimate second career here, Clarke.”

“I’d doubt anyone would willingly fork over money to reward me for my insomnia. But at least now, you know where to go if you need to purchase your own personal space heater. First one’s on the house. I’ll give you a friend slash ex-girlfriend discount on your next order.”

This is the first time Clarke has openly used the term in front of Lexa—which tastes like gravel in her mouth—and she panics for a second at the slip. But thankfully Lexa seems more focused on the
reminder of how she requires duvet-level warmth all year round.

“This would’ve come in handy that first year here.”

The heating of the apartment, or its lack thereof then, had been Lexa’s Everest to get the mercury to climb higher. On mornings when they didn’t wake up in each other’s arms and Lexa wasn’t siphoning off Clarke’s heat, then she would be wrapped tightly like a burrito, with only a mess of brown curls poking out, while Clarke was star-fished nakedly next to her. Clarke’s blush deepens thinking about their thermal extremes and differing states of un/dress while standing in their bedroom.

“Well now, you won’t want for a lack of warmth.”


She seems to deliberate saying something further after, drawing Clarke’s eyes to the bite of her bottom lip and the minute movement of her jaw. Questions look to be hanging off her tongue again and in the raise of her brow. But she must think better of it once more because whatever words Lexa was going to say are exchanged for soft hands instead.

Clarke’s breath hitches when Lexa gently places her hands on her hips, pulling her closer before winding her arms around her waist. They both fall into the new old habit with relief for the steadying contact. If they keep having these types of emotional hugs—and Lexa continues to be the one initiating them—Clarke is going to have a hard time not crossing any friendship boundaries, as amorphous or invisible as they may be. Still, she allows herself to breathe in Lexa’s scent and cup the nape of her neck with one hand while the other closely wraps around her back.

“So, you’re a closeted knitter, huh?” Lexa says, chuckling in her ear.

“This was not how I wanted to come out.”

“I can’t believe you yarnd for me.”

Clarke hums but doesn’t say anything. I’ll always yarn for you. (It doesn’t escape her that there’s a missing vowel in the verb.)

“Wait, you said you stress knit. Have you knitted anything lately?”

Hearing the question under the question, Clarke takes a moment to consider her answer, and then discloses, “Not since January.”

At the implication, she feels Lexa’s faint nod and an detectable tightening of arms that Clarke gladly returns.

—

They return to the living room after finally prying themselves out of their human cocoon. Clarke’s not sure for how long they were in the bedroom but they’re both shocked to discover that the snow has come down really hard.

Lexa gets on the phone immediately to try and find a ride but twenty minutes later and she still hasn’t managed to book an Uber or taxi.

“Either the roads aren’t cleared or they’re overbooked,” Lexa huffs out her frustration. “It’s apparently a mess out there.”
“Spend the night.”

The suggestion’s out before Clarke can think to stop it. Though she shouldn’t be surprised by her instinct to keep Lexa safe and warm, at her readiness to provide her shelter.

“Let me try Anya,” Lexa says completely missing Clarke’s offer.

While Lexa paces and makes her calls, Clarke’s attention has been divided between the weather channel and watching the white scene outside her windows. The flurries are descending at a blistering rate as if someone had shaken Brooklyn’s snow globe, she can barely make out the asphalt of the road.

“Anya and Raven made it home just in time. There’s no way they’re getting back in the car,” Lexa reports with a deep sigh after getting off the phone. She squints her eyes trying to think of other solutions, and then mumbles to herself, “Maybe I’ll just walk. It’s only twenty blocks.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lex. It doesn’t look like it’ll let up anytime soon,” she says and then points to the TV as the words ‘another nor’easter’ and ‘winter storm warning in effect’ flicker on the bottom news ticker. “Look, several feet of snow is expected for the next couple of hours, and more overnight. You’re not dressed for it. It’s already late, just stay here.”

“What?”

“Spend the night here,” Clarke repeats.

“What, no. I can’t.”

“You might not have a choice if the ploughs aren’t coming until later. They’re likely stuck somewhere themselves right now.”

It’s Lexa’s turn to stare at her as if she’s ridiculous. She bites her lip and taps her phone against her chin for several minutes while she continues to pace. Clarke reaches her hand out to touch her arm on the next pass, stopping the self-flagellation.

“Lexa, please stay,” she asks softly.

The earnest plea has Lexa stilling completely. She scans Clarke’s face carefully, intently, her gaze searching. Clarke feels the hairs on her arms standing from the intensity of the way Lexa is looking at her. She dares not blink for fear of failing some unknown test.

The question of staying or going takes on an unexpected gravity with the prickling of moisture she notices returning to Lexa’s eyes. Sympathy tears well up but she doesn’t pay them attention not wanting to miss something important that Lexa’s trying to say without words.

(After today, Clarke thinks her future dinner invitations to Lexa should come with footnote emo warnings: breathing optional, tears likely, feels certain.)

It’s a long deliberation before the answer comes, but when it does, on the tremble of a fragile breath, Clarke feels her own lungs inflate.

“Okay. I’ll stay.”
Dear Clarke,

I tried to call. But maybe I don’t have the right number anymore.

Perhaps it’s best I write anyways. I’m not sure I would be able to keep the crack from my voice if I were to hear yours. If I were to say these words aloud.

I do remember Amarillo. I remember the little boy who couldn’t keep still. I remember the brilliance of that warm day in Barcelona, holding your hand, in love with you and with the idea of naming a child after a primary colour.

But that yellow wasn’t what stood out for me that day. The gold of your hair did, as it always does under the kiss of sunlight. We once watched a sunrise together and it took everything in me not to look at you when you described how gorgeous it was, knowing my agreement wouldn’t be about the hues of amber painting the horizon.

You might not know this, we weren’t speaking then. But on my way to London, I had spent a few days in Reykjavik—where they have midnight suns.

Icelandair had a promotion at the time. Something about boosting tourism with cheap flights and extended lay-overs. I had an extra week to spare before getting the keys to my new apartment. After waiting for as long as I could, for a reason not to go, but when it didn’t come I thought a good alternative would be to seek out a land where the sun never sets for a quarter of the year.

Where time stands still.

My heart and my head were in an in-between place, and I didn’t know how to move forward without looking back. I think that’s why I was attracted to the notion of a country where time seems to stretch endless. Where summers are nightless, and daybreak a constant unfolding.

It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen. A landscape and a light that I have never experienced before. Black and green and grey, rock formations and fjords and fog in violent battle against one another. Small flat houses in tiny villages standing almost heroic against volcanoes that were at once majestic and menacing.

It was like arriving at the edge of the world, and holding your breath for it not to end.

Like the grains of dystopia had been scattered here, and life fights against tragedy to survive. Where it held its head high in the afterglow of a midnight sun.

If there was anywhere to be stranded and waiting, there was nowhere more poetic and hopeful.

I wish you could have seen it. Haunting and heartbreaking, but beautiful. Impossibly so.

Yet still, it didn’t compare.

Even when the clouds that hung low over the island were pushed aside and the sky awash in endless streams of reds and oranges and yellow.
It didn’t compare.

You are the artist so you will understand better than I do the depth of a colour and the ways it can move you and change you. But I have never come across another yellow that has effected me as much, that has resonated with me as deeply, as yours.

I continue to look but have not been able to find.

All the more ironic, as I am writing this in a café, in a city where there is very little sun, very little yellow.

Just as well, I suppose. Maybe that was my heart’s deliberate geographic choice. It already knew that the search would be in vain.

It makes me wonder then if you have found what you were looking for. What you wanted, what I couldn’t provide. Was that why you called? Was that what you were going to tell me before the voicemail cut out?

Part of me hopes yes—because your happiness has always been my life’s work that I would forever raise my shield and bend to my knees to defend. I would be glad for the news that you’re okay, that you’re happy, even if I’m not there to share it. Even if I’m no longer the reason for it.

But the selfish part of me, the part that still aches for you, wants the answer to be no. Wants to hear instead that the reason you called was to tell me you made a mistake, that you feel just as lost as I do, just as hollow.

I am hoping that you had called that night to ask me not to go.

Because I wouldn’t have left. Had you asked.

I would have stayed.

Yours always,
Lexa

—

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Lexa stays. A Sunday together.

Songs this chapter was written to:

These Arms of Mine, Otis Redding
Photograph, Ed Sheeran
These Memories, Hollow Coves
We’ll Be Okay, Imaginary Future & Kina Grannis
Are We Too Late, Tom Leeb
All I Want, Kodaline
(Ps. I love Iceland. I know this story / my writing traffics in hyperboles, but Iceland really is a breathtaking country. I've traveled extensively and it is hands-down one of my favourite places to visit in the world. Gorgeous.

Pps. Happy Easter to those who celebrate it. Happy weekend to those who don't. Thanks for reading and the continuing support and comments!)
Someone to Hold

Chapter Summary

Lexa stays and they spend their first Sunday together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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You were alone left out in the cold
Clinging to the ruin of your broken home
Too lost and hurting to carry your load
We all need someone to hold

Vancouver Sleep Clinic

Clarke turns her head to shield her eyes from the light coming in through the bedroom window. She groans, they had forgotten to close the blinds again.

Her mind’s still foggy so she can’t quite recall what exactly had prompted their lack of due diligence this time. Was it exhaustion from a night out with their friends? Exhaustion from a good-and-long-and-deep fucking? Daze from slow lovemaking? Or just general laziness?

“Baby, it’s really bright out,” Clarke says as she blindly reaches to nudge the sleeping form next to her, hoping to provoke a resolution.

She receives an answering groan but no words or movement accompany it. It’s unusual for silence to greet her so it must’ve been an eventful night. Peeping one eye open reveals the familiar mess of curls splayed across the adjacent pillow. Their sides are pressed together, with Lexa lying on her front. Clarke can feel the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest as light snoring filters the air.

The murmured sounds harmonise in tune with the polite chirping coming from the sycamore trees, as if the critters too were observing the sanctity of Sunday mornings and allowing the inhabitants of the quiet street a few more blissful moments. She can imagine the cardinals and blue jays trying to perform their soliloquies in hushed tones, and wonders if her girlfriend will drag her out later to go winter bird watching with the Urban Park Rangers.

Clarke smiles and closes her eyes again, something to look forward to in a few hours. For now, though, she’s lulled back to sleep by the gentle motion of rubbing Lexa’s back.

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The next time Clarke wakes up, there’s an arm around her waist and warm breaths hitting the back of her neck. She would press back closer, always enjoying being the front spoon, if it weren’t for the body heat that had awoken her in the first place. The moisture collecting in the small of her back had started to become uncomfortable.
Not wanting to soak Lexa’s front with her sweating, and not wanting to wake up the notoriously light sleeper, Clarke tries to wiggle her way out of the tight hold. It’s a carefully coordinated effort of lifting Lexa’s fingers one by one and shifting herself forward by micro movements. Just as she thinks she’s created enough of an opening to roll away, the same hand she had painstakingly pried off stops her, landing on her hip this time.

“Five more minutes, love.”

Lexa whisper-negotiates still half-asleep, and makes her case by pulling Clarke back in, effectively undoing all of her progress. Clarke is about to protest when she feels the graze of lips against her neck, then a firmer press and a gentle lick of tongue. Her counterargument dies in her throat.

“Mmm, salty. You must be hot,” are the words mumbled before Lexa disengages from Clarke completely, rolling onto her back and thoughtfully granting Clarke the relief of cool air.

It’s a practised routine and Clarke is all the more grateful for it, needing to tend to her insistent bladder. She turns herself around to tug the blanket closer to Lexa, knowing she’ll need to compensate for the missing warmth.

She’s about to go alleviate herself but then feels heaviness sit on her eyelids again and thinks Lexa has the right idea of five more minutes.

She scoots forward to wrap around Lexa and be the back spoon this time.

Clarke closes her eyes.

The birds continue their song.

—

The third time she gains semi-consciousness, the warmth has intensified. There’s a thigh between her legs and an unruly head of hair against her chest. Clarke cards a hand through the thick curls, mindlessly and out of worn habit. At the soothing motion Lexa noses in closer.

They both sigh into the nuzzled warmth. But before she can enjoy it for long, Lexa shifts unexpectedly, pulling a moan out of Clarke when her thigh inadvertently presses in harder.

Lexa’s hands skate up the side of her ribs while her pelvis starts a subtle rocking that Clarke falls into for a few minutes. Her subconscious movements increases the hot sensation between Clarke’s thighs. A hand cups her ass and pushes her more firmly into the grind, producing twin moans.

But thoughts of her arousal are put to the side when the pressure reminds her of other bodily functions, and the need to still pee. Clarke opens her eyes and yawns out her wakefulness, gathering the willpower to leave the warmth of their bed and other things.

As she pulls back slightly and looks down, she sees the Columbia sweater her girlfriend is wearing, exposed by the blanket waywardly covering only half her torso. Oddly, there are a few curious paint stains near the collar and on the sleeves. Clarke tries to blink away her confusion, rubbing her eyes with intent.

_Huh, when did those get there?_

It’s not uncommon for her to paint in a fugue state, but she doesn’t remember those particular marks. With the way Lexa is burrowed in the sweater, the extra decoration doesn’t seem to be an issue. They’d often timeshare the favourite garment, Lexa even making a schedule once so that it’s fair co-
ownership.

Sundays were Clarke’s days, why would Lexa—

Her eyes widen at the realisation, finally lifted out of her fog. It hits Clarke that this isn’t college girlfriend Lexa, despite the insignia of her attire. It’s now, and ex-girlfriend Lexa who’s asleep in their bed.

The events of last night click into place.

After deciding to stay, Lexa shyly asks for more comfy clothes to change into. Clarke is sheepish to admit that she might still have some of Lexa’s stuff she can wear. (She actually has a substantial amount of Lexa’s wardrobe left over, enough to fill a spare drawer and then some.)

“Wow, I haven’t seen this in a while. That’s where it is,” Lexa says hugging the sweater Clarke’s retrieved for her as if reunited with a long lost relative. If she notices the addition of a few extra blotches of paint, she doesn’t say.

Decked out in her old college sweats, and with Clarke also sporting more relaxed fibres, they settle on the couch to watch Netflix. It’s already late but neither are ready to say goodnight yet.

“How about Black Mirror? It’s Raven’s newest obsession but I haven’t seen it yet,” Clarke asks while adjusting the shared blanket so there was enough coverage to reach Lexa on the other end of the couch. If she gives herself a moment to think of it, it’s absurd how far apart they are sitting like there are land mines planted in the middle cushion.

“Me neither,” Lexa says distractedly as she makes darting looks to the shifting blanket as if it would bite her if she doesn’t keep a vigilant eye.

“She recommends Sand Jupiter.”

“Sure,” Lexa agrees, “what’s it about?”

“No idea,” Clarke shrugs. “I stop listening when she talks about, well, anything.”

“Maybe it’s a documentary on beaches in Jupiter,” Lexa excitedly hopes, her eyes lighting up.

“Hmph,” Clarke huffs out as she struggles to stretch the blanket. There’s not enough to spread completely across the length of the couch and adequately cover the both of them. “Lex, this is stupid. Come.”

Lexa looks up, cocking her head like a puppy and Clarke would melt into the adorableness if she isn’t busy fighting with tri-blend polyester plaid. She shuffles herself closer to the middle and opens up the blanket, patting the spot next to her.

Lexa hesitates at first but does accept the invitation, dutifully moving closer into place for Clarke to wrap them up in the blanket. Unthinkingly, Clarke leans forward and across Lexa’s body to tug in her right shoulder to minimise its exposure to the cold. She only realises their proximity when she hears Lexa’s breath catch in her ear.

“There, better,” Clarke says softly. “Ready?”

“Yup,” Lexa responds after clearing her throat. She smiles at Clarke, warm and familiar, before they
turn their heads to the screen.

A little over an hour later, and they’re staring blankly at the credits as Belinda Carlisle’s catchy tune rings out in the apartment. By Lexa’s expression, the episode was not what she was expecting either. The retro-future love story between two girls questioning the idea of forever hits a little close to home.

Clarke sneaks a glance at Lexa who looks contemplative. They’re still snuggly wrapped in the blanket, with little space between them. Clarke is really hot but she’s willingly enduring the scorching heat for Lexa’s warmth.

“Huh … so, not Jupiter,” Lexa says breaking the silence.

“I like Yorkie’s shorts,” Clarke offers as commentary while the song’s repeating question, *Do you know what it's worth?*, taunts her in the background. Lexa’s fashion sensibility is at the opposite end of the spectrum compared to Yorkie’s but Clarke couldn’t help visualising her in knee-length khaki throughout the movie. Pulled high on her waist, she thinks Lexa would look just as insanely attractive as her work suits.

“I like her glasses,” Lexa says.

Clarke chuckles and nudges Lexa’s shoulder, “You would.”

Because this has been an unexpected overnighter, Clarke doesn’t get the pleasure of seeing a bespectacled Lexa, her customary home-wear, especially late in the day when her contacts would bother her. She looks at Lexa wistfully, imagining the round black-rimmed frames and how they would complete this night’s domestic routine.

“What next?” Lexa asks expectantly, elbow gesturing to the screen while holding Clarke’s gaze.

“You up for more?” Clarke cocks an eyebrow seeing Lexa rub her eyes. “Aren’t they bothering you?”

“I’ll just remove them. And squint really hard.”

Clarke turns off the TV and disentangles from their cocoon, leaving a confused Lexa as she goes to the bedroom. A minute later, she comes back with her laptop, receiving a wide smile from the brunette on her couch.

“We can continue on here, no squinting necessary.” Lexa looks at her with affection for the thoughtfulness, causing Clarke to blush. She deflects, “Go take them off, I’ll set us up.”

Lexa leans in to kiss her on the cheek, helping to pink it further. “Thanks. Be right back.”

When Lexa returns, Clarke re-situates them in the blanket fort and cradles the laptop on their laps. “Claire Foy?”

“Not my favourite set of blues, but she’ll do,” Lexa garbles past an escaped yawn.

Clarke laughs, if only so she doesn’t think about how soft and kissable Lexa looks or how the tingles haven’t stopped tingling from the eddying effect of having Lexa so close.

One episode of the Crown turns into two, then three, and by the time Clarke started seeing triple Elizabeths, she knows she can’t keep her lids open any longer. Lexa looks similarly just as done in, the droop in her eyes heavy.
Their valiant fight to stay awake and spend more time together ends with Clarke settling Lexa in on the couch with spare blankets and pillows. There’s a moment where she doesn’t want to part from Lexa, shifting on her feet and entertaining the ridiculous thought of asking Lexa if she could join her, not wanting to leave having grown overly attached to her presence from the last several hours. In the end, at Lexa’s release of another yawn, she reluctantly bids Lexa goodnight before retreating quietly to her bedroom.

Drowsy and exhausted as she is, given their emotional night, she expects to drop dead as soon as her head hits she pillow. Frustratingly, the exact opposite happens. She becomes suddenly wide awake, and spends the next forty-five minutes tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep with Lexa just on the other side of the wall.

By the thin acoustics of the apartment, Clarke knows that Lexa too is facing the same difficulties of finding slumber. Every few minutes she hears the rustling of blankets, followed by a thump, presumably Lexa turning her body to find a more comfortable position. Whether it’s the lack of adequate springs in the couch or that Lexa is just as distracted as Clarke by the significance of them spending their first night together in four years, neither of them are getting an ounce of sleep.

Eyeing her phone to check the time and seeing 2:48 flashing mockingly back at her, Clarke sighs before making her decision and getting up to put them both out of their miseries.

It isn’t as impossible of a task as she thinks it would be to convince Lexa to abandon the couch. Maybe it’s ingrained habit from coaxing a tired Lexa into doing what she doesn’t want to do, mainly sleep, but it only takes a light prod and some teasing about Lexa’s priority of design over comfort coming back to bite her before the tired girl is following Clarke into their bedroom.

To Clarke’s surprise, Lexa wordlessly gets onto her side of the bed, tucking herself into position. Clarke’s steps falter for a second at the sight of Lexa curled there again. Lexa has no qualms about it though, the girl dozes off as soon as she lies down, breathing lightly. Clarke shakes her head and makes way to her own side. Despite leaving a good amount of distance between them, she nonetheless smiles at the renewed proximity.

It’s likely exhaustion and weakened willpower behind Lexa’s actions, Clarke thinks as she closes her eyes. But if the irrational trade-off of compromised decision-making is sharing her bed with Lexa again then Clarke can’t really complain as she feels the veil of night finally embrace her.

G’night love, she whispers into the covers without realising.

—

When Clarke looks back up from the film of her memory carousel, she sees Lexa has managed to burrow deeper into the blankets, helping herself to fuller coverage, one or two tucks shy of a burrito. She smiles at Lexa’s content expression, laughing quietly at her slightly parted mouth.

She doesn’t know what time it is but by the strength of the sun they must have slept in. Snow is still falling outside the window but with none of the fervency of last night, lighter and quieter and more subdued, lending to a sacred stillness that washes over the bedroom.

Clarke allows herself a small moment to take the brunette in, for her heart to adjust to the sight. Lexa looks serene and unencumbered by any of the fault lines that had shifted the ground between them during last night’s revelations.

The streaming sun, filtering in as soft beams of suspended light, strikes into their bedroom at a particular angle that highlights Lexa’s features in entrancing shadows and silhouettes.
Her face is soft, and her hair wild. Always wild.

Clarke chuckles to herself, remembering the countless mornings waking to her vision being filled with the brown mane. A hair tie was only ever a temporary fix for the start of night, but by morning it was predictably lodged somewhere under their pillows while loose curls sprang free. Like an unfair battle was waged in the dark hours, and the humble hair tie, unarmed and outnumbered, had no choice but to surrender.

She longs to bury her hands in the tresses, to run her fingers through them, knead into their softness, untangle the knots, or play with individual strands. To brush back the errant ones, and trace along the hairline with her thumb. As they fall asleep, or the rare times that she’d wake before Lexa, Clarke would sing her a soft tune as her hands expressed the verses in gentle caresses.

There was a period when Lexa was obsessed with Canadian singers from the late 80s and early 90s. The girl could carry a tune when she wanted to but would often belt out *Heaven* or *Summer of ’69* ebullient and off-key instead. Clarke suspects the extra shrill was done on purpose to goad her into singing them properly.

She didn’t give in to Lexa’s antics during the day. But at night, or in the early hours, Clarke would fill the air of their bedroom with tender renditions of the classics.

Verse by verse, she’d draw out subtlety from the stadium favourites, striping the anthems bare with a timbre of warmth and turning them into whispered ballads. As she cradled her girlfriend’s head against her chest, hands moved through her hair while *Everything I Do* lulled them both.

The pop songs fell outside of her usual set list of Elliott Smith and Aimee Mann or Cooke and Redding. But she didn’t mind adding Bryan Adams, not with the feel of Lexa’s smile against her skin.

What she wouldn’t give to be able to release the weight of words through fingertips and minor chords again. The two verses that she wishes she was daring enough to sing aloud, the ones that might start to chip away at the substantial debt she left behind.

*Still holding on*
*You're still the one*

For now, the words stay stuck in her throat. For now, she’s collecting her bravery and saving the title of the song, *Please forgive me*, and its refrain for when she feels deserving of any absolution.

But the longer she looks at Lexa, the longer she spends time in this bed, the harder it is to keep the words in, to not reach out.

Instead of touching, she soaks up the scent of vanilla and pine, soaks up Lexa’s bespoke blend of comfort and home.

Clarke remembers a difficult morning where she woke up to the realisation that her sheets no longer smelled of Lexa. She hadn’t known what was missing until it was gone, hadn’t known how intertwined the relationship between scent and memory and emotion was until the sweetness of vanilla and the woody, cedar of juniper left the fibres—left her grasping at the edges of her memory to hold on. She cried into her pillow thinking the lost of smell was the beginning of forgetting.

Having her sheets wrapped in Lexa and her nose filled with that scent again evokes old memories and a vivid reliving of times when Lexa would read to her in bed at night or Clarke would find her at the nook of their window the next morning immersed in the same book, eagerly cheating ahead to
the next chapter. Her head would be rested against the window pane and shoulders loosely covered by a bed sheet that was likely Clarke’s reject from overheating.

With the morning dew behind her and the haze of sleep still clinging to her eyes, Clarke wanted to drown in the sight and smell of Lexa. Lexa would open her arm without looking up from the page-turner and Clarke would cradle herself between her legs, leaning back into Lexa’s front. The sheet would come flying around like a cape in a superman flourish causing giggles as Lexa adjusts and tucks her in 500 thread count.

Clarke would look up to see love and adoration in clear green, and Lexa would kiss her softly before returning to the book. She’d flip back the several pages she had progressed and resume reading aloud from where they left off the night before. Veiled in mist, her voice would carry Clarke back somewhere halfway between sleep and a Victoria world of white gloves and rustling skirts and corsetry impropriety.

In the moment, she aches to be two girls sitting by the window again without a care in the world except for what happens next between Maud and Sue.

A peacefully asleep Lexa in her bed is a more than acceptable consolation, Clarke supposes. She lets her gaze keep watch over the flutter of Lexa’s eyelids, to stand guard over the sweep of eyelashes. Noticing the crease in her brow, a reaction to the streaming light, Clarke carefully adjusts the bedsheet such that it provides a temporary awning to keep the brightness off her face. Doing the little that she can, Clarke feels duty-bound to shelter Lexa, even if it’s from well-meaning sunlight.

Soon she loses focus there, moving her patrol onto other delicate features that warrant protection. With a face like Lexa’s, it’s hard to decide where to stay sentinel when so many things compete for attention. The adorable furrow of her brows, the sculpted brows themselves, the rise of her nose, the way they scrunch in concentration, the drop-off of her cheeks.

Clarke can’t even begin to think about those lips. Their fullness and the slight cut in the middle that divides the bottom lip, as if her maker had deemed the minor interruption necessary out of fairness to other faces. But Clarke thinks the imperfection makes them even better, the dip a perfect fit to rest a finger or press a tongue.

If Clarke could choose her nightwatch assignments, she would pick Lexa’s eyes to keep her dreams safe. But with regard to a morning shift, she’d volunteer to be in charge of those lips, so that she can be the first on scene when they wake to the day.

The same ones that are now letting out a small cute yawn, as palms come up to rub out the sleep from her eyes. Clarke discreetly inches back a little, not sure how Lexa will react once she keys into her location and position.

Clarke’s lying on her side with both hands under her head, holding her breath for Lexa’s move. She tracks the incremental changes in her cognitive awakening.

The look up to the ceiling. A slow blinking.

Then the progressive turn of head to take in the surroundings. Window first, then the dresser, then foot of bed.

On cue, the widening of eyes to telegraph Lexa’s consciousness of this being her old bedroom. Another small shift, then a hitch of breath.
The realisation that there’s someone else in the same bed.

Clarke braces herself.

But the anticipated freak-out doesn’t come. Lexa turns on her side, and mirrors Clarke’s position, giving her a soft look.

Nothing is said for several fluttering heartbeats as Lexa seems to be scanning Clarke’s face for clues of the events of last night that has led to this moment. It’s a gentle inquisition, more curious probing than interrogation.

Clarke lets her have the same opportunity she did earlier, to take in the surreal reality of waking up to an unexpected vision, to an unexpected person. Whatever conclusions Lexa finally reaches must be a positive outcome by the smile that widens and the eyes that soften impossibly more.

“Hi,” she whispers.

“Hi,” Clarke returns just as quietly, matching her dulcet tone.

Clarke can’t stop the tingles. For this to be a reality again—that Lexa is the last voice she hears at night and the first she hears in the morning—she can’t stop the butterflies.

“Good morning.” Lexa smiles with her eyes, their luminance and the small catch of sleepiness in her voice not helping the fluttering in Clarke’s stomach.

“Sleep ok?”

“Yeah, great actually,” Lexa says, her lips curling up, “comfy bed.”

Clarke laughs and lightly pushes her shoulder.

“Still so smug about the mattress.”

“I don’t know why you refuse to admit it’s a great bed.”

“It took us months to pick out! You’d think we were looking for a pot of gold at the end of a very gay rainbow.”

Lexus chuckles and says, “It’s fairly damn close. Mine in London felt like sleeping on rocks by comparison.”

Clarke smiles, bolstered by the easy banter, knowing the topic could have veered into awkward and dangerous territory.

She remembers being just as happy lying atop their temporary bed—made from skids Lexa had found near the shipping yard and with a tatami mat serving as padding—while their hunt for the right bed frame and mattress seemed to have no end in sight. But she’ll allow Lexa her long held deep satisfaction that—

“Bringing the hammer this early, I see,” Lexa says with a quirked brow, cutting off Clarke’s train of thought.

At the confused crease of her forehead, Lexa’s eyes subtly shift below, motioning to her bottom half. Clarke looks down and blushes immediately. Somewhere in the middle of the night, she must have
stripped out of her pants, leaving her only in her Thor underwear. She curses her body for the rote unconscious act, and not registering that she had a bedmate for the night.

She looks back up to find a light dust of pink on Lexa’s cheeks from the sight. Clarke’s legs suddenly feel the chill of goosebumps from Lexa’s extended gaze. It’s a good thing her white shirt stayed on during the night, keeping her at least half decent. Lexa had never failed to voice that sleeping topless was her favourite side effect of Clarke’s thermal discomfort.

No use in being shy now. Clarke merely shrugs, proudly owning her love of Marvel. “It makes me feel powerful in my dreams.”

“If only Raven knew what was under the hood, you guys wouldn’t be friends.”

They both laugh thinking of Raven’s extreme allegiance to DC Comics. (Anya had vetoed naming any of their future children Diana or Harley.)

“Octavia took me shopping with her for Tye’s clothes once,” Clarke explains with a chuckle. “You should’ve seen Raven’s face when we got back and Tye was decked in head to toe in Captain America. I think O did it on purpose just to get a rise out of her. Rey made the poor kid cry trying to confiscate his shield.”

Lexa smiles, shaking her head in amusement.

“I picked these up because I thought they were cute,” Clarke says shyly. And because she didn’t think anyone would actually see them, least of whom Lexa.

Lexa looks to be straining not to take another peek at the heroic briefs in question when she offers her agreement.

“They are.”

—

“Hey, if you’re up for it, I can whip us up some breakfast,” Clarke asks a few minutes later as she searches around under the covers for her pants while Lexa stretches out her back. “We just need to grab a few items around the corner.”

While pulling her joggers on, Clarke bites her lip, waiting for an answer. The snow has tapered off enough that they should be able to make a quick trip outside. She can hear the ploughs working hard, but is paradoxically hoping they’d work a little less hard so that she can stretch her time with Lexa.

When Lexa doesn’t answer right away, Clarke hurries to retract, trying to play off her disappointment, “I mean, unless you have to go, you can borrow my boots if you’re up for trekking through two feet of snow.”

“Would anything be open?” Lexa asks after a beat, reigniting a flicker of hope in Clarke.

“Frank & Larry’s, probably.”

That seems to be the right answer. Lexa’s eyes light up. “F&L still around?”

“Still there. Still have Brooklyn’s finest selection of produce.”

“Must be something in their fairy magic that makes them so green.”

Lexa smiles, likely calling to mind the two queens who’ve upheld Lafayette St to higher
hydroculture standards for decades. Part bodega and part urban farm, F&L’s was a unique Bed-Stuy institution whose offerings range from hydroponic onions and lettuce to eclectic collections of chewing gum and pantyhose. They offered vintage brands of the latter items, though one was to be more trusted than the other.

“Ok,” she assents.

“Ok?” Clarke asks in disbelief even as she has to hold back her fist pump from forming, “Sure?”

“Yeah, let’s go. I doubt they have any British leeks but I’m curious if the gum machine still works.”

Frank & Larry’s is like stepping into a time machine, with one foot in the past and the other in the future. At one end, the hydroponics glow under bright white horticultural grow-lights. At the other end, it is as if the 80s and 90s were freeze framed. Pop Rocks and Hubba Bubba sit alongside knee high socks and ten-colours-in-one retractable click pens.

Lexa has been standing on the nostalgia side of things for the last ten minutes, looking wearily at a stick of Beech-Nut dispensed from the gum machine. Her concentration seems to question its perpetual existence decades past the expiry date.

Given her interest in food was only limited to eating it, normally Lexa would be their designated cart pusher during grocery shopping, and Clarke would select and load. She would follow Clarke around, aisle to aisle, looking bored but ready to help on a moment’s notice with high-shelf items.

But on entering the shop, Lexa was promptly distracted by the wares near the front door, particularly the bright yellow metal box mounted on the wall that called out to her, in vintage font, “One cent delivers a ‘tasty chew’!” Apparently, the false advertising of ‘Always Refreshing’ was too much for her to ignore.

Clarke wonders if she’ll accost Frank or Larry again to pick up the same line of inquiry she had every time they stepped foot in here. (“I know it’s a stable product with a long shelf life, but that long!”)

So while Lexa fiddles with the gum machine—looking like she’s been transported from the future standing under flashing neon lights and next to shoulder pads and woollen and high-waisted pants—Clarke has been busy filling up their basket with the ingredients to make their breakfast.

Clarke smiles, shaking her head at this weekend’s turn of events. Running household chores with Lexa in a retro shop, she feels like they’ve time-travelled into their own version of San Junipero, the near-past resurfacing as a heightened present and more hopeful future.

Certainly, waking up this morning in Lexa’s arms—a copy of the original so real, indecipherable between consciousness and simulacrum—makes her yearn for the present to inversely catch up with the past.

Having Lexa several feet away on the other side, knowing she’s there and questioning the persistence of the gum machine, Clarke could understand Yorkie’s desire to preserve that little place of heaven on earth.

But then, for a terrifying second, standing in the bread aisle out of sight and touch of Lexa, Clarke fears that all of this has been a dream, an elaborate reproduction, that she’s plugged in somewhere to an altered state of augmented consciousness—the textures and surfaces and emotions technologically duplicated to such uncanny detail that it’s transcendent. A verisimilitude of reconnection and
intimacy so convincing, familiar, and enveloping that Clarke might have been blind to the illusion.

The possibility scares her.

Clarke doesn’t want this to be a work of science fiction, of intricately arranged pixels and prodigiously-written binary code. She doesn’t want an intermediary or surrogacy or pantomime of her desire for a different reality to the past four years.

She just wants it to be real. Wants Lexa to be real.

She turns on her feet, abandoning the sourdough for a moment, needing to have Lexa in her line of sight again, needing to verify her realness.

When she turns the corner and catches Lexa’s gaze, who gives her an exaggerated look of incomprehension while waving the packet of gum as if shaking an unbelievable fist in the air, Clarke lets out a wet laugh, breathing a mountain sigh of relief.

Yet still, she needs to touch Lexa, for corroboration purposes. Without a word, she continues her approach, not stopping until she’s pulling Lexa into a hug.

Lexa reflexively absorbs the impact and encircles her arms around Clarke’s waist, without complaint of the basket pushing into her side.

“What was that for, weirdo?” Lexa asks, with both concern and playfulness in her voice.

“Just needed it,” Clarke mumbles into her shoulder.

Despite the confusing spontaneous display of affection, she takes Clarke’s non-answer at face value, and teases instead, “Did they run out of organic free-range eggs again?”

Clarke gives her a fake glare at the reminder of her one-time tantrum when the specialty item was out of stock.

Ignoring Lexa’s chuckling, she asks into her hair, “About that, fancy or no?”

Lexa thinks on it for a second. Her answer to the recurring question asked during past Sundays would decide the level of decadence of their meal, a simple breakfast or something closer to brunch, and determine whether asparagus or quinoa or ceviche will make their way into the mix.

Clarke waits patiently, head on her chin, while Lexa mulls over the decision before arriving at the predictable, “Fancy.”

Both know it would not have been any other case.

After a gentle squeeze to the back of Lexa’s neck to acknowledge her reply, she reluctantly detaches herself from Lexa’s hold.

“K, just a few more items. Be right back,” she says softly.

Clarke bites back the follow-up plea, “Don’t go anywhere,” wanting to fix Lexa in place so she doesn’t disappear on her and prove herself to be a figment of Clarke’s imagination or the product of a prescient machine after all.

Reassured by Lexa’s nod, Clarke makes her way to the cold aisle smiling. The thrumming of contentment feels real and calms Clarke’s heart.
Her smile widens while grabbing a carton of organic free-range eggs (thankfully in stock), when she is reminded of Lexa’s first (and only) attempt to cook for her.

When it wasn’t fancy at all. When love was young and budding and real.

*****

Four types of eggs. Sunny-side up, scrambled, poached, hardboiled.

Clarke stared confusedly down at the paper plate carefully balanced on her lap. Across from her, sat in a similar cross-legged position, Lexa had an identical setup, though oddly with one less egg portion. A loaf of bread straddled between them where their knees touched.

Her girlfriend had a strange, mixed look of hope and trepidation as she poked warily at her poached egg with the tine of her fork. A smile broke out when orange liquid emerged from the puncture, Clarke wasn’t sure what other result Lexa anticipated, a chick to fall out?. Lexa beamed watching the yolk spill out smoothly and with just the right amount of thickness.

Clarke instinctively mirrored Lexa’s look of pride but she was no closer to understanding why they were having a minimalist breakfast outside.

The whistling and shouts and scurrying sounds of an early morning soccer game could be heard farther afield. Prospect was buzzing this time of year with the hubbub of activity after the temperature recently calmed from the previous sweltering heat, rendering a mildness and light breeze making the park a perfect venue for extending their weekday lunch dates to the weekend. But instead of their usual avocado toast, instead of a noon hour rendezvous, Lexa had surprised her with a breakfast picnic.

The gesture, though sweet and appreciated, was puzzling given the reductive menu and that Easter had long passed. They had a few dates under their belt already. Maybe this was another one of Lexa’s attempts at romance originality to keep Clarke guessing with her creativity. On the other hand, Clarke really hoped this wasn’t Lexa going to elaborate lengths for an eggasperating pun.

“You didn’t want scrambled?” Clarke asked, the question as random as what was in front of her. She prodded her own cautiously, testing its give and startled by the inconsistent buoyancy. One part collapsed as soon as her fork touched it, like an inverse soufflé, while another part presented unexpected resistance.

“Oh, I did. But I sorta, partially, melted the tip of the plastic spatula during my first attempt,” Lexa explained sheepishly, eyes still fixed on surveying her handiwork with some degree of suspect. “Then I only had one egg left after.”

“Here babe, you can have some of mine.” Clarke was quick to pawn off her share onto Lexa’s plate, relieved for less to eat. She took care to avoid giving Lexa the remnant tiny egg shells she spotted during her cursory evaluation earlier.

Taking a rallying breath, and putting on her best supportive smile, Clarke shovelled a forkful into her mouth.

“Mmm, it’s good!” Clarke exclaimed, her compliment genuine, as was her surprise. It was good, at least the lighter fluffier curds she ate compared to the denser sections she avoided. It tasted soft and creamy.
“Really?” Lexa asked, just as much in disbelief, eyeing Clarke suspiciously for any signs of a lie. When she detected none, she tried some herself. “You’re right, it is!”

Her beaming smile warmed Clarke, and made her braver to try the sunny side egg next, impressed by the yolk’s run when she cut into it.

“Here,” Lexa said, handing her the pepper mill she had taken with them from home. She ripped off a piece of bread to give to Clarke, who took to swiping it through the silky liquid.

“This is great, Lex.”

“Sorry we had to come out here. I had it all ready to go in the kitchen but then Anya kicked me out of the house with specific instructions to take my weird courting practices elsewhere.”

Clarke’s protectiveness flared. “She’s just jealous Raven’s idea of romance is to spend the evening under the hood of your dad’s car and then splitting her protein bar for dinner.” Clarke tilted her head forward and gave Lexa a sweet kiss. “Thank you.”

“Speaking of Dad, he was telling us the best foundation of a relationship is knowing how your girl takes her eggs.”

*Ah, now it makes sense,* Clarke thought with an endearing smile. But then thinking further of it, “But babe, you already know how I like my eggs.”

“But not how you’d like the way I’d make them,” Lexa muttered under her breath.

Clarke answered her sappiness by leaning in again, running her fingers through Lexa’s hair, then pulled her forward by the nape of her neck to give her another kiss, deeper this time and with a purposeful tongue. When they came out of the kiss, Clarke softly sucked on Lexa’s bottom lip then brushed her thumb against it before concluding, “That’s my favourite way.”

They both returned their attention to their eggs, hearts aflutter while looking blissfully dazed.

As she was finishing up her scrambled egg, Clarke noticed a granola bar by Lexa’s side that must’ve fallen out of her pocket during their makeout.

“Oh, um, in case you didn’t like the eggs,” Lexa explained when Clarke picked it up. “You’ve grilled fish and roasted chicken for me, I thought the least I could do was try to fry an egg. But I couldn’t be certain it’d meet the same culinary standards.” Lexa shifted in her spot on the plaid blanket to pull out another granola bar from the same pocket, and then two more out of the other side, causing Clarke to laugh. “They were my backup plan.”

Clarke was about to comment on not needing the contingency when Lexa reached into her back pocket and pulled out a metal spoon. She laughed again, reminded of their first meal together on the bleachers.

“Still carrying it around, huh?”

“Always prepared,” Lexa replied and started to tap the top of her hardboiled egg. She had a look of consternation when it didn’t immediately crack, but quickly recovered with relief when it eventually did.

Seeing Lexa struggle to remove the shells after, Clarke took over the task, receiving a grateful smile in return.
“If I’m being honest, I’m surprised you knew which knob to turn on the stove,” Clarke teased. “It’s a fancy spread you got here.”

“Anyā might have begrudgingly helped,” Lexa mumbled. “Before she decided she no longer wanted to be an accomplice or witness to domestic grossness. Her words.”

Less offended on Lexa’s behalf this time, Clarke laughed imagining the epic battle of scowl vs pout.

“Lex, you know I’m happy to cook for you, right? I don’t expect anything in return.”

“I wanted to,” Lexa said. “But I hope I haven’t set a precedent. This is the most fancy that it’ll get. I might’ve reached my ceiling with this so it’s best if I go out on a high.”

“Understandable.”

“It’ll keep my record at 1 for 1. 100% cooking success rate.”

“Sure,” Clarke humoured her, looking adoringly and trying to keep three words from surfacing. They hadn’t said them to each other yet but Clarke felt it with every kiss and look and gesture. It was getting increasingly harder to hold them back but too scary to say them so soon. “Maybe next time, we can do fancy together.”

Lexa nodded. “That’ll be nice. Eggs was the first thing Dad made for my mom,” she told her before launching into stories of Gustus’ misadventures in the kitchen, much to her mother’s chagrin.

Clarke listened enrapt, held captive by the visual of a giant, male version of Lexa floundering over egg whites.

*****

A buzzing in her back pocket draws Clarke back to the egg carton in her hand. She puts it into her basket, and pulls out her phone to see a text from Raven, then a successive one from Octavia.

(Raven) 10:03
Sorry

(Octavia) 10:03
You slept with Lexa?!

Clarke rebalances the basket in the crook of her arm so she can reply to the group text.

(Clarke) 10:03
Giant eye roll emoji.

(Raven) 10:04
Clarke, you can’t type out the emoji.

(Clarke) 10:04
There wasn’t one large enough to capture my reaction to Octavia’s overreaction.

(Clarke) 10:04
And no, I didn’t sleep with Lexa.
(Octavia) 10:05
Rey just told me she slept over.

(Clarke) 10:05
*With* and *over* are two very different things, O. And how’d you guys even know?

(Raven) 10:05
Anya. Who else? It’s not like you had the common courtesy to text your best friends that your ex stayed the night. I told you about the time I got foot fungus, it’s only fair you share.

Clarke ignores the visual. The first part of the text piques her interest, though. The only way Anya would know is if Lexa had texted her. She wonders if Lexa was in need of sisterly support, possibly having doubts about her decision to stay. Lexa wouldn’t have volunteered the information unless it was crisis-driven.

(Raven) 10:05
Anya pulled it out of her when she called to check if Lexa got home safe from the storm.

Clarke’s relieved to learn it’s because of Anya’s manhandling rather than Lexa’s anxiety about an overnighter with Clarke.

(Octavia) 10:06
I texted Lexa but she’s not answering. So, let me ask the important question. Couch or bed?

Clarke sighs. She’s regretting answering her phone. Maybe she should follow Lexa’s lead to ignore them.

(Clarke) 10:06
Does it matter?

(Octavia) 10:06
Yes

(Raven) 10:06
Yes

(Clarke) 10:06
Couch

(Octavia) 10:07
Damnit

(Raven) 10:07
Yes!

(Clarke) 10:07
Then bed.

(Octavia) 10:07
Ha! Suck it Rey!

Clarke doesn’t even bother asking what the bet is, not worth inviting the trouble. What could they possibly achieve knowing which piece of furniture was used when nothing but sleeping could have happened.
(Raven) 10:07
Front or back?

(Octavia) 10:07
Big or small?

(Clarke) (10:08)
Are we just throwing out opposite words now?

(Octavia) 10:08
Spoon, Clarke. Which spoon were you?

(Clarke) 10:09
Guys, as fun as this is not, I’m kinda in the middle of something.

(Raven) 10:09
Yeah, Lexa’s legs. Is that why she’s not answering her phone?

Clarke searches for the groan emoji, not to use but to verify its insufficiency. She holds her breath waiting on Octavia.

(Octavia) 10:12
Good one Rey! I’m still trying to think of a witty remark while feeding Tye. Clarke, may I get back to you with my retort at a more convenient time when both our hands aren’t busy?

(Clarke) 10:13
No. Middle finger emoji.

Despite their heavy-handedness, she appreciates their unique way of ensuring she’s okay after yesterday’s big night. Clarke chuckles as she pockets her phone and ignores its continued buzzing.

—

Her amusement, however, summarily ends when she goes to check on Lexa after completing her basket. Clarke isn’t sure if her eyes are playing tricks on her. Her eagerness to rejoin the brunette diminishes as Lexa comes into view.

Lexa hadn’t left the gum machine. But now, there’s another woman standing next to her.

Really really close next to her, almost sharing the same air space.

Clarke blinks several times to shake the vision, but every time her eyes reopen, she’s greeted with the same sight of their two figures standing too intimately close for them to be strangers.

A knot forms in her stomach.

The more Clarke stares, the tighter the feeling.

Thoughts of breakfast with Lexa, past or present, are out the window as her brain scrambles to make sense of what she sees, while her heart tries not to self-combust from its too-sudden quickening.

Despite materialising out of nowhere, there’s a familiarity to the woman that gnaws at Clarke and twists something inside her, erasing the good mood she has been in.

Clarke’s stomach drops when it finally dawns on her that it’s the same woman from the gallery. She’s shorter without her heels on, but Clarke recognises the strawberry blonde hair. She’s an
attractive woman, maybe a few years younger than them, Clarke can see now that she has the opportunity to take the then-stranger in more fully. Her head is thrown back in laughter as she engages Lexa in conversation. With their proximity and the familiar way she’s got a hand on Lexa’s arm, squeezing it at Lexa’s presumably charming words, Clarke feels like ice has been poured over her.

She doesn’t realise she’s got a death grip on the basket handle until Lexa’s gaze catches hers. She’d be more concerned for the safety of the basket’s contents if not for Lexa’s odd expression. Clarke’s anxiety gives way to confusion. There’s a quiet pleading that sits just at the corner of Lexa’s lips. It’s one that Clarke hasn’t seen in awhile but that she nonetheless understands as a silent call of distress in their shared secret language.

Before Clarke knows it, her feet are carrying her over to the pair, propelled by a wash of protectiveness.

“Babe, there you are!” Lexa exclaims as Clarke nears within earshot, catching both her and the companion off guard, the greeting having an air of endearment too affectionate to be addressing a friend.

Clarke almost stops mid-approach, and has to resist looking over her shoulder or jerking her head side to side to see if there is someone else in the vicinity to whom Lexa could be directing the pet name. But no, Lexa’s eyes are lit up, gaze decidedly on Clarke, her smile fond.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Lexa says more softly once Clarke’s within reaching distance for a tentative hand to brush her hip.

“Hi,” Clarke says slowly, her focus torn between the warmth of the smile and the heat of the touch on her hip.

There’s a stretched out second where she tries to read the situation in Lexa’s eyes, which betrays little to anyone who hasn’t been in a relationship with her for twelve years but Clarke can detect the hint of nerves and an entreaty behind their shine.

She quickly masks her puzzlement with a genuine smile to Lexa first, and then a more curt, polite one to the other blonde.

“Hayley, this is my girlfriend, Clarke,” Lexa casually introduces.

Clarke’s hastily assembled composure would’ve collapsed hearing of her new special status if Lexa didn’t wrap her arm around Clarke’s shoulder and pull her closer into her personal space. Clarke subconsciously leans into the hold, needing the anchor to not faint from her shock.

“Clarke, this is Hayley.”

“Hi, nice to meet you,” Clarke manages to eke out while offering her hand to shake.

The intended recipient doesn’t acknowledge it, doing a much poorer job than Clarke at hiding her surprise, and altogether terrible at observing basic manners and social decorum.

“Your girlfriend?” The blonde blurts more than asks Lexa, her mouth comically gaped open like a fish.

“Yes, the artist I told you about.”

“I thought she wasn’t real.”
Clarke wants to scoff, oddly offended. She doesn’t know why she’s being defensive of a fake relationship, but it never feels good to be dismissed as imaginary. In a strange twist from her earlier worry, the tables have turned and now she’s the one whose existence is called into question.

“She is,” Lexa defends aloud on her behalf, and for the full effect, tips her head down to kiss the crown of Clarke’s hair, “and she’s great.”

Her small act of affection is followed by a dazed, in-love look. Green eyes peer longingly into hers. With the way that Lexa is looking at her, they might as well be on an island on their honeymoon instead of standing in the candy aisle of a bodega the morning after a snowstorm.

Clarke feels the squeeze of hand from the arm around her shoulder then a thumb brushing back and forth in light circles that somehow has the same impact as rubbing two sticks together to start a fire.

“I’m very flattered that you asked me out again,” Lexa recaps, likely for Clarke’s sake, looking at the other woman for a fleeting second before hastily turning her attention back to Clarke as if aggrieved to have lost momentary eye contact, “But as you can see, I am very much taken.”

Maybe those fangirls in Copenhagen were onto something. Maybe Lexa should have been an actress instead of an architect because Clarke believes her. Her performance is of HBO calibre. If Hayley isn’t sold, it’s because Clarke has already bought her tickets to the show.

Earlier, Clarke didn’t know if her insides would survive seeing Lexa with another woman. Now, they feel jolted to life from the eruption of butterflies. It’s a symphony of deafening flight and flutter.

“I am very much real.”

Clarke decides to play along. They’ve been playing house all weekend, this wouldn’t be much of a stretch.

She retracts the unshaken hand to instead rest over Lexa’s stomach where her parka is unzipped, rubbing it gently. She wants to laugh hearing the hitch in Lexa’s breathing, feeling her body stiffen for a split second.

Two can play this game.

And for the full effect, she tips on her toes to land a quick kiss to the underside of Lexa’s jaw before snuggling her head into the crook of Lexa’s shoulder. (God, smells more amazing from the source than her sheets.)

“I’m sorry, I seem to be at a disadvantage. How do you know each other? Lexa might have talked about me, but she’s failed to mention a Hayley.”

Clarke pats Lexa’s chest in mock reprimand, though her head tilt and raised brow comes from genuine curiosity.

“We work together,” Hayley flatly supplies, her posture deflating by degrees of Clarke and Lexa’s increasing PDA.

“Hayley’s one of our controllers who keeps our numbers and the clients in line.”

Lexa moves her hand to rub Clarke’s back and then wraps her arm around her waist, upping the ante in their unspoken competition.

“That must be a tall order.” Clarke tries to say with a steady voice when she feels Lexa’s hold
tightening, bringing her almost flush to her chest, laying another kiss to her head. In retaliation, Clarke double-downs her ministrations at Lexa’s stomach, sneaking her hand under the Columbia sweatshirt to continue stroking directly on skin.

She realises in immediate hindsight as soon as she makes contact that it was a self-sabotage move. It’s her turn for her breath to catch at the feel of warm skin. She can’t tell if Lexa is flexing her abs on purpose or she’s simply tense from being equally affected, but the evidence that Lexa is still fit has Clarke’s brain short-circuiting.

Regardless, Clarke has committed to the act and she will see it through, even if her body is burning enough fuel to launch herself to the moon by the end of it.

“It is,” Hayley says, looking weary as to how to read the couple in front of her. It would seem she decides to go on the offensive. “I’m not sure if it’s the same in the art world, but in professional offices clients can be a serious handful.”

Clarke doesn’t miss the emphasis on ‘professional’ and the underhanded and unnecessary jab at her vocation. It puts the number-cruncher in the red for her, erasing any social goodwill Clarke has to be nice.

She must’ve slipped into some expression of displeasure or disdain because she feels a soft thumb trace her jaw a silent beat later before it moves up to lightly smooth the crease of her brow, involuntarily causing her eyes to close at the spellbound motion. Her pulse quickens in indirect tempo to the thumb’s gentle movement.

“Baby, you ok?” is whispered, the pet name slipping that startles the both of them for the blurring of fake and real.

“Sorry, they were out of the particular mushrooms I wanted to get. The enoki ones that you love.” The affectionate smile she receives in return has Clarke forgetting why Grumpy Cat made an appearance in the first place.

“Clarke’s had her fair share of interesting client experience.” Lexa comes to her defence again, breaking them out of the hypnotism of being so wrapped up in each other. “But I’ve been unfairly overloading her with mine.”

“She doesn’t talk much about co-workers,” Clarke says addressing Hayley and can’t help but pettily emphasise the word in reprisal, “but stories about clients I’ve heard plenty.” It’s easier to pretend when there’re grains of truth, Clarke thinks as she looks up to Lexa to ask, “Was it Bill who left you six voicemails in a day once?”

Lexa nods. “He was panicking about a submission to the city. I’d been in meetings all morning, and then left for a long lunch in Brooklyn, and came back to frantic emails and calls.”

Clarke notices Lexa lightly blushing and can’t understand why until it occurs to her. “Wait, was it that time we met up for lunch?” She asks, her eyes narrowing.

Lexa nods again, accompanied this time by a bite of her lip, the pink of her cheeks deepening. Her other hand comes up to rub the back of her neck.

“Lex, we went for two hours!” Clarke recalls wide-eyed, remembering the cloud nine that she had walked on hours after having spent her mid afternoon break with Lexa. She scolds, “You didn’t tell me you had to be back at the office.”

“It was sweet of you to pick up my favourite sandwich at that Banh Mi place. My time was better
spent at the park with you than hurrying back to whatever kerfuffle awaited in my inbox,” Lexa mutters, looking down and away from Clarke’s reprimanding gaze, scuffing the toe of her shoe against the floor looking like a scolded puppy.

Clarke feels guilty that Lexa had left her office in Lower Manhattan to join Clarke for a bite and a walk at Prospect. She’d just assumed Lexa had a free afternoon.

“Thanks babe,” Clarke says, her gratitude as real as the fluttering in her stomach. She rises on her toes to give Lexa a genuine kiss to her cheek. Neither say anything when her lips catch the corner of Lexa’s mouth.

“Anyways, there are only eight hours in a workday. How does he expect me to get any actual work done for his project if I’m always on the phone with him?”

“Um, yeah, that’s Bill for you.” Hayley tries to join in but her voice is too feeble to be heard by the other two.

“Were you able to get any work done when you got back? Or did he bother you some more? Do I need to call him?” Clarke asks like a concerned wife, no longer a fake girlfriend.

“He did,” Lexa confirms with a sigh. “But it’s fine. I can’t really get mad at him. Even though he’s so annoying, Bill’s actually one of the nicest clients.”

“A nice developer sounds like an oxymoron.”

“Honestly, it’s not much different to handholding a toddler trying to build his Lego tower. He’s just really excited and impatient.”

“With your diplomacy skills, I half expected you to go into international relations, become the UN Secretary or something. Not sure if I would be as patient.”

Lexa scoffs. “You’ve got no patience at all,” she says endeared with an amusing glint in her eye, “I don’t get how you can literally watch paint dry all day but can’t wait for popcorn to pop.”

“I don’t get why you insist on doing it over the stove. You don’t even cook. I’m the one who has to stand there and watch it.” Clarke pays no mind that they’ve completely detracted from the topic at hand.

Lexa shrugs. “Tastes a million times better. Don’t tell me I didn’t change your world at fourteen when I introduced you to stovetop popcorn with coconut oil and cultured butter.”

“That your dad made. He changed my world.”

They are so absorbed in their exchange of the last couple of minutes, falling easily into their new and old dynamic, and devolving into erstwhile patterns of bickering, they completely forget that they have an audience, that there’s a third participant. Not until Hayley shifts uncomfortably on her feet does Clarke realise the charade had bled into reality, an inside conversation full of intimate knowledge of each other.

“Wait, I thought you only just moved into town?” Hayley interjects, confusion and a hint of suspicion colouring her tone. “How long have you known each other?”

“Awhile.”

“Long.”
They both answer at the same time, both blushing at the same time, their short, vague replies not doing them any favours.

“So, you’ve been dating for longer than a few months?”

“You could say that,” Lexa answers this time on their behalf.

“Anyways, *babe*, speaking of cooking oil,” Clarke deflects, stressing the word and steering clear of the potential rabbit hole if they continued with Hayley’s line of questioning. She locks eyes with Lexa, smiling softly, “I’ve got everything we need. We should get going.”

“Yes, we should.”

“You really are real,” Hayley breathes out, finally addressing Clarke and looking at her with newly judgmental eyes and simultaneously as if she’d seen a unicorn.

“I really am.”

“I mean, she talks about you all the time, but I just figured it was some dude. I should’ve known by the way she—”

“Okay, gotta go!” Lexa cuts her off, and withdraws her arm from Clarke’s waist, but before Clarke can miss the warmth, she laces their fingers together and starts to lead them away to the cash till.

“I change my mind I want to stay. The conversation was just starting to be interesting,” Clarke pleads teasingly in Lexa’s ear.

Lexa ignores her to wish her co-worker farewell, “I’ll see you at the office, Hayley.”

“Enjoy the rest of your Sunday,” Clarke throws in over the shoulder, unable to keep the smug out of her voice.

She doesn’t care to find out the reaction, as Lexa wordlessly takes the basket from her, like a dutiful fake-girlfriend, and while still holding her other hand, gives another quick peck to her cheek as distraction. Lexa pointedly avoids meeting Clarke’s eyes that are amusingly seeking context of Hayley’s comments.

Walking away, they are the picture of a couple enacting a weekend ritual, having rolled out of bed in home clothes, hair mussed, to brave the chill and pick up a few items of groceries before retreating back to their haven and the warmth of each other’s bodies.

At least from the deep look of disappointment they leave behind, that’s what Hayley is thinking.

—

“And she still didn’t take the hint?”

Lexa shakes her head. Clarke grins incredulously at the density of some people.

They’re in the kitchen again, Lexa finishing unloading their haul while Clarke starts to prepare the omelettes. Between tasks Lexa retells of the co-worker who had been crushing on her but oblivious to Lexa’s gracious let-downs.

“I’ve tried to be polite and let her off easy. When that didn’t work, I tried short and direct, but she still wasn’t getting it. So finally I told her there was this artist I’ve been seeing.”
Lexa says the last part shyly while she proceeds to help prep the new items they picked up from F&L.

“Seeing?” Clarke pauses her work in the mixing bowl to raise an eyebrow that goes unseen. At Lexa’s silence and eye contact avoidance she decides to let her off the hook, and acquiesces, “I guess technically not a lie.”

“Well, it confused her enough to slow down her advances for a bit. I suppose now I understand why, but then again, she knows I’m a lesbian. Why would I be seeing a man?” Lexa’s brows furrow thinking on it further, her nose adorably scrunched in distaste at the visual.

“Maybe she thought it was a phase?” Clarke offers, chuckling.

“And saw her opening to try harder this past week to bring me back from the dark, hairy side?” Lexa asks rhetorically.

She shudders throwing her arms up dramatically in defeat, deepening Clarke’s laugh.

“How would you know it’s dark and hairy?” Clarke goads.

“All hearsay, nothing I can or want to substantiate,” Lexa dismisses before continuing to recount her efforts at throwing roadblocks against interoffice romance.

She speaks animately as she finishes quartering the king mushrooms then focuses her energy on chopping the white onions while Clarke beats the eggs in a mix of heavy cream, sea salt and black pepper. Her wrist may have worked a little too vigorously hearing certain parts of Hayley’s over-attentiveness.

Apparently the accountant had taken an immediate liking to the new designer. She had volunteered to accompany Lexa to the welcome dinner near the gallery, under the guise of not wanting her to get lost in the neighbourhood, despite Lexa’s insistence that it wasn’t necessary, being a native New Yorker and all.

It had puzzled Lexa that whenever she stayed late, Hayley would also coincidentally be doing overtime. She didn’t clue in until Hayley had asked her out to dinner after one late night. Lexa was expecting a pizza parlour and not the candlelit restaurant they ended up at.

“I told her I was flattered but not looking. She seemed to take that as a challenge.”

That has Clarke concerned. “Wait, does she even live in Brooklyn? She wasn’t stalking you, was she?”

“No, no. She was visiting family in the area yesterday and got caught in the storm as well. Hayley’s actually not that bad. Clueless but ultimately harmless.”

“Mhm.”

Lexa considers something for a second and then places a hand on Clarke’s hip to turn her and gain her full attention. Her gaze is soft when she says with emphatic earnestness, “Thanks for going with it.”

Lexa’s touch is like kindling, no matter how small it still sparks something in Clarke. The continuous presence of Lexa’s hand—absently left there while she tries to read Clarke’s true reaction to their earlier pretending—sets her pulse racing again.
There’s mild concern under Lexa’s gaze that perhaps her calculated risk went too far.

“I would’ve given you more notice but she surprised me. I thought it was better to show her than tell her.” It wasn’t too much, was it?, is unasked as Lexa fiddles with the fabric of Clarke’s top, gathering it in a bunch and releasing it, then repeating the nervous tic. The intimate action contradicts her concern of breaking an intimacy barrier without consulting.

“It’s fine,” Clarke croaks out, waving her off with a timid smile, hoping the thud of her heart isn’t audible.

How does she tell Lexa that it wasn’t a hardship, at all. That to the contrary, it was almost too easy how naturally they resumed their roles, folding into old habits and wearing the cloak of routine like a favourite sweater. That her skin still burns from where she was pressed up against Lexa.

“I chalk it up to doing her wallet a favour and saving her from spending any more money on candles,” she says instead.

They both chuckle. Lexa appears relieved by her lighthearted response and resumes chopping the onions as Clarke moves on from the egg mix to grab the leftover ingredients of last night’s dinner, adding the leeks and potato thins to Lexa’s bowl of mushrooms.

Clarke feels bad that the poor girl might have been racking up debt at Yankee Candle in her ill-advised wooing attempt to appeal to Lexa’s penchant for scented candles. If only Hayley knew that Lexa is very particular about her candles that even Clarke would be at a loss about the right essential oils and blend of natural scents.

(No.4 Bloom – A subtle inflection of pine mixed with the tranquil and uplifting notes of lavender for a restorative calm.)

But Clarke can’t blame Hayley for wanting to get closer to Lexa seeing as she’s guilty of the same. If she was to court Lexa now, it might not be beneath her to sign them up to a candle-making workshop.

—

It isn’t until Clarke’s distractedly peering into her fridge looking for the gruyere cheese, and thinking about herbaceous and woody notes infusing their apartment, that she realises Lexa has gone quiet after their shared laugh. She returns to the island to find Lexa deep in thought, biting her lower lip.

“You ok?” She asks worried.

“No, yeah, great,” Lexa is quick to reassure, but then draws in a deep breath before asking, “what about you?”

“I’m great too,” Clarke answers while grating the cheese.

Honestly, she’s over the moon. She normally abhors winter for its showmanship but this weekend’s meteorological extreme has started changing her mind about the benefits of Mother Nature’s incomprehensible ways, especially when snowfall in March puts Lexa in their kitchen and across the island from her. She can weather the emotional highs and lows—as intense and touch ’n go as they’ve been so far—if it means getting to prep Sunday breakfast together again.

“No, I mean, anyone have their eye on you?” Lexa corrects with a nervous chuckle.

Oh.
Clarke’s hand stills over the grater. Despite the talk of Hayley and the natural progression of the conversation, the query still throws her off.

The question of dating and significant others had been hanging over them and sitting in the back of Clarke’s mind. She thought it would require army boots and extra military reinforcements to cross that bridge and march across into the unknown.

It certainly felt like she needed her own battalion when Hayley showed up out of nowhere to her Brooklyn bodega. The relief from learning it’s nothing more than unrequited attention had put the worry about romantic relationships momentarily to bed.

But it hadn’t occurred to Clarke that Lexa might be having the same worries.

**Why would she care about my current romantic interests?**

Observing her now, her lower lip tucked under teeth while her gaze is newly diverted to the upper kitchen cupboards in pretence of nonchalance, onions forgotten, Clarke realises her anxiety about the topic may not have been one-sided.

“No secret admirer that I’m aware of,” Clarke stalls.

Lexa, ever the percipient interpreter of Clarke-speak, doesn’t fall for it, looking back at her with a thoughtful but discerning gaze to ask more pointedly, “No boyfriend or girlfriend?”

The air prickles with anticipation of the response to the casual but significant question. Clarke’s heart rate increases once more but for an entirely different reason now. Suddenly, the mood shifts with the weight of what she might say, their breakfast activities in suspended limbo.

Clarke bites her own lip, buying time as to how to phrase her answer. If what she and Lexa have been doing over the past two months constitutes as dating according to Raven and Octavia then she hasn’t done any of it, with anyone in the past four years. It’d be a stretch to call a random not-even-hookup her boyfriend or girlfriend.

The thought alone makes her queasy.

She decides to keep her answer open for the moment until her nerves steadies and better words come to her.

“Nothing serious.”

Clarke can’t tell if it’s a flash of relief or apprehension that she catches in Lexa’s reaction. Maybe both. The soft eyes and imperceptible head nod say the former, while the deeper bite into her lip and the twirling of thumbs say the latter. Whatever the case, Lexa’s clearly affected, and conflicted.

She wonders how it would influence Lexa’s ambivalence if she is to admit that there has never been anyone beyond a first awkward date, not a single guy or girl of remote interest to her. Not even one night stands.

Clarke had come close on several drunken occasions but when her alcohol-addled mind clued into the situation, likely awoken by the protested beating of her heart, she had promptly put an end to any prospect of more. When kissing someone else’s lips felt like dying, Clarke puked up her regret that it might have led to sex.

Because they had been each other’s firsts, Clarke came to associate sex with emotional intimacy. Whether it was slow and reverent or quick and dirty, soft expels or breathless panting, sex with Lexa
had always been steeped in love.

“You’ve ruined me for everyone else, Griffin,” Lexa had told her once while tracing the swells and valleys of her back with feather kisses after they had collapsed into their sheets following four successive orgasms—a competitive night of trying to break their personal bests.

(Two hours and chorused cries of her name later, Lexa proved several once mores to be the victor.)

“It’s a good thing then I don’t want anyone else, Woods,” was what Clarke had replied, turning on her side and entwining their fingers before pulling her into a lustful kiss that let Lexa know the veracity and in-disputability of her statement.

So, even through the haze of her inebriation, as soon as she’d feel a hand on her that wasn’t soft and knowing, Clarke would recoil and sober instantly. And when she realised the sting to her lips wasn’t from bee-stung ones, the tears would come streaming down, leaving her never-would-be date or never-gonna-happen one-night stand bewildered until Raven or Octavia could come to collect their inconsolable friend.

They’d walk away with a flotsam of regrets and reassurances exchanged; the best friends to the confused stranger (“Bad breakup, it’s not you”), them to her (“It’s okay, you’re okay”), and most heartbreakingly, Clarke to a non-present Lexa in repeated utterances (“I’m so sorry”).

So, no. Nothing serious at all for Clarke.

But she doesn’t want to leave Lexa on nothing, on vagueness. Not after last night, not after learning of Lexa’s letter and sharing her knitting. Assisted by ink and wool, she thinks they’re at a stage now, as fragile as their rebuilt friendship may sometimes be, that she can be—and should be—honest.

Clarke locks gazes with Lexa and braves to say, “I haven’t really dated.” On the next shaky breath, she clarifies, “There hasn’t been anyone since you.”

Lexa’s eyes widen as Clarke lets the truth of her non-existent dating history ring in the air. She doesn’t know what to make of Lexa’s expression which has visibly tipped the scale towards apprehension, but now mixed in with confusion.

A pit of dread forms in Clarke’s stomach, unsure of how her confession is being received. Maybe it wasn’t what Lexa needs or wants to hear. Clarke can’t tell. Lexa’s face gives nothing away save the continued subtle wringing of thumbs.

In an effort to move things along, Clarke then gives her try at nonchalance, as much as her thundering heart will allow, to ask, “Have you— Do you have someone?”

Again, despite the obvious direction of their conversation, Lexa seems equally taken aback by the question. She looks at Clarke trepidatious. Clarke would worry for the broken skin of Lexa’s bottom lip if she isn’t concerned with the state of her own.

Talk of romantic partners is something that friends should be able to share with each other, but the sinking stone in her stomach has Clarke second-guessing if she’d be able to digest such type of information, if it’d be too hurtful.

“There was, is someone,” Lexa says slowly, carefully, leaving a pregnant pause to let Clarke absorb the info.

Clarke’s thankful for the extra seconds to compose herself.
Even if she can’t make sense of the jumbled tenses of Lexa’s answer, hearing confirmation that there is indeed someone feels like a sucker punch, immediately regretting the terrible idea of asking. She can feel the slight wobble of her chin at the unexpected tight emotion.

Even knowing her actions would eventually push Lexa into another’s arms, Clarke feels gutted for the possibility to be an actuality.

_Fuck, it hurts._

Then it’s somehow worse.

“Her name’s Costia. We met at a work function.”

From _someone to someone with a name_ is the difference between falling off the roof of a house and being dropped from the sky without a parachute.

Her throat dries while her eyes sting with wetness.

As Lexa weighs her next words, Clarke is scared to hear more, scared to find out for how long they were together or how deep Costia’s bond with Lexa runs.

She can’t help but try to imagine what Costia would look like, surely a pretty face to match a pretty name. She feels her throat constricting further wondering about hair and eye colour—whether it’s a mix of yellow and blue or a matching set of brown;

about pigment of skin—whether she’s fair and closer to Lexa in swatches or farther apart in contrast at the other end of the spectrum in rich chocolate tones;

about height difference—whether it’s a perfect three inches to be tucked under Lexa’s chin and feel safe and protected in her arms or something more negligible to better meet green eyes and slant mouths together without effort of going on tip toes;

about her physique—whether she also runs and is as fit and into sports or she’s soft and curvy and inviting for Lexa to smooth her hands over;

about what she sounds like—whether her laugh is more genuine at Lexa’s shameless puns or her voice less scratchy in the morning, without the rasp, or if she has an English accent that’s swoon-worthy for its proper enunciation of consonants.

When Clarke’s mind goes to other possible sounds Costia might make, caused by Lexa, she knows it’s too far. For the sake of her heart and lungs, she can’t let herself go there. She shouldn’t have started in the first place. It’s a masochist exercise in futility to speculate whether Costia is or isn’t the prettiest, smartest, funniest, and most talented woman who’s a perfect fit for Lexa.

“Costia and I,” Lexa starts again but then wavers, furrowing her brows. “We are—”

The words land squarely against Clarke’s chest. When it had always been, _Clarke & I_, to hear Lexa place a different prefix in front of the ampersand is more painful than Clarke anticipated. She didn’t know the blow that a conjunctive word could deliver until her name is omitted from its use, an absence of connection to Lexa’s name, and replaced with another. She didn’t know the power of a pronoun to ruin until the _We_ refers to someone other than her and Lexa.

It hurts.

There’s a burning sensation behind her eyes.
Though her mind knows that it’s within Lexa’s purview and her every right to move on, Clarke’s heart isn’t as enlightened and not at all accepting in the moment. It’s protesting louder, more deafening, than when Clarke is drunk and about to make a mistake.

As Lexa mulls over how to finish her sentence, Clarke feels like she’s being split open and has to look away, to hide her deepening hurt over Costia’s special status.

Less, as it turns out, hurts so much more. One girl versus many seems painfully more meaningful.

Clarke didn’t know what to expect of what and who happened in Lexa’s life during their separation but had it been multiple flings or a string of affairs at least that would mean that no one stayed long enough to leave an impact.

One person, on the other hand, as Clarke well knows, can seep into your veins, leaving traces of themselves that become inseparable from the whole of you.

One person who can take up so much space inside of you and expand the universe within your chest, at once too much and not enough, that you feel like you can’t possibly contain it.

Someone to whom your every action and thought is tethered, where your happiness is an amplification of their heartbeat.

Is that who Costia is to Lexa now? Someone to hold, to press against, to kiss? To love?

Her only solace is the hope that, whatever Costia means to Lexa, she is able to handle Lexa’s heart with better care than Clarke did.

“Is she good to you?” Clarke asks quietly, the only question she can bear to hear an answer without buckling under its weight.

Her gaze fixes on the gruyere, the growing pile of shredded cheese. The intensity of her focus would melt it if her eyes weren’t glossed over with unshed tears, willing them not to fall.

“She is, very good.”

Clarke can only dumbly nod, swallowing past the lump in her throat. With the rush of blood in her ears, she doesn’t catch Lexa’s next words, “But it’s not the same. She’s not—,” and entirely misses the faint ‘you’ that falls from her lips.

All Clarke can concentrate on is overcoming the sudden stuffiness of the kitchen, the lack of oxygen. The hotness in her chest and the tightness in her stomach. She feels weak-kneed and must brace herself harder against the island to stay standing.

She’s trying to hold it together, to delay her emotional breakdown for later when she’s under the covers of her own solitude again. She doesn’t want to be the broken girl standing in front of the girl she let go. It’s no longer Lexa’s job to soothe her so Clarke has to figure out how to do it herself. Lexa deserves better than Clarke shutting down and wallowing in despair because Lexa went and did exactly what Clarke pushed her away to do—have a life without her.

So she tries to suck up as much air as possible, of what is available, and pushes down her pain. But she should’ve known that Lexa would be keyed in to her silent distress.

The next thing Clarke feels are gentle fingers under her chin, lifting it to regain her attention.

“Hey,” Lexa says softly. She puts a hand over Clarke’s and pries the cheese and grater from her.
Clarke makes eye contact then, locking onto Lexa’s unmasked worry. Two hands cup her face, a sea of green enters her blurry field of vision. Lexa’s eyes shine with compassionate warmth, even underneath her minor look of confusion.

Lexa sweeps one fallen tear from her cheek she hadn’t known escaped, with more care and kindness than Clarke deserves. She feels wholly unworthy of Lexa’s tenderness. Lexa in general. Her softness breaks Clarke more than if she was yelling and throwing things. Despite efforts not to fall apart, it dismantles Clarke with how gentle she is.

Lexa wipes another fallen tear.

“Why are you crying?” She asks kindly.

“Sorry,” Clarke whispers, an apology as much for the unbidden tears and breakdown now as for the heartbreaking decision then.

“It’s ok,” Lexa comforts.

“I’m happy for you and Costía,” Clarke tries to say with a small, gracious smile, “I wish you both well,” but failing not to sound like she’s robotically reciting a Hallmark card.

“You’re happy for us and wish us well?” Lexa asks raising an eyebrow, her confusion deepening.

“You deserve the best, Lexa. I’m happy if you’ve found it with your girlfriend,” Clarke elaborates, the words though genuine scrape her throat on their way out.

“Clarke, we aren’t together,” Lexa says.

Oh.

“I mean, we were but only very briefly. Costia and I are good friends now. Wait, did you think I was with her?” She asks.

“No,” Clarke meekly answers but her cheeks pinking betray that she might have jumped (leaped over the Grand Canyon) to conclusions.

To her credit, Lexa skates over Clarke’s presumptuousness, sparing her of further mortification. Her face has gone even softer.

“I was trying to get over a girl,” Lexa continues, making a point to stroke Clarke’s cheek, “and so was she. We bonded over our mutual heartbreak. For a hot second, we mistook it for more and tried to date but decided quickly that we work better as friends.”

“Oh,” Clarke says out loud this time. She feels monumentally daft for nose-diving off the cliff’s edge.

“I wouldn’t fake-date you if I had a real girlfriend to ward off Hayley. Costia and I never got past first base.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Clarke mutters abashed, “is it baseball?”

Lexa looks at her with intent and whispers, “It means, I never had breakfast with her. At least, not in that way. I’m particular about my eggs.”

For some reason, that gets the tears to come down harder. Maybe out of relief for being so wrong or embarrassment for her overreaction but Clarke can’t stop the tap from running.
“Hey, hey, I get it. You’ve convinced me of onion goggles,” Lexa says while brushing her thumbs across Clarke’s cheeks and catching more tears, “you’ve made your point, ok?”

Clarke laughs, wetly and brokenly, but grateful for Lexa’s humour. She takes several deep fortifying breaths.

“I’m glad that you had, have someone, Lex,” she says after her sobs have quieted, even if more shaky than she had hoped. “That Costia was there for you.”

With her face still in Lexa’s hands, Lexa surprises her by laying a kiss to her forehead before hugging her fully. Clarke draws strength from the embrace. They stand like that for awhile, holding onto each other, absorbing the meaning of their words and actions, now and during the missing years.

Then Lexa’s stomach gives a well-timed growl that breaks the tension completely, reminding them of the need to finish their breakfast prep, which by the clock’s display is veering decidedly into brunch territory.

—

The scene resets and they pick up where they left off before, Clarke with the cheese and Lexa with the onions and the air not as thick. Hearts more settled.

“No one else?” Clarke ventures to ask. She feels battle-hardened to stay on the topic of dating now that they’ve come out of the trenches after covering the treacherous ground of significant others (who turn out not to be so significant).

“You mean besides the artist I’m seeing?” Lexa jokes, and then laments, “Afraid not. I seem to only attract the persistent and oblivious kind as of late.”

“I’m sure in a city of 8.5 million, there’s someone out there waiting for you.” Me, Clarke bites back from saying as she expertly grates the cheese.

“Four million, if we’re only counting those that’d pass my basic requirement,” Lexa amends, finishing up her chopping.

“Have you checked Craigslist? Maybe you had a missed connection, and are just one keystroke away from your soulmate,” Clarke propositions, and chuckles at the aghast look she earns. She’s happy to ride the new playful wave, glad for the injection of levity back into their chat.

“You were wearing blue jeans and a red stripe sweater. Your beanie was falling. I wanted to reach out and push it back in place for you,” Lexa mimics a formal reading voice, “I was going to say hello but then my stop arrived. Late for a meeting, I hurried off but not before looking back to memorise the cute way you pushed your glasses up your nose. Are you my Waldo? Come find me. Lost and waiting at Bushwick L.”

“Who wouldn’t want to answer that ad?” Clarke asks rhetorically. Again, the Me fights not to come out.

“Modern love is an elaborate ruse by fictional writers having too much fun behind their laptops,” Lexa opines, then thinking on it for a second, appends, “or a creepy white dude.”

“Gasp. Is that cynicism I hear from someone who once declared that ‘if love is weakness, then let me be weak for you’?”
Clarke’s eyes widen at what she’d just said but Lexa only blushes, and then mumbles to herself though loud enough for Clarke to hear, “That’s because you were making avocado toast. I was referring to the fruit.”

“Uh-huh.” Clarke lets her have that one though she distinctly remembers a different time when the declaration was made, after Lexa had come hard riding her fingers and collapsed, weak-limbed, onto her. She’d also said that knees were an unnecessary accessory if she was going to be spending all her time being horizontal around Clarke.

“I mean, good for those who’ve found the one through awkward meet-cutes on the subway. But for the rest of us, I don’t know, it sometimes feels like we’re at the merciless humour of an invisible fate.”

Whatever Lexa is saying rings hollowed compared to how she and Clarke had met, colliding into each other. With Lexa catching her and Clarke leaving a literal stain on Lexa’s heart, it had very much been the universe showing its hand—giving visibility to its intentions. At least, that was what Lexa had revealed to her years later about how she had interpreted their first meeting as an inevitability. To go from believing they were kismet to possibly now questioning whether love was a cosmic joke, Clarke shrinks to think of her culpability in Lexa’s lost of faith.

“I think your dad might have something to say about that,” Clarke mutters instead, under her breath and not catching Lexa’s eyes. Before the romantic-agnostic could ask her to repeat herself, Clarke preempts, “Sorry Lex, one sec. Hold that thought. Let me just whip these up.”

Lexa hums and goes to set their plates while Clarke works the stovetop. The next few minutes are filled with the sizzle of the skillet and then the smell of egg goodness as the omelette browns and the cheese melts. Clarke stuffs extra mushrooms and chorizo into the half-moon fold of Lexa’s portion.

When she returns to the island to transfer Lexa’s omelette from the pan onto her plate, she chuckles seeing the dart of tongue reacting to the delicious sight.

“Bon appetit,” Clarke says, once situated on her stool, handing Lexa a fork.

Lexa smiles but then her eyes light up as if remembering an important matter, curiously getting up to retrieve something from the cupboards.

Clarke laughs when she comes back to gingerly place the two handmade mugs in front of her, taking great care to angle the lopsided ceramics in such a way as not to tip over. Lexa’s smile tilts into a self-satisfied smirk when they’re in position, as if she’d adjusted the Mona Lisa.

“I can’t believe you still have them,” Lexa says while grabbing the orange juice from the fridge, a tilt to her lips.

Clarke pouts thinking of parting ways with the lumpy clay, the uneven glazing, the droopy lettering of LW and CG. To her, they have more value than Da Vinci’s work. When the set was first brought home, Lexa made them use the hideous things for every drink—water, juice, coffee, beer, wine—insisting to break them in so they’d feel at home. She’d even taken to eating her soups and cereal out of them to prove their utility and versatility to Clarke, like she had brought home the ugliest pet and wanted to convince her girlfriend to let them keep it.

“Of course I kept them. They’re a monument to the rare instance of you not being good at something.”

Lexa pauses her task of uncapping the jug to feign affront, “What do you mean? They’re
Clarke waves at the monstrosities, “would even make it into Tye’s year-end preschool art show.”

Lexa gasps then goes to gently cradle the mugs with both her hands, in a gesture of covering non-existent ears, “You’re going to hurt their feelings,” before whispering to them in a serious, comforting tone, “she didn’t mean it.”

Clarke chuckles at her playfulness, fighting to keep the smile off her face. But her battle only worsens when as Lexa pours, she looks down at Clarke in such a way that has her stomach flipping, caught in the mesmerising hold of twinkling eyes that have taken on the glow of the late morning light.

The fluttering must be affecting her cognitive abilities because when Lexa sits back down next to her and clinks their mugs together, Clarke kisses her cheek absently, out of habit, and says, “Thank you lo—” before catching the word just in time, spitting the rest of it into her juice and then partially choking from the effort.

Lexa is quick to pat her back, rubbing it gently, perhaps also out of habit. Clarke bites back her gasp when Lexa’s hand moves automatically to lightly massage the nape of her neck. It becomes an entirely different bodily struggle to not melt into the soothing motion.

“You ok?” Lexa asks, concern in her eyes.

“Yup, good. Just down the wrong pipe.” Clarke tries to cover and feels equal relief and disappointment when the hand is gone. “Thanks.”

Lexa nods then takes a sip from her mug. She licks her lips, catching leftover orange pulp, before assessing, “Mhm, not guava goodness, but I guess it will have to do.”

Clarke wishes Lexa would stop doing things like that. She’s still recovering from the lingering heat on her back but her cheeks newly bloom from a sudden irrational envy of a citrus fruit.

She redirects her energy to her breakfast while Lexa has already started to consume the omelette as if these are the last eggs on earth.

Fearing for her digestive system by the speed with which she’s wolfing down her food, Clarke pats Lexa’s shoulder, laughing. “Lex, slow down. There’s more.”

It’s Lexa’s turn to blush. She looks up from under her lashes, and says bashfully, in scant defence of her enthusiasm, “S’good.”

Clarke’s heart thrums at the domesticity of it all, thoughts of Costia or of Lexa doing this with her or anyone else filed away.

—

“Depends on what you’re looking for, I guess,” Clarke says after they’re onto seconds of their omelettes, continuing the thread of conversation from earlier. “I’m sure there’s someone out there who’s into lame jokes and exercising, maybe at the same time.” She teases, “Must love avocado more than mortgages. Lame, fit, and poor, I’m sure there’s a perfect match for you on Tinder.”

“Sounds like my ideal woman. Where do I sign up?” Lexa asks with a suggestive raise of her brows but then makes Clarke laugh when they immediately knit together as she goes to append, “Wait,
“what is Tender?”

“Lex, you can’t be serious.”

“What, working architect hours, when would I have time to tender anyone?” Lexa defends.

“Ok, luddite. First of, it’s called Tinder, and it’s a dating app. If you like someone’s picture, you swipe right, if you don’t, then left.”

Lexa’s lips curl in distaste. “Well, that just sounds mean,” then adds after a beat, “and exactly like something Anya invented and Raven coded into existence.”

Clarke chuckles. “They would, wouldn’t they? Though their version would be more explicit about disliking someone.” She goes on to clarify when Lexa looks at her confused, “Tinder’s anonymous. You’re notified of a match only when two people mutually swipe right. You wouldn’t know if anyone’s swiped left.”

“Do you have Tinder?” Lexa asks, a mix of judgment and unease. Clarke hides her smile when Lexa lets out a small sigh of relief at the shake of her head.

“Murphy showed it to me once, it was after his breakup and before Bellamy. It was fun for about an hour watching his swipe journey descend into despair. He swiped right on everyone, and only received like two replies. Both very suspicious.”

Lexa interrupts, laughing. “Maybe that was when he decided to give the darker, hairier sex a try?”

“Maybe. Needless to say, the app didn’t appeal to me, too stressful wondering if I’m right-worthy. And it turns out,” Clarke pauses for effect, “artists are also too busy to tender anyone.”

Lexa looks to be chewing on something as she breaks from her eating. “Show me.”

“What?” Clarke croaks out, almost choking on her juice, again. “You want to try it?” She asks, surprised.

Lexa shrugs while subconsciously patting Clarke on the back, again. “Just curious how it works.”

Clarke pulls out her phone. “I’ll have to download the app first.”

She tries to keep the butterflies in when Lexa scoots her stool closer, their sides brushing so she can get a better view of Clarke’s screen. Quiet minutes are spent while Clarke downloads the app, links her Facebook account and sets up her profile.

Lexa offers to help her pick out a photo and draft up her bio.

They mutely go through some of her recent selfies. Lexa stays quiet so Clarke doesn’t know what she’s thinking. The photos are mostly candid shots snapped by Raven or Octavia more than pictures that Clarke has taken herself. Predominantly, she’s ever only sporting a small half smile, doubtful she’d attract any potential suitors. But Lexa takes her time to look at each one, seemingly taking in versions of Clarke—sleepy and grumpy and hungry—she hadn’t seen in the last few years.

Clarke feels exposed with the silent slideshow and decides to randomly pick a photo that wasn’t awful. Lexa finally perks up then from her haze to tell her to choose the one five photos back instead where there’s a hint of the blue t-shirt she’s wearing, nicely offsetting her eyes and the sunlight that’s hitting her hair. “You’re smiling in this one,” she justifies shyly, despite the obviousness of her choice.
After she sets the photo, Lexa takes the phone from her to compose the About text. Clarke doesn’t know why Lexa is laughing after until she reads it, but should’ve known something was up with the way Lexa’s tongue was poking out while typing it.

**Clarke, 29**

**Brooklyn**

*Speak to me in vermillion and I’ll answer you in apricot and burnt-cinnamon hues. Meet me in the hinterland where green fades into blue. I’ll be the one with the paintbrush, you bring you.*

“That’s terrible! You make sound like an ass, a horrible poet ass,” Clarke whines through her own laughter as she shoves Lexa on the shoulder.

“That’ll be your first red flag if anyone swipes right to this,” Lexa says chuckling.

“I feel like your logic is flawed.”

Lexa shrugs as if that’s the plan. “We need to weed out the weak.”

Their amusement continues when they start to browse profiles for potential matches in earnest. They laugh as they swipe, all left so far if Clarke is counting. She notices that Lexa stays silent on profiles of girls with blonde hair and blue eyes.

“What about this Finn here?” Lexa asks, poking her side good-naturedly. “He’s got good hair game.”

“No thanks, I’ve already had the best,” Clarke says without looking up, her eyes widening when the words catch up. “Besides, *long walks on a beach?* C’mon buddy, be better than that. Hard swipe left.”

At one point, Clarke doesn’t realise she’s accidentally swiped right, momentarily distracted by Lexa’s vanilla scent mixing with her laundry detergent. This close, she smells like tumbled softness. Clarke’s breath hitches when she sees a hand on her knee, and then feels a squeeze.

“Clarke?” Lexa repeats. “Babe, there’s a message.”

“Huh?”

Sure enough, when she looks down at her phone again, there’s a notification in the speech bubble with a message waiting. Someone named Niylah has texted, “I’m colour blind but you’re cute.”

Clarke has no clue who this Niylah is, nor does she care. Lexa, on the other hand, seems to care a great deal and has a stronger reaction to the romantic connection.

“Pfft, not what I would have first texted if I saw your photo,” Lexa says crossing her arms, scoffing at Niylah’s supposed pedestrian opening.

“Oh?” Clarke challenges with an eyebrow that reads, *Think you can do better?*. Clarke doesn’t expect a serious answer but eats her words when Lexa looks at her and then places a hand on her cheek.

“Change of location,” Lexa starts, sweeping her thumb across the apple and smiling smugly at the slight gasp it draws. She looks intensely into Clarke’s eyes.

“Meet me where the wheat field ends and the sky begins, I need to know if it’s impossibly as
beautiful there as looking at you here. I suspect not, but seeking confirmation.”

With the tingles Clarke feels from the touch on her cheek to the fluttering in her stomach, she practically wants to flee Brooklyn and skip to that wheat field. But she doesn’t want to give Lexa the satisfaction of knowing the effect she has on her.

“Lex,” she says, drawing out her name slowly and playing into her game. She puts a hand on Lexa’s thigh, making a few gentle passes up and down. She has to hold back her laugh at Lexa’s flustered look.

“Yeah?” is followed by a heavy swallow.

Clarke tugs at the hem of her sweater signalling for her to lean in until Clarke can whisper in her ear. She lets a few beats past for the rush in her own ears to lower, as her lips nearly brush the shell of Lexa’s, and then whispers, “I think you need to unsubscribe from badpoetry.com.”

Clarke laughs when Lexa breaks from their hold with a huff. While Lexa sends her a faux glare, Clarke congratulates herself for not losing her nerve being so close to Lexa and not kiss her.

“Whatever, it was that or, ‘Colour me intrigued,’” Lexa pouts.

At the jut of lip which she could never say no to, Clarke concedes that she preferred the first try and would have answered her text.

“How ‘bout Niyalah, are you going to answer hers?”

Clarke wants to ask, Who?, having completely forgotten about the match. “I don’t know. What would I even say?”

“Do you think she’s cute?” Lexa asks, pursing her lips, nervous and expectant.

Clarke wants to draw the bottom lip into her mouth and soothe the worry away with a gentle swipe of her tongue. She holds Lexa’s gaze, then slowly shakes her head. Twin sighs of relief come out before Clarke clicks off the message and then closes out of the app.

“See, not really my thing.”

“You’re right, this is your thing.” Lexa spears into the omelette resuming her breakfast.

Clarke smiles and subtly deletes the app when Lexa’s not looking.

—

After breakfast cleanup and Clarke has moved on to the next part of their typical Sunday routine, Lexa inquires after a shower, her OCD cleanliness kicking in, not able to wait until she got back to her place. Both are aware but neither points out that the snow has stopped by now and the roads are clear enough that Lexa could well leave to shower at her own apartment.

With the sun reaching its mid afternoon strength, the stranded-by-snowstorm excuse is stretched beyond plausibility as reason for keeping Lexa here. But Clarke happily remains mute if Lexa is as keen as she is to spend a few extra hours together.

Twenty minutes later, Clarke is still hunched over the kitchen counter in intense concentration, in the same position when Lexa had left for the bathroom. Brows furrowed, pout in place.

“Clarke just let me help you.”
“No,” Clarke rejects the offer with her head still down.

“But if you would just—” she swats Lexa’s hand away at her attempt to intervene.

“No, I’m going to get it. I’m so close.”

“You said that before I hopped in the shower.”

She ignores Lexa’s dismissal, then outright startles her a minute later, jumping off the stool and exclaiming, “Aha! Ye of little faith.”

It’s a good thing Clarke’s already off the stool when she at last makes eye contact with Lexa. Her triumphant pump of the fist stops mid-air seeing Lexa back in her jeans and one of Clarke’s borrowed tops, hair freshly washed and being air-dried with a towel.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous.

Clarke sputters at the sight of Lexa looking so at home and adorable in Clarke’s t-shirt with the emblazon, *Fuck Art*.

Lexa doesn’t notice her malfunctioning, distractedly looking down assessing the cause for Clarke’s excitement.

“Um, babe. It’s wrong.” The pet name slips out again that neither of them notices in the scuttle.

“What do you mean it’s wrong?” Clarke asks indignantly.

“There’s already a 2 in that column.”

Clarke practically shoves her aside to review the call, and drops her jaw in horror at the rookie mistake. “Noooooo, but I really thought I had it.”

The intense concentration returns, pencil back in her left hand as she vigorously rubs out her error. She retakes her post on the stool, zealously hoarding the top left corner of the Puzzles & Games section of the newspaper, trying to will the numbers one to nine to appear out of thin air.

She can hear Lexa failing to suppress her laughter at the image of Grumpy Cat doing Sudoku.

“Here.”

Pitying her, Lexa approaches from behind, places one hand gently on Clarke’s shoulder, the other reaching forward to point to an empty square. Her lips are close enough to Clarke’s ear that she almost grazes it when she says, “9.”

“How do you do that?” Clarke dramatically slams her pencil down in disgust, hoping the sound would drown out the gasp she made at Lexa’s sudden too-close proximity.

Lexa takes her pencil, and a few jots later, in a matter of seconds, she has all the 3s and 8s filled in as well.

“I thought we covered this already last night. What can I say, I’m good with my hands,” Lexa says as she wiggles her fingers in Clarke’s vision, receiving a retaliating elbow in the side. She laughs and pokes Clarke in a known ticklish spot before tactically retreating towards the couch out of revenge-striking distance.

Clarke chases after her. When she catches up, they both yelp at the surprise strength she has to topple
Lexa onto the couch. They burst into giggles as Clarke tries to tickle her into submission, attacking sensitive ribs.

As expected, her upper-hand is short-lived. Lexa manages to wrangle herself free and somehow flip them so that she is now on top of Clarke. Catches of breath are exchanged for fixed looks until her eyes drop to Clarke’s lips.

Clarke can feel Lexa’s chest rising and falling against her, and her heart thumps wildly in response, thinking of the many times they were in this exact position on the same couch.

*****

It had been their Sunday morning tradition, Lexa with her crossword and Clarke with Suduko. They would be sitting on the couch, Clarke’s back against the arm, and her legs resting leisurely across Lexa’s lap.

The May weather had finally brought about the much-anticipated spring, after a particularly brown winter that dirtied boots with sludge and road salt. Green had returned to the leaves and blue to the skies. Migratory birds were back to their perches atop telephone lines and rooftops, providing a pleasant murmur to these early hours. All of which deceptively stretched time in their apartment to an immeasurable breadth.

“What’s a five-letter slang word for extremely good, attractive, or stylish?”

“I don’t know. What do you have so far?” Clarke asked without looking up.

“I tried L-E-X-A but it doesn’t fit.”

Clarke blindly reached for a pillow and threw it in her direction.

Lexa expertly dodged the missile. After a pause, she said more seriously, “But there is an L and a E.”

“Hmmm, what about FLEEK?” Clarke pondered, and then inflected her voice to take on the cadence of an energetic cheerleader. “Like, your hair is always on fleek?”

“Perfect, that works!” Lexa hummed her satisfaction and made scratches to her newspaper. Clarke felt odd pride at her inner Tween being useful for once.

Not making any progress with her own puzzle, she set it aside on the coffee table, and turned her attention to the familiar sight of an absorbed Lexa tapping her pen against her chin, wholly focused on the half-folded newspaper before her. They were probably the only residents on their block, or in the borough, who still received printed news. But it was a habit that Clarke had never outgrown from her childhood.

Eating a big breakfast, reading the papers, and doing the puzzles were mainstays of Sunday mornings in the Griffin household.

(“Sundays are for crosswords, Clarke.”)

It was her dad’s way of ensuring they were a stable unit before the hectic weekdays of meetings and consults and classes and after-school activities would invariably pull them all in different directions. During high school, Lexa (and sometimes Anya) had joined them, easily folding into the routine, one
that had naturally carried forward into college when Clarke and Lexa had moved in together.

She smiled fondly, seeing the tip of that regal nose wrinkle in concentration and the brightness of those eyes moving furtively across the page while calculating strategic placement of letters.

But when the expanse of uninterrupted skin of long smooth legs came into view (“Sundays are not a day for pants, Clarke”), Clarke was suddenly overcome with a desire for a different kind of Sunday activity.

She lifted her legs off of Lexa’s lap, and moved to place a knee on either side of Lexa’s hips to straddle her. She wordlessly removed the ballpoint and tossed the newspaper to the ground once Lexa stilled her movements after finally cluing into Clarke’s new position. Lexa’s hand was still in the air, mid-grasp, when Clarke leaned in to whisper seductively, “I’ll show you how on fleek you are."

She didn’t give Lexa a chance to respond before she grabbed the back of Lexa’s neck and pulled her into a heated kiss. Deep and dirty with tongue and teeth.

“I don’t think that’s how threats work, Clarke,” Lexa said through her daze when they came up for air, her eyes darkened and lips bruised. Despite her words, she looked ready to be threatened again. “I’m never going to beat Raven at crosswords if you keep kissing me like that.”

“Well, if you’d rather think about Raven and crosswords,” Clarke lifted her leg faking to get off of Lexa.

Promptly, Lexa’s hands went to her hips to hold her in place.

“Fuck Raven.”

“Please don’t.”

“Never,” Lexa declared while tracing the letters of Clarke’s F*ck Art t-shirt, “I’ve already got my hands full.”

Clarke laughed when Lexa’s hands predictably groped her breasts, squeezing for emphasis while waggling her eyebrows.

She leaned in for a sweet kiss which Lexa eagerly accepted but then she seemed to have other ideas on how to preoccupy her hands. Clarke felt them return to her hips, encouraging her into a slow grinding motion. Lexa then slouched a bit before lifting her shirt to provide Clarke with better friction. Clarke moaned, rubbing herself against the hards abs that she could feel through the fabric of her pajama shorts which were getting damper by the second. The ache was building while intrepid hands went to cup her ass.

Lips then went searching along the column of her neck, sucking lightly at first and more fervently soon after.

“Lex, we can’t,” Clarke protested half-heartedly while contradictorily craning her neck for better access and weaving a hand through Lexa’s bed-head mane to hold her head closer for added pressure. “We’ll be late for brunch with your dad,” she had no idea what the current time was, and didn’t care, but she managed to expel her disingenuous concern for punctuality with the little breath that was starting to deplete rapidly in supply, “he’s got some kind of announcement.”

“He probably just discovered YouTube.”
“It sounded important, I don’t want to miss it. Besides, we can’t let Anya and Raven beat us there again.”

“Challenge,” Lexa switched to the other side of her neck, intent on mirroring the hickeys that Clarke could already feel forming, and punctuated the last word, “accepted.” With a well-placed suction, she ended her riposte on a smug popping sound.

She lifted her head and that was Clarke’s only split-second notice before soft lips were enveloping her once more in a hungry kiss and Lexa’s hands snuck under Clarke’s shirt to touch skin unimpeded.

A tongue was introduced, Clarke was unsure by whom, at the same time she felt a determined thumb pass over a nipple, then stroked back and forth with increasing pressure, while her other breast was kneaded to match the tempo of Clarke’s hip movements. Lexa’s quiet panting had Clarke eagerly abandoning any semblance of self-control. She took Lexa’s hand, the one not working her nipple under the sweetest torture, to guide it inside her shorts.

Lexa stopped her. Clarke whined but was relieved she only did so to remove both their shorts. She didn’t bother taking their tops off not wanting to break their kissing, instead rucking them up to rest above breasts.

They retook their positions and both whimpered when Clarke’s wetness painted Lexa’s abs as Lexa’s hand returned to kneading her breasts.

When long fingers stroked through her, gathering up her soaked neediness to spread across her folds, Clarke had to stop sucking on Lexa’s bottom lip for a moment to pace her racing heart. Lexa pulled back slightly too to take in Clarke’s flushed cheeks and dilated pupils as she explored while Clarke continued to rock into her.

“So fucking beautiful,” Lexa whispered her awe, and slowed down her movements despite the hurried agenda. “I’m so in love with you.”

The brunette must be in love because Clarke didn’t see how her uncombed hair and her rumbled tee constituted as anything in the neighbourhood of beauty.

“Kindly stop being so damn attractive,” Lexa breathed her request as her finger slowly entered Clarke, stroking her gently and stretching her before inserting a second, “It’s been over a decade, don’t you think that’s enough pretty? Have mercy on my poor heart.”

Despite what they were doing, it was her words that made Clarke blush.

“I promise to be gentle.”

But then, the opposite happened. As if suddenly remembering that they were racing against an invisible clock, within one swell breath, Lexa flipped Clarke on her back to lie atop the couch, and slipped inside again. She somehow had one of Clarke’s leg over her shoulder, spreading her wider. Air left Clarke’s lungs at the show of strength. Her arms shot out to wrap around Lexa’s other shoulder for anchor.

“Not too gentle,” Lexa negotiated between pants while pushing in as far as she could reach before pulling out and slamming back in. Clarke bit into her shoulder, avidly nodding her agreement.

Mouths immediately rejoined in a competitive dance of one-upmanship to swallow each other’s moans, tongues deepening as Lexa started pushing in and out faster.
With her shirt half ridden, and Lexa’s lips and hands insistent, Clarke was happily helpless to the rhythm Lexa had set. They were still more clothed than she’d normally prefer for as much access to Lexa’s skin as possible, but she couldn’t do anything about their current overdressed situation even if she wanted to. Lexa’s commitment to expedite the process demanded her full attention, and left little room for anything else. (They would reserve slow for later that evening when there’d be more time to peel back layer by layer.)

Soon, Clarke had to grab the back of the couch to desperately hang on after Lexa added a third finger, her thrusts taking on a merciless pace, using her shoulder as leverage to drive as deeply as possible. Clarke surrendered to the rhythm and encouraged it with pitch cries in Lexa’s ear.

So consumed by the closeness of her orgasm, almost wailing at how near the edge she was, Clarke didn’t realise Lexa had withdrawn and scooted down until she felt a tongue replacing fingers.

Lexa tried to make up with speed for what her tongue lacked in reach and girth. Clarke had no complaints especially not with the moans Lexa was emitting as if she was the one in Clarke’s position, legs spread and being thoroughly fucked. She nearly blacked out when Lexa’s lips sucked on her clit and fingers reentered.

Somewhere between the swipe of Lexa’s tongue over her clit and the slide of her fingers, accumulating wetness on the way out that lips then hungrily swallowed, Clarke came with a hoarse cry, flooding herself all over Lexa’s mouth and chin.

When Clarke’s breathing evened, Lexa withdrew gently, giving her a slow final lick and gentle kiss before she came back up to straddle Clarke again.

She locked eyes on Clarke, waited a beat, then proceeded to suck her fingers, moaning at the taste. Clarke felt a fresh rush of arousal seeing them wrapped in a different warmth.

Licking them only half clean, Lexa looked to Clarke in silent ask, and receiving a nod, pulled her fingers out of her mouth and gently pushed them into Clarke’s. Lexa pumped slowly as she started grinding on Clarke’s bare thigh.

Their frenzied chase for Clarke’s high must have left Lexa soaking uncomfortably earlier going by the wetness on her leg now. Clarke was getting worked up again at the dual stimulation of being orally penetrated by Lexa’s fingers while feeling Lexa spread herself in tight circles; her other hand bracing Clarke’s shoulder, her eyes closed, mouth opened, cheeks rosy and head tipped back as she moved deliberately against Clarke.

Seeing Lexa covered in a light sheen of perspiration, Clarke couldn’t help but think, god she’s so stupidly pretty—and was determined to help her fall, if only to see that beautiful face when she tipped over the edge.

Clarke slipped her left hand between her thigh and Lexa’s completely swollen lips. She curled her fingers up to easily enter Lexa who immediately began to ride them gratefully. Lexa timed her continuing thrusts into Clarke’s mouth to synchronise with every time she came down on Clarke’s fingers. She would apply soft pressure to Clarke’s tongue whenever she reconnected with her thigh.

Clarke would ruminate on Lexa’s multi-tasking talent if only to selfishly prolong her own pleasure, but she knew her girlfriend was close, and needed relief soon. Clarke took Lexa’s hand off her shoulder and urged it instead to palm her breast again. At the same time she lifted her hips and squeezed Lexa’s ass to bring the lower half of their bodies closer.

Clarke angled her hand to give Lexa as much leverage as possible to rub harder against her palm on
the downstroke. She felt herself dripping seeing the bounce of Lexa’s breasts from her efforts, shirt still rumbled past to expose hard, pink nipples.

She needed more, and wanted to give Lexa more.

Clarke tapped her wrist to indicate for Lexa to withdraw from her mouth. Lexa complied and opened her eyes, looking blissed and confused.

“Baby, I want to taste you too,” Clarke alerted.

She nudged Lexa off her fingers, which induced a laughable pout that turned into an uncontrollable grin when she gestured for her to shimmy up until her thighs were positioned on either side of Clarke’s face. Lexa stared down at her with completely blown pupils, straining to hold back her excitement. Clarke nodded and then the next thing she felt was Lexa’s warmth descending on her, enveloping her.

She stiffened her tongue as much as possible while Lexa resumed her riding movements. When the speed increased and Lexa started fucking herself using Clarke’s mouth with abandon, Clarke couldn’t decide what to do with her hands so she split the difference, one hand palming Lexa’s ass, the other circling her own clit. Feeling Lexa get wetter as her walls possessively contracted around Clarke’s tongue, she pushed two fingers inside herself to relieve the throb.

Clarke pushed in with every moan and whimper she pulled out of Lexa by her tongue.

“Oh god, Clarke.” Lexa’s eyes were scrunched in pleasure, chanting her name over and over, until she finally gasped out, “Baby, I— I can’t hold it anymore.”

Clarke somehow managed to open her mouth wider, driving her tongue in deeper while pressing her upper lip hard on Lexa’s clit to help her let go. The reaction was immediate, Lexa spilled herself all over Clarke.

“Fuck.”

She lifted herself off of Clarke’s face and repositioned her body to hover over her, giving her breathing room to recover.

“We just did,” Clarke said after taking a large gulp of air. She moved one arm to cover her eyes, panting heavily, and smiled when she felt kitten licks across her chin, Lexa helping to clean up her mess.

“I love you,” Lexa said, smiling against Clarke’s lips before she collapsed atop her, adding to the heap of loose limbs and wild hair.

“I love you. So much,” Clarke returned, with equal adoration.

She tightened her hold around Lexa’s shoulders and kissed her temple, when she caught sight of the time and chuckled. Clarke praisingly patted Lexa on the back. “Good job babe. We still got like 20 minutes.”

Lexa lifted her head to verify, and then raised her hand in a high-five request.

“Really?” Clarke squinted at her through one eye. “Are you asking for a high-five after sex?” At Lexa’s smirk and half-shrug, she slapped the open hand good-naturedly, earning a kiss to the cheek.

They laid there for another five minutes, and Clarke was almost asleep when Lexa stood and
stretched a hand out to help her up.

“Let’s go shower. I’ll just text Dad that we’ve got plumbing issues and will be 15 minutes late.” Eyebrows wag suggestively as she took off her shirt while walking backwards in the direction of their bedroom, before turning abruptly and sprinting towards it.

“Coming?”

*****

The air stills around them as Lexa hovers over Clarke on the couch, knees on either side of her hips, holding her down gently by her wrists above her head.

Thoughts of Sudoku and crosswords are no longer on Clarke’s mind.

Their giggles subsided once they grasped the position they were in. But instead of blushing at their proximity, especially coming out of her memory, Clarke is nervous trying to read Lexa’s expression that has fallen unexpectedly quiet and pensive. The playfulness of earlier is replaced by a sudden heaviness that’s not from the weight of feeling Lexa against her body again.

Her heart thuds loudly in anticipation of what’s to come, her anxiety heightened by the way Lexa is biting her lower lip and looking at her as if the answers of the universe is laid before her yet somehow so far out of reach.

“We could have had this,” Lexa whispers, gesturing a hand between them and then more vaguely at the apartment though presumably she metaphorically means this weekend and their time together. “Why didn’t you want this?” she asks, putting a heartbreaking hand to her chest, fingers splayed out in supplication as much as to steady herself.

Clarke feels her insides twist suddenly, painfully.

“Why didn’t you come for me?”

She has to strain to hear the question with how quietly Lexa asks it. When the words do finally reach her ear, the murmured sounds have become a roar and would have knocked her over if she isn’t already on her back.

Her chest tightens.

“Lexa,” Clarke breathes.

Lexa’s gaze is no longer on Clarke but a spot above her head, possibly at their hands. There’s a deep swallow before Lexa lets go of Clarke’s wrists, and shifts to sit cross-legged on the couch. Clarke immediately misses the warmth but knows the distance is necessary for the conversation. She adjusts her body so that she’s mirroring Lexa, who’s now looking down at her thumbs.

“I know you said no. But I thought you needed time and would eventually come,” Lexa says, her voice quiet and sad.

Clarke feels ashamed about how much time she needed, wasted, before she realised the full extent of her actions. Before it was too late. She’s about to answer when Lexa continues, looking forlorn.
“There’s this mews, a small cobblestone laneway, near Kensington that I wandered into once when I got off at the wrong station. The painted brickwork caught my eye as I walked by trying to reorient myself. Do you know what my first thought was?”

Clarke can see the strenuous effort Lexa is making not to let tears fall from her eyes that have welled up from the memory, despite staring blankly while telling her story, trying to keep emotion out of it. Though phrased as a question, Clarke knows Lexa isn’t expecting an answer, and stays quiet to let her continue.

“My first thought wasn’t about the nice brick pattern or interesting example of postwar architecture. It was, would Clarke like this?”

Her voice is steady enough but Lexa lets out a shuddered breath that matches the shake of Clarke’s own hands, holding themselves back from wanting to comfort her and doing a better job than the gasp that had escaped.

“It had already been two years since I moved to London. And still, when I should be trying to find my way back to make a meeting that I was already late for, I thought of you. Whether you’d like the different colour facades or would find it too tacky. I was thinking,” Lexa pauses to discretely wipe the corner of her eyes, “if there was a two-bedroom flat with a chartreuse-coloured door and cute shuttered windows waiting for you, would you come?”

Clarke’s heart crumbles.

Perhaps it’s being back in this space, in the microcosm of where their love bloomed and matured and ultimately withered, that it’s been such an emotionally unpredictable weekend. They’re surrounded by the discarded petals that Clarke had plucked off the bud, and trying to make sense whether they’re standing in a graveyard of regret and sorrow, or there’s enough scattered seeds to plant a new flower field of hope and happiness.

But of everything that she has put Lexa through in the last four years—ever since the fateful brunch with Gustus that she didn’t know at the time was the beginning of the end—there is one wrong that Clarke can right, one sprout of truth that she can offer.

“Lexa,” Clarke repeats hoping to capture Lexa’s gaze this time. It’s been minutes since Clarke has seen a glimpse of green. Infinitely too long.

When Lexa finally does look up, Clarke’s heart aches in equal measure to the pain that she reads in the gloss of her eyes.

Clarke tearfully reaches out to take Lexa’s trembling hand, and sighs a small relief that she isn’t reticent about the touch.

“I am sorry, Lexa,” she expresses with deep sorrow, a meagre mea culpa that doesn’t even begin to convey the depth of her remorse. “I’m sorry for what I did and how I’ve made you feel.” She takes in a deep breath. “But, to fully answer your question, even though it’s rhetorical and I’m probably several years too late, there’s something I want to show you,” Clarke says nervously.

Clarke can see the confusion all over Lexa’s face as she stands and stretches a hand out to help her up. When Lexa takes it, she chances lacing her fingers through Lexa’s hand and leads them towards the front door, grabbing the couch throw on the way out.

At Lexa’s deepening furrowed brow, Clarke clarifies in a soft tone, “It’s downstairs. In my studio.”
In painting, Clarke works with cracks that form slowly by brittle failure of dry paint. Where it’s a natural consequence of time and nature, she folds it into her process, plays with the perceptual effects of disrupted paint and the way certain light passages can make visually obvious what has before gone un-noticed.

Bringing Lexa into her studio feels like Lexa is the light and Clarke is the paint.

All of Clarke’s vulnerabilities and struggles will be laid bare for her perceptive eyes to see, that to everyone else are just strikes of charcoal and graphite, and swathes of green that have never made it onto her canvases.

For Lexa, it might reveal what the years apart have meant to Clarke, what fault lines have erupted and carved themselves onto tattered fabrics during nights of anguish, what marks and scratches have filled her sketchbooks during empty days when her canvas refused to be anything but vacant, what cracks Clarke hides in her art so that she didn’t have to face them in her life.

The studio will be new to Lexa, only ever having shared her workspace with Clarke in their cramped den. It came after Lexa had left for London when Clarke purchased both the upstairs and downstairs space. Usually, they’d enter through the main front door and immediately descend the stairs up to their second floor apartment, never paying heed to the ground floor door around the corner other than when they crossed paths with the downstairs neighbour to say hi.

It used to be an old printing shop, back when the residential street had mix commercial use as well. A graphic designer had rented it out as his live/work space before Clarke had taken over.

When it came into her possession, Lincoln helped to transfer most of Clarke’s materials for setup downstairs and to convert the small kitchen into her supplies washing station. Clarke had decided to keep the vintage risograph printer that the designer had left behind, using it for small print jobs to help advertise her exhibitions.

The machinery notwithstanding, it’s an artist’s space in every sense with canvases of all sizes leaned against walls, which themselves are adorned with coloured prints, while buckets of gesso and tubes of acrylic and oil neatly and messily line metal shelves, along with different types of light fixtures and numerous tin cans containing a variety of brushes and charcoal sticks.

In the centre of the room are two large skids that allows Clarke to work on larger pieces on the floor.

“When did Monty move out?” Lexa asks as she surveys the room, eyes continually scanning while standing in front of the worktable that she built from discarded doors, and absently brushing her hand against the stained wood.

The table is positioned in front of the large window, next to a set of drawers holding different types of paper and sketches. Clarke’s sketchbooks are scattered atop of both surfaces. Two stools, one stationary, the other on castors, sit listlessly as if they had been abandoned on a moment’s notice. A third armchair sits between them, looking loved and lived in because Clarke uses it sometimes for her morning coffee but more often for knitting or reading when sleep escapes her.

“Not long after you left,” Clarke answers as she arranges the plaid blanket down at an open space on the floor where they could sit and lean against the only free wall.

She decides to forgo the three seating options, needing to be physically closer to Lexa for what she is about to reveal.

(He puts it out of her mind how she had sat behind Lexa on the stool teaching her how to paint,
holding the brush for her and holding her breath because they were doing it topless.)

Clarke pats a spot on the blanket, gesturing for Lexa to get comfortable on the ground while she rummages her drawers to locate the desired sketchbook.

Once found, she returns to join Lexa, sitting next to her close enough that their shoulders brush as their backs lean against the wall. She pulls her knees up and props the sketchbook on top.

A deep breath.

Silence ensues, except for the turning of paper, as Clarke flips to the desired page. In the spine is an envelope, plain white, standard size, unmarked and unstamped.

For how unimportant it looks, she hands it to Lexa as if transferring a bomb.

Lexa looks at her curiously, a question in her eyes, as she gingerly takes the envelope. Reading its meaningfulness in Clarke’s scared blues, she handles it delicately.

“It’s for you,” Clarke says, not able to raise her voice above a whisper, “it’s um … you’ll see.”

What Lexa will see when she opens it is the fifth letter Clarke wrote to her but the fifth one she didn’t send.

—

Clarke closes her eyes and leans her head back against the wall, hands hanging loosely over her knees, and leaving Lexa to discover the contents. She hears the sharp inhale as Lexa starts to read, and then not a sound after, figuring she’s holding her breath line by line.

She tries to stay still, not wanting to disrupt the frailty of the moment. In the letter she had wondered where Lexa would be if the one written before it had reached her. But to have Lexa reading this one, sat next to her, in the studio of their home and after a night and morning spent together, is beyond the future she foresaw when the words leaked out of her porous heart—when the ocean between them had kept Clarke and Lexa on either shores of holding on and moving on.

Next thing Clarke hears is the rustling of paper again as Lexa is likely opening up the folded napkin sketch that accompanies the letter. Clarke knows the one without looking, it’s two figures standing in front of Big Ben.

Her heart feels like it’s beating out of her chest, sounds of crashing waves fill her ears.

On the same trip as Barcelona, they had spent a few days in the south of Spain. There’s a beach there, where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic, where sea ends and ocean begins. Clarke remembers standing mesmerised on the walkway watching both bodies of water—rough and windy with crashing waves on one side and peaceful and still ripples on the other—and marvelling at the impossibility of such an encounter. Blue and green, warm and cool, co-existing.

She remembers staring at it, so absorbed in her perceptual meditation on where the separation of colours occurs and trying to isolate the exact moment they mix, she had forgotten where she was until Lexa’s warm hands wrapped a light scarf around her bare shoulders. (“You’ll burn, love.”)

She remembers when she turned around to look at Lexa, gathered up in her protective embrace, she saw the deepest affection—the meaning of love—in the colour of her eyes, filling Clarke’s vision with dense forest instead of ocean and sea. She imagined then a house by the water amongst the trees and mountains.
Clarke can hear the crashing waves now, and can make out the house, precariously perched on a cliff’s edge, windswept and battered but still standing.

Sharing the letter and the sketch feels like she’s on the precipice. Of what, she’s not sure yet. She’s not sure if the tide of truth will pull them closer to the house or farther away.

Goosebumps and the hairs on her arm rise when several silent minutes later, Lexa puts a halting hand over hers. The touch is both anchoring and unmooring.

“Clarke?”

Clarke prolongs the minute as much as she can—an expanded breath of time—before answering knowing that when she opens her eyes and parts her lips things may never be the same with Lexa again.

By the way Lexa is looking at her when she does give her attention, Clarke is thankful for the extra seconds she took to compose herself.

Lexa’s eyes shine with held-back emotion and utter confusion. Her knees are drawn up to her chest, the letter balanced on them while the sketch is held shakily in her hands.

“Clarke, I don’t understand. The letter is undated but the sketch says June 2017 on the back.”

“The sketch wasn’t drawn in New York, it was drawn onsite,” Clarke says slowly, her voice adopting the tremor of Lexa’s hand, the implication hanging for a moment before she discloses, “And the letter was written a month after I got back.”

“Got back?” Lexa parrots as a question, letting the words echo in the room while she tries to grasp their meaning. When it comes, she looks incredulous. “You went to London?”

“Yes.”

“Last summer?”

“Yes.”

“London?”

Clarke nods.

“To answer your other question, I did come for you.”

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The rest of their Sunday, picking right up after this.

If it hasn't been obvious yet, this is a very Clexa-centric fic, hence no mentions of others
I've been travelling quite a bit lately so it's been more challenging to edit this instalment as thoroughly as the last but I didn't want to leave you guys hanging any longer, so to speak. I'll go back to smooth it out later. The resolution to Clarke and Lexa's emotional weekend will be in the next chapter, which will wrap up this arc of the story as we head into the final third act.

Thank you so much for continuing to read. I'm humbled and encouraged by your comments. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday.
Someone to Stay

Chapter Summary

The rest of their Sunday.

Chapter Notes

This chapter really has what it says on the tin: fluff, angst, pining and clichés (in varying quantities and intensities). There also might be some canon slippages in there. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You've been fighting the memory all on your own
Nothing washes, nothing grows
I know how it feels being by yourself in the rain
We all need someone to stay

Can you keep me close?
Can you love me most?

Vancouver Sleep Clinic

****

Clarke feels lost. Metaphorically if not literally lost without Lexa.

Lexa was their map holder and navigator whenever and wherever they traveled. Clarke would point to a random spot on the map and it would be Lexa who’d gamely get them there. With an eerily accurate internal compass and her professional training as an architect, Lexa always had greater spatial awareness than Clarke and could move them along the messy lines of a foreign map with the ease of a Sunday stroll through linear tree-lined boulevards.

Clarke would happily, blindly follow, on foot or ferry, by bus or tram or subway. With Lexa’s hand in hers or their arms hooked together, she hadn’t worried about the destination and only enjoyed the journey, hopping on and hopping off, up and down escalators, slipping past sliding doors in fits of giggles.

Lexa was their cartographer as she carved out new paths to stitch together old streets, their tour guide from monument to monument to quiet moments stolen in narrow alleyways for slow and deep kisses and whisperings of tomorrows and forevers.
Through crowds Lexa would tighten her grip of Clarke’s hand; under the moonlight of an empty beach she’d tighten her hold around Clarke’s waist while they swayed to the distant murmuring of the ocean’s waves; and then in the early hours of day break, she’d tighten under Clarke while softly expelling her name, letting the fading stars know exactly where to find her.

Without Lexa, Clarke somehow ended up on a park bench by a different body of water, on another continent, lost and alone. Wanting and waiting.

The decision to fly to London came after accepting the Whitechapel’s invitation to come see their space. The gallery had reached out to Clarke for a special exhibition they were planning the next summer on colour and light, tapping her as one of the exciting young American artists they’d like to feature.

On the phone, the curator had been effusive with her compliments about Clarke’s compelling use of mixed media, hyperbolic about the way she pushes the heuristic boundaries of emotion in her colour field representations. Clarke felt a blush that couldn’t have been seen through her mobile but when she was casually encouraged to come for a non-committal assessment visit, at her convenience within a two-month window, it was her heart that sped up that she was sure could be heard across satellites.

While Clarke had been flattered by the interest and welcomed the opportunity to expand her showings to Europe, her heart palpitated for a different reason given the city the gallery was located in. As much as it’d be a boost to her public profile, she was more focused on what it’d mean personally to breathe the same urban air as Lexa again.

Her instinct was to immediately say yes, her heart practically lurching out of her chest towards the Atlantic. Certainly, the offer attached to the follow-up email to cover her plane ticket and hotel booking was an enticement to accept. And when Amsterdam and Berlin had also called, making it an ideal mini-trip as though the stars aligned, Clarke thought the universe was trying to tell her something, nudging her along.

Her hesitation, however, came from the unshakeable image of dull green eyes after the first time she had said no, when it should’ve been a yes then. Their haunting dolour had stayed with Clarke and stayed her hand at any redemptive action even after she wanted to take back her answer.

Would Lexa want to see her? Has she moved on? Is she happy now and doesn’t need a visit from the ghost of her past?

As much as it was cold and tired and still broken, she didn’t want to make the decision to visit based on her aching heart. Clarke had to consider how it would impact Lexa, whether it would re-open the wound rather than heal it.

The email sat in her inbox for several days before she answered. She came to her resolution after gaining some liquid courage that helped her to see the visit as an opportunity to tell Lexa in person the things she’d only been able to let pour out in paint and ink. She would be the direct messenger of her unsent letters, giving closure to Lexa, to offer a proper ending, a goodbye, and leaving it to her if she wants Clarke back in her life.

As soon as she made her decision, there was no point in delaying it. So two weeks later, a seven hour flight, and after succumbing to jet lag followed by a couple of days of meetings with the Whitechapel’s enthusiastic team, Clarke found herself lost in London on her last day before her flight to Amsterdam the next morning.

Her itinerary had only room for four full days in the capital and she’d hoped, ridiculously so, that she’d randomly run into Lexa before her time was up. (Depending on the outcome of their
encounter, she would extend her stay indefinitely if she had to.)

Because she was never good at math and thought the chances of 1 in 8 million people being an American architect with green eyes were high, Clarke had kept her own set peeled for her favourite shade, thinking it’d easily stand out against the greys of skies and stone and concrete.

It was likely why and how she’d missed her stop on the District line, distracted by every brunette that remotely came into her field of vision. But it was never the right shade of auburn or the right bounce of curls nor did it have the same volume that Clarke would want to sink her hands in. Even when the brown matched, the green didn’t. Even when the green came close, nothing else did. Nose and cheekbones weren’t high enough, jawline too soft and undefined, lips too thin. Smile lacking the gentle curl, the mischievous twinkle.

Every time the doors opened and a rush of passengers disembarked exchanging for new ones Clarke would crane her neck for a glimpse. The rise of hope as people boarded, then its fall within milli seconds when no one turned out to be Lexa, hadn’t deterred her from repeating the routine at the next stop with renewed optimism that this changeover in population of her train-ride companions would yield more than curious or suspicious looks.

(Londoners were about as keen on eye contact in a confined space as New Yorkers.)

Emarrassingly and absently, she had followed one promising prospect—or at least the back of her figure—off the train, across the platform, and onto another before boarding an unknown train. When the woman had finally turned around and met Clarke’s gaze with kind but brown eyes, Clarke slumped into her seat and politely smiled her disappointment.

Feeling foolish, she kept her gaze forward for the rest of her journey, fixated on the inconsequential ads and the strange prompts to See It, Say It, Sort It. Only when she had taken notice of the seat cushions did Clarke realise she had swapped the multicoloured squares of the District line moquette design for the blue of the Central line’s woven fabric, and yellow poles for red ones.

Sighing at her own ridiculousness, Clarke indiscriminately got off at the next station. Greeted by sudden sunlight and non-stale air when she emerged out of the underground, she felt disoriented to somehow end up at the northern entrance of Hyde Park, on the other end of town. Pulled in by scented flowers and the canopies of blossoming trees, she studiously followed the paths until it wound to the Serpentine.

Clarke spent an unseeing half hour in the gallery before she made her way to a bench by the lake.

Sitting alone while the early Sunday morning crowd took advantage of the rare sunshine, soaking up its warmth and brightness, Clarke got a a glimpse of the life she could’ve had.

Would she and Lexa have swapped Prospect for Hyde in their Sunday routine? Taking leisurely strolls around the meandering paths, following the edge of the lake as it led them from flowers to fountain, from statues to swimming pond to the Sackler Gallery where Clarke would admire the art and Lexa the contemporary architecture. Then spend hours sitting by the boathouse feeding the swans and watching the pedal boats laze around the water, or take up a spot on the expansive lawn, under the shade of a copper beech tree, its deep purple colour providing a pretty cover while they leaned against each other, leafing through the books they’d picked up from the gallery’s bookshop.

A female runner passing by caught Clarke’s attention, catching her breath for a moment at the similarities. The slim but strong build moving in fluid motion as feet lightly pounded against pavement had her thinking of a different scenario. Instead of coming to the park together, maybe Lexa would meet her at their bench, where Clarke had her after-run coffee waiting and Lexa
proffered a sweet, slow kiss in exchange. When’d she feel a tongue lick into her mouth, Clarke’s feeble appeal—a tiny tug at a sweaty singlet—to keep things PG would go unheeded for a few butterfly-fluttering moments before Lexa’d plop herself down beside her. A crinkle to her eyes, and a lilt to her lips that promised things later.

Her tongue slipped out to moisten her lips, she could almost taste that smile again. Looking down at the flower in her hand that she had picked up along the way, knowing that it could well have been a follow-up gift to the kiss, plucked during Lexa’s run and saved to be placed in Clarke’s hair when they met, she felt tears well up, a tepid melancholy for the what-could-have-been.

*I know I don’t really have the right to ask, but if you have room for one more tiny favour. I would really love a second chance to see Lexa again.*

She petitioned to the universe, blowing on the petals and releasing it to the will of the world, letting her wish be carried by the light breeze.

Following their flight path, Clarke’s gaze landed on a young couple wrapped around each other two benches down. The two girls didn’t have a care for anything but each other, as their fingers interlaced and thumbs moved in lazy patterns. They were oblivious to her faltering smile, how bittersweetly happy she was for them.

Clarke had to keep herself back from accosting them to advise that no matter if their love was just starting out, small and fragile, or if it was becoming something bigger than their age could comprehend, large and consuming, to cherish the now regardless whether their future selves decide to let go or to hold on tighter.

She looked away when they started to kiss, as warm and tender as their arms holding each other. One last wistful smile and Clarke gave them back their privacy, no longer wanting to intrude on the intimacy, as she felt her heart’s pang for two different girls and a different time.

Well, if the universe was busy, Clarke will just have to engineer her own future. She pulled out her phone, checking the time and dialling the number anyways despite the hour.

Several rings stretched out her wait until a croaky voice came through, dismissive and disgruntled. “This isn’t the asshole hotline.”

Hearing Raven’s dependable humour unexpectedly caused a tear to overflow down her cheek. Clarke let a beat pass, taking a deep breath and trying but failing to hold onto her thinning composure. It hadn’t been her intent but she quietly sobbed into her phone, “Rey, I’m lost.”

“One last wistful smile and Clarke gave them back their privacy, no longer wanting to intrude on the intimacy, as she felt her heart’s pang for two different girls and a different time.”

Well, if the universe was busy, Clarke will just have to engineer her own future. She pulled out her phone, checking the time and dialling the number anyways despite the hour.

“Clarke?” The worry was immediate, alertness followed suit. She could hear rumbling of sheets, likely Raven sitting up in bed, forcing herself awake, maybe waking up Anya in turn. “What time is it? Where are you?”

“At a park.”

“At park.”

“Prospect at—” Raven must’ve pulled her phone away from her ear to check the time, her voice trailing off before coming back more clearly again, “at five am? I’m pulling on pants now, I could meet you in fifteen.”

Shuffling movements corresponded with Raven’s intent. Clarke was heart-warmed by her best friend’s reflexive offer of support without knowing the problem. “I doubt that's possible. Not Prospect. Hyde Park.” Clarke paused and then quietly said, “I’m in London.”

“As in the city of the province of our friends to the north?” Raven asked slowly though Clarke could
hear the scepticism already in her voice. The noises have stopped, she could imagine Raven with half a pant leg on.


“What?!” Came the shocked request for confirmation. “Across the giant fucking pond?”

“Yeah, a gallery interested in showing my work flew me in."

“Jesus, Clarke. How are you on the other side of the world right now?”

Clarke was asking herself the same question. “I’m not sure either. I don’t know how I ended up here.” In the park, in London, or at this point in her life where Lexa could be physically within reach but still thousands of miles away, Clarke didn’t know.

“Is your Wayz malfunctioning again? I thought I updated it for you.”

“No, it’s working. I just got on the wrong line.”

“And a fucking airplane,” Raven tried to joke but when Clarke remained silent, she asked worried, “Are you ok?”

“Yes. No.” She struggled to keep the pinch from her voice or another small sob from coming out. “I feel lost without her.” Clarke didn’t have to specify who for Raven to know, the sympathetic sigh on the other end told her as much. “I stupidly thought I’d land in the city and she’d be right there. I’m such an idiot.”

“Clarke,” Raven said softly in compassionate concern.

Clarke didn’t have a plan. Having not been the planner in their relationship, the actual logistics of how and where she’d find Lexa hadn’t occurred to her. The days leading up to her flight were spent thinking about—agonising over—what’d she say when she sees Lexa, the plane ride was spent rehearsing that speech, practising her apology. Too busy flailing to even inform her friends of her spontaneity.

When their trips had been planned to a tee and all Clarke had to do was show up, the reality of being left to her own device was another sobering wake-up call to the toll of redistributed labour post-breakup.

No hand on her hip to silently redirect her to go right when her erroneous instinct was to go left, no second set of eyes to help her cross the street in blind faith while she continued an animated story, no smug smile accompanying a hand waving her MTA card as she patted herself at the turnstile.

No one to help pack her bag and remind her about the ways of the world, to ground her and keep her from floating away with her head in the clouds.

Clarke had to look up, had to look out, and remember things on her own. It wasn’t something she had gotten accustomed to, even after three and a half years of trying. From conjoined to disjointed, the adjustment to her everyday had been a steep learning curve. She was still falling and failing.

Clarke took a deep breath before she brought up the reason for her call, what she should’ve done before departing JFK. “Do you … do you think you could ask Anya for her address?”

Silence.
She could hear Raven holding her breath.

It was a touchy topic. Raven had never mentioned it but Clarke knew that Anya hadn’t been too pleased with Raven’s involvement in helping to erect the communication wall between Clarke and her sister. Raven herself had been conflicted by her actions, at the apparent choice she’d made from the difficult spot Clarke had put her in. But a broken, whiskey-drenched Clarke had been a very persuasive reason for Raven to prevent one breakdown by facilitating another.

“Clarke—”

“I know, just … please Raven,” Clarke begged. “I fucked up and need to make it right. I can’t leave London without seeing her.” Clarke’s eyes were wet and her lower lip trembling with the effort to not cry as she asked, “Please, could I have her address?”

“Clarke, it’s not that I don’t want to help you. I would ask,” Raven said treading carefully, “but Anya’s not here. She’s in LA on a business trip. I could text her but I’m not sure if she’ll answer at this hour there. I’ll try, ok?”

Clarke’s brows knitted together calculating the timezone math. Half-past ten in the morning in the UK meant that Anya was likely asleep in her hotel room and unlikely to check her phone. She slumped in stricken dejection against the bench, feeling her chance slipping away.

She could only muster, “Ok.”

Raven went quiet for the next minute or so to message her wife. Clarke stayed on the line, listening intently to each press of finger, each tap a scaffolding of rebuilt hope.

“Anya’s a light sleeper so maybe she’ll hear it,” Raven hedged when she came back.

Clarke nodded but when she realised Raven couldn’t see her, said, “Thank you,” and then more quietly, “Lexa’s the same.”

“I’ll text you as soon as I get it,” Raven informed. Clarke could hear the sound of the sheets ruffling again, maybe Raven was burrowing back into her bed. A yawn came before she prompted, “Now, tell me about London.”

Clarke welcomed the distraction while anxiously waiting for Anya’s answer. She told Raven about still recovering from jet lag then bemoaned that four days really wasn’t enough to see anything of significance in London, especially when the first was spent asleep, and the next two being shuttled around by her hosts from one art venue to the next, meeting one important person after another. It’d been such a whirlwind, she didn’t even have time to try fish and chips, which appeared to pop up on every corner like a Starbucks.

(News and biscuits she had plenty of, on the other hand, with all the meetings.)

She did manage, however, after finishing up at Tate Modern yesterday evening, to catch Big Ben at dusk. Clarke stood in awe seeing the houses of parliament illuminating the edges of the Thames like a lantern with the tower clock the stalwart candle keeping this side of the city in an orange glow. Although only a stone’s throw away, Clarke had purposefully avoided the tourist trap of the London Eye. She turned her back to the glorified moving circle, and stared out at Big Ben’s reflection on the water, keeping her gaze steady so as not to think about how romantically tragic she’d be to ride the Ferris wheel alone.

Instead, she had let her hands move across the page of her faithful sketchbook companion, bringing to life an alternate romantic reality where she and Lexa were leaned into each other, a quiet moment
of rest during a walk on the promenade to take in the view. Drawing kept her distracted from wanting to slip her hand into the phantom of a back jean pocket.

Rather than reveal the latter part to Raven, Clarke was about to ask how things were back home when she heard light snoring. She smiled at the gentle rhythmic breathing, and let minutes passed lulled by its comfort.

“Thanks Rey,” she whispered into the phone after and then quietly hung up.

—

An hour later and nothing further from Raven.

While she continued to wait, Clarke wondered about where Lexa might be at the moment, where she might possibly live.

Of the little that she had seen while out, she had noticed an uncanny number of coloured front doors. She wondered if Lexa lived behind a red or blue or green one, above a flower shop or beside a cafe, whether it faced a cobblestone lane and covered with lush creepers and potted plants or it was part of a row of tall, white Victorian townhouses. She had walked by a street that featured houses entirely painted in pastel colours, and had to quicken her steps to catch up with the curator after lagging behind, distracted by her real estate guessing game.

It reminded her of Open House New York that she and Lexa would annually make a weekend of in the fall which granted them access into private spaces and architectural gems that were normally closed off to the public. The beaming smile that would never leave Lexa’s face was always worth the trade-off of sore feet from long treks and even longer queues.

Hollow metal or stainless steel, copper-stained or traditional wood, Lexa would judge the occupants of fanciful residences by their type of doors. Her favourite had been a set of two floor-to-ceiling oversize oak doors with a pivot mechanism, that when in the open position, spilt the living room out onto the street, bleeding inside and outside spaces together.

“Excuse me,” broke Clarke out of her thoughts as she was considering the feasibility of knocking on every door in London in search of Lexa.

Clarke looked up to find a young family, a dad holding the hand of his toddler daughter while the mom bounced a baby in her arms, stroller by their side.

“Yes?” Clarke smiled kindly at them.

“Could you point us to the Science Museum?” The man asked in perfect but heavily accented English, a bit flustered while wrangling a map. If Clarke had to guess from his cadence and pitch, the family was of Scandinavian origin. “I forgot to charge my phone,” he elaborated, waving the device in hand, “and this map is confusing.”

His partner muttered something in Swedish, Danish maybe, but definitely in the universal couple’s language of I told you so as she cooed their baby who started to become restless from the lack of motion.

“I’m sorry, I’m not from around here,” Clarke responded. If it wasn’t for her phone’s GPS, she wouldn’t have a clue where she was. “But let me see,” she said as she navigated to the map app.

“My mistake,” he replied confused, “I assumed you live here.”
Clarke paused to look down at herself, dressed comfortably in jeans and a band shirt, a light jacket by her side on the bench but none of the extra load typically carried by tourists, no shopping bags or backpack. She could understand his misreading that she belonged here.

“No, just passing through,” Clarke shook her head shyly, as hurtful as it was to admit. She gave another smile, smaller but still genuine nonetheless, before returning her attention to the app. “It looks like you need to follow that path towards the East Albert Lawn,” she said pointing ahead. “It should be within walking distance from the south gate there.”

The couple smiled their thanks as the dad scooped up his daughter, his other arm wrapping around his partner. A kiss to the forehead before departing. The little girl cutely waved at Clarke as they bid their farewell, blonde hair and sleepy blue eyes smiling at her. “Have a good day, enjoy the rest of your visit,” the dad said over his shoulder.

“You too.”

She watched them until they disappeared out of sight. Another scenario, another lifetime.

When the family turned the corner, Clarke looked down at her lap again. Her phone returned to being stubbornly dark.

—

By late afternoon, the text still hadn’t arrived despite her intense concentration to will the screen to life. Clarke had walked the park twice more, mobile clutched in hand, only to end up seated back in the same bench waiting. A Pret sandwich, picked up at a corner shop outside the park during her second lap, provided carb comfort to keep her spirits up and sadness at bay.

As she neared the end of her late lunch, Clarke’s hope dwindled in indirect proportion to the amount of crumbs collecting on her lap. Whether Anya didn’t get Raven’s messages or she was being protective of her sister, Clarke’s phone stayed obstinately silent. She started to feel as grey as the looming skies, the clouds having drifted in the past hour to cover up the sunshine.

She was ready to pack it in, resigning to board her flight to Amsterdam still empty-hearted, when her phone finally lit up. The buzzes startled her after so long of quiet. Clarke dropped her phone in her eagerness to fish it out of her pocket. She let out a sigh of relief that it had landed in the grass and the screen remained un-shattered.

Clarke held her breath as she read the texts.

(Raven) 3:15pm
12B Columbia Road, Bethnal Green.

(Raven) 3:15pm
But you never got it from me, and I never hacked into my wife’s iCloud contacts.

Clarke will have to ask Raven later why hacking was necessary but in the moment she wanted to break out in dance in the middle of Hyde Park. Her phone almost slipped out of her hand again in her excitement, only catching it at the last second.

(Clarke) 3:16pm
Thank you. I want to kiss you right now!

(Raven) 3:16pm
Wrong brunette.
(Raven) 3:16pm
Good luck, Clarke. Phone’s glued to me, text if you need anything.

Though appreciated, the offer of support brought Clarke back down. She suddenly realised the enormity of what she was about to do.

*Shit, I’m going to see Lexa.*

—

It turned out, what she got to see, at least for the first little while on arrival, was Lexa’s door.

She was proud to have somehow gotten herself to the east end of London, a twenty-minute tube ride and fifteen-minute walk later. It had been a blind journey spent calming her nerves and rehearsing how she would greet Lexa. An internal struggle of where she should fall on the (in)formality scale of *Hey, Hi,* and *Hello* carried her footsteps from the station until she was stood on a mixed residential-commercial street.

Behind her was a small park where kids were wringing out the final minutes of their weekend fun until they were called to dinner or the overhanging clouds forced them inside.

Several metres away, the stall vendors were packing up their goods of what looked to be a Sunday street market closing down. The clanking of metal as they decamped their temporary tables and tents couldn’t compete with the battering of Clarke’s racing heart. The last of the last-minute shoppers were finalising their purchases before making their way home, blustering past Clarke without noticing the nervous fist she held mid-air ready to knock or the other hand sweatily palming her side.

It was any other Sunday for everyone but the girl standing in front of the blue painted door.

A deep inhale. A timid knock, then two.

Clarke waited, holding her breath, shifting on her feet.

No answer.

Three, four more knocks.

More time passed.

Still no answer.

A fifth, sixth, a bit more force, a bit more insistence.

But nothing.

By the seventh and eight rap of the door, returning to a soft and feeble contact of knuckle to wood, the street had gone so quiet that the sounds despite their weakening tenor echoed off the stone as loudly as their unanswered calls reverberated in her heart.

After double checking the address on her phone and thrice looking at the street name and number to verify consistency across all three, Clarke leaned her forehead against the door.

*No big deal. Maybe Lexa’s not home yet. Maybe she’s out doing her Sunday errands.* So she thought, hoped.

Clarke stared down at the ground, gaze fixed on her shoes while she contemplated her next move.
She got this far, and after taking so long to get here—years of regret and tears—she could stand to wait an hour or two, all evening if needed.

Just as Clarke was considering crossing the road to wait on another park bench, she felt a light tap on her shoulder. Her body stiffened immediately and her nerves spiked—despite the lead-up to this moment, she suddenly felt unprepared to be met with green again. On a shaken breath, she turned around.

Instead, gentle grey eyes looked kindly upon her from under the cover of a black umbrella that made white hair stand out. “Are you alright, dear?” The elderly woman asked, a look of concern colouring her inquiry.

She was far from alright but Clarke nodded anyways and answered, “Waiting for someone,” cobbling together a small smile hoping it would hide her disappointment that the woman hadn’t turned out to be the someone she wanted.

“Would you like to come in? You can wait inside the shop. I was about to close up but I don’t want you to catch a cold out here. Such dreadful, indecisive weather.”

At the woman’s words and gesture, Clarke registered at the same time that it had started to drizzle and there was a bookshop next door. She hadn’t noticed the latter with her focus on 12B instead of 12A, and missed the former because she was focused on keeping her own eyes from watering.

The glow of the bookshop and the warmth of the shopkeeper’s gaze seemed like an appealing alternative to waiting out in the rain. It’d be inimical to her interests to look haggard and disheveled when she does finally see Lexa so she nodded again and silently followed inside.

—

“You have a beautiful shop, Rose.”

“Thank you but it’s not mine. Originally, yes. But now it’s my granddaughter’s,” Rose answered while mother-henning for Clarke to make herself comfortable at the alcove near the front of the shop, a prime vantage point to keep an eye out for next door. She fussed with the cushions and tidied some books into neat piles as she voluntarily elaborated, “I’m helping out today so Tessa can have time with her family, an event with her in-laws. I was her last resort to fill in for the afternoon. I think I’ve earned myself a nice Sunday roast, it was rather busy earlier.”

Clarke smiled trying to picture the grandmother tending to the rush hour crowd. Rose’s kindness and affability softened the dud of her first attempt to see Lexa.

“Young people are in such hurry these days,” Rose muttered shaking her head as she went in search of something at the back storage.

Clarke smiled at her puttering figure then looked around in her absence, taking in the wooden stacks, the colourful spines and the mismatched collection of chairs scattered throughout the narrow space.

The shop smelled of oak and old paper leaves, the heady signature scent of a library. Picking up a dusty paperback on the side table, Clarke realised this was a used bookshop when she flipped to the inside cover and saw a dedication.

Dearest Anne,

This was a love letter from Gorz to his wife but I might as well have been a named co-author of the book, and the title changed to Letter to A, as the sentiments written here are the same as I feel for
you.

Yours until my last breath,
R

Clarke wondered what happened to Anne and R that this book was now available for second-hand purchase and no longer belonging to their private library. Was it an amicable break or a painful separation or a devastating loss, she pondered as she opened to the first page and started reading.

“You’re 82 years old. You’ve shrunk six centimetres, you only weigh 45 kilos yet you’re still beautiful, graceful and desirable. We’ve lived together now for 58 years and I love you more than ever. I once more feel a gnawing emptiness in the hollow of my chest that is only filled when your body is pressed next to mine.”

Nope.

Clarke had to promptly close the book after finishing the first paragraph, her own hollowed chest not able to read further. A plume of dust billowed in the air as she snapped it shut. Fortuitously, Rose returned in time to save her from going down that rabbit hole.

Clarke scrambled to help her hostess seeing the slight shake of her hands holding a tray with teapot and cups and a plate of biscuits.

Rose smiled gratefully as Clarke set it on the table. With practised hands she went about making their cups of tea. As she poured, she asked, “Do you have a date with your girlfriend?”

It’s a good thing Clarke hadn’t the opportunity to sip yet. She choked on nothing instead. “Girlfriend?” Clarke asked past her small cough, accepting the cup and saucer from Rose.

“Yes, 12B, my granddaughter’s upstairs neighbour. A friend of yours I presume,” Rose said, looking at her curiously, which clued Clarke in that she meant ‘girlfriend’ platonically.

Clarke doesn’t want to be trite or evasive by answering, it’s complicated, so she nods politely to abate Rose’s confusion.

“How is she called again? I can remember the Thatcher years unfortunately too well but names escape me now. Lena?”

“Lexa,” Clarke corrected with a smile.

“Lexa, that’s right. She’s a lovely girl. We had a nice chitchat once during another time I was covering. She has a beautiful smile,” Rose said, fondness in her words.

That perked Clarke’s ears and her lips subconsciously curled further thinking of Lexa’s. “She does,” she confirmed before drinking from her tea. “Mmm, this is nice. Thank you.”

“What are your plans with Lexa?” Rose repeated her question, asked innocently from the rim of her cup, blowing gently on the hot liquid. Though the curious glint hadn’t left and there was something oddly knowing in her gaze.

“Um, no plans, it’s a surprise visit,” Clarke demurred to admit. She was still undecided about Hey, Hi, and Hello, any plan after that would be a luxury.

“That’s thoughtful of you. Some people are not keen on surprises but I enjoy it when my girlfriends would call on me unexpectedly.”
Unexpected alright, Clarke kept to herself. She listened as Rose launched into stories about her youthful misadventures with the ladies of Dagenham, when knees and hips were still in working order. Clarke had no points of references for the places and things Rose named, but she was thankful for the diversion as her pulse hadn’t yet fully returned to its normal beat, still keyed up in anticipation of seeing Lexa.

“Things changed when we moved into Hackney and the little ones came along—” Rose was cut off when the shop’s phone rang. “One moment, dear,” she said, patting Clarke’s knee.

Clarke watched as she moved behind the counter to answer the call. She heard indistinct mentions of neighbour and friend but otherwise tried not to eavesdrop, distracting herself with the shortbread and scanning the shop some more. She could imagine Lexa as a customer here, coming in every Sunday after breakfast and settling with a book for a couple of hours.

Maybe she was in this morning.

Clarke’s heart skipped a beat, her stomach fluttering thinking of Lexa being in the same room, possibly the same spot as hers just hours earlier. Her hand grazed the cushion searching for Lexa’s lingering warmth. If she concentrated hard enough she could feel the brush of Lexa’s fingers along the back of her hand, a touch so tangible it raised the hairs on her arm.

Clarke was about to close her eyes to steep in the feeling when Rose returned, looking a little doleful.

“That was Tessa calling to check in about closing,” Rose said, her voice a sympathetic warmth to cushion her words, “I’m sorry, when I told her about you waiting she informed me that Lexa went on a business trip.”

Clarke stared blankly at first not able to process the implication. When the meaning finally hit, all the air left her lungs. Her heart was in her stomach.

She tried to temper her reaction but by the downturn of Rose’s expression it must have been plain that her own had drastically fallen. She dusted off the biscuit crumbs from her lap onto her napkin to bide more time while she attempted to compose herself.

“Did … did she say when Lexa would be back?” Clarke asked quietly, holding out hope that maybe it was only a long weekend trip, and already thinking of pushing back her Amsterdam itinerary a day, two or three as necessary. She’ll forgo the Stedelijk entirely if she had to.

At Clarke’s expectant look, Rose appeared reluctant to answer, “End of next month.” Clarke completely deflated. It was only the beginning of this month. “Tessa is looking after her plants. I didn’t quite catch the details but something about work in Zurich.” She paused as if to consider the length of absence and said, “I must say that’s quite a long time to be away from home. She didn’t mention it to you?”

Clarke dumbly shook her head, unable to speak because the word home was stuck in her throat, and ringing in her ear.

It dawned on her then that Lexa wasn’t a visitor to England like Clarke was, that London is her home now. This was not a meanwhile situation for her. She had a second-storey flat and possibly bought groceries from the market down the road and spent time at the bookshop next door, and went on business trips to Switzerland. If she was splitting her time in another country then Lexa must be doing well professionally. She had settled and planted roots in Europe. Clarke’s stay was temporary, Lexa’s was not. She had a new life and, in spite of being the one not here, it was Clarke who was painfully absent from it—painfully excluded from intimate knowledge of her whereabouts or
She was glad to be sitting for how weak her legs suddenly felt. For how weak she suddenly felt.

“You can surprise her when she returns,” Rose tried to placate, eager to soften the blow. “I’m sure she’d love for you to ring her up again.”

Clarke gave a straining smile that was likely much smaller than she’d hoped to muster. “I should get going then, I don’t want to keep you from your supper any longer.”

“It’s fine, dear.”

“Thank you for the tea and biscuits, Rose,” Clarke said sincerely, proud that her voice didn’t wobble as she gathered herself up and took unsteady steps towards the door.

She hurried out the shop after repeating her thanks, unseeing of the worried look, unhearing of the imploring to take a spare umbrella, and unfeeling of the raindrops that were coming down with careless insistence.

When she reached the corner light, Clarke allowed herself one last blurry look back at the blue door. If she squinted hard enough, she could make out a lanky figure hurrying to it, scrambling for her keys, failing the first try to slot it into place. If she squinted hard enough, a second, shorter figure would join the first and wordlessly take the key, effortlessly get it to open, earning a kiss to the cheek before they both scrambled inside.

She blinked and they were gone. The visual dissolved into the damp night. The door stayed closed.

Clarke wondered if it would hurt more or less if the door had opened, if Lexa had been home and answered. With it shut and silent, she and Lexa felt both final and unfinished—the type of non-ending of Clarke’s own making.

Against her heart’s imperious demands to stay, but with nothing left to do but go, Clarke walked away from the street.

She cried into her hotel pillow that night. For the cruelty of fate, for the callousness of her own choices, for the fiction of happy endings. For being close, but not close enough.

—

*This ship was only ever built to fall apart*

*The oceans that we couldn’t cross*

The song played in her earbuds.

10,000 feet in the air and rising, she was leaning her head against the window, as the city shrunk and the river snaked out of view, as rows of housing were exchanged for a quilt pattern of agricultural squares, the density of the city opening to verdant fields, and once more, she was left with the wrong green.

The monitor of the seat beside her had started to mutely play Kyss Mig, one of Lexa’s favourite movies. Clarke had to look away, familiar with how the film’s love story unfolds, envious of how it had worked out for the protagonists but not for her. In a strange role reversal, it was the brunette in the movie, coincidentally also an architect, who hopped on a plane and went searching for her happy ending with the blonde.
Clarke thought she could do the same, that crossing the ocean would be enough, that coming would be enough, that she’d find Lexa on the other side. Not a missed connection and a visceral absence.

She kept her sights on a disappearing London, until it was just a speck.

*What a moment, encountering the dawn*
*Breathing in the air I’ve never known*

When white puffs became visible, she closed her eyes. Her head was in the clouds, but being surrounded by only the vapour of love, she ached to return to the ground.

*****

Lexa looks stunned.

“London?” She asks, her voice barely above a whisper, but it’s uncertain to both her and Clarke as to what exactly she is asking.

Clarke gives a perfunctory nod anyways.

Seconds stretch, time slowing to a crawl. Stillness permeates the studio, a static electricity that keeps them sitting together leaned against the wall.

Clarke isn’t sure if it’s her imagination, or wishful thinking given their unchanging positions of the last hour, but she swears she can feel Lexa pressing imperceptibly closer into her side, an incremental, infinitesimal amount—an absorbing, affecting touch that anchors her.

“I was in Zurich for two months on a joint project with a Swiss firm,” Lexa says in a hushed tone, trying not to break the fragile air around them, and then goes on to explain unprompted, “They needed someone from our London office to be onsite for coordination. Since I was one of the few unattached, I volunteered to go. I almost didn’t but Costia had encouraged me to get some fresh mountain air. Said I could at least brood somewhere more scenic.”

Clarke smiles tightly that she and Lexa were like ships in the night passing each other by; Clarke coming to London to find her reason to breathe again, Lexa leaving to escape it.

“Really, I think she just wanted an excuse to visit me so she could take her new girlfriend on holiday,” Lexa tries to introduce a note of levity but only manages to look small and quiet and sad.

Clarke doesn’t think Lexa expects a response but she mutters absently regardless, “That sounds nice.”

“You would’ve liked it. I used to spend my weekends hiking for a view from the mountain of where water and city and forest come together,” Lexa relates. Clarke can hear a hint of awe in her recollection and thinks she’ll expand her travel story but concludes on a tangent instead, “It was different from London. From New York.”

“I’m sure the Swiss Alps have nothing on Bear Mountain,” Clarke sarcastically quips.

“They don’t,” Lexa affirms more serious than the intent of Clarke’s clumsy joke. “I can’t believe my timing,” she exhaled a moment after, shaking her head in quiet disbelief.
Clarke shakes her head in turn. “That’s on me,” she cops repentantly, not hesitating to take full responsibility for the schedule slippage. “I should have come sooner.”

Lexa looks at her and Clarke can see the answering question almost fully formed, Why didn’t you?, but it stays unasked. She questions instead, “Did you like London?”

“Honestly, most of what I saw was either a white wall or my hotel’s white sheets,” Clarke answers with a sigh. “It barely counted.”

At least, it didn’t count where she wanted it to. Like an invisible city described by Calvino, one of Lexa’s favourite writers, Clarke left London without having discovered it. The thread of its discourse remained a secret, its rules a mystery, the people and perspectives unknown, and everything concealed. Yet, none of that mattered because the only attraction the city held for her was missing.

“You know, the two beigel shops I told you about in Brick Lane are around the corner from the Whitechapel,” Lexa informs, rueful and wistful. “My flat isn’t far from there either. A fifteen-minute walk.”

Clarke hums, unable to process the what-ifs of the spatial proximity but temporal disparity of their presence and movements in London.

At her silence, Lexa shifts her gaze to the letter and sketch, cycling indecisively between them until it settles on Big Ben. Clarke notices how her finger subconsciously traces the outline of the smaller figure, like she’s reaching into the drawing to soothe the intrepid stroller who might have been walking that bank alone.

An unmetered minute later, when Lexa’s attention returns to Clarke again, her eyes are swimming with questions in a pool of deep green. If it weren’t for their sadness, Clarke would let herself drown in how beautiful they look, how prettily the golden flecks dance under their glisten. Lexa’s lips part with intention to say something further but then nothing comes.

Clarke stays quiet sensing that Lexa needs more time to sieve her thoughts, giving her space as she breaks eye contact to reread the letter, perhaps to find her own words somewhere among the rubble of Clarke’s.

As Lexa scans the page, Clarke thinks of the state she was in when she wrote it, a few weeks after her trip, exhausted and lonely and newly heartbroken—trying to sift through the silt and grit of almost-but-not-quite.

—

**Dear Lexa,**

This is the fifth letter I’ve written, and likely the fifth letter I won’t send. I came close on number four. I wonder where we would be had I posted it; where you would be when it reached you.

I wonder if you would be reading it in your ‘flat’, that’s what they call it over there, right? Or maybe you’d be on the tube, in a pub. I’m not sure, and out of ideas from my little knowledge of London and the English ways of things.

I’m imagining tea and biscuits next to my scrawling. Too cliché? Perhaps. But maybe the sense of decorum will give more seriousness to the loops of my l’s and k’s. You once told me they were too whimsical. You had traced the letters of my name with your finger on my back to prove your point.

“See Clarke, that’s how you write l and k.”
But I didn’t care then if they were straight lines or loops, I was just happy to be lying naked underneath you. To feel your breath against my neck as you mapped out my back with your gentle touch, as an invisible alphabet formed over slopes and valleys.

I would have carried the weight of the Alexandria Library, your namesake, if it meant you were the one writing out every letter of every book.

Sanskrit, Dutch, Kanji, it didn’t matter.

You held every cursive, and every prose and verse I could have ever wanted inscribed on my skin.

Falling asleep to the movement of your hands was a dream that I never wanted to wake from.

A beautiful dream I wish I could experience again. Just once.

It seems so fleeting now. The secret language spoken by your fingertips so out of reach.

And each day that you’re not here, I find my own words are slipping. I’ve never been good with them in the first place, at least not as clever as you are. Images have always been my vocabulary of choice. You know this.

But now, I have trouble with even the simplest of nouns.

Jar, rain, door. Home.

I don’t know what else to say other than that I wish you were here, sitting next to me as I write this, so that you could help me find the right words.

Or, better yet, that I was there with you, so that no words were needed at all.

Missing you terribly …

Yours still,
Clarke

She had stopped writing for the longest time after the fourth letter, after failing to send it, breaking down at the post office because she didn’t have an address then. She had composed this fifth in an effort of catharsis if not resolution when the emotional dredge of her overseas gallery visit had become too much to process. How close she had been to Lexa but infinitely far away. How much she misses her.

Thinking of the books in Tessa’s shop, of the unspoken words she had carried home with her, Clarke was reminded of the unread texts Lexa had written on her back, but that she knew transparently to be inscriptions of affection and tenderness with the way they had penetrated her skin and seeped through her veins like India ink on vellum.

Putting her emotions down on paper had helped her to let go just a little, to mourn the irretrievable past and accept the irreconcilable future.

She had tucked the sketch into the letter and sealed her longing into the envelope, hoping maybe someday she’d be able to breathe the words directly to the intended reader. Until then, Clarke swapped her pen for her paintbrush and poured her energy into her art.

—

Clarke shifts her gaze to the opposite wall where an unassuming painting is propped, subtle and not
as saturated as its colourful neighbours, instead blooming in shades of white and faint blushes of pink. She draws a breath to say, while staring ahead, “There were peonies on the window sill.”

Clarke can see furrowed brows in her peripheral after the words register. Lexa asks, “What?”

“It might not have been the same mews, but there were peonies potted along a window sill above the garage of one house. I thought, would Lexa like that?” Clarke looks back to meet Lexa’s eyes. Sometimes, when light hits them a certain way, they could be mistaken for blue. Right now, they’re a pale shade of the blue of Lexa’s London door. “I thought of you too, Lexa,” she says, belatedly addressing Lexa’s pining upstairs. “There hasn’t been a day that I didn’t think of you, that I didn’t miss you.”

Lexa stares at her searchingly, and swallows against the gravity of Clarke’s admittance—of how much of Lexa she carried and carries with her—said out loud and written across the page held in her hand.

Wordlessly, she lets go of the sketch to take Clarke’s left hand and intertwine it in her right. They both let out shuddering breaths at the grounding touch.

“What happened after you left?” Lexa asks in seeming reference to the lack of follow-up, as their thumbs absently chase each other.

“When I left London, not having seen you but saw a glimpse of your life, I thought that door stayed closed for a reason,” Clarke answers, her chest suddenly heavy again with the defeat of her resigned acceptance then that nothing more would come of it. “I thought it was another consequence of my choice that I had to live with. Assuming I blew my chance to see you, I tried to move on and turned my focus to the Chelsea group exhibition.”

Clarke had put her head in the sand and hoped that when she came back up the world would be a little kinder and the air easier to breathe.

“Then I walked into the gallery,” Lexa finishes the timeline. Clarke can see the wheels turning in her head. Her brows justifiably furrow as she gently prods, “Clarke, it’s been two months. Why didn’t you tell me about this, any of it? You didn’t mention it at the chippy, and I went on and on about London.”

“Hey, I loved your stories. My scattered days there seemed inconsequential,” Clarke starts to explain. “I planned to tell you, eventually. But at first, I didn’t know if you were ready to hear it and didn’t want to upset you if you weren’t,” Clarke reasons. They were entering a precarious situation and she didn’t want to be the cause of Lexa’s pain anymore than she had already been. “I was shocked you were even in New York. I was happy we were even talking. I didn’t think I had a right to more than that.” She gives Lexa a half-hearted smile and then posits, “Telling you about London, about how I felt, would have been putting the cart before the horse.”

Clarke tries to read her expression but Lexa merely looks introspective, deeper in thought.

“We were becoming friends again and rebuilding trust. I guess I was waiting to earn enough back,” she expands giving Lexa more time to draft her response, further elaborating with the underlying truth, “But partly too, I think I’ve been stalling because I’ve held things in for so long, I don’t know how to let them out.”

Lexa squeezes her hand in acknowledgment and her eyes remain kind but she doesn’t spare Clarke of her honesty, “I can appreciate that, but Clarke, that’s not good enough.”
Clarke nods and bows her head, aware that Lexa is absolutely right. “I know.”

“You could have tried, found a way to say something. You not saying anything is what got us here in the first place,” Lexa makes clear, alluding to Clarke’s passivity and history of silence that led to the disintegration of their relationship. Lexa dips her head to catch Clarke’s downturn gaze, sorrow reflected in her own as she utters, “You’ve kept me in the dark about everything.”

“I never meant to,” Clarke says faintly without any real recourse to a defendable position that would credibly excuse her actions, “I was lost.”

“All this time, all these years, I thought you didn’t care, Clarke. Let alone feel like this,” Lexa whispers, raising the letter in her free hand for emphasis. Her tone isn’t accusatory or damning, worst, it’s soft and sad. “It was like you pulled a lever and everything turned off all at once. It wasn’t just dark, it was lonely.”

On hearing the emotion and break of her voice on the last word, and then seeing a tear falling, Clarke rushes to cup her face and comfort her. “I’m so sorry. I wished I had done things differently,” she expresses with self-reproach for her capriciousness. “But I did care, Lexa. I do care.”

“Then why? I couldn’t, can’t understand. What did I do wrong?” Lexa asks, her tone pleading for answers.

“You did nothing wrong,” Clarke is quick to dismiss fault, and tries to make some sense of the lumbering past, “I was so overwhelmed and confused then.”

“You started pulling away after the hospital,” Lexa recalls shakily. “It was one no after another. You wouldn’t talk to me. Wouldn’t look at me after awhile. You stopped touching me. Stopped kissing me.”

Lexa’s watery eyes look down to Clarke’s lips. The longing there could bring nations to their knees.

“You gave me no warning. It was just one less thing each day, until there was nothing,” Lexa says crying unbidden now, “I can’t even remember our last kiss because I didn’t know it would’ve been the last. You didn’t give me a chance to remember it.”

Lexa’s chest heaves for air as Clarke thumbs away her tears while fighting back her own. She thinks Lexa will push her away, will reject the comfort, but instead Lexa leans into it more, eliminating the gap between cheek and hand, like she needs Clarke’s caress to not fall apart completely. Clarke firms her hold and tries to keep her together as best as she can.

“It was a Sunday,” she tells her, glancing at Lexa’s lips and remembering for them both. It’s not something she could forget. “It was the week before you moved out to Anya’s. You were asleep on the couch. It was cold that night and I hadn’t slept a wink. I came out to check on you, to see if you had enough blankets.”

Lexa tries to slow down her breathing to listen to Clarke who can see the effort it’s taking her to keep the tears from flowing more.

“I think you were dreaming, or half dreaming because when I went to tug the blanket closer, you subconsciously pulled me in to be spooned. I couldn’t say no, so I laid with you for a bit, my back to your front, trying to give you as much of my warmth as I could.”

Clarke remembers how tightly Lexa held on to her, the way she wrapped possessively around her as if afraid it’d be the last time she’d have Clarke in her arms.
“I must’ve fallen asleep because the next time I opened my eyes, I was turned facing you and you were looking at me, like, like you were trying to memorise my face.” *Like you are now*, Clarke thinks, in the same way Lexa’s eyes are currently roving over her features. “I couldn’t tell if you were still dreaming but you tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear,” Clarke’s breath catches when present Lexa mimics the action, “and then asked me for just one last one. I didn’t get a chance to ask what you meant when I felt your lips on mine.”

Lexa looks at her with a furrowed expression, as if maybe bits of the puzzle are falling into place. That maybe what she thought was a dream hadn’t been.

“It was soft and gentle. And slow, so so slow, like you were trying to preserve the taste of my lips.” Lexa’s eyes drop to her lips again and then surprises her by brushing a thumb over her bottom lip. Clarke sucks in a breath, holding back a gasp as her pulse quickens. Widened green eyes tell her Lexa is just as startled by the unexpected action.

When the soothing motion stops on the heel of a bashful look, Clarke continues her story. “You kept it chaste, but with the way you lightly nipped and sucked I felt tingles run the length of my body.” Her skin heats anew at the ghost of that fire.

“I thought you were done when you pulled back but you were only changing angle. And then you deepened the kiss, and it was crushing and consuming. Like you were trying to draw out all the words that I couldn’t, wouldn’t say. I fell into it, fell into you. Our bed had been so cold. I missed you so much and to feel you against me again, our mouths moving together, our lips speaking to one another again, I surrendered to it. When our tongues touched, how it caused you to whimper long and heartbreaking, a near wail, like you had been waiting centuries to taste me again, I practically came undone. I completely gave myself to you in that moment, pouring everything into the kiss that I was holding back during the day. It was all I wanted but didn’t allow myself to have. It was—”

Clarke doesn’t realise sometime during her narration she has closed her eyes, lost in the memory, until the words coming out are replaced by a puff of warm air going in and then, suddenly and breathtakingly, trembling lips press against hers.

She can’t tell if this is her memory or a dream or really happening but Clarke’s lips instinctively react while her head plays catch up with her racing heart.

Lexa is kissing her.

Clarke immediately melts into the softness, whimpers into its give, and shudders remembering with full-body clarity how Lexa feels against her, *electric* and *tender*, beautifully, contradictorily so. A thousand fluttering butterflies take off, their winged energy amplifying the charge.

Lexa’s hand is grasping the nape of her neck to bring her closer but the hold is as timid as it is grounding, as shaky as it is steadying. Her fingers absently massage into Clarke’s hair in quietly patterned pleading as her lips try to cover and recover a lost rhythm, as they cling to a missed warmth.

Clarke opens her mouth and Lexa pulls her in by the fragile tether of mutually presumed unrequited love. Eliding consonants and vowels, the grammar of the kiss is full of stealing sweeps and intimate but furtive brushes, fleeting nips and catching tucks, as if they are on borrowed time, collecting as much ephemera of each other, the taste and texture, the dusty sweetness as they can.

Breathing in and breathing out one another instead of air, their mouths try to palliate the wrenching need of tongues that are too scared to ask for more. Clarke sinks into and inside Lexa, ebbing with the flow of her movements.
Then like the last time, Lexa changes angle to intensify the kiss into something more, drawing Clarke in to erase any unwanted space between them. She kisses Clarke like she’s answering that letter, sweeping and full and aching, signing her name across Clarke’s lips, writing herself into Clarke’s mouth. Sentences and whole paragraphs hanging off of needy moans.

Clarke wants to cry for how long she has craved to feel Lexa’s lips again, for how keenly she misses them. Lexa smooths over with her tongue what she bruises with quiet ardour. If it was possible to be wrecked by a kiss, the tremor of Clarke’s heart would be evidence. She wants to fall again and again into gentle ruin by shortness of breath, by the billowing dust of Lexa’s sighs.

They kiss and kiss and kiss, and for an undefinable sublime moment, Clarke is unweathered and unbroken, healed and whole.

She feels wetness on her cheeks that she doesn’t know if it’s hers or Lexa’s. Before she could make the inquiry, her heart twists in a plaintive cry, and Clarke doesn’t know why until she registers the sudden absence.

Lexa’s lips are gone, just as abruptly as they’d come.

—I— I can’t,” Lexa stutters out after pulling back, her bottom lip quivering the tiniest crack of regret but to Clarke it looks like mountains have split apart, opening up a canyon between them—a chasm so wide, they might as well be on different sides of the Atlantic again.

Lexa’s lips are kissed-bruised and flushed rosy, normally what she would find devastatingly gorgeous, but it’s Lexa’s torn, damaged look that devastates Clarke.

“Lexa,” Clarke tries to reach out but Lexa is already scrambling to her feet and moving away.

“Shit, what did I just do?” Lexa berates herself, head and hands shaking, as Clarke regains her bearings and stands up too.

She takes a step forward but Lexa takes reactionary steps back, clinging to the distance to keep her from re-entering Clarke’s orbit. Clarke has to push down a flash of hurt when Lexa’s hand comes up defensively to indicate that she shouldn’t advance any further.

“I’m sorry. I got caught up in the moment. I don’t know what I was thinking. I thought I could, but I can’t. I … I shouldn’t have done that,” Lexa all but stammers with creased eyebrows in a toiled effort at retraction, her words choppy and charged.

When Clarke opens her mouth to speak, Lexa preemptively cuts off any potential counterargument.

“I can’t have my heart broken again. I’m still trying to put it back together. I can’t hope—” Lexa rationalises, though whether to convince Clarke or herself is unclear. She’s shaking her head some more, eyes glazed over and lost in a wilderness of fight or flight but steadfastly avoiding Clarke’s. A few tears have made their way down her flushed cheeks when she concludes, “We can’t be kissing like that.”

“I’m sorry, I thought the kiss, I thought it was what you wanted,” Clarke tries to hang on as the ground shifts beneath her. She doesn’t realise her own eyes are wet again until she feels hot tears on her cheeks. She holds back her hand that aches to touch Lexa and redraw her in.

“What I wanted was for you not to say no to our life, our future,” Lexa all but whispers as she fights to keep the wobble from her chin. For how quiet and tiny her words are they cut Clarke as sharply as
her glassy gaze when she finally looks up. “You left me out in the cold. What I wanted, what I needed, was to not feel alone. To not feel unwanted.”

“Lexa, please, I—”

“Clarke, you can’t kiss me like that,” Lexa re-pleads, amending the pronoun, her voice trying for firmer but only sounding more broken. Her fingers lightly brush her lips, ambiguous in intent if to rub out the stain or to relive the feel of Clarke. Heartbreak is bare when she says her next sentence, “You went to London, you wrote me that letter, you baked for me, you knitted for me, I don’t know what to do with any of that. Not after you’ve said no to us. To me.”

Any rebuttal Clarke has dies in her throat when Lexa’s final words reach her ears, on delay caused by her thundering heartbeat drowning out all noise.

”To my marriage proposal.”

Lexa’s face contorts in pain, looking as crestfallen as Clarke feels. The silence that follows rings like a death knell throughout the studio for whatever hope was latent in the kiss. Whatever they were rebuilding towards brick by brick completely crumbles at the reminder of what Clarke had truly rejected.

The sight of Lexa on bended knee immediately flashes before her, the same paralysing image that crippled her hand every time she went to pick up a paint brush after Lexa left for London. She thought she was making the right choice at the time but every fibre of her being has throbbed with regret ever since she uttered a barely audible, no.

Clarke is stood frozen and can’t get her limbs to move, weighed down now as she was then to give Lexa the answer she seeks, unable to stop Lexa from leaving. She hears several burdened steps taken before Lexa brokenly says, looking over her shoulder, a straining attempt to hold herself together just a little longer, “Thank you for the dinner and this weekend. But can we,” she pauses to wipe a tear, “can we not talk for a bit? I need some time.”

There’s a plea in her eyes, an emotional appeal for a tiny mercy from what Clarke’s lips are capable of devastating, in speech and touch.

Clarke can only numbly nod.

She watches stricken and helpless as Lexa walks away, presumably back up the stairs to gather her things, possibly taking the knitted sweater, but without doubt, taking Clarke’s heart with her as she leaves their apartment.

As the footsteps grow fainter, so does the beat of her heart.

When she hears the undeniable sound of her front door closing in the adjacent corridor, Clarke finds her voice again but is unsurprised when only a sob comes out.

I do want you, remains unsaid.

She can’t ascertain for how long she stayed standing wordless in the studio but by the time she decides to make a move, the high sun has brightened her hardwood floors with long golden streaks, ochre hues beaming in opposite degrees to how sombre Clarke feels. It’s a contrast to the fading light of her eyes she knows dimmed with every step that took Lexa away from where she stood.
That can’t be it.

It can’t end there, she thinks once the shock subsides.

Thinking of the kiss, thinking of Lexa’s broken words, and feeling their cracks renewed in her heart, thinking that she should have pushed through, should have said something, Clarke refuses to let their weekend end like this. She needs to do, say something. Lexa was right, she needs to try.

“Fuck it.”

Grabbing the spare house keys by her workbench, Clarke hastily exits the studio’s side door, heedless of proper winter wear, and determined not to repeat past mistakes by staying silent. Clarke has never sprinted before in her life but picks up her feet like she’s seen Lexa do dozens of time, and makes a mad dash out.

The sun’s late afternoon zeal has brought forth the first of the melting snow. She raises a hand to shield her eyes from the glare of its brilliance, looking frantically left to right trying to make out the familiar figure. The ground is covered in layers of white, interrupted by occasional dots of colour coming from children’s bright coats as they play in the snow. The low hums of the ploughs can be heard a couple of streets over, mixing in with the kids’ laughter and squeals of excitement.

But she doesn’t pay attention to any of it, least of all the judgmental looks she earns from her neighbours who are out supervising the production of snow people and snow angels. She doesn’t care if she looks like a crazy artist in her stained sweats, barefoot saved wool socks. The dampening discomfort of her feet feels inconsequential to the urgency of finding Lexa.

Clarke cranes her neck for a view past the white forts and the blinding smiles. Predictably, there are no signs of Lexa. Realistically, she is likely already on the subway or speeding away in an Uber. Still, Clarke is aggrieved to find the sidewalks empty.

Not giving up just yet, Clarke runs down to the end of the street where it meets the main road to check. But soon enough, she runs out of sidewalk and air and has to stop before she keels over. Clarke pants as she wraps her arms around herself, feeling the sudden chill, deceptive given how bright and blue the sky would have her believe.

She scans the scene but Lexa is again nowhere to be found. Clarke thinks of texting her but then realises she’s as much without phone as without a coat.

A frustrated “Fuck!” earns her withering glares from vigilant parents ever protective of innocent ears.

She ignores them to lift her head up high, releasing puffs of disappointment and air pockets of dejection to join the white clouds. Clarke stares motionless while the sun smiles radiantly back at her, compassionless to her despondency.

Breathe, Clarke, she has to remind herself.

Eventually she picks up her sodden feet, and with a heavy heart, drags herself back the same steps home, head hung low. She uses the main entrance this time, out of habit and needing distance from her studio. Her gaze is down as she mechanically opens and then locks the house door.

The sound of its click so resolutely final.

—

Once back inside, Clarke leans her forehead against the door in an ironic inversion of London. It
seems no matter which side of it she’s on, Lexa wouldn’t be there.

Or so it would seem, until Clarke turns around to ascend to her apartment.

The sight slams against her chest. Restarts her heart.

Sitting on the first two steps at the bottom of the stairs is Lexa. Or at least, the lump of her, parka still on with the laces of her boots half done, clutching her knitted sweater in one hand, while the other arm is wrapped around knees that are pulled up to her chest. Her head is bowed, and she looks for all the world bent and broken, but very much still there.

“Lexa?”

Clarke gasps out, stilling herself mid-stride as if the vision in front of her will disappear with the minutiae of movements. She thinks her voice might have been too quiet to be heard, her disbelief ringing too loudly in her ear to gauge the right volume.

But Lexa lifts her head at the sound of her voice, the low rasp eliciting an automated response. Clarke is wrecked by the blurry gaze that meets her, sympathy tears welling as she hears her name returned in the same hushed tone.

“Clarke.”


“I couldn’t go,” Lexa whispers, eyes red-rimmed and nose rose-tipped. She looks up to the ceiling momentarily, seeking strength from an invisible source. Her words are stretched thin by the labour to regain her composure, but manages to say more loudly when she locks gazes with Clarke again, “I didn’t want to leave things on that note,” accompanied by a weak smile, “not after you made breakfast for me. I shouldn’t have left like that, I’m sorry.”

That sets Clarke in motion again. She vigorously shakes her head and is in front of Lexa within seconds, unable to let the unnecessary apology stand.

“No, you have absolutely nothing to be sorry for,” she says, kneeling down and taking Lexa’s hand in hers. She is quick to push out her own apology instead, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Lexa.”

Lexa lowers her legs and parts her knees. The invitation is subtle but Clarke practically launches herself in between her thighs and bundles her up in a tight embrace. A quivering chin comes to rest on her shoulder. It devastates her, she feels the tremor vibrating against the hollow of her chest. Clarke weaves her hand in Lexa’s hair, grasping the back of her head, and hugs her tighter.

“I’m so so sorry I broke us.”

Only by the sounds of sniffling and shifting fabric of her parka followed by a shaky breath does Clarke know that Lexa heard her. They cling on to each other, lost and hurting in a pile of ruin, as she repeatedly whispers her apologies into Lexa’s ear.

“I never meant to hurt you and I’m profoundly sorry that I did and how I did it,” Clarke cries between shallowed breaths.

She is on her knees and can feel the edge of the stair tread dig into her lower thighs but she doesn’t care for the discomfort. The slight pinch is a tolerable pain compared to how injured her heart feels. Clarke would spend a lifetime in bowed supplication if it helped to fix their hurt.
She tightens her hold when she feels Lexa fisting her sweater like she’s trying to tether herself to Clarke, afraid of being let go again.

An indefinite time later, Clarke pulls back a small amount, but only enough to cradle Lexa’s face in her hands, not wanting to lose contact. “Lexa, I did want you,” she says, thumbing the stray tear that’s fallen down Lexa’s cheek. Clarke looks intently into wet green eyes and says with as much strength as fours years of pain allows her, “I do want you.”

Lexa nods, but has no words to return, seemingly absorbed in deciphering the meaning of Clarke’s. Clarke holds her gaze, hoping its steadiness communicates the authenticity of her confession. She wills the shine of her blue eyes, which she knows must be azure by now with tears involved, to relay the depth of her remorse and the breadth of her want.

A light passes in Lexa’s expression that looks like she’s come to a decision about Clarke’s sincerity. But there’s little time to parse the outcome because a flicker of a glance down to her lips is the only signal alighting Lexa’s intended reply. The next breath gets half a chance to come out before Clarke feels a hand cup her neck and then Lexa is kissing her again.

Clarke’s split-second surprise gives way to letting Lexa answer her declaration in whatever way she wants, however she wants. Lets her breathe her sadness in broken expels of air, move their mouths together in gentle urgency, slant and angle for the right fit. Lips part willingly for a tentative tongue that thrums with latent need, while hands grip tighter in hair and around a slim waist to say, I’m here and Thank you for coming back.

On the tug of the hem of her top, Clarke opens her mouth and allows Lexa to deepen the kiss, to set the pace and pressure of their tongues in a slow dance of meet and retreat, a pas de deux of longing, an adagio of requited yearning. Fearing the coda may be reached too soon, the end too near, she chances a slow suck of Lexa’s bottom lip, draws it out then holds it in place while tenderly brushing against its plumpness with her tongue, each sweep a tiny act of contrition that she hopes Lexa can feel to her core.

I’m sorry and please forgive me are imprinted into the swell of lips, and when air demands she break the kiss, the repentances are traced along the ridge of jaw before landing quietly on the apples of cheek. With a final soft kiss to Lexa’s forehead, Clarke repeats, with naked honesty, “I want you.”

Lexa’s only response is to rest her forehead against Clarke’s. The implications of Clarke’s use of present tense hang between them but doesn’t burst the bubble of the tenuous quiet that has enveloped them while their hearts slow to beat in time with the other. Lexa’s exhales become Clarke’s inhales.

After their breathing calms, Clarke prepares herself to rise, to take Lexa’s hand and help her up. Instead, she feels hands tuck at her hips, feels a soft knead into her skin, and by a tacit agreement, allows herself to be incrementally adjusted then lifted until she’s straddling Lexa’s lap.

Lexa abandons the knitted sweater in her grasp so that both hands can encircle Clarke’s waist to hold her tight and to keep her close. There’s a murmured prayer in they way she cradles Clarke within her arms, a silent plea to stay steadfast. Clarke feels weightless and can do nothing more than oblige, as eager to live in the moment as long as possible, not knowing what will happen when it stops.

Lips imploringly return to mould against hers. As she did on the couch four years ago, Clarke falls into the kiss, falls into Lexa once more, into the give of her mouth as it asks for kindness and gentleness to not break them again, to give their bruised and battered hearts a rest.

Though she tries to keep to the leisureed pace, a slow ache builds lower that’s making it a challenge to her restraint to not ask for more, knowing she’s only deserving of what little Lexa wants to give. She
strains not to roll her hips against Lexa despite the encouragement of Lexa’s hands softly pushing into her. The light nips and soft brushes and gentle presses of Lexa’s lips have to be enough. And they are more than for how much they feed the butterflies in Clarke’s stomach and causes the hairs on her arms to rise. Tingles shoot up and down the whole of her with every languid pass of tongue.

Apparently though, it’s not enough for Lexa, because the next thing Clarke knows she’s being carried blindly back to the studio. In one swell swoop, Lexa had risen onto her feet, with Clarke still in her arms and their mouths slanted together as if detachment was not an option. Clarke automatically wraps her legs around Lexa’s waist.

Somewhere between the stairs and the studio door, the kiss intensifies to new depths that has Clarke drowning in the taste and touch of Lexa, swimming to reach the ocean floor for how redolently immersive it feels to have Lexa’s lips on her again.

Still refusing to separate, their mouths continue to move against each other as Lexa finds the open space in the studio to put Clarke down where they had sat earlier. They continue to kiss while Lexa disrobes from her parka. Clarke has no mind to know what becomes of it, her hands busy trying to find purchase on Lexa’s top to anchor herself. Lexa is somehow able to coax their bodies lower until Clarke is on her back and she feels the warmth of the plaid blanket beneath her.

When Clarke opens her eyes after they come up for air, she blinks in wonder of being under Lexa again, of having her hovering on top, arms outstretched with palms set by the side of her head and knees bracing her hips.

They’re both lightly panting as she takes Lexa in. She can see the pulse in her neck beating erratic, likely matching Clarke’s own. Lexa’s pupils are dilated and cheeks flushed, a swollen bottom lip slightly tucked under in an effort to keep it from trembling, all combining into a mixed expression of vulnerable and aroused. With hair falling wildly to complete the composition, Clarke thinks she has never looked more beautiful.

The wait and silent ask hangs in the air between them, the hesitation commensurate with the uncertainty of their raw emotions. Yet, the ache to touch is palpable, the need to feel the slide of skin against each other again immense. To find one another once more in the legibility of a curve or the eloquence of a dip, in revisiting the lines and verses of a never-forgotten book. The want to regain fluency in an out-of-practise language reads plainly in darkened eyes and parted lips.

With all the things left unsaid but perhaps some could be communicated through a syntax of moans and sighs in place of verbs and nouns, the question of ‘should they’ yields to one of ‘how soon’. How soon can she feel Lexa again, feel her inside and around her, feel the code of her heart written and rewritten by the diction of Lexa’s hands.

Clarke gives a small but decisive nod that Lexa looks both relieved and conflicted to receive. They exchange nervous breaths, and then mutually undress each other, peeling off layers quietly, in movements at once slow and sacred and scared; delicate and timid and reverent.

Air is knocked out of her at the privilege sight when they’re both fully naked, skin prickling with anticipation as eyes roam the expanse of exposed softness. Lexa looks a little paler than Clarke remembers, perhaps as a result from lack of sun, yet the milky cream is no less appealing than the former tan tones. On the other hand, the abs that Clarke had surreptitiously felt at the bodega prove to be true and a persistent constancy. She can see and feel how fit and firm Lexa continues to be. Lexa seems similarly engaged in an appraisal of what has changed, drinking Clarke in just as well. She wonders if Lexa still finds her attractive given her now slimmer frame, less full and fewer curves, the slight size difference brought about by a diminished appetite from cooking for one. But
her worries are unfounded by the way Lexa’s gaze lingers on Clarke’s still ample breasts and struggles to move past her erect nipples.

They study each other, whether memorising or recalling or comparing, they take the time to index everything within their fields of vision and append to an already large back catalogue of visuals for later reference. The sunlight illuminating Lexa in silhouette does much to impress the image in Clarke’s archives.

Lexa gathers her curls and sweeps it to one side over her shoulder, revealing a beautiful neck that Clarke can’t help but instinctually reach up and cup, thumbing her reverence in idle strokes of the underside of her jaw. She traces Lexa’s features with her other hand, fingers in place of graphite to draw the edge of her hairline, the arch of her eyebrows, down the slope of her nose, and over the bow of lips. Clarke’s breath catches feeling the tiniest pressure of a stolen kiss as she moves her thumb back and forth across Lexa’s lips.

Lexa closes her eyes and pitches forward into the tenderness. After a long fallow period of absence and abstinence, she seems to crave the touch as much as Clarke needs to give it.

When her eyes open again, the sheen of green—fighting to stay dry—wrecks Clarke anew, worsening her oxygen deprivation. Clarke moves to bring her down to kiss the tears that are brimming over. But she comes to realise that she’s a mirror of what she sees when she feels lips gathering wetness from her cheeks instead, kissing away her own tears.

After Lexa dries Clarke’s cheeks, she seems intent to resume her post as Lexa, the cartographer of Clarke’s body, filling the vacancy that only she was ever qualified to take. Lexa kisses down the column of her neck to the dip of collarbone, across her upper chest, over the top of her breasts, down its valley until she reaches her navel and retraces the entire journey, scattered kiss by scattered kiss. She moves with such slow precision that, because of and not in spite of the lightness of touch, leaves a simmering heat on the way down, and before Clarke’s skin has a chance to cool, rekindles the fire on the return trip up.

Lexa begins an experimental slide of hand along the side of her ribs to the underside of her breast with the same tenderness, covering land that her lips hadn’t and raising the rest of Clarke’s unattended goosebumps. Her fingers skate and her thumb brushes all the while keeping spellbound eye contact like she’s measuring the cause and effect of her attentiveness on the degree of blue disappearing from Clarke’s irises. Lexa makes several passes until, by unspoken agreement and joint need, she lowers her body into Clarke, slotting a thigh between her legs.

When their bodies meet, Clarke isn’t prepared for Lexa’s wet warmth and the jolt of sensation it induces. She grabs blindly for Lexa who takes her hand and holds it above her head, entwining their fingers and squeezing it knowingly. They take a moment to acclimatise to the dissonant familiarity, to attune fluctuant heartbeats to the affecting feel, pausing the clock’s second hand to fill in the memory gaps, minor and major.

Lexa then recaptures her lips at the same time that she starts a slow rocking motion. The growing evidence between Clarke’s legs and the butterflies in her stomach make clear how impossible it has been for Clarke to be intimate with anyone else. With the way her body intensely responds to being naked under Lexa, the way her heart calibrates to her softly panting chest, no one ever stood a chance.

Minutes are spent revelling in a toe-curling glide of bodies. Clarke’s entire world exists only where her skin makes contact with Lexa’s, where lips meet and breaths mingle. Lexa grinds small circles that has Clarke gasping into her mouth for the dismantling feeling of having Lexa’s wetness paint her thighs again. So slick and so warm.
How she could have ever given this up Clarke tries not to think as Lexa spreads herself, presses more firmly, kisses more ardently.

She is nearly undone hearing the need heavy in Lexa’s increasingly laboured breathing as much as the aching feel of her throbbing, swollen clit moving against her. From the heat of her own, Lexa’s thigh must be burning too whenever it grazes into Clarke.

There’s a direct causal relationship between the tightness of her grip of Clarke’s hand with the syncopated beating of Clarke’s heart. Lexa would squeeze her hand to anchor herself on particularly hard rubs. Clarke’s chest would responsively crack open wider to make room for the louder beat that compensates in volume for the quiet desperation of Lexa’s stifled groans.

So so unbelievably wet, so incredibly hot, is all Clarke can think as Lexa searches intently for friction.

A whimpered Clarke surprises her seconds before Lexa spills herself on her leg. Surprising because Clarke thought she’d be the one to come first. Though she isn’t far behind when Lexa tenses, her whole body a taut line for a suspended moment and inadvertently pushes harder into Clarke, sending her crashing just as unexpectedly. Clarke has to break their kissing and turn her head to breathlessly mouth Lexa’s name into her neck. Her free hand shoots down to grab hold of Lexa’s ass to squeeze and press her closer as they ride out the small aftershocks.

Lexa pulls back a moment later to reveal a bloom of pink on her cheek, an unnecessary embarrassment that Clarke is quick to kiss away, first the apples and then her lips. Innocent at first but then Lexa deepens it, leaving her undiminished need hot and heavy on Clarke’s tongue while the rich and musky scent of their mixed arousal fills her nose.

It lets Clarke know that their premature orgasms were only a prelude and that Lexa needs more, and soon. Her prediction proves true when Lexa’s eyes subtly darken in lust over her breasts once the kiss ends. Lexa’s hand on her ribs tentatively slides up in silent ask that Clarke is eager to grant permission by arching her back. But rather than the hand, Lexa immediately covers her mouth over Clarke’s other nipple. She moans wantonly as she sucks. Clarke has to bite her lip to keep herself from bucking to the sensation. Lexa laves and pebbles the bud to a hardened state. Just as Clarke thinks she can’t handle the pressure, the sliding hand finally joins in, palming her other breast, rolling and pinching the nipple, to match the rhythmic motion of an indulgent tongue. Tongue and thumb compete, taking turns flicking.

Perspiration pools between Clarke’s breasts from her straining effort not to come again from this alone. Lexa doesn’t help when she flattens her tongue over the bead of sweat and licks agonisingly slow along its trail. Her love of Clarke’s breasts has never been a secret but it’s a lofty reminder of how parched Lexa has been by the way she drinks Clarke in, literally this time.

When she seemingly has her fill, Lexa moves her hand down Clarke’s stomach with clear intent. Even as her legs widen in anticipation, Clarke whispers nervously, “Lexa, I—I haven’t.” Lexa looks to be tapping into unknown reserves of will power to still her descent but she gives the softest gaze and an even softer kiss to the corner of her mouth to let Clarke know it’s okay if she wants to stop. That is far from what Clarke wants, and by how completely blown Lexa’s pupils are and the hunger of her gaze, it isn’t what she wants either. When Lexa confesses, “Me too,” Clarke is bolstered by the shared vulnerability. She wraps her hand around Lexa’s wrist and guides her lower as she warmly tenders, “Slow,” to which Lexa agrees by the faint press of another kiss.

Lexa then slips between them to cup Clarke, pausing for mutual moans when her hand meets damp,
coarse hair, before fingers sweep through Clarke’s folds and spread her wetness. “Lexa,” Clarke barely hears herself gasp out as she keens into the touch and begs with one hand in Lexa’s hair to kiss her again, fuller this time. They kiss with purpose while Lexa explores, as fingers and folds commune.

Lexa’s touch is both gentle and generous, hyper-alert to minute ways that draw out Clarke’s pleasure.

She stays on the surface and the passes are no more than skates around her entrance, up and over and around her outer lips, drawn and redrawn circles that collect her slick and redistribute it, but Clarke feels like she’s being penetrated nonetheless. She can’t remember the last time she was this wet. Clarke pours more of herself on Lexa’s hand.

She whines pitifully when the kissing ends too soon but her complaint gets lost to the ether when Lexa’s middle finger comes to rest at the seam of her opening, waiting. Lexa fixes her gaze with petitioning eyes full of repressed want that’s finally allowing itself this one moment of weakness.

On Clarke’s nod, she kisses her again, and then pushes slowly into her. Clarke’s body involuntarily lifts off the ground at the new pressure at her entrance—something she hasn’t felt outside of her own fingers since Lexa was last here. Fluid leaks out. Her jaw slacks open. Lexa’s tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip to soothe away the sting that’s more pleasure than pain. She gives Clarke a moment to adjust to the stretch before she enters her fully, reaching to the hilt of her index. Clarke’s walls instinctively clench around it and pulls Lexa desperately, impossibly in farther.

“Clarke,” Lexa gasps at the possessive reaction. Her finger twitches unwittingly and Clarke tightens more.

When Lexa starts to move more deliberately, silky warmth clings to her finger as it slides with languid repose. It really is as if Clarke’s floating now, weightless and at risk of being carried away by the fervent flapping. But instead of butterflies, they feel like the fireflies of her youth revisiting and spreading their golden glow through her body.

Then Lexa curls her finger, Clarke nearly faints. Lexa absorbs her cries into her mouth as her inner walls start pulsing wildly.

Though it’s only a single digit, the way Lexa moves in and out of her unhurried, in hallowed strokes, feels more intense for how gentle she is, the care with which she takes to relearn every inch of Clarke is driving her towards the edge as precipitously as three fingers thrusting and fucking relentlessly into her would.

Even when Lexa adds a second finger, goes deeper and reaches farther, causing them both to moan in elevated pleasure, she keeps the pace slow and measured, drawing it out to untenable ends as if scared to break the fragility that has shrouded every wordless action taken from the stairs to here. She kisses and strokes and curls as if time is elastic, stretching it out as far as possible in order to feel, to memorise, to consume as much of Clarke as possible.

A quiet but ravenous search for a lost sigh, a forgotten moan, a broken whimper. If love lives inside the gentleness of seeking fingers, then Lexa is asking her over and over again to remember it.

Clarke cants into the touches and tries to reassure as earnestly as she can that whatever Lexa has touched is hers to have, and offers in turn other parts she hasn’t yet reached.

But she is also eager to reciprocate, to show that the want and need is very much mutual. Clarke cups Lexa’s jaw and communicates with her eyes, her expression tender but tentative.
Lexa bites her lip, and if Clarke wasn’t so close to her, she might have missed her please. Lexa is more than wet enough for Clarke to easily slip two fingers in, and be swept up by the warmth that greets her. They both gasp. To be inside of Lexa again, to feel her contracting and expanding, Clarke’s body is overtaken by a swell of emotion. A hotness rebuilds behind her eyes that competes with the heat between her thighs. The whole of her strains not to shudder, to fall apart, teetered between happiness and rueful awakening for what was and what they’re on the edge of again.

In a coordinated pattern of push and pull, they assiduously attend to the other’s need. When Lexa pushes into her, she pulls out of Lexa, the alternating movements are a figurative struggle between past and present as Clarke hangs on, willing her tears not to spill, willing her heart not to burst out of her chest for how expansive this feeling is, willing herself not to say the three words that have waited on the tip of her tongue since Lexa left.

Clarke curves her palm to give Lexa more leverage to rub herself as their gentle thrusts continue and the intensity of their slow build rises. For every desperate Lexa that she can’t hold in, she hears an equally shattered Clarke exhaled into her ear, followed by more fluid coating her hand.

Then Clarke is drawn into a gut-wrenching kiss. Her world narrows to what Lexa is telling her without words. She surrenders to the treatise of Lexa’s lips and tongue articulating her want, her sorrow, her anguish. Clarke moves their mouths together as if the kiss is a weighty tome to what was lost. Her licks and presses and sucks gain urgency, growing fraught and frantic to reach the last page where the location of their lost love might be found.

She pushes and pushes into Clarke, going deeper and deeper while soaking her own desire all over Clarke’s fingers. The feeling is so intense and Clarke fights to delay her orgasm’s impending arrival for how much she wants it not to end.

But then Lexa begs into her mouth, “Please, Clarke,” and she can’t hold it in any longer. “Please.”

The order of sequence switches. Clarke unexpectedly comes first, without any stimulation to her clit, overwhelmed by the magnitude of Lexa’s aching plea, gushing into her hand. Lexa follows suit seconds later in stuttered breaths. They ride out their orgasms against still pumping hands, holding on tightly to each other as movements slow but heart rates don’t.

When the aftershocks subside, Clarke is sucker punched by the tears that finally fall, but not from her own face.

It’s Lexa who breaks when she lets out a watery whimper and then sobs into her neck. Lexa’s whole body is shaking as she cries, her shoulders quaking against Clarke’s chest. She folds in on herself on top of Clarke, trembling.

Clarke immediately wraps one arm around her while scrambling with the other to reach for Lexa’s parka to cover them.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Please don’t cry,” Clarke pleads even as she’s doing the same.

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When Clarke tries to disentangle from Lexa sometime later, after the tremors and tears have stopped, Lexa resists, gripping at her waist, and lowly whines for the lost of contact.

“Shhhhh,” Clarke coos, carding fingers through her hair and rubbing her back, struggling not to break herself while tending to Lexa’s vulnerability. “I’m not leaving, Lex. I just want to grab us another blanket.”
Lexa acquiesces and only lets go of her grasp enough for Clarke to roll out of her hold. Clarke hurries to her washing station at the other end of the studio. She retrieves a blanket from the extras in the converted pantry that she keeps for spending nights down here when she’s too tired and lazy from painting to go back upstairs. After wetting a washcloth, Clarke hastens to return to Lexa.

The sight of the brunette, still in a heap on the floor underneath the parka, lying on her side with her knees pulled up, would stop her from breathing if comforting Lexa isn’t a bigger priority. Clarke kneels in front of her.

“Here, lo— Lexa,” Clarke says, removing the parka and drawing Lexa up into her arms, managing to get the limp girl settled on her lap in a straddled sitting position. Overlooking both their nude states and the residual stickiness she feels from Lexa against her stomach, Clarke swaddles them in the blanket. They are brought chest to chest when Lexa leans in to lay her chin on top of Clarke’s shoulder, seemingly needing the contact like her breathing is tethered to their renewed physical connection.

They stay in a hushed pattern of rise and fall of chests while Clarke rubs her back some more. Lexa has always been slender, strong but slender, but she has never felt as slight as she does now in Clarke’s arms and Clarke does all she can to hold her together. She kisses the top of her hair and then occasionally the side of her head, each an admission of guilt, an ownership of regret, a silent ask for pardon. Hearts quieten a little with every turn of affection.

After awhile Lexa begins to return every kiss by pressing her lips into Clarke’s neck. Clarke hadn’t noticed at first until she would feel an answering warmth somewhere on the column of her throat, Lexa’s heat traveling successively higher after each peck Clarke gives. Clarke increases the frequency to test her theory and feels the undeniable fluttering of Lexa’s reply. Then on a frail breath, Lexa tilts her head to graze against Clarke’s chin before bringing their mouths together again.

The kiss is long and warm, staying innocent, but for how it aches with melancholy Clarke feels it reverberate deeply. It’s tentative and reflective of Lexa’s conflicted emotions. Clarke tries to be the well that collects her sadness, for her to pour in her heartache.

When Lexa pulls back once they’re starved for air, and then leans their foreheads together, Clarke sees errant tears that have newly fallen. She reaches for the washcloth and holds it up, giving Lexa a chance to object.

At her tiny nod, Clarke proceeds to gently wipe Lexa’s face, starting underneath her eyes, which stare back at her through a clear green from their shine, before moving to her cheeks that have wet lines carved into them too pretty for their remit. Lexa isn’t wearing mascara today but the tear stains look to be its invisible runoff, like the marks of an embattled warrior returning from war. For the moment, it is as if Lexa has laid down her sword, worn and weary, and Clarke is patching her wounds by gentle swabs and murmuring kisses and fragments of love alone.

Bruised lips are next as she softly pads off the leftover moisture pooling from a sniffling nose. Clarke kisses its tip and then the top of her lip before drawing its bottom counterpart into her mouth, using the tip of her tongue in lieu of washcloth to complete her task.

She then takes Lexa’s hand to remove traces of herself left on her fingers, pushing the cloth gently between their webbing. Her strokes are slow, the brushes thorough, allowing Lexa’s gaze to track her every movement over each finger, from base to tip and around knuckles and joints. She pays extra attention to the space between forefinger and middle. When she finishes, Clarke delicately kisses the back of Lexa’s hand, as soft and as gentle as her nursing has been.

She shyly looks down between them where their lower halves meet and motions for Lexa to take
over the cleaning if she wishes. Clarke doesn’t expect it when Lexa shakes her head and then lightly lifts herself off of her lap in apparent prompt for Clarke to continue her care, seemingly too overwhelmed to have the energy to undertake the task on her own.

Clarke swallows the weight of the responsibility, the act of trust, and then nervously adjusts the fabric in her palm before she moves it to clean Lexa’s inner thighs. A stillness overtakes them as Clarke tends to her, maintaining persistent eye contact throughout to read for any discomfort. She wipes one side and then the other, tender and tactful, without looking and going on memory of her familiarity with the landscape. They both suck in a breath when she shifts her attention to where Lexa’s thighs join, gently moving to and fro.

The postcoital moment feels as intimate as when they had been inside of each other earlier. But the feathered intimacy, despite how faint the touch and how clinical she tries to keep it, has Clarke throbbing again, especially when her fingers slide along the slit of Lexa’s opening and she feels more wetness produced with each pass through her folds, counterproductive to her drying efforts.

The closeness must be affecting Lexa as much as Clarke with the way the swelling pressure of her clit can be felt through the cloth. Clarke gulps and isn’t sure she should continue.

Lexa decides for her.

With newly dilated pupils, Lexa wordlessly removes the small towel. As Clarke is about to retract her hand, Lexa indicates for her to keep it in place, a shy bite to the bottom of her lip when her wetness makes direct contact. Brooking no argument from Clarke who confirms their shared want with a nod, Lexa then starts a gentle rolling of her hips against her palm.

She closes her eyes as she slowly grinds against Clarke who whimpers in sympathetic arousal to her evident desire. Clearly, after the dam broke, once, twice, isn’t enough. Clarke’s other hand comes to rest on her hip and help guide her.

Clarke can’t keep her eyes off of Lexa and the gorgeous blush of her chest and cheeks as she engages in a slow rhythm that spreads her wetness anew, entirely undoing Clarke’s cleaning endeavour. Lexa’s mouth hangs partially open as her tongue lightly pokes out while she rides Clarke’s palm, drawing endless figure eights back and forth.

It’s an intoxicating sight as much as a heady sensation that has Clarke needy and squirming. From the way Lexa is pressing into her, and when she parts her legs wider then moans, long and loud, Clarke feels the heat between her own burning.

“Please, inside,” Lexa begs as she climbs towards her peak.

Things escalate fairly quickly from there.

Clarke lifts her off for one second to position her fingers and then brings Lexa down onto them on a sharp inhale later. Air is punched out of her lungs when Lexa envelops her again. Wet and warm and addictively welcoming. Lexa immediately grabs the back of her head to draw her closer towards her chest, arching her back that Clarke doesn’t fail to take the hint. She latches onto a stiff nipple, sucking and licking as Lexa tightens her grinding circles.

Clarke’s hand moves from Lexa’s hip to cup her ass in encouragement. When she starts to knead it, more fluid gets released into her palm, causing her to moan into Lexa’s breast while Lexa pants into her hair.

But soon Lexa’s rhythm becomes uncoordinated. Reading her desperation, Clarke moves her thumb
in purposeful swipes across her clit but then not wanting to send Lexa careening too soon, she withdraws her fingers and inserts her thumb instead in shallow thrusts. The pads of two fingers take over rubbing her clit, and squeezing it in between, taking up a mixed rhythm of a fevered and leisureed pace. The inversion and diversion has Lexa crying out her name repeatedly in ragged chants between breaks of, *please.*

She nudges Clarke’s head to gain her attention from her mouthful of breast. Clarke is confused for a second, her lips still puckered, but then Lexa dips down and kisses her desperately, messily before she lays herself back on the blanket, taking Clarke with her.

The next few minutes become a blur of fumbling ecstasy. Before Clarke knows it, her head is being pushed down and she’s in between Lexa’s legs. There’s a new pressing need behind Lexa’s entreaty like she urgently has to feel more of Clarke on and in her.

Clarke adjusts to the abrupt change without fuss. Her thumb continues to move inside of Lexa but she replaces fingers with tongue to wrap around Lexa’s clit. The first suck—the first touch of tip to tip—sends a maddening rush to her head that also has Lexa fisting her hair and cantiing into her mouth. Clarke decisively abandons her thumb and fucks Lexa with her tongue instead, sweeping down and entering as deeply as she can, needing more of her taste. *God, she’s missed it.* It only takes a few furious drives before Lexa comes, her ardour swallowed by Clarke’s mouth.

Clarke licks Lexa’s release coating her outer lips, content to continue the aftercare, but then she’s being pulled back up for Lexa to taste herself. Lexa moans into the kiss, still adrift in the haze of her orgasm. Clarke doesn’t realise how far gone she is as well until she feels three fingers pumping inside of her. Though she doesn’t know how Lexa gained entry without her noticing, she pushes her hips down on instinct at the fullness while Lexa thrusts fervently in and out.

When Lexa’s free hand grabs a generous handful of breast, squeezing in matched rhythm, Clarke loses control of her hips and starts rutting with abandon.

When Lexa sucks on her tongue and then starts pushing in and out of her mouth too, Clarke can only surrender to the dual penetration, the triple stimulation, by coming hard into Lexa’s hand, her third release more acute than the first two. Her voice is hoarse for how loudly, forcefully she comes.

Clarke collapses on top of Lexa, who’s nonplussed to break her fall.

“Still amazing,” Lexa exhales.

On those words, it’s Clarke who sobs this time, overwhelmed by the gravity of the figurative mess she’s made and the emotional reckoning of trying to reclaim the vestiges of love through scrapes and scraps of heated skin.

Lexa wraps both arms around her.

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“When did we become one of those couples who cry after sex?” Lexa asks as she stares up at the ceiling afterwards, Clarke lying half on top of her, their breaths still heavy while bodies are sweaty and flushed.

“You started it,” Clarke mumbles into her skin, taking in their mixed scent, and ignores Lexa’s slip of reference to them as a twosome. She mindlessly draws circles on Lexa’s chest, while Lexa draws illegible patterns on her back. They’ve both given themselves over to the fragile afterglow, yielding to the softness of each other, neither yet ready to break from the tenuous sense of normalcy.
“Talk about putting the cart before the horse,” Lexa says. “Why didn’t we do this sooner?”

Clarke doesn’t answer her rhetorical question in favour of asking the more important one, “Are you ok?”

Lexa turns her head and looks at her an extended beat, picking up the question under the question. Her eyes roam Clarke’s face, scanning it for something and lingering a few times on her lips. She answers honestly, “I’m not sure,” and then lobbies in turn, “are you?”

Clarke gives a small smile before she parrots, “I’m not sure.”

Lexa reaches down to brush hair away from her face before she takes Clarke’s hand from her chest and engages their fingers in a play of catch and release. Clarke has always loved Lexa’s hands and not only for the obvious length reasons, and more than for their refuge, the warmth and safety they provide. While she adores her eyes for their absorbing intelligence and the cosmic secrets they harbour, her lips for their slaying effect to connect ground with sky in every kiss, she cherishes Lexa’s hands for the way it makes her feel present, here. It calms her heart now, as it always did then, when Lexa weaves her fingers through Clarke’s.

“You know, I was almost out the door but came back because of them,” Lexa says breaking Clarke out of her thoughts. At her confused look, Lexa pecks her lips for emphasis. Apparently, Clarke isn’t the only one considering the other’s physical virtues. “You’re a really good kisser.”

“I feel like that’s the start of a circular argument neither of us will win,” Clarke says as she knits patterns with their fingers. “Thank you for staying,” she expresses sincerely, tilting her chin up for a deeper kiss that Lexa doesn’t hesitate to accommodate. Coming out of her haze, Clarke then muses a second later, “Had I used that door, it would have saved me from a dramatic running after you in the snow.”

“So there are exceptions to your no-run rule,” Lexa teases.

*Only you. Clarke thinks but hums instead.*

“I was hoping you got worst after four years,” Lexa ruminates and then has to clarify when Clarke gives her another puzzling look. “Like if you had picked up some annoying habits or started having overgrown hair or suddenly became a terrible kisser, it’d be easier,” she laments the hardship.

Easier for what? Clarke continues to reply inside her head.

The tips of Lexa’s ears oddly pink and Clarke doesn’t understand why until she says, “God, I must be giving you whiplash. First I kiss you, then run away, then kiss you again, and this …” She gestures a limply waving hand to their state of undress. “Thrice.”

“Twice, the first one was a warm-up,” Clarke corrects. “Obviously, my body doesn’t mind your indecision,” she says rubbing her thighs at the evidence of her non-objection and where it still pulses. Considering the profundity and significance of their recent activities, however, she quietly says, “It doesn’t have to mean more than what you want it to.”

For Clarke it means a lot more, but as much as she feels the world righted again in those blissful minutes, and as hurtful as it may be if Lexa doesn’t feel or want or need the same, she can recognise it as a heightened moment of vulnerability, and doesn’t expect anything from her. Clarke knows the afterglow will eventually fade and that two (and a half) orgasms won’t fix what she broke, they wouldn’t absolve her of the hurt and pain. It will take time to grasp the full import of their momentary reconciliation against the long-term impact of Clarke’s actions.
(By the yearning in Lexa’s touch, there’s hope that she might be amenable to something beyond friendship in the distant future.)

Lexa looks at her intently, a bite to her lip, but then apparently takes Clarke’s cue and keeps the answer to herself. She squeezes Clarke’s hand, her gaze softening and asks just as quietly, “Can I get back to you on that?”

Clarke nods.

“I just— I’ve missed kissing you. Touching you. That’s where I’m at,” Lexa whispers.

Clarke lays a gentle kiss to her neck to let her know it’s okay. As Lexa’s gaze returns to the ceiling, she hums her hope into the pulse that beats under her lips.

They stay quiet after, each preoccupied with thoughts of meaning and want and need.

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“Clarke, what happened?” Lexa asks. “Why did we break up?”

This is it. Clarke knows this is something that’s stayed with her for too long and it’s time she finally lets it go, let the words fall out.

They’re sat up again, shoulders brushing with blankets wrapped around their torsos, legs stretched out in front of them and leaning their backs against the wall. Lexa’s hand is still intertwined with hers.

“I don’t think my answer will ever be a satisfactory or a good enough reason. You deserved better, Lexa. But I will try to explain at least my state of mind at the time,” she says.

Lexa nods her acknowledgment and encourages, “Please do, I want to understand. What happened at the hospital?”

Clarke takes a deep breath.

“It always felt too big,” she starts.

“What did? The hospital?” Lexa asks, confused.

“Us. Our love.”

“Our love was too big?”

Clarke nods, absentmindedly playing with the thread of the corner of the blanket. “Sometimes. Sometimes so large I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Lexa hums understanding.

“I’ve been in love with you since I was 14. By the time I was 26, we had experienced so much together. The type of love that others our age were only just getting started with. Do you know the statistics of college sweethearts surviving longterm? Let alone high school sweethearts? It felt too good to be true.”

Lexa shakes her head, and lets out a humourless chuckle, “So you manufactured angst? You’re telling me you foiled us because of math?”
“No, I mean to say that it’s incredibly rare. Most people grow up and grow out of young love. We didn’t. We grew up together and grew more into it,” Clarke clarifies. “By our mid-twenties we had already condensed a lifetime of love into a decade.”

“Clarke, you’re not making any sense. That doesn’t sound like a reason to break up.”

“Do you remember Speedy?” Clarke asks, confusing Lexa even further by the abrupt change of topic, but receiving a nod anyways.

“Yeah, your pet turtle,” Lexa says, eyebrows furrowed.

“I was maybe six, seven, and playing in our backyard while my dad was reading on the patio. I was really excited when Speedy finally came out of his shell. I wanted to show Dad so I picked him up and started running towards him. But in my excitement, I tripped over the raised pavement where the grass ends.”

Lexa winces, guessing what happens next. Clarke shudders at the memory of dropping her new pet and the sound of shell hitting the paved surface.

“This is why I don’t run,” she jokes. “Thankfully, it was only a minor crack and very minimal damage to his shell. My dad immediately looked him over and tried to comfort me that it was a really tiny fracture. But even after the vet reassured us that Speedy would be fine—just need to clean his shell daily and keep it covered until it heals on its own—I couldn’t stop crying for two weeks that I broke him. I acutely felt his pain.”

Lexa gives her a sympathetic look.

“I nursed him back to health. I even made him special shell covers that I drew on so he’d still feel pretty,” Clarke digresses.

Lexa smiles at the imagery but remains confused by the anecdote’s relevance. “That’s a nice story Clarke but what does breaking his shell have to do with breaking us?”

“I know this will sound absolutely absurd, but that’s what being with you, being in love felt like. I was holding you, us in my hands and running across the lawn, excited and happy,” Clarke says smiling before sobering up. “But then your dad got sick.”

“My dad,” Lexa repeats, trying to follow along with Clarke’s non-linear thinking.

Clarke nods and has to pause to gather herself and her courage for the next difficult bits.

“When Gustus got sick, and then you left, I suddenly realised what I held was bigger and more fragile than I knew how to handle, and we were going too fast, too far, too soon. A crash would be inevitable. I felt like we were bound to stumble.”

Lexa looks hurt, and asks, “When I abandoned you for those few days? Is that what you’ve been holding onto?”

Clarke shakes her head. There’s a distant gleam in both of their eyes recalling when Gustus announced he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He had said it so casually between bites of steak, that none of them registered it until his words finally caught up to Anya who practically swatted the red meat out of his mouth. Between she and Raven trying to calm Anya down from throttling her dad for not telling them sooner before it reached late Stage 3, Clarke hadn’t noticed that Lexa had gone mute. Her girlfriend didn’t say a word for the rest of the evening, not on the ride home and not when she folded herself into a ball on their bed. Clarke held her all night and offered what little
comfort she could.

She woke up the next morning to an empty bed that remained empty for the next four nights when Lexa disappeared on her. It had been the first of many shitty weeks and months to come. Clarke’s throat tightens thinking of her helplessness at the time with Lexa unexpectedly leaving. But she puts aside the memory of that pain to continue the story.

“No, Lex. Not at all. I understood why you had to leave after hearing the news. You were faced with the prospect of losing a second parent—and having to experience the same grief twice. I know how devastating losing your mom was, and understood what losing your dad too would mean. I didn’t fault you for needing the space to process things.”

“Then what was it?” Lexa asks patiently.

“We had never gone more than a day without talking. Five days felt like a lifetime. You disappeared on me after that brunch. I didn’t know where you were, what you were doing, if you were okay. You just went MIA. If it weren’t for the two texts from Anya letting me know you were safe—sad but safe—I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“I’ve regretted how I reacted, turning my back on you,” Lexa says contritely but the crease between her brows persists. “But I thought we got past it. I came back.”

“We did and you did,” Clarke confirms, squeezing her hand. “But that time away from you was the first time I understood how much of my happiness was wrapped with yours, how rudderless, unmoored I felt without you there.”

“I felt the same,” Lexa echoes.

“I spent those days and evenings with your dad. It helped to calm me, and he reassured that you’re fine and just being a typical broody Woods. He told me so many stories of you,” Clarke recounts, smiling pensively. “He also talked about your mom. The way he speaks of her, it’s clear that a Woods only knows how to love one way, big and large and fucking incredibly deep.”

Lexa gives a watery smile, her eyes glossing over thinking of her mom.

Clarke’s tone then turns melancholic. “We talked about her illness. Not in his exact words but I could tell how your mother’s death broke him. That he has never fully recovered and the only reason he’s been able to pull on his shoes each morning and put one foot in front of the other was because of you and Anya.”

Her own tears have started to well up again but Clarke pushes on, needing to get it all out.

“He said that seeing the heartbreak you tried to hide from him, which was too heavy for any ten year-old to be carrying, he resolved to keep going, to fight on and through his grief. To put his own ache aside and be and do everything he could to give you the life that would shelter you from any amount of pain. He told me that he thinks he’d done a fairly good job. ‘They’re a bit rough around the edges but good girls,’” Clarke tries to mimic his baritone voice.

They share a quiet chuckle.

But the small moment of reprieve turns sombre. She chokes back a sob to say, “But then he started talking about the time he had left. He said you had me now, and Anya had Raven, so it was okay for him to rest. He said he was tired and was ready for his fight to be over. To see his love again.”

Clarke’s vision becomes completely blurry and she hesitates to look at Lexa knowing she wouldn’t
be in any better state.

“By then, it had only been four days apart from you, but still it was four days too long for me. I couldn’t imagine more than fifteen years,” Clarke says as she wipes a tear. “It was like getting a look into the future of what awaited us, the pain of a life without the other. He’s still so in love with your mom. Still hurting.”

“Yeah, he’s never really dated since,” Lexa affirms, swallowing tightly, “I mean, besides his occasional lady friends.”

Clarke nods. “I asked him about that. He told me they were never serious because he was waiting for your mom.” She stops momentarily to figure out how to arrange her next words. “As much as I loved hearing about her, I didn’t know why she was on his mind so much until I had walked in on him one evening looking over a form. He tried to hide it from me but I’ve seen enough of them at Mom’s hospital to know what it is,” she settles on. Clarke then looks deeply into Lexa’s eyes and holds her gaze, drawing out long beats before she poignantly asks, “Do you know what MOLST is?”

By the way Lexa’s eyes widen she does know, but she asks anyways, “MOLST?”

“It’s a Medical Order for Life-Sustaining Treatment. It’s a form that tells of a patient’s wishes in the event he has no pulse and/or is not breathing. It instructs health care professionals on what to do medically.”

They both hold their breaths on those words, the meaning floating aloft between them.

Lexa anticipates her dad’s wishes. “Don’t tell me he …”

“It was something he was considering when he first learned of his diagnosis. He wanted to be prepared. He told me that when the time comes, he thought he might be ready to go,” Clarke pauses for a deep breath. “Should something happen, he wanted to go naturally, he didn’t want any attempts at resuscitation.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Lexa mutters. Clarke squeezes her hand again to calm her.

“He was heartbroken over your mom and thought he might be dying and would get to be with her soon. He didn’t want to delay it any longer if it ever came to,” Clarke tells her. “He was going to talk to you and Anya about it after you returned.”

“He never did,” Lexa says.

“I’m not sure why, maybe he changed his mind,” Clarke conjectures, and then continues solemn, “He didn’t mention it again after that day and I tried not to think about it. But I guess the conversation stayed with me because it didn’t work, I kept replaying it in my head whenever I was with him overnight.”

Clarke remembers holding her breath making sure he had his. The knitting helped to stay her hands from constantly checking his pulse.

“Then, he had that minor emergency towards the end of his stay at the hospital,” she continues. “Do you remember that weekend he was recovering after intensive care, and Anya had left for a two-day business trip?”

Lexa nods and says, “Yeah, Anya had a big case upstate and tried hard to get out of it. The only reason she finally went was because she basically threatened to sue the hospital if there was even a
“Right, he was mostly fine other than tired those days after the surgery. You had gone home for the evening to shower and take a quick nap. It was the first time you had left his bedside in days. I was the only one there,” Clarke says. “We chatted and played cards. Then I must’ve fallen asleep with my head on his lap, waiting for you.”

Lexa’s thumbs make subconscious circles around Clarke’s hand while she processes the events.

“I woke up to him calling for your mom, and before I could make sense of what was happening his monitor started beeping. His heart had stopped beating. The code team rushed in within seconds,” Clarke says on a bluster as if it was currently happening, “I thought I saw a pink form being pulled from his chart, I couldn’t be sure amid the chaos and my panic. It was harrowing for a few minutes but ultimately he was okay. It turned out to be an adverse reaction to the medication that had caused him to go into cardiac arrest.”

“I remember coming back to the hospital to you crying and the doctor informing me of the scare but nothing long-term to worry about,” Lexa says, filling in her perspective. “They switched him onto another drug immediately.”

Clarke nods. Her eyes sting reliving the moment.

“It was a minor bump on his way to full recovery but it more than scared me, Lexa,” she whispers. “That conversation I had months earlier with your dad hit me full force. As they were resuscitating him, I could only think about how he wanted to give up because he was exhausted from being without your mom. Then I couldn’t stop thinking about my turtle, about you and me headed towards that pavement. It scared me to realise what was at stake, that we were destined to fall and break.”

With Gustus’ illness, Clarke was faced for the first time with the question of mortality, the impossibility of forever. Suddenly, she had to reconcile the finiteness of time with the intensity and immensity of love, of what she and Lexa had. It scared the shit out of her. Lexa was all Clarke had ever known, all that she’d ever known to be of love. Suddenly, she was confronted by the power imbalance of the personal versus the cosmic, it seemed like an unfair fight. What chance did Clarke stand against the enormity of it all? She was traumatised by the near-death experience, overwhelmed by the possibility of loss.

Lexa stares at her trying to understand, the hinge of her jaw working minutely. The seconds stretch between them as she considers her response, a torn deliberation in her gaze.

“Clarke,” Lexa says slowly and then levels, “that’s bullshit. You were scared of us breaking so you broke us anyways?”

Clarke smiles tightly that Lexa rightly calls her out on her flimsy reasoning. It sounds daft even to her own ears. She tries to give context to her motivations instead. “At the time I didn’t know how to process what I was feeling. Remember how I couldn’t sleep for the first few weeks after he was discharged?”

“You’d wake up in sweats,” Lexa answers with a curt nod.

They had perfected a routine of Lexa wordlessly changing Clarke out of her shirt and scooting them over to the side of the bed where the sheets were dry. She’d sit up against the headboard and adjusted Clarke between her legs, back against her chest, holding her and reading to her until exhausting won out.
Clarke discloses, “I was haunted by the sound of him calling out for Alexandria. I was living inside of my head, struggling with my swirling thoughts about him getting sick, you leaving, about what your mom’s death had done to him, to you, about his wishes, and then him nearly dying and calling for her. It was a lot all at once.”

“You should’ve told me.”

“You were busy with his recovery, my internal freak out seemed trifle in comparison. I didn’t want to burden you so I tried to figure it out on my own.” Clarke pauses and bites her lip, looking at Lexa regrettably. “And, and then—”

“And then I asked you to marry me,” Lexa finishes for her. “When Dad got better I didn’t see a reason to wait. I thought we were headed that way anyways. Who knew I was so wrong, it wasn’t what you wanted.”

“No, Lexa, that’s the problem. It was exactly what I wanted,” Clarke corrects which only confuses Lexa more. “I’ve been dreaming of a life with you since we were kids. I wanted to be Mrs. Griffin-Woods.”

“Then why did you say no?” Lexa asks quietly with a pained expression that Clarke feels sharply inside.

“When you proposed, I was already overloaded and spiralling. I panicked. The reality hit me of what it would mean to marry you, to fall more in love, to build a life together, and then to have it suddenly taken away. I didn’t think I could survive what your dad endured. I didn’t want to doom us to the same fate, I wanted to spare you,” the words spill out of Clarke.

“But you made a decision for both of us without talking to me, Clarke,” Lexa says beseeching for Clarke to understand the monopoly of her choice over their fate, how her feelings had usurped what Lexa might have wanted, taking away her agency.

“You’re right, I should have talked to you,” Clarke concedes. “I know that now. But at the time, I was still having nightmares about being in that hospital bed and calling your name. Or worst, you in that hospital bed. I wasn’t thinking straight. I— I was scared.”

“You were scared?” Lexa asks in a strained, disbelieving voice. “Clarke, I was terrified. I watched my mother die, and thought I had to do it again with my father. For a third time.” It’s Clarke’s turn to be confused, at which Lexa elaborates, her eyes going misty.

“A part of him died with her. Every night for the first six months, I watched him cry himself to sleep, after he thought we had gone to bed. He was rarely without a smile during the day, but at night, when he thought no one was looking, he would crumble. I’ve never seen my dad look so small, a 6’-5” man curled up in a corner. I’d find him squeezed into my mom’s armchair in their bedroom. He was whimpering, Clarke. His whole frame shaking.”

Lexa lets out an unsteady breath.

“She had never allowed him to sit in her chair because he had his man cave leather one. She had found the Wegner at an estate auction. It was the one thing she refused to share with him because it was too delicate for his brute form. She had been so mad at him for scratching the left armrest when they first brought it into the house.”

Clarke’s eyes widen, realising Lexa is referring to the same armchair that used to sit in her den upstairs. While Jake had given Clarke the record player, Gustus had gifted Lexa with the armchair
when they moved in. It was on the only thing of the apartment that Lexa took with her when she moved out. Clarke had known that the mid-century piece of furniture belonged to her mom, so she understood Lexa’s attachment, but not of its deeper significance.

“He barely fits in it,” Lexa says, the tears streaming down. “But it was like he was trying to feel her again. Each night I watched my father become a little less of the man he was with my mom,” she says while wiping her cheeks. “So I know what’s at stake. I know what loss is and how much it can break a person. I was scared too.”

Lexa’s voice is shaking by now, while Clarke’s throat is too tight to respond.

“I never thought I’d have or even want the kind of love my parents had. When my mom passed, I was angry and questioned what was the purpose of them being together—it just seemed cruel, how could anything be worth that pain. Yet despite his heartbreak, Dad still believed in love and kept telling me to wait and see. And then you came along, and I understood,” Lexa says, then amends sorrowfully, “or I thought I did.”

She takes a moment to let the weight of her words sink in before she continues, sounding defeated despite the optimism of her next ones. “When he made it through, I chose hope over fear. It made me want to embrace life, to make the most of it, however long or short. With you.”

Lexa meets her gaze with utter incomprehension that Clarke would choose to run in the opposite direction when faced with the same choice, given their history. Clarke’s regret eats at her a thousandfold.

“You could have told me all of this. You could’ve shared it with me, Clarke. I would’ve understood or at least tried to. I would’ve helped you carry the load,” Lexa says, and then whispers with irrefutable acuity in hindsight, “We could have been scared together.”

Clarke doesn’t answer.

She bows her head and looks down sad and sullen. Short of apologising again, there isn’t much she can say that could erase the years of unnecessary solitude and suffering. Though there is much more that needs to be said, she feels like they’ve met their emotional quota for now—more than plenty to wade through—and lets the conversation peter out.

They sit in silence for a long while, letting admissions and apologies get absorbed into the canvases and walls of Clarke’s studio, stain themselves into hearts while the murmuring activity of street life continues unabated filtering through the window crack. They’re still naked except by cover of the blanket but their vulnerability lies in the words that have finally found the light.

—

Doors are a strange thing, Clarke thinks. As she lets her mind wander while Lexa’s eyes have closed, her attention turned to the studio door, the one that leads outside. Though she doesn’t have the same material appreciation for them as Lexa, there’s something about how they pivot and swing, how their opening and closing set choices in motion. The right one, the wrong one. In London, she had found the right door but at the wrong time. Earlier, her timing was right but she went through the wrong door.

There are endless variations of surfaces and sizes yet different trajectories and life paths hinge on only a few millimetres of hardware, on their heroic smallness to carry a large load. With her eyes narrowed in to the metal joint, Clarke thinks of all the hinges that have led to this moment, a pink form, a beeping machine, a ring box but an unseen ring, a sweater, a letter, a sketch.
Clarke doesn’t know what comes next, how they’ll move forward from here, which threshold they’ll cross, together or alone. In some ways this weekend—the confessions, the kisses, the touches—feels like a goodbye. Her heart twists that this could possibly be the last of them. In other ways, it may have helped Lexa to start reaching overdue, four-year-in-waiting closure, however small the steps. Clarke’s decision has never been for lack of want of Lexa, she hopes her words and lips and hands have at least made that much clear, even if all else remains murky.

“Clarke,” Lexa calls for her, breaking Clarke from her reverie.

“Yeah?”

Clarke turns to look at her. Lexa’s eyes are still closed but there’s a trace of a pout on her face. Clarke worries for a second, until she speaks again.

“I’m not a turtle.”

At Lexa’s unexpected stating of the obvious, Clarke laughs, full and bright for the first time since they’ve come into the studio.

“No, you’re not.”

Lexa opens her eyes then, her gaze as gentle as ever, a wash of green and gold. But there’s also a weariness to them like she’s aged over the two days, the lines drawn deeper by the gravitational shift from trying to recover their lost past and contending with the consequences of Clarke’s unravelling.

She sweeps hair out of Clarke’s face before running her fingers through it. Clarke doesn’t want to think of what she must look like, a combination of bed head and sex hair. “You’re definitely a lion though,” Lexa muses, fondness in her voice as she surveys the unkempt yellow mop. Her half-smile covers the fatigue of her gaze.

Clarke is about to pout back her objection but then Lexa’s expression turns serious, the air changing with the knit of her brows. She looks down at her hands for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

“I don’t know what or how to feel about all this yet,” Lexa says honestly, looking back up. “I should be so angry with you. But, more than anything, I’m just sad. For us.”

Clarke nods, but doesn’t say anything, giving Lexa the room to voice her feelings.

“I was preparing for my dad’s passing. Instead I had to grieve for our relationship. It has been an extraordinarily painful four years, Clarke. To now find out how it didn’t have to be had you just talked to me, I’m at a loss. And I don’t know if I feel better or worse knowing that you had suffered too, that I wasn’t alone in my sorrow.”

Clarke nods again, but newly accompanied with a chew to her lip and moisture in her eyes.

“It’s been a lot,” Lexa says on an exhale. “I need some time to clear my head, to figure somethings out on my own. I know I was being dramatic before, but it’ll be good to get some distance,” she looks down at Clarke’s lips and body as if to say from all that temptation.

Clarke can’t keep her expression from falling, despite putting on a show of nodding.

But before her panic can rise, Lexa’s contradictory movement closer to Clarke provides solace. “Were it up to my body, if it was just a physical thing, it’d self-evidently be a different story. But there’s so much more going on here that I have to consider without the influence of these,” she says looking into Clarke’s eyes, “and these,” ending with a peck to the corner of her mouth.
Lexa’s softness of touch—and her seeming inability to stay away once re-granted the privilege of unfettered access—helps to keep Clarke in check.

“We can continue to text and call each other. I still have a lot of questions so it’d be good to keep talking,” Lexa expands then concludes, “but maybe I don’t see you for awhile.”

Clarke’s teeth dig deeper into her lip as she lets the terms and conditions of their separation bounce in her head. “How long is awhile?” She asks quietly.

“I don’t know,” Lexa looks conflicted as to what the right timeframe would be for her ascetic tolerance of not being in Clarke’s company. “A week, two, three.”

As the count increases, her stomach drops farther. Nonetheless, Clarke can recognise the value of giving each other space, and wants to give Lexa what she needs. Lexa has proven herself to be someone to stay, over and over again; and if Lexa needs Clarke to be someone to wait, then she will. Swallowing her fear for what the time apart could mean, she will be hopeful and constant and holding tight.

“Take as long as you need, as long as it takes,” she tells her, genuine and true, keeping back the last of her tears.

Lexa nods, kissing the top of her head. She lifts her arm and Clarke naturally tucks herself in. Clarke nuzzles into her neck and tries to recommit to memory the smell and feel of home.

Lexa then surprises her by bending down and giving her the most tender but deepest kiss yet, like she’s savouring the last as the weekend and this chapter comes to a close. Clarke breathes her in, her tongue making soft reparations and small asks for requited love. *I will wait and I will mend and I will love you still,* she exhales and promises into the kiss.

“Thank you for finally letting me in,” Lexa whispers after.

Clarke rests her head on Lexa’s shoulder, a new lightness in her chest. Her heart, though it may be a little worst for wear, is still beating.

The door still ajar.

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Chapter End Notes

Thus ends the story. No, just kidding. But, there is now a final chapter count as we enter the last act! Next chapter: Clarke and Lexa’s relationship changes. Lexa makes a decision.

So, here's the thing. I had planned to post this past Sunday but then got stage fright. I had the worst writer's angst on this chapter, it nearly killed me. Like Clarke, I too am lost and have no idea what I'm doing! Actually, no that's another a lie. All of this has been an elaborate (100K+ words???) ruse to write emo smut. :)

The song playing in Clarke's headphones on the plane is Vapour by Vancouver Sleep
Clinic. Their other two songs Someone to Stay and Killing Me to Love You rounds out the musical inspiration for the words, with a smidgen of In My Veins and Pieces both by Andrew Belle thrown in for good measure.

And the book referenced in the flashback is Letter to A, written by philosopher/writer André Gorz to his 82-yr old, terminally ill wife. A beautiful story (and an emotional backstory).

Thanks for the reception on the last chapter! A warm welcome to new readers to this corner of soft, angsty (smutty) Clexa, and cheers to the stalwart who are still here. (Can you give some of your bravery to Clarke?)
To Keep You Close, To Love You Most

Chapter Summary

Clarke and Lexa’s relationship changes. Lexa makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything feels hot. But cold at the same time.

Her body has gone to war with itself and Clarke is the collateral damage. She’s sore everywhere. She doesn’t have muscles, why are they sore?

She hasn’t left her couch since yesterday morning, huddled in a mountain of blankets yet still shivering. Falling in and out of sleep, it escapes her what week it is, let alone day or hour. There’s no light out to help her tell the time.

On a scale of one to Mensa, Clarke’s level of cognition is at an all-time low of negative double digits.

Everything hurts and there’s been incessant pounding that sounds like it’s coming from outside of her head. Clarke scrunches her eyes closed hoping to will the jack hammering away.

Next thing she hears is the turning of her lock and possibly a faint calling of her name. Clarke can’t quite tell but is glad the pounding has at least stopped.

The sound of her name comes nearer causing her to smile hearing the familiar click of the consonants.

“Clarke?”

The next time she opens her eyes, standing in front of her is a beautiful woman looking chic in a midnight blue coat and cream-coloured cigarette pants with a leather briefcase in hand. Her hair is half tied back in braids, a scarf wrapped regally around a slender neck. She looks like a vision rising out of the piles of tissues on the floor.

Crisp among the crumble.

“Pretty,” Clarke voices aloud despite the scratch to her throat to get the word out. She cranes her neck for a better view. Seeing the struggle, in one swell motion, her visitor falls graciously down to her knees bringing them eye level. The briefcase is carelessly set on the ground and keys dropped next to it. When the figure crowds in closer and reveals deep green eyes Clarke feels whatever little air is left knocked out of her. “Wow, prettier.”

“Clarke,” is repeated again, a softness breaking at the end of her name, and Clarke can’t understand why worry lines are etched in the pretty lady’s forehead. She feels her body sway forward, hand reaching out to grasp at the vision, wanting to smooth the lines out, but her feeble pawing merely meets empty air causing her to stumble a little off the couch.

An arm immediately shoots out to steady her and delicately shift her back in place, then one hand
cups her face while the other feels her forehead. The worry lines deepen. Clarke leans into the palm, somehow comforting despite the temperature difference. She practically whines when the hand is gone but abandons her protest when fingers card through her hair, sighing into the soothing touch. Her unexpected nurse doesn’t seem bothered by the slight dampness.

“S’nice.”

“Jesus, Clarke. You’re burning up.”

Clarke shakes her head to refute. “Cold.”

“You’ve got a fever, babe.”

Clarke rubs her eyes, the pet name breaking through her stupor briefly.

“Lexa?” She asks meekly, shaking her head in an attempt to clear the haze. “Has it been two weeks already?”

An endeared smile graces Lexa’s lips as she brushes her thumb across the hinge of Clarke’s jaw, below her ear, while her fingers play with the baby hairs at the nape of her neck. Clarke wants to melt into a puddle, she’s halfway there anyways with how soaked her shirt feels.

“No. It’s Thursday. You were supposed to meet up with Raven and Octavia.”

Clarke nods and abruptly sits up, a big mistake as the room starts to spin. “Ok, let me get dressed,” she says anyways, intent to keep her social calendar appointment, attempting to stagger to her feet and fight against gravity. “Lexa, stop moving. You’re making the room dizzy.”

Lexa gently pushes her back on the couch, ignoring her plea to remain still.

“Your coffee date was last night, you missed it,” Lexa explains patiently as she adjusts Clarke into a sitting position, settling her against the back of the couch and rewrapping the blankets around her.

Clarke wracks her brain trying to put the pieces together but then feels exhausted from the effort to concentrate on anything other than breathing. It feels like being drunk but not drunk enough to numb the insistent throbbing pain. “Are they mad? They wanted me to talk about Lexa,” she asks, tipping her head back atop the couch cushion, closing her eyes. *She’s hot.*

Lexa laughs and shakes her head but Clarke doesn’t see it, nor does she realise her last thought was said out loud.

“When you didn’t show, Anya cancelled on me to go hang out with Raven for an impromptu date night. O was happy she didn’t have to change out of her mom sweats.”

“Oh,” Clarke sighs, relieved as much for her friends’ nonplussed reactions as for her own desire to remain in home clothes. But the temporary peace soon washes away. When she opens her eyes again they immediately widen in alarm, “Who punched you in the neck?”

Clarke’s suddenly lucid. She feels herself getting upset, a frown and fist forming at the sight of a small purplish patch just above the collar of Lexa’s silk blouse. She reaches out to clumsily hook her finger in the collar for a better look, jerking Lexa forward.

Lexa wordlessly wrests her hand away. Clarke can’t quite understand the blush and sigh she receives, or the mumbled, “Who do you think.” She struggles to make sense of her culpability because she’s too busy declaring, “I’ll fight them!”, and punching her fist in the air. Or so she
thought, but is then doubly confused to find her arm still lying listlessly by her side. Her throat suddenly feels like sandpaper from the rasp of her mini-roar.

“There’ll be no war,” Lexa whispers and unwraps her fingers, tracing soft lines in her palm to calm her.

It comes to Clarke when Lexa next goes to smooth out her pout, the pad of two fingers flattening the downward curve of her upper lip then lingering on her beauty mark. She recalls in one moment of clarity the jumbled events of only a few days ago, the dinner, the storm, the revelations, Lexa kissing her, making love to her, running away, Clarke running after her, the snow and chill. **So that’s why I’m cold.** If she had her full wits, she’d realise it’s also likely that her body finally buckled under the weight of the emotional juggernaut of their weekend.

As the events replay, Lexa shuffles out of her coat and lays it over the couch’s arm. The cushion shifts next to Clarke and before she can question the movement her head is lifted off the couch and then pressed into a warm chest, Lexa’s arm coming around her shoulder and rubbing her back in soothing circles. Clarke re-closes her eyes folding herself into the warmth and indulging the comfort.

“They hadn’t heard from you today either so they worried,” Lexa says softly into her hair. Then a beat after, “I worried. Raven gave me her spare key to check in on you. Why didn’t you text me?”

Her question is greeted with silence as Clarke dozes off for the next few minutes. When it seems like it will go unanswered, Clarke speaks up, eyes still closed.

“Space.”

“What?”

“You … need … space,” Clarke labours to explain but her chest feels suddenly heavy, each word a mountain climb to convey, “I … give … space.” She lifts her head off and leans her upper body imperceptibly away from Lexa as a gesture to respect the wish for distance.

She doesn’t get far, Lexa tightens her hold, bringing Clarke even closer into her chest.

“I think recent history will show that my words and actions are inconsistent when it comes to you,” Lexa says, likely more to herself since her answer only confuses an already cognitively-compromised Clarke.

Clarke starts to vigorously shake her head, which is hurting as much from the tight elastic band as from the complexity of Lexa’s sentence. “Less words,” she breathes into Lexa’s neck.

“I can’t stay away,” comes the quiet reply and a hitch of breath as Clarke’s parted lips graze her skin.

“Ok.”

Another kiss to the top of her head and then Lexa asks, “Clarke, when was the last time you’ve eaten? Showered?”

“Ok.”

Lexa chuckles. “You’re the worst with the flu.”

Clarke isn’t given a chance to defend herself. Lexa gets up off the couch and gingerly lays her head back against the cushion. That startles Clarke awake, she feels tears suddenly prickling and the pout returning, “Are you leaving?”, she asks with a quiver to her lip.
“Be right back,” Lexa reassures her, retracing a thumb across her pursed lips and placing a feather kiss on her forehead.

Her tenderness mollifies Clarke into another catnap.

—

“No, Lexa,” Clarke whines turning her head away from the spoon, “I don’t want grape juice.”

She doesn’t care if she sounds petulant. It’s disgusting.

Lexa sighs deeply as she mutters, “Well, if you had something other than children’s Tylenol in your cabinet.”

“Octavia,” Clarke simply says without followup while continuing to side eye the offending liquid and sealing her lips in a thin line, her only defence against its pungent strength that breaks through even her congestion.

“I’ll grab stuff from CVS later,” Lexa tells her before the spoon and the taste of grape returns to Clarke’s lips. “For now, please?” A head shake. “You’ll feel better.” A huff. “For me?” Clarke opens her mouth.

It’s been like this, minutes of micro-negotiations of Lexa trying to administer medicine and fluids as Clarke refuses and retreats. All she wants to do is sleep, she doesn’t understand why Lexa is torturing her. But then when she feels soft lips lightly land on hers after swallowing the latest disgusting spoonful, the scowl disappears to collect her reward, Lexa’s version of a dangling carrot. For every acquiescence, she’d receive a kiss, a bartering system Lexa had developed to counteract Clarke’s uselessness and stubborn aversion to sickness self-care.

(“Medicine is for the weak. I’ll just ride it out.”
“Clarke, that’s ridiculous. Your mother is a doctor.”)

During one fit of a terrible cold in senior year, to Lexa’s delight and Clarke’s embarrassment, they had learned that Clarke would do just about anything if Lexa’s lips got involved. Apparently her kisses were the elixir guaranteed to make Clarke bend like a willow to her caregiving demands.

Because of this ingrained call-and-response Lexa-reflexivity, and with currently lowered defences, that is how Clarke finds herself falling prey to Lexa’s ploy.

After the fourth of Clarke’s objection, Lexa had muttered under her breath, “Fine.” But Clarke still had enough wherewithal to know better than to prematurely celebrate her victory, squinting at Lexa as she put the medicine down on the coffee table, her movement slow and deliberate.

“Fine?” She asked suspiciously, if not hoarsely.

“Uh-huh,” Lexa answered nonchalant. “You’re going to be so mad at sick Clarke when you regain full consciousness.”

Lexa’s preamble and the determined look in her eyes evaded understanding until, without further notice, she braced a knee on either side of Clarke’s thighs and settled herself on top of her lap, careful not to put weight down. The new proximity didn’t help Clarke’s already laboured breathing while Lexa the tactician stared intently at her, calculating her next chess move. It got worse when two hands went to cup Clarke’s face, worser when her nose was booped in affectionate passes, and worstest when Lexa tilted her head and leaned in to give her the softest kiss.
Lexa is the best at being the worst.

At first it was only a light moistening effect as Lexa traced the contour of Clarke’s lips with the plumpness of hers. But then her teeth gently bit down on Clarke’s bottom lip to draw it out and part the seam of her mouth. All Clarke could do was whimper and let her in. Like a pliable drunk, she chased the high of their mouths moving together. With her flu-addled inability to tell time Clarke didn’t know for how long Lexa kissed her but the fire of it left a soaking warmth in her fevered state.

“Clarke,” Lexa murmured against her lips when they drew for air.

“Hmm?” Clarke inquired, her lips remaining parted after Lexa pulled fully away. She didn’t get an answer and was too caught up in the buzzing daze to question why when a grape flavour splashed on her tongue.

Her eyes immediately scrunched in distaste but then shot open in betrayal when understanding dawned. She glared at Lexa who looked unapologetic, self-satisfied even. Before Clarke could launch into reprimand Lexa gave her another soft peck.

“Quid pro quo,” Lexa proffered. “This,” she lifted the spoon and fed another drop to Clarke’s still open mouth, “for this,” and then kissed her again.

Clarke had no fight in her to combat such unfair grounds for trade. “Fine,” she lowly husked in defeat even as she hid her smile seeing the radiant, triumphant grin her capitulation had earned.

Now, six teaspoons and six kisses later, her tongue purple and lips rosy to match the flush of her cheeks, Clarke has consumed almost half of the evil bottle, forced to take four times the dose for adult effectiveness.

“I doubt Tye would give me this much trouble,” Lexa says after the last of the teaspoon, not without a hint of fondness seeping through, giving a final kiss to Clarke’s nose before rising from her straddled position. “Alright, let’s get you cleaned up. I’m going to run the bath.”

By the time Clarke grasps what she means Lexa’s already out of the room and she hears the start of water flowing. Any protestations die in her throat as she finds herself falling asleep to the distant sounds of rummaging. Does children’s Tylenol really work this fast or is she just really tired.

“Clarke?” Lexa prods gently when she returns, waking her up by sweeping her matted hair away from her face. “Hey,” she smiles when Clarke opens her eyes at the dulcet tone. “Think you can stand?”

The headache and sore muscles are screaming no but Clarke nods wanting to be helpful and makes a valiant effort to join Lexa on her feet. “I can do it,” she psychs herself.

She cannot.

She nearly falls from pitching off the couch too eagerly. Lexa immediately catches her. Clarke pants heavily against her chest, winded by the attempt. Lexa rubs her back anew, making broad strokes with one hand while the other grips her waist to prevent further swaying.

“Stay here,” Clarke decides after amassing enough air to utter a belated challenge to Lexa’s agenda, “No clean.”

“Yes clean,” Lexa insists. “It’ll do you good.”

Clarke moves her head against Lexa’s chest in silent disagreement. Lexa lightly scratches into her
scalp to soothe her. Clarke folds into the touch, and considers maybe Lexa’s the one with the ailment, how could she think any place else would be better than here.

“You smell.”

Clarke is too stuffed up to argue the veracity of the claim, so instead she pleads for mercy, “I can’t, Lex,” and wants to cry at the weighted feeling as if someone has tied cannon balls to her feet and is asking her to run the marathon. She looks down to scowl at her body’s treachery.

Before any crocodile tears have a chance to form, however, she looses contact with the ground only to find Lexa has swept her up in her arms, bracing her under her knees and neck. Then they’re on the move, Lexa heedful not to jostle her too much. Once in the master bathroom she’s gently deposited down to stand near the edge of the bathtub.

Lexa has one hand on her hip to keep her steady while bending to check the temperature of the drawn bath.

“I think it’s ready now,” she determines, and then rises again to face Clarke. “I found some epsom salt under the sink,” she says sheepishly realising it might sound like she was snooping. She distractedly, subconsciously, brushes her thumb at the slip of skin between Clarke’s shirt and bottom as she rambles on, “I didn’t put too much in because it’ll dehydrate you but there’s enough to help loosen and relax your muscles. In any case the steam should clear your airways a bit.”

“Thank you,” Clarke says simply, quietly.

“I’ll leave you to it then. You’re okay to take it from here?”

It’s doubtful she can. Clarke already feels her strength thinning from the strain to stay upright, but not wanting to disappoint she nods with more conviction than she has.

Lexa looks unconvinced. She shifts on her feet with a torn expression whether she should leave after all, not trusting Clarke to undress and bathe herself. But she lets her trepidation go to say, “Ok, I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

Clarke nods again. After a final squeeze to her hip, she receives one last worried look and then the door softly clicks closed.

She sighs. Her shoulders slump, her chest tightens. Her body aches.

Clarke breathes deeply as she taps into her reserves to power through. If she can do this then she’ll be less of a burden on Lexa who won’t have to stay much longer. Lexa should be focusing on healing her own pain rather than thinking about Clarke’s.

So she tries her best, she does.

Her body has other ideas. Clarke finds even lifting the hem of her shirt feels like an impossible task. She pushes past the small tears welling in the corner of her eyes to manage an arm out of one sleeve. Exhaustion wins out however when the second sleeve isn’t as cooperative.

Clarke braces a hand against the wall for support and then leans her side fully into it. Her mind swims for anchor as unrelenting waves thrash against her. She rarely gets sick but when she does, it’s forceful and vengeful as if making up for lost time. This go-round feels doubly intense for how her body has also physically succumbed to the emotional tumult of their reunion. A heaviness clouds her head, a taxing effort to hold herself up.
“Lexa,” she feebly calls, more out of self-comfort initially than a desire to be rescued from a losing battle with her shirt. But then, in light of recent revelations, she thinks of her misplaced martyrdom to suffer alone. “Lexa,” she tries louder and with greater intent, taking the first step to put her pride aside to ask for help.

Lexa is in front of her again within seconds. She must have been waiting closely by the door because the sound of Clarke’s weak plea would not have traveled as far as the living room. Maybe the urgency in her middling rasp broke through drywall.

“Clarke,” Lexa inquires, worriedly scanning for injury that couldn’t possibly have occurred in the five minutes she stepped away.

“The shirt won,” Clarke tries for a joke to sound less vulnerable than she feels. She looks at Lexa with what must be the biggest, wettest, bluest eyes and asks, “Help, please.”

Lexa nods and smooths out her wrinkles with a thumb, understanding the layered meaning underneath. “Ok.” An unbidden tear spills over that Clarke can’t keep back and that Lexa is quick to wipe away. “It’s ok,” she whispers. The unsaid I’m here rings between them.

It’s intimate and gentle, Lexa’s movements are patience embodied as she removes Clarke’s shirt and delicately disentangles her limbs from the roguish fabric. Sweatpants and underwear are next and Lexa respectfully looks away to grant her privacy, crouched on bended knee and allowing her shoulders to serve as anchor so Clarke can keep her balance while stepping out of the garments.

When she rises again, Clarke’s breath catches in her throat at the renewed closeness and eye contact. Lexa keeps their gazes locked as she reaches behind and unhooks Clarke’s bra then gingerly pulls the straps down and away from her. Ever the gentlewoman, Lexa’s focus never once falters below her neckline.

She helps Clarke into the tub into a seated position and all Clarke can do is sigh at the relief of heat on her skin, wanting to submerge completely underneath. Instead she looks up at Lexa with a question in her eyes that she’s not sure what they’re asking.

There must however be a helplessness to her gaze that gets tacitly picked up.

Lexa hesitates for but a moment, a bite to her lip and the flicker of a war of emotions in her eyes, and then to both their surprise she begins to undress. Her silk blouse and tailored pants are promptly discarded. Clarke turns her head to let her remove the rest without an audience.

She stares at the water, flat and smooth and motionless, its calm a contradiction to the quickening beat of her heart, the flutter in her stomach. Just when she thinks she’s slowed her breathing to a matching tranquility, the stillness gets disrupted when Lexa settles in behind her, bracketing Clarke between her legs. Her body thrums once more.

Lexa sweeps Clarke’s hair over her shoulder and then gently urges her to bend forward. Clarke gets the hint and wraps her arms around her knees, pillowing her head atop and exposing her back for washing.

A gasp falls into the fold of arms when Lexa’s fingers trace the outline of her spine, sending a shiver along its length that Clarke feels travel to her toes.

After a few beats of fortifying silence, they fall into an old rhythm. In long passes interspersed with circular movements, Lexa scrubs and cleans. Clarke softens and melts.

In the past, the roles tended to be reverse. In high school, Clarke worked out Lexa’s knots after
games, in college she smoothed out Lexa’s tightness from hunching over her drafting table. A steaming bath and essential oils and Clarke’s aftercare were the only things Lexa allowed herself to indulge in outside of her ascetic inclinations. Conversely, as an aesthete, Clarke gladly lets the strong and beautiful back serve as canvas for the brushstrokes of her fingers.

The infrequent times that Clarke sat in front rather than behind was when she was sick. A steaming bath and warm hands and Lexa’s tenderness were balms to Clarke’s aches and pains.

When Lexa pulls Clarke back into her chest and bares Clarke’s weight against her wiry frame, she thinks of how much she has missed Lexa’s strength and warmth and wonders how she had survived the last two bouts of illness without. The tears then had nothing to do with how unwell she felt. The soft unseen tears now has everything to do with how she feels in Lexa’s hold.

Lexa leans forward, her chin resting over Clarke’s shoulder as she turns her attention to her arms. She moves the bar of soap from shoulder down to elbow then to forearm, wrist and hand before journeying back and repeating the lathering routine on the other side. Clarke is practically liquid happiness when Lexa returns to rinse off the soap with a small wet towel, rubbing and kneading into her sore muscles.

Lexa chuckles, “Clarke, you’re purring.”

“Am not.”

“Uh-hmm,” Lexa insists as she works around her elbow, pressing into the hollow cove and working the cloth around its bend.

“Mmmm,” she does indeed purr, “so good with your hands.”

“I’m not even touching you directly.”

“That good,” Clarke answers, earning another laugh.

The bliss ends too soon as Lexa hands her the soap and towel to tend to her front herself. She’s given no room for complaint however when Lexa shampoos her hair and massages into her scalp. If Clarke was purring before she’s vibrating now with unguarded contentment.

When they’re both finished with their respective tasks, Lexa drains the tub and helps her to rise, turning her around to face each other.

When their gazes meet Clarke can’t help but notice Lexa’s eyes flicker to her lips, distracted from her next plan of action. There’s a momentary stalemate as Lexa looks to be battling dragons not to kiss her, armed with only a plastic sword and a heightened sense of propriety. Clarke feels the pull as much if not more. The thumping of her heart sends reinforcements of pink rushing to her already rosy cheeks, its beat reaching an unexaggerated fevered pitch.

The spell is broken however when Clarke shudders like a shaken leaf, her teeth lightly chattering from the temperature difference out of the bathwater. The movement refocuses Lexa.

“Close your eyes,” Lexa whispers as she reaches behind Clarke to turn on the shower head. She does as told and allows Lexa to work fingers through her hair to wash out the shampoo while water gently pelts against the back of her head and upper torso.

Exhaustion overtakes her again and she cant into Lexa who swiftly catches her by the waist. Lexa readjusts to complete the rinse with one hand while the other keeps Clarke close and steady. Clarke loses self-awareness that they’re standing naked breast to breast as the medicine seems to be kicking
in, its effect sitting heavy on her eyelids.

The next moments become a blur.

She faintly registers Lexa turning off the tap, helping her out of the tub, and towelling her off. Somehow she ends up seated at the edge of her bed protectively wrapped in a towel while Lexa scrambles to find appropriate sleepwear.

“Here,” Lexa says softly when she returns with an oversize t-shirt and loose comfy shorts. In her hurry to dress Clarke she must have forgotten about her own state of undress.

Clarke’s head is halfway through the neck opening but enough of her face is visible to expose a deep blush when her line of sight catches Lexa’s perk nipples. She averts her gaze and tries to communicate her gratitude to Lexa through glassy eyes that are fighting to stay open.

“Sleep, Clarke,” Lexa encourages as she shifts her up on the bed and into the sheets. Clarke wants to tell her that shouldn’t be a problem but she’s already being pulled under by the time the sentence finishes forming in her head. The last thing she hears is Lexa moving about tidying up.

Clarke falls asleep enveloped by happy domesticity.

—

An indeterminate time later when she opens her eyes, Clarke is greeted by green and gold and gentleness.

“Hi,” is softly expelled.

“How long have I been sleeping?” Clarke asks. Though she’s still trying to piece
things together she’s well aware of how simultaneously stubborn and defencelessly needy she can become when her immune system is under attack.

“Only sick Clarke?” Lexa teases pointedly.

“Well, I hope she didn’t cause you too much trouble,” Clarke tries to gauge but Lexa’s non-committal hum has her worried, “God, did she do or say something stupid?”

Lexa smirks with an endeared twinkle to her gaze. “That’s between me and sick Clarke, doctor patient confidentiality,” she says. “And nothing a little grape juice and epsom salt didn’t fix.”

Clarke’s eyes widen. Foggy flashes of the couch and the bathtub sends a rush of pink to her cheeks and ears. Lexa laughs prettily. Clarke groans but also feels slight relief. It can’t be so bad if Lexa’s joking.

Before she has a chance to excuse her incapacitated state her stomach grumbles. “Is that for me?” Clarke asks hopefully, needlessly, as she looks forlorn at the plate.

“No,” Lexa deadpans, “I thought I’d eat in front of you while you’re dying.”

Clarke has regained enough energy to glower at her.

“I didn’t think you’d have much of an appetite but you should at least eat something,” Lexa says, placing the plate on Clarke’s lap and then surprises them both by settling next to her on the bed. Their shoulders brush together and Clarke gravitates to the bolstering touch.

She looks down at the toast and then at Lexa and back again to the plate in awe as if Lexa had just procured a Michelin star dish. “Thank you,” she says softly and turns to reflexively give Lexa a kiss on the cheek.

“Sorry it’s not chicken soup but I figured this would be less gross than avocado soup,” Lexa rambles, sidestepping her blush from the kiss. “I only lightly toasted it so hopefully it’s not too hard to swallow.”

Clarke squeezes her hand then proceeds to take nibbling bites from the sandwich. She eats in silence for the next few minutes while Lexa absently fiddles with the loose thread of her oversize shirt. Clarke is partway through one quarter before it occurs to her to ask, “Have you eaten?”

Lexa’s non-answer is answer enough so Clarke gives her the other half. She cuts off Lexa’s anticipated refusal by reassuring that she can’t finish it. Lexa nods and gratefully accepts.

More time is stretched between them while they share the late meal in comforting quiet. Clarke doesn’t know what time it is but by the darkened sky and the muted activities of the street it must be late evening after dusk. She feels marginally better than she did this afternoon though her body is still thermally indecisive between hot and cold. Her limbs still ache.

By the time her half is eaten, the pull of sleep calls again, and she has to fight off slumber to get a few more greedy minutes with Lexa. She lays her head on Lexa’s shoulder, not able to hold it up any more, inviting herself into the crook of her neck.

“You’ve been reading Calvino again?” Lexa asks.

Clarke’s brows furrow momentarily until she remembers the thin paperback sitting on the other night table by Lexa’s side. After their weekend and talk of London, Clarke’s mind has been ruminating on invisible cities and of being lost and searching for unseen possibilities.
“Yeah,” she says.

“Still one of my favourites,” Lexa tells her picking up the book and reading the back summary.

Within a slim 165 pages, a young Marco Polo describes to an aging Kublai Khan fifty-five cities that the Venetian explorer has supposedly visited, and Lexa has read them all to her on numerous occasions, sometimes cover to cover, sometimes at random. Tales from Cities and Memory, Cities and Desire, and Cities and Sky were some of the bedtime stories Lexa would weave in and out of her own imaginaries about concrete utopias or sky gardens or fabric fortresses. Clarke clung onto the Italian writer’s words because it gave her insight into the dreaming that fuelled the type of architect Lexa aims to be.

(Clarke had loved it so much and dog-eared it so affectionately that Lexa had ‘accidentally’ left it behind)

“Which city?” Clarke asks, knowing the answer already but wanting to hear it again. She doesn’t expect for Lexa to turn to the page and read out loud.

_Those who arrive at Thekla can see little of the city, beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffoldings, the metal armatures, the wooden catwalks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles. If you ask "Why is Thekla's construction taking such a long time?" the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer "So that it's destruction cannot begin." And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, "Not only the city."

If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. "What meaning does your construction have?" he asks. "What is the aim of a city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?"

“We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now,” they answer.

Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. "There is the blueprint,” they say.

Clarke hums when Lexa finishes reading. She can’t deny how poetic it is for a city’s plan to be mapped to the constellations and considered incomplete until it reaches the stars in height if not breadth, how through incremental addition ground and sky won’t be so far apart anymore. Her mind is cloudy still but it feels like the same could be said about love and its scaffolding. It builds and builds and it is forever unfinished. Endless construction so as to be no destruction. She wonders if maybe that’s the key to finding her way back to Lexa. One beam and cross brace at a time until the ruins are rebuilt.

“That's how I see New York,” Lexa says picking up a parallel thread. “It’s always under construction. But as annoying as that is, there’s something infinitely hopeful in it.”

Her words are a familiar refrain. Lexa has told her in the past that while most people find construction sites noisy and disruptive, she’s always found them to be beautiful places of possibility.

“Yeah,” Clarke repeats.

“When I first got to London and was missing New York, I’d look for cranes in the sky,” Lexa notes
The tinge of melancholy tugs at Clarke’s heart, imagining Lexa staking out some rooftop perch for an unobstructed view of the skyline. When she doesn’t continue, only staring blankly ahead seemingly mulling over other words and memories, Clarke shares in an equally hushed tone, “For awhile, after you left, I’d go on these random walks around Brooklyn but always somehow ended up in front of a construction site. I’d stand for hours just staring. I guess it made me feel closer to you.”

The air crackles between them of their mutual sorrow. Two lonely souls searching among different streets and spires but carrying the same sadness. Instead of a direct response, Lexa gently asks, “Another?”

Clarke nods into her shoulder. Opposite to her intention, Lexa puts the book down. Clarke watches curiously as she removes the plate and sets it on the side table. She has to suppress her small shock when Lexa returns to shift their positions to sit behind Clarke, nestling the invalid between her legs.

She leans Clarke back against her chest and gives them a moment for heartbeats to adjust in time. Lexa’s shuddered breath sends a different chill down her body. “You can feel closer to me now,” Lexa whispers in her ear, but sounding like she needs the comfort more so than Clarke.

Lexa picks up the book again and rests it lightly atop of Clarke’s midsection. The book, the warmth, the fragile affection are all a callback to when Clarke was torn and restless after the hospital. She thinks maybe Lexa is subconsciously recreating this small moment to re-feel and better understand Clarke’s vulnerability then. Wishful thinking perhaps but whatever Lexa seeks to find Clarke aims to have a different outcome this time.

Lexa lays a hand flat above Clarke’s chest over her heart. Nothing is said as she lets Lexa simply feel her and the steady rhythm their co-presence induces.

Then, as Lexa reads, staying awake proves difficult. Clarke ultimately gives into her drowsiness, cradled in the soft timbre of Lexa’s voice reciting the weaving of the city of Ersilia and its labyrinth of strings.

(Just before consciousness slips away, Clarke makes a mental note of another thing to add to her growing amends list, take Lexa somewhere high.)

(But as she drifts off she misses a kiss to her head and Lexa’s deep sigh and her quiet words, “I wish I knew what to do.”)

—

She dreams of Lexa.

Wading in and out of sleep, Clarke runs the weekend reel on endless loop, thinking of the soft press of lips, the feel of their bodies moving together. Lexa inside of her, being inside of Lexa. A visual repair to the physical if not emotional hurt.

The next time Clarke opens her eyes, the warmth is gone. She’s huddled in blankets and the sun is streaking through partially drawn curtains but neither of which is the kind of heat her body craves.

At least her headache has been reduced to simply an unpleasant buzz and the aches a low-grade inconvenience.

Her cognitive awakening also happens faster this time, and the memories are more forthcoming, reminding her of the who responsible for her better health and making her acutely miss the source of
the empty warmth.

There’s no room for sulking however when Clarke spots a bag of popcorn beside a refilled glass of water. She can’t keep the smile off her face reaching for the sticky note underneath the glass:

_Plenty of rest, lots of fluids. Doctor’s orders._

There’s a second sticky note on the popcorn that widens her smile to rival the sun:

_Don’t use the microwave._

Clarke grabs her phone to text Lexa.

_(Clarke) 09:20_
Thank you Dr Woods

_(Lexa) 09:24_
Feel better?

_(Clarke) 09:24_
Much

_(Lexa) 09:25_
Take it easy on the popcorn. I know how you like to inhale it but be kind to your throat.

Her concern reactivates the butterflies in Clarke’s stomach. They exchange some quick texts before Lexa has to rush off to a meeting and Clarke is in need of another nap. For a split second, it must be the flu talking, Clarke considers adding a heart eyes emoji to her sign-off. She’s saved from herself when Lexa offers up her own, more subdued emoticon.

_(Lexa) 09:29_
Ttyl :)

Only four letters but the small promise of continued communication is enough to etch the smile permanently on Clarke’s face for the rest of the morning. Her heart flutters in anticipation for ‘later.’

—

Later turns out to be a strange sequence of events.

After two movies of mind-numbing plotlessness, Clarke’s impatience to return to full form bests her. Wanting to rid the lethargy and expel the last dregs of her illness, she perhaps increased her medicine dose more than she should. It knocks her out and when she wakes up, groggy and disoriented with Lexa still on her mind, Clarke decides to leave her a voicemail.

Her dreams had crystallised for her what a near future with Lexa may look like and ways forward to make it happen. Unfortunately, she spectacularly misjudges the clarity of her thoughts.

“I know you asked for some time and you’re still processing and deciding what you want, deciding about me. But if you need help figuring me out, I could be your direct source. Who knows me better than me, I mean other than you who would know me better than me. You know?” Clarke trails off realising she sounds insane. “Ok, well, um … when you’re ready, I’d like to take you on a date.”

Her eyes widen, _noooooooo_, that was not what she means to say. She can’t believe she just asked Lexa out, how more obtuse could she be. That is so far from the concept of giving Lexa space. She
wants to launch herself into the sun. But the words have already travelled across the wires and she can’t take them back. So she bucks up and commits to them with verve.

“Yes, that’s right, I said a date. It was not a slip. Romantic or platonic, it doesn’t matter. You can pick the type of onic or antic you want. As long as it isn’t anything like the panic that I’m currently experiencing, I’ve got us both covered in that department.”

Clarke doesn’t know how to conclude the call after that, imagining smacking herself wouldn’t translate well over voicemail. She decides to go with politeness instead, “Thank you for your time. Regards,” and swiftly hangs up before further damage can be done. It’s a battle of will not to call back and append her full name and credentials as if terminating an official correspondence.

Clarke Griffin,
BA, MA, Idiot.

The burst of energy it took to self-sabotage finally runs out and Clarke collapses back into the couch. She re-burrows into her blanket fort and hopes this has been a dream.

Hours later, Lexa confirms indeed it is not. Clarke is in the middle of re-heating the takeout pho soup that Lexa had thoughtfully left in the fridge for her when the text comes.

(Lexa) 7:42 pm
Was that sick Clarke calling?

(Clarke) 7:42 pm
Maybe

(Lexa) 7:42 pm
She’s adorable.

(Lexa) 7:42 pm
I like her hearts.

That’s odd and something Lexa would not text unless a few glasses of chardonnay are involved.

(Clarke) 7:43 pm
Wait, is this tipsy Lexa?

(Lexa) 7:43 pm
Maybe

(Lexa) 7:43 pm
After work drinks. Never trust three-for-one shots.

(Clarke) 7:43 pm
A bit early for shots?

(Lexa) 7:43 pm
Big celebration. Yay.

Dots animate her screen for a long beat.

(Lexa) 7:46 pm
Where is the gay emoji Clarke? I think someone stole it from my phone.
Clarke laughs at the typo. Cheap alcohol and fatigue have always been Lexa’s undoing. She wishes she could hug her right now and kiss away the pretty pout she knows Lexa must be sporting while she scrutinises her keyboard to locate the occasion-appropriate emotional shorthand.

Clarke helps her out by sending her own rainbow, party popper and confetti.

*(Clarke) 7:47 pm*
You can borrow mine

But Lexa seems to have already moved on.

*(Lexa) 7:48 pm*
I must go play darts. They found out I can throw things.

*(Lexa) 7:48 pm*
But between you and me, I would not trust me with a sharp object right now.

The confession pulls another chuckle out of Clarke. She imagines Lexa decimating the competition with her missile accuracy even while under the influence. (No one let her play beer pong in college.)

Clarke’s amusement stays with her until she tucks into her late dinner and catches up on email. Her smile fades however when Lexa’s next texts pop up and the tone has decidedly shifted.

*(Lexa) 9:24 pm*
You confuse me. I am confused.

*(Lexa) 9:25 pm*
We were together for twelve years. You broke up with me because you were scared of loving me too much. We don’t see or talk to each other for four years until I reached out. Then we kissed and had the best (only) sex I’ve had in four years, and now you want to take me on a date?

Tipsy Lexa is also honest Lexa, articulate and succinct. It knocks the air out of Clarke’s lungs she’s only recently recovered. She closes her laptop and stares at her phone. There are two paths that she can take: a brush-off of Lexa’s inebriated state and picking up the thread later when they’re both clear-headed, or be equally as honest now. She chooses the latter.

*(Clarke) 9:28 pm*
We were together for twelve years. I broke up with you because I feared losing a love so big and cosmic that I felt too small to deserve or able to handle, holding my breath for that day when my knees and heart and lungs would give out. But more basically because I was an idiot. We don’t see or talk to each other for four years because, see last point, until you reached out and I felt like I could breath again. Then we kissed and had the best (only) sex I’ve had in four years, and now I want to take you on a date to prove to you that I’m trying to be less of an idiot.

Clarke lets out a deep breath after hitting send. Minutes go by unanswered. When Lexa starts typing again, a lifetime spans the spaces between the dots of the ellipsis.

*(Lexa) 9:42 pm*
Sober Lexa will have to get back to you on that. Her heart hurts.

Clarke’s own clenches reading the three words.

*(Clarke) 9:43 pm*
I know. Mine too.
It’s understandable that she doesn’t hear from Lexa for the rest of the night. Or several days after.

Each day without another real word from Lexa would make Clarke feel worst if Lexa didn’t maintain a modicum of communication.

*Goodnight, Clarke*  
*Goodnight, Lexa*  

*Good morning, Lexa*  
*Good morning, Clarke*

Clarke’s not one for counting words but the ten that are sent and received daily reads like a million passing between them. They say, in all the ways that count, *I’m still here.* Even when Lexa has to fly out to Chicago for a three-day conference that Clarke finds out about later, the small exchange doesn’t break off.

In the quiet of those days, Clarke picks up her brush and knitting needles, sometimes making more progress with one than the other. Though she fully recovers from her ailment, the re-opened wounds from the weekend take longer to heal.

But rather than ignore it, Clarke lets the ache hurt, lets the melancholy sit. She resolves to wait and to embrace time instead of fight it.

Lexa must have come to her own set of resolutions because when she returns from her trip, the frequency of their communication picks up, no longer relegated to the polar ends of daylight. More words come. Along with them, many questions. Clarke answers as honestly as she can, revealing further insights into her emotions and motivations.

Sometimes fraught, sometimes frail, yet steeped in renewed tenderness, they settle into a new groove with each other, balancing innocuous friendly chatter with serious talk about their time apart. Clarke’s fear and guilt, Lexa’s loneliness and sense of abandonment—they revisit the past with a fuller grasp of the bigger picture and with greater empathy prescinding from hurtful miscommunication.

It’s not long before they move on from text-based only exchanges to phone calls too. After the temporary absence, hearing Lexa’s voice again settles something in Clarke. The considered word arrangements, the meaningful hums, how she goes quiet at the end of a sentence when she’s uncertain, her rambling and self-conscious laugh when she’s nervous, all endears Clarke to press the phone closer to her ear.

Although their back and forth does tactically avoid the subject of Clarke asking her out, and for now, the topic of their future altogether, hope shines bright for Clarke that she and Lexa are still tethered.

—

Spring finally arrives and with it a new beginning for Clarke and Lexa.

The change comes when she least expects it.

Clarke is lying on her bed staring up at the ceiling and waiting for nightfall and a darkened sky, a bowl of popcorn on her stomach as she mindlessly tosses kernels in the air and makes minimal effort to catch them in her mouth.
Her poor practise of eye mouth coordination gets interrupted when her phone rings. Clarke immediately picks up without checking the caller id knowing who’d it be, anticipating Lexa’s audio reminder to watch Mercury rising tonight. Their last conversation covered Lexa’s excitement over the celestial event, *the only time of year, Clarke, we can see Mercury clearly in the sky with a naked eye.* Lexa had sent her a calendar e-vite.

Before she has a chance to greet and confirm her intent to look out her window and up later, Lexa speaks.

“**Yes.**”

She sounds breathless like the word has been stuck in her throat and pushed out by a sudden expulsion of air.

“**Yes?**”

“I’d like that date.”

*Oh.*

“**Ow!*”

Clarke drops the phone on her face, though manages to keep the popcorn balanced on her stomach. Priorities.

She scrambles for her phone and re-situates herself into a sitting position, rubbing her forehead. She then checks her left arm for feeling to make sure she isn’t having a heart attack and imagining hearing things.

“Clarke?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“No,” Lexa corrects. “I’m saying yes to you asking me out.”

*That makes more sense.* Clarke bites her lip, humming and stalling as she processes. At her prolonged silence, Lexa follows up with, “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“No, no,” Clarke quickly reassures. “Most definitely not. Still very much interested. Very much. Like super a lot,” she wishes her brain would catch up much faster to grant her access to a better thesaurus because her pounding heart is making it hard to formulate any coherent thought.

“Tonight?”

Clarke looks down at her ripped sweat pants and pats her unwashed hair, doing mad calculations as to how fast she can transform herself.

“Not tonight,” Lexa emits a soft chuckle. “Your calendar is already scheduled, Clarke.” There’s the reminder she was expecting.

“Right, right,” Clarke nods, a nervous chuckle. “Which kind of date? Friendly or more?”

“I’m kinda curious what a Griffin date post-2014 would be like,” Lexa answers indirectly.

“The same as pre-2014,” Clarke says automatically despite not having a clue what she intends to do. She’s thrown by Lexa’s spontaneity but what she lacks in planning knowledge she makes up in false confidence. “I’m going to Griffin charm the pants off of you,” she asserts with gusto.
“Is that so?” Lexa challenges, amusement laced in her scepticism. Clarke can visualise the raised eyebrow accompanying the curl of lip. “That kind of date, huh?”

“I mean, not like off off,” Clarke hastily back-pedals, losing the momentary steam she gained in self faith. “Your pants can stay on. They will stay on. This will be purely above the belt charming.”

She thinks she hears a stifled laugh. “So you’ll charm my shirt off?”

“Yes, I mean no! I’ll stay above the neckline,” Clarke revises her ladder of charisma. “Charm your head off.”

“I’m quite partial to where it is,” Lexa continues her fun at Clarke’s expense. “I know I’ve been out of the dating scene for a while but a beheading seems like an awful, undesirable outcome.”

Clarke debated her retort but then decided to go on the offence to re-steer this ship. “You’re going to fall so in love with me by the end of the date, it’s not your head I’d be worried about.”

She feels triumphant at her boldness and the hitch of breath it causes on the other end of the line. Then, in slow motion, the words play back to her and suddenly there’s a shortage of air at this end too.

The longest beat in the history of romantic failings passes between them.

“Big talk,” Lexa says finally, her tone thankfully still light.

Clarke sighs in relief letting her head fall back against the headboard. “Prepare to be thoroughly wooed.”

Lessa doesn’t hold back her laughter then. “Woo? Why does it sound like a threat?”

“Court, chase, pursue.”

“That’s a lot of exertion.”

“I’ve been lifting weights,” Clarke says seriously as she starts to do mindless reps with the popcorn bowl, her brain going a mile a minute wracking for date ideas.

“Alright, Griffin, let’s see what you’ve got.”

—

“Raven, I am so not charming, and totally fucked.”

“Clarke, my kingdom for some context. I left my other telepathy hat at home.”

“I asked Lexa on a date.”

“I feel like we’ve been here before.”

“A date date.”

“Oh, a date date, and not just a date like the other dates you’ve already been on with Lexa who you’ve already dated before. Oh, that! Why didn’t you say so?”

Clarke ignores her. “What do I do?”
“How would I know?”

“I don’t have any charm.”

“No argument here.”

“I’ve dated one girl my whole life. And we were kids, so an avocado smoothie and some skin was all I needed.”

“I don’t think Lexa would be opposed to either of that now.”

“No, I have to woo her.”

“Woo?”

“Yes, woo!” Clarke rises in a fit of inspiration, perhaps too enthusiastically, her tank top riding.

“Whoa, slow down there Woo Tank Clan,” Raven pulls her by the hem back on the couch. “We don’t want Lexa malfunctioning on the date by getting the girls involved.”

“Clarke, you’ll be fine,” comes a quiet voice from the corner.

Raven screams causing Clarke to yelp as well, both startling in their seat.

“Jesus, Lincoln!” Raven clutches one hand to her heart and the other braces Clarke’s shoulder. “You shouldn’t sneak up on us like that!”

“I’ve been sitting here for the last 30 minutes of Clarke’s flailing,” Lincoln says calmly. “I live here.”

Raven waves him off as if the tidbit is inconsequential.

Clarke had texted both Raven and Octavia about the need for an emergency girls meeting. Octavia couldn’t make it because she is currently tied up at the precinct but offered her home and significant other in her stead. (“Lincoln is basically female me, but taller, more muscles, less hair. He’s a good listener.”) Not wanting to miss on the gossip of Clarke’s latest romantic complications, she made Lincoln leave the firehall early because there was a bigger and more dramatic fire they needed to put out.

“Just to recap,” Lincoln rises from the armchair and joins them on the couch, skilfully dodging Tye’s landmine of toys on the floor. He sits between Clarke and Raven, his bulky form sinking both girls towards the middle cushion, then taps his notepad where there is illegible scrawling, “Clarke was sick; Lexa nursed her back to health, voluntarily; semi-sick Clarke asked her out on a date; fast forward weeks of reconnecting, she says yes; and now there is unsubstantiated concern about Clarke’s persuasion prowess.”

“It’s not unsubstantiated, we are concerned,” Raven corrects, taking his pencil from him, erasing vigorously and amending his report for Octavia.

Clarke is too flustered to pay heed to their squabbling about proper annotation. She buries her head in her hands and groans.

Lincoln rubs her back and gently says, “Just be you, Clarke.”

“I can see why O never married you, Linc,” Raven objects, shaking her head. “That’s terrible advice. Don’t listen to him.”
Lincoln sighs but congenially leans back against the couch to give her the room to bully Clarke to adopt her supposed superior agenda.

“What do you suppose, Rey? It’s a little late for me to be someone else.”

“It’s not about being but doing. You need a grand gesture,” Raven says and then shoves Lincoln’s shoulder to force out a grunt of agreement.

“I don’t own a boombox.”

“One, you need to update your movie references. Two, you need to show her. Lexa has a pretty good idea of what past Clarke would do, Clexa 1.0 is a tough act to follow, but predictable. Her guard is likely up about how it’d be different this time,” Raven says, and then turns to Lincoln. “Are you jotting this down?”

“Yes, dismantle Lexa’s defences by doing something unexpected,” Lincoln nods.

“You’re a genius, Lincoln,” Clarke smacks an enthusiastic kiss on his cheek, an idea forming.

“Hey!” Raven looks in abject horror at her thunder being stolen. “That was like 99% my idea. Typical, the 1% swooping in to benefit from our hard work.”

Lincoln looks at her unimpressed. “You and Anya make more than six figures. Each. Octavia and I are lowly public servants.”

“Fine, you can have the glory. O will be so proud,” Raven concedes. She turns to Clarke, “So, what will you do?”

“Something I don’t normally.”

——

Clarke adjusts the snapback on her head before she nervously knocks on Lexa’s door. She hears shuffling and hurried steps then Lexa appears looking windswept like she had flown from the far corner of her apartment.

“Sorry, you said casual but I couldn’t decide—”

Lexa falls silent as soon as Clarke comes into view. She scans her up and down, the ripped tight jeans and royal blue shirt with orange lettering, her gaze ending and lingering on the snapback.

“Hi,” Clarke ventures in a timorous voice, shifting on her feet.

“You look,” Lexa pauses to find the right word, rewiring her short circuited brain, “sportive.” Her brows knit in confusion.

At her scrutiny, Clarke itches to remove the woollen top, feeling as uncomfortable in athletic wear as she probably looks. She’s also anxious to rid the mitt in her hand, pushing it into Lexa’s chest.

“My glove?” Lexa asks.

In lieu of an answer, with her now free hand Clarke reaches into her back pocket to procure two tickets, handing them over to Lexa as explanation.

Lexa’s eyes widen. “The Mets opener?”
Clarke nods and looks sheepishly to the ground as she says, “It’s baseball,” as if the former pitcher wouldn’t know and the glove wasn’t clue enough.

“How’d you get these? They’re usually sold out,” Lexa asks incredulous. Her eyes squint to read the details and then bulges at their seat location.

Clarke shrugs. It had been a complicated negotiation that involved giving up several Saturday nights for dinner at the Griffins in exchange for temporary custody of her dad’s prized possession of a Dieter Rams 1970s radio that Raven could pick apart in order to motivate her to find “something with a ball that Lexa would really like.” Raven in turn convinced her wife to convince one of her high profile clients who owed Anya a favour to give up their platinum season pass seats.

“A good deal,” she oversimplifies instead.

Lexa unexpectedly startles Clarke with a vibrant laugh. “You must be really keen to woo me if you’re willing to endure watching sports.”

“Concede a battle to win the war.” Clarke’s eyes twinkle remembering something, “What was it you always told me about butting?”

“Bunting,” Lexa corrects the proper baseball term.

Clarke clears her throat and straightens up, both hands behind her back in stoic posture, putting on her best Lexa impersonation, “Victory stands on the back of sacrifice, Clarke.”

Lexa glares at her but without any real malice.

“Wow, I haven’t been to a game in forever,” she says and then looks down at herself wearing a loose sweater and cutoffs. Clarke tries to keep her eyes north of the long expanse of exposed skin. “I don’t have anything appropriately orange to wear.”

Clarke reaches into her canvas tote bag that’s hanging off her shoulder. “Here, you can wear this one. Dad’s idea of a gag gift for my last birthday.”

Lexa takes the jersey from her. She turns it over in her hands, surveying the stitching and running her fingers over the name. When Clarke shifts on her feet again at the stretched out silence, Lexa apologetically opens the door wider to make room for her to enter, “Sorry, come in.”

Instead of going, Lexa unexpectedly comes into Clarke’s personal space and hugs her. A hurried kiss to the cheek and a shy “Hi back” renders Clarke flushed and flustered before she departs for the bedroom.

Left to stand awkwardly by the door, Clarke takes the opportunity to cast a nosey eye about. Her surveying ends seconds later. When Clarke had offered to pick Lexa up, she didn’t know what to expect of Lexa’s apartment but this isn’t it. To call it spartan would be to accuse Lexa of being a maximalist.

It’s an open layout and has all the hallmarks of a modernist aesthetic, wide plank hardwood floors, ceramic countertops, stainless steel appliances, and designer fixtures, complete with a high ceiling and an enviable view. But not much else.

There is no couch. Her mom’s Wegner chair is the only piece of furniture that suitably serves as a
seating option. Random piles of books sit on the floor and on top of the one lonely writing desk. Otherwise, there is a severe lack of things that would constitute as material evidence that anyone lives here. Minimalist designer John Pawson or artist Donald Judd might feel self-conscious that they own too much stuff after entering this space. By comparison, Clarke feels like a hoarder in her Bed-Stuy home.

She does smile however seeing her knitted sweater strewn over the armchair. She can imagine Lexa burrowing in it and the chair with a book.

When Lexa returns, and asks while spinning, “What do we think?”, Clarke has to suck in a breath at the sight of her last name emblazoned across Lexa’s back. The jersey is tuck loosely into the top of her black skinny jeans she’s wearing with the cuffs rolled. Finished off with aviator sunglasses clipped into the V of her collar, Lexa looks an effortless cross between the most attractive sports fan and the most ideal girlfriend.

“I mean, I guess it’s alright,” Clarke feigns disinterest earning a glare. She gives up the ruse when the glare turns into a pout, “Oh, please. Like you don’t already know only you could make pinstripe look good.”

A glint passes Lexa’s eye as she takes Clarke in once more. “You’re one to talk.”

God, it’d be so easy to cross the room in two steps and pull Lexa into a kiss as rebuttal. Instead, Clarke deflects, gesturing to behind her, “Too busy to decorate?”

Lexa’s cheeks bloom pink as she shyly defends, “Um, haven’t fully settled in.”

“Obviously,” Clarke chuckles. “Lex, it’s been months.”

Lexa shrugs with a small smile, then avoids Clarke’s gaze when she mutters under her breath, “Not really home.”

“I know you don’t cook but you have to eat,” Clarke says tilting her head questioningly to the empty spot where a dining table should be.

“I’m reading this book by a Japanese writer on minimalist living. He only owns three shirts, four pairs of trousers, four pairs of socks, and a roll-up mattress.”

“That sounds tragic, Lex.”

“He says he’s happier.”

“Hmmm.” Not wanting to further put Lexa on the spot as to why she’s looking into Japanese minimalism for happiness, Clarke asks instead, “All set?”

Lexa smiles and nods.

“Wait, what’s that for?” Clarke points to the thin blanket that she’s only just noticing draped over Lexa’s arm.

“For when you undoubtedly fall asleep during the game,” Lexa foretells her, the smile turning into a knowing, far-too-attractive smirk.

Clarke takes the blanket from her and stuffs it with extra deliberate force into her bag while griping loudly, “Not my fault you’re into boring things.”
Clarke does not trip over the threshold when Lexa playfully pushes her out the door but she does trip over nothing when Lexa swats her bum with her glove and says,

“Let’s go, babe.”

—

“Play ball!”

“I feel like the umpire works for the Department of Obvious,” Clarke says into Lexa’s ear as the crowd cheers loudly on the home plate umpire’s signal for the game to start.

“It’s tradition, Clarke,” Lexa humours her. “Baseball is all about tradition. Speaking of,” she flags down the snack guy.

“No, Lex, I got it,” Clarke tries in vain to give money to the boy after he hands Lexa an overflowing souvenir helmet of popcorn. He’s shot down from entertaining Clarke’s attempt at chivalry when Lexa throws him a non-negotiable ‘don’t you dare’ stare. “This is my date,” she weakly protests but it goes unheard as Lexa deposits the snack into her lap.

“You got these ridiculously good seats so we didn’t have to endure the line at the Shake Shack. Who knew in-seat food delivery would change my life,” Lexa says pointing to the gourmet meal of thick cut fries and a filet mignon steak sandwich cradled on her own lap, “So, what’s a couple hundred bucks for some heated kernels.” She makes sure the vendor catches her sarcasm about the over-gouging price as he hands her change back.

The poor kid gives them a tight smile. Clarke’s fairly certain he picks up speed and skips the next couple of rows to avoid further reprimand for something out of his control.

“It’s an expensive tradition,” Clarke mutters but relents, “thank you.”

“Mhm,” Lexa garbles around her sandwich, taking a first enthusiastic bite that causes the cheese to ooze forth. Clarke has to look away when she darts a tongue out to catch the remnant. “Oh my god, totally 2,000 calories worth of regret.”

Clarke laughs while handing her a napkin. “I think it’s safe to say you can afford it,” she comments as the memory of pressing against Lexa’s abs flash in her mind.

For the next while, her attention is divided between her popcorn, Lexa, and whatever incomprehensible things are happening a few feet away on the field. They’re seated in the second row to the right of home plate. Clarke would have been happy if they were in the upper stands but Lexa seems overly pleased with their nearness to the action so she sends her silent thanks to the Reyes-Woods for the smile that hasn’t left Lexa’s face since they entered Citi Field.

“Lexa, that pitcher’s hair is longer than mine,” Clarke points to the blonde on the mound a quarter way through her popcorn.

“That’s Syndergaard,” Lexa tells her without looking, her gaze fixed on the ball that’s been hit to centre field. Clarke has been having trouble locating the (too tiny) ball so she’s focused instead on the players and what they look like. After the catch is made, Lexa turns to her and says, “He’s nicknamed Thor.”

“His hair whooshes when he throws, Lexa. Whooshes. It’s not very threatening or god-like if he looks to be in a shampoo commercial when the ball leaves his hand.”
Lexa laughs and kisses Clarke on the cheek.

It’s been like this since the first inning after Clarke had given up on trying to follow the game when it proved impossible to differentiate which team is which. One side is wearing white, the other light grey in purposeful confusion. Clarke found better entertainment on picking out a player’s physical attribute or habit and Lexa would supply her with a random fact. The unexpected added bonus of her running commentary has been cheek kisses whenever Clarke says anything wildly accurate though not remotely relevant. The left side of her face is permanently red but the constant rush of blood feels so worth it for the ringing laughter in her ear.

“I fear for that man’s future children,” Clarke shifts her critical eye to the third baseman. “I’m not sure if pants should be that tight.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about him. He makes $20 million. He’ll be fine.”

“What?!” Clarke squeaks, causing a few heads to turn their way, “Why am I not a sportsperson?”

“Because you say sportsperson.”

“I should’ve picked up a bat instead of a brush.”

Lexa laughs again, patting her knee. “I think you’d have a better batting average with a brush though.”

Clarke looks at her confused. Another cheek kiss.

Lexa seems as enamoured with her clueless companion as with the play in front. The twinkle in her eyes shines brighter than the mid-afternoon sun, the golden flecks in quiet competition with the freckles that have appeared on the tip of her nose.

Clarke catches Lexa’s gaze slip to her lips just as Lexa pulls her sunglasses on to hide her telling eyes. When Clarke’s expression downturns at the grievous action, Lexa taps the bill of her hat and says softly, endearingly, “The excitement is that way,” cocking her head towards the field.

“Not from where I’m sitting,” Clarke counters.

She nonetheless turns her attention back to the game and lets the sounds of clanking bats, cracking balls, and boisterous crowds distract her from wanting to lean in, grab Lexa by the jersey and give her a proper deep kiss.

To keep her lips busy with something else to do, she returns to her quipping, encouraged by Lexa’s continuing failure to rein in her laughter. Initially it was standard date jitters that had Clarke running her mouth but with each successive chuckle and cheek kiss, the butterflies and banter multiply.

They fall into a rhythm for a couple more innings but then keeping the fluttering at bay proves hopeless when the game starts to pick up. Unluckily for Clarke, Lexa commits to being an extra fan and extra affectionate when something good happens with the baseball. She squeezes Clarke’s thigh whenever the ball is hit, and when it isn’t she brushes her thumb idly over the exposed knee where Clarke’s jeans are ripped.

When a player runs to a base, Lexa’s hand runs higher on her thigh. On one particularly long run when the batter has rounded the third base and is on his way back to where he started, her hand travels so far up, Clarke can’t contain her hitch of breath and suddenly bolts out of her seat. Lexa looks at her strangely but thankfully seconds later others join her on their feet as the player crosses home plate, making Clarke’s premature ejection seem intentional.
Vanilla and pine infuse her nose when Lexa wraps her up in celebration of the run. Clarke soaks up the feeling. Again she’s out of time with the rest of her neighbours, keeping hold of Lexa and remaining standing long after play resumes. A clearing throat behind them breaks their overly-intimate celebration.

When Clarke returns to her seat, so does the intrepid hand. Clarke sighs and gives up. She braves to take Lexa’s hand in hers and laces their fingers. It’s a white flag that she’s happy to wave seeing the smile that Lexa tries to hide.

It finally occurs to her after another witty remark, when Lexa’s lips land awfully close to the corner of her mouth causing her to gasp, that the chaste kisses and the innocent touches have an ulterior motive.

“Oh my god,” Clarke narrows her eyes and lightly pushes Lexa away, “you’re doing it on purpose!”

Lexa forces her grin into feigned “I don’t know what you’re talking about” innocence. To prove her point she cups Clarke’s jaw and turns her head. Clarke stops breathing thinking Lexa will kiss her, and closes her eyes in anticipation. Cruelly, she receives a nose boop instead. Her cheeks take on the colour of the opposing team’s red caps.

“Funny, I was promised the Griffin charm but all I keep getting is the Griffin blush. I know you’re not into athletic things, Clarke, but where’s your game?” Lexa muses, laughing at Clarke’s offended expression.

“I was being a gentlewoman but if you want to play dirty, fine,” Clarke spiritedly threatens, “we’ll see who’s blushing by the time the puck goes in,” and leaves it hanging ominously on that uncertainty.

She doesn’t understand why Lexa’s laughing but lets it go while she plots her revenge. Clarke was saving her energy for later, the next part of her planned itinerary, but decides a little fun now wouldn’t hurt.

The opportunity presents itself literally on a plate when Lexa’s onto her second steak sandwich. After her last bite as she’s dusting the baguette’s crumbs off her lap, Clarke turns to her and takes a hold of the base of her neck and plays with the baby hairs.

She wants to laugh at how much Lexa stiffens, how quiet she becomes when she should be cheering. Clarke understands the appeal now. Watching Lexa’s cheeks progressively bloom more pink is the type of spectator sport she can really get into.

The crowds blur out of focus, the noise dulls to a low rush in her ears as the stalemate thickens the air between them.

Clarke leans in and on Lexa’s gasp and widened eyes, she gently, so so gently, licks her bottom lip. The sharpness of the monetary jack cheese hitting her tongue is nothing compared to the sharp inhale her intimate breach of space elicits. She draws the lip into her mouth and gives it a soft suck. Lexa practically melts into her seat, releasing a tiny whimper.

“You had something there,” Clarke whispers when she finally separates and grants Lexa mercy.

Lexa looks almost done for and begrudgingly grumbles, “Well played.”

Clarke smiles triumphantly and gives her a peck on the cheek. They silently agree to a truce after that.
By the seventh inning, Clarke’s proud to have stayed awake this long so naturally rewards herself by drifting off onto Lexa’s shoulder. The blanket immediately comes out as she snuggles into Lexa’s side. She closes her eyes to the sight of a sun-drenched smile and the thought of afternoon kisses.

“Clarke,” she hears faintly an indeterminable time later, and feels a gentle tug, “it’s over.”

“Thank god,” she mutters half-asleep, “I mean, what, already? So soon? I was really starting to enjoy the …” Clarke pauses for a yawn to escape, “nap.”

Lexa snickers but doesn’t respond.

“Did you catch anything?” Clarke asks without waking.

“No foul balls this time.”

“Did you catch any polite ones?”

Lexa chuckles, “We should get going before they kick us out.”

Clarke cracks an eye open on those words but then startles Lexa by springing to her feet when she sees the seats half empty around her.

She fishes out her phone from her pocket and seeing the expectant text, her eyes light up. She grabs Lexa’s hand. “Let’s go!” Clarke repeats with much more enthusiasm, leading them out and weaving hurriedly through the foot traffic.

“Clarke, slow down,” Lexa implores chuckling.

“Can’t,” Clarke says ambiguously, determinedly.

“Hey,” Lexa stops walking, the abruptness causes Clarke to boomerang back into her arms. Lexa places her free hand on her hip and gently squeezes. “I had a good time, thank you,” she says, her lopsided grin contagious. She gives Clarke a genuine kiss to the cheek this time and embraces her in a hug.

“Good time is only just starting,” Clarke smiles into her hair, “Come on, we got somewhere else to be.”

“In that case,” Lexa snakes an arm around Clarke’s waist and spins them around, taking over the navigation redirecting them the right way to the exit where Clarke’s rental is parked.

—

“What is this place?” Lexa asks as they’re standing in front of the open trunk of the car where it’s parked in front of what looks to be an abandoned dome-like building.

“You’ll see,” Clarke answers vaguely while tossing her a long-sleeve black top. She takes Lexa’s glove from her and stows it away. On Lexa’s raised eyebrow she expands, “You’re welcome to stay in Mets gear but thought you might want something less fanatic.” Lexa examines the top. “It was in the back of my closet,” Clarke answers the unasked question.

She then swaps out her own blue and orange for a white tee and leather jacket. Lexa whips around and scrambles to avert her gaze when Clarke’s blue bra is momentarily revealed.

After the wardrobe change, without thought, they primp each other like old habit, adjusting collars and smoothing out wrinkles. Clarke becomes aware of their closeness only when she realises Lexa
has stopped breathing at her dusting motion of Lexa’s shoulder. They’re standing within a breath’s reach of each others lips. The air is charged with pregnant gazes before Clarke leans in to give Lexa a gentle kiss near her jaw and ear and whispers, “You look great.”

She takes Lexa’s hand and leads them into the building.

The inside is opulent and ornate and nothing like its rough exterior. Stained glass covers the windows and mosaic tiles line stonewalls that stretch high towards vaulted ceilings. The serenity is a complete contrast whence they had just came, a sacred silence permeates the air as streaks of waning daylight break through the coloured glass and bounce off the crystals of the chandeliers. Gold-leafed paintings shimmer under the watchful eye of saints and angels.

“Wow,” Lexa breathes, her soft expel echoing in the open space.

“We’re early but I figured you’d like to have a look around first,” Clarke says quietly. “This was a former Ukrainian church before the parish moved to Little Odessa.”

“It’s beautiful,” Lexa says with her head still tilted up. She doesn’t catch Clarke staring at her in cliché agreement. Then something seems to cross her mind and she rocks nervously back on her heels. “Um, you’re not going to ask me to marry you, right,” Lexa questions jokingly but there’s an edge of fear in her voice.

The thought warms Clarke but the half-panicked look in Lexa’s eyes grounds her fleeting vision of white chiffon. She shakes her head and is about to reply when a tall, dark guy walks towards them, grinning with warm intent. Clarke has half a chance to notice his presence before she’s scooped into his arms and spun around.

“Wells, put me down!” Clarke squeaks while giggling.

When she’s put back on her feet, she notices Lexa standing straighter and more stiff than before, her features tightened in a newly reserved look. Clarke unconsciously brushes her thumb over Lexa’s where their hands have rejoined, also unconsciously, and sees the subtle relaxing of her brows.

“Wells, this is Lexa,” she introduces. “Lexa, Wells.”

“Nice to meet you,” Lexa says extending her hand, polite but empty of the warmth she’s basked Clarke in all afternoon.

“You too,” Wells smiles kindly at her while shaking her hand, and to Clarke’s mortification, he stares at her for a too-long awkward beat. Lexa steps imperceptibly, territorially, closer to Clarke but doesn’t shrink from the scrutiny. Conversely, she seems to have grown impossibly taller to match the eight inches difference of her unanticipated adjudicator. Wells finally breaks from the standoff to let out a low whistle, “Man, Clarke wasn’t lying about the eyes.”

On that Lexa softens almost completely. She quirks an eyebrow, but Clarke’s too busy jabbing an elbow into him to see.

“They certainly do sparkle,” Wells continues in spite of the very obvious death glare sent his way.

Clarke clears her throat and tries to gain control of the conversation, “You’d know all about brilliance.” She directs her next words at Lexa, “Wells’s day job is a lighting designer. He helped me source the LED tubes for my last painting.”

“Oh,” Lexa hums but then her understanding quickly turns into confusion as she looks up at the pendants hanging above them. “Are you here to fix the lighting?”
Wells chuckles and looks at Clarke curiously. When Clarke doesn’t answer, he fills Lexa in, “No. We’re playing tonight,” and points to the equipment down the nave.

“Playing?”

“The acoustics in here are amazing.”

“When he’s not playing with lumens,” Clarke interjects, “Wells plays gigs. He’s the lead and genius behind the cover band, Well, Well, Well.”

Lexa looks impressed by his dual identity but also for the pun name. Before she can respond, they hear voices ahead of seeing some of his band mates filing in. Wells gives them acknowledging nods then turns back to the girls, “Anyways, I gotta finish setting up. Chat with you later, and hope you enjoy the show.”

Lexa gives him her most genuine smile yet, and Clarke leads them to sit while Wells greets his mates. She explains to Lexa that Wells participates in these secret concerts put on by a collective that pairs musicians and performers with underground venues. They happen bi-monthly but the locations remain a mystery until the day of, when subscribers get notifications of where to show up. The events are free but goers are asked to make an in-kind donation to the local arts community.

Lexa listens in rapture as Clarke describes the first one she went to at a disused swimming pool where the featured act was a cellist and dancer, how she was mesmerised by the way the music reverberated against the tiles while the lithe body accordingly drew beautiful lines across the empty space of the deep end. The last one she went to involved an a cappella troupe making harmonies at an abandoned grain store building in the shipyard area of Brooklyn’s waterfront, their voices carrying across the concrete and steel and rust of a by-gone era.

Clarke doesn’t tell Lexa that she often went alone, nursing a beer and a broken heart. She let herself be swept up in the music and movements and lyrics, giving over to the swell of strings, the ache of someone else’s longing or the quiet affirmation of a kinder love.

She does however tell her about enjoying the venues as much as the aural experience, the beauty in rediscovering a space that had outlived its use, that time left behind from which a different generation or set of people have moved on.

One of her favourites had been the Old City Hall subway station where a jazz band played. Hearing the Blues while standing under leaded skylights and the Guastavino tile arches of Romanesque architecture was something else. She felt a personal sense of renewal participating in breathing new life into an old one.

Lexa in turn tells her of some of the churches and old buildings she’s visited of which there is no shortage in Europe. And so they spend the hour chatting—completely engrossed in each other and the conversation and entirely unaware of Wells’ passing looks—while absently watching the crew clear the floor space, moving furniture about and arranging their set.

By the time the sun has dipped out of view, the space has been transformed into something that looks like the marriage of a mini concert hall and an intimate lounge room. When Wells flips the switch, they all pause to emit a collective awe at the chandeliers lighting up.

“C’mon,” Clarke whispers and pulls Lexa up to stake out a prime spot on a loveseat to the left of the makeshift stage, wanting to take advantage of being the first ones here. She ignores Wells’ wink when he hands them two beers after they settle into the plush cushions.
They continue their chatter as the public starts to show. Soon the spaces fill up, a scattering among the temporary furnishings, some by the provisional mini bar, many standing in easy conversation. It’s a chilled atmosphere and Clarke soaks up the warmth of having Lexa pressed into her side and still holding her hand.

The band gets a warm reception when Wells finally takes to the mic.

Wells has eclectic taste, doing acoustic renditions ranging from Destiny’s Child to Jessie Ware, Ed Sheeren to Elliot Smith. His mashup of Drake and Depeche Mode has the crowd buzzing.

Clarke feels the buzz in her stomach and on the surface of her skin where it makes contact with Lexa. They haven’t spoken since Wells started his set list but with Lexa’s thumb returning to brushing Clarke’s knee she doesn’t think she has the capacity for words now.

During a short break, an oblivious guy approaches them and tries to ask Clarke for a dance, blind to the death stare from her date or how she’s wrapped up in the brunette’s arm. He must have had one too many drinks not to shrivel from the icy rejection of his advance. Thankfully, his more clued-in buddy drags him away by the back of his shirt while shooting them an apologetic look.

Clarke thinks Lexa stopped breathing for those ten tense seconds. They both breathe relieved air when Wells returns to the stage and their vicinity is cleared of unwanted suitors.

When she hears the familiar notes, Clarke gathers enough courage to show Lexa exactly with whom she’d rather dance. She stands and extends a hand. Lexa bites her lip looking up in surprise but nonetheless rises to join her. Clarke keeps eye contact as she walks backwards leading them a few steps away from their seat. She places Lexa’s hands on her hip and rests her arms on Lexa’s shoulders, crossing hands behind her neck.

They slow dance to Jessie Ware’s Alone, swaying gently. On the verse, just come a little closer, Clarke bravely steps closer to lay her chin on Lexa’s shoulder and Lexa correspondingly circles her arms to the small of Clarke’s back.

I don’t want somebody else to call my name
No, I don’t want somebody else when you could just say
Say that you’re the one who’s taking me home
’Cause I want you on my skin and my bones
Knocking me off my feet
Just say I’m the one that you need (oh, please)
Say that you’re the one who’s taking me home
So I can get you alone

“Bold, Griffin,” Lexa whispers. “You plan on taking me home?”

“Maybe not tonight,” Clarke responds seriously, quietly, and can’t keep the deep-seated look of love from her eyes, “but someday I hope.”

Lexa lets her have that. She hums into Clarke’s hair and tightens her arms to narrow any remote gap left between them. They stay in a close hold, barely moving, more a hug than a dance, even when the next two songs pick up in tempo.

“Besides, this isn’t my bold move,” Clarke says.

“Oh?”

Clarke doesn’t directly answer. As if they had rehearsed the timing, she hears Wells announcing her
name and then polite, encouraging applause. Lexa looks confused but Clarke kisses her on the cheek and gestures for her to retake her seat.

Clarke turns and joins Wells on stage on the stool he’s brought out for her. She steals a glance at Lexa before addressing the crowd, concentrating on the smiles and expectant looks and not the shocked expression to her left.

“Thanks for indulging me, Wells. Let’s see how, well, well this goes.” Her words garner some chuckles. “This is Anchor by Novo Amor.” She adjusts the stool to angle more towards Lexa. Taking a deep breath and meeting Lexa’s eyes, she says softly, “For you.”

She nods to Wells and he begins finger-picking the acoustic guitar. Her knee moves nervously in time to the opening chord and then finding her cue Clarke’s voice fills up the space of the church with soft yearning.

Everything, everyone, fades out.

For the next four minutes, it’s just her and Lexa. Four years of regret condensed into four minutes of hope.

_Took the breath from my open mouth,_
_Never known how it broke me down,_
_I went in circles somewhere else_

_Shook the best when your love was home,_
_Storing up on your summer glow,_
_you went in search of something else_

_And i hear your ship is comin’ in_
_Your tears a sea for me to swim_
_And i hear a storm is comin’ in_
_My dear is it all we’ve ever been?_

Halfway through the song, Clarke has to sing pass the lump in her throat as tears well in her eyes. Lexa looks similarly overcome with emotion but they don’t break their locked gazes. The audience has gone eerily quiet as if afraid to intrude on their private moment.

The earthy grit of Clarke’s voice drifts them in and out of a collective ethereal dream, her earnestness giving a deeper layer to the restlessly romantic lyrics.

_Caught the air in your woven mouth,_
_Leave it all i’ll be heaving how you went_  
_In search of something else_

_Taught the hand that taut the bride,_
_Both our eyes lock to the tide_  
_We went in circles somewhere else_

_And i hear your ship is comin’ in_  
_Your tears a sea for me to swim_  
_And i hear a storm is comin’ in_  
_My dear is it all we’ve ever been?_

She closes the song out on the repeated plea of the final verse, pressing a quiet urgency for Lexa to follow its directive.
Wells strums out the last notes as Clarke finally looks out to the crowd to acknowledge their warm applause.

When she turns back to where she expects to find Lexa, her stomach drops seeing the empty seat. Clarke is stood frozen scanning the immediate vicinity for Lexa, eyes widen in alarm that she might have been too forward with her romantic overture.

Wells gently nudges, and whispers, “She went that way,” pointing in the direction of the north transept. He lays a comforting hand on her shoulder, “You did great.”

Clarke squeezes his forearm in thanks and hurries to find Lexa.

She almost misses her. Lexa is tucked partially out of view with her back turned, facing a set of stained glass windows.

Hearing the shallow breathing, Clarke gives her a second.

“Hey,” she says quietly after the care of approaching a fawn in the forest. “I know I’m rusty, but was it that bad?”

She feels slightly reassured to hear a soft chuckle. Lexa then turns and sends her a wobbly smile. Clarke’s heart aches at the sight of her glassy gaze.

“Terrible, shouldn’t have gotten out of bed for that,” Lexa says leaning back against the wall, crossing her legs by the ankle as Clarke mimics her position on the opposite wall. The alcove space is small and it would only take two steps to close the distance between them but Clarke leaves it open for emotions and heartbeats to settle. “Sorry, just needed a moment.”

“Do you want me to go?” Clarke asks worried, readying to leave.

“No,” is the immediate soft response. The tender way Lexa is looking at her pins Clarke in place. They stand motionless, wordless exchanges of meaningful gazes, Clarke’s song still playing between them. Minutes pass in idyll quiet.

Maybe it’s the sacred space they’re in that Lexa feels safe to admit quiescent desires aloud. “I really want to kiss you,” she whispers.

“I really want to kiss you,” Clarke echoes.

“Why don’t you?”

That’s all the invitation Clarke needs before she’s millimetres in front of Lexa, with her hands sinking into her hair and pressing their foreheads and noses together. Lexa immediately opens to receive her, hands to waist, bringing them hip to hip. Clarke draws nearer to Lexa’s lips, within touch but not touching. It takes monumental restraint for her not to go further as she whispers into Lexa’s parted mouth, “I’m trying to be a gentlewoman, remember. No funny business on the first date.”

Clarke motions to back away but Lexa firms her grasp. “It’s a good thing this isn’t a first then,” she says.
Then she repeats Clarke’s actions earlier at the game, moistening Clarke’s bottom lip with her tongue before taking it into her mouth. Clarke’s mind flashes to the time on the couch when she was sick and Lexa had made the same teasing move.

Except this time it’s not teasing at all.

Clarke lets a barely audible breath expel before Lexa is angling her head and erases the gap entirely. Then Lexa’s mouth is moving against hers. Soft and wet and warm. They both sigh into the kiss, at once sweet and heady.

It’s kept as decent as appropriate for the public setting but it nonetheless makes Clarke’s heart skip several beats and her legs feel like they’d give out if they aren’t currently braced against Lexa’s.

For the moment, slow and full of grace, it is as if Lexa is anchoring up to her.

“Oh,” Clarke admits defeatedly, “consider me thoroughly wooed.”

Lexa laughs melodiously. “I thought you were doing the wooing.”

“So did I,” Clarke says, punctuating each word, “clearly, your lips ignored the memo,” playfully glaring at them as if they’re her competitor, and then in the same breath rewards them for their rebellion.

This second kiss is briefer but deeper, a dip of tongue, a wayward bite, leaving them both breathless and wanting when it ends too soon.

But sensibly, before things can embarrassingly escalate, Lexa breaks off first and then cradles Clarke’s head into the crook of her neck. One hand tangles in her hair and the other rubs her back. She breathes Clarke in and kisses the top of her head.

“Thanks for the song. And the day.”

—

After that day, they toddle over the line of friends but more. They resume all the activities pre-snowstorm—the dates, the banter, the butterflies—but there’s a new layer of affection and intimacy and open wanting to their interactions.

Texts proliferate with suggestive emojis, phone calls with unsubtle flirting. Meet-ups are punctuated with intermittent hand-holding and knee-grazing and cheek-brushing.

Whatever unspoken understanding was established in that alcove manifests in extended gazes and prolonged hugs and stolen kisses. They constantly search each other out by hands and lips.

Something inside of Clarke expands.

Most of April passes by in this elastic rhythm. During the week, Clarke works on her art by day then at night she works on reconnecting with Lexa. They talk. And laugh. She often falls asleep with Lexa in her ear and a smile on her face, if not a fluttering of her heart. On the weekends, they find excuses to be in each other’s company. A yard sale, a book sale, this brunch place, that dining spot, the new furniture shop, the old brewery.

Like the meadow rue that they came across during the flower show Lexa dragged her to, whose lilac sprays stay shy until late in the summer when the pellucid petals burst into dreamy clouds of
lavender-pink, their relationship unfolds in quiet wait for the right conditions to blossom.

Each outing, every kiss form part of the constant gardening that they’ve mutually taken up.

This includes Lexa surprisingly volunteering to fulfil one of Clarke’s dinner obligations at the Griffins with her. The Saturday night is spent basking in the glow of her parents adoration for the return of their second daughter. Clarke can’t fault them for the lavish attention they pay, she has been no better off with containing her enamoured looks. (She fares worse batting away Jake and Abby’s indiscreet, knowing looks thrown her way.)

Lexa takes her dad’s wide-ranging questions in stride, easily bouncing between talk of Wimbledon stars and the Stephen Hawking Centre for Theoretical Cosmology. (No, she hadn’t met Andy Murray. Yes, the Centre is amazing, lots of smart people there.) While the two nerds over-excite themselves on the confounding subjects, Clarke engages her mom in a conversation about the pieces she’s prepping for her upcoming exhibitions.

Her ear, however, remains attuned to Lexa’s laugh or the change in her cadence when the topic picks up steam or the terribly, unfairly adorable furrow of brow when Jake runs off on a tangent about subatomic particles as if lecturing in front of his NYU undergrads.

Clarke’s breath hitches mid-sentence about the tint differences between sakura and cotton candy when Lexa’s hand slips into hers. Without looking, without saying, a warmth takes residence in her palm. The sensation quickly flares up her chest and then heats her neck before Clarke’s cheeks turn a deeper shade of the very colour she’s trying to describe.

A simple touch, but one of such inconsequential familiarity that it is all the more significant. Lexa laces their fingers in humdrum practice, giving Clarke a gentle smile, unaware of the simultaneous uplifting and grounding effect the minor connection produces.

It’s like Lexa is giving fragments of herself, testing out which pieces fit where. In old places, like the right side of Clarke at the Griffin dinner table, or in new locations, like the farmer’s market that Clarke frequents and where a weekend later they’re standing by the food truck waiting on two pulled-pork subs and dutch fries.

Clarke can’t hide her smile.

She feels ridiculously happy; for Lexa’s bottomless pit and predilection for greasy foods and potato skins; for her own predilection for pretty girls in jean jackets and midi skirts.

Lexa’s arm is around her waist. There had been an abnormal spike in temperature, warm enough for Clarke to don an oversized shirt dress. She feels the imprint of Lexa’s hand on her hip as though the diaphanous fabric is non-existent.

Clarke tucks herself into Lexa, mindlessly stroking her side under her jacket. Stood embraced, with lips occasionally meeting neck or temple, with eyes crinkling behind wayfarer sunglasses and wearing almost matching white sneakers, they’re a walking Brooklyn cliché and a closer approximate of the real couple they had pretended to be at the bodega.

“I can’t believe you abandoned the little Warriors for pulled pork,” Clarke says as their food is handed to them.

Lexa untangles herself to take charge of the garnishing. “I’ve met my quota for squeals this morning,” she replies over her shoulder while drizzling her Cubano with chipotle mayo and adding additional gherkins and chillis. She laughs catching Clarke’s disgusted face at her choice of
condiments. Without asking, she dresses Clarke’s sandwich in a generous helping of kewpie. “Besides, there’s only so much ice cream I can consume before I literally melt.”

They find an open bench and sit hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder. There’s more than enough space to give a wider berth between them. But as it is lately, that’s not an option. The proximity not only is easier for equal access to the fries perched on Lexa’s lap but also to facilitate the sharing of butterflies.

They chat about Aden and the Trikru’s latest achievements while gorging on the street fare and exchanging swipes of the pale ale, routinely turning to each other for check-in kisses.

Somewhere past brunches and co-watching the same movies while apartments away, they’ve slipped into old roles without conscious effort. Girlfriends without the label.

A reignited love without the declaration.

Clarke knows a talk is necessary and imminent. But in the meantime, she collects from all these meandering brooks of Lexa, hands cupped for greatest catchment, saving the overflow into her rainy day account for watering their garden later.

For now, while Lexa’s lips shine with aioli oil and blonde wheat and tastes of sun-kissed warmth, Clarke’s heart has never felt more full.

—

It’s with this same fullness that has her nervously rapping on Lexa’s door a week later. She shifts on her heels and runs a hand along the pleats of her cocktail dress, looking markedly different from when she had come for the baseball game.

That should have been her clue for what to expect on the other side of the door when it finally opens.

Lexa stands in the doorway in a strapless dress that hugs her chest and gathers at her waist then flows out in pretty flowing waves ending just above her knees. Her hair is swept over one shoulder falling in loose curls, needlessly drawing attention to the bare skin of delicate collarbones and an elegant neck. Light smokey eyes, crimson lipstick, and deep purple pumps finish the composition.

She’s looking at Clarke with a bite to her lip and then down at herself when Clarke remains speechless and sputtering for air. “Is this ok?”

Clarke shakes her head slowly, drawing worry lines on Lexa’s forehead. She takes one deliberate step forward and places a hand on Lexa’s chest, gently pushing her backwards into the apartment. Then closes the door.

Lexa’s laugh can be heard through the hollow metal. Clarke takes a deep breath to complain, “I was not prepared for that.” The laughter increases. “Just give me a second. I have to pick my jaw off the floor.”

She lets two beats pass and then knocks again. This time the shock isn’t as severe but the image still just as stunning.

“You look beautiful,” Clarke exhales when mirthful green eyes set on her again.

“So do you, Clarke.”

She drapes her shawl over her other arm and then offers an elbow out to Lexa. “Shall we?”
On the cab ride there, Clarke explains to her how the art fundraiser works. Artists and designers, both up-and-coming and the more established, anonymously contribute work for auction with the charitable proceedings going to local arts programs. The anonymity provides fledgling creatives an opportunity to display on equal footing with their idols. It’s also a fun guessing game to attribute authorship to different pieces and a delight for attendees to find out they had unwittingly bid on a famous work.

“Will you tell me which one’s yours?” Lexa asks when they enter the gallery while handing off their things to coat check.

“Of course not,” Clarke answers distractedly, her eyes scanning for the champagne flutes and penguin suits. When she spots the reflection of a silver tray, she jerks in that direction. Clarke marches them with purpose towards the unsuspecting server, and immediately accosts him.

“When do the tiny burgers come out?”

He looks at them perplexed and turns to Lexa as if she would have an answer. Lexa simply shrugs one shoulder and not-explains, “She’s humpy,” deepening his confusion.

“Sorry, I’m only on drinks tonight.” Seeing the scrunched brows and thin lips on Clarke’s unimpressed face, he seems genuinely apologetic for being assigned the wrong duty.

“It’s fine, we’ll take these,” Lexa says diplomatically, taking two glasses of wine from his tray. “Thank you.”

“Mhm,” Clarke huffs out as he scurries away.

“Didn’t you eat?” Lexa asks endeared, consolingly rubbing the small of her back.

“No,” Clarke further sulks but does take a conciliatory sip of the Gewurztraminer, “I was too nervous for this second date.”

Lexa’s expression softens. “Clarke, we’ve been on tons of dates in the last month.”

“Not official ones.”

“Is that what this is?” Lexa gestures her hand in the air, and then teases, “I would’ve worn something nicer.”

Clarke’s eyes narrow in reprimand but re-widen immediately when Lexa leans in to kiss her on the cheek. She tilts her head for a proper kiss but Lexa turns away.

“Nuh-uh,” Lexa denies, laughing at Clarke’s pout, “if you’re going to hold out on me about your work, I reserve the same right to hold out on you.”

“What does that mean?”

Lexa swipes her thumb to smudge out the lipstick stain. “No kissing until I find out which one is your art.”

Clarke huffs again and crosses her arms.

Lexa uncrosses them and then kisses her other cheek to rub it in. “Let’s have a look around. I want to see what I can’t afford,” Lexa says and tapes on at the end, “I promise to keep my eye out for tiny food.”
Lexa sticks close by her as Clarke leads them around the large open space. She’s pleased with the turnout this year, a wide range of New York’s finest seems to be represented, a variety of works in illustration, painting, ceramics, sculpture, photography, and print, adorn walls and floors and on plinths. She can spot a few known artists already, their marked styles a dead giveaway.

“God, they don’t pay architects enough,” Lexa opines, looking forlornly at a ceramic vase while reading its accompanying caption. “This recommended minimum bid is already past my maximum.” Her hope further deflates seeing the other prices already in contention on the bid card. It’s an open auction so other offers are visible though the bidder identity remains anonymous and marked by an assigned number.

“I think you went into the right profession. I’m not sure Lexa, the potter, would have any legs to stand on.”

Lexa mock-gasps at the same time pokes her in the ribs. “Take it back. Somewhere in the world there’s a market for wobbly mugs.”

“Sure, babe.”

“Seriously, this is beautiful,” Lexa says.

Clarke tries to hide her smile knowing it’s a work by Natalie Weinberger. She can see why the architect is drawn to the dusky beauty of the sculpted vessel, its understated but sensuous form striking a balance between aesthetic and function, a hallmark of the Brooklyn-based ceramicist. The particular piece Lexa is eyeing is made with white stoneware and black basalt sand.

Lexa lets out a sigh while filling out the next line on the bid card. Clarke laughs seeing her increase of $1.

After that, Lexa adopts the strategy of placing a bid for anything that remotely piques her interest, despite the offers being wildly out of her price range. She artificially inflates the price to a ridiculous amount to stimulate a bidding war on popular works. “It’s for charity,” she reasons, “I’m sure whichever rich old white guy’s ego will compel him to match and exceed my asking.”

Clarke isn’t convinced of the logic but smiles anyways.

Lexa’s brows scrunch when she seems to realise a different veritable truth about wealthy people. “But then again, rich people are cheap.” She looks at Clarke seriously, “So, on the off chance that I win all of these, will you come visit me under my troll bridge because I can no longer afford a roof over my head?”

“Of course,” Clarke agrees, tilting her head for a better angle to take in the copper wire sculpture in front of them. “I can be your potato and avocado dealer.”

When she looks up to make eye contact again, her gaze lands on a familiar figure approaching them from behind Lexa.

“Lexa!” The woman calls out and Clarke would have a worse reaction if it isn’t for the shy guy struggling to catch up with her.

“Hayley?” Lexa asks, turning around and looking as startled as Clarke feels at the accountant’s over-eager grin.

“Small world,” Hayley says, then gestures to the tight jeans, blazer-clad, bow-tie wearing and perfectly coiffed man on her arm. “You remember Christopher?”
“Hi, nice to see you again,” Lexa kindly smiles at him, offering a professional, polite nod and then addresses Clarke with her next comment, “Christopher’s an architectural photographer. He did our last shoot down by the Brickworks.”

“This is Clarke,” Hayley introduces to her date before Lexa has a chance to, “Lexa’s girlfriend.”

Clarke has to contain her reaction at the unexpected, but not entirely false, moniker. It’s not the complete truth but is less than the full lie when they first met so she doesn’t correct Hayley and politely shakes Christopher’s out-stretched hand. Lexa for her part doesn’t object either, instead putting an arm around Clarke’s shoulder and kisses the top of her head. Her actions do nothing to dispel Hayley’s misconception or Clarke’s desire for it to be true.

“Are you exhibiting?” Clarke asks the photographer.

“Ah, unfortunately no, not this year,” he says regretfully. “Been travelling too much on assignment and didn’t have my shit together in time. Either one of you?”

“Clarke’s an amazing artist,” Hayley fills him in. It would seem now that her sight is set on someone else, she’s Clarke’s biggest fan and promoter. Clarke and Lexa raise twin eyebrows at her. “I hope you’re auctioning something. Which piece is yours? I want to put in a bid.”

At that, Lexa cocks her head and playfully prods, “Yeah, Clarke, which piece?”

Clarke has refused to self-identify her work and amusedly spent the evening watching Lexa take longer assessing every painting that has colour. She remained mute whenever Lexa attempted to pull hints from her by asking questions about technique or intent.

“In the spirit of fairness, I can’t tell you,” Clarke sticks to her guns.

“Afraid all the other bid cards would be left blank if people find out?” Lexa asks.

Clarke blushing at her back-handed compliment, and naturally the thing to do is kiss Lexa’s bare shoulder in retaliation. She adds a little bit of teeth that satisfactorily causes Lexa to stifle a yelp.

“God, you guys are cute,” Hayley observes. “What was I thinking that I had a chance?” This time she receives three quirked brows. “Anyways. It’s good to see you both but we have to get going to my parents. Christopher’s meeting them for the first time,” she says with a gleeful look that’s decidedly not mirrored by her new boyfriend.

They exchange farewells and leave just as briskly as they came, Christopher dragging behind and overlooking his shoulder sporting a panicked look while jokingly mouthing for help. Clarke and Lexa share a chuckle as his whispered plea trails off, “It’s only the second date.”

“Lex, I think your office’s Human Resources need to upgrade their vetting system,” Clarke voices her concern watching their retreating figures.

After Hayley and Christopher’s departure, they circle the gallery twice more. On the third round, Clarke gets roped into conversation with some fellow artists and Lexa excuses herself once they start talking shop about curation politics, leaving with a peck to Clarke’s temple and a squeeze of her waist. Clarke immediately tunes out and tracks her line of sight to the statuesque beauty fluidly moving through the lofty, wood beam space of the converted printing factory. She sighs dreamily watching the billowing air that the folds of Lexa’s dress leave in their wake.

On repeated calling of her name, Clarke reluctantly turns her attention back. Sometime after a dreadful chat about commissioning fees, Lexa thankfully reappears by her side and more thankfully,
armed with two small plates of food. Clarke barely musters enough social etiquette to not be rude as she turns her back to her peers and directs Lexa to a dedicated seating area.

“Why so tiny,” Clarke questions as she gobbles down the roasted salmon with black quinoa and reaches for the lime chilli chicken kebab, mangling her words, “but so good?”

With greater grace, Lexa handles the miniature steak that’s topped with shavings of pink horseradish and elderflower. “And pretty,” she adds before taking a bite.

“You’d think people would be more willing to open their chequebooks on full stomachs,” Clarke continues her unsolicited criticism of the reductive menu while shamelessly devouring it. “Oh my god, try this, it’s amazing,” she brings the shrimp cracker with mango slaw to Lexa’s mouth without forethought to the residual feel of Lexa’s tongue accidentally lapping her finger.

Lexa licks her lips, ignoring both their pinking cheeks. “Mhm, that is nice.” She takes a sip of her refilled wine glass to soak the flavour and comments, “But considering some of the bids I put down, that’s the most expensive shrimp cracker I’ve ever had.”

Clarke waves her off like $400 truffle mushroom with toasted hazelnuts and panko tarragon crust is an everyday occurrence. “It’s for the children.”

When the food disappears in less than ten minutes, Lexa flags a server down for seconds. (“Are we allowed seconds? For the price of that vase I wanted, we should be allowed tenths, twentieths.”)

By the time humpy Clarke is somewhat sated, they’re herded to the centre of the room for the auction results to be announced.

“How does this work?” Lexa asks fidgeting with the poker chip she’s holding, eyeing the number on it.

“Fairly simple. They’ll reveal whose work it is and then announce the chip number belonging to the highest bidder. The winning price will be known but they use the chip system so bidders can remain anonymous if they want,” Clarke informs her. “You can either collect your successful bid at the end of the night or if you let them know, they can deliver it for you.”

As the auctioneer makes her way through the bid cards, the gallery erupts in collective oohs and aahs, interjected with frequent disappointing cries. There are several surprises, of both price and authorship. The crowd beams with positivity when a few of the art students on scholarships earn some of the night’s highest bids.

Clarke feels a tug of her hand when the ceramic piece is next. Lexa cutely bounces on her feet in anticipation.

Clarke tries to hide her smile.

When the number is called out, Lexa looks down at her chip and frowns, shoulders deflating. Her head hangs as she laments, “Just as expected, but god, it’s still so disappointing to be poor.”

Clarke laughs and silently flashes her matching chip number in front of Lexa before she goes up to the table to provide her contact details, leaving the brunette shocked and mouth agape with incredulity.

“That’s just mean,” Lexa glowers with a look of mock betrayal when Clarke returns by her side. Her imminent pout doesn’t have a chance to form though when Clarke wordlessly hands her the receipt where the delivery address is clearly not marked for Bed-Stuy.
“For me?” Lexa asks disbelieving, “Clarke …”

“I figure your apartment could use some livening up,” she says, her eyes not meeting Lexa’s while removing invisible lint from her dress, “It’ll help to make it more of a home.”

Lexa is looking at her like Clarke made the stoneware herself.

“Thank you.”

Lexa is still too bowled over by Clarke’s generosity that her confounded gaze burns a hole in the side of Clarke’s head through successive bids.

“Next up is a series of line drawings,” the auctioneer says with a conspiratorial grin like she’s in on a secret. “I’m pleased to reveal it’s by Clarke Griffin. In a surprising twist, there is no colour. Very cheeky, Ms Griffin.”

The crowd laughs and almost drowns out the small gasp Lexa lets out. “Told you it wasn’t any of the colour paintings,” Clarke whispers, smug to have caught Lexa off guard.

Lexa doesn’t answer and shakes her head in seeming disagreement, “No, I— uh, I …”

Clarke’s puzzled by her denial and loss of words until the auctioneer calls out the winning number, the same one that’s been etched in Clarke’s mind watching Lexa play with her chip for the past half hour.

“Wait, you did know?!” Clarke gasps in turn, whipping around to lock gazes head-on.

“I didn’t actually,” Lexa says in awe and timidly admits, “I just felt a strong emotional pull to the abstract figures for some reason.”

_Because you’re one of them._

Clarke doesn’t know what to say. She hadn’t thought her sketches would attract any attention. Maybe a young couple on a date might pick the work out but she didn’t expect for the subject of the drawings to unwittingly purchase them because it had spoken directly to her.

They’re three simple sketches of a pair made by subtle charcoal strokes, the vaguest hint of an outline of silhouettes wrapping around each other. A curved back protective over an arched chest in one, an entwine of limbs in another, and two bent forms of heaving softness in the last, each infer a tender embrace. In very few lines, the formal abstraction evokes a heightened sense of intimacy and togetherness.

They were drawn after Clarke recovered from the flu and was processing the weekend as best as she knew how. More of their ilk lay about her studio so Clarke felt okay to part with them.

“Lex, I could’ve happily given you these sketches for free,” Clarke says. “You didn’t have to spend that much on them.”

“I would’ve put down more zeros if I had that many to spare in my bank account,” Lexa says, looking ready to mortgage her life for Clarke’s doodles. “They were my favourite of the show.”

Clarke really wants to kiss her right now. By the adoring gaze she’s receiving, it looks like she’s granted silent permission.

“Follow me,” Clarke requests quietly.
Lexa gives her a puzzled look when she retrieves their items from coat check but doesn’t exit the main doors and instead leads them to a set of stairs.

—

“It’s incredible up here,” Lexa breathes.

They’re standing on the rooftop overlooking the skyline, Hudson Square below and the city beyond. Lexa is leaned forward on her forearms resting on top of the railing, hands clasped and thumbs twirling. Clarke stands closely next to her, back against the metal bar. The light breeze is making a pretty mess of Lexa’s hair and tangling the knots in Clarke’s stomach.

A few stragglers are off to the side similarly taking in the spectacular view of the Hudson and a lit-up lower Manhattan. Glass and steel and concrete against a backdrop of cranes frozen in mid suspension and the reds and oranges of a yawning sky jostle for their attention.

“Not exactly a construction site but not a bad substitute,” Clarke says.

Lexa nods her appreciation.

“Remember the mad dashes down here past midnight to get something printed for your crits the next day,” Clarke reminisces.

Lexa chuckles sharing in the memory of rushing to the Printing District in Soho, the only area guaranteed to have one or two printshops open late. Lexa would panic she wouldn’t finish in time and Clarke would calmly help her work the machines.

“Yeah, then while you slept in the next morning,” Lexa bemoans, “I had to stand up in front of my prof and peers trying to sound coherent enough like I hadn’t been awake for twenty-four hours.”

“You’ve never had a problem with looking put together,” Clarke comments giving her a meaningful once-over. She then turns to face the same direction as Lexa, mimicking her stance. “You look incredible tonight,” she tells her, amending Lexa’s earlier assessment of the scenery.

It’s quiet for awhile after. They stare out in silence until Lexa lifts herself off the railing and steps behind Clarke, bracing her arms around her. Clarke naturally leans back into her hold, laying the back of her head against Lexa’s shoulder. Lexa’s arms slide to cross at her stomach. Clarke wonders if Lexa can hear her increased heart rate this close.

To give it time to settle she randomly points to various buildings and Lexa gamely recites some lesser-known facts about the architecture or the architect behind it. For buildings she doesn’t know, Lexa makes up fictional accounts that has Clarke laughing airy breaths into her neck. When a strong gust of wind passes, Lexa buttresses her arms protectively to shield Clarke without pausing her insight into why the dutch architect Rem Koolhaas referred to the city as Delirious New York.

Clarke can sympathise with his sentiment. She’s feeling more than delirious herself.

Some of the stories are familiar to Clarke as she’s heard it before from Lexa but with the soothing voice in her ear she’s not fussy about new or old information. She’d gladly entertain a live reading of the national building code for the warm sounds and even warmer sensation filling her chest.

The conversation diverges into unexpected architectural connections in popular culture. Scrabble was invented by Alfred Butts, an unemployed architect from Jackson Heights. A street is named after him there, spelled out in scrabble tiles. Pink Floyd, Ice Cube, and Queen Noor of Jordan all studied
architecture.

“It’s an illustrious profession, Clarke,” Lexa needlessly makes her case, “Poor, but illustrious.”

“Not that poor if you can afford to drop a grand on three sketches,” Clarke argues.

“You can find me hugging my precious drawings when I relocate to the troll bridge.”

Clarke laughs.

—

“Clarke, why did you say no to London too?” Lexa asks carefully, quietly, moving the conversation forward in somewhat of a predictive turn after talk about the differences between London’s and New York’s Sohos.

Lexa must be imagining this same rooftop scene but swapping yellow cabs for red routemaster buses.

Clarke feels Lexa’s chest tighten as her own twists hearing the dejected tone. It’s been light and flirty in the last few weeks so the direct reference to the faults and fractures of their relationship reminds her that there’s still a precarity to the state of things.

“I somewhat get it if you weren’t ready for marriage, if it felt too big or if I was rushing it after the hospital, but—” Lexa’s sentence is left unfinished, seemingly losing air from re-feeling doubly rejected.

“Several things, really,” Clarke answers quietly, looking down at her feet, “but one of the biggest was I didn’t think I deserved you. After your proposal, you stayed and waited. Even though I had broken your heart, you didn’t leave.”

“Because I was in love with you,” Lexa says equally hushed. “Because I didn’t want to leave.”

“I didn’t want you to leave,” Clarke confirms squeezing her hand that she’s grateful hasn’t let go.

Lexa nods against her shoulder. “When you rejected my proposal I was deeply hurt but I still wanted to spend my life with you, with or without an official certificate. You didn’t outright break up with me so I thought you just needed time. I saw London as an opportunity for us to have a new start.”

When Lexa goes quiet and doesn’t continue, Clarke picks up the thread.

“I know you had applied to the position before your dad got sick, and we had talked about its possibility.”

It was the same office that Alexandria Sr had completed summer placements at while Lexa’s mother was studying abroad and then interned with for two years after graduation. Clarke had been supportive of exploring the option of a temporary move to London as a way for Lexa to connect with pieces of her mom.

“Yeah, it’s really inconsiderate of cancer to change life plans,” Lexa feebly jokes, finding her voice again.

“Its timing certainly sucked,” Clarke concurred.

“With Dad’s sickness I completely put London out of my mind. I didn’t expect to hear from them again when another opening became available. Apparently I left an impression, or at least Mom did.”
“Right,” Clarke says nodding. She pauses to carefully arrange her thoughts and words. “When you brought up the new offer, I was stuck in a limbo I didn’t know how to get out of. You had been really patient and I felt guilty about the proposal, about stringing you along. I didn’t want you to wait anymore. I stupidly thought London could be a new life for you without me.”

Leda hums her disappointment about their discordant perspectives, little else to add to Clarke’s misguided logic.

“Once my panic had settled in at the hospital,” Clarke continues with a defeated shrug, “it had snowballed from there. One bad choice after another.”

The conversation doesn’t have the same heaviness as the one in the studio but Clarke nonetheless feels the weight of her decisions. When she began to shut Leda out, it started to unravel the strands of their love and she didn’t know how to reconnect them. She couldn’t take any of it back, until one year became two then three and more.

She had felt scattered then in more ways than one. Now, curled in Leda’s arms, the pieces don’t feel so disparate. The recent progress lets her know she has a willing partner to help her collect them.

“What would’ve happened if I hadn’t come back to New York?” Leda asks, taking up playing with Clarke’s fingers.

The lace of wistfulness indicates it’s a rhetorical question, Clarke answers anyways. “After my spectacular fail at seeing you last summer, I secretly hoped that something would come of my upcoming exhibition at the Whitechapel. I was going to send you an invitation to the private view or knock on your door again and deliver it in person. Then, stumble my way from there,” she says honestly, biting her lip, “depending on how or if you’d receive me.”

Leda chuckles. “That would’ve been an interesting post or visit to get. Not seeing you for years and then being invited to your show.” She then clears her throat and lowers her voice, presumably to copy Clarke’s raspiness, and intones sarcastically, “Hey, I didn’t want a life with you in London but come see my painting?”

Clarke tilts her head back to look at her, relieved to find a small cracked smile letting her know that there’s no bite to Leda’s teasing.

Clarke hangs her head melodramatically, “As it’s been well established by now, I’ve no clue what I’m doing.”

“You certainly keep me on my toes.”

“No one’s ever accused me of being predictable.”

“Hhm,” Leda agrees then entreats, “but it’d be great if from here on out, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to keep my feet firmly planted on the ground.”

Clarke laughs again, quiet and grateful for the lightness with which they can approach the topic now.

She turns in Leda’s arms.

She gazes deeply into Leda’s eyes and only finds fondness there for Clarke’s unpredictability if not the ghost of sadness for things that can’t be changed.

“I’m sorry.”
“I know.”

“Can I show you how sorry I am?” Clarke asks. On Lexa’s lifted brow, she divulges, “there was a reason I brought you up here besides the view.”

“Yeah?” Lexa asks.

Clarke reaches up to tuck a piece of her hair behind her ear. Lexa’s pupils dilate, recognising the tell tale move for when Clarke is about to do something that’ll cause both of them to lose their breaths.

Whatever height Clarke gained with her choice of footwear for the evening is negated by Lexa’s heels so she has to lift on her toes to initiate the kiss.

No taunting or teasing this time as she draws Lexa’s lips into hers, moving their mouths together in a familiar pattern. It’s only been hours since the last one but she nonetheless savours the sweet relief of reacquainting with Lexa’s pillowed softness.

They kiss, full and aching. Hands blindly reach for purchase in hair and on hips. Clarke arches and Lexa bends, a duplicate of the two figures in her sketch.

Lexa slides her tongue inside and Clarke readily receives it, making room for a shared whimper to escape. As greedy and indiscriminate as Clarke has been for any type of physical contact with Lexa, hugging or hand-holding or shoulder-brushing, in this moment, she’ll willingly give up any and every form of touch that doesn’t involve Lexa’s tongue.

The kiss is as intimate as it is deep. Soft and steady.

Clarke could have walked away from the auction with nothing in her hands but the taste of Lexa in her mouth and deemed the night an overwhelming success.

“Let’s not wait that long until the next one,” Clarke proposes into Lexa’s mouth when they finally part.

“No,” Lexa says, shaking her head firmly.

“No?”

“My rationing of our kissing tonight has an ulterior motive,” She makes her point by pressing Clarke’s ear into her chest. Clarke laughs hearing its thundering beat, “for health reasons, Clarke.”

Despite the hazard, and against her own medical advice, Lexa tilts Clarke’s chin back up and kisses her again.

And again.

—

It was supposed to be a couples getaway weekend but Tye had unexpectedly fallen ill and Anya had an emergency with one of her cases. Raven refused to third-wheel the domestic grossness of Clexa 2.0.

Ever since the auction date, Clarke and Lexa have slid more decidedly towards the girlfriend end of the friends-or-more scale. The ‘talk’ still hasn’t happened, something Clarke is hoping to rectify this Memorial weekend, but regardless of what non-label is currently attached to their dynamic, their overt affection remains too much for Raven to withstand solo.
(They had both blushed furiously when Raven had group-texted during the getaway planning, *How can you two be this gross without having any sex?*) Jointly reading from Clarke’s phone in the dairy aisle, Lexa had promptly let go of Clarke’s hand and made an excuse to go find protein bars that she could use as projectiles to launch at their friend.

It’s a good thing she left, missing Octavia’s follow-up text about history repeating itself. *(How very 2004 of you to accidentally get a girlfriend without the title.)*

“Now what?” Clarke asks, a duffle bag in hand as she stands beside the Jeep rental looking at the Woods cabin.

Gustus was getting too old to be camping so his daughters had pitched in to build a cabin by the lake. Lexa designed it, Anya negotiated the land and bought the building materials, and all three built it by hand, with a little muscle help from some of Gustus’ guys.

She takes in the black-painted timbre frame structure, a simple rectangular box nestled between pine trees and elevated on concrete plinths to project out towards the lake. Clarke smiles noting how very Lexa it is in its restraint with just a tiny touch of extra-ness in its prow.

Lexa squeezes Clarke’s shoulder with the arm she has around her. “Now we eat,” she says lifting the bags of groceries she’s holding.

Clarke’s smile widens as she rubs Lexa’s stomach over the same flannel shirt that she had worn to her birthday dinner. Lexa couldn’t look more different than from the auction, plaid for pumps, but still as disarmingly attractive. Clarke kisses her response and fondness into the underside of Lexa’s chin, “Sure, babe. Good thing we picked up some potatoes on the way.”

Lexa disentangles from Clarke, taking the duffel from her, and heads towards the oversize sliding door, her sight focusing on the chipped lintel before entering. Clarke trails behind to grab the last of the groceries.

Inside, it feels like Clarke has stepped right back outside. A flood of natural light pours into the double height space from the skylights and another set of oversize sliding doors offers sweeping views of the lake.

It’s an open plan with kitchen slash dining and a media den anchoring either ends and connected in the centre by the living area featuring a wood burning fireplace. Sleeping quarters are housed in the upper loft over the workspace. The timber wood is left exposed and unpainted, and as Lexa has already started a fire, the whole dwelling is lit in an orange glow, matching the setting sun slowly dipping towards the horizon.

“Fuck,” Clarke expels, earning a quiet chuckle from her lumberjack. “Why do you even bother living in the city?”

“It can get lonely here,” Lexa responds without context.

(Clarke learns later that when Lexa visited the last two summers she’d stayed here in the woods to avoid running into Clarke in the city.)

Her artist’s gaze takes one more mental snapshot of the scenery before she makes her way to the kitchen where Lexa’s deposited their groceries on the wood dining table.

“Sweet potato fries?”

“Yes, please.” She receives the expected answer as Lexa slips through the backdoor, curiously with
an ax in hand. Then Clarke faintly hears a distant shout of, “Gonna chop some wood!”

Clarke shakes her head as she starts prepping their dinner, suspecting her smile will be a permanent fixture the next four days.

The spend the rest of the evening after dinner retired to the den enjoying the fully fitted entertainment system courtesy of Raven. Lexa’s head is laid sideways on Clarke’s lap as sighs exchange for soft pulls of hair by deft fingers. After a long drive and an even longer work week, both are too exhausted to engage in anything other than the surety and comfort of each other’s presence and the Discovery Channel as background companion.

Midway through the second underwater documentary, Clarke shifts to lay horizontal as well, spooning Lexa from behind. It’s a warmth that has Clarke immediately sweating. But with her front pressed into Lexa and her back into the couch—the flicker of the screen setting Lexa’s profile in an iridescent blue—there’s little argument that can persuade Clarke of a better feeling to have or a better place to be on a Friday night.

It’s the sort of domestic bliss that she could only allow herself to start dreaming of again after their (second) first date, the tinder to ignite the feelings that Clarke has been fighting to temper. Without explicitly knowing where Lexa’s current thinking is, she’s been cautious about hoping too far ahead. Yet, every caress and gaze and kiss, snuck in between whispered words and bright laughter, implicitly tell her that they’re well on their way there.

As Clarke patiently waits on verbal confirmation from Lexa of some form of reciprocation or some type of affirmative decision on them as a twosome, she collects these pockets of time together and hangs them like lanterns to light their path forward. They haven’t consumed a drop of alcohol tonight but she feels drunk in the hazy glow of their stumbling towards a co-definition of where exactly there is that they want to be.

When bedtime rolls around, against Clarke’s expectation but fulfilling her hidden hope, Lexa takes her hand and leads them up to the main loft and curls her body around Clarke’s, an inversion of their downstairs position. Neither question the sleeping arrangement or how naturally they fold their bodies into familiar shapes.

No second guessing. It just feels right.

Lexa’s shallow breaths hit her neck and that’s all the encouragement Clarke needs to close her eyes.

“G’night, Clarke.”

“Night, Lexa.”

Much of Saturday is spent reading on the deck with the books they each brought, a quiet, subdued day with less activities than their past camping outings, though occasional dips (and kisses) in the lake still feature prominently.

Their energy appears to concentrate instead on not having sex and not succumbing to pent-up desire. Alone in a cabin for a protracted length of time is proving to be an inadvertent test of their resolve neither considered as part of the itinerary.

Clarke’s bikini and composure face an especially difficult time hanging on in the water when she’s
straddled on Lexa’s hips and then pushed up against a large boulder. Lexa starts rocking unconsciously into her core while they continue to make out and only catches herself when Clarke can’t keep in a moan.

They part ways flushed and panting to their separate deck chairs to dry off, Lexa looking like she can’t get enough air into her lungs from the sight of Clarke’s string bikini half slipping off one shoulder. Her hardened nipples stretching the fabric taut is likely making matters worse. Clarke fares no better when Lexa lays on her front and provides a prime view of her backside tightly hugged by wet lycra. Behind the safety of sunglasses, she tracks the journey droplets of water take over the swell and down Lexa’s inner thigh.

With self-chastising swiftness she picks up her reading to cling onto the frayed edges of propriety.

Clarke might as well toss her book into the lake because the words on the page won’t stop swimming from her inability to not fantasise about riding Lexa’s ass until they’re both a writhing mass of limbs.

It gets to such a ridiculous sodden point that Clarke has to excuse herself inside to the privacy of the shower.

She doesn’t even bother removing her swimwear. As soon as she’s under the rain head, her left hand dips inside her bottom piece, inelegantly pushing the fabric out of the way to take a relieving swipe through her folds. Her other hand shoots out to balance against the wall. The coldness of the tile against her palm does little to cool the heat between her legs.

Clarke imagines Lexa outside, imagines helping to apply sun lotion on her fair skin that’s already a constellation of freckles. She visualises sitting astride Lexa’s ass, rubbing the lotion in and the knots out, fingers pressing up and down and across the expanse of an unfairly fit back. Lexa’s head would be turned to the side expelling breaths and tiny curses unable to control her reaction.

Unable to control her own, Clarke would lift herself off Lexa momentarily, hook her fingers in Lexa’s bikini bottom and roll it down her thighs. It’d stay on dangling around her knees because Clarke wouldn’t be able to wait and sinks herself back down pressing her soaking wetness onto Lexa’s cheek. They’d both moan as Clarke sets a rhythm of pushing against Lexa, one palm braced by her shoulder while the other hand laces hers and squeezes with every wet pass.

Clarke, Lexa would pant out, repeatedly, desperately, and when it soon becomes too much she would arch her back and raise her chest off the chair, balancing herself on her forearm, creating enough room for Clarke to slip a hand in, clumsily push the cup aside and palm her pebbled breast.

As Clarke imagines picking up the pace of her near-rut now while kneading Lexa’s breast, she pushes two fingers inside and starts pumping in matched rhythm of her dream-self. The water hits her back as she tries to hit the spot inside over and over again. At this angle and with her level of desperation, she doesn’t have the length or coordination to fully succeed. But the image of dream-Lexa reaching back to push Clarke more into her while breathily commanding, harder and faster, is stimulation enough for Clarke to cum hard over her own hand.

Her screams and calls of Lexa’s name get drowned out by the pitter-patter of the rain shower.

Or so she thinks until she exits the bathroom to find real-Lexa on the couch reading a magazine upside down and her cheeks flushed completely red that distinctly isn’t from a sun burn.

—

Now, freshly showered (for real) and full from grilled bass and roasted vegetables, they sit on the
floor on a blanket in front of the fireplace with Lexa’s back against the couch and Clarke slotted between her legs that are bent at the knees. Clarke has been finger-drawing patterns on one knee while Lexa mirrors the circular movements around her stomach, lazily enjoying the warm crackling of the fire.

They take turns sharing a glass of red wine. Clarke hands Lexa the stem after finishing her sip.

“I’ve decided,” Clarke starts to say and draws out the pause for dramatic effect as her tongue darts to catch a drop of merlot from her lip. At Lexa’s prompting hum, she finishes, “I definitely prefer glamping.”

Lexa laughs and re-hands the glass back, “Is that so?”

“You. Tents and mosquito bites are so overrated,” Clarke puts forth, “Heated showers and more than two inches of bed padding are really undersold in state parks. And of course,” she takes the final sip and sets the now-empty glass down, turning her head to press the inky stain further into Lexa’s lips, “a nice vintage.”

The short kiss ends on Lexa’s smile as she weighs Clarke’s words, “I’m with you on mosquitoes and heated showers. Proper hydration is an absolute necessity. But, I reserve judgment on tents and lumpy sleeping conditions as I recall not much sleeping actually happened.”

“Yeah well, not-sleeping was the only attraction to camping for me.”

Lexa nods as they reset their gazes to the fireplace’s play of light. A moment later, the circle patterns on Clarke’s stomach break away from their copying movements on her knee. In fact, Lexa’s hand stops moving almost altogether after sneaking under the hem of Clarke’s shirt and stilling just below her navel.

“Clarke,” Lexa asks, “did you know that wood and stone have amazing acoustic qualities?”

“Yeah?” Clarke semi-croaks, not sure that she cares for an architecture lesson right now with Lexa starting up a brushing motion of her thumb on her soft skin.

“What were you doing in the shower?”

That is not where she thought Lexa was going with her question. There’s no longer any wine for her to choke on to excuse her sudden coughing.

“I— um—” she splutters, happy not to be facing Lexa as she weakly mumbles, “showering …”

Lexa breathes hotly into her ear, “Why were you calling my name?”

That is not the next question she expected Lexa to ask, and so directly.

“You, um, were low on body wash,” Clarke lowly moans when the tips of Lexa’s fingers dip just below her shorts.

“Oh, so you might have missed a few spots?”

“Some.”

“Where?” Lexa asks interestedly, withdrawing her hand to softly brush across Clarke’s stomach again. “Here?”

“No,” she answers with a hitched voice, catching onto Lexa’s game. Clarke finds the time between
breaths lengthening while the space between heartbeats shortening, “I got that.”

“Here?” The hand moves slowly up her side, pressing gently against her ribs.

“No.”

“What about here?” She feels the underside of her breast gently caressed, “I know there’s a lot of surface area to cover,” Lexa’s fingers splay out, and the line shouldn’t work, the game too obvious, but it does, “you might not have gotten it all.”

“Mhm.”

“What was that?”

“Uh-hmm,” Clarke closes her eyes and moistens her lips, pushing the struggling words out, “missed that.”

At the affirmation, Lexa cups Clarke’s breast fully, its weight sitting heavy in her hand, overflowing in her grasp. “I could’ve helped you out, stretch the soap far.”

Clarke whimpers into the touch at the words and squirms against Lexa as she starts a kneading motion.

“I think you might have missed here too,” Lexa noses into the crook of Clarke’s neck, her lips skimming its length. As her hand continues its mission, her tongue laves a trail from collarbone to the hinge of Clarke’s jaw before deciding on a spot in between to suck in her mark. Clarke reaches behind to hold her head in place, moaning when teeth lightly sink into her skin.

Weeks of celibacy after the body-breaking orgasms Lexa last gave her leaves Clarke undoubtedly wet from the teasing. The fabric of her shorts is thinning and sticky. She needs relief soon and takes Lexa’s free hand to bring it into her shorts.

“This definitely didn’t get enough attention,” she husks.

Instead of continuing the descent, Lexa moves her other hand down and hooks both thumbs into Clarke’s shorts and then helps her shuffle out of them. She then takes the hem of Clarke’s shirt and lifts it up and over her head.

Once Clarke is completely nude in front of her, things slow down. Lexa bends her head and kisses Clarke deeply. They spend the next several moments simply kissing, tasting each other. Flooding their senses with the rich and fruity flavour of oak-aged wine, intermingled with notes of vanilla and spice and woody lakeside earthiness. The fire keeps her warm while Lexa’s gentle hands keep her safe, moving slowly over her body.

Time recalibrates, measured in the slow passes of thumb over Clarke’s nipple and the skates of fingers over her ribs and stomach, stretched out in the sucking of tongue and the bite of lips. Untouched but Clarke is dripping steadily, a glistening heat painting her inner thigh.

“I want you so badly,” Lexa breaks the kiss to tell her, mouthing along the outline of her jaw. “I want to be inside you.”

She sounds like she’s almost begging to be granted the privilege. The desperation comes through when she kisses Clarke again, a little sloppier, a little messier than before.

Clarke nods against her shoulder without parting their lips and blindly takes Lexa’s hand leading it
Lexa’s fingers brush past wet blonde curls and glide through fluttery folds. “Clarke, you’re so wet,” she says in awe, breaking the kiss again to have a look. Craning forward, they both stare with lustful eyes and heaving chests at the sheen coating her middle and index as she strokes through Clarke.

They watch with heady rapture when Lexa slides down and her fingers disappear from view. Air leaves Clarke as Lexa fills her. It’s a tight sensation at first but then all pleasure. She slams her eyes shut and drops her head back against Lexa’s shoulder.

Lexa pumps in and out of Clarke, dragging and curling on every second thrust. Her other hand redoubles attention to Clarke’s breasts, taking greedy turns between the two. Clarke’s hands tightly grip Lexa’s knees, bracing against the overwhelming feeling.

Lexa’s lips nibble behind the shell of her ear as she continues to verbalise just how much she wants and has missed Clarke. “God, I’ve been trying to hold back,” she pants between pumps, pushing and grunting, “but it’s impossible.”

“Yeah?” Clarke encourages the monologue, though it doesn’t seem necessary.

“I can’t stop thinking about these,” Lexa answers and fondles the pale flesh that spills over her hand, “and been dreaming about this,” flexes her fingers coaxing more wetness to gush out, “incredible warmth.”

“Me too.”

“I just want to be inside of you, all the time.” She pushes in deeper to make her point, hooks her fingers as far as they’ll go. Her thumb makes obscene sweeps of Clarke’s outer lips, the surface treatment contrasting sharply to her search for depth.

“How—” Clarke can barely get out, “How do you want me, Lex?”

“Sucking me in,” Clarke’s clenching entrance responds possessively, the muscles contract on cue to trap Lexa’s fingers momentarily, “completely enveloping me.” Lexa adds a third finger, increasing the fullness.

Clarke bites down hard on her bottom lip short of breaking the skin.

“I’m close,” she pleads when Lexa uncomprehendingly stops moving like she’s memorising being sheathed inside of Clarke. “Please.”

“Hold it, baby.”

Against Lexa’s wish, Clarke nearly comes at the term of endearment. But she sucks in a breath, tucks her bottom lip in further and does her best not to fall apart as Lexa tweaks her nipple and tugs it to heightened pleasure.

“Not yet, ok?” She softly commands as the pumping thankfully resumes but at a toe-curling pace that’s oppositely productive to delaying Clarke’s orgasm. “I want to feel you. To hear you.”

She kisses Clarke again with no other agenda but to feel Clarke’s whimpers reverberate in the roof of her mouth, to have her name echoing in hollowed breaths.

Just as Clarke thinks she’s reached the edge, Lexa pulls out. Clarke’s too blissed out to understand what is happening, until she’s gently pushed forward to rest on her hands and knees. While she takes
the opportunity to regulate her breathing and regain cognition, Lexa hurriedly undresses behind her.

Before Clarke has a chance to clear the fog, she’s nudged forward to give Lexa manoeuvring room and then Lexa is palming her cheeks to open wider before licking the length of her. Clarke’s hips jerk away involuntarily, instinctually, at the same time bucking back for more, a rasp cry stumbling from her lips.

“Is this ok?” Lexa asks, her thumb temporarily taking over from her tongue, the pad tracing her slit and pressing firmly here and there. Clarke has no words so she nods very, very agreeably, more than ok.

Lexa takes her time. Her tongue returns, hot as it gathers Clarke’s wetness and pushes it back where it came, smoothing a hand down her bent spine as Clarke takes to incoherent blathering. Lexa softly pushes in and out of her, twisting circles inside that wrench deep-throated sighs. She trembles under the touch, shaking from the pleasure.

“You taste amazing,” Lexa coos. Her airy words send a relieving breeze. But the reprieve is short. Lexa renews to an ardent addressing of their shared arousal, her mouth working overtime to draw fluid and ‘fucks’ out of Clarke.

Clarke hangs her head and gains an upside down view past her swaying breasts of Lexa working a hand between her own legs while her chin shines with Clarke’s desire. Her belly coils tight when the tip of a tongue connects with the tip of her clit. Low protracted moans fall from her open mouth when Lexa takes up a maddening flicking pattern.

After the last time in her studio, the lovemaking entangled with the confessions, there was a distinct possibility that she and Lexa would never be that closed again once the vulnerability and nostalgia passed and clearer heads prevailed. For awhile it looked that way with the last of the defence line that Lexa put up to limit their physicality despite the magnetism of their bodies and hearts.

Lexa is right. It’s an impossible task.

Whether it’s an intimate, clumsy first time under the stars or currently balanced on all fours with a tingly sensation taking over her whole body making the world feel one lick, one swipe or curl away from imploding, staying away isn’t an option. On top or underneath, in front or behind, Clarke can’t notfeel Lexa moving against and inside of her—taking her to the edge and back again.

Lexa removes her tongue and re-enters with two fingers at once that has Clarke surging forward in a stream of expletives and falling onto her forearms, face pressed to the floor, back arching and cheeks rising to meet the new angle of thrusting.

“Oh god, Lexa!”

Answering the neediness of her call, Lexa fucks into her with fervour, alternating between smooth and rough strokes. She groans and Clarke whimpers, throats dry where nothing else is.

Clarke pulses wildly around Lexa, the concentrated heat threatening to explode once more. Lexa’s fingers are drenched. She must realise Clarke won’t be able to hold out much longer. She drapes herself over Clarke, using her pelvis to intensify the driving. Clarke spreads her knees wider, opens up for her.

“Fuck, Clarke.”

Lexa admires of her body’s receptiveness when another finger is added with ease. She reaches under to grab a handful of Clarke’s breast and squeezes in time to the picked up pace.
Lexa

Push and squeeze.

Lexa

Pull and curl.

Lexa

They keep to that punishing pattern for a short while until the rough movements are offset by the indescribable softness of Lexa’s lips writing herself into Clarke’s skin, quietly asking things of her that are a contradiction to the hardness of her thrusts.

Clarke is a goner after that, especially when Lexa whispers absently, gently, into her ear, “Please, love,” and on an upstroke, “come for me.”

And she does, collapsing flat on the floor on a keening wail. In a reverse enactment of her earlier fantasy, Lexa swiftly shifts to ride her ass. Clarke helps to encourage her by panting with whatever air is availed to her, “That’s it, baby,” as Lexa smears her arousal and rubs her throbbing clit in search of a rhythm. Lexa brings herself to orgasm in under four concentrated grunts and breaks on top of Clarke, joining them together in a guttural, shuddering mess.

By mutual agreement, despite the intensity of their physical reunion, it’s not enough. After catching their breaths, they turn on their respective sides and kiss and kiss until Lexa lifts Clarke’s leg to rest over her hip and then positions her lower body to rub their cores together.

It takes some strategic placements and minute adjustments before they find the right angle for friction, but when they do, when wetness meets wetness and folds slip past each other and clits slide together, Clarke has never felt so close to shattering from such intimacy.

They halt their kissing to watch the dance of firelight reflected in gazes of inexorable love. They push and grind and rock. When they reach the height of their climb again, hands clasped and hearts in synchronous rhythm, Clarke has to close her eyes and kiss Lexa so that her mouth doesn’t let slip the three words fighting to surface.

Instead, she breathes her gratitude into Lexa’s mouth that she’s allowed to be here again, quietly depositing the single verb and the two pronouns to collect back later.

When Lexa comes again, biting into Clarke’s shoulder for anchor, it’s a healing pain.

Everything feels right.

The expansion happens once more.

—

Sunday is a repeat of Saturday. Reading on the deck. Swims in the lake. Except, in addition to making love by the fireplace, they also do it on the deck and in the lake. In every room of the cabin. Taking almost every opportunity to fill the spaces where hands and mouths have felt empty.

After scrubbing the place clean of the spread evidence of their renewed love, they pull out of the cabin on Monday full on and of each other, kiss-bruised and sun-drenched. Clarke doesn’t let go of Lexa’s hand the entire two-hour drive back to the city. Lexa can’t stop kissing her at every stop light and gas station. Neither of their smiles break.
Girlfriends or not, the label is moot. The weekend leaves Clarke sure that nothing else matters but the feel of Lexa under her skin and in her bones.

—

She wants to tell her. Needs to tell her.

Lexa needs to know how she feels because it is not something Clarke can contain any longer.

The words almost slip out when Lexa drops off banh mi sandwiches to her studio while in the area for a meeting; when she is wearing her spectacles and spends more time pushing the rim up her nose than making progress in her book; when she slides in behind Clarke in their bed that Lexa has started spending four out of the seven nights of the week; when they’re on a triple date with their friends and Clarke aches for the permanence that the other two pairs enjoy.

Things have just expanded and expanded between them. It’s impossible for the words to stay quiet.

There are encouraging signs that Lexa would be receptive to hearing them. It’s highly likely she feels them herself. There’s no other way to interpret the starry-eyed gazes Lexa gives Clarke or the affected fondness of her words and touch.

—

“Lexa,”

They’re in her apartment, cuddled up on the couch doing nothing but enjoying each other’s presence after a dinner out. Clarke had planned to say it during the meal at the restaurant that she’d booked especially for the occasion but lost her nerve somewhere between the main and dessert.

Cuddled around each other in their former home together, now seems like a better moment anyways to tell Lexa how much she wishes for their past to be their future again.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Me too,” Lexa swallows and nods, straightening up at Clarke’s serious tone and looking as nervous as Clarke feels.

Their mutual anxiety is reassuring. After all these months of rebuilding their love, Lexa must be in a similar state of readiness to finally give it a name.

By the soft gaze she receives, by the search in Lexa’s eyes for a mirror of understanding, the three words look just as ready to fall out of Lexa’s mouth.

She takes Lexa’s hand, ready to profess.

“Clarke, I—”

“Sorry, can I start?” Clarke interjects, afraid her courage will leave if she waits any longer, “you need to know first.”

Lexa bites her lip and lets loose a shaky breath before letting Clarke go on, her expression expectant and scared for how the next words would change them.

“Lexa, I love you,” Clarke exhales.

She lets seconds tick by for the declaration to hold, giving the words their due weight.
On a deeper breath, and looking deeply, adoringly, into widened eyes, she says more confidently, “I love you. I’m in love with you.”

Lexa stills completely.

Her gaze searching.

“You love me?” She asks, quiet, contemplative.

Clarke nods, her eyes misting at finally giving room to the caged feeling. “I do, so much.” She scoots closer on the couch and places their joined hands over Lexa’s heart, “I want this, us. You.”

Lexa’s silence stretches. Her beautiful, intelligent eyes working overtime to read the import of Clarke’s profession. Clarke gives her the time to let the words sink in. She continues, “I’ve never stopped loving you, but I didn’t realise how much more I could love you.”

Lexa looks understandably overwhelmed, though oddly a little bewildered. Clarke thought her affection and actions have been transparent, so she’s surprised by Lexa’s seeming surprise. Unexpectedly, Lexa gets on her feet and paces slowly back and forth. Clarke patiently waits on the couch, watching her track grooves into the hardwood, a welter of conflicting, confused emotions playing out on her face.

“This?” Lexa asks, gesturing a hesitant hand between them, “Us?”

Clarke nods.

Lexa looks at her, a halting torn gaze. “How do you see it happening?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What? We go on more dates, move in together, get married? Is that what you see?” Lexa asks mechanically, straining to keep the emotion out of her voice though failing to hide the tumult from her eyes.

Clarke feels knots forming in her stomach not expecting or grasping this line of questioning about the scheduling and logistics of their relationship.

“Yeah, eventually. I hope,” Clarke says quietly, trying to maintain calm even as she senses something is off and things are headed awry.

She’s right. For some reason, that was the wrong thing to say.

“You hope?” Lexa asks with a pained expression, getting suddenly, visibly upset. Clarke can see the gathered storm in her eyes which have become wet, uncomprehendingly so. Lexa’s chest rises and falls struggling to rein in her slipping composure.

“Clarke, we were there,” Lexa says with beggared breath and resurfaced heartbreak, “we had it. This, us,” and waves her hand as tears form and she can’t hold back her emotions, “we had it.”

“We can have it again,” Clarke covers quickly, seeing an opening.

Another wrong thing to say as Lexa starts shaking her head.

“I—” Clarke sputters, at a loss for how widely she has possibly missed the mark but tries to grapple for some words to understand the situation, “I thought … I thought you wanted it too. Me, the cabin —” she leaves it hanging, feeling a sharp stab that maybe she had completely misread the entire
The entire last three months.


“Then, what’s wrong?”

“The more time we spend together, the more I want you, the more I lo—” she cuts herself off, her chest heaving. “You’re you. Every time we kiss, each time we touch, I crave for the next.”

“Me too.” Clarke wants to hold Lexa but she looks too raw.

“I crave to be near you, all the time. I crave your words and your laugh and the blue of your eyes. It isn’t just a want for me, Clarke,” Lexa says with devastated affect, “it’s a visceral need.”

Before Clarke can echo her agreement, Lexa continues.

“But I was here before. I wanted and needed you and you walked away. Without a word.” Lexa shakes her head, pacing again before she amends, “Actually no, you didn’t even walk away. Had you, I could have at least gone after you. But you did nothing.” She looks at Clarke through blurred vision, “I can’t pour everything into you again and be left with nothing. I can’t, won’t survive that a second time. I’d just be breaking my own heart.”

“You wouldn’t have to survive it. We can take it slow. I know we’ve been caught up in each other lately but if that scares you then we can slow down. You don’t have to go all in,” Clarke negotiates, standing up and then braves to retake both of Lexa’s hands in hers. “However little or much you want to give, I’ll make up for the rest.”

Lexa continues to shake her head but she doesn’t reject Clarke’s touch. Clarke takes that as a positive sign.

“We can take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere. I mean it, Lexa. I want that future with you, us. I want Sunday breakfasts and secret concerts and weekends at the cabin and rooftop kisses,” she pauses to wipe Lexa’s tears and give her a small kiss, doing the little she can to steady the tremble of Lexa’s bottom lip (and her own). “Even baseball games. I want it, all of it with you. We can figure it out together.”

“And when it gets hard?” Lexa asks.

“Then we’ll still figure it out together. I’m not going anywhere,” she reaffirms.

Clarke sees resolve crumbling in Lexa’s eyes at her steadfastness and thinks she might be breaking through to her. But then Lexa disentangles their hands and takes a laboured step backwards, putting a hurtful distance between them.

Her action confuses Clarke, her next words more so.

“I am.”

“What?”

She doesn’t expect the clarification Lexa provides.

“I’m leaving for London.”
The admittance doesn’t register at first. When it does, Clarke’s stomach drops and the floor feels like it’s been pulled from under her.

“What?”

“New York was supposed to be temporary. I was always meant to go back to London,” Lexa expands, her words coming out fast to catch up with the velocity of Clarke’s fallen expression, her plummeting heart. “That’s what I had to tell you.”

“What?” is all the vocabulary Clarke can continue to muster. The air is thickening with tension that’s making it hard to find its way to her lungs.

“They offered me junior associateship if this project went well. But I—”

“You’re leaving?” Clarke asks, her mind still reeling on the first part, “When?”

“I’m scheduled to return by end of the month.”

That’s little over two weeks away.

“You’re leaving?” Clarke repeats shell-shocked.

“I was supposed to have already left two months ago.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

Lexa is silent. Guilt and something else unreadable in her expression.

The silence gives Clarke a moment to replay recent events. Her heart hammers and her throat constricts. She feels sick to her stomach, a gut-wrenching anger at the three words that have haunted her and impaired her judgment.

“What have we been doing then? All those dates and kisses and—” Clarke asks, a tremor in her voice, devastated by the realisation that they might have meant so much more to her than to Lexa.

Lexa vehemently shakes her head, failing at her desperate attempt to stay stoic. “I was trying to figure things out. Trying to move on.”

Unable to process the news, unable to understand how they’ve been on a completely different page, book even, Clarke lets her anger take over. “How? By pretending to be my friend? By faking feelings for me? By letting me think I possibly had a chance?”

Pain flares inside, a heated sensation behind her eyes at the specious appearance of love.

If Clarke wanted the words to sting, she well succeeded with the flash of deep hurt on Lexa’s face before her mask resettles. They both know that Lexa is anything but disingenuous. But in the moment, Clarke can only feel betrayed by her deceit, wholly wounded by the apparent artifice of their time together.

“I meant every—”

“You lied to me,” Clarke assails pre-empting Lexa from defending her actions.

“I never lied.”

“You just didn’t tell me the truth.”
A slight movement of her jaw is Clarke’s only warning before Lexa’s expression hardens and her words fly out like daggers.

“What truth, Clarke?!” Lexa finally explodes, “That I took the assignment because my heart was still in pieces and thought maybe if I could see you again one last time I wouldn’t feel so broken? That if we could be friends I’d get some small amount of closure as to why we weren’t more? That I naively thought in four months I could erase the pain of four years?"

Clarke is rendered speechless by Lexa’s outburst, by her anguish.

“What truth? That I had no idea these last months would show me how close we were to that eventuality. How fucking close I can get to happiness before it’s ripped away? Before you rip it away?"

“So, what?? Is this revenge, Lexa?” The hurt drives Clarke to lash out. “I blindsided you so now you’re returning the favour? Was that the whole plan to make me fall in love with you again? Just so you can twist the knife deeper? Quid pro quo. Right? A last good fuck before you go back to your life?”

Lexa looks stunned. Her expression twists into agony and Clarke immediately regrets her words.

But it’s too late.

“Lex—”

“Fuck you, Clarke.”

She says with a ruinous break of her voice.

Lexa grabs her coat and is out of the apartment before Clarke has a chance to take the next breath, leaving her words behind to ricochet off the hollow walls.

They’re not the three words Clarke thought she’d hear tonight, but they’re the three words that bring her to her knees.

Her heart and lungs contract.

The elastic finally snaps.

Clarke crumbles to the floor and cries.

Chapter End Notes

Everything is fine. They’re fine.
*Shouts over my shoulder while running away à la Friends Phoebe limb-flailing*

So ... looks like Clarke doesn’t have full monopoly on panicking and unpredictability in this relationship. Oh, Lexa. But, nothing to worry about. Theirs is a tender, elastic love. The thing with snapped elastic? It can be retied. Unless, well, you know, the rubber disintegrates and then the whole metaphor just falls apart. :)

Next chapter: Lexa’s POV. We catch up to where her head and heart has been all this time, and fill in some gaps.

Then we’re into the homestretch before the (soft) epilogue!

Hope everyone is having a great summer so far!

(Special thanks to @imaginationofacornflake for heroically wading through this monster chapter to help cross the Is and dot the Ts)
In the Half Light

Chapter Summary

A shift in perspective sheds new light on the past. We catch up to where Lexa's head and heart has been all this time.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Lexa's ted talk. Grab a cuppa for 2.5 lextra hours. Special thanks to @imaginationofacornflake and @weasal for beta-ing this beast. They're the true MVPs!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And all that I've known to be of love
And I am gentle
You ran off with it all
And I am desperate
And all that I dream
Where do you run, where do you run to?

(Mercury by Sufjan Stevens)

Golden light and brilliant blue.

A breath-stealing look across the gymnasium floor, a stellar collision in the corridor.

A first kiss under the stars, a first time under the rain.

Ever since they met, Lexa has been in love with Clarke.

Where her mother had loved her father with quiet, measured grace, and her father adored her mother with not-so-quiet and immeasurable ardour, Lexa is the product of both.

With grace and ardour, she has loved Clarke. For sixteen years, Lexa’s heart has been in constant expansion making room for her boundless, radiating warmth (a brilliance so hot that sometimes it burns).

She has been gentle and faithful. Patient and kind.

Confident and steadfast. Desperate and broken.

She has felt weightless and been left speechless.

But not once has her love wavered. Even after Clarke’s did, heartbreakingly and without cause,
Lexa’s love remains, tender and true.

****

“Lexa, what happened?”

Lexa shakily lifted her arm to reveal the small velvet box clutched in her hand. She shook her head, with greater violence than the soft, almost inaudible ‘no’ that had precipitated the tearful trek leading her to stand heartbroken in front of her sister’s apartment door. Hours since, the rejection still reverberated in her chest, a substitute for where her heart should be beating.

She was immediately drawn into a crushing embrace. Unable to find any words, Lexa could only sob into Anya’s shirt, distraught and gasping in spurts of uneven air.

Anya rubbed a soothing hand up and down Lexa’s back. “You’re okay.”

Lexa weakly mumbled an unintelligible reply into the now wet shoulder. She was far from okay.

—

Two months later, Anya was already waiting halfway down the same hallway, wordlessly taking the duffle bag while the other arm pulled Lexa in.

“She—” Lexa had to pause for the crack in her voice to finish its break, “she said no,” and a tear to fall, “again.”

Anya held on tighter.

“You’re okay.”

****

Her heart is pounding.

It’s screaming for her to turn around and go back to Clarke.

But as her feet carry her out the door farther away from their apartment and faster than she has the wits to stop, it takes everything in Lexa not to break. For the third time.

Her cheeks are stained, her breaths short and vision blurred from witnessing the pain that rived across Clarke’s face when Lexa revealed she was leaving for London.

Driven by her own pain and the stifling, hot sensation she’d unexpectedly felt upon hearing the three words, and then magnified by the accusation that her actions of the past months amounted to a cruel, meaningless fuck, Lexa found herself running.

She had to get out, flee the scene before she had the chance to say anything of what she had planned and rehearsed to share with Clarke.

She should have known better. Plans and Clarke rarely make sense in the same sentence. Lexa is a
planner and a list maker. Clarke has never fit neatly into any timetable or semblance of order, especially not within the narrow width of a spreadsheet column.

Lexa doesn’t stop moving until she’s sitting on hardwood floor with her back against a familiar black door, blocks away from the sounds of heaving sobs that still ring in her ears and are a struggle not to echo.

She doesn’t remember how she got here or for how long she’s been sat but then a different blonde is suddenly in front of her, kneeled down and looking alarmed.

“Clarke,” is all she has the capacity to whisper before her sister’s arms protectively wrap around her. Lexa pitches forward into the comfort, unmindful of the awkward position.

A second set of concerned eyes come into her view.

“Shhhh,” Anya coos and tries to reassure, “you’re okay.”

The worn refrain makes Lexa cry harder. She didn’t think she’d be here again.

—

They’re arguing.

Or more like, Raven is speaking with her outside voice in flurried frustration while Anya’s calmness is likely motivating her volume.

Lexa can hear them all the way in the bedroom from where she sits near-catatonic on their couch. Her head is in her hands with elbows on her knees, hair curtaining to shield from the too-bright streetlight and shut the world out.

Were she not lost in her thoughts and focused on abating the deafening rush of blood in her ears, she’d be able to catch snippets of the one-sided conversation, “What the hell happened?”, “I knew things were going too well,” and “They’re both fucking idiots, you can’t trust them with themselves.”

It goes quiet for awhile, maybe Anya is filling her wife in, but of what Lexa wouldn’t know as she’s been scant on specifics about what happened with Clarke. Aware of her plans, Anya may have guessed how they’ve gone awry but she wouldn’t betray Lexa’s confidence without first consulting her.

When they at last re-emerge to the living room, brown eyes softly meet Lexa’s gaze, tender and empathetic and completely in contrast to the previous yelling.

“Lexa,” Raven says, combing back her hair behind her ear and wiping away another fallen tear, “I owe you an apology and we should talk later.”

That momentarily snaps Lexa out of her haze, confused by Raven’s remorseful look. It would make more sense for Clarke’s best friend to be angry with her.

“I’m sorry, I should have been a better friend to you back then,” Raven continues. “To both of you.”

Lexa doesn’t understand but nods nonetheless, no energy to question.

“Is Clarke home? She’s not answering her phone,” Raven asks, tapping out a text, worry lines knitting her brows together.
Hearing the name involuntarily draws another small sob from Lexa. She nods again.

“Ok, ok,” Raven rubs her back and then turns to mouth something to her wife.

Lexa quickly loses track of their hushed conversation, returning to her prior numb state and only vaguely aware of their movements. Then she hears a faint, “O, meet you there in fifteen,” trailing out the door before Raven is gone.

Lexa doesn’t move a muscle, doesn’t make a sound. All her effort is concentrated on not letting the near permanent ache consume her whole, the one she had first carried across the ocean and then back again, the same dull throbbing she thought was beginning to ease these last few months only to flare up tonight. Acutely.

Anya silently sits with her, a stalwart presence. She lets the younger Woods steep in her melancholy for awhile before she retrieves two tumblers from the kitchen and a bottle of whisky. She returns to retake her place on the couch, sitting crossed leg this time as she silently pours their drinks.

Lexa stares as the burnished golden liquid fills the highball glass. She had picked up the single malt Scottish whisky during a day trip to Speyside after a business meeting in Aberdeen. Her host wouldn’t let her leave without a visit to Aberlour’s distillery so that she could get a better sense of the Highland heartiness with which their office would be partnering. Not much of a whisky drinker herself (that had been Clarke) Lexa agreed if only to catch a glimpse of the spectacular scenery of Ben Rinnes, its natural springs and pink granite.

During the sampling portion of the tour, when their guide had described the A’bunadh finish as “robust and intense with bitter-sweet notes of exotic spices,” she’d immediately thought of her sister. Much like Anya, it takes a little bit of getting used to for the uninitiated, but once past the numbing first sip, the strength of its rich, complex taste stays.

(A different bottle still sits in her London apartment, the 12 year old malt purchased on the whim that one day she’d get to share its warm and lingering finish with Clarke, the amber colour a placeholder for the sunsets that they might one day watch together again. The age of the malt purely coincidental.)

“Has the appropriate amount of time passed by yet?” Anya asks, breaking the silence after finishing the pour.

Lexa looks up and raises an eyebrow for clarification.

“For the touchy feely part to be over,” Anya says while handing Lexa her drink, meeting her gaze, a mixture of apathy and empathy that only an older sibling could countenance in equal measure.

That cracks a tiny smile out of Lexa, followed by a small wet chuckle that loosens the tightness in her throat and finally allows some air to enter. She takes a fortifying sip before she slumps on the couch, resting the back of her head on the cushion and stares up to the ceiling, pushing her long exhale upwards.

“Fuck.”

“You told her about London?”

Lexa slowly shakes her head. “Not exactly,” she says. Thinking of how the evening spiralled out of control, she feels a renewed sense of despair. “She told me she loves me, is in love with me, has never stopped and wants to give us a real second go.”
Anya looks unmoved as if Lexa had just revealed the sun sets in the west but nonetheless tips her chin for Lexa to continue, intuiting more to the story.

“I’ve waited so long to hear those words,” Lexa quietly relays, eyes going misty again. She can recall with devastating clarity the exact last time they had spoken of love, when she had asked—begged Clarke to not break them—and didn’t receive an answer.

“Do you love me?” She asked, cupping Clarke’s face and searching for some resonance. Lexa tried in vain to see past the distant look, the taut expression that revealed little of her heart’s mirrored break. “If you still do, then nothing else matters except us. Except you, love.”

On her last thread of courage, Lexa leaned in and kissed the corner of Clarke’s mouth, holding her hope in place and wishing Clarke would make the millimetre of adjustment to press their lips fully together.

She waited, tense and trembling.

She could have sworn she felt Clarke’s lips part, could have sworn there was a perceptible press.

Instead, Clarke took a deep, shaky breath then slowly pried Lexa’s fingers away and just as slowly took two steps back putting a hurtful distance between them, the millimetre stretching into a million miles.

Clarke wouldn’t meet her eyes as she sealed their fate, biting her lip so hard that Lexa feared she’d break skin.

“You should go, Lexa. There’s nothing here for you.”

Her insides twisted in indescribable pain. It would have been a greater kindness for Clarke to have punched her instead. Yet, after months of nothing, it was eerily fitting for those to be her final words to Lexa.

Only white-knuckled, clenched fists betrayed Clarke’s steadfast resolve—like keeping her hands by her side would prevent her from reaching out—otherwise Lexa’s last effort to breakthrough to her was met with deafening, stony silence.

They stood wordless in shared aching solitude for an eternity before Lexa, with the little strength she had left, picked up her duffle bag and said with as much steadiness as she could muster, “Despite nothing, I still do. I still—,” Lexa choked out, “I love you.”

She waited, giving Clarke another chance—a small infinity—to reciprocate.

When parted lips formed a soundless answer, Lexa left their home, turning her back on the sight of wet blue eyes and their muted tears, with a gaping hole in her heart for the words that never came.

Clarke’s unreturned I love you has stayed with Lexa, vacant and haunting. The memory sends a bone chilling shudder through her body. She thought she was over it, but apparently the pain laid dormant waiting for the ripe moment to resurface, the trauma of separation and abandonment reasserting itself with disruptive effect.

Anya waits, calmly drinking her whisky while Lexa works through the cobwebs.

Lexa tucks her bottom lip in to keep it from trembling and goes momentarily silent, scratching at a loose thread on the couch and stalling for how to articulate her reaction when Clarke finally voiced her love—years later.
“When she said them, I don’t know … it freaked me out.”

When Clarke looked at her with such love and hope, suddenly everything felt too incredibly real, which also meant a real possibility for things to fall apart again. The suppressed memories came flooding back and drowned out the speech she had prepared. They reopened wounds that she thought were finally healing.

“I was scared.” The fear of abandonment made her question precisely the things that she wanted, saw for them—what she was ready to reach for again. She tells Anya of how her rational brain took over to stupidly put Clarke on the spot.

“Lexa,” Anya sighs exasperated.

“I not so eloquently blurted out about leaving but before I was able to finish, she panicked, then I panicked some more and left without really telling her anything,” Lexa rushes out on a bluster, winded by her own daftness.

She recounts the hurtful things they’d exchanged.

Lexa looks down at her hands, at how empty they currently feel from the mess she and Clarke have both made. Anya doesn’t say anything, perhaps as taken aback as Lexa was by the complete derailment of her plan to talk to Clarke.

“I know, I could’ve handled the conversation bett—” Lexa’s follow-up is cut off by a sharp pain to her upper arm. “Ow!”

Anya retracts her fist and looks unimpressed by her little sister’s wimpyness, like she’s personally affronted by Lexa’s physical and emotional flakiness. Lexa glares at her while rubbing her arm.

“Fuck sakes, Lexa,” Anya reproaches and grabs the tumbler away from her. “You don’t deserve this. I thought you were crying because she rejected you again.”

“I didn’t get a chance to ask. She straightaway assumed New York has been one big lie,” Lexa defends. She pauses feeling hurt at the utter lack of faith Clarke put into what they had been rebuilding, how easily and quickly she doubted the veracity of Lexa’s actions and affection only moments after declaring her own. “She accused me of faking it this whole time. Like none of it meant anything. That I’d be cruel enough to deceive her into thinking we were headed in one direction while I was going another—like what she did to me.”

The second punch is just as unexpected but delivered with a little less sting.

“Of course she would think those things. You haven’t told her how disgustingly in love you are with her.”

“I thought she knew from what I was telling her without words,” Lexa says quietly.

She doesn’t think any combination of twenty-six letters is sufficient to communicate what she felt—feels—for Clarke, so she relied on the skim of lips and the slip of skin, the small acts of love to tell the story instead. Far from being a good fuck, every act of intimacy was an act of deep and fulfilling and profound love—an embodied experience with far greater depth of meaning than the poverty of verbs and nouns.

In every kiss and every look, in her quiet non-verbal presses of I love yous, in the way Lexa gasped into Clarke’s mouth while their bodies reached the height of connection or in the way she linked their hands and pulled Clarke closer and whispered morning prayers into the mess of golden hair, she
thought the truth was bare.

For Clarke to have dismissed all that in the split second of her anger at perceived betrayal was a gut-punch reaffirming once more that Clarke did not trust in their love. That contrary to her promise of steadfastness this time around, as soon as it got hard, her instinct was to cast doubt over what they have.

“I was about to elaborate on London but she threw me off.” Lexa rubs her face, feeling the toll of reliving the conversation. “I was starting to tell her that I was trying to figure things out, trying to move on with her not from her, but then she drew the wrong conclusion that I’ve just been fucking around, mindfucking with her. I didn’t think she’d be so easily dismissive.”

Lexa takes a moment to blink away the new tears forming.

“Do you know how hurtful that is, An?” Lexa continues, her voice croaking. “For me to be so hopelessly still in love with her, after she abandoned me, after she fucking rejected my marriage proposal, and I spent years feeling unwanted, only to have her question my motives, to think I’ve just been waiting around to exact revenge. Like what, breaking her would somehow un-break me.”

It hurts for Clarke to have reduced Lexa’s feelings to something as trivial as being spiteful. That she’d be motivated by pettiness rather than anything other than a desire to heal, to mend a still broken heart. Each act since her visit to Clarke’s gallery had been a scrap of duct tape, clumsily torn and applied, but an earnest attempt nonetheless to put the pieces back together.

Somewhere between the Standard and that fateful Sunday, Lexa’s heart had fallen back irrevocably in step with Clarke’s, accelerating every time they were in the same room, skipping a beat whenever they weren’t. From the first hug to their last touch and kiss, she’d given herself over to Clarke again and again. It cut her deeply for Clarke to assume any other intent but love.

“I know my reaction was poor and it may have set her off, but I wish … ” Lexa doesn’t know what she wishes.

A deep sigh breaks her out of her thoughts, reminding her that Anya is still there. She hasn’t said anything for some time, probably having checked out after learning of Lexa’s dramatics. She looks almost bored, attention diverted to the ripped part of her jeans that is more fascinating than the perennial tearing of Lexa’s heart.

Lexa retrieves the whisky from the coffee table and takes a careless drink, regretting right away when it quickly burns down her already scratched throat. The reason Lexa isn’t much of a whisky drinker is because she can’t hold the liquor. It takes very little before she’s babbling nonsense.

“I’ve tried,” Lexa commiserates on a random note, once a good percentage of the 40% alcohol kicks in. On Anya’s pitiless expression, which Lexa interprets as, Did you really?, Lexa mutters, “Shouldn’t she be the one trying?” but immediately feels guilty for her childishness when Anya stares in silent disapproval.

This must be what the one-sided conversation Raven had with Anya was like earlier.

“I know, I know, she’s more than tried,” Lexa retracts, an unbidden smile forming thinking of all the ways that Clarke has tried, “she’s such an amazing tryer, An. Like the best. She’s well overpaid her debt with how hard she’s tried.”

Anya props her legs on the coffee table, crossing them at the ankle, links her fingers behind her head, elbows out, and leans back against the couch.
Lexa steam rolls on, “But, you’re gonna say, it’s not about who owes whom more. There’s no ledger or debt in relationships, Lexa,” she chastises herself, approximating Anya’s voice, “just two people figuring shit out together, working their way through the hurt.”

Anya nods to show she’s listening but has closed her eyes and is probably not actually listening.

Lexa continues anyways after a few more healthy sips of the Aberlour, its smoothness facilitating surprisingly lucid thoughts, “You’re also thinking: my heart-eyes may be picked up by satellites but I have to realise that from Clarke’s perspective, she needs verbal confirmation. She’s terrified that she’s screwed things up so irreparably that I wouldn’t, haven’t, forgiven her let alone be broadcasting blinking codes into the universe for everyone to know but her.” Anya hums and Lexa’s eyebrows scrunch like she’s come to a realisation as she pushes on. “She says I love you and I question her intentions, then tell her I’m leaving. She doesn’t know of my plans, hasn’t had a front row seat to the Lexa tragi-comedy like you have, no idea that I gush about her until your ears bleed. So, it’s valid for her to feel blindsided.”

“Mhm-hmm.”

“Fuck, you’re right!” Lexa slaps a hand to Anya’s thigh, eyes widening like she’s just discovered the earth isn’t flat. “And even though Clarke and I have talked a lot I’ve also been holding out, probably because I’m still traumatised and likely safeguarding this jello heart of mine. But, if I want us to work, I have to let her in fully. I trust her, I do, but I have to let her know that I—”

“Are you done with your soliloquy?” Anya interjects, abruptly taking the sail out of Lexa’s next monologue.

Lexa reluctantly concedes the floor to her sister who bluntly but not unkindly informs her, “As enlightening as it is to witness your self-actualisation, I’m not the person you should be telling all this. You have a crying girlfriend who might not be crying if you were having this conversation with her instead.”

Lexa nods, taking Anya’s word as law.

The word girlfriend sends a stab to her heart at the same time warms her belly. (It could also be the malt fermenting.) Minutes of meaningful silence pass between them. The warm thoughts turn contemplative.

“I don’t know how not to love her, An.”

In the amber haze of a waning whisky-soaked night, it’s the surest statement Lexa has made of the last couple of hours (years) and causes a flutter in her chest.

“You were a goner from day one.”

*****

“Dad, I demand a new model. This one’s broken.”

At the sound of the front door slamming, Gustus looked up from his reading on the couch, past his eldest daughter to his youngest for some context, finding a starry-eyed Lexa covered in white paint.

“Look,” Anya protested, waving a hand gesturing to Lexa’s general personhood, “the little gay
hasn’t said a word since I picked her up walking home like a zombie. Worse, she won’t stop smiling.”

“Any, you are also gay,” their dad pointed out, unable to hide his amusement.

“But I’m useful. I do your taxes.”

Anya started poking her sister for a response. Lexa absently swatted her hand away and plopped down on the couch, joining Gustus, backpack still on and, by the beaming smile on her face, the only thing keeping her from floating away. She pulled the bottom of her shirt out to have a better look at the new fabric art she’d acquired that afternoon.

“Good luck trying to get her to wash that shirt ever again,” Anya hedged, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Lexa ignored the jibe and revealed in whispered reverence. “She’s beautiful, Dad. I’m going to marry her.”

Gustus chuckled while Anya made a disgusted face. “That’s a productive first week of school, honey.”

“She’s beautiful,” Lexa repeated, breathing out her awe and thinking of the mass of blonde and blue that had physically assaulted her in the hallway, “so incredibly beautiful …”

“Say beautiful again,” Anya lowly threatened.

Gustus looked on with fondness. “Does she have a name?”

“Clarke Griffin-Woods.”

Anya emitted a vaguely intelligible retching noise, arms uncrossed and hanging indignant, before silently stalking out of the living room with brooding contempt for her sister’s indefatigably gay heart.

—

Lexa’s crush on Clarke grew. As she sat in the girls locker room astride the wooden bench, facing her best friend while kohl was being applied to her face before the start of the baseball game, Lexa’s crush was becoming an unmanageable thing.

“Hold still,” Clarke whispered though both knew the command was unnecessary given that Lexa hadn’t been breathing for the last ten minutes.

Lexa was in the midst of smudging the black powder under her eyes, a mirror held up in one hand and the kohl stick in the other, when Clarke had entered the locker room looking a little winded and a little lost but a whole lot hot.

The locker room was buzzing with excited chatter, players strategising and smack-talking while mid-dressed, with more skin on display than not. Yet, Lexa only had eyes for the jean-clad blonde outfitted in her away jersey. She watched interestedly as Clarke scanned the close quarters for the owner of that jersey number. When their gazes locked, there was a shared hitch of breath that closed the distance between them before Clarke was sitting down in front of her.

In a surprising move that had them both gasping, Clarke placed her hands behind Lexa’s knees and pulled her closer with unknown strength neither expected. Lexa had to brace a hand against Clarke’s
thigh to keep from face planting into her chest, a scenario that wasn’t undesirable but not helpful to her already erratically beating heart. More unhelpful was Clarke shooting her hand out to stop Lexa’s forward momentum, her palm warm against Lexa’s bare ribs.

They simultaneously flushed coming to the same realisation that Lexa was still only in her sports bra and boy shorts.

Clarke had become a fixture during practice and in and out of the locker room, so thankfully, none of Lexa’s teammates paid them any attention or gave her flack for their questionable proximity and the rosy tint of her cheeks it produced. Clarke’s hovering presence was a sweet torture that Lexa was sure would lead to self-combustion soon.

A flicker of a stolen glance down at Lexa’s abs and the tiniest poke of tongue were Clarke’s slightest giveaway of her equally affected state, otherwise she immediately took to their recently adopted routine, grabbing the kohl from Lexa and taking over.

Lexa loved baseball for its rituals. Players at-bat dances, pitchers wind-up routines, coaches gum-chewing fervour, the sport’s compulsiveness and idiosyncrasies. Smearing kohl to absorb light and prevent glare was another one of them, and quickly moved to the top of her list ever since Clarke had invited herself to disrupt Lexa’s pre-game peacefulness. What would normally be a time to gather her thoughts had been co-opted for gathering her wits.

That seemed to be Clarke’s operative mode, co-opting Lexa’s time and inviting herself into Lexa’s life as if she had always belonged. Lexa hadn’t expected their first meeting to be a literal run-in, nor their second for Clarke to have impinged on her solitude given the vacancy of seats around the bleachers. Where it should have been jarring with how much Lexa values personal space, Clarke’s presence had felt like an undiscovered part of Lexa was simply making itself known.

Nothing about Clarke was expected or predictable. Everything about her was addictive.

“Sorry I’m late,” Clarke said as she expertly swiped the eye black onto Lexa’s skin, moving her fingers in blind practice with a deft softness of which Lexa was getting far too attached. “Some new soy-base inks got delivered at the last minute. If I didn’t snatch them up then the nerds from the Print Club will drool over them.”

Clarke went on to describe the rivalry between the Art Club and the Print Club before detailing her enthusiasm for the new paints. Lexa barely heard anything past the burning sensation of Clarke’s hand that still hadn’t left her ribs. When Clarke swooned over magenta her fingers pressed into the spaces between bones, when she got excited about experimenting with some new brush technique her thumb unconsciously mimicked the motion, nearing perilously close to the band of Lexa’s sports bra. Besides the physicality of her storytelling, she was close enough for Lexa to count the freckle-to-freckle ratio, a futile, inconclusive task interrupted by attention-hogging blue.

Lexa didn’t think she’d survive to the first pitch.


“Huh?”

“Does it still hurt?”

During the last game, a bad bounce of a hard hit grounder ball had struck Lexa under her left eye. As she went tumbling to the ground like a collapsed house of cards, she clocked a flash of blonde, Clarke scrambling off the bench and arriving by her side before any of her teammates or coach could
move a muscle. While the medic tended to the pitcher, and determined it’d be nothing more than a nasty bruise, Clarke had glared menacingly from her crouched position at the batter who looked genuinely apologetic if not frightened by the not-so-empty threat of violence gathering storm in closely-held fists. It took Lexa groaning and reaching out for her hand to comfort her as if she was the injured one for Clarke to accept the incident as an accident.

Clarke gently touched the tender area that had since eased in swelling and discoloured to a faint purplish-blue. Lexa shook her head in reply but before she could elaborate that her current worry was a swell of a different kind, Clarke trailed the pads of three fingers down over her cheek. She did the same to the non-injured side.

“There,” Clarke pulled back and held the mirror up for Lexa to evaluate her handiwork, “that should cover it.”

Lexa sucked in a breath at the sight of black tears running down her cheekbones. Her green eyes stood out dramatically against the midnight of the kohl, looking like a hardened warrior.

“Your enemies will think twice before they attack you again,” Clarke said seriously, without hint of sarcasm.

Lexa laughed. “Clarke, it’s high school softball, not a battlefield.”

“Tell that to your face when you get hit by a ball. Not very soft, is it? Besides, it gives you a commanding presence.”

Lexa couldn’t deny that she felt more fierce behind the mask, far more intimidating than the cute raccoon of her jersey currently stretched over Clarke’s chest. “Thank you.”

The fuller eye coverage also helped to hide her deepening blush when Clarke leaned in and kissed her on one cheek, answering, “You’re welcome, Commander,” and then the other, wishing, “Good luck.”

Then she was gone in the same blustered way she had arrived, leaving Lexa certain that the luck she needed wasn’t for the game.

—

As usual, the dining table had been set by Clarke’s dad, a whimsy of mismatched plates and Star Wars-themed napkins. As a professor at NYU, he ran more regular hours than his surgeon wife and could take on a fair share of the time-based domestic duties, including preparing dinner. Though Clarke was the resident artist of the household, Jake took creative liberty when it came to making the Griffins’ meals colourful.

As with every Wednesday, as Lexa had come to know for the past year, the aromas of lemon and herb slow-roast chicken wafted in the air, the main paired with a couscous and mint beet salad and a side serving of honey-glazed potatoes.

Normally, Clarke would be onto her second helping by now, savouring the tender and juicy meat and the way it melted in her mouth. Her moans would have Lexa shifting nervously in her seat.

This Wednesday was different.

Clarke had insisted on taking over chef duties for the evening, adding an avocado risotto to the menu that Lexa knew to be for her benefit. Knowing the labour put into replicating the original meal—letting the marinade sit overnight, giving the chicken a shoulder massage as per Jake’s insistence that
the technique was what makes the dish, and watching the oven for over three hours—Lexa confusedly eyed Clarke’s untouched plate, and couldn’t understand why she wasn’t reaping the reward of her efforts, not consuming any of it.

Clarke seemed oddly nervous and too distracted to even properly take in the compliments after the first bites.

“This is excellent, Clarke.”

“Well done, sweetheart. I think she’s got you beat, Jake.”

“Maybe you should cook every Wednesday,” Jake gamely lobbied and received two supportive nods.

For the next minutes, the sounds of scraping metal against china competed with Jake’s hearty laugh, Abby’s chiding at his dad jokes, and Lexa’s enthusiastic but well-mannered chewing. But amid the pleasant murmur of contented dining, Clarke remained uncharacteristically quiet.

Her eyes were cast down on her lap, nodding absently while her parents chatted animatedly with Lexa about their day. Lexa slipped a hand over Clarke’s to remind her of the comforting presence to her right.

It was a wordless gesture, I'm here, it reassured.

Lexa was giving Jake her full attention as he described the plight of teaching undergraduate students about quantum physics. There was no indication that she wasn’t completely enthralled by his digression into the elemental composition of the universe, but she gently rubbed a thumb on Clarke’s hand to let her know that the summer freckles there were the only galaxies Lexa was truly interested in or currently in tune with. When Jake had moved on to Stephen Hawking and the multiverse, Lexa threaded their fingers, converting the current of her excitement into tingles that she hoped communicated, however many verses exist, that Lexa would always want to hold Clarke’s hand.

The anchoring touch seemed to bolster Clarke’s resolve for what she looked to be building silent courage to do next.

“Mom, Dad,” Clarke visibly swallowed her nerves, taking a careful minute to look up at each parent before turning to Lexa purposefully—an adoring gaze that made Lexa’s stomach flip—and then settling her sight back across the table. The conversation petered out at her serious tone and prolonged eye contact. Lexa firmed her hold of their hands, as three pairs of curious eyes waited on Clarke.

“I would like you to meet my girlfriend.”

The unexpected announcement was met with two unreadable stares and one very large, hard gulp. This was news to Lexa too. Since that night in the outfield, she and Clarke had kissed (a lot) and been on a handful of (secret) dates. They’d circled around the term, and had performed all the duties associated with its meaning, but had yet to tack on any labels to name what they had been doing.

Lexa had difficulty, as she always did around Clarke, to find the right words for what they were becoming to each other.

While others do it quietly or loudly, the way Clarke had come into Lexa’s life had been a degree of brightness in addition to a measure of volume. She had arrived like a lit matchstick to kerosene. From friendship to more, being with Clarke was akin to getting lost within a glowing forest of dusky, lucent depths trying to find the source of that wild fire. The word girlfriend failed the metaphor and
paled as a descriptor.

Clarke’s public declaration was surprising. There had been no prior discussion.

An extended moment of silence stilled the air as no one moved, the scene pausing over a collective held breath. That was until Jake started bobbing his head side to side as if trying to peer between Clarke and Lexa and then behind and beyond them.

“Where is she?” Clarke’s father asked, neck craned anticipating an invisible person to pop out from the corridor.

Clarke rolled her eyes. “It’s Lexa, Dad.”

Lexa shily waved her right hand, giving Jake and Abby a sheepish smile. Clarke squeezed her left in solidarity. A stupid grin eventually crossed Jake’s face, while Abby’s look of consternation worried into the creases of her forehead.

“Honey, we know,” Clarke’s father beamed, while her mother took a decidedly different route on the same beat, “Are you using protection?”

“Mom!” “Abby!” came the simultaneous cries.

Lexa’s head whipped down, her attention suddenly fixating on the risotto on her plate. Her face had taken on an unhealthy pallor at an alarming rate, trying to hide the loss of blood behind a curtain of hair. Her grip on Clarke’s hand went from a soothing hold to a painful tightening.

“We were your age once,” Abby said knowingly to her daughter and then pointedly turned to her husband, “We were their age once.”

At that, Jake’s eyes bulged comically and then narrowed suspiciously at the pair of nervous teenagers. His gaze lingered especially on Lexa, and then to both their horror, on their hands that were visible on the table. Even though they hadn’t done anything yet, it was the first time in their short dating history that Lexa cursed having long fingers. Clarke not so subtly jerked her hand out of view to solve half the problem.

“No, you were never,” Clarke argued, “you’ve always just been old.”

“How do you think you came about?”

“I willed myself into existence.”

“Nope, that stubbornness is definitely inherited from your mother.”

Blue eyes, identical to her apparent-girlfriend, looked mirthfully back at Clarke, while a pair of thin upturned lips relayed disapproval at the slight. Physically-speaking, there was no argument as to where Clarke came from.

“Well, I hope you’ve also inherited my sensibility,” Abby said sternly. “You haven’t answered my question. Are you practising safe sex? Are you protecting yourselves?”

Lexus thought she heard what sounded like a choking sound only to realise it came from her, the singular noise she was capable of emitting while the Griffins volleyed back and forth. The intensity of her stare at the risotto could turn it into soup.

“You can’t be serious, Mom,” Clarke whined.
To Clarke’s chagrin, Abby’s tone turned to doctor mode, as she persisted. “As serious as a STI. I know dental dams aren’t popular, but—”

“Oh my god,” Clarke groaned, “Dad, make her stop.” She looked to be seriously contemplating banging her head down on her plate if the uneaten chicken wasn’t in the way. “We haven’t gone past third base anyways.”

That didn’t give Jake or Abby (or Lexa) any relief. Leave it to Clarke to retain the least useful and currently most inappropriate sports information.

Clarke’s bisexuality had never been an issue, so Lexa wasn’t concerned about a negative reaction to their new relationship status. Certainly it wouldn’t have escaped Clarke’s astute parents, or anyone with a pair of working eyes, why they’d been grinning like fools ever since Lexa’s playoff games.

Nonetheless, something about making it official to parents was scary, even if they were the most left-leaning and free-love embracing. Lexa just didn’t think Abby would leap-frog right over acceptance and onto sex education.

“What your mother is trying to say is that we’re happy for you, kiddo.”

“That’s not at all what she said,” Clarke pouted.

“A loose translation.”

“That’s not what I said,” Abby parroted her agreement, but then relented, seeing her daughter’s pursed lips and frown lines, and softened more in line with her husband’s gentleness to say, “But yes, we are very happy. We know you care a great deal for each other.”

“It’s hard to miss the way you look at Lexa. Let’s face it kiddo,” Jake tagged in, “you are about as subtle as your girlfriend’s eyeliner.”

Lexa had been listening intently but hoping to avoid active participation. No such luck. Face set seriously, Jake turned his attention to her. “Speaking of,“ he said, drawing out the words and making sure to catch Lexa’s eyes, “now Lexa, I know you wouldn’t hurt a fly, but if you hurt my daughter …” and left the sentence hanging ominously with a smile. The threat was delivered deceptively kindly, over-dripping with saccharine.

Lexa sneaked a glance at Clarke in a silent plead for backup. But between the uncool dad and bad-cop mom routines, Clarke looked to be plotting, if not their demise, then how she could draft up her emancipation papers and run away to Vegas with Lexa.

Left to save herself, Lexa finally found her words to insert into the family drama, “I won’t.” She straightened up in her seat, and adjusted her posture as if she’d been called into the principal’s office. “I look at Clarke the same way too,” she said softly and turned her head to do exactly just that. A warm fluttering in her chest brightened her already love-struck expression. “I promise to always protect her.”

Clarke returned the look and they shared an intimate moment, causing the wings of the butterflies to flap more urgently. Lexa continued, “I can assure you that I will take the utmost care to be safe with Clarke’s heart.”

Clarke beamed at her and lifted Lexa’s hand, first to rest against her chest for one suspended heartbeat, and then to her lips to kiss it gently. Before Lexa could bask in the unexpected sweetness, she felt the press of lips on her cheek, and forgetting where they were, she tilted her head for a proper kiss, getting briefly lost in Clarke’s softness before two loud clearing throats reminded them of their
audience.

They both flushed pink.

“Hands on the table where I can see them,” Jake cautioned prompting the girls to scramble to follow his directive.

His wife nodded in support then abandoned the doctor mask entirely to return to full mom mode again. “I will hold you both to Lexa’s promise. Thank you for telling us, sweetheart. It’s quite obvious you have a very special bond. Take care of each other.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, Mom.”

The teenagers smiled tenderly at one another with a final squeeze of their on-the-table held hands before Clarke started to dig into her chicken with earnest and Lexa happily polished off her risotto.

—

“Thank god it turns out one of us can cook,” Lexa breathed into Clarke’s neck as she drew back for some air after another deep kiss while straddling Clarke on her bed.

After being waved away from clean-up duty as reward for cooking tonight, Clarke had grabbed Lexa’s hand and dragged her upstairs. They haven’t left her bedroom since.

Clarke panted as her hands deliberately sought out Lexa’s ass and started kneading. “Yeah?”

“I can’t survive on the taste of you alone,” Lexa explained but contrary to her statement she licked Clarke’s neck and then sucked for several distracted seconds, then returned to her point, “no matter how delicious you are.”

Clarke tipped Lexa’s chin up to kiss her again in answer. She dipped her tongue in, and despite having just finished dinner, Lexa felt indescribable hunger once more.

“Girlfriends, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“When were you planning on telling me?”

“I thought you knew.” Clarke then nibbled behind Lexa’s ear, “I don’t do this,” and then squeezed Lexa’s ass, “with Raven or Octavia.”

They both shudder at the thought.

“Give a girl a little more warning next time,” Lexa implored. “Your mom scares me.”

“Her bite is bigger than her bark.”

“Don’t you mean it the other way around?”

“No.”

“Besides, it was for your sake.”
“How so?”

“You like brevity. I couldn’t go on referring to you as the girl I really like, and despite the nervous mess she renders me every time she smiles or looks my way, I want to spend every second with her, being nervous and messy,” Clarke unfurled in a stream of consciousness, then shrugged while shyly avoiding eye contact, “So, shorthand, girlfriend.”

“I really like you too,” Lexa returned, heart eyes on full blast, “like, a stupendous amount.” There was nothing short or brief about how much Lexa liked her.

Clarke then got serious, her expression set in odd apprehension. “Lexa, will you be my girlfriend?” She asked and waited with a bit lip as if there was any chance at rejection.

Lexa chuckled at her backwards sense of timing, and before Clarke could feel offended by her laughter, she leaned in to pull Clarke’s lip from under its hold, covering her mouth over the slight opening, and passed the yes between one breath and the next.

Clarke tilted her head and celebrated their official newfound status with a bruising kiss. As her tongue slipped in, Clarke slipped further and further into the recesses of Lexa’s heart and burrowed herself deeper and deeper. Hands took on minds of their own and before Lexa knew which way was up, Clarke was bucking up into her and Lexa was pushing down.

With quickened heartbeats and the dampness of her arousal that she’d hoped didn’t betray her, their upcoming camping trip couldn’t come soon enough.

“Girls, door open!” Jake shouted with parental prescience as he walked by Clarke’s bedroom, startling Lexa into taking a tumble off the bed.

It was only three feet between bed and floor but when Clarke leaned over and looked down at her with concerned eyes while struggling to stifle her laugh, a mirth of crinkling blue against pale, rosy cheeks, Lexa felt like she was still falling and would never reach the ground.

——

Lexa shifted nervously on her feet. She looked furtively from side to side. The alley was still empty.

“Stop fidgeting,” came the muffled sound from below her. “You’ll draw more attention.”

Since their first time in the tent, and many enthusiastic subsequent times later, Clarke on her knees would normally have Lexa’s heart palpitating but currently its hiked rate was for a less pleasurable reason. The syncopated hissing sound of the spray can was the main perpetrator behind her nerves. She decided then and there that a life of petty crime wasn’t for her, too much anxiety.

“I’d like to put it on the record that I’m here against my will,” Lexa commented, even though she had voluntarily and eagerly followed Clarke after practice to the alleyway three blocks down the road from their school. “You’re really hot, babe, but I don’t know if I’d go to jail for you.”

“Your fickle love is noted.”

Lexa blushed and was glad to have Clarke’s attention elsewhere than her reddening cheeks at the mention of the four-letter word. She’d been waiting for the right moment to express it.

“Why are you painting white on a white wall?” Lexa whisper-asked for the fifth time.

Clarke sat back on her haunches, and lifted her mask. She looked at her creation and seemed pleased,
though there was nothing to the naked eye that Lexa could find pleasing. It looked like a blank white wall. She had helpfully carried a collapsible ladder and large stencils for Clarke then served as lookout for the past hour while Clarke swept up and down and across the wall in fluid movements but Lexa couldn’t quite piece together what the big picture amounted to.

She knew Clarke had been making daily trips this week with her backpack to some unknown location, up to no good, but today was the first time Lexa was available to tag along on the covert operation. Lexa had expected some resistance to her company given how secretive she’d been but Clarke seemed oddly receptive to having a co-conspirator.

“Now, we wait,” Clarke said, sidestepping her question. She patted the spot next to her, settling in a few feet away from the graffiti, back against the wall.

Lexa eyed her suspiciously. “For what?”

“You’ll see.”

“Kinda hard to, it’s getting dark soon.”

“That’s the point.”

Lexa had given up long ago on following Clarke’s logic so she hummed and took her spot next to her girlfriend. They sat holding hands as the orange glow of the sky turned deep blue, Clarke listening distractedly to Lexa’s baseball anecdotes. For some reason, as daylight faded, Clarke’s palm got sweatier. She kept oddly looking over at the wall and her invisible artwork with increasing degrees of trepidation.

“… and then we won the World Series,” Lexa threw in to test her attention yet knowing she lost Clarke long ago.

“Oh-huh,” Clarke turned and sweetly kissed her on the cheek, “well done, babe,” and looked proudly at Lexa as if she’d announced she’d won the Cy Young award.

“Clarke, you’re not even listening.”

“I am too. You’re still talking about a ball, right?”

Lexa narrowed her eyes at her but then couldn’t handle the adorable look of confusion so she leaned in for a kiss which Clarke took to like a sunflower to sun. She seemed to blossom under Lexa’s touch, her lips opening invitingly that had Lexa moving with the enthusiasm of butterflies to nectar. This may be close to approaching their 800th kiss, that Lexa was definitely not keeping count of, but in any event generated the heat and electric feel of the first.

Lexa was still in her practice uniform, wearing a tank top with arm holes wide enough for Clarke to slip a hand in and send chills down Lexa’s spine as it softly grazed in search of purchase over her stomach. The kiss deepened and stretched out for toe-curling minutes until Clarke sagely pulled back before sex in an alleyway became a real possibility. The lustful eyes didn’t make her case for stopping but Lexa forced herself to back away from the too appealing thought of taking Clarke up against the brick wall.

At least, the momentary distraction settled Clarke’s nerves. She appeared calmer now, rising to her feet and taking Lexa with her. The encroaching night soon blanketed them in darkness, a flickering street lamp their new dim source of light. Curiously, Clarke walked her a few paces away from the wall, with wordless instruction to wait there while she went to retrieve something from her backpack.
Lexa watched mesmerised as Clarke fiddled with whatever additional equipment she brought, crouched low to the ground, her tongue cutely poked out in concentration that Lexa caught a glimpse of whenever she turned her head to make sure Lexa hadn’t moved.

Lexa would not move for the world even if it shook under her feet. A low buzzing sound emitted from Clarke’s bag where a wire connected it to a long black tube. Then, a bright light projected up from the ground and onto the wall. Lexa didn’t know what to expect until Clarke stepped aside and joined her.

She gasped as the image became visible, awestruck by the glowing white writing and the blue and green floral artwork wrapping and twisting delicately around the letterforms.

_Lexa,_

_will you_  
_go to prom_  
_with me?_

“I used UV reactive invisible paints,” Clarke shyly muttered, scuffing the toe of her shoe against the gravel, “it goes on clear but can be seen with a blacklight.”

All Lexa could do was reach an arm out and blindly pull Clarke in front of her, pressing them closely together as she continued to stare speechless over her shoulder at the personalised graffiti.

“Clarke,” she exhaled when air returned to her lungs.

Her girlfriend turned in her arms and looked up at her with unwarranted concern that Lexa’s answer would be anything but an emphatic yes.

Nothing had ever come more naturally to her than her next actions. She cupped the back of Clarke’s neck and kissed her _yes_ into her hair, then another on her forehead, her nose and chin, and a final affirmative press into her lips, a lingering hold there that was only parted to make room for long overdue words to slip between them.

“I am so in love with you,” Lexa professed.

She felt the warmth of Clarke’s hitched breath before her girlfriend contracted the sentiment and returned, “I love you.”

Lexa felt the words more than heard it. Her stomach flipped and her heart skipped a beat.

Clarke tucked her head shyly into the crook of Lexa’s neck afterwards, smiled into her skin, and asked, “So, is that a yes?”

Lexa shook her head. “I have to check my iCalendar later. It’s a busy month for me, I’ll see if I can squeeze you in.”

She yelped when Clarke did exactly that, squeezing her sides in scolding displeasure, nails digging into her skin as hands took up permanent residence inside her tank top. “Our iCalendars are synced. Indexing your library by colour, genre, and spine width doesn’t count as being busy.”

Lexa took Clarke’s face in her hands, tucking a blonde strand behind her ears. “The answer will always be yes, Clarke,” she said before kissing her fully with the certitude that when it comes to whatever Clarke asks, Lexa will never deny.

The kiss didn’t last long, not when their smiles hindered it.
“But if your criminal activities escalate from misdemeanour to felony then we’ll have to revisit case by case,” Lexa footnoted.

“I promise your pretty face will never see the inside of a jail,” Clarke vowed. “Trust me.”

“Lexa, do you trust me?”

Six years of dating and nothing expected ever came from that particular glint in her girlfriend’s eyes so Lexa should be weary of the question’s misdirection. Clarke’s hands hidden behind her back should be warning enough. The mischievous grin an obvious flag.

Lexa slowly took off her glasses, dog-eared the page of her novel and set both on the bedside table. She straightened up against the headboard, eyeing Clarke with a degree of suspicion, exerting monumental effort to look past the boy shorts and threadbare tank top that was on its last days.

Despite the warning signs, Lexa didn’t dwell long on her answer. “Of course,” she affirmed. She trusted Clarke implicitly, even with the sway to her hips and the widening of her smile as she sauntered to the edge of their bed.

“Good,” Clarke said in a low gravel, a drip of prurient intent in her voice that had Lexa gulping and considering a retraction. She watched, throat going parched, as Clarke kneeled on the bed and scooted up until she was straddling Lexa’s lap, “because I want to try something new.”

What was to be new wasn’t quite clear as Clarke leaned in to kiss her with all the familiarity and oldness of an act performed thousands of times. No haste to the way Clarke moved her lips despite the urgency of Lexa’s hands that had responsively gripped onto her hips. When Lexa tried to introduce tongue, Clarke pulled back and chuckled, “Not yet.”

Lexa’s pout drew another chuckle but she dropped her complaint when Clarke finally procured the something in her hands, a piece of red fabric. Lexa curled her lips in lieu of the really? that bubbled excitement in her chest.

“Do you trust me?” Clarke asked again and then unfairly kissed up Lexa’s neck to coax out the yes that was already on its way up her throat but got lodged mid journey when Clarke started gently rocking against her and palming her breast. A few more yes ses were yolked from her with a slow thumbing of her nipple over the thinness of her shirt. It never took much for Clarke to make Lexa wet and wanting, utterly bendable to her girlfriend’s every will.

Clarke rolled her hips while unnecessarily asking, “You sure?”.

As an alternative answer, Lexa turned her head to catch Clarke’s lips in a competing agenda of needing to kiss her again as much as needing to breathe. Clarke allowed it, tilting for the right angle of melted warmth and midnight longing. They fell into the kiss, so deep and lost that it threatened to preempt any follow through promised by the fabric still clutched in Clarke’s hand. If this was all they’d get up to for the rest of the evening, Lexa would be nonplussed at the shortened itinerary.

Clarke couldn’t be detracted though. She put a hand to Lexa’s chest, gently pushing her back, and then whispered in her ear, “Close your eyes, love.”

Again, Lexa had a hard time saying no. Laced in love and lust, she had no desire to disobey the quiet command, wanting forever to do exactly as she was told. Just as Clarke was about to blindfold her she lightly held her wrist from advancing further, “Wait, give me a second to remember,” and then carded fingers through Clarke’s hair before cupping her face, looking deeply into the pool of blue
that was part amused, part aroused, and all adoration.

“You’re such a sap,” Clarke joked, her eyes twinkling as her cheeks bloomed pink.

“If you see what I see you’d never want things to go dark.” Lexa remarked with no small amount of affected awe for the brilliance of that deepening blue. If her sight was to be compromised for the next while, she wanted the last image to be of golden cerulean light.

Her sappiness earned an endeared eye-roll and an inuit kiss.

“Ready,” Lexa finally gave the signal and closed her eyes, abdicating complete control of her pleasure over to Clarke who didn’t hesitate once granted permission.

Clarke tied the cloth around Lexa’s head, keeping it loose enough for comfort but tight enough to hold. “How many fingers am I holding up?” She asked and seemed satisfied with the blindfold’s effectiveness when Lexa wrongly guessed four.

With cutoff visibility, Lexa’s hands instinctively pressed harder into Clarke’s hips, bringing them closer, the weight on her lap a safe anchor.

“If it gets too overwhelming, say Anya,” Clarke instructed, her voice still close enough to be reassuring.

Lexa laughed, not sure if the request was serious but it helped to lessen her nerves, while also increasing her arousal and anticipation that things would escalate to a point where they may need a safe word. “Do we really need a word?”

“Probably not but I want to make sure you’re completely comfortable. If things get too intense, just say the word. You can take the blindfold off any time, ok?” Clarke gently kissed the fabric over her eyelids for emphasis.

“Okay, but I’m not invoking my sister during sex.”

“Exactly, if you have to call her name then I’ll know we really need to stop.”

“Still no. How about avocado?”

Lexa didn’t need to see to know Grumpy Clarke made an appearance. “Lexa, I will break up with you right now if that fucking tropical fruit comes anywhere near our bedroom, least of all between me and an orgasm,” Clarke said. “Pick something that isn’t on your brain 24/7 and you’re not likely to say while I’m inside of you.”

“Chris Hemsworth.”

“That’s what you’re going with?” Clarke replied, laughing.

Lexa shrugged and nodded. “I doubt I’ll ever accidentally scream his name.”

“Oh, you’ll be screaming something,” Clarke intimated, and those were the last words before her girlfriend made to manifest the prophecy.

It quickly became clear that being at Clarke’s mercy was terrifyingly exhilarating. There was a long pause where Clarke seemed to be calculating her next move, the stretched-out silence causing goosebumps to form and the surface of Lexa’s skin to heat. She felt the throb between her legs as much as the uptick in her heartbeat.
The indecision ended with a light pressure against her bottom lip which jutted out instinctively to chase the feeling. Lexa realised it was Clarke’s thumb when it started to softly sweep across. She should’ve known and wanted to laugh at the predictability of the first touch. It was no small secret that her lips, especially the bottom one, were Clarke’s favourite landing spot for her gaze, the takeoff point for every intimate act they shared. On the rare occasions that Lexa would sleep in and not be up before Clarke, she’d wake up to a nibbling sensation. Or even when she was the first to open her eyes, she’d find that her bottom lip was tucked between Clarke’s, like she had dreamt about it during the night, latched on, and was unwilling to let go.

Then a different sweeping softness replaced the first, a little wet, a little humid. Clarke lightly held her chin and instructed, “Open, love.”

When she did, the tip of Clarke’s tongue dipped in and stroked her own, drawing it out and then sucking on it. Lexa whimpered, her nails digging into Clarke’s hips which increased their tempo with greater intent.

Feeling the dampness of Clarke’s shorts, moaning was all Lexa could do not to flip Clarke onto her back, pin her to the mattress, and turn the whole affair into a quick fucking, burying her fingers deep inside as the soiled state of her own panties was encouraging to happen.

But with unfettered access Clarke wasn’t focused on speed tonight, her goal appeared to be a touch-by-touch dismantling until Lexa begged to be the one to be fucked. She withdrew from Lexa’s mouth and nosed along her jawline, tracing its sharpness with delicateness in contrast to the wantonness of seconds ago.

Without visuals, Lexa’s other senses heightened, her hearing especially attuned to the minutest of movements.

So on the slightest shift of her shirt, rolled up and over her breasts, Lexa’s breath hitched, and when Clarke’s thumb returned to her nipple in direct contact, the sensation was tenfold stronger than earlier. Another hand joined in to palm her other breast, kneading it to matched attention. Lexa arched into the dual stroking. She couldn’t tell if it was she or Clarke who released a low whine. Likely both.

Seconds later, one hand abandoned its task to cup the back of Lexa’s neck and pull her into a deep, dirty kiss before Clarke breathed into Lexa’s mouth, “I’m going to make you come so hard,” rasped full of filthy promise that had Lexa already on the edge. She worried for her soaked underwear if this was only kissing and fondling.

“You shouldn’t,” Lexa panted between Clarke’s kisses to her neck, “make promises,” her sternum, “you can’t,” and down her belly, “keep.”

Clarke scoffed like Lexa had just accused her of not being able to paint, and then re-travelled the journey back up to kiss her as well as she could paint.

But then the warmth and weight were gone, Clarke lifted off of her lap, leaving Lexa’s lips in puckered confusion and her hands pawing at nothing. By the sounds and changing pressure on the bed, Clarke must be undressing. Lexa took the spare seconds to regulate her breathing. Clarke then returned to help remove her clothes before straddling her again.

The momentary loss of contact was more than made up for when Clarke started to grind against Lexa’s abs. Lexa eagerly accommodated, hardening her stomach, hands returning to their position on Clarke’s hips to guide her search for friction. This was the sole reason Lexa still committed to doing two hundred sit-ups a day, just to feel the slide of Clarke against her, dripping and trailing.
But something felt slightly different now. She nearly fainted when her fingers grazed against lace and on further investigation realising Clarke was in a thong, Lexa must have let out the smallest gasp of air; small because her lungs were having a hard time holding onto any.

Though she didn’t really need the help, Clarke’s wetness painting against her skin, separated only by the thinnest, smoothest of fabric, was triggering more of her own.

So far, nothing they were doing was out of the ordinary but the lack of visibility somehow made it new and so incredibly erotic. Lexa had to rely on tactile memory to navigate the unknown but that alone made the experience all the more arousing. The way her hands sought out Clarke’s body, the sinking relief they expressed when met with a familiar expanse of skin, how cupping Clarke’s ass and then fingers catching on the string of the thong and a string of wetness felt like reaching a hidden stream after a long day’s trek lost in mountainous ruins, it was all unbelievably amazing.

She blindlyfingered Clarke from behind as Clarke moved fervently against her, coating Lexa’s index on every push back.

Suddenly there was something soft and hard, and oddly silky, pressed against the seam of her lips. More lace. Cluing in to what was on offer, her jaw unhinged without prompt this time.

It was Clarke’s turn to arch into her as she laved around the pebbled breast, licking and sucking then getting creative with circling and tugging. From texture alone, there was more skin than lace for her to work with so not much stood to obstruct her goal of rendering Clarke just as puddled of a mess as she was feeling. Given the amount of time Lexa liked to spend here, she didn’t require any visual cues to find her way around. She did, however, miss being able to look into Clarke’s eyes to watch her reactions. Lexa had to settle for the whimpering noises above as encouragement that she was doing well.

Another breast neared Lexa’s mouth. She took up a different pattern to the previous, alternating between a rapid flicking motion of her tongue and a soft grazing of her nose. It always took seconds between switches to find her destination but when she did the lost time was more than recovered by her enthusiasm.

“Really really well done, Lex,” Clarke panted.

Lexa nearly bolted off the bed when she suddenly felt a finger brushing through her folds and circling her entrance. It was the faintest, most teasing touch but its unexpectedness caused a spike in her heart rate. The surprise soon gave way to a lip-biting build up of heat between her legs as Clarke stroked up and down and around, dipping in only the slightest to gather Lexa’s desire but never fully entering. Lexa could no longer concentrate on Clarke’s folds when hers was being softly spread and stroked with excruciating slowness. While Clarke’s grinding increased in rhythm, she seemed content to keep her finger to an unhurried pace until it stopped moving altogether.

Lexa only understood why when her head was gently pushed back when the soft flesh that was in her mouth was replaced with wet firmness, Clarke’s finger slowly pushing in and waiting. Lexa moaned as she tasted herself and readjusted her sucking technique to wrap more fully around the digit. Clarke then started pumping her finger in matched rhythm to her hips.

Two fingers then entered Lexa, timed as well to Clarke’s bucking hips. They pushed and massaged against Lexa’s walls just as the finger on her tongue pressed down. Lexa’s body tightened at the tripled intensity, but that apparently contravened with Clarke’s plans. “Don’t come yet,” she breathed out despite hypocritically sounding and feeling like she was on the verge of doing just that.

Lexa mumbled her barely discernible assent, another rush of fluid coming out when all three fingers
curled simultaneously. She helplessly let Clarke’s hands and body move on her. The blindfold seemed almost unnecessary at this point with the bright light that was forming behind her eyelids and the heat flaring between her thighs and traveling up her chest that was its own illuminating beacon.

A few more thrusts and Clarke finally granted her some reprieve, removing the finger from Lexa’s mouth, giving her the opportunity to groan out, “Fuck,” and beg, “baby, please—” but for what she didn’t know.

Clarke pulled out and also stopped her grinding, resting her forehead against Lexa’s and giving them time for their breaths to even, to recharge their air supply. Clarke kissed her achingly slowly. Lexa felt herself contracting around nothing. It was an intimate interlude that tethered Lexa to the moment and to Clarke while her heart and stomach had been soaring to new heights.

It was perhaps too lullingly soft compared to what Clarke had in mind next. So Lexa was unprepared when Clarke dismounted and nudged her to lie flat on her back, considerately adjusting the blindfold so the knot wouldn’t get in the way.

Lexa couldn’t tell what was happening but knew Clarke was no longer on the bed. Her feet were then tugged until her body was positioned closer to the bottom and her legs dangled over the edge.

She laid exposed without knowing what was to come, yet Lexa felt entirely safe, her heartbeat tracked to the inhale and exhale pattern of Clarke’s breathing. She realised in that moment how much she entrusted her vulnerability to Clarke, the degree to which Lexa was unguarded in her presence, literally naked or emotionally bare.

“Still okay?” Clarke asked breathily as she parted Lexa’s knees and slotted in between her legs, affectionately stroking her belly with one hand and a thigh with the other. The soft touches reassured her of Clarke’s presence, that she was only a breath and a brush away.

Lexa nodded while searchingly reaching a hand down that Clarke was quick to lace their fingers. “Good,” she confirmed and received an anchoring squeeze.

It was a good thing they were holding hands because the next thing Lexa felt and was completely unready for was Clarke licking into her without warning. Clarke’s tongue probed and parted her folds before pushing and pushing as far as she could reach. Lexa’s hips bucked up but Clarke’s other hand was quick to hold her down, wrapping tightly around her thigh and keeping her grounded. When Clarke established the desired rhythm, she disentangled their hands to slide up her ribs and then greedily grope Lexa’s breast as Clarke’s mouth carried out its mission in ravaging devastation. Lexa mewled and placed an arm over her eyes out of habit, only to remember they were already covered.

She was seconds from coming when Clarke edged away.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Clarke cooed when Lexa whined her disapproval aloud, gently squeezing her thigh and widening Lexa’s legs apart, “you’ll like this next part.”

Things were already dark but Lexa was sure she blacked out when something full and soft came in contact with her dripping cunt. She came to the realisation it was Clarke’s breast when her hardened nipple was used to trail up Lexa’s wetness, circle around her clit, before it rested invitingly at her entrance.

Clarke then adjusted for the right angle, positioning one of Lexa’s legs over what Lexa can only guess to be her shoulder. She rubbed against Lexa tentatively at first but once she received the appropriate cues Clarke moved with more confidence, dragging and pushing.
The feeling was intense. Being fucked by Clarke’s breast felt like she’d NASA-levelled up into the next stratosphere of pleasure. Lexa’s hands clawed uselessly for purchase on the bed sheets.

She was rapidly climbing towards orgasm once more when the blindfold was removed. At first, the unexpected light was harsh, but when her eyes adjusted to the room and the first thing she saw was Clarke backlit, one breast still covered in lace while the other spilled nakedly into her, Lexa’s whole body jerked up in reaction.

“I miss your eyes,” Clarke explained simply before she started moving again, pushing against Lexa and using her raised leg as leverage. She locked their gazes as she picked up the pace in thrusting dissonance to Lexa’s laboured breathing. “Hi, gorgeous,” she expelled in punctuated pumps.

Though it was only a shallow penetration, Clarke’s nipple physically unable to reach where her fingers can, it didn’t stop Clarke from trying to go as deeply as possible or Lexa from opening her legs as wide as possible to take it in.

Lexa’s mouth hung open and there wasn’t much more of the world she could ask than the sight of blue eyes, flushed cheeks, and utter adoration. There wasn’t much to be done before she came loudly on Clarke’s tender bidding, “Happy anniversary, love.”

When Clarke thumbed her clit in feverish passes, Lexa’s body further tightened into a bow and thighs clenched, the new level of sensual richness resulting in one of the most intimate and intense releases she had ever experienced. Seeing Clarke’s breast covered in her wetness, while slipping in and out of rhythm to keep up with her erratic hips, Lexa rolled right into a second orgasm. Her screams were matched by Clarke, whose hand she glimpsed pumping furiously inside herself.

She gestured for Clarke to climb up her body, needing Clarke’s breast in her mouth again. As incentive, Lexa positioned three fingers on her stomach for Clarke to mount which she was quick to do and even quicker to come riding them as Lexa sucked her dry.

“As much as I loved the blindfold, next time,” Lexa drawled out her suggestion as Clarke fell gracelessly on top of her after, “just say boob and lace.”

“Pfft,” Clarke replied, “you would’ve come on the spot.”

Lexa had no energy to deny it. “True.”

“Let’s nap. Then I’ll let you fuck me slowly with the strap-on,” Clarke mumbled as she lightly dozed off.

Lexa nodded and tucked Clarke’s head under her chin, making adjustments to bare the dead-weight as she strengthened her hold around Clarke’s waist.

Happy anniversary, indeed.

—

“Do you think we’ve peaked too soon?” Clarke asked sometime later while Lexa traced lines along her spine after waking up in the same position to the same weighted feeling whence they had fallen asleep.

Everything was a dull thrum, their timed heartbeat, entangled breaths, and the buzz of the streetlight that was their only companion at this hour.

Lexa knew Clarke meant their relationship, questioning their premature ascent to the height of young
love. Six years weren’t that many seasons but their bond somehow felt like twenty thousand springs had already bloomed between them, pollen spread far and wide enough for several lifetimes.

This was the second time in recent weeks that Clarke had wondered about an invisible ceiling they might’ve already reached, but after mind-numbing and body-breaking sex, Lexa had no room for any philosophical meanderings. No concerns for expiration dates. She raised an eyebrow instead.

“Oh?”

Clarke didn’t miss the mischief in her eyes. “No, Lex, don’t do it,” she warned, immediately clocking her playful mood, but already smiling for Lexa’s anticipated response, “don’t pun me.”

Lexa flipped them, pinning Clarke down with her hips and started a slow deliberate grind that mixed their spent fluid together and restarted the throb of her clit. She took both of Clarke’s hands and entwined their fingers as she held them above her head, squeezing every time she ground into her flushed skin. And then, bending her head down, with the tip of her tongue she mapped a winding journey around the peak of Clarke’s breast that wasn’t tender, paying it attention for symmetry purposes, not wanting it to feel left out because Clarke had heavily favoured the other one during their earlier activity.

Once Lexa had Clarke panting underneath in writhing desperation, she placed a soft, barely there kiss inches shy of a nipple, and conjectured,

“I don’t think we’ve reached the summit yet.”

Clarke’s disapproving groan turned into a drawn out moan as Lexa gently sucked and pulled the nipple taut into her mouth, then let go of one hand to brush through Clarke’s wetness but not enter her.

“You think you can come from just this?” Lexa paused to ask before laving and licking again, “or do you need more?” and then stroked Clarke with purpose.

Clarke in the end didn’t have to choose because Lexa made her come from what little or much she dinned to offer, reaching several peaks that her girlfriend refused to acknowledge to Lexa’s smug satisfaction.

“I love you,” Clarke said between heavy breaths into the pillow, on the tail end of her fourth orgasm.

They both winced when Lexa pulled out from behind her. After the third one, Lexa had flipped Clarke on her stomach and they abandoned themselves in ecstasy when Lexa started fucking her with their favourite toy. She carelessly flung the strap-on across the room now that it’d served its purpose. Clarke’s laugh was cut short when Lexa replaced its length with her own fingers, fitting three in easily. She didn’t move them, only wanting to feel Clarke’s warmth, to revel in its intimate comfort.

“I love you too, baby,” Lexa breathed against her neck and then kissed behind the shell of her ear.

As they lazily laid on their sides, Lexa’s fingers inside and body curved around her, holding Clarke’s other hand where it was tucked near her chest while their heads shared the same pillow, Lexa felt the thrumming return.

She drifted off to sleep on the thought that no, this wasn’t the height of love. There was no measurable limit that Lexa could imagine reaching when it came to loving Clarke. Not in breadth or depth, and certainly not in height.
She shifted closer, erasing any physical space between them, in silent argument with the universe about the fixity of what she and Clarke meant to each other, certain that they were nowhere near what they were still yet to become.

****

“Alright, that’s enough softness,” Anya decides, getting to her feet.

Lexa looks up at her through glassy eyes from under a thick cloud of whisky stupor. The memory of that halfway anniversary fades out as her focus on her sister’s stance fades in.

Anya leaves her in the living room momentarily to go in search of something in the bedroom. She remakes her entrance by flinging tiny pieces of stretch fabric at Lexa, a duffle bag hanging off her shoulder and an unamused look on her face.

“I do not wallow,” Anya simply says by way of explanation as she crosses her arms and waits patiently for Lexa to catch up with her programme. “At least, not like this.”

It turns out, not surprisingly, that the way Anya likes to wallow involves a springy floor and some boxing gloves. Lexa allows a small smile when twenty minutes and a full bottle of water later they enter the old ring where their father used to train. It’s a 24-hour gym that they’d frequented in their youth to watch Gustus, a giant soft teddy bear of a man, take out his anger with the world on naïve, arrogant opponents who had never faced a grieving husband before.

It’s the place where Anya had learned to deal with her bottled rage through controlled violence, where Lexa was taught how to release pain through precise movements, and jabs and hooks, crosses and uppercuts became the Woods’ adopted language.

“Let’s get a few in and then you’re going back to Clarke and she can deal with this brooding mess,” Anya informs Lexa of her no-choice plans for the rest of the night as they suit up.

She gulps another bottle of water before Lexa finds herself slowly dancing around Anya whose boxing technique involves a lot of glaring and very little moving. Bouncing ridiculously side to side on her feet, Lexa is motivated by her overloaded bladder more than anything but she does find it unnerving how Anya simply observes her with quiet judgement. When not slightly intoxicated, Lexa makes for a great sparring opponent.

In the moment, distances appear like car side mirrors, closer than they actually are. Or was it the other way around? Lexa isn’t sure but her first attempt at swinging her arm is met wildly with empty air and, confusedly, Anya’s smirk from ten feet away.

Lexa tries again, moving in closer. More air. At one point, it looks to be like Anya’s casually leaning against the ropes with her elbows hanging off of them and her legs kicked out crossed at the ankles. Lexa scowls, not understanding why none of her hits are landing. She’s never had a problem with eye-hand coordination, not like Clarke. Her heart pangs at the thought of the blonde and how Lexa had long given up on teaching her to hit a baseball. The adorable furrowed concentration and how much better her girlfriend looked in her jersey were the only reasons she tried in the first place.

Lost in her Clarke-fugue, Lexa’s already-compromised concentration lapses at an inopportune moment when Anya’s first right crosses into her field of vision and she fails to block it. The hit connects with her left cheekbone and knocks her down.
“Shit,” Anya exclaims. “Why didn’t you move?” she asks reaching a glove out to help pull Lexa up who waves her off, preferring to roll over and die on the mat.

“Whose idea was it to ply me with Scottish whisky and then punch me?” She groans through gritted teeth while cradling her face with her gloves.

Anya sighs in exasperation though not without an edge of worry when she crouches down to assess the damage and intones, “I didn’t think you’d be that emotionally unstable not to see a giant glove coming right at your face. You’ve been wiggling around like an idiot, why would you choose then to stand still?”

After she determines that the damage is minimal, Anya helps Lexa to her feet. Lexa sways into her hold, feeling the slosh in her stomach from the too-quick rise. “Fucking lightweight.”

Lexa bristles and then pouts, “I can drink you under the table if it was anything other than whisky.”

“Avocado smoothies don’t count.”

Lexa glares at her, then reaches up to gently touch the tender spot under her eye, wincing when her gloved hand misjudges the distance and effectively lightly punches herself.

“Ugh, just as well that my outside matches my inside.”

Anya rolls her eyes but nonetheless walks her to the ropes and off the ring. “So goddamn dramatic,” she mutters as they make their way to a bench.

Lexa slumps on it while Anya disappears to the kit room and returns with supplies.

“Here,” Anya shoves an ice pack at her.

*****

“Here, love,” Clarke said, placing the bag of frozen peas over the tender spot, earning a hiss and scowl from Lexa.

Lexa had disappeared for fives days and returned with a nasty cut under her eye and bruised knuckles. She was currently slumped on the floor, back against the lower kitchen cabinets with Clarke crouched in front of her, a mixed expression of relief and worry, anger and sadness.

“You should see the other guy,” Lexa tried to play off as humour. The other guy being the hard edge of a bar counter when she had slipped off the stool on her fourth beer and fifth shot. Her tipsiness helped to dull the ache but now the pain was avenging itself in full force.

The bartender had dialled the first number on her phone and Clarke had showed up twenty minutes later, still in her sweats and eyes red-rimmed likely from crying and another sleepless night spent alone in their bed. She’d wordlessly hooked Lexa’s arm around her shoulder and shuffled them out to the waiting cab with its engine still running.

Lexa had expected shouting and yelling considering this wasn’t how she’d intended their first meeting to be since she went MIA after her dad’s news. Instead, Clarke let Lexa curl into her the entire ride back to Brooklyn, and cooed soft words in her ears as Lexa quietly sobbed into her chest.
“I bet,” Clarke responded sympathetically, adjusting the bag of peas for wider coverage. “Was he responsible for this too?”

Lexa looked down at her mangled hands, still stinging in closed fists, and shook her head to slur proudly, “Nope, that was all me.”

Clarke nodded, and then brushed Lexa’s damp and wild hair out of her face. “Please don’t do that again.”

“What? Get in a fight with mahogany wood?”

Clarke predictably didn’t see the humour and ignored her sarcasm. She gently took Lexa’s hands in hers, careful to avoid the cuts and bruises.

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m sorry,” Lexa told her with a tremble to her lip.

Clarke looked up then and reached a hand to cup her jaw, brushing a thumb to her lip. She gently kissed it still, “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

It wasn’t. After learning of her father’s cancer, Lexa turtled into survival mode and hid away from the world, from Clarke, at the gym. She slept on the cot in the backroom, when sleep actually came, and when it didn’t, whiled the hours away with punches and jabs until her body was an aching collection of wiry muscles to match the battered state of her heart. Only Anya knew where she was and reassured her girlfriend that Lexa hadn’t fallen off the face of the earth.

Clarke kissed her nose, “It will be,” and rose to retrieve the elaborate medical kit that her mother insisted on keeping around the apartment.

That night, after Clarke cleaned her wounds, bandaged her up, and helped her to shower, Lexa laid in bed with Clarke’s arm protectively wrapped around her stomach. Clarke was snoring heavily behind her, as if finally allowing herself to catch up on elusive sleep once certain of Lexa’s safety.

The thought of losing her father kept her up but the knowledge that Clarke would always be by her side gave Lexa a deeper sense of peace. Whatever was to happen over the next few months, at least she had Clarke this time.

“I’m sorry I left,” Lexa whispered then silently promised, “but I will always return.”

—

“Hi, honey.”

“Hi, Dad.” Lexa leaned in and kissed her father’s cheek. She then turned and gave an affectionate kiss to the blonde lump poking out of the blanket burrito in the armchair two feet away, adjusting the blanket for some ventilation, before setting down the paper bag and trays of coffee cups next to his hospital bed.

Lexa laughed when Gustus pawed for the bagels she started pulling out of the bag. They were his reward, a secret between father and daughter, for passing his last test with a clean bill of health. Doctors were optimistic that he could be discharged for out-patient care within the week if things continued positively. Though the cream cheese and smoked salmon were at odds with the dietary
restraints that Lexa would be sure to institute as soon as they left the hospital’s doors, she thought to make one exception today after how loudly he had been complaining about the diminishing quality of even the jello.

Really, Lexa was just thrilled that he’d regained enough energy after the surgery to be vocal about gelatin.

“Eat fast,” she instructed him conspiratorially, turning her head to the door wary of being overheard, “they’ve started rounds. You’ve got maybe two, three checks before we get busted.”

Gustus nodded and hastily took a giant bite out of his breakfast bagel, consuming almost half in one go. Lexa shook her head and handed him a napkin.

“Please don’t choke to death,” she admonished, “that would defeat the purpose.”

His coughing caused a slight shifting in the armchair. Lexa looked over affectionately at Clarke, wanting nothing more than to smooth out the worry lines and thin lips.

“She finally closed her eyes when you left to pick up breakfast,” Gustus filled her in. “I think her odds for daughter of the year are really high. You and Anya better step it up.”

“Hey!” Lexa defended, “Some of us have real jobs and can’t spend day and night with you playing chess.”

“The life of an artist, a lady of leisure.” They both laughed knowing how offended Clarke would be by their dismissal of her profession, aware that she worked as hard and long hours as her surgeon mother.

In reality, Lexa and Anya had been grateful for Clarke’s unwavering commitment to their father. It wasn’t only an emotional toll but also a physical burden she had voluntarily taken on, shuttling Gustus to every appointment they couldn’t, keeping him company during his chemo sessions, and tending to his fevers and aches and pains with little regard for her own discomfort and loss of sleep. Between her and Raven, they were able to tag team his care such that the nurses had assumed he was a very lucky father of four.

Lexa knew that Clarke undoubtedly loved her but didn’t realise how fully until she watched the way Clarke over-extended herself, the way she loved him just as selflessly in sponge baths and spoon feeds and midnight songs. Lexa had stumbled on them once playing Never Have I Ever with Clarke’s homemade jello shots, both giggling like school girls. They’d refused to let her in on the joke but Lexa hadn’t cared because Clarke had silently waved her over and spent the next hour sitting between Lexa’s legs pressing her back into her front while they continued their game. (She confided in Lexa later that there was no alcohol content in the shots but allowed Gustus to think otherwise.)

Something struck a chord with Lexa that day watching her girlfriend and father engage in a battle of wits and learning more about his misappropriated youth than she needed to. When Clarke had laughed breathily into her neck and then kissed her in triumph at having tricked Gustus to admit he preferred her over Raven, Lexa could taste their future on the slip of Clarke’s tongue.

“Dad,” Lexa paused nibbling on her bagel and played with the crinkled wrapper before asking, “how’d you do it with Mom?”

“Do what, sweetheart?”

“Ask her.”
“Ah,” Gustus said when understanding dawned, catching the way Lexa’s eyes f oathed to Clarke’s form, her lovestruck gaze. He gamely launched into the tale, a smile only reserved for her mother taking over his entire face.

Lexa had heard the story many times before—involving orange blossoms and a poor attempt at replicating the same meal from the Parisian cafe where they first met—but she wanted to hear it again. She found comfort in listening to how her father had fumbled his way through dinner, a meal that her mother had barely touched because coq au vin shouldn’t look blue, then insisted on serving her dessert despite her wariness of his history with a high-speed mixer, and ending on tears for when a sapphire ring sat waiting at the bottom of her madeleine cake.

“I think she only said yes so she wouldn’t have to eat any more of my food,” her father chuckled, a permanent fondness at the corner of his eyes for his late wife.

Lexa smiled, recalling her mother’s version of the event wasn’t quite the same. Though she had joked that they were tears of relief for having reached the end of the meal, unbeknownst to him, her mom had discovered the ring weeks earlier in an unused thermos sitting high up on the kitchen cabinet. It had been a crisp October morning, winter making an earlier appearance than usual, and she’d wanted to supply him with soup on the construction site instead of the usual lunch box sandwiches that she’d pack each day for him. He didn’t end up getting soup that day but there was an extra heaping of last night’s leftover grilled chicken in his sandwich.

“Honey, can you get my wallet?” Lexa didn’t understand the abrupt change in topic but indulged Gustus’s request anyways.

When she returned with his overly padded leather wallet, one that she and Anya tried many Christmases and birthdays to replace, he rifled past an exorbitant amount of receipts that were likely no longer useful to pull out a small wad of tissue, handing it over to Lexa.

“Dad …” she gasped when she unfolded the tissue to find her mother’s engagement ring.

“It’s yours to give to Clarke, when you’re ready.”

Lexa whipped her head up and looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“What about Anya?”

“She was the one who actually told me you should have it. Your sister refuses to participate in the patriarchy,” Gustus recounted, using air quotes around the word and a little lost for what exactly it meant, “and is grateful that sappiness skipped the first born.”

Lexa’s attention returned to the ring, too busy admiring its iridescent blue that was strikingly familiar to reply with anything other than an acknowledging hum. She couldn’t believe her father had been carrying this around in his wallet like an outdated Subway stamp card.

“You mother would have loved Clarke,” Gustus said, a mist to his eyes and a crack in his voice that had Lexa’s throat constricting. “God knows she’s done a better job of taking care of the both of us than I have.”

“Yeah,” Lexa concurred then pocketed the ring inside her jacket. Her heart seemed to beat louder where it rested against her chest.

“If you’ve found a girl who’s willing to give your hairy beast of a father a sponge bath after he’s puked up the special meal she’d spent hours making for him,” Gustus said, “and don’t marry her, then you’re not the hopeless romantic sap I raised you to be.”
“Thank you.”

On hearing a rustling, both Woods turned to see the subject of their mutual affection letting out a yawn looking like a lion rising from slumber before she mumbled groggily, “Were you guys just going to eat them all without me?”

“The awake are hungry, Clarke.”

Clarke padded towards Lexa and just as sleepily laid a kiss on her, soft and slow that Lexa melted into and made her forget her father was still in the room.

Only an intently loud cough kept things from escalating. Lexa stole one last kiss before whispering, “Good morning, beautiful,” into Clarke’s hair and looping an arm around her waist.

“Morning, gorgeous,” Clarke said as she settled on Lexa’s lap and took over her bagel sandwich.

Clarke snuggled in close, her hand resting on Lexa’s chest that made Lexa nervous for its nearness to the ring. As Clarke and Gustus chatted, reviewing the strategies of their last chess game, Gustus itching for a rematch and vowing to obliterate Clarke next time (“very unkind to defeat a man after his guts have been opened on the table”), Lexa was preoccupied with strategies of the sort involving flowers and candlelight, possibly a sunken knee under a sunken sun.

She didn’t realise how deeply she’d been concentrating until fingers smoothed out the lines of her forehead and Clarke tipped her head forward to quietly ask in her ear, “Everything ok?”

“Fine,” Lexa answered, receiving a sweet kiss to the underside of her jaw, “more than.”

With her father in recovery and her future wife on her lap, Lexa couldn’t think of anything that could be more fine.

—

“Will you love me until I’m seventy?”

“Did you just ask me a Ed Sheeren lyric?”

“Answer the question, Clarke.”

“It depends. Are adult diapers involved?” Clarke laughed loudly as Lexa walked away. “See what I did there?” She shouted after her to an empty room. Lexa smiled despite herself, faintly catching Clarke’s smug satisfaction. “Doesn’t feel so good to be punned, does it?”

A week later.

“Would you give up forever to touch me?”

“Just touch? Can we do other things?”

“Sure.”

“Like what?”

“Come find out.”

The next day.
“Would you do anything for love?”

“Meatloaf didn’t, why should I!”

“You’re killing me here, Clarke.”

“What’s with all the questions, Lexa?”

“Just practising.”

“Practising what?”

“Asking.”

“You’re practising asking?”

“Yup.”

“What for?”

“Someday.”

Lexa smiled, kissed Clarke’s forehead and left it at that.

—

That someday did come, but not with the ending Lexa had in mind.

Maybe she should have read the signs sooner, maybe there was something not quite right with her weather app forecasting sunshine when the overhead clouds told a different story, maybe the bleachers of their old high school being unexpectedly under construction forcing Lexa to change the venue at the last minute was the surest clue that it wasn’t meant to be.

Maybe if she had paid more attention to Clarke’s growing distance and not easily accepted her girlfriend’s excuses of being overworked at her gallery assistant job while toiling on art pieces for submissions to various group shows then Lexa would recognise that the blank looks and vacant kisses and tentative touches were the canaries in the mine of her now hollowed out chest.

Maybe she shouldn’t have proposed in their bedroom, nervous and unplanned, the words slipping out and she slipping down to one knee when the sight of Clarke, beautiful and radiant if not worn, asked her if it was okay they stayed in tonight instead of the fated dinner Lexa had planned. Both already in their cocktail dresses, the ring weighing heavy in her skirt pocket, Lexa hadn’t seen a reason to wait another hour. The speech about wanting to spend every night with Clarke for the rest of their lives, whether staying in or going out she didn’t care as long they were together, came out before Clarke could let out her next breath.

Maybe she should’ve waited. Another hour, week, month. Maybe then Lexa’s heart wouldn’t be shattering.

The thing with love that Lexa had learned as she struggled to rise from her bended position was that it doesn’t keep a counter. Twelve years, six hundred Sundays, and several thousand kisses mattered not when one word could undo a lifetime in the making.

Growing up, Lexa was fascinated with the stars and the cosmos. Many assumed she became an architect because of her mother. That was mostly correct. But when she was young, she dreamt of building a ladder tall enough for her to climb the sky. If she built enough ladders, enough vertical
structures in different designs and makes, then the constellations would always be within reach.

It was the same way that she’d love Clarke, adding a rung for every year, Sunday, and kiss; scaling every height imaginable to pull the stars closer.

But she had never made a rung for the word, no. And when Clarke said it, whispered it, tears in her eyes and a hand to stop Lexa from opening the velvet box, Lexa felt herself slipping on the ladder and then falling precipitously.

Her heart was not prepared for the steep drop.

It hurt like nothing else ever had.

—

Lexa had never raised a voice at Clarke, never once expressed anger, but she felt something rising inside her, reaching a boiling point when she awoke wrapped tightly in a second blanket that she knew wasn’t her doing.

She sat up to find the building code book she’d been consulting set aside on the coffee table with her glasses sitting atop, neatly piled on the set of architectural drawings she’d brought home to study. Her gaze then caught on the uneaten plate of food that had been left out on the counter for her last night when she returned after another late hour at the office. She had no appetite for it, exhausted from burning both ends of the candle at work so that she didn’t have to face the arid, emptiness of home.

After the failed proposal, Clarke hadn’t left and Lexa had chosen to stay. Although it ached that marriage was a denied possibility, the truth was her heart was already bonded to Clarke’s. It had long ago made its commitments and vows, tethered irrevocably to always follow the beat of another’s rhythm.

So, she stayed and waited.

The acts of kindness, the minutiae of love, should have made her happy, should have enveloped her in warmth; instead they simply hurt.

Lexa, finally, snapped.

To greet another day alone on the couch, fifteen short steps away from their shared bed while the emotional gulf widened between them, she couldn’t hold it in anymore when Clarke emerged from the bedroom, heavy bags under her eyes and looking as weathered as Lexa felt.

“Clarke, you can’t keep doing this.”

Her short, biting tone stayed Clarke’s hand from reaching for the french press. She looked up like a deer in headlights, the sound of Lexa’s voice startling for how long it had been since they had said anything to each other besides good morning and goodnight. Lexa’s stomach sinking more and more everyday, yet not getting any closer to reaching a merciful bottom.

“Stop tucking me in. Stop making me lasagna,” Lexa nearly shouted in agitated frustration, gesturing wildly. At Clarke’s scared look, she softened and pleaded, “It’s not fair to give me hope.”

Clarke opened her mouth like she wanted to say something. Lexa waited with imploring eyes but once more, as it had been for the past month, nothing came.
Lexa braved approaching her, looking past the stiffened posture. She placed her hands on Clarke’s hips and was relieved to not be rejected. She stepped in closer, venturing to make their bodies flushed and overjoyed when Clarke didn’t object, seeming to need the physical connection as much as she did.

For a minute they were the old Clarke and Lexa, sleepy-eyed and embracing one another in the kitchen as they waited for their coffee to steep, content to do nothing but stay in each other’s arms and steal a few more blissful moments of quiet until the rush of the day pulled them in different ways.

For a moment, Clarke pressed in closer, and laid her head against Lexa’s chest, listening for her heartbeat which Lexa tried to slow down from its elevated rate.

For a moment, Lexa thought they just might be okay.

Then Clarke tilted her head and Lexa braced for the moment to be over, for them to separate and things to return to excruciating silence. Instead, Clarke searched for her lips and kissed her with trembling need. Lexa was taken off guard only for a second before she kissed her back, hard and desperate.

Clarke fisted her shirt, clinging on with equal desperation. They changed angles, deepening the kiss. Lexa swallowed the lump in her throat to swallow as much of Clarke’s palpable hurt as she could.

She felt Clarke’s hand grabbing for hers and placing them near the top of her sweatpants. This was a terrible idea but Lexa couldn’t stop herself, especially not when Clarke begged, “Please, I need to feel you.”

Within seconds she untied the drawstrings and rid Clarke of her pants, spinning them around and smoothly lifting Clarke on the counter. She moaned her appreciation at the wetness found when she went to cup her. In their hurry to be close again, she didn’t want to waste time removing Clarke’s underwear so she inelegantly pushed the fabric aside, slicking her fingers in purposeful swipes through her folds. Clarke whined her approval into their kiss that hadn’t yet broken, neither wanting to give up any contact. Clarke’s bare feet wrapped around her waist and dug into her backside in encouragement.

Lexa pushed two fingers in slowly, pausing for the stretch and the feel of Clarke taking her in. She went as deep as she could before pulling out then began thrusting. It was clumsy and intense but she didn’t care, not with the way Clarke was pulsing around her, walls slick and contracting greedily. They kept to the fraught rhythm for some time, Clarke’s lips moving to her neck and sucking her pleasured reactions into Lexa’s skin.

Somehow Lexa knew it wasn’t enough. With how Clarke’s nails raked her back, she needed more, needed for Lexa’s touch to stay for days.

Lexa withdrew and pulled her off the counter. She turned Clarke around so they both faced the same direction, and commanded softly but firmly, “Bend over.”

When Clarke did, locking her arms and bracing her hands against the counter edge as she raised her ass, Lexa didn’t give her time to adjust before she yanked her underwear down, kicked her feet apart and Lexa re-entered in one swell motion. They gasped in unison, air punched simultaneously out of both lungs. She kneaded a bare cheek with one hand while the other worked feverishly pushing in and out, the sound of slapping skin ringing loudly across the kitchen tile until the slapping became actual contact between Lexa’s palm and Clarke’s ass. They didn’t do this often but once in awhile Clarke really enjoyed submitting to Lexa, especially when she was feeling vulnerable and needed the
rough play as distraction.

“Is this what you want?” Lexa asked with the smallest hint of hesitation, making sure she’d read the situation correctly. She landed another loud smack to Clarke’s cheek, the sound more forceful than the actual impact.

Clarke consented between shallow breaths by lifting her ass higher in show. “Please make it hurt,” she whimpered, pleading to feel any other pain than the one currently stifling them.

Hearing the need in Clarke’s voice, Lexa committed to the role and fucked her as hard and as fast as she could, grunting in effort behind her, both hands working overtime in opposite goals of pleasure and pain, the former neutralising the latter until she had Clarke mewling on the counter.

Lexa abandoned the slapping to pull her own pants down so that she could rut against Clarke skin on skin, using her pelvis to drive her thrusts in deeper. The position was somewhat awkward as Lexa strained for purchase but they made do until Lexa gave up on finding the right angle for herself and dropped to her knees to use her mouth instead to heighten Clarke’s pleasure.

Her fingers stayed in, continuing to fill Clarke on every other stroke of her tongue. The urgency of the fucking made for an uncoordinated affair with none of the smoothness and synchronicity typical of their lovemaking. But it didn’t matter that Clarke’s hips stuttered or Lexa’s fingers slipped, they chased each other with the same hunger of two lost souls trying to find their way back together.

Clarke was keening by now, lowly whining as Lexa worked her jaw harder and her fingers deeper. Lexa reached her free hand round and pressed against Clarke’s swollen clit. The effect was immediate, more fluid gushed out as wailing cries broke the thick air. Lexa continued to pump and press at a blistering rate until Clarke’s orgasm crashed over them both, a mess of sweat and arousal coating her chin.

She gently kissed along Clarke’s spine before turning her back round. Clarke lifted her head gesturing for a kiss which Lexa more than eagerly gave. Lexa kissed her until the aftershocks subsided, a softness at odds with what they’d just been doing.

She tasted salt on her tongue and didn’t need to look to know Clarke was crying, making her own eyes water.

“I’m sorry,” Clarke sobbed against her lips and then clung onto Lexa’s shirt as she buried her head into the crook of her neck.

Lexa didn’t want it to end there, not like this—in tears with Clarke shaking under her—when it’d been weeks since they were last intimate, the longest they’ve ever been without touch. She kissed the top of her head then wrapped Clarke’s legs around her waist before carrying her into their bedroom.

Lexa finished undressing them in quiet, wiping away Clarke’s tears, before she moved to lay Clarke on her back, intent on making love to her for as long as the spell would last, knowing she was working on borrowed time.

Clarke was on the same page but had a different idea about execution. She took Lexa’s hand and led her to the shower where they spent more quiet minutes intimately cleaning each other, washing as much of the hurt away in gentle swipes and grazing kisses.

Once clean and returned to the bed, Clarke indicated for Lexa to lie on her side but in the opposite facing direction, her head towards the end of the bed so that they can both have equal access to each other.
“Together, okay?” Clarke prompted and demonstrated her intent by licking into Lexa who was already soaked from the kitchen warm-up and shower. She struggled not to buck into Clarke’s face from the unexpected sensation.

Lexa followed her cue and copied the action. They proceeded like that, Clarke would initiate a movement, Lexa would follow on par with every lick and curl, push and pull until they were nearly synchronous, three fingers deep inside each other. Their tongues worked slowly, opposite to the previous frenzied pace. The earlier clumsiness was exchanged for a murmured calm, full of aching attentiveness.

“You feel so good,” Clarke awed, stilling her fingers to savour the fullness. Her tongue gathered fluid that was seeping through and spread it to other areas, pausing near the rim of Lexa’s smaller hole. Lexa shuddered in anticipation, having no wits left to answer, only to wait for the next action to mimic.

She imitated Clarke when the tip of her tongue traced the rim and then slowly pushed inside. They worked each other up, stretching the tight hole until a full tongue could fit. Anal wasn’t new to them, but in this position, with fingers buried to the hilt, working in mutual pleasure, it gave way to heightened intimacy that they were connected in every way possible.

Lexa held off tears for how close they were now compared to the distance that had slowly crept into their relationship since her dad’s sickness. For the first time in a long time she felt incredibly close to Clarke and wanted to feel everything she could. So Lexa mirrored whatever Clarke did, an echo of every sigh and moan as they slowly, gently fucked each other, attentive to every cue and noise, speaking in shared body language while morning light spread its way into their apartment.

They took occasional breaks to kiss along inner thighs when things got too intense but they weren’t yet ready to go over the edge, and played with each other’s nipples while caressing and massaging whatever flesh was within reach. Need would soon win over again and they’d return to their mime routine, increasing in tempo with each pass, fingers and tongues twinning in time to fill both openings. Their bodies contracted and expanded to the other, contorted in bliss, making tactile reparations of what their hearts couldn’t verbally articulate.

Lexa felt the pressure building in her lower belly and could sense the same in Clarke’s tightening walls.

Things precipitated quickly when they started bucking into the other, no longer able to control the pacing. They reached simultaneous orgasm when Lexa pressed a thumb to Clarke’s clit and the immediate feedback sent them both hurdling over.

Taking initiative, Lexa increased the thrusting into Clarke’s ass, using her free hand to pull the cheeks wider and push her tongue in deeper before replacing it with a thumb and started pumping. They released a string of expletives now that both their mouths weren’t preoccupied.

“Clarke!”

“Lexa, baby, I’m coming, fuck!”

The pet name and Clarke’s newly spent desire triggered Lexa’s second and stronger orgasm that had Clarke’s mouth returning to eagerly lave up the overflow. A third height was reached when her thumb withdrew only for an index finger to fill Lexa with bursting pleasure as it hit its mark again and again. Unable to copy, Lexa took to sucking on Clarke’s clit to ride the crest of the overwhelming feeling. Their cries rang out the apartment, a series of broken wails as they clung onto the moment. She has never experienced a more beautiful wreckage.
They eventually rolled away from each other when their panting sent shivers through their still fluttering folds. Lexa then realigned her body to orient correctly on the bed. Clarke didn’t hesitate to nestle in when Lexa opened her arms in invitation.

Lexa kissed her lazily, mixing their fluids and buying time for their breathing to slow. To her surprise, Clarke re-entered her minutes later, like she hadn’t had enough and needed to be inside of Lexa as soon as possible and for as long as desired. Lexa continued their kiss while Clarke twisted her fingers and hit the back of her walls over and over in tender passes. Every time Lexa neared the edge, Clarke would pull out and then repeated the whole process until she came silently into Clarke’s mouth. No air left to make a sound.

They laid quietly after, neither wanting to disturb the tentative peace.

“Please talk to me,” Lexa whispered hoarsely into Clarke’s hair, running her fingers through it in a soothing pattern. “Whatever it is, we can figure it out.”

Clarke had already fallen asleep. In one final mirrored act, Lexa did too.

She hadn’t known it then, buoyed by the hope that this would be a turning point, but it was one of the last times they’d do anything together.

—

Lexa felt like she’d been living under a half light since leaving New York after finally severing ties with Clarke, no other choice when her Clarke ceased being hers. Floating among the scattered mote of dreams turned into dust, haunted by the ghost of what was and could have been, Lexa had to let go. Staying was too painful. But going had meant turning her back on the brilliance that had kept her warm for twelve years, and stepping into the shadow of a new place, sad and lost among unknown streets.

During her first months in London, despite it being her choice of destination, she harboured unreasonable, misplaced anger towards the city—for being everything New York was not. It was damp and grey, people drove on the wrong side of the road, bagel was spelt wrong, there was too much tea and not enough sunlight.

After her mother passed, Lexa thought Clarke was the universe’s way of apology, its corrective measure for her early heartbreak. An irreplaceable loss softened by a devastatingly beautiful gain. She thought their love was sacred ground untouchable to further grief because Lexa had already paid her dues. So she tended and cultivated the wild land in blissful ignorance. Where her heart had been shattered, it had found peace in growing the garden with Clarke, tilling and milling the fertile ground daily with quiet love. She never thought that devastatingly beautiful could also be just devastating, that the very ground she felt safe on would split asunder and swallow her whole.

With her young heart darkened by the wounds of watching her strong and stunning mother fade away, she naturally gravitated to Clarke’s new light. Being with her was like partaking in a luminous, poetic reverie that had Lexa too absorbed in private discourse with the starry sky—head always tilted up—for her to notice the erosion happening afoot.

She should have known that such an oneiric place couldn’t exist, the product of a spatial imaginary too pure, too idyllic, too good to be true.

Lexa was angry at herself for being so stupidly, blindly in love, for a weakness for blue and her surrender to the comfort of a morning rasp and a soft hand always reaching for hers. It was a self-betrayal that could’ve been avoided had she hardened rather than softened all those years ago.
So Lexa was angry on the Tube, angry on her walk to work, angry at not knowing how to tender British pounds, angry when she discovered and finally heard Clarke’s voicemail, not at Clarke, but at herself that her first instinct was to book the next flight home with little regard to prematurely abandoning her new life.

It took weeks before the anger settled. The repressed rage had kept her company so she didn’t feel so alone but it did little to quell the aching melancholy. She channeled her anger and heartache into useful toil, clocking in countless hours at the office, until it turned into a dull pain.

When it became too much, the nights too lonely and the days too empty like the terrible sad songs playing on repeat in her flat, she decided to finally respond to Clarke’s voicemail.

She called and texted. No answer. She drafted several letters and sent the most legible one that had the least blurry words and smudged ink. No returned post.

That should have plunged Lexa into despair but the resounding silence—an undeniable and resolute affirmation of what would not be—in an odd way forced her to pull up her socks, swallow the pain and try to move on. She endeavoured to make London home, as in vain as the effort may prove.

Life carried on and Lexa did her best to bend to its changing wind and not break.

—

Sundays were holy. Not because Lexa was religious but because they had belonged to her and Clarke as the day of rest and reconnection with one another.

Sunday breakfasts, crosswords and sudoku, and stretching the afternoon light by the stretch and sighs of bodies in search of familiar and new heights. Her To Do list would have numerous bullet points but only one repeated task, Clarke. After every round, Lexa would reach over for the piece of paper and emphatically cross out Clarke’s name, making her girlfriend laugh without fail each time. Once in awhile Clarke would append specific activities before or after her name that had Lexa blushing while enthusiastically nodding.

Two years on, and Sundays were still the most difficult day of the week for Lexa.

It got a bit easier with new routines, new workers and casual friends. But on this particular Sunday, curled up as she was in the downstairs bookshop in her usual spot, tea and book in hand, Lexa felt the ache more palpably than she had in recent months. Maybe it was because it was her birthday, and instead of a cupcake it was a scone, and rather than the warmth of yellow and blue she was met with the concern of white and grey.

“Is everything alright, dear?” Rose, the shopkeeper’s grandmother asked, drawing Lexa out of her thoughts.

It had been a quiet morning, Rose covering for Tessa and keeping Lexa company since the heavy downpour kept the usual Sunday book-sniffers off the streets and allowed them to have a tea-party for two.

Lexus stalled but then seeing the sympathetic gaze, she answered honestly, “There’s this girl,” at Rose’s gentle prod for elaboration with kind, patient eyes, Lexa finished saying, “we used to be in love.”

She looked down at the tea cup and saucer on her lap.

“I see,” Rose said with the sort of understanding that came from years of life experience, the kind
that also knew there was more that Lexa was yearning to say but holding back. So she stayed silent without question or judgment, distilling her wisdom through stillness.

“I mean, I’m still in love with her,” Lexa said quietly, stirring her tea and trying to keep the want out of her voice. “She, not so much with me.” When she looked up and saw compassion in Rose’s expression, her eyes watered as she croaked out, “I miss her.”

Lexa had never felt the presence of an absence more acutely than today. The Portuguese call it saudade, that nearly untranslatable word of the profound longing—a hope of return—for an absent someone or something, a melancholy and nostalgia for a love that remains when the person has not.

She didn’t know why she was telling a complete stranger her sob story but something about the pattering of rain against the shop’s window and the memory of books abandoned in favour of a different kind of reading of bodies made Lexa want to unload all her longing, to let it be heard among the novels and short fictions and poems that carry far greater or more tragic love stories. That maybe her words could find solace within their margins and end pages.

Rose smiled empathetically and offered her handkerchief.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to cry into your tea,” Lexa said, wiping the moisture from her cheek. She took a moment to recover her voice, “It’s been over two years, I didn’t think I had any tears left.”

The grandmother waved her off. “When you get to my age, time is an elastic thing. One day you’re young and in love and the next, your husband has passed away after more than fifty years of marriage.”

Lexa looked up and suddenly felt silly for her romantic trifles. Rose squeezed her hand to indicate it was okay.

She gave Lexa a sad smile before she continued. “I used to get very cross with him for leaving his socks willy-nilly around the house. Two weeks after the funeral I found the missing half of the polka dot pair he had been driving me crazy looking for. I cried more than I did at the funeral. It was in his bloody toolbox. He must have gotten hot while working but lord knows why he’d store it in there or only took off one sock.”

They shared a quiet chuckle.

The sombre mood returned when Rose revealed, “My sons can’t trust me not to fall apart in the men’s section of Marks & Spencer. My grandchildren have clear instructions to keep me away from the sock aisle.”

Rose then surprised her by getting up and going to one of the stacks. Lexa watched curiously, half expecting her to pull out the errant garment, but she instead scanned the shelf for a particular title, opened it to the desired page once located, and nodded her head when she found the right passage. She then shuffled back to show Lexa, her finger pointing to the particular line.

Love words, agonise over sentences.
And pay attention to the world.

“I’m a retired librarian and have had my nose in a book for most of my life,” Rose began as Lexa read the two sentences trying to parse their meaning against her intent, “so, what I know of the real world will be of little value to you.”

Lexa quirked her eyebrow, a counter-argument on the tip of her tongue but she stayed quiet knowing Rose wasn’t finished.
“Susan Sontag wrote that as advice for what writers ought to do but I’ve always taken to applying it more liberally to how one should conduct life. To love, to agonise, to pay attention. I know my poor heart is still beating if I’m agonising over a sock. It’s been years now but I’d rather cry over misplaced footwear than be numbed to this persistent ache,” Rose said putting a hand to her chest. “It means he loved me well.”

Lexa didn’t fully understand Rose’s point but more tears fell anyways. She could only imagine her loss, its depth and intensity even years on. Though Lexa’s longing was critically incomparable, she empathised with what it was to live with the spectral of love, to make do with a faded light.

“If you are still attentive to the way your heart stutters, dear, then I suspect you’ve been in a similarly fortuitous situation. It would be more worrisome if you weren’t crying over my tea.”

Lexa let out a wet laugh. “Clarke was the one who did all the crying in our relationship. I guess I’m catching up,” she bashfully admitted as she blinked the tears away. Taking a deep breath, Lexa voiced wistfully, “I can’t help but wonder if I gave up too soon. Maybe if I had waited a little longer …”

“Tell me about her,” Rose kindly pressed, distracting her from the dangers of what ifs.

So Lexa did, telling her about what was. She spoke of Clarke’s smile, of her generosity and warmth, how they met, how hard Lexa fell and has never quite recovered. Rose listened, her openness and calm a silent comfort.

“You know, you would make a great librarian,” Rose mused half way through her story. When Lexa quirked her head in ask, she clarified, “My library is an archive of longings. Another of Sontag’s epithet.”

Lexa smiled despite again not quite catching Rose’s drift. If that is the case, then Clarke’s is the only book she has ever wanted to read.

It wasn’t the Sunday Lexa had expected to have but a surprisingly heart-mending one nonetheless to spend it talking about Clarke, to sieve through the years and the abundance of moments that still made the butterflies flutter thinking of them.

There weren’t any cupcakes but in a small way, it felt like Clarke was there with her.

—

Lexa smiled as she watched from the living room, Costia’s head tilted back in laughter as Costia and her girlfriend shared a moment observing the Zurich skyline out on the balcony. She was happy for her friend to have found someone again.

They developed a kinship over their shared heartache. She’d met Costia at a trade show two summers ago, striking up a conversation as seat neighbours during an extremely boring talk on cross-laminated timber, an alternative building material suitable for both indoor and outdoor applications.

“My ex is a rep for a concrete supplier. They’ve been losing bids recently to CLT. This is my passive aggressive way of getting back at her;” drew Lexa out of her near nap as the presenter droned on about an upcoming landmark project in Dalston that would become the world’s largest CLT building. The subject was fascinating but unfortunately the presenter had already lost most of the room with his constant fumbling of the laser pointer that would frazzle him from his script.

When Lexa realised the comment was addressed to her she turned to find an extremely attractive woman of similar age. Had Lexa had eyes for anything other than pale skin, golden hair and a
dismantling beauty mark then this combination of dark skin, beautiful curls and charming smile would have hitched her breath. Instead, she smiled politely and raised an amused brow.

“I’ve decided to only spec wood in all of my projects from now on,” her companion continued in dry English humour. “That’ll teach her to cheat on me.”

Lexa’s eyes widened but she added helpfully, “It is more environmentally friendly.”

“Costia. Inside architect.”

Lexa laughed at the interior designer’s self-description and shook the outstretched hand. “Lexa. Exclusively outside.”

They endured the remaining forty-five minutes of the talk together, entering into easy conversation that extended into a mutual desire to take the friendly banter to the pop-up bar. On their way, Costia had paused to grab the presenter’s business card. Lexa had laughed when she handed her the card, after scribbling on the back of it, ‘Prefabricated wood paneling will save 2,400 metric tons of carbon compared to a concrete frame.’ “I’m going to mail this anonymously to her.”

Over drinks, they covered various topics and found common ground not only as designers but as jilted lovers of tragic romantic histories. “She cheated, how cliché. Didn’t even have the decency to be more original,” was brushed by with wilful nonchalance that betrayed deeper hurt than the slight shrug was meant to obfuscate.

In Costia, Lexa immediately found a sympathetic heart that was also recovering and trying to make sense of the vagaries of love. The bond formed quickly and the friendship grew organically, the first person Lexa could confide in who had no attachment or accountability to Clarke, but who understood nonetheless the hardship of letting go despite all good and healthy reasons to sever the emotional ties.

“Hey,” Costia nudged her to lift her legs so she could sit on the couch, disrupting her train of thoughts moments later.

“Gaia’s taking a nap?” Lexa asked as she placed her legs back down over Costia’s lap when she settled. She could make out Gaia’s prone form on the outdoor lounger, tightly tucked in a blanket.

“Yeah, she’s regretting that third helping of raclette now,” Costia relayed with endearment. She looked concernedly to Lexa. “You’ve been quiet all night.”

Lexa shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. I can’t place it, but I have this weird feeling that this isn’t where I should be right now. That I’m in the wrong city.”

Costia stole a sip from Lexa’s wine glass on the coffee table before shoving a piece of chocolate into her mouth and muffling out, “Feels fairly right to me.”

Lexa hummed but couldn’t shake the mood she’s in. “Cos, I—I” she started to say but struggled to pinpoint the direction of her thoughts. Costia waited patiently while Lexa arranged her words. “I think I need to go home.”

“What? Why would you trade the Limmat for Thames? Besides, your contract’s almost through. You’ve got, what, another month here?”

“No, not London.”

It took a second for Costia to register her meaning and then she questioned, “That upcoming project
Lexa nodded. It’s a major commission that Lexa’s office was recently awarded as a joint venture with a New York firm—a mixed use multi-residential redevelopment in Queens. The Zurich placement was working out well so her boss had tapped her to represent them in New York. “Are you going to accept it?” Costia asked, carefully reading Lexa’s expression.

It would be a great career opportunity complete with a promotion at the project’s end when she returns to London. She’d have more design autonomy than ever. “It’s a good offer. I’d start in December, get to run my own small team, and they’d pay for my apartment.”

“But?"  

“She might be with someone,” Lexa quietly voiced her fear. Every time she thought of being in an adjacent borough to Clarke, let alone on the same side of the ocean, she felt a stabbing pang that was indecipherably good or bad. She wasn’t sure if the professional standing would be worth the personal turmoil, gun-shy to risk more collateral damage to her heart.

“I’m not sure I could handle that.”

It would be the cruellest joke to bump into Clarke with her now-husband or wife.

“But how much longer can you keep going like this?” Costia asked with kindness despite the harsh reality of her question. “You work too much. You haven’t dated. Your only attempt has been with me and we can both agree that was a spectacular disaster. You’re terrible at snogging,” she teased poking at Lexa’s feet, “too much salt.”

Lexa pinched her side in protest, not willing to acknowledge how she couldn’t hold back the tears when Costia’s lips had met hers and all she could feel was unreasonable guilt that they weren’t the right set. It had been a barely brushed kiss but the unfamiliar softness and sweetness had sent her into a panic. It took two tubs of ice cream and several horribly heterosexual movies (“look, your life could be worse or straight”) to salvage their first and only date.

“High standards,” Lexa joked then turned her head towards the direction of the light snoring filtering through the balcony doors. “Speaking of, Gaia’s great by the way.”

Costia’s gaze softened, the goofiest smile forming. “She’s brilliant.”

“So,” Lexa leaned forward, eyebrows furrowed in a perplexed expression as if trying to solve calculus, “what is she doing with you?”

“Pot, kettle,” Costia bristled, pinching Lexa’s leg in retaliation. “I’ve seen photos of Clarke, she’s too fit for you.”

“That’s probably why we’re no longer together.”

Costia rolled her eyes. “Please, now you’re just fishing. You know how hot you are.”

“Seriously though, things look to be going well.”

“Yeah,” Costia nodded, a light bloom to her cheeks. “Not just a rebound I don’t think. She’s a bit of a dream, to be honest.”

Lexa felt her stomach flip, mind immediately going to that one time she had whispered into the crook of Clarke’s neck, “You’re my dream girl, you know,” attributing the moniker between grateful bites
of street fries, headed home on the A train after another late night in the studio, and Clarke’s reply had been, “You’re not mine because I don’t want you to ever be anything other than real.”

She shook her head to rid the memory and smiled at Costia’s goofy look. “I’m happy for you, Cos.”

“I don’t want to jinx it and I know it’s early days, but it feels right. I can’t explain it yet but it does.”

Lexa understood the feeling. She went quiet for a second, another memory taking hold. “When we first moved in together, Clarke used to do this thing that drove me nuts.” She paused for the momentary swoop in her stomach to pass. “She’s a fantastic cook but shit at clean-up. A horrible dishwasher loader, never stacking it properly. Plates and bowls haphazardly thrown on top of each other where the water couldn’t reach and I’d end up having to rewash them by hand.”

She smiled and shook her head before continuing.

“But at her parents or my dad’s, she had no problem doing it correctly. When I finally realised she did it on purpose at home and confronted her about it, she told me that when I get upset, the vein in my neck bulges.” Lexa rubbed her hand in the area, her throat tightening at the touch. “She told me this was her favourite place in the world, just under my jaw. I’d get grouchy and worked up after excessive scrubbing in the kitchen, and it gave her an excuse to spend time here to smooth it out.”

Lexa could feel the ghost of Clarke’s lips there as her eyes welled up.

Costia gently patted her leg.

“Basically, she intentionally made me tense so she could relax me.” Lexa chuckled, a little embarrassed for getting emotional. “But she never needed a reason,” she disclosed quietly, looking up to the ceiling to keep the tears from falling, “nothing has ever felt more right than when her head was laid there. I haven’t been able to find that feeling again.”

She avoided Costia’s gaze, sure to find pity there.

Costia took a different tact. “Seriously, Lexa. Go to New York. Find Clarke. Get an answer, go from there. I don’t think you’ll ever find that feeling again, or be able to move on, unless you finally get some closure.”

Truthfully, Lexa’s decision was made as soon as her boss brought up the overseas assignment. She nodded even as she pouted and put up a fake fight, “Closure is overrated, I prefer open-ended uncertainty that daily chips away at my will to live.”

“So dramatic. How’d Clarke put up with your brooding arse for so long?”

“She was quite fond of my ass,” Lexa defended smugly much to Costia’s feigned disgust.

“Gross, Lex.”

“Not what she said,” Lexa muttered but then chewed on her bottom lip as she considered how her life might change by year’s end. “Do you think exes can be friends?”

“Personally, no,” Costia answered. “But my circumstances were different than yours. Is that what you want?”

“No.” It’s nowhere near what she wants, but it may be the start of what she needs. “I miss my best friend.”

“If things go to shite, you’ve got one waiting here,” Costia reassured. “Though I have the vague
feeling that you may not be coming back if it was an option.”

She didn’t answer aloud, not ready to give shape to a latent hope, but Lexa couldn’t quite help her heart’s murmuring agreement.

*****

It’s been a long road since that conversation with Costia to her current late night one with Anya in a dodgy gym while the pain in her cheek throbs.

When she found herself standing in front of Clarke’s painting in January, overwhelmed by the bleeding emotions on display in oil and artificial light and magnified by the immensity of being in the same space as her lost love, Lexa had no words. Nothing had prepared her for the way her stomach swooped and her heart skipped several beats when she heard Clarke call out for her. Nothing prepared her for the way Clarke would re-enter her life on the whim of a friendship request.

Slowly and surely, over the coming months, the half light had returned to a full light, she basked in the recovered warmth, as in love with the sweater Clarke knitted for her as she ever was with the fledgling knitter. Lexa has worked hard to move past heartbreak that has rend and eviscerated her, a difficult task of reconciling pain with possibility, not to replace one with the other but to make space for both.

The snowstorm and Clarke’s sickness, Wells’s concert, the auction and the rooftop, the weekend at the cabin, and all the kissing and hand-holding and breath-stealing in-between, were steps closer to the future originally denied her but that Clarke had been prodigiously making amends to reclaim. Their first kiss and first time together again, in the chase of sighs and shattering reach of highs, Lexa had felt her palpable want and had sought to live inside that feeling ever since.

Whatever reticence she held was purely out of self-preservation in case of a second devastating misreading of their hearts alignment.

It had been a breathless headlong rush that Lexa was only now coming up for air from. Her body aches from toiling to consign hurt to the past and sweep away sorrow as a firmer, fiercer love takes hold.

“T’m tired, An.”

With the effect of the alcohol now somewhat lifted—nothing sobers like being knocked off one’s feet—Lexa suddenly feels bone weary. She pulls her knees up and lays her head on top of her crossed arms, exhausted by an inner dialogue between thinking and feeling.

Anya doesn’t say anything. They both stare ahead watching a new set of boxers take a turn in the ring. Watching the fluid motion and intricate footwork distracts them for awhile until Lexa raises the subject again.

“My night wasn’t supposed to end like this.” She looks expectantly to her sister for some sage advice, anything that might lessen her pain.

Anya doesn’t break her gaze from the ring, unsympathetic to Lexa’s plight. She harrumphs when one of the boxers walks right into a mean left cross and finally turns to Lexa, “I didn’t raise you to be this wallowing twig.”
"You didn’t raise me at all."

"Lexa, the only surety in life is death and property tax. Nothing else is inevitable or supposed to happen."

Lexa narrows her eyes but Anya is unmoved.

"What? I’m not a Chinese fortune cookie dispenser."

Lexa huffs in askance of expecting anything other than snark from her sister.

"Does that hurt?" Anya asks a minute later, gesturing to Lexa’s cheek. Before Lexa could determine the direction of the tangent, she’s caught off guard by a punch to her upper arm. "How about that?"

Lexa glares at her for both the unnecessary violence and the obvious question, but relents an answer nonetheless, "Yes."

"Are you still alive?"

Lexa sighs, "Yes."

"There’s your fortune," Anya concludes with the sensitivity of a hammer meeting glass. "Stop fucking brooding. It’s unbecoming."

"You brood," Lexa pouts while rubbing her arm.

"Only because I’m always one selfie-stick away from slapping humanity." On Lexa’s continued jutted lip, she softens imperceptibly and delivers the next part with tempered kindness for the shortness of her words. "Look, you’re hurt. Clarke’s hurt. But you’re both still alive, still here in the same city. So, stop crying over spilt milk. Wasted dairy is only a tragedy for cows. Are you a cow?"

"No?"

"Problem solved," Anya determines conclusively. "You owe me another bottle of whisky. I wouldn’t have shared had I known you were just being dramatic."

"How generous of you."

"My magnanimity knows no bounds."

Lexa cracks a smile and opens her arms in affectionate gesture.

"Hug me and you’ll lose a limb."

She doesn’t heed her sister’s warning and crushes her in a hug anyways.

"That’s enough," Anya lightly pushes her off after an extended hold. "Let’s go, wuss," she beckons with a shove to her shoulder, seeing that the ring is free again, "try to stay standing this time."

Anya’s ways are unconventional but they work, at least for tonight, despite being worse for wear, Lexa feels a smidgen more settled than when she had come crying to her.

—

After leaving the gym, Lexa drags herself back to her apartment to freshen up before returning to Clarke to set things right. Her plans are once more derailed when Raven texts that she and Octavia
will be spending the night with Clarke who needs some time. Lexa’s stomach drops that she won’t be the one to offer comfort, as much as she appreciates that their friends are there for Clarke.

She falls asleep with a heavy heart.

The next morning, phone still clutched in hand, she wakes in alarm on her couch and immediately scans the device for a response to her messages from the night before.

But nothing.

*Are you ok?*
*I stupidly panicked.*
*We should talk.*
*I can explain.*
*Please call me.*

For some reason, Lexa could only text in spurts of three words at a time. Poor substitutes for the ones she’s holding onto, that she should have immediately returned when Clarke said them, that she needed desperately to now say in person before 3,500 miles separate them again.

She deflates seeing the series of blue bubbles but no grey ones to follow in her iMessage window, never thinking that blue would ever be an unwanted colour. No response and no indication of read message either.

She scrolls up to their last interaction; Clarke’s ‘*I miss you*’ ten minutes after Lexa had left for work, followed by an image of a hand underneath Lexa’s wrinkled pillow and a closeup of a pout half covered by messy blonde hair, and then at lunch hour, two simple words of ‘*Just you*’ as answer to Lexa’s inquiry into plans for the evening.

The exchange had caused an insurgent of butterflies to lead a rebellion in her stomach during lunch while Lexa took savouring bites of her avocado sandwich that Clarke had packaged for her. They were reaching a ridiculous level of domesticity again, leaving Lexa’s whole being a useless pile of wanting, thrumming joy.

‘*Can’t wait x*’, the last text, now stares tauntingly back at her, as it would for the next several days without another word from Clarke.

Midweek, phone still glued to her but not any more responsive, Lexa ventures to Clarke’s apartment, hoping to work it out in person. She doesn’t sweat, not the way Clarke does, but standing in front of the downstairs buzzer has Lexa swiping unholy amounts of moisture against her jeans.

She’s about to buzz when the front door swings open and she finds Octavia struggling with Tye on her hips and a bag over her shoulder.

“Lexa, hi.”

“Wessa!”

Before Lexa has a chance to overcome her surprise, Tye is making a grab motion with his hands and practically lunging himself into her arms, his mother straining not to topple over from the force. She’d made good on her promise to babysit, granting his parents much needed alone time, and the two of them had bonded over a shared love of 90s singers. Lexa’s infinite patience proved a good fit to counteract his hyperactivity. Their forever friendship cemented during a second sitting when they built a Lego tower his height. It’d been the most rewarding design so far in her budding career.
Beautiful brown eyes light up as Lexa easily absorbs his impact and lifts him high in the air.

“Hi, buddy,” she greets, blowing raspberries into his adorably protruding belly that gets exposed when his shirt rises. The giggles distract her enough to forget her mission for a moment as the best friends reacquaint.

“We’re just on our way out. Dropped in to check that the oven isn’t on. Clarke’s been fudging scatter-brained lately,” Octavia discloses, careful to keep her cursing toddler-friendly. “Thankfully the oven was off but she did forget to lock her door. Getting robbed wouldn’t be a good look when she comes back.”

Lexa makes note of Clarke’s frazzled state for later. For now, she raises her brow for clarification, confused about the latter statement.

Octavia returns her confused look, curious as to why any of this is news to Lexa. “Ducking hole between two cheeks, she didn’t tell you? I thought you guys would be talking by now.”

Lexa shakes her head, shifting to settle Tye on her hips. A bubble of unease rises in her chest that Clarke’s shutting her out again.

“There was a last minute issue at the Toronto gallery. Clarke left in a rush this morning for her flight.”

It must be written all over Lexa’s face how crestfallen she feels, despite the plastered smile she’s maintaining for Tye’s sake, because Octavia places a comforting hand on her arm and reassures, “She’ll be back in a few days. I’m sure she would’ve told you if she wasn’t in such a hurry.”

Lexa offers a shaky smile, the knots tightening for the widening gap in communication, fearful of the silence from four years ago creeping back. She bounces the toddler who’s started restlessly entertaining himself with bunching her shirt, the motion more to soothe her than him.

“Are you really going back to London?” Octavia asks, her gaze curious more than judgmental.

“Yes, but there’s more to it,” Lexa answers vaguely. “I want to tell you but Clarke deserves to hear it first, from me.”

Her friend nods in understanding. “She’s really hurt, as are you. You guys need to talk.”

“I’m trying but she’s not answering my texts, O.”

Octavia gives her a sympathetic smile and reaches out to alleviate Lexa of her son, who has fallen asleep after the momentary excitement passed but he only snuggles in closer into Lexa’s chest at the disturbance. “I’ll do what I can to get her to contact you, but you know, when stubborn Clarke sets her mind …”

“Thank you.” Lexa adjusts Tye’s position so that his legs wrap fully around her. She cradles his head and strokes his back as Octavia motions to leave. “Need a lift? I’ve got the company car today.”

“Nah, it’s alright. I doubt it comes with a child seat but thanks,” Octavia says over her shoulder as she locks the door. “We’re only going three blocks anyways. Linc’s meeting us at the kiddie pool. Wanna walk me?”

They spend the next fifteen minutes in a leisurely stroll, Octavia giving a play by play of hers and Raven’s night and morning after with Clarke. Lexa listens intently, her heart twisting to hear of their failed attempts to lift Clarke from her despondency. She wishes she could run to her now and
eliminate the new distance between them before it grows to untenable lengths.

Octavia must be picking up on her anxiety and shifts the conversation. “Whatever happens, I’m here for you,” she tells Lexa, and then promises, “We’ll come visit this time, okay?”, a flash of guilt passing, but before either of them can address the past and future, they spot Lincoln who waves the duo over.

Lexa melts seeing his blinding smile for his family. As Octavia wipes drool from Tye’s chin, she can’t help but imagine a different pair of blue eyes smiling fondly down at a child in her arms.

She sighs enviously watching the family of three head inside to the pool after exchanging goodbyes. They part on loose plans to see Lexa again before her flight.

—

The rest of the week passes in a blur. Between wrapping up at the office and finalising arrangements in London, the days furl forward.

Lexa is hoping tonight—a last minute get together to celebrate Lincoln’s promotion—will be the night they can finally talk. She’s flying out the next day and only has a continuous string of unanswered texts to show for her efforts at clearing the air with Clarke. As a last resort, she’s finally clued her friends in on what’s happening and they were quick to move mountains with a thinly veiled excuse to get Clarke in the same room with Lexa. Or at least for this evening, the same open-air space on the High Line that’s been transformed into a dance floor.

While waiting at the bar with Lincoln to place their group drinks order, the hair on Lexa’s arms stands up like a sixth sense letting her know that Clarke has arrived. When she turns her head in the direction of where she senses Clarke to be a few short metres away, Lexa’s heart stutters at the breathless sight.

Clarke’s wearing a mid length black dress that’s paired with the leather jacket she had sported at Well’s mini concert, casually finished off with white sneakers rather than heels, landing her decidedly on the effortless side of cool and edgy. Her hair is tied up in an attractive messy bun that frees her face for rosy soft skin and light smoky eyes to shine.

Clarke has always exuded a confident alluring beauty but tonight it seems to flow out of her in excess.

Or Lexa just aches for her to such a degree that Clarke could have walked in wearing pyjamas and she’d still find her the most striking sight this side of the Hudson.

Then Lexa’s heart falters for a different reason. A lump forms in her throat as she watches Clarke pause to scan the crowd for their group. The relief of finally seeing her is replaced with worry. To everyone else, Clarke looks like a hot girl here to have a good time with her friends. To Lexa, under the stain of lipstick and the cover of eyeshadow, she looks tired and sad and heartbroken. There’s a tautness to her movements and a guardedness in her gaze, like the pull and loyalty of friendship are the only things motivating her attendance tonight.

Lexa wants to go to her and sweep Clarke up in her arms.

Instead, Lincoln gets the privilege, reaching her first. They embrace affectionately, a smile mirroring on Lexa’s face seeing the ones shared between the friends. Lexa has never been jealous of Lincoln until this moment, the way Clarke’s arms wind round his neck, how small and safe she looks against his chest, raised high on her toes to close their height gap and tuck her head in.
It was only ten days ago that Lexa had been the recipient of that warmth, of having Clarke’s breath faintly on her skin that morning as she lightly dozed. Even in sleep, her hand had clung to Lexa’s shirt.

Lexa moves to stand awkwardly near them, unsure of what to do with her hands so she pockets her nerves and bounces on her feet, waiting for the opportune moment to announce her presence. She looks on adoringly as Clarke doesn’t seem to want to let go of her life-size teddy bear.

Their gazes finally meet when Clarke looks up over Lincoln’s shoulder and catches Lexa staring. Lexa is about to open her mouth to say hello but the word stays stuck in her throat on noticing a sheen forming in Clarke’s eyes, and before she knows it, Clarke is excusing herself to find the washroom, leaving hurriedly on the faint pretence that she drank too much on the ride over.

Lexa’s posture deflates. But Lincoln is quick to hold her up, an arm around her shoulder, and ushers her to the designated seating area where the others are already settled, taking in the sounds of the live band. Raven and Octavia are up to their usual bickering while Anya looks on bored.

When Clarke finds them again, there’s a slight smudge to her eye makeup though her too-wide smile overcompensates as she says hi to everyone. Lexa doesn’t know what hurts more, the curt nod thrown her way or the farthest seat possible Clarke takes.

Their friends trade the usual light ribbing and good-natured barbs while scrambling to disperse the thick air with chatter. But Lexa doesn’t catch any of it, attention attuned instead to Clarke’s shallow breathing and the way she’s playing with the label of her beer bottle, eyes downcast with a faraway look.

It takes all but ten minutes before the tension proves too much for the larger group who make lame excuses to be anywhere but between them. Raven drags Anya to the dance floor. Octavia and Lincoln search for a quieter spot to check on the sitter. Their blustering exits leave Lexa alone with Clarke who stares very interestedly at the pooling moisture running down her beer, intent on not making eye contact.

It stings that the mere one and half metres that separate them feels like an impassable gulf.

“Clarke,” Lexa tries. The sound of her name startles Clarke. Her hand stills for a second but she doesn’t look up.

“Please look at me,” Lexa pleads. There must be a desperation to her tone because Clarke does lift her head and flashes her a quick look, but not quick enough to hide the hurt. It was only a fleeting glance but by god has Lexa missed those eyes. “I want to explain.”

Clarke doesn’t seem to hear or perhaps is wilfully ignoring what she heard, returning to her new hobby of paper-peeling. Several excruciating beats of silence pass before she asks, in a voice so quiet that Lexa only hears because of how closely she is paying attention, “What happened to your eye?”

Lexa’s forehead creases, confused by the non-sequitur, her hand going to her face and only remembering the injury when she feels the lingering tenderness. The swelling has subsided but the skin remains noticeably discoloured that in her hurry to come here Lexa hadn’t bothered covering up. She watches Clarke track the movement of her fingers delicately brushing over the bruise. Clarke’s eyes go fleetingly soft, then alarmed when Lexa hisses from accidentally pushing too hard.

“Anya. Boxing,” Lexa answers with an insouciant shrug hoping to downplay the incident.

Clarke studies her for an unnerving stretch of time, silently reading the latent meaning, but finally
accepts the shortened explanation with a conciliatory nod and a bite of her lip.

Things return to awkward for awhile after as Lexa tries to unscramble her words from the momentary interruption, cobbling together her thoughts. Clarke hastens the process.

“When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow night.”

Clarke’s eyes widen at the scant timeframe, stealing a glance at her watch like she could map out twenty-four hours by the spin of the second hand. “You’re still going …” she lowly sighs under her breath that Lexa is likely not meant to catch. Clarke swallows heavily, straining to keep her composure.

“Yes,” Lexa confirms anyways because this is her opening. “But I’m coming ba—”

A bass drop hits just as Lexa speaks the latter part, like a stuttering heartbeat, Clarke misses what she says. Her follow-up question detracts Lexa from repeating herself and elaborating further. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I didn’t need to.”

Lexa knows she’s phrased it wrong as soon as the words come out. She’s proven right by the way Clarke’s shoulders slump and how she folds inward, caving under the weight of keeping them squared until now. Her lefthand grip on the beer tightens and her lips thin to almost nonexistence. She squeezes her eyes shut for a second in a thin attempt to fight back tears.

On re-meeting Lexa’s gaze, Clarke nods as if coaching herself that Lexa has no obligation to her, that she has no right to answers, an accountability only afforded to two people part of a mutual relationship.

Sad blue eyes, several significant shades shy of their usual lustre, pin Lexa in place and empty the air from her lungs. Lexa hasn’t even left for London yet but looking at Clarke now, so small and vulnerable, she already feels homesick.

Clarke’s voice is thick with emotion when she braves to reply, “You’re right, you don’t owe me anything.” She turns her head to the side, breaking their eye contact, and stares distantly to some nondescript section of the dancefloor over Lexa’s shoulder.

Lexa wants to scream at the fraught situation, her complicity in landing them here in the first place and then making matters worse with her inability to say the right thing in Clarke’s presence. The goal tonight was to have Clarke back in her arms but by how things are developing it’d be a miracle if Clarke ever talks to her again.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Lexa seeks to rectify her mistake and reaches out to stabilise the slight tremor of Clarke’s hand. “Love, I—”

Unfortunately, Clarke overreacts to the surprising touch as much as the slipped out pet name, spilling her beer as she reflexively jerks away. Both reach for the pile of napkins at the same time, hearts hammering at the same accelerated rate. They work in silent coordination cleaning the mess until Lexa’s wiping hand accidentally brushes against Clarke’s causing a second jolt. That seems to be the final straw. Clarke abandons the task without a word, rises abruptly and stalks away, looking more upset than ever and leaving Lexa to curse to an empty chair.

She doesn’t know when Anya joins her but suddenly there’s a comforting hand on her shoulder.
Lexa looks up from her daze hoping to find Clarke still sitting across from her.

“She’s with Rey at the bar,” Anya fills in helpfully.

Lexa scans the bar until she sees a blonde and brunette huddled by the corner seats, Raven soothingly rubbing Clarke’s back up and down. Several telling shots sit between them on the counter.

Clarke takes up post there for most of the night, and from Lexa’s protective watch, seems to get increasingly more drunk. Their friends take turns to try and lull her back to Lexa but the cheap whiskey isn’t helping their plight. Lexa’s own attempt is thwarted by Hayley Kiyoko of all people, the remixed cover the only thing that effectively gets Clarke off her stoop just as Lexa approaches.

The rebuke stings but, as a diversion, Lexa takes up sentinel as a self-appointed bodyguard of the leather jacket that Clarke leaves unattended. It’s not a bad consolation if this is how the rest of her night is meant to unfold, on an elevated urban park of a former railway beneath a yawning sky, keeping watch over Clarke.

She spends the next hour at her new perch by the bar looking forlornly as Clarke loses herself in the music. More than spilt alcohol is keeping her elbows glued to the sticky surface; steps away, bare shoulders and a deep neckline shimmering under the glow of hanging fairy lights motivates Lexa’s thirst for a different type of hydration.

Lexa watches with fondness (and a pooling in her stomach) as Clarke moves aimlessly on the dancefloor, out of time to the music and heedless of other bodies around her. She looks unbelievably sultry and addictive, oozing sex appeal that under different circumstances would have Lexa sliding in right behind her, hands on her hips as Clarke would start grinding. Lexa would bend down to kiss her while Clarke reaches back to sink her hand in Lexa’s hair; hands and hips and tongue moving together.

Lexa is snapped out of her daydream when a tall blonde approaches Clarke, a cliché of edgy haircut, skinny jeans and a band t-shirt with rolled up sleeves, all swagger and muscle holding up a built frame. If Lexa was in a generous mood, or not so incredibly gay, then she would ascribe him as aesthetically pleasing despite his wafting emission of hipster irony, the scent of white privilege a choking grasp even from this distance.

Clarke doesn’t seem to care or notice his presence, at least not with the same eagle eyes that has Lexa’s jaw tightening almost painfully. Clarke continues to sway and swing her body to her own song unaware of the massive attention her movements generate.

Blonde Bon Iver not so subtly shuffles nearer to her that Lexa expects won’t be taken kindly if it interferes with Clarke’s one-person dance show. She scoffs as he nervously runs a hand through his thick hair strategising how to make his introduction.

Granted she’s being unfair with her impetuous judgment, holding unreasonable contempt for a stranger’s existence, but there’s no way Clarke would be interested in someone who looks like they home-brew kombucha tea as a hobby. Lexa’s gutted however when Clarke doesn’t refuse his advance and even fakes a laugh at whatever inane pickup line Hipster Central had managed to extract from the thick hair gel.

Watching him stand exceedingly close to Clarke—when such closeness has eluded her for more than a week—makes Lexa’s insides feel like they’re being pulverised, unable to stop the heated sensation behind her eyes. Their proximity is still on the side of innocent, and though there is no actual bodily contact, Lexa can’t help but think this is all wrong, that she should be in Skinny Jean’s place instead,
making Clarke laugh and blush, being within a breath’s reach of that beauty mark and chin dimple as they lean in closer to hear each other better.

She knows that under present conditions she has no right to be territorial but as soon as she sees Artisanal Bread breaching into Clarke’s personal space, Lexa is off her stool and heading towards the dance floor before he can convince Clarke to run away together on his tandem bicycle.

Maybe it’s the gin and tonic she’s been nursing propelling her forward but she’ll be damned if Clarke slips out of her grip without a fight. They’re broken enough and it’s indefensible for Lexa to let things remain unfixed.

“Clarke, what are you doing?” She asks once arriving within hearing distance, braving a light touch to her elbow.

Glassy eyes meet her imploring gaze. There’s a too-brief look of relief like Clarke just realised the voice belongs to her Lexa but then it’s instantly gone as Clarke recalls the events that have led them here. She sizes Lexa up for a painful moment of clarity, cycling through a conflict of deep hurt, resigned sorrow and simmering anger, indecisive on which emotion to settle.

“I’m trying to move on,” Clarke replies defeatedly in the end. Lexa’s throat tightens. The unguarded comment is said without bite, but the gut punch hits Lexa as squarely as the blonde’s intoxicated breath. Clarke’s drunker than Lexa thought her to be, not catching the hurt her answer provokes. Lexa’s stunned enough by the callback to their conversation that Eau de Suave is able to seize the opportunity to make his move, misinterpreting Clarke’s lack of rejection as encouragement, oblivious to the lovers spat happening right in front of him.

Seeing his hand on Clarke’s waist stabs at Lexa’s heart. She’s conflicted between wanting to punch him and simply walking away, tired and done, but Clarke’s next whispered words ground her, “It’s not working. I don’t want anyone else.”

Unfortunately, Mr. Clueless doesn’t get the memo over the loud music and draws Clarke in by the waist. Before Lexa’s protective instincts can kick in, Clarke snaps out of her tipsy nescient state, sends a death glare at the intrepid hand and immediately pushes him off of her. The force of her reaction has her stumbling back hard into Lexa’s chest and inadvertently elbowing her in the ribs. Lexa is winded but bites the pain to wrap her arms around the drunk girl and steady her, grateful that Clarke doesn’t recoil from the touch.

Clarke turns her head to investigate her landing pad, startled to find the catching arms belonging to Lexa.

“Baby?” She asks with a clouded gaze like she’d already forgotten the altercation. Lexa aches at both the term and seeing the renewed welling of tears.

“Yeah, it’s me,” she coos in the shell of her ear.

Lexa wishes she could tell her the truth right now to put them both out of their shared miseries. But Clarke’s inebriation makes for terrible timing. Instead, Lexa scowls at Whole Foods Poster Boy, sending a threatening glare that can’t be interpreted as anything other than, not this girl.

Credit to him, he catches on and puts his hands up in a gesture of surrender before moving on to another spot on the dancefloor, leaving with an apologetic mumble of, “Sorry, didn’t know she had a girlfriend.”

She does, Lexa thinks and possessively tightens her hold of Clarke, hoping the strength of her grip
communicates familiarity and safety and love. Clarke melts into her.

Unable to control her impulse, Lexa steals a kiss to the top of Clarke’s head and feels the absorbing touch to the chill of her bones, nestling into the softness of blonde hair.

Clarke turns in her arms and pleads with hazy eyes made more beautiful by summer’s twilight, a quiet request on her tongue, “Dance with me,” she beseeches, “please, one last time.”

Though she hopes it won’t be the last, Lexa is eager to oblige, letting Clarke loop her arms around her neck as Lexa encircles her waist, hands resting delicately on the small of her back. Careless of the music’s upbeat tempo, they sway in slow motion, barely moving.

The hold is far too intimate for the thumping bass and the rise and fall of bouncing bodies in youthful bliss around them. Clarke presses herself into Lexa, erases what little gap exists, and asks with beggared breaths against her skin for a stillness to their rupture.

Lexa sings into her ear, a murmuring of the song that Clarke had sung to her in the church and that has been swelling inside of Lexa since, hoping the returned plea to anchor up to her will be enough to calm stuttering hearts.

Over Clarke’s shoulder, Lexa catches the curious, worried looks of their friends, the other two couples helicoptering within supporting distance. She sends them each a reassuring nod to relay things are okay, for the moment anyways. Lexa closes her eyes and breathes in the fragile happiness.

_Dancers of love intertwine_  
such graceful girls  
_lit by the moon_  
on these clear nights_  

With the stars and moon in lucent conspiracy above them, she’s reminded of the quote in the book that presently sits on her nightstand, the Order of Time that she had been introduced to through NPR’s Cosmos & Culture blog and had been geeking over with Jake. She thinks back to Rose’s words from the used bookshop, of how time is elastic and mutable, a posit that’s confirmed in the book’s opening chapter.

According to the Italian physicist-poet Carlo Rovelli, time passes faster in the mountains than it does at sea level. A dweller by the sea lives less, ages less, has less time than her mountain friend; there are fewer turns of the clock down below. London is closer to the sea. New York is twice its altitude. Fitting then, surrounded by their skyscrapers, that New Yorkers would experience the opposite. Thus when Lexa was in the UK, she felt out of sync with the rhythms of her adopted city, time passing more slowly, she running at a different speed.

Now, dancing on the High Line with Clarke in her arms, an otherwise lyrical and enchanting night but for their injurious souls, she wishes time wouldn’t move so rapidly. That it would stop altogether. In oblique address of Clarke’s question months ago about how to face the vastness of love and the shortness of life, Lexa knows the answer lies here, where she had long ago found her place and purpose.

_Time has a different rhythm in every different place and passes here differently from there. The things of this world interweave dances made to different rhythms._

Lexa thinks she has always been made to interweave with Clarke’s rhythm.
She wishes to stay in this time forever.

Their dance eventually ends. There’s a war raging at the tips of Lexa’s fingers to not let Clarke pull away, a grumbling battle in the tingle of lips not to kiss her. Both their gazes flicker to the area of contention.

Clarke makes the decision for Lexa, crossing the front lines by lifting on her toes for their mouths to be within heart-skipping nearness. She leaves a micro permission-seeking gap that Lexa is quick to close. The kiss is at once desperate and delicate as lips move with soft but urgent pressure, evoking a tacit understanding in the feel and form of paramour touches that evades them in speech.

Lexa can taste the melted plastic remnants of bottom shelf alcohol but it’s the sweetness of Clarke’s tongue searching aching for hers that fuels the aural dissonance between the rush of blood in her ears and the frenetic buzz of the crowd. She’ll gladly surrender to poison by second-hand moonshine if the honeyed aftertaste is her reward.

Just before they part, Clarke keeps Lexa’s bottom lip tucked in between hers, a long suckle with a slight sting of teeth as much for archival as for marking purposes, like this might be their last kiss and she wants to leave visible traces of herself. Lexa opens for another shorter kiss that promises the taste of Clarke is not something she’ll forget anytime soon.

Lexa spends the rest of the evening wrapping Clarke against her chest back in the lounge area, the modicum of comfort she’s able to offer as Clarke can’t be dissuaded from numbing her feelings in more cheap whiskey.

With Raven and Octavia’s help later, they manage to get Clarke into a cab while Lexa pays the night’s tab and apologises profusely to Lincoln for ruining his celebration. Lincoln waves her off with a hug. Lexa says goodbye to her friends and sister before she’s bundling Clarke in her arms in the cab’s backseat on their way home to Brooklyn.

—

Succeeding to coax keys from Clarke then pry the door open despite the weighty hindrance by her side, Lexa finds the apartment tellingly more tidy than she’d last left it. She tucks the thought of Clarke stress-cleaning away for later, already having her hands full undertaking to move the immovable lug in her arms.

After plying water into Clarke’s system, Lexa ushers her into the bathroom to remove her makeup. She lifts Clarke onto the counter and then steps in between her legs. Lexa tries to slow down her racing heart at being so kissably close to Clarke again. Thankfully a drunk Clarke is more amenable than a sick Clarke who doesn’t put up a fight as she dabs the cotton swab to wipe off the mascara and then lipstick.

Lexa strains to keep focus on each task at hand but it’s especially difficult under the clouded intensity of Clarke’s staring, “Better?” She whispers when done and receives an adorable head butt to her chin instead as if Clarke wants to share the burden of keeping her head up. Or she was aiming for a kiss but missing wildly. Lexa lowers her ahead and gives an appeasing peck to the tip of her red nose which has always been a beacon of her emotional distress.

Their bedroom is next, where Lexa does find the bed unmade, a mess of crumpled sheets and stray popcorn. She spots her Columbia t-shirt on the pillow next to Clarke’s side, on her side, and a pair of knitting needles and what looks to be the start of a scarf, but they’re not what catches Lexa’s breath. It hitches when her gaze lands on two pieces of paper waywardly cast atop the sheets. Two lists, with scratches and revisions, and very pregnant titles.
Lexa takes a shaky breath and fights the urge to read the items under each heading. She steps away from a sleepy Clarke to clear the clutter one-handed while the other arm stays outstretched, hand still on Clarke’s hip to keep her steady.

Lexa then removes Clarke’s clothes and reaches for the shirt to pull over her head but decides against it given the summer’s heat. Feeling personally attacked by a vision of pale skin that’s only interrupted by panties and camisole, Lexa has to suck in a breath and avert her gaze lest she runs her fingers across the exposed softness.

She refocuses to help Clarke into bed, before settling seated behind her, a mirror of when Clarke was sick. It’s a seamless domestic act, soft and intimate, practised countless times higher than the thread count that she has sorely missed this past week.

She should head to her own apartment for much needed rest. There’s still packing to be done and a long travel day ahead. But right now, with Clarke leaned back against her, and the whole of the universe atomised to where their hands touch, clasped over Clarke’s stomach, Lexa is unable to move a muscle. She possesses zero immunity to a pretty, crying girl, least of all when it’s mixed with the heady scent of whiskey-drenched heartbreak. As Lexa gently strokes Clarke’s hair and steals kisses into the unravelled mane, she stows the feeling for when her hands will be empty this time tomorrow.

From the extended silence, she assumes Clarke has fallen asleep and is relieved for the repose. Lexa battles the heaviness of her own eyelids to spend the quiet strategising how to wade their way out of the morass of cut-off explanations, incomplete declarations, and truncated texts.

Just as Lexa feels herself drifting off, Clarke suddenly jerks in her arms.

Lexa presses her impossibly closer and soothes, “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Clarke turns to nose into the underside of her jaw, grazing against her neck in gentle passes, a subconscious habit usually done to reaffirm Lexa’s presence during difficult nights. (Lexa shirks from thinking of the last time the self-comfort mechanism was a nightly occurrence.)

Lexa feels a light wetness and before she can investigate further, Clarke asks, “Is this how it felt?”

She doesn’t know how to answer, not quite grasping Clarke’s meaning yet.

“I’m so sorry.” Clarke starts to sob and it breaks Lexa’s heart anew to hear the break in her voice.

“Hey … it’s okay,” Lexa reiterates.

“It’s not. I didn’t—” Clarke pauses to let a hiccup pass and Lexa takes the opportunity to wipe her tears, “I didn’t know it could hurt like this. What it must have been like for you. I’m, I’m sorry.”

“I know, love.” Lexa is having a hard time not choking up while straining to calm an inconsolable Clarke. “I promise, it’s okay.”

But her words aren’t penetrating the fog.

The thickness of the alcohol that Lexa can still smell on Clarke’s breath seems to be fuelling her emotional plummet to depths that Lexa isn’t prepared for at this late hour and level of exhaustion.

“I get it, why you’d want to go back to England.” Clarke’s frame is lightly shaking by now and Lexa struggles to keep her together as much as to follow her train of thought. “You’re better off without.”
She re-situates Clarke so that the blonde is cradled sideways between her legs instead, curled into Lexa’s chest, knees bent and head against her shoulder. The new fetal position gives her better opportunity to comfort, especially when the word ‘me’ falls from Clarke’s lips and lands like a sinking ship in Lexa’s stomach.

Lexa cups her face and says with firm conviction that she hopes would break through Clarke’s stupor, “I’m not. And I don’t want to be.”

But Clarke shrugs off the reassurance, vehemently shaking her head and not accepting what Lexa’s telling her.

“I broke you, this,” Clarke whimpers and presses her hand into Lexa’s chest in drunken despair, lamenting, “and I don’t have enough superglue to put it back together,” then cutely re-buries her head into Lexa’s neck in dramatic fashion that would be laughable if not for the underlying sentiment of her accompanying words. “I bought too much yellow paint and not enough glue. I didn’t do—it’s not enough.”

The colour, the blurred sentences and jumbled thoughts, take Lexa right back to that first voicemail. Hearing Clarke’s heartbreaking but wrong conclusion about inadequacy, she makes her decision. She can’t hold off until Clarke is sufficiently sober to hear what she has to say.

Lexa reaches for her mobile on the side table. Maybe the best way to reach Clarke is to adopt the language she understands best, exposition via modern technology.

“You know, Clarke, for someone non-athletic, you’re really good at jumping to conclusions,” she mutters while tapping away a text message that’ll hopefully make sense to her in the morning.

Within seconds, a reciprocal ding sounds in the distance. *Huh, her phone does work,* Lexa notes but gives it no further thought. She then calls again, and is unsurprised when it goes to voicemail after several rings.

Lexa takes a deep breath.

“Hi Clarke,” she starts after the beep, brushing Clarke’s hair behind her ear and placing a kiss on her head.

“It’s past midnight. I fly out tomorrow, or rather today. My relationship to time has been tenuous lately. I’m sitting with you in my arms, on our bed, in our apartment. It’s not a sentence I would’ve expected to say six months ago.”

She wants to chuckle hearing Clarke hum in agreement as if she’s listening though her eyes have since closed and light snores fill the room.

“Six months ago I returned to New York, not for the job, but for you. The job was an excuse, you were the reason. You have always been my reason for everything I do.

“I never told you about London because it’s a non-issue. Clarke, I essentially rearranged my plans the moment we started hanging out again. From the first time I saw you at the gallery, and as soon as I realised you still wanted me in your life, I was never going to go back to London. Not permanently.”

Lexa pauses and looks down at the small lion under her chin. The only permanence she’s invested in is this quiet roaring. The day Clarke had left a flu-motivated voicemail and asked her on a date, Lexa and her colleagues were celebrating their project achieving building permit status. Where she should have been ecstatic about the implications for her career, all Lexa was preoccupied with was Clarke’s
health and whether she had supplied her with enough fluids, cold presses, and popcorn.

Lexa knew then that she had reached a point of no return. Although she felt profound vulnerability and helplessness following the breakdown of their relationship, the betrayal and breach of trust leading to a deep grief and loss, Clarke’s confession and contrition that snowstorm weekend had done much to help progress her mourning process. To move on and construct a new future. She spent the following days in Chicago in solitude and quiet contemplation over the choice that had been in the making since their hug on the pier. She would stay in New York and say goodbye to London.

Clarke shifts in her hold and Lexa squeezes tighter, chasing the echo of how incredible it had felt to embrace Clarke again for the first time.

“I didn’t accept the promotion,” she continues, “I actually quit my job. I’ve been coordinating the end of my contract remotely. Then three weeks ago, Costia proposed to her girlfriend and asked me to be there for her engagement party. It’s why I’m flying to London, for that and to tie up loose ends with my office and flat in person. I’m only going for three weeks.

“This was what I wanted to tell you before gay panic set in and I let our conversation deteriorate the way it did. I’m sorry for how I’ve hurt you,” Lexa repents. “I know I’ve gone about it all wrong. But before I reacted like a complete idiot, I had planned on asking you two things.”

Clarke purrs into Lexa’s neck, warm breath and lips skimming against her throat keep Lexa grounded though it does little to tamper the butterflies when Clarke’s hand starts to gently roam under her shirt.

“The first was if you’d like to be my date to Costia’s party. The second—”

Just as Lexa works up the courage to finally voice the big ask she’s been carrying around for weeks Clarke’s voicemail cuts out, causing her to fumble the phone and drop it. Clarke stirs momentarily but otherwise remains oblivious to her flailing. Lexa takes a breath and redials, immediately picking up where she left off.

“And the second question I was going to ask is if I could come home, permanently.”

Lexa lets out a shuddered breath.

“I’m hoping third time’s the charm, that you’ll say yes,” she laughs nervously, “because I’m sorta deeply in love with you too. I’ll basically be jobless and homeless when I return to New York so I really am keen on it not being another no. Don’t make me live with Raven and Anya.”

By the way Clarke is clinging to her like a koala, she doesn’t think it will come to that, but Lexa has been wrong before.

“Mmmmm hmmm,” Clarke unexpectedly replies. Lexa freezes thinking she’s awake but she only snuggles in closer and firms her grip on Lexa’s shirt.

Lexa cups her sleepy face and gently places a sweet kiss on her lips. Clarke snores against her mouth.

“I am leaving for London but I’m coming back. Clarke, you have always been my plan. And if I am still a part of yours, which god I hope is the case, please call me when you get this.”
There isn’t much to pack but Lexa drags out putting each item into her luggage, buying time for Clarke’s call back.

Her three-quarter full suitcase has been sitting ready in her empty apartment, the last quarter waiting to be filled on this late afternoon of departure.

It’s an eerie echo of four years ago. Leaving but not wanting to go, waiting for an answer that’s not forthcoming.

Lexa hasn’t heard from Clarke since she tucked her into bed, kissed her on the forehead, and left their apartment and her heart behind.

She casts an eye about. The rental is a comfortable enough place but lacks any warmth, not for want of furniture or material goods. She never bothered to nest because it was only ever meant to be temporary. Only ever a meanwhile solution until the permanent one could be reached.

She has no attachment to anything in this loft, other than her books, her mother’s chair, and the knitted sweater Clarke gave her. The books and chair she’ll stow with her dad, who’s been conscripted to help clear out the space while she’s away. The item of most value will go with her.

For June, Arran wool should be too hot to wear. Lexa doesn’t care. She feels cold and dons the sweater anyways. At least she’ll have something of Clarke on the flight.

Lexa closes the suitcase, an apt, soundless act in keeping with the silence she’s lived with for years. She misses Clarke’s noisiness, the utter chaos she wracks, the loudness with which she loves Lexa.

The ride to the airport is as lonely as the sound of her front door clicking shut. Anya doesn’t do sentimentality so Lexa shuttles herself to JFK. (Her sister’s parting text simply reads, “Aberlour.”)

Lexa knows she’s coming back, to what, remains uncertain, yet the ache of leaving things unresolved with Clarke makes it feel like another painful goodbye to the city.

She watches the moving images of glass and concrete flash by. Nothing is quite like New York at dusk, the sun graciously bowing out to the bright lights of LED dreams. In the slippage from real to artifice, there’s one moment of simultaneity where the desires of the city’s collective unconscious suspend in stillness—held in place by hope and possibility—before dispersing across the ether. Somewhere in that ephemeral light is a version of her and Clarke’s future.

—

Lexa should hate airports. Ever since becoming a frequent solo flyer, it would be reasonable for her to detest spending any amount of time there, especially when she’s come to associate them with separation and longing.

She took a short course once on airport design when she hadn’t yet decided to specialise in housing. In design circles, architecturally speaking, it’s considered a non-place. Neither here nor there. A transient in-between state of being with no real spatial qualities. Like shopping malls, gas stations, and supermarkets, they are generic and prosaic. Get in, get out.

Non-places represent marked distinctions between transit and dwelling (staying and going), identity and anonymity (intimacy and strangeness). Airports, in particular, are characterised by their alienating conditions; the deliberately designed lack of comfort and warmth that keeps people moving, the formalities and impersonal regard that keeps processes efficient. They are a provisional container where millions of nameless personal histories overlap but rarely interact. Arrive. Depart.
Yet, for all the seeming detachment and indifference, she finds airports to be places of hope. Lexa has come to embrace airports for the untold stories writ large in the intersection of moving bodies, their ephemerality and the temporary distance from the reality that normally awaits her outside—London, a city without Clarke; New York, a city with the ghost of them.

In the one to two hours each time she spends inside waiting on the rigid seats, she could surrender herself to imagining different possibilities, alternative scenarios of their life together. Maybe Clarke is dropping her off for her business trip or picking her up afterwards, or they’re idling time together until boarding for their holiday destination. Three-letter acronyms would flicker above their heads, contracted signifiers of exotic locales to be added to an ever-expanding bucket list.

But today, she does hate airports because for the first time since flying to Iceland, she’s leaving a reality that she does not want to let go of. She moves perfunctorily through check-in and bag drop-off then security and customs before holing up in the departure lounge, knees curled to her chest.

Every couple of sighs, she casts a hopeful look at her phone. She must do it frequently enough to annoy a nearby passenger to move to another section of the gate.

“Please call, love.”

But sheer will power does not make it ring.

The universe, as it turns out, has other plans.

“Lexa!”

Lexa’s heart is in her throat. She recognises the timbre and texture of that voice even through the muffle of her earphones.

When she whips around the most beautiful and bizarre vision greets her. A frantic mess of blonde is running—running—towards her. A wild Clarke appears.

Lexa rises from her seat and turns towards the commotion.

“Clarke?”

Clarke arrives breathless in front of her, no preamble, as she says, “I made two lists. You like lists.”

It’s only then that Lexa notices the backpack slung on her shoulder as Clarke shifts the bag to retrieve with shaky hands two pieces of paper that she outstretches for Lexa to take.

Lexa scans them and immediately recognises the import of the bullet points. Two columns. Three capital letters headlining each.

NYC and LDN.

Under them, curated virtues of each city stack messily one atop the other, from “Real bagels” and “Frank & Larry’s” in favour of the former to “Free art galleries” and “Non-microwaved tea” as argument for the latter. However, it’s the last identical item at the end of both lists that puzzles Lexa.

Clarke.

“I know it’s kinda late since you’re already at the airport. The lists were supposed to help you decide. I’m sorry for what I said last week. What I should have said when you told me about London was, um, please don’t go,” Clarke begs, an unrestrained measure of hope expelling forth between each
sentence that she pants, still catching her breath.

Lexa stares blankly, nerves fraying and all thought processes several beats behind. Clarke misreads Lexa’s shocked silence as an answer, her expression falls before her brows crease in determination.

“But if you must,” she tearfully negotiates, “let me follow.”

At Lexa’s prolonged silence, Clarke pushes on.

“As an artist, my schedule and place of work is flexible. I’m the boss of me so I could go anywhere, really,” she starts to ramble, “wherever you are,” is tacked on quietly. Clarke then picks up steam to make her case, “My brushes are portable. I’ve got them here in my bag.” She turns to helpfully point to her bag, “Not all of them because that’s a lot. Just a few of the good ones. And I know I wasn’t in London long but I think they sell paint there too. I mean, they must, how else would they fill all those museums and galleries?”

Lexa is perplexed as to why Clarke needs to convince her of which city she belongs. Until realisation dawns.

“And like, ever since Bear Mountain, I’ve been a huge fan of rain. I didn’t bring an umbrella but maybe I can borrow yours until I get my own. Anya wouldn’t lend me hers. She said she’s done more than enough with intimidating the airline into getting me a last-minute seat on your flight. But I don’t understand why she would book a return ticket. I think she doesn’t have faith in me to not screw up again or maybe she just wants me to pay for forcing her to be my travel agent …”

Clarke trails off when Lexa pockets the lists and wordlessly steps in closer. She gently wipes the tears that have spilled over, then reaches for the phone in her hand. There’s a small electric shock when their fingers graze—enough of a jolt to quiet the noise around them. Clarke looks at her scared and expectant. Lexa smiles softly, brushing her thumb over the back of Clarke’s hand to soothe, before refocusing on her task.

She’s startled to find a large crack across the glass. Nonetheless, she persists to tap in the passcode (rightly guessing it hasn’t changed from her birth date), swipes away the flight tracker app to locate the one she needs, punches in the same code again, and then presses the phone to Clarke’s ear.

At the confused look, Lexa places her free hand on Clarke’s hip to steady them both and whispers, “You have voicemail.”

Lexa watches as confusion turns into slow understanding—there’s a pause and a tut while Clarke navigates to the second, more important voicemail message—into disbelieving, unfettered elation. Her heart stammers, observing the swell of emotions playing across Clarke’s face, as the tears come faster than she can stop. Then, Clarke is kissing her, a heart-mending, sweeping kiss that Lexa feels to the bend of her knees.

Everything falls away as they fall into each other.

The earth may quake and the ground split asunder, but in the tremor of Clarke’s lips, Lexa’s universe is remade.

When they pull back, in the clarity of a renewed golden light and brilliant blue, she finally, finally, gets the answer she’s been waiting four long years to hear.

“Yes.”
Chapter End Notes

Next penultimate chapter: Clarke and Lexa figuring out (together) what ‘yes’ means for them and their future. NYC or LDN?

Hello! It's been a hot summer, huh? Hope everyone's keeping hydrated. I can't believe it's already August. Between this chapter and the last:

1) I've made some very fine internet friends, though oddly, most of them seem to hail from Scotland and are of the relic vintage variety. There must be something clexa in the Scottish waters.

2) I have emerged from my cave and am now on Tumblr @theproseofnight. *shudders* That's a scary sentence to write. But come say hi and help me figure out how to use it!

We're headed into the homestretch now, friends. Thanks for keeping me company on this angsty and emo-smut journey. My heart has swelled with the kudos and support from the last chapter. #hearteyes

ps, this instalment's music inspiration: Novo Amor (the entire Bathing Beach album) and Mimicking Bird's Belonging; while Sufjan Steven's Mercury provided the Lexa-inspired feels.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!