Everything is the same as it was
by AphroditesLaw

Summary

Evidently, whatever force had made seven billion people vanish had forgotten to take her. After months of aimless driving, Clarke was certain she was alone in this world. Being held at gunpoint by an angry farmer wasn’t really how she’d wished to be proven wrong.
Chapter 1

Clarke couldn’t really explain what had happened. One moment she had been speaking to a fellow nurse, the next she’d been alone in the hospital, surrounded by resounding quiet. She checked first on the newborn nurseries, horrified to find every bassinet empty, then sprinted outside, searching everywhere for anyone. She tried her phone, the Internet, the radio—all unsuccessfully. She pounded on her friends’ doors, shouted on building rooftops until her voice broke, went to police stations and even opened a manhole, at one point, thinking maybe some people were hiding in the sewers. In just a second, the world had been emptied.

So she drove. She drove from New York to New Mexico, needing to reach her mother. She drove hoping to see faces, to find answers, to assess the damage. She drove around empty cars, drove on deserted roads and through deserted towns. She found the supplies she needed in supermarkets and local stores, often feeling like a thief for walking out without paying. Sometimes, she stopped in bars to dull her excruciating anxiety. She forced herself to sleep in hopes of waking up to crowds in the streets again, but day after day it became clear that a terribly confusing event had occurred and she had not been selected to participate. It was overwhelming—to have the world at her feet but no one by her side to witness it with. She missed having conversations the most. It was torture to ask the same questions knowing they would remain unanswered.

By the time Clarke finally reached her mother’s house in Albuquerque, the last shred of hope she’d clung to vanished. She stayed only a few days in the empty home, in her childhood bedroom, wishing that the last time she had seen her mother had not been on a computer screen. She couldn’t even remember what they’d talked about. Had she made her mother laugh? Had her last words been I love you or was it a quick bye before she dashed to work?

Haunted by everything that had disappeared and everything that remained, Clarke finally left Albuquerque behind. She took out her maps and decided to visit her country. Why wouldn’t she? She had no loans to repay anymore, no endless shifts, no ties left anywhere. Afterward, she’d drive down to Mexico and make her way toward Central America. It would take her months if not years to visit everything the forgotten tourist books praised, but having a destination kept her going and this one was as good as any other. If she didn’t move, her grief would consume her.

Cities and towns didn’t fall apart as quickly as she thought they would, but most started to have a stench. To her surprise, there were still some animals around, though empty kennels and some lonely cows in fields told her that many had been taken as well. She started thinking the world had done a sloppy job. What kind of selective process had occurred? Why them? Why her? The few forlorn and whimpering pets roaming the streets with their leashes dragging on the ground had nearly made her burst into tears. Clarke hoped they’d survive somehow. It was all there was left to do.

The last city she went through was Las Vegas. Clarke found its emptiness particularly unsettling. Something about the black screens and dead lights broke something in her. New York had been grueling to drive through—the City that Never Sleeps, finally asleep—but Vegas felt different. She had visited before with friends and there’d been something contagious about the energy there. But now, Clarke felt smaller than ever when she drove down the Strip at night, witnessing the entirety of Vegas plunged in the dark. She had to get out, and so found herself driving north, toward the smaller towns.

At times she drove silently, but for the most part she sang at the top of her lungs. Artists were gone, but she could preserve some pieces of art. This new world wouldn't swallow it all. She found instant cameras in malls and took a string of pictures, so many in fact that her RV was filled with stacks of
them. She thought there should be someone documenting what happened to the world After.

In Oregon, Clarke found herself appreciating the quiet for the first time. There were dry stretches of land until she reached the forests and the mountains; thick vegetation and flower farms for miles and miles. Clarke had never seen anything like it. One windy morning, she stood beneath the pouring rain, eyes closed as thunder snarled in the sky. When the sun peeked through the clouds again, she lied back in her drenched clothes and waited to dry. The world kept turning as if nothing had changed and Clarke didn't know what to make of it.

The next day, she was on a winding road cutting through the forest when she saw a lake surrounded by the mountains. There was a campsite nearby with dusty tents knocked over by the weather and time. Clarke parked the RV and stretched out her muscles. The buzzing of flies drew her attention to picnic baskets on tables. Plastic containers were still closed, but mold had gotten to the food inside.

Clarke walked on the small pier and sat at the edge with her feet in the water, enjoying the cool breeze and the distant chirp of birds. In these peaceful moments, she often wondered if it was selfish of her to enjoy anything at all. Maybe she was supposed to do something—flick a switch somewhere, press a button, reverse whatever had ended humankind. But there was nowhere to start.

She decided to hit the road again when the wind picked up. Near the lake was a sign planted in the ground that pointed toward a dirt road. It simply read: WOODS FARM, FRESH FRUIT ON SALE. There were many similar signs in the countryside, although vines had slowly started to cover this one. In a few months, it would likely be completely hidden. Clarke decided to drive down the path, hoping to find some fruit trees to satisfy her growling stomach.

She drove past the edge of the forest where the road cut through a field of apple trees on one side and thick grass on the other. At the end of the road was a pale blue house with a wide porch. Clarke parked her RV in the driveway, jumping out with a spring in her step. Fruit was ambrosia compared to her canned goods and she couldn’t wait to sink her teeth into the sweet flesh. But something moving in the grass field caught her attention first. To her amusement, it was a cow. Clarke hadn’t seen any since Utah.

“Stop!”

Clarke bit her tongue in shock, startled by the voice. She spun around with wide eyes and one hand pressed against her pounding heart. A woman stood a few feet away clutching a rifle, though she
only pointed it at Clarke’s feet. Still, Clarke had never had a weapon pointed anywhere near her before and her first reaction was to put her hands up and hold her breath.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered.

There were so many thoughts crossing through her mind that Clarke feared she might simply faint. Here was another human being—finally!—but she had a rifle pointed at her and a determined look in her eyes.

“My cow is not food and my chickens aren’t yours to steal,” the woman said with a scowl. “This is private property.”

Clarke blinked in confusion before understanding dawned on her. “No, no, I would never—I just saw your farm and—I didn’t think there was anyone else here.”

The woman stared at her a moment longer before loosening her grip on the rifle.

“There is.”

“I see that now,” Clarke smiled weakly, glad that the woman seemed more curious than upset. Maybe she was afraid as well.

“Are there others with you?” The woman asked.

“No, it’s just me. I promise.”

It was so… miraculously strange. Clarke couldn’t stop staring at the woman, who didn’t look much older than her. It was clear from the small truck parked on the dirt road that she had come back from somewhere. Now that the initial shock was abating, Clarke felt elation bloom in her chest. She wasn’t alone!

“I… I’m Clarke.”

The woman finally slung her rifle on her shoulder. She still seemed cautious, but at least the air had been cleared.

“I’m sorry to have startled you,” she said. “I was just surprised.”

“It’s all right. I understand.”

The woman chewed on her bottom lip. ”I’m Lexa. This is my home.”

”It’s beautiful.” Clarke shifted on her feet, just now noticing the cow had walked elsewhere. “Are you alone?”

Lexa nodded. “For four months now, ever since…”

“Yes. That.” Clarke was anxious to talk about it. “Do you have any idea what happened? Had they said something on the radio? Sent text alerts? I was at work when everyone just… And it’s been so confusing.”

Lexa shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t know any more than you do. I was at the marketplace when it happened. No warnings. I’m sure people would’ve panicked beforehand if there had been.”

Clarke’s shoulders slumped.
“If it’s any consolation, I met another woman about a week after,” Lexa revealed. “I was picking some of the apple trees when she drove by. She stayed here for a night, but she was determined to get back on the road.”

“Another,” Clarke repeated, in awe. “Who was she?”

“She said her name was Indra Jones and that she was on her way to New Orleans, where her family lived. She had to make sure.”

Clarke had done her share of making sure. She had crossed the country to her mother’s house, her friends’ apartments, even her aunt’s cottage. She had gone to military bases and the White House, thinking that if help was to be found it would be there, but they had been as deserted as the other places.

“Did she say she would come back?”

Lexa seemed to deflate. “She had a gun and one bullet in it.”

"Oh. I see."

Clarke had visited a gun shop once. There were plenty on the road. Her fingers had glided over pistols and shotguns one too many times. Pharmacies and hospitals were just as tempting—she knew what would work. But the final push never came. There was always one question preventing her from doing it: what if they come back? She could only hope Indra Jones would ask herself the same.

“Did your family live nearby?” Lexa asked.

“No, my mother and friends were in Albuquerque.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t find them.”

“I’m sorry about your family, too.”

“My mother was very sick,” Lexa murmured. “It would have been crueler not to take her.”

Clarke didn’t know what to say. She noticed Lexa looking over at her RV in the driveway.

“You live in that?” Lexa asked.

“I do.”

“It’s hideous.”

Clarke frowned, feeling defensive. “It’s practical. I don’t like sleeping in other people’s houses. Empty or not, it feels wrong.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

It was then that Clarke noticed a bandage wrapped around Lexa’s forearm with spots of fresh blood. The nurse in her sprung forward, though she caught herself and stopped a few steps away from Lexa.

"You’re hurt.”

Lexa covered the bandage with her hand, as if self-conscious. “It’s nothing. Just a few cuts.”
“It’s still bleeding. What happened?”

“My neighbor,” Lexa explained with a small grimace. “He must’ve been carrying barbed wire for his fence when… And, well, it was left on the ground and the high grass covered it. I tripped.”

“I can stitch it for you, if you’d like. I’m a nurse. Was a nurse. Well, I still know how to do it.”

“Oh. That would probably be wise.”

“Do you have a pharmacy nearby?” Clarke asked.

“In town. But I’ve brought some supplies over already.”

“Can I take a look at what you have?”

“Yes, of course.”

Lexa looked toward her chicken coup and then back at Clarke. “Would you… like to have dinner with me afterward? I have a good grill, fresh fruit, vegetables. It’s the least I can do.”

The question was a pleasant surprise. Clarke never imagined she would get to share a meal with anyone again.

“I’d love to.”

Lexa smiled briefly, shifting on her feet as if unsure what to say next. It occurred to Clarke that they would’ve never met in the world of Before. This land of orchards and farm animals seemed so foreign to her. She couldn’t even remember the last time she’d been to a marketplace. She’d lived her entire life in big cities, most recently confined to her hospital and cramped studio apartment. Yet here she was, about to dine on a farm in Oregon with a perfect stranger who just a moment ago had a rifle pointed at her.

“I have wine,” Clarke suddenly remembered. “A Screaming Eagle Cabernet. Apparently it’s a cult wine with a price tag in the thousands. The Vegas store had a special lock and everything, but well, the keys were right there.”

Lexa pursed her lips, pretending to think about it. “I would think this is a special enough occasion to try it.”

Clarke let out her first laugh in months. “I would agree.”
Chapter 2

Clarke sat at Lexa's kitchen table, looking around at the hanging pans and fresh herbs in pots. Every surface was clean, but Clarke could tell this home had been well lived in. There were small cracks running along the wooden table, spots ingrained in the counter, and yellowed recipes stuck to the fridge. Clarke thought they looked so old they might crumble from her touch. She wondered if Lexa had lived here her whole life—if the farm had been passed down from generation to generation—but she couldn't see any pictures around.

"This is everything I have," Lexa said as she walked in carrying a basket of medical supplies. She set it in front of Clarke and then sat on the nearest chair.

Clarke sifted through the basket, recognizing over-the-counter drugs she had in her own stock. There were also prescription bottles—and more than Clarke could count. She didn't want to pry, but she recognized the cocktail of drugs commonly used to treat Alzheimer's in late stages. Her slight hesitation must've been obvious to Lexa.

"My mom," Lexa simply said. It was clearly not a topic she wanted to delve deeper into.

Clarke gently pushed aside the pill containers and grabbed the suture kit she'd spotted. It was a bit old school but it would have to do. She set out the thread and needle on a clean cloth and got up to wash her hands in the bucket of water by the sink. Just as she finished soaping them up, she remembered this wasn't a hospital and they had no local anesthesia.

"Shit, I forgot about painkillers. I have some pretty strong stuff in my RV; we can wait until they kick in and—"

"I can take it," Lexa interrupted. She extended her arm and took off the bandage, showing off the four deep indents from the barbed wire.

Clarke bit her lip, trying to read Lexa's steely expression. "Those are deep cuts," she cautioned. "This stitching is going to hurt."

"I've had worse."

Clarke didn't expect Lexa to elaborate and knew stubborn when she saw it. "Whatever you're more comfortable with." She grabbed a wooden spoon and extended it to her. "At least use this if you need to bite on something."

Lexus seemed dubious, but said nothing as she took the spoon. Clarke sat down and set out to clean the wound first, though she noted Lexa had done a good job of keeping out any dirt or grass. She picked up the tweezers and needle holder, relieved that the thread was already in the curved needle. She was a few months out of practice and needed all the help she could get.

"Okay, just think about something else," Clarke suggested.

Lexus arched a brow. "Like the end of the world?"

Clarke paused and looked up at Lexas. Her eyes were a deep shade of green, intense and questioning. It was difficult to look away.
"I could start a conversation if you'd prefer," Clarke offered.

Lexa nodded, motioning for her to continue. Clarke looked back at the wound, trying to think of something to say.

"I sat in the Oval Office," she suddenly remembered. "It was definitely smaller than I thought."

Lexa seemed impressed. "Did you really?"

Clarke hummed in response as she lifted the edge of Lexa's skin with the tweezers, trying to ignore Lexa's sudden hiss. She had to keep focused and Lexa had made her choice. Once she drove the needle into the skin and pulled the thread through the other side, the rest became fairly repetitive. The trick was to keep a steady hand and avoid blinking too much.

"Where else did you go?" Lexa asked in a strained voice.

From the corner of her eye, Clarke could tell Lexa had a white-knuckle grip on the wooden spoon.

"Missouri, Kansas, Arizona—I have a map with x marks and everything." Clarke didn't mind talking about her trips, especially if it kept Lexa distracted. "Most of the time I'd camp outside the big cities, though. They're harder to drive through with all the cars on the streets, not to mention the smells. Then there's also the pets."

"The pets?" Lexa repeated, eyes following the needle and thread.

Clarke barely nodded. "At first it was sad but... then they got aggressive. Hungry."

"I guess that's a natural progression in this world."

"This world can bite me," Clarke said without thinking. As she briefly glanced up, she noticed Lexa had a small smile. Her face had gone a shade paler since she'd sat down, but she tried hard not to show her discomfort.

"No offense," Lexa said, "but I think it already has."

Clarke let out a wry chuckle as she finished another square knot. "I've noticed."

They were silent for a moment as Clarke moved on to the last few stitches. She wouldn't say it out loud with Lexa in pain right by her, but she missed her job. She missed listening to patients and talking them through uncomfortable situations. But however much she missed helping people, or turning the grimaces of children into smiles, she hoped they were at peace now. Sometimes she even dreamed about their brave little faces. It wasn't fair that they had been robbed of the chance to get better. Clarke still couldn't tell if it was mercy or cruelty. Was there a confused child somewhere who'd also been left behind?

"Are you okay?" Lexa murmured.

Realizing her vision had blurred from unexpected tears, Clarke stopped what she was doing and shook her head.

"I'm sorry—I was just—" She tried blinking away the tears. "Oh this is stupid, I don't do this."

"It's all right."

"No, it's not," Clarke shook her head again, refocusing on her task. "I don't want to make a mess."
"It looks very neat."

Clarke took a deep breath before finishing the last knot and cutting the thread. Finally, she set the tools aside and wiped a hand over her cheeks for good measure. She'd done enough crying already.

"It should scar well," she said in a more professional tone.

"Thank you, Clarke."

"Of course."

Lexa bit her lip, seeming hesitant. "It's hard for me, too. The grief. The confusion."

Clarke had the impression that Lexa was not usually someone who spoke about her feelings. But circumstances had changed so drastically. Months of solitude in such a strange world would change anyone, and just being in someone else's presence again felt cathartic. Clarke had yearned for conversations so much. There were only so many times she could talk to animals while they blankly stared at her.

"I can't stop thinking about the newborns in my hospital," Clarke said. "One minute they were alive, wriggling their little toes in the world for the first time, and then…"

Lexa set the wooden spoon aside. "We don't know for sure what it means. Maybe they're somewhere else."

Clarke hadn't meant to get choked up, but voicing the thoughts that had plagued her for months was difficult.

"Do you believe in that? Another place? Other worlds?"

"I didn't use to," Lexa replied. "But I have wracked my brain for a scientific explanation, and…"

"It would have to be one hell of a virus."

Lexa nodded. "I thought maybe it could have been something airborne, even something different in the sun that would make living beings disappear, but…"

"Why not us?" Clarke completed Lexa's train of thought.

"Why not half my farm animals?" Lexa sighed as she rolled up the sleeve of her shirt so it didn't fall over the stitches. Clarke noticed the tattoo around her upper arm for the first time. It was an intricate design with bold lines and swirls. She hadn't imagined a farm girl would have ink that exotic.

"I got sick right after it happened," Lexa continued. "Chills, a high fever—I could barely even stay up. I thought maybe I'd vanish as well, eventually, but then I got better."

At Clarke's confused frown, Lexa smiled tersely. "My mother had the flu, on top of everything else. Turns out that was her last gift to me."

"I'm sorry. That must've been awful."

"At least it forced me to sleep. Honestly it was the best part of my days before I set out a routine for myself."

Clarke had a similar relationship with sleep. At first, it gave her hope. Maybe she'd wake up to the old world. Maybe the nightmare would end. It gave her some comfort that Lexa had the same
experience, even miles away on her farm. But Clarke hadn't gotten sick, and she couldn't imagine her state of mind if she had.

"Were you better by the time you met Indra?"

Lexa shook her head. "Not quite. She actually insisted on making me a three-course meal before she left," she smiled at the memory, but it quickly turned bittersweet. "She said there had to be a reason that I was still here and made me promise I'd look after myself."

"That was kind of her."

"I wish I'd made her promise it, too."

Clarke understood the sentiment, but she doubted it would've made a difference. "We all make our choices. Sometimes what we want for others isn't something we can allow ourselves."

Lexa smiled softly. "Out of all the farms in Oregon, I'm glad it was mine you stumbled on, Clarke."

Clarke meant to voice her agreement, but was cut off by a yawn that she promptly slapped her hand against.

"Sorry," she chuckled sheepishly. "My five a.m. drive is catching up to me."

"You should rest," Lexa offered. "It'll take me a while to get dinner ready anyway."

"No, I'd love to help," Clarke insisted.

"Do you know how to pluck a chicken?"

Clarke paused with her mouth half-open. The very thought was not appealing in the least, but she would have to get over these things quickly.

"I can learn?"

"Learning while tired and hungry is no way to do it. Please, I don't mind. You're my guest."

"If you insist…"

Lexa got up and picked up the supply basket with a victorious smile, "I do."

* * *

Lying back in bed, Clarke stared up at the ceiling of her cramped little bedroom. It was dark and cool inside the RV and she could feel her eyelids growing heavy. Yet, a part of her just wanted to run out and make sure Lexa was still there. She turned to her side and buried her face in her pillow, willing herself to sleep. If none of it was real, if the farm was empty, she couldn't imagine surviving this world anymore. It would be too hard—to have known hope and relief only for it to slip away like sand between her fingers. But if she hadn't made it all up, if there really was a farm girl out there making dinner for them to enjoy together, she could hardly wait to feel alive again. Thankfully, Clarke fell asleep in a matter of seconds.

When she woke, it was to the colors of the setting sun on the walls. She sprang out of bed, only to stop herself in the doorway. She had to calm down first. She wiped her clammy hands on her pants and threw her hair up in a bun, hoping she was presentable. Finally, she grabbed the bottle of wine she had mentioned and took a deep breath.
When she stepped out of the RV, the first thing Clarke saw was the cow grazing in the field. For some reason, it brought her immense joy.

"Don't ever disappear on me, pretty girl."

As she walked toward the porch, the smell of grilled meat made her slow down. She went around the house instead, walking toward the back of it where she saw a plume of smoke wafting in the air.

To Clarke's great relief, Lexa stood behind a small and well-used grill, turning over tender pieces of meat. She had kept her hair up but changed out of her shirt, opting instead for a short-sleeved top that didn't irritate her stitches. She had already set up a table with wine glasses, fresh veggies cut up in bowls, and a basket of breadsticks.

Clarke had been in many backyards Before and After, but this setting took her breath away. It was wide and open, with a vegetable garden further back surrounded by a fence. Of course, the food looked much more appetizing than Clarke's canned tuna and ravioli. She was worried announcing her presence would disturb this peaceful picture.

"Hello," she croaked out.

Lexa's head shot up. For a second, it seemed like she'd also forgotten she wasn't alone anymore.

"Hi," she breathed out. "I was going to knock on your door as soon as this was ready."

"I'm still a bit too keyed up to sleep for long," Clarke explained, feeling oddly nervous. They knew so little about one another, yet were each other's remaining hope that they could still have a human connection in this empty world. It was intimidating to be the embodiment of someone's wishes. Clarke didn't want to disappoint.

Lexa seemed to be thinking the same. "I never thought—" she looked at Clarke like she still couldn't believe it either. "It's just been…"

"Lonely?" Clarke prompted.

"Yes."

Clarke relaxed and approached her, showing off the bottle of wine. "At least we have something to toast to," she said, trying her hand at a lighthearted tone. She hated how clumsy she felt. She used to be good with people—were four months alone really enough to change that?

Lexa smiled. "There's a corkscrew on the table."

Clarke set out to open the bottle, admittedly with little difficulty. She'd… opened a decent number in the past few months. She poured the wine in the glasses and looked toward Lexa, who was plating the chicken. It looked and smelled incredible. Clarke sat on one side of the table, with Lexa taking her place in front of her.

"This looks delicious, Lexa. Thank you."

Lexa nudged the bowl of tomatoes and cucumbers toward her. They looked at each other for a beat, perhaps suddenly stricken by how unfamiliar this all was. Humankind had vanished but somehow here they were, two girls about to have dinner together while the sun dipped down and the wind breezed through the willows and fruit trees in the fields nearby.

"This is kind of crazy," Clarke whispered.
"I know. Do you ever feel…" Lexa toyed with her napkin, "when suddenly you're at peace, or content, that you're—"

"Selfish?" Clarke asked. "All the time."

It was the same thought she'd had at the lake and many other times before. How could she enjoy herself when the rest of the world was gone? How could she not be trying to find a solution? How could she be eating candy bars or lying on beaches while it was entirely possible billions of people were stuck somewhere in terrible pain?

"But…" Clarke continued, "I've been to so many places trying to find a sign and coming up empty. Eventually I realized it would drive me mad to live that way."

Lexa nodded, shoulders relaxing.

Clarke chewed on her bottom lip. "Should we try the wine?"

"Please."

Clarke poured the wine and lifted her glass for a toast. She hadn't planned what to say, but the words came naturally. "To those we've lost."

Lexa took a deep breath. "And to those we might find."

After they clinked their glasses, they both drank slowly, savoring the wine that Clarke had taken without ever believing she might share it. Lexa in particular seemed to like it. She let out a small hum and licked the residue on her top lip.

"Wow."

Clarke had to take another sip. "It definitely beats $2 dollar wine in a can."

"Vegas, you said?" Lexa asked. "I think another trip might be in order."

Clarke grinned. "I'm sure we can find a new supplier. We are in Oregon, right?"

Lexa chuckled. It was then that Clarke realized she'd said "we" as if Lexa and her would spend any more time together after their dinner. Truth be told, Clarke didn't know how to broach the subject. She had hoped for months to find someone else. Now that she finally had, would she really be able to drive away? At the same time, she couldn't impose herself on Lexa, who had yet to mention anything about the future. Maybe it was useless to worry about it. Maybe all Clarke had to do was eat, enjoy their conversation, and let things happen as they would. After all, they could both be gone by dawn.

"There are a few shops in the nearest city, but I haven't gone yet," Lexa said. "Still plenty of supplies in town."

Clarke wondered if Lexa had ever left the farm. "Have you lived here your whole life?"

Lexa started to cut her chicken. "No, I was kic—" she stopped herself. "I left when I was a teen to live in Portland with my uncle. I only came back here last year, when my mother's disease got worse."

"So you were in Portland before that?" Clarke asked, curious to know more about Lexa's life.

"Actually, I was kind of all over the place. A lot in D.C.—but mainly different countries."
Clarke arched a brow. "An explorer?"

"Photographer. Mostly for National Geographic."

"Holy shit."

Lexa smiled proudly while she ate her chicken. "It was fun."

"That sounds incredible."

"Well, I didn't save any lives."

Clarke started eating as well. "Who knows—art can save people, too." She savored the fresh food, delighted by everything. "This is so good, by the way."

Lexa seemed pleased. "I'm glad you like it."

As they continued eating and drinking, Clarke felt a breeze and heard the rustle of the trees behind them. She let out a small sigh. "It's so peaceful here."

"Hm-mm, always been that way." Lexa looked at Clarke, the curiosity plain on her face. "Can I ask you a question?"

Clarke let out a small laugh. "I mean, we've sort of got the time for that, yeah."

"You said you drove a lot, crossed states… Did you have a stop in mind?"

Ah. So there it was. Clarke shrugged. "I kind of figured it'd come to me. I mean, hard plans are kind of pointless now, don't you think?"

Lexa looked down, making Clarke worry she'd said something wrong. Then, Lexa took out a folded piece of paper from her back pocket. She smoothed out the creases and slid it over to Clarke. It was a bullet point list:

- GET GARDEN NETTING
- MORE TOMATO PLANTS
- CLEAN CHICKEN COUP
- FIX GATE
- FIX ROOFTOP

It was the first five of a list of twenty, and Clarke got dizzy just reading it all. It was a lot for one person to do alone.

"Plans and goals are all I have," Lexa said. "That's how I get out of bed every morning."

Clarke nodded slowly, understanding the difference in how they coped on a daily basis. While she drove around and stopped based on one general idea of exploring the world, Lexa had her entire days carefully detailed.

"That's a lot of things to do," she said.

Lexa folded up the paper again. "But at least it's something."

Clarke couldn't disagree with that. They continued to eat their meal, with the topic returning to Clarke's explorations. She mentioned snooping around the White House and often choosing to take a dip in fountains.
"I got too creeped out in Vegas," she shared, "but the bathing potential in the fountains of Bellagio? Too good to pass up, even without the water show."

Lexa grinned, clearly amused by the thought. "We don't have fountains here, but we do have a very clean lake."

"Oh yeah, I stayed on the pier for a bit. It's beautiful."

Lexa's ears went a bit red. "Really? I was there earlier this morning. That would've been some way to meet."

Clarke watched as Lexa took another sip of wine. "Why? Were you naked?"

Lexa nearly spluttered out her drink. "That's not what I—well—"

"I was naked in the Bellagio fountains," Clarke shrugged. "What's the point otherwise?"

Lexa's mouth parted open as she blinked at Clarke, somewhat amazed by the turn in conversation.

"That's one way to see it."

Clarke felt relieved that their conversations came so easily. Maybe it was because of the situation, but her gut rarely failed her. So far, Lexa had been kind, generous, and open enough to share details of her life. They had clearly had different upbringings and led very different lives, but they could still find common ground in their stories. They could learn from each other.

"How do the stitches feel?" Clarke asked, glancing at them.

"Itchy."

"That's normal," Clarke said. "But don't scratch."

"Is that your professional advice?"

"Yep. Certified."

Clarke grabbed a breadstick and enjoyed its crunchiness. She'd never thought to grab a box before, too busy trying all the chips flavors she could find. Most of them were vile.

"From the only Italian restaurant in a sixty mile radius," Lexa revealed. "I used to go all the time when I was a kid."

"They're really good. All of this is amazing, Lexa. I can't thank you enough."

"You brought the wine."

"Ah, yes," Clarke took the bottle and poured both of them another glass. "My redeeming quality."

When she looked back up, Lexa was staring at her with a small smile. "You should stay," she said. Clarke's own smile vanished. Had she heard Lexa right?

"I mean, if you want to, you can," Lexa corrected herself. "I have a guest room, but obviously you could stay wherever you like. It could be a day, a week..." Growing a bit uncertain, Lexa's voice lowered. "It's just... been so nice to talk to someone. To you."
Clarke didn't want the hope blooming in her chest to be dashed. "Lexa… Are you sure? I don't want you to feel like you need to offer. You've already invited me in your house, cooked for me—and I don't even have anything to offer back. I've just got an ugly RV blocking your driveway."

"I don't expect a give and take," Lexa shrugged. "There aren't any rules anymore. No laws, no barriers, no social guidebooks. I don't feel obliged to feed you or house you—there's plenty food and space all around us. But I let one person go before, and I've regretted it every day."

Earlier today, Clarke had driven without a goal in mind. She'd taken pictures of Oregon, eaten dry cereal in a forest clearing, and found her way to a gorgeous lake. She'd thought the highlight of her day would be to find fruit trees, but instead she'd found a woman her age who invited her to dinner in her backyard. Now, she was invited to stay longer. Clarke didn't know what the future held, or if she even cared anymore, but she knew the answer to her earlier question: she couldn't drive away. Not yet.

"I'd love to stay."

Chapter End Notes

I know some parts can be angsty, but I promise it'll get lighter.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night wasn't as restful as Clarke hoped it'd be. After dinner, Lexa and her had cleaned up and Clarke had insisted on doing the dishes. Lexa had shown her the water trough, which was originally for two mules that had unfortunately vanished. She'd also shown her the gallons of water she had stocked in the small shed by the chicken coup. Despite the boundless resources free for them to grab, Clarke could tell Lexa wasn't the wasteful type. She still used the farm compost bin, burned the rest of the trash every end of the week, and was generally careful about water. Clarke didn't really understand the point of it all, having gotten used to chucking her own trash in dumpsters or ditches on the road. She wasn't a complete slob, but her ecological footprint was hardly a concern. Earth was already getting a considerable break from Man's garbage.

By the time Clarke had finished up, Lexa had tidied up the backyard and the kitchen. She'd offered Clarke the guest room, where she'd changed the sheets and even put some lavender in a vase. Clarke felt impolite for declining, but sleeping in anyone else's bed still made her uncomfortable. She'd tried sleeping in a hotel once, reasoning that it was fine to put to use the brand new sheets, but she had tossed and turned all night, having the eerie feeling that she was not in her place. The RV had been a no-brainer once she'd come across the dealership. She had made it hers and every inch of it was now familiar and safe.

But tonight, clutching her pillow close, Clarke felt a weight on her chest. She hoped Lexa didn't find her ungrateful. A part of her also wished that she had something to offer back, no matter what Lexa had said. It was true that there were no more rules anymore and that civilization was gone, but it didn't mean they could forget what was ingrained in them. She'd have to find what could make Lexa happy.

As her grip on the pillow finally loosened, Clarke had one last thought for Indra Jones. She knew only her name, and that perhaps she might have used her gun already, yet she had hope that one day she might also meet her. It was clear that the woman had had a great impact on Lexa, not only to help her regain her strength while she was sick, but also to convince Lexa she had what it took to survive. Clarke had been on the road for months and not seen a single soul, let alone affected anything other than the insects that might've crashed on her windshield. It was rather incredible that Lexa had stayed on her property and met two people already. What were the odds of that?

_Maybe all paths lead to a farm in Oregon_, Clarke sleepily wondered…

* * *

It was a knock that woke Clarke up this time—or rather, startled her awake. Bleary-eyed, she made her way to the door and found Lexa standing outside holding a pot of coffee. She was still in her pajamas—cotton shorts and a grey tank top—and her hair was half-up in a bun that didn't do much to keep flyaway strands out of her face. In all fairness, she had quite the long locks. Clarke had choppily cut her own hair out of sheer boredom and it still looked just as untamable in the mornings.

"I'm sorry; did I wake you?" Lexa asked.

Clarke quickly shook her head. "Trust me, being woken up by someone knocking on my door might be my new favorite thing."
Lexa smiled softly. "I thought you might like some freshly brewed coffee. I also have eggs and toast."

"You have bread?" Clarke asked, surprised.

Lexa nodded. "I make it myself. Just had to lug over a camp oven, along with other portable appliances." She stopped herself, suddenly amused. "What have you been eating exactly?"

"Pop tarts, canned crap, microwavable goods…"

"You have a fridge at least, right?"

"Uh-huh."

Lexa narrowed her eyes. "And what's inside it?"

Clarke ran her hand down the RV door, pretending to think long and hard. "I think… beer? Some carrots."

"I see. Breakfast of champions right there."

Clarke noticed that Lexa was now trying to fight a full grin. She crossed her arms, feeling defensive. "Okay, look, I just grab whatever's in nearby stores. It's saved me the hassle of daily plans."

Lexa hummed in understanding, though it didn't seem she was particularly impressed with Clarke's way of living. Obviously, she preferred a planned approach. "We can check the stores in town today. Stock up on the stuff you like so you don't need to go back and forth."

"But coffee first, right?"

Lexa chuckled. "Of course."

Clarke had a sudden idea. "Why don't you come in? It's nice and cool in here and I've got a table that seats four. Plus, it'll help make me feel like I'm not a complete parasite."

"You're not," Lexa softened. "Do you have a burner?"

"Yeah, I can make the eggs."

Lexa glanced inside the RV. She was clearly curious and Clarke felt excited to have her over—which was ridiculous considering this was just her crappy RV and Lexa had an entire farm for cooking and eating space, but still, it was finally something she could offer.

"Okay," Lexa said, "I'll be right back."

She gave Clarke the pot of coffee before heading toward the house to grab the rest of their breakfast. Clarke quickly went back inside to wipe the table and kitchen counters before pouring the steaming coffee in two mugs. She didn't have any flowers to put on the table but at least everything was clean. Just in case, and because the bedroom had no door, she also made her bed.

Even if she'd left cooking behind four months ago, it didn't mean she'd completely lost her skills. When Lexa came back with a basket of sliced bread, a crate of eggs, apple slices and jam, Clarke invited her to sit down at the table, which was more of a corner booth than anything but still comfortable. She then grabbed a pan she'd never used and cracked the eggs over some olive oil that she usually doused on her microwavable rice.
"It is nice in here," Lexa said, echoing Clarke's earlier words.

She looked around at what Clarke had done with the space, taking in the various little details. Just as she was about to sit down, she spotted an opened bag of chips on the kitchen counter. Beneath it was a thick stack of photos.

Clarke followed her line of sight and suddenly felt her face heat up in embarrassment. She hadn’t cared about the quality of her pictures because she hadn’t really believed anyone would see them, let alone a professional photographer.

"Oh um, those were just a way to kill time," she explained in a near apologetic tone.

"May I look?" Lexa asked.

Clarke had to keep herself from cringing so visibly. "Sure, but no criticism of angles or solar flares please."

Lexa picked up the photos and sat down at the table. "I'll be gentle."

As she flipped through them, sometimes staring a few minutes, Clarke resumed her task of making the eggs. She focused on it purposefully, too self-conscious to look at Lexa looking at her pictures. Or maybe it wasn't embarrassment—maybe it was because someone else was finally seeing what she had seen for months. Lexa was witnessing this world with her and Clarke worried it might be too much for someone who hadn’t been away from her land more than a few miles.

When she plated the eggs on top of the toast and brought them to the table, Lexa was on a photo of the deserted 18th street in Washington. Clarke had taken so many shots that she couldn’t even remember snapping this one.

"I used to walk there every day," Lexa said, her thumb brushing over the cars. "It was one of those streets that always stayed busy, no matter the time."

"I felt that way when I got to Times Square," Clarke murmured.

Lexa stared at the photo a bit longer before finally setting the stack aside. "These are good," she changed the subject with a smile. "They should be in a gallery somewhere."

"I think attendance would be a bit low."

Lexa shrugged. "You never know. We could put signs and billboards up."

"Well, if it's going to be that elaborate we should at least have a joint gallery. I imagine you have loads of pictures—we could do a Before and After theme."

Though the conversation had started in a lighthearted way, Lexa suddenly tensed.

"I... actually don't have any photos of mine at the farm."

Clarke frowned in confusion. "Why not?"

Lexa started putting jam on her toast, maybe in an effort to distract herself. "My mother was never really into art. It was all fantasy to her—distractions from real labor. I didn't see the point of frustrating her with something she didn't understand, so I left everything behind."

Clarke wrapped her hands around her mug, feeling her heart ache for Lexa. "I'm sorry to hear that."
Lexa looked up at Clarke with a sad smile. "We all make our choices, right?"

Clarke nodded at the phrase she had uttered so many times. It was one her own mother had repeated throughout her childhood. Abigail Griffin had always let her daughter make her own decisions when it came to her path in life, celebrating her achievements and encouraging her through failures. Clarke couldn't imagine what it was like to have a mother so completely removed from her daughter's life that she didn't have one single photograph of hers. It made sense now why the house walls were so bare.

"You came back here despite everything," Clarke remembered Lexa saying. "That couldn't have been an easy decision."

Lexa took a slow sip of her coffee. "This place is still my childhood. My mom was still my mom, even when she couldn't remember me. I think I would've wound up here anyway if I was still in D.C. four months ago."

Clarke wondered what made Lexa so sure.

"What's the first place you wanted to drive to after it happened?" Lexa asked, as if in answer to Clarke's thoughts.

It wasn't hard for Clarke to remember what her first instinct had been once she'd panicked her way through New York. "My mom's."

Lexa nodded, having made her point. "I'm actually thankful I was already here. I know how to live off the land—how to make this work in the long term, if there is one."

"So you don't see yourself ever leaving?" Clarke gently prodded.

Lexa seemed to consider her response carefully. "I've already seen the world. I've seen parts of it that most people never dreamed of. I don't want to see it like this," she said, glancing at Clarke's photos. "It's not worth it."

"There's still beauty out there," Clarke felt the need to respond. She had traveled enough to see it. The world had not been emptied of its colors and sounds. Clarke would not have survived this long if it had—if she hadn't found some comfort in the twitter of birds or the smell of rain.

"Be that as it may," Lexa answered, "I've chased enough sunsets."

It seemed to Clarke that Lexa wanted to move on from the conversation, which she couldn't refuse her. They ate their food and drank their coffee more silently than their previous dinner, which felt strange to Clarke and yet oddly familiar. She had gotten used to silence and it was nice to share it with someone.

When the end of their breakfast neared, Lexa was sponging up the egg yolk with the rest of her toast. She was meticulous about getting her plate wiped clean.

"For someone who only has beer and carrots in her fridge," Lexa said after her last bite, "you make surprisingly tasty eggs."

"I'm known to have a few surprises up my sleeve."

"Anything else I should know about?" Lexa asked.

Clarke sat back, resisting the urge to prop her feet up on the table as she usually did. "Let's see... I
used to be a bartender to pay my tuition. I could make us some pretty stellar margaritas tonight.”

Lexa cracked a smile. "Do you always think about cocktails right after breakfast?"

"You don't?"

"I could be convinced to start."

Clarke grinned. "Is there anywhere in town we could grab some tequila and lime juice?"

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Lexa's pickup truck was not nearly as uncomfortable as it looked. Although its rust and dents dated it back at least twenty-years, the inside was sparkling clean and Lexa had hung an air freshener that reminded Clarke of the Laundromat by her New York apartment. These days, it wasn't often that she thought of her old place with fondness rather than overwhelming melancholy.

They left in the early afternoon and drove down the path Clarke had taken to get to the farm, which Lexa explained was the quickest way into town. Once they got to the lake, Clarke spotted the half-covered sign that pointed toward the farm.

"You know, we would've missed each other if I hadn't followed that sign," she realized.

Lexa had her eyes trained on the road, used to its bumps and turns but still focused. "We would've crossed paths."

Clarke looked at her, surprised by the confidence in her tone.

"What makes you so sure?"

"If you'd arrived earlier, we would've met at the lake," Lexa said, reminding Clarke of their dinner conversation. "If you'd ignored the sign and hadn't driven toward the farm, we would've still crossed paths on this road. I think it was a bit inevitable actually."

Clarke liked the thought of that; something inevitable in this volatile world.

"Where were you coming from anyway? Your neighbor's?"

Lexa nodded. "I've been feeding his chickens. I wanted to bring them over to the farm but there's not enough room in my chicken coup. I've been thinking of building something bigger for them all—maybe a fenced-in area in the field. I'd just have to move Luna to the apple field."

"Luna? Is that the cow?"

"Hm-mm," Lexa hummed in response as the car finally passed over the edge of the forest. They were clearly still deep in the countryside, with empty fields and meadows on both sides and the dusty road stretching ahead of them for what looked like miles. It was a shame the world hadn't kept more cows around to peacefully graze.

A chilling thought crossed Clarke's mind. "Are you uh… planning to keep Luna around or…?"

Lexa gave her a quick glance. "Are you asking if I'm going to slaughter my only cow?"

Clarke winced. "Sorry, you don't have to answer that."

Lexa didn't seem to mind Clarke's line of questioning. "We only had dairy cows on the farm, but I
sold them after taking over. There was just this one cow—I found out she was pregnant the day before the sale, so I kept her. She gave birth six months ago on a full moon. Even my mom came out to help—she kept bringing the vet and me sandwiches and cut up fruit." As she spoke, Lexa's small smile stretched into a genuine grin. It was the first time Clarke heard her share a good memory of her mother. "Luna's here to stay, though I wish I could find her a friend. She misses her mom."

With the last part spoken more quietly, Clarke had a feeling Lexa shared the sentiment.

"I saw a cow in Utah," Clarke remembered. "I'm sure she could use company, too."

Lexa chuckled. "That's farther than I was thinking."

"Yeah, but I've got all the music you could want and a DVD player," Clarke bragged.

"It's been a while since I've seen a movie…"

"We could grab some DVDs at a department store."

Lexa hummed in a noncommittal way, still staring ahead at the road. Clarke knew to drop the topic of a longer travel, though she still couldn't align herself with Lexa's view of remaining in one place. The farm was beautiful and Clarke was looking forward to exploring and knowing every inch of it, but there was still so much out there to see…

As the road widened and they passed a few scattered houses, it became clear that they were getting closer to town. Finally, Clarke noticed a welcome sign ahead marking their entrance into the town of Polis—population 6000.

Lexa sighed and started slowing down. "Population 0 and a few stray cats."

She drove the truck around cars still on the road, seemingly used to the pattern of her zigzags.

"Why don't you just move them out of the way?" Clarke suggested. "Keys are still inside."

"I did it for the first ten," Lexa drawled, "Got very lazy after that."

Clarke narrowed her eyes at her. "You like the obstacle course, don't you?"

Lexa fought back a smile. "Makes the drive a bit more interesting."

"Of course." Clarke looked out the window, trying to memorize each turn Lexa took. Soon, more houses and buildings came into view. Clarke was particularly interested in the brick-wall police station.

"The Polis Police?"

Lexa let out a puff of laughter. It couldn't have been the first time she heard that, but the genuine wonder in Clarke's tone must've gotten to her.

"Now try saying that over and over again."

"Is that how you had fun as a kid?" Clarke teased.

"Yeah, tongue-twisters ad nauseam," Lexa bit back.

"All right, you don't have to go all Latin on me."
Lexa pursed her lips like she was contemplating something. "That was a worry of mine; that I would meet someone else but we spoke different languages. I brought back a bunch of books from the library—Spanish, Mandarin, Italian. I know some French from my trips but it's hardly—"

"That was your main concern?" Clarke asked. "Because mine was more along the lines of being stuck with a bigoted prick or a murderous cult leader."

"It crossed my mind as well," Lexa answered very seriously.

"That explains the rifle."

Lexa squirmed in her seat. "I thought dinner made up for that."

Clarke chuckled. "It did."

Her smile fell as they passed the marketplace, made obvious by the tons of decaying food on the stalls.

"That's the part where you breathe through your mouth," Lexa said as she pressed harder on the gas pedal.

A whiff of rotten food was enough for Clarke to hold her breath. She looked away toward the stores instead, but the florist shop and its dead flowers in buckets wasn't exactly a gleeful picture either, though one she was accustomed to by now.

They stopped a few minutes later in the town centre, where the air was much easier to breathe. They got out of the car and looked around at the various stores, which included the pharmacy Clarke remembered Lexa mentioning. Clarke zeroed in on the large grocery store next to it, but Lexa had another idea.

"Let's do the bakery first," she suggested. "I have a feeling you're going to eat my bread at an alarming rate and we need all the dry ingredients we can get."

Clarke pretended to scowl. "You offered."

"I just want to make sure I keep up with the pace of demand," Lexa retorted before heading toward the small bakery.

To Clarke's surprise, the shelves and display cases inside were all empty. There were only crumbs and specks of flour left behind, and the door to the back was ajar. By the way Lexa immediately walked toward it, it was obvious she'd been here before. Maybe she'd cleaned everything up to avoid a situation like the marketplace, though that was another thing Clarke couldn't really see the point of doing. Cleaning up this world was a waste of energy.

The back room was completely dark until Lexa turned on her flashlight and beamed it toward large sacks on shelves.

"Should we take them all?" Clarke asked.

Lexa shook her head. "Room temperatures change all the time at the farm. It's better to just keep them here."

Clarke often wondered about the expiration dates on the food she found. It wasn't a problem yet, for the most part, but one day it would be.
After some deliberation, they grabbed a sack of flour, sugar, and yeast and lugged them over to the back of the pickup truck.

"Now for the good stuff," Clarke said before marching toward the grocery store.

Lexa walked by her side and opened the door, which triggered a small bell. "You're very easy to please."

Clarke was about to pretend outrage when she realized Lexa was right. She was hardly a picky forager.

It was dark inside the store but the wide windowpanes allowed enough afternoon sun to be their natural light. Clarke grabbed a shopping basket and walked down the alcohol aisle, which she found overstocked with packs of beer and not much else. There were only a few red wines, some vodka, and a sad bottle of Jack.

Lexa appeared at the end of the aisle with her own basket. "I'm going to grab some of the dry foods."

"Is there a storage room?" Clarke asked. "I need to check their booze because this here is a bit sad."

"Oh. Yeah, Polis beer was a favorite here."

"That's great, but it's not going in our margaritas."

Lexa turned around. "Door in the back is the storage, but it's pitch-black and cramped in there. This store is older than the farm."

Clarke set her basket down and turned on her flashlight. "I found my way into and out of a Vegas cellar with a book light—I can handle this."

At Lexa's arched brow, Clarke offered a sheepish smile. "Long story."

Clarke made her way to the door and walked inside the back room with a tight grip on her flashlight. 'Crammed' was a nice way to describe the room. The metal racks were old and rusty, with full boxes of supplies stacked one on top of another in mismatched ways. Whoever had been in charge hadn't cared much about organization. It smelled unbearably stuffy and mold was growing on the humid walls. There was a leak somewhere and rainwater had clearly found its way inside a few times, but that wasn't Clarke's problem.

She moved sideways down one of the aisles, shining the light on the various box labels. There was still a lot of produce they could move from here, though Clarke wasn't sure she wanted to risk eating any of it, dry or not.

She was at the back of the last rack when she finally found a stock of large wooden crates with holes for handles, one of them labeled LIQUOR. She crouched down with a wide grin and set her flashlight on the opposite shelf before gripping the handle of the crate. Though she tried pulling it out a few times, the box was firmly lodged between two shelves without even a hair's breadth of space. It was no wonder no one bothered restocking the store shelf when they couldn't even pull out this crate.

But Clarke had promised margaritas. She gripped the handle with both hands and put her back into it, pulling as hard as she could. When the box started to give, Clarke's burst of adrenaline prevented her from noticing the shelf starting to sway with each hard pull. Emboldened by her success, she tugged at the crate harder, tongue pressed between her teeth as sweat started to form on her forehead.
The crate dislodged so abruptly that Clarke stumbled against the back rack, bringing the crate with her in a forceful motion. The chain reaction was inevitable. Clarke only had the reflex to throw herself to the side before the entire shelf came crashing.

Boxes slid out too quickly for Clarke to think. She cried out when a heavy crate landed on her foot, its sharp corner pressing into her bone. She tried pulling her leg out but found that it only made it worse. The crate was firmly lodged beneath the metal beam of the shelf, pushing down and threatening to crush her foot.

Clarke suddenly saw spots of white, her voice gone as her mouth hung open in pain. She tried to grab the beam of the shelf but couldn't muster enough strength to pull it up, feeling like the crate weighed heavier by the second. She started coughing as thick dust lodged itself in her throat.

"Clarke!" Lexa suddenly called out. "Where are you?!"

Clarke used the last of her voice to crack out a reply, "Over here!"

Lexus's flashlight suddenly beamed into her eyes, causing Clarke to screw them shut.

"Oh my god," Lexa said before rushing to her side. She set the flashlight in an upright position, casting some light around them, before quickly assessing the situation.

"I'm going to pull this up, okay?"

She gripped the metal beam that was trapping the crate and pulled as hard as she could, getting it to budge after a few seconds. Clarke felt the crate's weight lighten enough for her to pull out her foot, but the sudden movement made the pain spread out like fire. Lexa carefully let go of the beam before kneeling by Clarke's side.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" She asked, clear panic in her voice.

Clarke shook her head, feeling hot tears leaking down her cheeks. "I screwed up."

"You didn't screw up," Lexa said. She grabbed the flashlight and slid it beneath her belt so that its beam was directed toward the floor. "Accidents happen."

Though Clarke could hardly see Lexa's face anymore, she heard her take a deep breath.

"I'm going to carry you outside, is that okay?"

Clarke took a shuddering breath and nodded several times, still shell-shocked but desperate to see the condition her foot was in. Please don't be broken, she thought, please, please, please.

She felt Lexa's arms beneath her knees and back, and in one swoop with just a bit of wobble, Lexa was carrying her out of the back room with careful steps.

"Almost there."

Clarke could feel Lexa's arms trembling slightly, but she didn't waver and soon they were out of the store.

"I—I need to see," Clarke said.

Lexus nodded, lowering Clarke to the pavement. With shaky hands, Clarke started taking out the laces of her boot. Lexa watched keenly, aware that it wasn't going to be pretty. After a pained moan, Clarke finally slid her boot off. She inhaled sharply before pulling off her sock.
"Oh fuck," she whimpered.

Lexa swallowed hard at the sight of the angry bruise stretching over Clarke's foot. She watched as Clarke leaned over, running her fingers down the skin with her teeth clenched.

It hurt. That was all Clarke could think of. The burn and pulsing of the pain kept tears in her eyes as she tried assessing whether or not she had completely fucked herself over. But when she managed to wiggle her toes and saw each one move, a certain relief washed over her in an instant.

She let herself fall back on the ground. "Oh thank god."

Lexa kneeled closer. "What is it?"

"I think it's just a contusion," Clarke replied, finally breathing more easily.

"That's great!" Lexa rejoiced before catching herself. "I mean—better. Are you sure?"

"No way to know for certain," Clarke winced as she sat back up. "But I didn't hear a crack and I can wiggle all my toes. No huge swelling either yet. I think my Timbs might've saved my foot on that one."

"What about finding a portable X-Ray? Those are a thing, right?"

Clarke blinked, her thoughts far too erratic to be coherent. "I—yeah I guess, but they're not exactly available on every corner."

At Lexa's anxious look, Clarke softened. "Lexa, I may not be a doctor but I've seen my share of broken feet and I also know my body pretty well."

"Yes, of course."

"If the bruising doesn't change colors in a few days, you have permission to revoke my certification."

"I'm glad you can still make jokes," Lexa said, offering her a weak smile.

Clarke nodded, not ready to think about how much worse the situation could've been. All she wanted now was some ice and a bed. "Help me to the car, please?"

Lexa wrapped her arm tightly around Clarke's waist as Clarke slung her arm around her neck. They got up a bit awkwardly but Clarke seemed determined to hop the short distance toward the car. Lexa did her best to support her weight and match her pace.

Finally, Clarke lied across the back seats of the truck with her foot propped up. Now in a more comfortable position, she leaned back against the window and wiped her hand over her clammy forehead.

Lexa handed her a bottle of water and cereal bars she must've picked up in the store.

Clarke caught her hand. "Thank you," she said. The words were not merely enough for the depth of her gratitude, but it was all she could muster for now.

For a short beat, Lexa only stared back at her. "I'll be back in a minute," she said before taking off abruptly.

"Wait—what?"
Clarke tried to twist around in her seat to see where Lexa had gone off to, but her neck was sore from the fall and she figured Lexa wouldn't just carry an injured girl to her pickup truck and never come back.

She occupied herself by staring at her bruise more intently, leaning over to very lightly run her index over the marked skin. It would heal, but she realized with some regret that she wouldn't be able to drive for a bit. At least not her RV with its stubborn pedals.

She heard Lexa's footsteps and looked toward the open door again. When Lexa leaned down, she was breathless and carrying two crutches.

"I didn't think I'd need these when I last went to the pharmacy, but I did remember spotting them." She placed the crutches on the floor beneath the seats as well as a plastic bag with what looked like creams.

Clarke found herself speechless once more. Lexa finished by closing the door and putting their grocery baskets in the back before sitting in the driver's seat. All at once, her shoulders slumped and she let out a long breath.

"Are you going to be okay?" She asked Clarke, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

Clarke wasn't sure if she meant for the drive or in general, but she nodded regardless. "Let's get back to the farm."

Lexa started the car and slowly drove back up the road they'd taken, careful to avoid bumps. They passed all the same stores in silence, both still deep in thought. Clarke wasn't ready to face her stupidity just yet. She'd underestimated the danger and couldn't imagine what would've happened if Lexa hadn't been there.

When they finally drove out of town, the sun was still high up in the sky and casting a nice golden glow on the fields around them.

"Some pair we are," Lexa said, breaking the silence.

It took a few seconds for Clarke to react, frowning in confusion.

"I'm Stitches and you're Bruises," Lexa continued with a small smile, clearly invested in lightening the mood. "But we're going to make it through."

Clarke knew that Lexa was trying to reassure her, but now more than ever she questioned her mortality. It was odd—she had feared disappearing without a warning before, feared being gone in just the blink of an eye, but somehow she'd never worried about the other ways she could die. It was like she had been waiting for her turn to vanish but had forgotten she was still vulnerable to thousands of other dangers.

Yet for the first time, Clarke also realized that this world might never take her at all. She might merely grow old and die naturally, grey hair atop her head and a margarita in her hand.

It terrified her more. But as she looked over at Lexa, who had already given her so much, she felt able to face the days and weeks and months ahead. Maybe Lexa was right not to chase sunsets anymore. Maybe all they could do was enjoy each one for what it was: the sign of another day gone by.

Somehow, Lexa and her were both still here to witness this world turning. Clarke would damn well fight for it to remain that way.
I hope you enjoyed this belated chapter. Thank you for sticking with this story :)

Chapter End Notes
When Lexa offered the guest bedroom this time, arguing that Clarke would be much closer to the kitchen and the backyard, Clarke was too tired to protest. And once she lied back on the mattress and Lexa propped two pillows behind her and one beneath her foot, she couldn't even remember why she'd declined the night before. Being in this bed didn't feel wrong or unsettling. It felt like Before; like nothing had changed and she was a welcome guest in someone's home. She hadn't even realized just how lumpy her own mattress was in comparison to a real bed. It felt nice. Like she could belong here.

So it was no surprise, really, that she fell asleep like a baby. Once or twice she stirred awake, hearing Lexa working in the kitchen or tiptoeing to her own room, but just like when Lexa had knocked at her door, Clarke wasn't bothered by the noise she made. She liked the reminder that she wasn't alone; that she was sharing space with someone. Maybe it was dangerous to get used to it so soon, to want to learn more about Lexa's little sounds and habits, but it wasn't something she'd worry about for now.

When Clarke woke up in the early morning, it was to a painful throb in her foot. She sat up, took off the pack of ice that had now turned to water, and examined the skin as best as she could in the dim sunlight. It was still an awful red color, but Clarke worried more about the slight swelling. There was still a possibility the bone had suffered.

A clinking sound in the kitchen caught her attention. She could make out Lexa's footsteps and a timer ringing before Lexa abruptly turned it off. There was a pleasant smell in the air; fruity and sweet. Clarke wondered if Lexa was making a different type of bread. She turned to the clock and groaned when she realized just how early it was: just past six a.m., barely after sunrise. She'd gotten used to waking up with the sun as a nurse with chaotic working hours, but it was now a habit Clarke wished her body could kick to the curb. It seemed that Lexa had the same problem… though Clarke had a hunch she enjoyed the early wake ups.

After grabbing her crutches, Clarke awkwardly made her way to the kitchen. She stopped when she saw Lexa stood at the counter with an apron and her hair up, reading a cooking book while she chewed on something. Somehow she'd gotten flour on the back of her neck.

"Hey."

Lexus turned around with a surprised look. "Clarke—you shouldn't be up."

Clarke made her way to the table and sat down, leaving the crutches on the floor beside her. "I'm not."

"The timer was too loud, wasn't it?" Lexa asked with a wince. "I'll try to make less noise tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it. What's that smell? It's amazing."

Lexus took off a kitchen towel atop a plate, revealing a deep-dish apple pie.

"It's still a bit hot but I thought you might enjoy this."

"Lexa! You didn't have to go through all that trouble."
"I know. Between my bank appointment at dawn and my meeting with the mayor, I was swamped."

Clarke didn't seem impressed by the quip, which made Lexa smile as she set the pie on the table with plates and forks.

"Do you feel like you have to be Martha Stewart because I'm your guest?" Clarke joked.

Lexa's eyes crinkled as she laughed. She looked a bit tired, possibly because she'd gotten up early enough to bake an entire pie from scratch for breakfast. She took a seat and cut two slices.

"I like baking for myself," she assured Clarke. "Besides, the apples need to be eaten."

"Hm. You should definitely put Luna in the field then."

"It's on the list," Lexa agreed as she gave Clarke her plate.

"God, it really looks delicious," Clarke sighed. "Are you the kind of person who's just good at everything? Because that might be infuriating."

Lexa shook her head. " Barely decent compared to the pies my mom used to make. It's too bad we don't have milk."

The first part made Clarke curious, but she guessed it might be too sensitive a topic this morning.

"Are you a dunker?" Clarke asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"Ever try powdered milk?"

Lexa looked offended. "I grew up on a dairy farm, Clarke. Powdered milk is the Antichrist and that's all there is to it."

Clarke let out a laugh. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was a sore subject."

Lexa nodded as she sunk her fork into the pie. "How do you feel?"

Clarke was momentarily distracted by the sudden catch of sunlight in Lexa's hair. A deep orange glow was starting to wash over the kitchen walls.

"I'm all right," she answered, digging into her food. There was a good chunk of apples and the crust was a beautiful golden color.

"Are you?" Lexa asked again.

Clarke sighed. "It's probably going to take a while to get better. I'll keep an eye on the swelling, but I think my pride took the biggest hit."

"Your pride?" Lexa repeated, confused. "Clarke, that store is so old—those shelves were bound to collapse one day."

"Yeah, you told me and I didn't listen. I had to see it through, because that's what I do." Clarke felt an unexpected surge of anger swell up. "Do you know how many pantries and cellars and basements I've walked into these past few months? I never even stopped to think something could fall on my head and that would be it for me. I was a selfish idiot and I put you in danger, too."
Lexa seemed at a loss, surprised by the sudden outburst and Clarke's harsh choice of words.

"The danger is out there, it's true," Lexa acknowledged softly, "and sometimes we might trip on hidden barbed wire or see rooftops collapse, but... getting mad at yourself for making mistakes in a world we've barely begun to understand... it isn't worth it."

Clarke swallowed back the lump in her throat. "How do you stay so calm?"

Lexa chuckled sadly. "I had my share of breakdowns, I swear. A few weeks ago I yelled at the rain."

"You did?" Clarke tried imagining that; Lexa soaked and angry cursing the droplets of water showering down on her.

"I even threw rocks at the sky like a child."

"Well, I'm sure you had your reasons."

They shared a brief smile as Clarke let go of the tension residing in her shoulders, trying not to think about the store and her foot anymore. Lexa was right: there was no use replaying her mistake and hoping for a different outcome.

"I wanted to talk to you about your list," she said. "I'd like to help with it as much as I can."

Lexa raised a brow. "You can barely walk."

"But I can stand and sit and I'm good with my hands. Surely there's something I can do."

Lexa mulled it over. "Maybe you could do an inventory of the food stock in the shed. At first I used to just grab things and dump them there in a panic, so I'm not even sure what I have and don't have anymore. That would be helpful to know."

"Done."

"But Clarke, I meant it when I said I don't need this to be give and take."

"Maybe you don't need it, but there's no way I'm letting you take care of an entire farm while I deplete your resources."

Lexa rolled her eyes with a smile before getting up to put water in the coffee pot. "You're hardly the greedy type so far."

Clarke watched her move around the kitchen. "That's because I'm on my best behavior... for now." Her eyes fell on Lexa's arm; the redness around the stitches looked much better. "Stitches still good?"

"Hm?" Lexa asked, measuring the coffee. "Oh, yes."

Clarke wondered if Lexa would tell her if she was in pain. She seemed the type to keep it to herself. Thankfully there was no sign of infection so far. "Are you up to date on your tetanus shot?"

Lexa actually snorted. "I've worked around rusty wires and tools my entire life. Don't worry, I'm up to date."

"Good. Just have to make sure everything stays dry and clean. That means no swimming in the lake, by the way."

Lexa turned around with a frown. "That's a bit much."
"As your nurse," Clarke said between two bites of pie, "I get to be the judge of that."

"As your host, I think you'll dislike me smelling like chicken shit every time we sit down for a meal."

Clarke shrugged. "I'm already used to it."

Lexa's mouth parted open, speechless for a brief moment. "I could very easily throw you in the chicken pen."

"Then we'll both smell," Clarke pointed out as she happily picked at the crumbs on her plate.

In the end, a compromise was made: Lexa would still drive them to the lake the next morning and both of them would keep to the shallow end. Clarke let her have this small victory, especially since her own scalp was starting to feel greasy, but she would keep an eye on Lexa's arm. After her scare yesterday, she realized something easily treatable before could now be life-threatening. It made her think back on what Lexa had said about being sick and alone, treating her flu symptoms without proper diagnosis or help. She had probably used her mother's medication, but what if her state had worsened? What if Indra hadn't been there to cook her a meal and convince her to fight back?

Clarke wasn't going to take any unnecessary risks anymore.

* * *

Time was a funny thing. Clarke used to have her eyes on the clock, living from one moment to the next knowing exactly where she had to be and how quickly she had to move. Her weekly schedule was a constant on the fridge. The calendar on her phone was crammed with reminders, chiming at least five times a day. She used to be able to guess the time just based on her hunger or fatigue.

Now? Not so much. Clarke had a wristwatch inherited from her father. It was worn and had a slight crack right down the center, but it still worked and, for a while, after, she'd kept glancing at it. But knowing the time in this world was as useful as knowing how to barter. Slowly, Clarke had stopped keeping up with the days. Mondays disappeared. Weekends held no meaning. All that mattered was the sunrise.

Clarke awoke with it once more the following morning, this time to the distant sound of the rooster's crow. *That's new*, she thought, unable to remember if she'd heard it before. She ran a hand through her hair and down her face, groaning at the sudden cramp in her arm. Had she slept on it?

Oh no. Yesterday. Right. Clarke sleepily stared at the shadows on the wall, giving herself some time to think more clearly. Yesterday had been a quiet day. After breakfast, Lexa had taken her to the shed where she'd set up a chair for her and also a mountain of pillows nearby, if she needed them. She'd taken all the crates of food down from the higher shelf and then, on Clarke's insistence, left her to it.

The task had not been amusing in the slightest. Clarke had spent the day going through bags of rice, beans, corn, honey—god, so much honey—and more pasta than she knew existed. She'd counted every jar and every can, written down expiration dates, and even color-coded which they should eat first. Her armpits and shoulders had started to ache so badly from the weight she'd put on her crutches that Lexa had insisted she use one of the creams she'd grabbed from the pharmacy. To be honest, it was rather nice and smelled divine.

Clarke had stayed in the backyard the rest of the evening, lounging on a thick quilt on the grass while Lexa worked on her tomato plants. Lexa had given her some of the magazines her mother and her had read while sick, an entire pile of them that Clarke was eager to distract herself with. At one point,
after glancing at Lexa wiping her sweaty forehead with her garden glove, Clarke had once again been struck by the absurdity of their situation.

That somehow they had made counting cans, planting vegetables, and laying on the grass the new normal of this world. That somehow they could settle because there was nothing else to do. It was absurd and strange and frightening, but it was theirs—and Clarke was too exhausted to deny herself those easier days out of guilt.

Still, sometimes it hung in the air between them. Sometimes they let the silence between conversations last just a bit longer. It wasn't odd—not to Clarke, and she liked to believe Lexa and her understood each other a bit more now, or at least as much as anyone could understand a person after three full days by each other's side in an otherwise empty world. They shared their trauma in those quieter moments, knowing it was much too soon to put it into words. They didn't speak much of what it all meant because neither knew. There was enough comfort in sharing a present and likely a future. And it was a relief that it was with someone like Lexa.

Stretching out her back in bed, Clarke wondered if it meant anything at all that it was Lexa. Why this woman, this photographer who had come back to the family farm to help her sick mother? Would Lexa still be here if she had been stuck in D.C. when it happened? Was she still here because she was Lexa or because whatever circumstances had aligned for Clarke to live had aligned for her, too?

And what of Indra? Clarke clung to Lexa's story, knowing it meant they weren't entirely alone. If three people had survived, why not four? Why not a dozen—a hundred?

Knowing she was venturing into the land of unanswerable questions again, Clarke sat up in bed and let out a yawn while she stretched her arms high up above her head. Her uninjured foot brushed against the crutches propped up against the nightstand, which was enough to make them tilt to the side and fall to the floor with a clatter.

Clarke let out a groan, annoyed with herself. As she bent down to grab the crutches, Lexa entered the room.

"Here," she said, quickly picking them up.

"Thanks." When Clarke looked up to say good morning, she noticed a plastic sheet wrapped around Lexa's stitches and secured with medical tape. Lexa was smiling sheepishly.

"You're going to swim, aren't you?" Clarke asked.

"I made sure the stitches would stay perfectly dry."

"Well now you're suffocating the skin."

"It's not that tight. Anyway, I realized that I can't not swim, Clarke. It's a part of the routine."

"Right," Clarke rolled her eyes, slightly exasperated by this girl's disregard for her own health. "The mighty regimen."

"You're upset."

"Well I thought we compromised."

"Yes, but then last night my leg cramped in bed and—" Lexa stopped, realizing her explanation was piss-poor. "Look, I'll just be crabby all day if I don't. You'd hate me for it. Really, it's best for both of us."
"Right."

Lexa bit her lip. "Do you still want me to drive you there?"

"Yes," Clarke sighed.

"Good. Because I have coffee in a thermos and a breakfast basket all packed. Meet you outside when you're ready."

As she watched Lexa leave the room, Clarke let out a whine and fell back in bed. Lexa was the type to swim at the crack of dawn. Of course she was.

After grabbing some clean clothes from her RV and her bottle of shampoo, Clarke decided to stay in her t-shirt and pajama shorts for the ride. Lexa seemed amused when Clarke dumped her stuff in the back and sat down in the front seat with her foot propped up and her hair still a mess. She watched her buckle up and let out another yawn, and then entrusted her with the thermos of coffee.

"It's extra strong," Lexa said.

They were off on the road after that, passing Luna in her favorite spot beneath a tree. Clarke watched her in the side view mirror until she was out of sight.

"What a gal," she smiled.

Lexa chuckled, "How sleep-deprived are you exactly?"

Clarke kept her hands wrapped around the thermos, enjoying how warm it felt against her skin.

"I'm not sure," she answered, looking out the window as they entered the forest. "I think I slept all right actually. You?"

Lexa kept her eyes on the road. "The usual."

"What's that? Your usual?"

Lexa shrugged. "Six hours?"

"Lexa," Clarke groaned, "We went to bed at the same time. How is that possible?"

"I don't know, honestly. It just takes me hours to fall asleep. Been like that since I came back."

"Do you take anything?"

Lexa arched a brow.

"Pills?" Clarke clarified.

"Oh. No. But I'm used to it now. Happened to me all the time when I was a kid—before Portland. Old habits die hard and all that."

Clarke had noticed before that Lexa had a very particular tendency when she mentioned her past. It was like she had cleaved it in half; the before and after Portland; the farm with her mother and the city with her uncle; both with precise timestamps that Clarke had yet to figure out. She knew Lexa had gone on to become a photographer, but there was still a whole lot of middle to piece together.

"What about you?" Lexa asked.
"Me?"

"Any habits you can't shake?"

Clarke gave herself a few seconds to think. "I used to call my mom every week. Didn't matter how busy I was, I'd always take a few minutes to do it. Every now and then, there's that feeling at the back of my mind—like when you know you're forgetting something. And then I realize it's that: wanting to call my mom to talk about our days."

"What would you tell her?" Lexa asked in a soft tone.

Clarke imagined how the conversation would go and then let out a chuckle. "Hey, mom, I quit my job, but don't worry about me because I'm living it up. Recently I sat my butt in the Oval Office, stole an RV, drove across the country, met a scary farmer, bruised my ankle because I couldn't find tequila, and now I'm on my way to a lake for a morning swim. How are you doing?"

Lexa bit down on her lip to stop her smile from spreading. "That's quite the list of accomplishments."

"Somehow I think she'd be proud. Even the tequila part. My mom had her share of wild days before she had me."

Lexa slowed down, noticing large branches on the road ahead. She quickly glanced at Clarke, perhaps expecting more to her story, but Clarke had fallen silent.

"Did I really scare you?" Lexa asked a few minutes later. The notion seemed to amuse her more than anything else.

Clarke arched a brow, as if it'd been obvious. "You scolded me while holding a gun."

"Because I was scared of you."

"Me? Short blondie in the field of flowers talking to your cow?"

"Talking or deciding how to slice her up—I couldn't tell."

They glanced at each other before breaking into laughter.

"Do you even know how to shoot?" Clarke asked. "Because that thing was pointed at my feet the entire time."

"I'm not huge on guns," Lexa answered more seriously. "I actually found it in the shed when I was sick. Didn't know my mom even owned one."

"I've got one in the RV," Clarke admitted. "I hate it, but one time in Albuquerque some dogs got really aggressive and—I don't know, I thought maybe I'd need it in a situation like that."

"That makes sense."

As the lake came into view, Lexa slowed down again and drove into the small parking lot near the picnic tables. Clarke had forgotten about the fallen tents and baskets. She wondered why Lexa had cleaned the bakery in town but hadn't done the same here. Maybe she just hadn't gotten around to it.

"Should we pick up those tents and add them to the burn pile?" She suggested.

Lexa's entire body froze, like suddenly she had been caught doing something she shouldn't.
"Are you okay?" Clarke asked, confused.

"I… I don't want to do that."

"We don't have to burn them, I'm sure there's a dumpster nearby—"

"No," Lexa blurted out. Her eyes widened and she turned to look at Clarke with a pleading look. "I'm sorry. Those belonged to people I've known since I was a kid. A family. I just can't… erase them from here. Not yet."

Clarke had never seen Lexa look so worried and felt the urge to comfort her. "Of course, whatever you want. I won't mention it again."

"Thank you," Lexa murmured.

After a few seconds of silence, Clarke cleared her throat and offered her a smile. "Should we get out of the car?"

Lexa blinked out of her daze and nodded quickly, "Yes. Let's go for a swim." She grabbed the keys and hurried to Clarke's side to help with the door and her crutches. They made their way down to the lake, settling on a stretch of grass right by the pier. There was still a bit of morning dew but Lexa had brought the same quilt Clarke had used in the backyard the previous day. The breakfast basket was stocked with jam, bread, hard-boiled eggs, and of course another container of apple slices. Clarke had yet to tire of them, but she wondered if Lexa was sick of eating apples every day.

"Do you need any help to get in the water?" Lexa asked.

Clarke looked toward the lake just a few feet away and shook her head. "I'll be fine. You go."

Lexa nodded before moving to the side to take off her clothes. Clarke looked away to be polite, but as she watched Lexa walk to the pier in her underwear without any semblance of bashfulness, she felt silly for acting like a prude. They were both adults. Alone in the world. And Lexa certainly had nothing to be self-conscious about. It didn't really surprise Clarke that she was fit, what with the farm work every day, but she was intrigued by the floral back tattoo, rather unlike the pattern she had on her arm. Mesmerized by Lexa's casual grace, Clarke watched as she set down her soap and shampoo at the end of the pier, untied her hair, and dove straight into the lake. She made so little noise when she hit the water that Clarke couldn't help but compare it to her own style of… well, canonballing.

She looked away after that, letting Lexa enjoy what was clearly an important part of the day for her. Clarke started her own ritual, untangling her hair with her fingers. She checked on her foot one last time before stripping to her underwear and grabbing her soap and crutches. She hadn’t lied when she said she bathed nude, but she preferred taking her cue from Lexa today.

Clarke made her way to the edge of the lake and sat down where the clear water was now up to her waist. She closed her eyes a moment, enjoying the contrast of the sun and the cool water. She lied back for a while, relieving pressure on her foot and letting her hair soak. When she heard the distant splash of whatever swimming technique Lexa was engaged in, Clarke finally soaped up and gave her scalp its much-needed shampoo.

With pruney fingers and her muscles feeling like liquid, Clarke made her way to the quilt where she lied back in a starfish position to let the sun dry her skin. It was a few minutes after that she heard a light chuckle and scrunched up her nose at the sudden drops of water falling on her face. When she opened her eyes, it was to Lexa standing near her with a lazy grin and her hair dripping.

"I sort of thought we could share the quilt, but I see now that you're a hogger," Lexa said.
Clarke would’ve usually had a quick retort, but she was taken aback by the blissful look Lexa was sporting. Her eyes sparkled with renewed energy and she was already braiding parts of her hair.

"I've never had complaints before," Clarke finally answered. She moved to one side and patted the space next to her. "Will this be enough?"

Lexa sighed as she plopped herself down and dragged the picnic basket closer. "I usually require queen-size space, but I'm too hungry to care."

"I'll remember that next time," Clarke smiled, watching Lexa sink her teeth into a jam sandwich.

They stayed at the lake for nearly two hours, drying off in the sun and taking their time with the giant thermos of coffee. They chatted about Lexa's trips as a photographer, the places she had been all over the world and the people she had met. Clarke had never left the United States and so clung to every word, imagining the sights and smells as Lexa described them. After a lull, Clarke felt so comfortable with her full stomach and the soft quilt beneath her that she dozed off. Lexa woke her up half an hour later by brushing her fingers against her arm, pointing out that a few mosquitos were starting to feast on her. Clarke realized the sun had gotten much brighter, a sure indication it would be a hot day.

* * *

Back at the farm, Clarke felt like her energy had spiked before her nap at the lake and it was all downhill from there. Contrary to Lexa, who had planned out a busy day in the vegetable garden again, Clarke felt completely drained.

"The last few days have been a change of pace for you," Lexa gently pointed out when Clarke apologized once more for being so useless. "You said you were always on the road, getting up at dawn, always moving... maybe your body's just trying to catch up on the sleep you missed."

Clarke thought to point out that Lexa also woke up early yet had boundless energy during the day, but perhaps she had a point. She hadn't considered how differently she was going about her life now. She gave herself the day to see if Lexa was right; to listen to her body and sleep even if the sun was high in the sky.

By the time she did wake up, it was the evening and Lexa came to her doorway just a few minutes later. She smiled at Clarke.

"Well?"

"Well," Clarke repeated in a raspy voice, cheeks much rosier than they had been in weeks. "I have officially thrown my sleep schedule out the window. I'm a vampire now."

Lexa chuckled as she walked in the room holding a pile of magazines. "But do you feel better?"

Clarke nodded as she sat up against her pillows.

"Here," Lexa said, handing her the magazines. "You forgot them in the backyard yesterday."

"Oh thank you." Clarke put them on her lap, knowing it'd be a while before she conked out again. "I imagine you reading these with your flu brain wasn't very fun."

"Believe it or not, reading actually pulled me through the days. It was a good distraction."

"Did you do everything you wanted to do in the garden?"
"Yeah, I just need to figure out bird proof fencing though."

"I'll help you with that," Clarke said.

"Okay. It's not too bad yet."

Clarke bit her lip. "Thank you for today, Lexa. The lake and letting me hibernate. I really needed it."

"One day you'll stop thanking me for doing the bare minimum."

Clarke shook her head with a smile and then picked up a magazine. "Well then, I should finish this article on summer's trendiest looks because I'm in desperate need of fashion tips."

Lexa chuckled. "I'll leave you to it. Goodnight, Clarke."

"Goodnight, Lexa."

After letting go of each other's stare, Lexa finally turned around and closed the door behind her.

Clarke settled further into the pillows and flipped through the magazine casually, only reading the short fictional stories and artist interviews. It was hard to give a rat's ass about political pieces and financial tips these days.

After growing bored, she started answering some of the last page quizzes. She noticed that Lexa had answered them as well, though she must've been very feverish when she did it because some circles were completely off the mark and others were very shaky. Still, Clarke got a kick out of reading her results. Apparently Lexa had an abundance of creative energy and her Game of Thrones house was Stark.

Clarke was mid-yawn when she let go of a page and it fell to reveal a spread on a jazz musician—a woman with dark skin and a blinding smile. The title immediately caught Clarke's eye.

INDRA JONES, FROM WASHINGTON TO NEW ORLEANS

It couldn't be.

Clarke quickly sat up and turned the page to the full article, holding her breath as she read the paragraphs. Indra Jones was a jazz singer originally from Washington now living in New Orleans with her family. Her latest album, entitled Promise, would be released in the fall, just two months before the kickoff of her fifth national tour. In her spare time, she enjoyed kickboxing and cooking three-course meals for her family.

Clarke felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. There was no doubt from Lexa's pencil marks in the quiz that she had gone through this magazine. Was it possible that she had met this very woman? Clarke tried remembering exactly what Lexa had told her. That she had had the flu right after and that a woman named Indra Jones had made her promise to survive this new world. That she had been saved from thinking she was alone—saved from giving up.

But every word that Lexa had used to describe the encounter, from the three-course meal to New Orleans, Clarke found in the article. This new world was mystifying, yes, but a coincidence this enormous… Clarke couldn't believe.

Yet she remembered the look in Lexa's eyes, the magnitude of her conviction… And she'd been ill, alone, confused.
She hadn't lied, Clarke thought. Not knowingly at least.

Indra Jones had saved her, but whether or not Lexa had actually met her was another matter entirely.

Chapter End Notes

What?!

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

I'm at aphrodites-law on tumblr if you'd like to chat :D
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sleep eluded Clarke. It was no surprise after she'd spent the afternoon in bed, but she knew that was only partly to blame. She couldn’t stop thinking about Indra Jones, but mostly she couldn’t stop thinking about Lexa. She couldn’t reconcile how the Lexa she had come to know, so focused and self-possessed, could have once been so delirious that she had conjured a woman from a magazine to save her.

Clarke had avoided her trauma for a long time on the road. The confusion of it all had rendered her numb until finally she had arrived at her mother's house and crumbled; knees buckling on the dusty floors of the family kitchen as she let out the sobs she'd smothered for miles and days. But Lexa hadn't traveled. She'd already caught her mother's flu and had been thrust into the new After with the beginnings of a sick mind that would only get worse. Picturing Lexa in her bed, weak and in pain, believing she might die alone, made Clarke ache.

She hoped that she was wrong and that Indra did exist, that she'd been on a trip when it happened and had had to make her way back to New Orleans. But no, circumstances didn't just align themselves so perfectly; a sick and isolated woman reading a magazine and then shortly after meeting one of the featured artists? Clarke had to be rational about this.

It was just that… She had long ago thrown reason and logic out the window. They had no place in this world anymore. Reason had failed her time and time again. And so what if Lexa had hallucinated so vividly that she didn't even think to second-guess herself? She was here; healthy and even driven to survive this world. Did it matter how she'd gotten herself to that point? Clarke knew that it didn't matter to her; she understood the brain and she'd heard more outlandish stories from patients than that of a jazz singer cooking a sick woman a three-course meal. Lexa, consciously or not, had found a way to survive, and that alone mattered to Clarke.

But while Clarke didn't mind the truth, it was likely Lexa would react more poorly. It meant that Indra would be gone for good—disappear like the rest. Clarke imagined herself in Lexa's situation, only that she was the one who had hallucinated her savior, perhaps a farmer with mismatched tattoos, a farmer who liked to bake and swim, and the thought of losing her—of her farmer's soft smile in the mornings disappearing in the blink of an eye… it made her body feel heavy with dread. She'd only had days of it and already the thought of going back to her lonely existence was suffocating.

Clarke wouldn't live that way again. She couldn't, and she understood why Lexa might panic knowing that she had been just as alone for months, realizing that this world might be truly empty outside of their farm. If there was no Indra Jones, there was no one else they knew of.

But if not three, there were still two of them, and they had found each other in such a vast world after only a few months. Clarke could only hope Lexa would find some comfort in that.

* * *

She left her crutches propped against the kitchen counter, her bruised foot held up in the air as she poured the hot water in the French press. Clarke felt like a proper flamingo this morning, only she was missing the pink tinge of sunlight against her skin. It was still dark outside, as silent as ever, but if Clarke was very quiet she could faintly hear the wind chimes near the shed. The light from the lamp on the counter was dim and Clarke made a note to ask Lexa where she stashed batteries—or at
least where they could find a dozen more cordless lamps (preferably not in dark and stuffy
backrooms).

"This is a surprise."

Lexa entered the kitchen with a tired smile, like she had been deep in slumber just a minute ago.
Clarke had learned quickly that Lexa didn't dawdle. If there was something to be done, she either did
it immediately or wrote it on her list. Clarke wouldn't be shocked to learn that Lexa got out of bed
before she was truly awake, listing off the millions of little things that had to be done during the day
as her excuse. She wondered if Lexa was just used to very little sleep or if she purposefully avoided
it.

"I told you I'm a vampire now," Clarke said, pouring the coffee in another cup. They both drank
their coffee black, though Clarke was starting to think more seriously about getting some powdered
milk… if only Lexa would not cast her out of the farm for it.

Lexa glanced out the window. "It's only a few minutes until sunrise, Dracula. You have to make the
most of them."

Clarke smiled as they both sat at the table. "Entertain me, then."

Lexa took a sip of her coffee and then scrunched her nose. "Sorry, I actually need sunlight to be
lively. You'll get nothing out of me."

"Well this breakfast just got very boring."

They laughed together, raspy and still tinged with fatigue. Clarke couldn't keep her eyes off of Lexa,
a part of her desperate to ask questions and the other afraid that it would mean the end of these
mornings together. She looked so harmless in her tank top and sleep shorts, nothing like the hardened
woman who had barked at her that the farm was private property. There was so much more she
wanted to know about Lexa; it was like a hunger that she couldn't shake.

"What's the plan for today?" She asked instead.

Lexa got up quickly to put slices of yesterday's bread in the toaster. "I was thinking of driving out to
a home improvement store. I was putting off the garden netting because it was never really a problem
Before and now there's even fewer birds, but… since you came I realized we can't afford to lose
anything in the garden. I mean technically we could, with our stock in the shed, but in the long run
—" Lexa cut herself off with a sigh. "I just think it's important to have something sustainable close
by."

"Of course. It's nice to have fresh food."

"But not just that," Lexa said. "There's so much more we could improve. We could bring over some
of those big solar generators, water tanks to make a shower in the backyard… I could figure out the
plumbing to get water running to the house again. We could use a cistern and catch rainwater more
efficiently—"

"I can see your mind working a mile a minute," Clarke chuckled.

Lexa cleared her throat with a sheepish smile. "I have ideas."

"Hm." Clarke wondered what had prompted Lexa to think about this. "Can I ask why now? I mean
it's been a few months and it seems like you're already running the farm pretty effectively."
"I guess I've only recently imagined what a long term might look like," Lexa answered. "I have a complicated relationship with this place, but I think it's time to put that behind. Make it better slowly but surely."

"Complicated because you left?" Clarke asked cautiously.

Maybe it was because they were still cloaked in shadows that Lexa finally opened up, or maybe their time together had convinced her that her past was safe in Clarke's hands. Whatever the reason was, Clarke was eager to listen.

"I didn't leave," Lexa admitted. "I was kicked out."

"Kicked out? Why?"

The toaster dinged, startling them both. Lexa grabbed the two pieces and put one on Clarke's plate. She took a deep breath.

"When I was thirteen, my mom caught me holding hands with a girl by the lake. To everyone else it was just holding hands, perfectly innocuous, but to her... I think she knew before I even did that I wasn't her idea of normal." Lexa stared intently at a spot on the table. "Maybe I was stupid not to protect myself when she confronted me, but even back then I couldn't stomach the thought of lying anymore. That same night she told me she couldn't have a lesbian under her roof."

Clarke sat motionlessly as she watched Lexa, though Lexa had yet to meet her eyes. She started spreading apricot jam on her toast, giving her hands something to do.

"I called my uncle the next day and he came all the way from Portland to pick me up at school. He drove us to the farm, told me to stay in the car, and came out of the house with all my stuff. My mom was on the porch the whole time. Didn't say a word to her brother and didn't look at me once. That was the last time I saw her, until last year."

It was quiet again as Clarke absorbed the information, her head spinning at the thought of a thirteen year old Lexa sitting in a car and desperately trying to catch her mother's eyes. "Lexa... After all that, you still moved back here for her?"

Lexa set the knife aside. "She didn't remember any of it. Sometimes I'd think she got her wish to forget about her kid. But when you're the kid, a part of you still clings to the best memories. She was a good mother before it happened. She knew I had dreams that didn't include the farm and she encouraged them. So even if she stopped loving me, she still gave me thirteen good years. I wanted to give her at least one or two, if I could."

Lexa's body had gone still as she tried deciphering Clarke's reaction.

"I don't know what to say. Jesus..."

"There isn't much to say," Lexa murmured. "I was lucky my uncle put everything on the line for me, and I had the resources to deal with my issues. It wasn't like a big secret I kept or never talked about. But before you mentioned being afraid you'd be stuck with a bigot, I thought I should keep it to myself."

"Oh. Oh, you were concerned about my reaction?"

Lexa nodded.

"Lexa, you don't have to worry about that at all! I've actually—"
A loud moo of distress outside stopped them. When several more followed, Lexa dropped her toast and immediately sprang up.

"Luna."

She ran out of the kitchen, nearly knocking down her chair in the process. Clarke heard the front door open and clatter shut while Luna's cries grew louder. She grabbed her crutches and got up with a pounding heart. What the hell was going on?

She ignored the throb in her foot as she made her way to the front porch and nearly tripped down the two stairs. When she heard a shot ring out, her body froze.

"Lexa!"

She could barely see in the dark, but managed to make out Lexa in the field furiously shooting with her rifle. Something was moving in the high grass. Clarke hurried toward the field, painfully lifting her body over the fence. It had been much easier the first time she'd done this. She could see Luna cower near a tree and Lexa just a hundred feet away with her rifle pointed toward the edge of the forest.

Clarke didn't get too close to Luna but she gasped in horror when she noticed the reason for her panic. There was a gash on her flank from an obvious bite and some claw marks on her neck. Blood was leaking down her light brown fur and she was still mooing, deathly frightened.

Lexa walked back their way with her hands gripping the rifle tightly. She was fuming.

"What the hell happened?" Clarke asked.

"Coyote," Lexa spat out the word like it was poison. "I should've never left Luna outside!"

Clarke had never seen Lexa so angry. "Did you get it?"

"I don't know, it's too dark." Another feeble moo caught Lexa's attention and she approached Luna slowly. "It's okay, girl, you're okay."

Luna visibly calmed down as Lexa kept a respectful distance, speaking in a hushed tone.

"You're safe now."

Clarke stayed a few steps behind Lexa, but noticed Luna was breathing heavily.

"Lexa, she's—"

"You can stitch her up, right?" Lexa interrupted. "I can find skin staples."

"What?" Clarke stuttered. "Lexa, I'm not a vet."

"What's the difference, just close up the gash!" Lexa exclaimed.

Clarke flinched in surprise.

Lexa blanched, realizing she had raised her voice. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—" She was shaking and clearly coming down from an adrenaline rush.

Clarke let her catch her breath before speaking quietly. "The bleeding doesn't look profuse so it's likely just a flesh wound, okay? It should heal on its own as long as we take care of it."
Lexa nodded feebly. "What do we do?"

"We clean the wound and disinfect it, but right now Luna needs to be as calm as possible. Let her get over the fright."

"Okay." Lexa nodded several times before approaching Luna cautiously. "I'll take her to the cowshed."

"I'll get the supplies."

Lexa paused and looked around, scanning for any movement toward the forest and the apple field. The sun was now starting to rise, but with the height of the grass and the shadows, they still couldn't see very far.

"Wait inside until we have better light," Lexa said. "I'll make sure Luna's calmed down and then I'll come get you."

"I can take care of myself," Clarke replied with a frown.

"What are you going to do - swing your crutches at a starving coyote?"

Clarke felt a pang of annoyance. She knew Lexa was only operating from a place of worry, but it sounded belittling. It wasn't the time to butt heads though. She merely turned around and made her way toward the house.

Once inside, Clarke found the basket of medical supplies and made her best guess as to what to use. While the gash didn't look so deep on Luna, it was still big by human standards. Clarke had seen her share of gnarly dog bites at the hospital, but those rarely stemmed from an instinct to tear into flesh and feed. It was scary to think back on her encounter with the dogs in Albuquerque. It had only taken a few months for them to tap back into their most basic nature—how long would it be until they ventured out of the urban areas to hunt for meat? Maybe it was time for Clarke to learn how to actually shoot the gun in her RV.

While waiting for Lexa, Clarke finished her tepid coffee and looked out the window toward the cowshed in the field. It wasn't very big, but it was secure. In any case, Clarke hoped Lexa's bullets had scared the coyote enough to never come back.

Feeling pain in her arms and back, Clarke sat down on her bed. She felt something beneath the sheets and remembered the magazine she'd hidden. She pulled it out and sighed, opening it to the page on Indra. She'd almost forgotten about it, but the incident with Luna helped put things in perspective. Their priority was the present, not whatever had happened months ago. Keeping themselves healthy and safe now was the only thing that mattered. And Lexa was definitely not in the right headspace today to deal with this article.

"Clarke?" Lexa called out from the entrance.

Clarke startled and quickly hid the opened magazine beneath the pillow. She pretended to check on her foot before Lexa appeared in the doorway. She looked remorseful and more tired than when she'd sat down for coffee.

"Clarke, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

Clarke felt her earlier annoyance fade a little. "Like I'm a child?"

Lena crossed her hands in front of her, fidgeting. "I just want things to be easier. To make this place
comfortable, and safe, and—"

"Safe from what, Lexa? Nature? Whatever took away our families and friends? You can't protect this place from either."

"But if I did…" Lexa trailed off, looking up at Clarke.

Surprised by the vulnerability in Lexa's usually guarded expression, it took a while for Clarke to pick up on what she meant.

"Do you think I'm desperate to leave or something?"

Lexa bit her lip. "Before you hurt your foot we never really… defined your stay."

"I thought you said there are no rules in this world anymore."

"That was when I didn't know you very well."

Clarke smiled softly. "And now?"

"Now I… I like having you around."

Clarke arched a brow, which made Lexa sigh. "We work well together, Clarke. And for some reason we found each other, and I think… I think that means something. But you want to see the world, and this place can't compete with that."

"Hm."

"What?" Lexa asked, looking worried she'd said too much.

"Lexa… I lived like that because I couldn't figure out a different way. Driving, seeing places, taking pictures—that was my way of dealing. I thought that if I stopped, I was giving up. And I never imagined the future because all I could see was me by myself eating trash and talking to bugs. But then I found you, with your lists and your plans... And now I kinda like thinking about what the next day might look like. So if you want us to build a shower and harness the power of the fucking sun… I want to do that, too, okay?"

At Lexa's soft smile and nod, Clarke grabbed her crutches and got up. "Now how about we check on the real star of this shitshow?"

They walked side by side toward the cowshed, with Lexa on high alert as she looked around for any movement in the grass. She was also mindful of Clarke's slower pace, though Clarke herself was getting more annoyed that her injured foot was proving to be such an inconvenience, especially in the field where the crutches often sunk into the softer ground. It was one thing to lose her mobility, it was another for Lexa to have to slow down for her.

The cowshed was quiet when they made their way inside, but the sunlight was already filtering through the translucent walls and it was very clean. Clarke found that it looked more modern than she'd imagined, though the air was stuffy. Lexa guided her to one of the stalls, where they found Luna eating from a heap of hay. It wasn't a very big enclosure, but there was plenty of food and water for the last cow of the farm. She seemed back to her old self, chewing mindlessly and not very worried about the two women stepping closer to her.

Lexa set the basket of supplies on the ground and ran her hand down Luna's coat in a soothing manner.
"I'm going to keep her here for a while. At least the stall will be open so she can move around."

Clarke left her crutches against the wall and skipped toward the side of Luna that was injured. She kept one arm on Luna's back for support as she examined her wounds. The lacerations looked more or less the same, though the bleeding had now dried, but there was hay and dust stuck to the gash. It seemed that Luna had rubbed herself against the hay and now her wound looked like a matted mess of fur, blood and dirt.

"You silly thing," Clarke sighed. "We're definitely gonna bandage this, otherwise it's never staying clean."

"What do you need?" asked Lexa.

"We need to rinse all this first, I can't see anything."

Lexa picked up one of the buckets of water and stood by Clarke's side.

Clarke bit her lip. "Okay, well, just…" She motioned for Lexa to pour it all on the wound, but Lexa seemed hesitant.

"What if it hurts her?"

"I don't think it hurts her that much. She's very calm."

Lexa slowly spilled the water on the wound, causing Luna to jerk her head but otherwise remain unbothered by what was happening at her side. As the hay and dust washed away, Clarke got a better view of the bite. It wasn't pretty to look at, but in the light and up close it wasn't as gory as she had anticipated. There was nothing exposed but flesh and Clarke felt her nerves dissipate. This she could deal with. She put on the first air gloves, ignoring the little voice still warning her she had no experience with animals.

"Now the disinfectant."

Lexa handed her the bottle but Clarke suddenly wavered, poorly balanced after letting go of Luna's back. Lexa immediately steadied her by reaching for her waist and letting Clarke cling to her upper arm.

"Shit - sorry." Clarke let out a laugh in embarrassment.

Lexa shook a head with a smile. "I think there's a stool somewhere, let me go get it."

Clarke leaned back on Luna and waited for Lexa to come back with a wooden stool. It was covered in dust and probably hadn't been used in years, but it relieved the pressure on her back when she finally sat down.

"I feel like a grandma," she grumbled.

Lexa passed her the disinfectant. "You don't look a day over eighty."

"Oh ha ha. We'll see who makes jokes when it's time to take out your stitches."

"It'll probably still be me."

Clarke shook her head while fighting back a smile. She disinfected the gash while Lexa stood by Luna's head, speaking to her softly and rubbing the back of her neck. Luna clearly disliked the sharp sting but only moved her body away once, nothing that Lexa hadn't anticipated. Clarke used two of
the extra large bandages to dress the wound and then moved on to the claw marks.

"Did that ever happen before? A coyote attack?" She asked while applying an antiseptic ointment.

Lexa shook her head. "Not that I can remember. There used to be decent traffic on the road during the day, especially by the lake, so that kept wild animals away. And at night I always put Luna's mom here. I should've never left Luna out."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Clarke said, trying to ease Lexa's guilt. "It's easy to forget there are still living things out there."

"I was hoping for rabbits, not a starving predator."

Clarke chuckled. "I saw a hare once. Zoomed right past me."

"Lucky you."

Clarke grinned but her face quickly contorted into a grimace when she felt shooting pain down her lower back.

"What's wrong?" Lexa asked.

"Nothing. It's just my back. Doesn't agree with my posture when I use the crutches apparently."

"Let's get back to the house. We can take it easy today."

Clarke arched a brow. "No plans?"

"Doing nothing is the plan."

"Oh wow. Am I corrupting you?"

Lexa started tidying up with a small smile. "Not yet."

* * *

They left Luna after a few more affectionate back rubs. Though the coyote had gotten a small chunk of her today, it was clear in retrospect that she'd gotten out of it relatively unscathed. Clarke didn't want to imagine what would’ve happened if Lexa and her had still been asleep. Luna was much bigger than a prairie wolf, but her size had clearly not deterred it from attacking. Clarke had a fleeting thought for the cow in Utah, hoping it hadn’t had to face the same danger.

As they made their way back to the house, Clarke slowed down in the field and Lexa showed visible concern.

"I should find you something more practical," she said. "What about one of those motorized shopping carts?"

Clarke snorted. "Then I'll never get up."

"Maybe that would be for the best."

Clarke let out a grunt when one crutch sunk into soft mud and she felt the crutch pad press harder into her armpit again.

"I know where we could get a wheelchair," Lexa continued.
Clarke stopped. "Lexa, please just—" She held in her own frustrations by taking a deep breath. "I don't want a wheelchair or a shopping cart or a knee scooter. I don't even want a magic carpet. This is temporary. Besides, I'm better equipped to deal with a coyote with my swinging crutches than a wheelchair. Just let me deal with my bruises the way I want to."

She went up the porch and into the house, hearing Lexa sigh behind her but leaving the conversation at that.

Clarke lay back across the foot of her bed and dropped the crutches on the floor. She closed her eyes and let the silence wash over. Lexa came in a few minutes later with a glass of water that she put on the nightstand.

"I won't mention it again," she said.

Clarke opened her eyes and looked up at her. "I know you're trying to help. I appreciate it."

Lexa leaned against the wall. "I just think we deserve some comfort, don't you?"

Clarke looked away, staring at the ceiling instead.

"Look, I get it," Lexa said. "Punishing yourself, thinking you deserve the pain. Survivor guilt, right? Why do we get to be here? Have nice things? But during our first dinner together you said something that helped me a lot. You said that it would drive you mad to live that way; to carry around your guilt every day. I think that's when I allowed myself to think about ideas for the farm."

"I do want to survive this world," Clarke murmured. "I even want to be happy in it. I'm just not sure I can."

"Maybe that's something we find out on the way."

Clarke smiled sadly. "Maybe."

Lexa came closer to the bed. "Either way, I'm not going to sit back while you hurt. That's not the kind of person you met, Clarke. I'm sorry if that annoys you."

"Well... you'd make a good nurse."

The prospect made Lexa's nose wrinkle. "I'm too impatient."

"Don't photographers have to wait hours for the perfect shot?"

"That wasn't really my work."

"I want to see it one day. Your work."

Lexa hummed in acknowledgment before moving over to grab Clarke's pillow. "Here, put this under your foot."

When she realized what Lexa was doing, it was too late to stop it and Clarke's heart jumped in her throat. She sat up immediately and both their gazes fell on the magazine open to the page on Indra Jones. It was the picture where she was smiling.

"Lexa..."

Lexa was frozen, one hand still gripping the pillow tightly as she stared at Indra's face. Slowly, her grip loosened and the pillow fell on the floor.
"That's…" she said it quietly, a deep crease between her brows. She picked up the magazine and looked closer at Indra's face, then opened the page to the full article.

"Why don't you sit down? Please?" Clarke asked in a shaky tone.

Llexa turned the pages between the pictures and the interview, scanning through the paragraphs.

"That's exactly how I… The same clothes…" She said, more to herself than Clarke.

"Lexa—"

"Why were you hiding this?" Lexa asked, her confusion deep and evident. The question resonated like an accusation, and Clarke worried she'd done something irreparable.

She reached out for her hand, always more in tune with her actions than her words, but Lexa took a step back. "I wasn't. I just…"

"You just what? This is the woman I met, Clarke. The woman who helped me."

"Lexa." Their eyes met again, and Clarke felt her heart pound. "You were sick…" She merely whispered, trying to make her understand.

"No," Lexa abruptly retorted, shaking her head. "No, no, I saw her!"

"Read the article," Clarke feebly pointed out, "the three-course meal, the promise, the family in New Orleans—"

"You think I lied," Lexa realized in a horrified voice. "You think I made the story up."

"No. I think you were ill and traumatized. I think—"

"I'm not insane, Clarke!" Lexa exploded. "I'm not my fucking mother!"

"I'm not saying that!"

Lexa looked all over the room like she was utterly disorientated, her words coming out in a tone of dismay. "I don't understand. I saw her. I know I did."

Clarke quickly picked up her crutches. "Let's go out for some fresh air. Let's figure this out together."

Lexa shook her head, eyes lost and face paling. "No, I can't be here anymore. I can't breathe here."

She walked out of the room without so much as a glance back, still clutching the magazine.

"Wait!" Clarke exclaimed as she got up. "Please!"

The front door opened and closed, leaving Clarke scrambling to follow. She heard Lexa's steps down the porch stairs and then in the driveway toward her truck. Clarke pushed against the front door, but the screen door bounced back harshly and hit her side, making Clarke lose her grip on her crutch.

"Fuck, come on." She watched in despair as Lexa got inside her car and started it, driving down the dirt road.

"Llexa!"

Clarke felt hot tears spring in her eyes as she picked up the crutch and hurried down the porch,
ignoring the pain shooting through her body. She watched in panic as Lexa's car became smaller and smaller, raising a swirl of dust behind.

"Please just stop! Come back," she repeated. Finally she stopped going after her, resigned to the growing distance between them.

She had never thought of it as Lexa lying, not since she'd put the pieces together, and she had never wanted Lexa to doubt herself. But as she stood alone now, Clarke felt her earlier fear present itself cruelly. Worse even was how powerless she felt, just as she had months ago, only this time as a result of her own choice.

"Don't leave me--" her body shook with a sudden sob.

Finally the car reached the edge of the forest and disappeared at the turn, leaving Clarke staring at the settling dust.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah... How is everyone doing today?

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

A few quiet minutes passed before Clarke accepted that Lexa's truck wouldn't reappear from around the corner, but accepting that Lexa might never come back at all wasn't something she was ready to do. Clarke felt immobilized, thunderstruck by the pain and fear twisting in her stomach. Had she really driven away the only other person left in this world? All because of some stupid magazine? If Clarke had liked the thought of an Indra Jones before, she felt angry at her now.

And angry at Lexa.

Angry that she would leave—that after repeatedly telling Clarke to go easy on her body, she would put herself in danger by driving while so upset. What if she drove straight into those cars that she had purposefully not moved? What if she drove into a tree? Into-

*The lake*, Clarke abruptly thought.

She snapped herself out of her daze and looked around at the fields, thinking as quickly as she used to at the hospital. Lexa had told her that it wasn't like her to sit back; well, if she thought Clarke was anything like that, she had another thing coming.

Without a beat to second-guess herself, Clarke rushed to her RV. She ignored the burning throb in her foot and threw her crutches on the passenger seat with more force than needed. Lexa didn't get to disappear on her; didn't get to leave like it was so simple. It wasn't simple anymore. They didn't get to bail in this world, not when it could mean being alone again.

Clarke pulled out of the driveway and started down the road, ignoring the hot sting of tears in her eyes. Going down the twisting road, she remembered the first time she'd driven here. The excitement she'd felt at the thought of fruit—because those were the things you got excited over in this world. She hadn't thought for a second she might find so much more. That she'd soon be facing green eyes and a rifle. That she'd have a whole meal prepared for her that night and that when she'd speak, she'd finally be heard.

Music and movies… Those were nice, and something to pass the time, but it wasn't interaction. It was still isolating, because each time she finished a movie and realized she had no one to talk about it with, the loneliness hit her even harder. There was no one to laugh with, no one whose arm she could clutch when she stupidly watched *The Babadook* in the dead of night. Being alone meant no one stopped her from making said stupid decisions. But being with Lexa—she'd thought they had a mutual understanding about each other's safety. That they had each other's back, be it by stitching up wounds or pulling crates off of bruised ankles. And yet, Clarke had kept the truth about Indra Jones hidden beneath her pillow, and she couldn't help but wonder if that had hurt Lexa more. She hadn't thought of how Lexa would perceive it; that she would see it as a sign of a debilitating mind rather than one aiming to survive.

But she should have known it would matter to Lexa. That picking up the magazine would realize her worst fear. Still, to leave so abruptly, to willfully disappear in this world… Clarke couldn't accept
that. If Lexa wanted her gone, away, a distant memory—fine, Clarke would give her that, but selfish as it may be, she needed to hear those words. She needed to be sure Lexa was safe before she took her RV down this road again and never returned.

Clarke was so focused on finding her that when she eventually saw her, she wasn't entirely sure it wasn't just a figment of her imagination. It took her a few seconds to slam on the brakes, just a few feet away from the towering trees that surrounded the lake.

The picnic tables and the tents were just as Lexa and Clarke had left them, collecting more dirt by the day. Lexa's truck was parked right in front of the drinking fountain, mere inches from it in fact, and the door was wide open. Straight ahead, Clarke saw Lexa sitting at the end of the pier with the magazine discarded next to her.

All at once, Clarke's body slumped. She was still angry; angry enough to let it dictate her next actions, but the sight of Lexa, so still and small from here, was enough to stop her from storming out. She shut the engine off and leaned her forehead against the steering wheel, taking deep breaths to quiet her heart. So little ago she'd had no one to worry about but herself, which meant she'd forgotten that caring about others could feel so soul-crushing, especially when they insisted on putting themselves in danger. Maybe Lexa had felt something similar when she'd found her in the back of the grocery store, the victim of her own reckless actions, and maybe it was the prospect of being alone again that was the driving force behind it all… but Clarke knew that she'd rather Lexa alive and hating her than completely gone.

It took some painful effort to get out of her RV and then down the grassy slope to the pier, but Clarke was getting good at ignoring her body. She walked down the pier with her heart in her throat, stilling when she heard Lexa's quiet cries. She kept brushing a hand over her face, maybe to combat the tears, or deny that any had fallen at all, but Clarke could tell it was a battle already lost. That Lexa would still try to be so quiet in this world made her stomach twist.

"Lexa."

"You shouldn't have come," Lexa abruptly told her, her voice unlike what Clarke remembered. It was almost aggressive—self-protective, maybe. It was the first time Clarke had seen Lexa cry after all.

"It's a bit late for that."

L exa shook her head, still looking away. "Doesn't matter anyway. Tomorrow I might just forget this ever happened."

Clarke took a deep breath, knowing Lexa was just venting now. "We both know that's not how Alzheimer's works."

The word had an effect on Lexa, who finally snapped her head in Clarke's direction. Her eyes were so red that they looked puffy, and there were still tear tracks on her cheeks. She looked angry though, and Clarke felt herself freeze in worry of what she might say.

"You know so much, don't you, Clarke?" Lexa asked between clenched teeth. "You know this new world so well. Traveled all around it. It's got no mysteries left for you."

Clarke swallowed the lump in her throat. "I never said that. You know that's not true."

Lexa's expression twisted, anger crumbling into heartache again. Like she'd given up on trying to hide it. "I thought you'd already realized I can't be trusted to tell the truth."
Clarke shook her head. "I never meant for it to come off as me hiding it from you. I swear I--"

"Well you were right," Lexa bitterly said. "I don't know what the truth is anymore. I keep reading over that article and I can't figure it out. Because I close my eyes and I see her in my kitchen, talking to me." She started shaking then, her eyes so lost that Clarke had to fight the urge to reach out. "I see her like I see you. So what the fuck do I know?"

Frustrated by the distance between them, Clarke got rid of the crutches and slowly sat down by her. "How about this," she started softly: "you close your eyes again, and you tell me exactly what you remember."

"I don't think that would-"

"Come on, we're figuring this out. Give it a shot?"

Lexa inhaled deeply before relenting and closing her eyes.

"How about we start with what Indra was wearing," Clarke offered.

Lexa seemed deep in thought until she frowned in frustration. "Now I can't get the magazine out of my head."

"That's okay, how about what her voice sounded like. Can you remember the tone? Was it deep? Nasal?"

Lexa shook her head. "No, it was… comforting. Warm. I liked listening to her. It gave me…"

"Hope?" Clarke asked.

"Yes."

"You told me you were picking apples when she drove by. Do you remember that?"

Lexa's frown deepened. "I did? No, no, I was in bed. I-I saw her walk around the kitchen while I was in bed. She was—she opened a cupboard to find some honey. No, the pills. My mom's flu medication."

"But Lexa… you room doesn't face the kitchen."

Lexa's head turned slightly toward Clarke, but she kept her eyes closed. "It… I must've been sitting at the kitchen table, then."

"Okay. What did you eat?"

Lexa's lips parted open, but she kept quiet for some time. "A three-course meal," she finally murmured.

"What did it taste like?" Clarke asked more pressingly.

Lexa clenched her fist on her lap, growing more agitated. "I don't know."

"What about smells? Did she boil something? Did she take the vegetables from your garden? Peel the potatoes?"

Lexa's eyes flew open and her jaw twitched, betraying her mounting frustration. "Who remembers these kinds of things?" she justified.
"I remember the meal you made me," Clarke answered. "The smell of grilled chicken; the way you arranged the vegetables on the table. I remember everything we talked about."

"That was days ago."

"Lexa..." Clarke gently backpedaled. "Do you really believe you saw her? Because I don't mind if you do, I don't. I'll believe it if you do. But you have to decide, because it's the only way you move forward. It's time to put everything behind, remember?"

"She had a gun," Lexa suddenly remembered. "Why would I imagine her having a gun? That's not in the article."

Clarke felt something inside her freeze. "Maybe... if you gave her a gun it explained away why she wouldn't—couldn't come back. Or maybe she was taking the gun away from your hands."

Lexa wiped her eyes with her sleeve, and Clarke could see that she was giving up on arguing back.

"I'm sick."

Clarke shifted closer. "No, Lexa, you were sick, but it wasn't just that. What we went through, what we're still going through; it's a trauma. We can't even put words to it because nothing comes close. You were sick, and you were also in shock, and the two paired together—"

Lexa scoffed. "You're being too kind. Trying to rationalize the lies I've been telling myself and feeding you."

"But they weren't lies to you."

"It doesn't matter."

"So why does it matter how you pulled through? Maybe you tricked yourself; maybe your brain deceived you to protect you—so what? You're here now, aren’t you?"

"Because I don't know how long I can do this," Lexa answered. "I don't know how long I have before I'm just like my mother."

"You're not her. You said so yourself."

"That was before, but now I know. If that magazine isn’t enough proof to you that I am completely losing my mind, just like she did—"

Lexa made to look away, but something in Clarke knew she couldn't lose her just then. She reached out and cupped her cheeks, holding her stare.

"No, look at me. Listen to me," Clarke intoned, almost like an order: "you said she stayed here her whole life, but you went and saw the world. You said she kicked you out when you were young, her own flesh and blood, but you, you took in a stranger and offered me everything you have."

"None of it matters if I start forgetting."

"But you haven’t."

"Indra—"

"Indra was how you kept yourself alive. That's the opposite of disease. That's how you fought and it's how you got here."
Lexa smiled bitterly. "I'm not even sure I am alive."

Clarke felt renewed anger take over her. It was time to stop trying to reason with words. In an abrupt move, she pushed Lexa off the pier and watched her splash hard into the lake. Lexa disappeared just a second beneath the surface before coming back up, spluttering with her soaked hair in her wide eyes.

"What the fuck!" She exclaimed.

"Oh you felt that?" Clarke asked. "You're cold, Lexa?"

Lexa looked at Clarke like she had grown another head.

"That's being alive," Clarke said. "You know what else you can do when you're alive and living through the worst trauma of your life? Have a coping mechanism. Yeah, that's a thing, and guess what? It's normal."

Lexa scowled. "Summoning a singer out of thin air is hardly-"

"So what! I drank myself stupid!" Clarke exclaimed. "Is that supposed to be any better? I wish I'd had an Indra in my passenger seat. I wish I'd had someone telling me there was a reason I was still here. Do you know how many breakdowns that would've spared me? I didn't have an Indra telling me not to walk into gun shops. I had to fight myself over and over again and it fucking hurt, Lexa."

Clarke's vision blurred and she realized that Lexa had gone completely still.

"So you don't get to tell me it was all for nothing," Clarke continued. "That we're not real or that the pain isn't real, because it is, and you need to accept that."

Lexa swallowed back a lump in her throat. Clarke looked away, feeling just as overwhelmed. She didn't want to cry anymore. She'd done it enough.

"You can be angry," she told her, "but it doesn't give you the right to treat me like some kind of ghost. I'm alive, and I'm breathing, and I've spent months coming to terms with it, so don't you dare tell me the contrary."

Lexa shook her head. "I didn't mean it that way."

"You left me in the dust," Clarke finally said, needing to get it off her chest.

"I know."

"You drove away and I stayed there like an idiot, not knowing if that was it, if I was alone in this stupid world again."

Lexa stood motionless, her hair dripping into the water and causing the tiniest ripples. "I'm sorry," she said, voice above a whisper.

Clarke knew that she was; could see it in her tears and her trembling lip, but a part of her couldn't shake the image of her leaving.

"If you do it again-"

"I won't."

Clarke heard Lexa shuffle in the water and lift herself back on the pier to sit. After a moment, she
looked at Clarke.

"Do you forgive me?"

Clarke took a moment before she scoffed. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Lexus folded her hands on her lap. "I could make you a sorry cake."

"Oh well if there's cake…"

Lexa smiled sadly. "You could've hurt yourself driving after me."

Clarke took one long, shuddering breath. "I am so tired of could'vess and what ifs, Lexa."

Lexa nodded a few times, almost to herself. "Me too."

Clarke wasn't sure where they went from now on; if Lexa had made her decision about Indra Jones one way or the other, but she hoped that if something between them had broken, it would soon be mended. She took one last look at Lexa's trembling frame before grabbing her crutches and getting up.

"Come on, let's get you dried up."

Lexa took a long look at the lake, as if it was their last time here. "We're alone, Clarke," she said in a still brittle voice. "Everyone's gone and it's never going to change."

Clarke wanted to answer that they didn't know that, that they couldn't know, that they'd found each other and could find someone else, but what was the point in that? It was all still a guessing game. The only certainty was that they still had each other.

"We both know this world can still hurt us, but it doesn't mean we give up." Clarke hesitated before she extended her hand. "You're not alone and neither am I. Not anymore."

Lexa bit her lip before taking her hand and getting up. They stood quietly until Clarke realized something and smiled.

"I actually need my hand to walk though, so…"

Lexa let out a tired chuckle before letting go of her hand. They walked side by side to the RV, where Clarke felt the ghost of Lexa's palm on her lower back as she slowly went up the few stairs. The feeling was gone when she turned though, and soon Lexa was closing the door behind them and they were enveloped in the warmth of Clarke's home.

Lexa was still drenched, but it was her exhaustion that struck Clarke the most. She had never looked so small and weary.

Clarke had a sudden thought: "How about we stay here overnight? Just leave the farm where it is for now. Luna is safe and she has plenty of food and water."

Lexa blinked slowly, then nodded. "Okay."

"What do you want to wear? Shorts? Dress?"

"Shorts are fine."

Clarke moved toward her room. "I've got just the thing for you." She pulled cotton shorts and a t-
shirt from one of her cramped drawers and turned around, finding Lexa in the doorway to her room and curiously peering at the space. "Here you go. That tiny door on your right is the bathroom."

"Thank you, Clarke. I… for-"

"I know."

Lexa took the clothes with a small nod before she disappeared inside the bathroom. Of course there was no bath in there, but it was still fairly spacious with stacks of towels and bottles of water. A decent bathroom wasn't the first thing Clarke had made sure of when she'd checked out all the RVs in the lot… but it had been fairly high up on the list.

After sitting on her bed, Clarke worked on unlacing her boots. She had propped the crutches against her nightstand when Lexa emerged from the bathroom with her damp hair swept to one side. She ran her hands down the t-shirt.

"It's soft."

"With the $200 price tag it had, it better be."

Lexa arched a brow. "Went luxury shopping?"

"Oh you know… Just here and there."

When Lexa seemed hesitant to walk into Clarke's room any further, Clarke made the decision for her. She reached out and pulled Lexa by the wrist toward her bed.

"What are you doing?" Lexa asked, almost alarmed.

Clarke chuckled before lying down on her side and patting the space in front of her. "Come on."

Lexa toyed with the hem of the t-shirt before finally getting on the mattress and lying down. She stayed on the far end of Clarke's pillow, sharing its ample size comfortably. It was clear Clarke had given herself the best bedding—and why wouldn't she have?

"It's nice here," Lexa said, eyes still roving around until they settled back on Clarke with a soft smile.

"It's my little cocoon," Clarke shared. "I could've gotten any other RV, you know? Party bus, luxury tour bus… But this one felt right."

"It fits you."

At Clarke's arched brow, Lexa clarified: "Looks a bit like a mess, but is warm and pleasant."

Clarke's mouth dropped open. "Wow. Get out."

Lexa laughed into the pillow. "I'm kidding."

"Warm and pleasant," Clarke grumbled. "That's like describing a fireplace."

Lexa's laugh tapered off, but her smile remained. "Please continue."

"Anyway, in here it's always felt safe. My little room anywhere I drove."

"Your home."
"In a way."

"Did you bring anything from Albuquerque?"

Clarke shook her head, still picturing her childhood home as if she'd left it yesterday. "It didn't seem right to move stuff. I like that they've still got their place in the world. Besides, the house isn't going anywhere."

"No place like your first home," Lexa murmured, fighting to keep her eyes open.

Clarke felt her heart swell, having never seen Lexa so vulnerable before. It was a different vulnerability than tears. One where she trusted Clarke enough to fall asleep next to her and be safe.

"Get some sleep," Clarke whispered back.

Lexa's eyes finally closed and her breath started to even out. "Will you stay?" She mumbled into the pillow.

It was no good making promises in this world, but Clarke decided this was one she had to make. "I'm not going anywhere."

* * *

Clarke woke up first, unsurprisingly, but felt odd just staring at Lexa's face and counting her eyelashes. Not that it wasn't pleasant, but Lexa was clearly worn out and she deserved some sleep without being so keenly observed. So Clarke made her way out as quietly as possible, and then plopped herself down in the driver's seat. She looked out at the lake and the forest for a while, but even that got a bit eerie.

It was her map and Oregon guidebook laid out on the dashboard that gave her a sudden idea. It had been a horribly long day already for the both of them, and they deserved some kind of reprieve. So naturally Clarke turned the engine on and stepped on the gas.

* * *

The place was stuffy, but the windows opened with just a slight creak and the sunlight made it easy to navigate around the chairs and stools. Clarke had to admit she was rather proud of herself for finding the place. She found everything she needed inside without much of a search, though it should have annoyed her a little bit. The bar was just thirty minutes away from Polis, and damn… the tequila was right here and it was *aplenty*.

"Moving forward," Clarke sighed to herself as she made her way back to the RV with her crutches.

She peered inside her bedroom and found Lexa still deep asleep, and if the drive hadn’t shaken her up, it was clear to Clarke that she needed every minute she could get. So Clarke lied on her back this time and stared at the ceiling, feeling that it was at least a good compromise. She liked being near Lexa.

The shadows on the walls had changed position by the time Lexa finally woke up. She did it slowly, and then all at once, sitting up with a groggy expression, like she didn't remember how she'd gotten here. When her eyes settled on Clarke, the confusion melted away.

"How long was I asleep?"

Clarke smirked at her messy hair, which had now dried and made her curls stick out. "Long enough
for me to drive us somewhere special."

"We left the lake?" And then, alarmed: "Clarke, your foot-

"-is fine. Sore, but I've accepted that for today. Actually this is exactly what we deserve for the shit we've been put through." Clarke got up and grabbed her crutches to make her way out of the room. "Get some slippers on and stop worrying so much!"

Lexa heard the RV door open and close, and then Clarke's distinct footsteps crunch on the gravel outside. She looked around the room and rubbed the back of her neck with a befuddled frown.

"Slippers?" She quietly repeated.

* * *

When Lexa finally walked into the bar wearing a pair of Clarke's luxury hotel slippers—there were a few aligned beneath the bed… a peculiarity for sure, but more charming than odd—Clarke had already set up the pitcher of tequila with two glasses on the bar.

"Well?" She asked Lexa. "What do you think? Fancy a drink?"

Lexa looked at her in amusement. "I was actually thinking about making coffee, but..."

“Oh no, no, no, this is margarita hour, and it’s long overdue."

Lexa sat on the barstool, right on the other side of Clarke's seat, and looked at her drink, complete with a cocktail umbrella sticking out of it. She hadn’t woken up particularly thirsty for tequila and lime juice, but Clarke's excitement was contagious.

"All right, but for future reference, what do I put down in my calendar as margarita hour?"

Clarke grinned. “In this world? Whenever you damn please o’clock.”

“Cheers to that,” Lexa chuckled, raising her glass.

They clunk their glasses together and drank, eyes squeezing just a second from the salt, tequila, and lime. This... was simple, Clarke thought. Just two girls sharing a drink in a bar. Why couldn’t the rest follow suit? She set her drink on her napkin and bit her lip. She’d thought of so many things to ask Lexa, yet felt like they’d all gone straight out of her head.

“So... I think I remember you saying something about getting a shower running. Can we throw hot water into those plans?"

Lexa laughed. “So that’s why you dragged me out here. To bribe me."

“Duh. Ply you with my world famous cocktail so you’ll do my bidding."

“Well unfortunately I’ve already told you the extent of my ideas,” Lexa retorted with a smile. “Guess your pretty eyes work better than booze."

Clarke batted her lashes dramatically. “As they should."

“I take it back. Now you just look like a lunatic."

“Nah, no take backs.”
Lexa's smile faded a bit. She set her drink down. "There is something I’d like to take back. The way I spoke to you earlier—"

"Lexa."

"-was unacceptable."

"You were hurting."

"And I lashed out at you."

Clarke remembered that nothing simple could last for too long. "Look, I lived in New York for years and I was a nurse. Trust me when I say I’ve had much worse directed at me."

Lexa shook her head. "I don’t want that to be the standard for how I treat you. It can be easy to just allow all our faults because—because we don’t have a choice. Because we worry speaking up would push the other away. But I want you to hold me accountable for my faults. And I promise you it won’t drive me away again. I may sulk, but…” They shared a small smile. "I don’t want us to sweep things under the rug when issues arise. It’s what my family did, and... obviously it didn’t work out very well."

"Okay. We hold each other accountable."

They held each other's stare, a newfound understanding between them. It didn't feel like a new start—and Clarke didn't want it to, because she quite liked their start—but something was shifting, becoming stronger maybe, and it brought Clarke a fresh sense of hope.

“So we’re really doing this huh? You and I?"

Lexa collected some salt from the rim of her glass and licked it off. “Yup."

“Well, I’ll drink to that again."

* * *

With the pitcher down to one more drink at most, and not even a full one, it was no surprise to Clarke when she noticed Lexa's eyes becoming a bit hazy. Clarke knew Lexa wasn't drunk though, and neither was she. She hadn’t made enough for that, and hadn’t intended do. They'd reached the pleasant plateau of an elongated buzz, where everything felt warm and time meant nothing. Lexa smiled more, especially when Clarke recounted her adventures on the road, and oh what a difference it made compared to the tear-stained cheeks Clarke remembered from this morning.

"You know," Lexa said at the end of one of her anecdotes, "my uncle would've liked you a lot."

"Your uncle? Why's that?"

"He was a quiet man—famously tight-lipped around strangers," Lexa recounted with a toothy grin, "but then he'd pick me up at school and he'd unbraid my hair at home and he'd tell me all these stories about his adventures. He was a park ranger, and you'd never think this guy saw anything but his corner of the forest, but it was like he'd lived ten different lives. He had stories about backpacking through Scotland, getting his heart broken in New Guinea, breaking his nose in Japan. And I... I never knew one person could have so much land in them; so many stories. But I wanted that, and he wanted it for me. Adventure."

Clarke wondered if he had been the one to encourage her first. Lexa had said her mother hadn’t
minded her dreams, but maybe her uncle had been the one to see them as a reality. "Did you keep in contact? After you came here?"

Lexa shook her head. "He died five years ago. Heart attack."

"Lexa, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, I made my peace with it. It actually… I know he would’ve volunteered to come here for my mom—for his sister. Told me to stay away and that he could handle it. But he hated it here, and taking him away from his cabins and his corner of the forest… I think that would’ve killed him, too. Differently I guess, but it just wasn't meant to be him here."

The story had sobered Clarke, and she thought that Lexa might want an out from the direction of their conversation. Good as it felt to learn more about her, Clarke didn't want it to be because of the drink in Lexa's hand loosening her tongue. She could wait another time for the rest of her stories.

"Hey, we should find some food," she said. "I saw some snacks in the back."

Lexa immediately sat up. "The back? Clarke…"

"Relax, there are no crates or shoddy metal racks," Clarke replied.

Lexa narrowed her eyes at her. "By any chance, would you consider a straitjacket and a wheelchair? Some bubble wrap I could roll you in?"

Clarke let out a laugh. "I got us here in one piece, didn't I?"

"You took advantage of my near-coma."

"I didn't hear you complain when you downed that pitcher."

Lexa rolled her eyes. "I guess you make the rules."

"Finally something that you get right."

Lexa seemed eager to play along. "What does that make you then? President?"

"Nah, I think a new system is in order. I'm going with queen."

"Is that all? Why not empress?"

"I do like the idea of my own empire."

Lexa held her stare, leaning forward on the bar. "So what would Your Imperial Majesty make of me?"

"Probably my butler."

Lexa's mouth dropped open.

Clarke shrugged. "That's for calling me a pleasant mess earlier."

"At least make me a general," Lexa argued.

Clarke pretended to think on it, staring at Lexa with a twinkle in her eye. "All right, the highest I can offer is commander of the imperial fleet."
"My own fleet? Yeah, all right."

There was a beat then, just a moment where neither looked away, where Lexa's smile became cocky, like she had won their little back-and-forth for some reason. It was a different look on her; that haughty little smile. Clarke wondered if she was seeing more of the Lexa before the farm. The woman who'd lived in DC, traveled the world with a camera, and lived all sorts of different adventures. There was something so attractive about it; about that sudden shift in Lexa's expression.

"Drunk Lexa Woods, we meet at last," Clarke said in a raspier tone, choosing to ignore the stir in the pit of her stomach. Jokes were easy. You could hide a lot of things behind a joke.

But Lexa… Lexa was more unpredictable than Clarke expected. She simply hummed, eyes a bit darker, like she knew, and after one glance down leaned back and looked toward the door behind the bar.

"I'm starving," she said. "Let's find those snacks."

* * *

With their bellies full of pistachios, stale chips, and pretzels, they lied back on the grassy area behind the bar. They were silent together, simply staring at the bursts of color in the evening sky, sometimes dozing off for minutes at a time until a breeze or the chirp of a few desperate crickets awoke them again. Clarke felt remarkably lazy, too content to do anything but wonder about the vastness of the world.

"I wonder if there's something up there," Lexa marveled after some time. "I never used to bother about these things before."

"Sometimes I do, too," Clarke said absentmindedly, focused on one particular cloud. "Or not necessarily up there, but… everywhere around us."

It was a while before Lexa spoke again. "I was really sure that religion did more harm than good, but now I think there has to be something. Not anything like what was written or believed in over the centuries, but something."

"I always thought that if there was, that it would be beyond our imagination anyway," Clarke shared. "My dad used to say that no one had the right story. Just wasn't something we were meant to know. At least not yet."

"Not yet," Lexa repeated, mulling it over. She seemed pensive, as if it could be that easy to just… dismiss the questions entirely. "I like that."

"He still had his own theory though. Used to put me to sleep with it," Clarke rolled her eyes affectionately.

"What was it?"

"He used to believe it was steps. That this world was just one step, and then we went up to the next one, which was just another world."

"And was there ever an end to this staircase?"

Clarke smiled fondly at the memory of her father answering the very same question. "Somewhere different for everyone. A place or a feeling that fit you, rather than this one holy place you were supposed to fit in."
"So a hellish landscape if you were a criminal, or some nirvana if you donated to orphanages every week."

Clarke shook her head. "I don't think it was that simple, though I'll admit appreciating the concept of hell when I started working at the hospital. When you see victims who suffered at the hands of people that… don't even sound human to you, you hope for it. A place where those people feel the pain they've inflicted on others. But then I'd think: if there was no justice in this world, why would the next one be any different?"

It was a somber thought; to imagine that the people gone had all disappeared to the same place. After all, there had been no variations in the way everyone had vanished. Lexa felt strange about it all. Scared, maybe, to accept that there actually might be a grand design in place. But what was more worrisome: that they had been forgotten, or that they might be the very center of it?

Clarke felt Lexa's hand graze hers, pulling her out of her dizzying thoughts. Entwining their fingers felt like the most natural thing, and so she did it without hesitating.

"Booze and stargazing will make anyone's mind spin," Clarke told her softly. "We're not worrying about unanswerable questions, okay? Not now. We have a farm to take care of; chickens to feed and a cow to protect. We have hundreds of childhood stories to tell each other and thousands of movies to watch. Let's do those things first."

Lexa nodded and, afterward, they dozed off for some time under their blanket of stars, until eventually Clarke felt Lexa brush a hand down her arm to get up.

"Let's go to bed," she murmured right by her ear, though Clarke hardly registered it at all.

Lexa supported her body as she feebly used one crutch up the stairs and into the dark RV. Next she knew, she was on her bed and Lexa leaned down to look at her.

"I'm sorry I left you, Clarke," she told her quietly, gently. "You have my word it won't ever happen again."

Clarke looked up at her and swallowed back the feelings her apology welled up.

"I'm still waiting on that cake," she said, deflecting again.

Lexa didn't fall so easily for the joke, barely smiling before she hesitantly brushed a strand of Clarke's hair behind her ear.

"Can I…"

Clarke nodded before Lexa was even done. "Anything."

"I just didn't know how much a person could miss holding another."

Because it was the only thing that felt right in the instant, Clarke turned around and lied on her side. She felt her heart lurch when Lexa pressed her front against her back, wrapped her arm around her waist, and whispered *is this okay?* before she softly nudged her shoulder with her forehead. Eventually, they both stilled and Clarke heard her breathing even out.

She had missed it too, deep inside her, this feeling of touching someone and being touched. She had hoped to find another person for so long, but maybe it hadn’t been just anyone she’d ached for. Maybe it'd been Lexa, before she could even know it.
Clarke had always felt safe inside her RV, and there had always been some comfort in that, but with Lexa nearby she felt protected, and what a different feeling that was. It had been such a long day, so long that the morning felt weeks away; a distant nightmare she’d finally awoken from. But she had Lexa again and Lexa had her. That was all that mattered.

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