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<td>Bellarke, Slow Burn, Bellamy knows what he wants, Angst, started way back in the day after 1x03, so some things are not as angsty as canon, a lot of things aren't like canon, canon is pretty much ignored here, We could call it an AU, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Baby Fic, Unexpected Pregnancy, You've been warned</td>
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**Uneven**

by [avari20](http://archiveofourown.org/users/avari20)

**Summary**

In this new society they are carving out day by day, choices have to be made. Sometimes choices are made for people. Sometimes it's a matter of circumstances.
Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I don't own The 100.

Set after Contents Under Pressure. Undetermined amount of time later, before next episode. Probably not in line with the series at all. Read. Enjoy. Comment. Fanfic writers get paid in reviews.

"Regretting saving his life, Princess?"

That voice. As much as I hated to admit it, I knew exactly who it belonged to without turning around. How could I not? Ever since we came to Earth, that voice had been the guiding light of over ninety people under the age of eighteen. It was the dissenter, the revolutionary, and then the unifier. It was the voice that teased, taunted, and derided. Sometimes it went soft and affectionate, but those times were so few and far between they might as well have never happened. I didn't hate that voice, but neither did I look forward to hearing it. I knew from painful experience that hating someone took up too much precious energy. Here on Earth, every scrap of energy I could gather needed to be geared toward survival—mine or someone else's.

So I didn't need to look in Bellamy's direction to know it was him; I turned because part of me didn't want to give him my back for long. Call it the human instinct that was never truly bred out of mankind. Nobody ignored someone as dangerous as Bellamy Blake.

I wished I could say I knew for sure that he wouldn't kill me. I couldn't because I didn't. We weren't friends. We were tentative allies. Our situation turned on a dime here. There was a real possibility that one day things would take a turn for the worse, and Bellamy would decide it was in his best interest to get rid of me.

Or worse...that I would come to the same conclusion.

He leaned against the tree in that lazy way of his, like this whole forest belonged to him. I guess it did in a way. For a ragtag society that could do whatever it wanted, people naturally gravitated towards Bellamy Blake's leadership.

The night was cold, but he didn't have his jacket on. Did he follow me out here? How long was he standing there? "Which him?" I asked cautiously. "There's a dozen patients a day here."

"You know exactly who I'm talking about." Brown eyes shifted to the drop ship.

Or maybe it was the main part of camp, where all the tents were. People were settling in for the night. The drone of chatter and the occasional laugh punctured the darkness. Even with Grounders and the multitude of problems that faced us every day, at night it almost felt like things were normal. Peaceful. Add in the hum of machinery and it would almost be like the Ark again.

Except I didn't miss the Ark. I missed the illusion I used to have there, but I didn't miss the cramped space and artificial air or harsh lighting. I didn't miss the metallic clanking of my feet on layers of machinery. I liked the hard but forgiving ground and the smells. God, the smells of Earth after the rain was something I could never have accurately imagined. There was no one left alive on the Ark that could even describe it.

I swallowed and shook my head. "I'm not doing this with you."
"Why not? Because it might be true?"

"Because I just don't see the point of it. We both know it's none of your business. There's no reason for you to even take an interest, unless you're bored. Can't see how that could be an issue between Grounders and finding food. That must mean you're looking for a fight, but if that's the case, Octavia's your girl."

He pushed away from the tree. "Guys like the Spacewalker get off on charm and a few slick moves. I just wondered how you could fall for that."

My chest squeezed. "He's not a bad person at heart. Even if you're right. Chalk it up to circumstances." I didn't know why I was even discussing this. Bellamy was not my friend. I didn't have any of those in camp.

Not anymore.

That compressed feeling increased. I think it was loneliness.

"Yeah. Circumstances. Those can be a bitch." He came to stand beside me, but angled his body slightly to align chest to shoulder. I snuck a suspicious peek at him. What was that about?

Even if we weren't friends, I couldn't deny that there were moments here and there that Bellamy and I managed to hit on the same note. With everything we were going through, those instances of communion were critical, and that was when I understood him. Bellamy Blake was someone that made sense to me. Pretty rare thing for me lately.

But right then? I couldn't figure out his motive. That put me on edge.

"You didn't answer my question. Do you regret saving him?"

I shook my head, frowning. "Why would I?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe I was just checking to make sure the one healer we've got hasn't suddenly turned sociopath."

Was that...a joke?

Okay, what surreal world did I just land in? "How did you know, anyway?"

He shrugged, taking a step or two to put himself right in front of me. "I'm observant. Comes from all those years of keeping tabs on patrols and hiding O." He looked down his blade of a nose at me. "Finn's too weak for you in any case. He's the kind of guy that needs to be needed. That's what Raven is for."

"Why are you suddenly shelling out dating advice?" I asked, growing irritated. And more than a little disturbed. This was so out of the ordinary I felt off kilter. Given that we were probably being watched by possibly homicidal Grounders and we didn't know half of the things that could kill us on this planet, that was saying something. What was Bellamy's game? Trying to win my trust?

"Just making conversation."

"That's weird," I told him bluntly. "Especially coming from you. What do you want?"

His mouth kicked up. There was a new purpose in his gaze, like a knowing, and I didn't know who or what it was directed at. Or why.
Those were dangerous questions to not have answered.

"The thing about strong girls, Princess, is that they need strong men."

He was leaning, I realized suddenly. The kind of leaning that brought him imperceptively closer to me, that curved his body just slightly over mine. That was the kind of thing guys did when they were interested.

What the hell?

Okay, this was definitely a game. Some sick and twisted play at either adding me to a harem number or getting me into his back pocket. That pissed me off. This was how he was going to do it? Really? I didn't kid myself with how much influence I had over the others. They would turn on me if I ever became less than useful. But I was the closest thing we had to a doctor, and that meant I was valuable. The others might let that sway them in certain decisions, but me and Bellamy together? He'd be the closest thing to a king we'd ever had.

I lifted my chin. "What do you want, Bellamy? Just say it."

"Funny choice of words." He didn't reach out. He didn't even move. But I felt touched, way down where I had no business feeling the affect of that low, raspy tone.

"Forget it."

I turned on my heel, so done with this conversation. He was lucky I didn't try to clock him, except there wasn't a law saying he couldn't talk to me. There wasn't a law at all, as a matter of fact. Just a set of guidelines that were so loose they often weren't worth the air it took to repeat them. And really, he didn't do anything worth clocking him for. Just implying and trying to play me for a fool.

"You're not seeing the bigger picture," he called out after me.

I wheeled around. "Is this the part where you tell me that it would be smart to attach myself to the alpha male? Are you going to list all the reasons that would benefit me? Because I don't see it. That's not the way this works. I have agency and functioning reasoning skills, and none of them are pointing to you."

His smile faded, and his gaze sharpened. "You're reading this the wrong way." Then he shrugged again. "Fine. They may not be pointing at me now, but I've got time. Even better, I've got facts on my side." He dropped his arms and ambled toward me, unhurried. "This is a new world. I'm not going away. If I'm interested in you, the others are going to take notice. We both know no one in this camp is going to challenge me on it."

I watched him, wary. "They might surprise you."

"Maybe, but I can be tenacious." He moved over the uneven ground with a surety that never seemed to falter in him. At least, not in front of anyone else. I could have been the only person in camp alive to witness how he felt with Adam. Octavia probably saw all the different sides to Bellamy that existed, but nothing I'd glimpsed suggested he gave up easily.

That thought sent a shiver of something down my spine. Foreboding? Dread?

I couldn't deny he was handsome in a harsh way. Even in the firelight his symmetrical face and dark eyes were easy to see. It was the way he wore responsibility that really made him different though. That and his determination.
Suddenly he was turning some of that on me.

Dammit. I did not need this. "I'm not into games. There's too much to deal with already."

"You wouldn't pick any of them anyway," he remarked. He was already in front of me again. "You would have done it already if that were the case."

I clenched my hands in a rare display of frustration. "This conversation is so irrelevant to life that words are failing me." Did he not get it?

"I'll make it simple for you, Princess. You've got the right to say no, but it's not going to magically make me disappear. I'm going to be right here, in camp, under your nose. Nobody's going to gainsay me. In their eyes, you're as good as mine. And I'll be around when you figure that out for yourself."

I had this crystal clear picture in my head all of a sudden; working every day, carving out a life, talking to him, and having other people follow this crazy unwritten rule that nobody touched what belonged to Bellamy Blake. "That's not how this is going to go," I said. It wasn't. I would be damned if I allowed him to dictate my life like that.

"I'm just telling you what people will do. All they'll have to do is see how I look at you."

"Then stop. Stop looking at me."

"Circumstances," he said softly. If I didn't know better, I'd think he even had a little regret mixed up in there. "We're on a little island in an ocean of the unknown, Clarke. There's only so much we can do to change that."

He searched my face, looking for something I wasn't sure existed in me. "See you in the morning."

He walked away then, treading towards the camp without so much as glancing back.

I watched him go, my chest rising and falling like I'd been running for my life. I had no idea what just happened. Not really. A few words, some subtext that could have been totally different from what I heard. I just had a feeling that I wasn't wrong.

I looked at the camp, that place that Bellamy Blake ruled over, and suddenly I was less sure of the future than I had ever been.

The End
Chapter 2

Disclaimer: I don't own The 100.

So it seems I lied to my readers and myself. There's no way this could stay a one-shot. Not with the amount of chemistry zinging between these two characters. I don't know why I bothered trying to convince myself otherwise.

Read. Enjoy. Review. Reviews are payment and motivation. Keep that in mind. (and a huge thank you to everyone who took the time to tell me what they thought of the first chapter!)

There was no place to hide in camp. Not really. Everybody clustered in a group meant that every single person's life was on display. There wasn't a ton of privacy on the Ark, but at least there we had walls and our own quarters. Unless the drop ship and the flimsy makeshift tents counted, day to day life was essentially a play.

On the one hand that meant we all knew when trouble was coming almost instantly.

On the other, there was Bellamy.

I thought I was prepared for it. I couldn't imagine anything being more awkward than it already was between us. I knew I was going to have to talk to him. Interaction could not be avoided. I even spent some time considering various ways to approach the situation. In the end I decided that the detachment I'd worked a lifetime to cultivate was going to come in handy. That ability to separate myself from danger or blood or fear, to operate even when I just wanted to fall apart, was hardwon. I'd never fully tested it before Earth, to be honest. Now it seemed like I couldn't go five minutes without having to retreat behind that wall.

When I came out of my tent the following morning, I had already mentally prepared myself for another day of being at loggerheads with Bellamy and clawing for every inch of ground we could out of the wilderness. I didn't see him immediately, so I just went directly into my rounds. I checked everybody that need to be checked. I cleaned wounds, bandaged gashes, and generally got lost in the business of survival.

The stares weren't obvious at first. Just side glances. Nothing unusual. We all had to work together, but that didn't mean some of the kids had stopped assessing possible opponents. We were a motley crew of delinquints, radicals, and criminals. All of us had bucked the system in one way or another. I saw a hungry look in more than one face. Maybe they just wanted power. Maybe they just didn't want to be on the lowest rungs of whatever thing we were building here. Whatever the reason, I had no doubt that there were people amongst the hundred that wouldn't hesitate to kill if they thought it would help them.

Bellamy claiming that no one would challenge him was naïve, in my opinion. I just had to glance over my shoulder and at least three candidates would be staring back at me.

Staring. A lot.

I started to feel it between my shoulders. Being noticed like this was not good. I felt my lack of friends keenly. All I had were tentative allies. Nobody I could really trust to have my back if I needed them.
Monty and Jasper might try.

Finn, maybe. A very big maybe.

I shied away from that thought.

In the early afternoon I was washing my hands in one of the bowls, wishing for a chance to take a real shower, when Octavia came up beside me. "Hey."

I paused, wary. "Hey." She was the last person I expected to make conversation with me...after what happened with the Grounder. I don't think we were friends before. Not exactly. But it was better than now.

I couldn't blame her. I made a choice. I had to own that just as much as I expected Bellamy to own his decisions and their consequences.

"Bellamy exempted you from patrols. Why?"

I- "What?" I noticed people looking at us and stepped closer, lowering my voice. "What do you mean? When?"

"This morning. He said that if we had our one healer on patrol, we'd run the risk of having a sleep deprived doctor operating if something happened."

That sounded reasonable...except for what it meant. Bellamy essentially just afforded me a special priviledge, something no one else in camp had. Only the smallest kids were exempt from night patrol, for obvious reasons. Everybody else had to pull their weight.

He was making me into the princess.

My blood ran cold. There was logic to what he was saying. I was the doctor. Or whatever we had to call it until the rest of the people on the Ark landed. If I was on night patrol and something happened, the risk of me making a mistake increased exponentially with each hour of sleep I didn't get. Other people wouldn't see it like that, though. They'd see the daughter of the upperclass I used to be.

What the hell was Bellamy thinking?

Octavia was watching me, forcing me to move beyond my anger and fear to scramble for some kind of explanation. "We need to learn how to take care of ourselves," I said slowly. "If I'm the only healer we have, it won't be enough."

Her eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means we should teach more people how to do basic first aid." I was thinking out loud, but it was a good idea. A very good idea. "Reinforce what they learned in Earth Studies."

"Like what, have classes or something?"

I looked at her, the girl who was rumored to be found under the floor. I didn't know how true that was, but in any case she never attended formal classes. Whatever she learned, she learned second hand through Bellamy or their mother. Did she know anything about first aid? Field dressings? If she got hurt again—and the probability was high—would she be able to take care of herself?

Whatever happened in the first few minutes after an injury was critical. What if Octavia or someone else was alone in the woods? What if there was no one to help?
"Classes. That's exactly what we're going to do. Start with two or three people at a time, work our way from there, but everybody should be reaquainted with the fundamentals." It was common sense. Sometimes the truth was dangerous, but not when it came to medicine.

Octavia seemed to turn that over in her head, looking unsure. "When would we get started?"

"As soon as possible." Right after I talked to Bellamy.

That would have to wait. Someone fell and cut their leg on one of the exposed tree limbs they were using to strengthen the wall. The gash was deep and the risk of infection was high. It took all my attention for the better part of two hours.

It reinforced my conclusions, though. People needed to be trained. Soon.

I found Bellamy on my way to wash my hands—again. He was consulting with one of the kids that might have been in the engineering program. The hurricane did a number on us. It was clear more permanent shelter was needed, but the wall came first. Bigger logs, better tools for cutting, everything rudimentary man figured out thousands of years ago. We had to relearn it all.

I came up behind Bellamy and nodded at the kid he was talking to, who immediately quieted and backed off. Bellamy turned his dark head and looked at me over his shoulder.

Gave me a once-over, actually. Head to toe.

My lips tightened. "Can I talk to you?"

He nodded. I turned, intending to walk away when I felt a light pressure on my elbow. I looked down; long thick fingers were pressed, just at the tips, against my bone to guide me. Guide me.

I hated the way my cheeks heated. All thoughts of detachment went right out the window, as my dad used to say. I honestly did not know if I was embarrassed or angry, and it just wasn't worth the effort of finding out. I stepped neatly out of reach, chin up, pretending not to see the twinkle of dark amusement in Bellamy's eye.

We walked over a few feet, as much out of earshot as we could be with eighty eight other people around us. I kept my arm carefully out of reach, my hand clenched behind my back. "Why?" I asked the second we stopped. I didn't bother to explain and he didn't bother to misunderstand.

His arms weren't folded in his usual I am listening posture. "It's a good idea."

"It's making people take notice."

"There is that."

"Are you trying to make them hate me?"

"Why would I do that? We need you, whether they like it or not."

"There are kids here that would try to murder me in my sleep just for being born in better position than them. You know that. Giving me any kind of special treatment without a reason they can sink their teeth into is a very bad idea. Or was that the plan?"

"I'll give them something," he said, so self assured.

"What? How?"
"A permanent clinic."

I frowned.

"Just because you won't be on patrol doesn't mean life is going to get any easier on you. We'll set up a medical bay, with beds and enough supplies to handle just about anything."

"We don't have supplies."

"We'll get them or we'll make them. Whatever is necessary. As long as people know they have a place to go, they'll see how much sense it makes to keep you on your task. No distractions."

I couldn't help but wonder if he was isolating me even as I mentally applauded the basic idea. We did need a med bay, someplace to keep patients instead of me running all over the camp. It would be safer and more efficient. "I'll need helpers."

He turned his head just slightly, narrowing his eyes. "I'm listening."

"I can't do all of this alone. I need nurses. We need to teach everybody first aid."

I could see him thinking about it, considering all the angles. "That might be a good idea."

"It is." His idea might have had enough merit that I wasn't going to argue, but I wasn't asking his permission. "If this...collaboration is going to work, we have to communicate. This is me communicating. We need classes. Portable supply kits. We just need to figure out how we're going to organize everything in between finding food and rebuilding."

"You realize if you teach people what you know, you're giving up some of your power."

"I know. It's not about that. It's about making sure we have enough people to make something out of this whole repopulating Earth thing." To make it all worth it somehow. Wells was dead. The Ark was dying. We couldn't get through one day without some kind of trauma. I needed an end goal. Something to work for.

Thinking about Wells, I licked my lips.

Bellamy's gaze dropped.

I froze. He was staring at my mouth. He wasn't even pretending not to. Every minute of last night's conversation came rushing back to me. I felt hot and cold all at the same time. I took a quick step back.

I regretted that the second I did it. I'd just given ground to Bellamy Blake.

I showed a weakness. No, I'd just shown awareness, that I was affected by him. It didn't matter that I was frustrated and upset—how exactly I was affected wasn't the issue. It was that he got to me.

And people noticed. Not everybody at once, but enough. They hesitated in their tasks, nudged their buddies, whispered something. One head came up. Finn looked right at me.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

I didn't want it to. There was nothing there. Just a mistake. A moment that was born out of fear and uncertainty. A human need for connection. That was all. He had Raven to think about.

I had myself.
I straightened my shoulders and turned back to Bellamy—who saw the entire exchange between me and Finn. It must have lasted only seconds, if that, but he saw. And he wasn't pleased. "Guess you did a better job of saving him that you thought, if he's already up and around."

"He shouldn't be. The last thing he needs to do is tear his stitches."

"I can think of a few more things to add to the list." The muscle in his jaw ticked. Then his full attention was back on me, and the air changed. "It's already starting, Clarke. You know that, right?"

I wanted to tell him that it wouldn't be if it weren't for him. He had a choice. I did not for one second believe there was anything remotely romantic motivating Bellamy. This was about consolidating power and sex, pure and simple. He was dragging me into it. I resented that. To say anything about it, though, would give him another foothold. So I didn't. I just turned my back and walked away, glaring at anybody who made eye contact.

That was a dangerous thing to do, but I wasn't going to act weak. There was no mercy here.

I saw him off and on the rest of the day, of course. That night when we gathered around the fire, he explained about the med center. There were grumblings. More than a few, but they quieted when Bellamy mentioned the nurses and the classes. People didn't seem to mind that details were still up in the air. For now they were pacified.

When I walked back to my tent, I was bone tired. It was late, a lot later than I wanted. Checking up on patients took time. The kid who gashed his leg was running a fever, but that was normal. I'd get up in a few hours and check on him again. Right then I just wanted to collapse on my bed and sleep.

I used to read in bed. Now I could barely imagine having the time or the motivation to while away the hours, lounging and poring over an ebook.

My eyes were already sliding down, and I hadn't even made it to my tent yet.

A shadow moved next to it.

I froze. A Grounder? Someone else?

Bellamy.

"You have got to be kidding me." I quickly glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Relax, Princess. I'm just here to talk specifics."

My shoulders sagged. "Can't this wait until morning, Bellamy?"

Dark brows drew together in a deep frown. "Someone giving you a hard time?"

"What?" I shook my head. "Patients. That's it."

He absorbed that, nodding a little. "You look rough."

I huffed out a laugh despite myself. "Thanks."

Quick as a blink, a smile flashed across his face. It totally transformed him. "Yeah, I guess I could have said that better."

I blinked, wondering for the first time just how old he was. With all the worry lines gone, he looked
barely older than me.

The smile faded, but his eyes were still warm. "Go to bed, Clarke. It'll wait until morning."

I was almost pitifully grateful for that. "Okay." I walked forward, thinking he'd move.

He didn't.

His arms came up like two prongs, forming a box that I stepped right into. I managed not to run into his chest, but it was close—so close that when my head snapped back, I almost took out his chin.

This was kissing distance.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded, glad I could find my voice.

He pitched that cocky smirk at me. "Wishing you good night." His voice was the deep hum of the Ark.

He smelled like the woods.

I narrowed my eyes—and stomped on his foot.

He almost yelped, but caught it in time. He limped back, biting his lip and half laughing. "You don't play fair, Princess."

"I'm not playing," I retorted, not bothering to hide how pride I was of myself. Nobody was going to push me around. It felt good to remind myself of that. I wasn't going to go around and start punching people for the rush, but right here, right now, I felt good. "Night," I tossed at him tartly as I strode past and ducked into my tent.

I felt good. I felt a little like the old Clarke again.

Outside the tent, I heard a chuckle. "See you tomorrow."
The next morning I found a flower in front of my tent. I stared down at it like it was poisonous. Who left it? Bellamy? It didn't seem like something he would do.

And if it was Finn...

I kicked it to the side.

The day started out like usual. The round of patients, the chat with Bellamy. He didn't say anything about the flower. I felt eyes on me all day long. I had a feeling they belonged to Finn.

I saved his checkup for last. In fact, I avoided it. I even went out of my way to find Bellamy and talk about those portable med packs. We reached an understanding fairly quickly, surprisingly. I told him I would compile a list and check out the local vegetation with Monty to see if there was anything we could use.

I settled the scheduling of classes with Octavia. She was glad to have something to do. Bellamy keeping her out of trouble meant she had a lot of time on her hands to observe people, which meant she knew just who the first group of students should be. From there it was easy for her to organize the rotation.

She had a brain. I'd always known that. I was just glad we were on speaking terms again. I didn't think she'd forget any time soon. Then again, neither would I. For now we had an uneasy truce.

I still hadn't seen Finn by midday. Lucky for me, Monty was willing to go on the expedition sooner than expected. Like, immediately. So we went. It took a few hours, but we made enough progress that I started to feel like this would actually work. We took plants back to camp.

We were in top half of the drop ship, organizing as best we could, when Bellamy found us. He climbed out of the hatch. Monty took one look at him and mumbled an excuse of some kind. He practically ran out of there.

Bellamy half-smiled at me, as if to say, See? I told you.

I sighed. That was enough. "Okay. Clearly this is not going to go away on its own, so let's do this." I turned and faced him dead on. "The thing about attaching myself to the alpha male? It gives all the power in that relationship to the alpha male, who could just shove me out of the way any time he wanted."

He watched me, lips tight.

"Strong girls don't need strong men, Bellamy. Strong girls just need themselves."

"Maybe it's the other way around, then." He stepped closer, head angling.
I put my hand firmly on his chest. "I didn't pick you. I can't make it any more clear than that."

"And why is that, Princess? There's no one here better for you than me."

"Based on what? The fact that people listen to you? You know just as well as I do that you're walking a tightrope."

"Because you're right on that rope with me. We all are. You've been telling me this whole time that the only way any of us is going to survive is by working together. Here I am offering just that and you're turning me down."

"Then do us both a favor and just take this out." I pushed, making him fall back a step. "If you want to work together, fine. But don't dress it up with smiles and getting too close. Don't try to manipulate me. Either be honest or get the hell out of my way."

"Be honest? Fine." He grabbed my head in both his hands and kissed me. It was hard, short, and nothing like my kiss with Finn. It wasn't need. I didn't know what it was, but it wasn't need. He pulled back, glaring at me defiantly. "How's that for honest?"

I punched him in the face. I cried out when my knuckles connected. I forget to tuck my thumb in on the side instead of in the fist, and pain radiated all the way up to my elbow. I cradled my injured limb to my chest, breathing hard. "How's that?" I bit out.

Why the hell did so many people hit each other? There was nothing satisfying about it.

"Don't ever grab me like that again. I kiss who I want, when I want."

He ran his tongue over the inside of his cheek, using a thumb to brush the side of his lips. His face was red, but I doubted it would bruise. He'd taken worse hits.

I didn't know how many emotions eyes could show. He was thinking about grabbing me again, I could see that, and he was angry. But he didn't move. Instead he nodded almost to himself, like he'd accepted my conditions. "So what does it take, Princess? Spacewalker's hero hair? His inability to mention the other girls in his life?"

I felt that all the way down to my bones. When Bellamy came out swinging, he didn't mess around. He knew just where to hit with only a few words. All the blood drained out of my face. "I picked him because he made an effort to understand me," I said quietly. I didn't think I could say it louder. "He saw me as more than a means to an end. And for just a second, he made me forget how utterly miserable this place could be."

Something flittered across Bellamy's face. "Clarke..." He couldn't seem to find words, and he turned away from me in clear frustration.

I didn't know why we were still talking. "Let's get this settled. Do you want to be partners or not?"

He looked tall and strong standing there. He had that classic lone wolf figure, straight but wide enough for someone to wrap their arms around him. He even looked a little bit lonely, staring at the floor in thought like that. Amazing that there were nearly a hundred other kids with us and we both felt like that.

I shook my head. Stupid. Of course he wasn't lonely. He had Octavia and a half a dozen girls in his harem. If there was anybody who could use some alone time, it was Bellamy Blake.
Or maybe not. Just because there were people around, didn't mean he felt he could depend on them.

I sighed. Now I was defending him in my head. I guess all this time spent in close quarters together was starting to get to me after all. "I think we'd work well together," I ventured into the silence, "as long as you accept the conditions."

His big hand twitched at his side. "You know, Princess, I've never been one to follow the rules to the letter." He turned to me. "Yes, I want to be partners, but I'm not going to be a good boy and roll over."

I wanted to tear my hair out. "What the hell is the matter with you?" I burst out. "Why do you keep insisting on bringing sex or whatever into this? It's totally unnecessary!"

He stilled. "What the fuck is so unnecessary about wanting you?" His voice was quiet and thunderous.

My lips parted. Wanting me?

Wait, why was I surprised? Of course he—that was what the sex part was all about, after all.

He coiled like a cobra I saw in a picture once, the look on his face freezing the air in my lungs. "I thought you were smarter than that, Clarke."

What did that mean?

Why was it so hard to breathe?

Was this fear?

"I. Pick. You."

I felt weak all of a sudden. All over.

This time when he came closer, he didn't walk. He stalked. I wanted to recoil. I had the strangest urge to run in the opposite direction, like I was looking death in the eye. But that wasn't what was going on here. It was something entirely different.

Something I had no words for.

I inhaled and held it, trying not to inhale his scent. I stared at his left shoulder. Look up, I commanded myself helplessly. Look up, dammit.

I couldn't.

He was literally so close I could feel warm air gently puffing across my forehead.

This wasn't me. I wasn't a coward. I used to be a doctor-in-training. I was a healer now. Where was my self-control? I swallowed. "I...don't see why..."

"Yeah. You don't. Doesn't matter." His hand ghosted up my arm to my shoulder, not touching.

"Are you going to try and make me believe you care about me?" I did meet his eyes then, challenging him to lie to my face.

"Think words like 'care' and 'love' mean anything down here, Princess? That's for people like Spacewalker and Raven. People like us are about actions." His hand drifted over my shoulder.
Again, he didn't touch me. He was mocking the wall I'd set up between us.

"Sounds like a weak pick up line to me." I sounded braver than I felt. I captured his wrist—which was almost too big to circle my fingers around—and held him still.

He didn't resist. "Love is nothing. It's just a pretty name for something that can change overnight."

"Then what's this? Lust?"

He shook his head, and for once, he didn't look angry or upset. He was almost soft. "Connection."

I let that wash over me.

"You and me, we're the kind of people that give up all of ourselves for things we deem worth it, and when we do, we take it all the way to the end." He looked at our hands. "Now imagine," he said as he caressed a finger over my skin, "if we decided to commit ourselves to each other. A nice word like love wouldn't hold a candle to what we could have."

_That sounds so nice._

What? Was I crazy? Nice? I was lonelier than I'd thought if Bellamy Blake could spin this kind of tale to me. "Love is a pretty word," I admitted, "but it also means being happy with someone."

"Sometimes. Is that better than just being glad they exist, all the time?" He was holding my hand now, not the other way around. He seemed to be fascinated by the texture, rubbing his thumb down mine. "Wanting someone with you all the time, because they understand you? Feeling good deep down where no one can see, right in the gut, because in the back of your mind you know this person wants the same things you do?" His eyes darkened when they met mine. "Is it, Clarke?"

The way he said my name caused a shiver to run down my spine. "I don't know," I admitted. "I find it hard to think when you're—"

He stepped back.

I felt like he'd just cut off something vital. I looked down at my—now empty—hand.

"So go and think," he said, all dark control. "Think long and hard when I'm not close and we can't touch. When you realize I'm right, you won't be able to say that I manipulated you." He spread his arms out a little. "I'm the one."

Where did he get off saying that? Where was he finding the courage to make that kind of announcement? People didn't go around declaring their intentions. They dodged around it, playing that game of 'whoever cares least wins'. They didn't want to be hurt.

I didn't want to be hurt. Not the way that I was. Bellamy was older than me; hadn't that ever happened to him?

Suddenly I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything—myself, what I wanted, if I could even be what Bellamy was clearly expecting.

More important than that, though, was what I expected of myself. And him.

He was right about a lot of things, I thought as we made our way back down the hatch and into the camp. I walked a little behind him, eyeing his back every so and so often. We'd be a good team. We were the kind of people who threw ourselves into things. He was a natural protector and responsible
in more ways than I'd initially given him credit for. He had a sense of fairness, even if it was on the barbaric side.

Ever since we'd come to Earth, I'd seen people transform from perfectly contained animals to wild and reckless creatures that I couldn't really label properly. They just...went crazy, like they'd been waiting their whole lives to burst free. And Bellamy led the pack. Controlled anarchy.

What he was proposing was the next step. Organization. It fell into what I'd hoped for since the beginning. I should have been glad we were starting to see eye to eye on that, but did I trust him to see it through?

Maybe. If it benefitted him.

I could see how it would benefit him.

I could see how it would benefit me.

I'd rejected the idea of a partnership based on sex and power alone. I was worth more than that. I wasn't pulling some bullshit when I said I didn't need anyone but myself. Sometimes, though, I wanted to need. I wanted to not be the strong one every once in a while.

I wondered, suddenly, if that was part of what motivated Bellamy.

He'd tempted me. Tempted me deeply. He made it sound like a match, an unstoppable union between two like-minded people with something deeper than others could fathom. There was just one thing missing in all of that.

Trust.

I was judging every word he said. I wouldn't have been surprised if he did the same with me. How was that going to help either of us? Worse, it wasn't something we could fix by just deciding that it was better.

My head was starting to hurt. I stopped. "Finn."

He turned and looked at me, scowling. "What?"

"I forgot to check on Finn." Oh god, how could that be? Ugh, how could I have forgotten? The guy nearly died on my table and I was thinking about Bellamy Blake's back.

*Get it together, Clarke.*

"I've got to go."

Bellamy's arm shot out, blocking me. "Hey."

I looked from it to him. "What?"

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Shook his head and dropped his arm. "Nothing."

Someone called his name. He walked away without looking back. Again.

I went to Finn's tent with lead feet. Raven was there, but only for a few minutes. She had patrols. She gave us a good long look before she left, clearly reluctant to leave us alone. I felt even worse, but I set that aside so I could check the stitches.
Finn lay on his back, shirtless, not saying a word as he watched me. After ten minutes I sat back on my heels. "Looks good," I said woodenly.

"Think so?" he asked with a cheeky grin. Clearly he meant himself.

That would have made me smile not too long ago. "You shouldn't move around so much. We don't have the supplies or the manpower to try a second surgery. You'd be dead, Finn. Don't push your luck."

"Hey." He caught my hand.

I pulled it back.

He hesitated, fingers curling in the air. "Anything interesting happen this morning?" he asked suddenly. "Anything special?"

The flower. So it was Finn.

Why had he done that? I felt a surge of anger. Wasn't he thinking about Raven at all? That girl was so head over heels for him she risked her life to get to Earth. She built a shuttle out of scrape, dammit. That deserved some credit. "Nothing important," I answered impulsively, getting up.

I was so confused. On the one hand I wanted to feel flattered by the gesture. On the other I wanted to ask him just what the hell he thought he was doing, sneaking behind someone's back. That wasn't me. It wasn't who I was, and I didn't like Finn acting as though leaving me presents was a good thing.

I left before he could say another word. I needed space. I needed a second to myself.

The second I emerged from the tent I spotted Bellamy. His back was to me. He was talking to Octavia, holding his hands like he was talking about a box. I paused and considered him with a critical eye. Even at a distance, a person would be able to tell who the others looked to for guidance. It was in the way he stood.

His head turned. He looked right at me.

Even with a half dozen kids milling between us, our eyes seemed to connect without any effort at all.

I wasn't in the habit of lying to myself. Not really. There were truths that I wanted to believe, and truths that I didn't, but flat out lying about something wasn't a habit I'd ever picked up.

So I knew, then and there, that I was in trouble.
When you have a friend, you have someone you can confide in. You don't have to keep things bottled up. You can let it out, get perspective, and trust in the fact that someone might see a solution you can't.

Who did I talk to?

I was afraid that my judgement was becoming impaired, influenced by our microcosm society and the harsh conditions we were dealing with. The last time I spilled my guts to someone, it turned out badly. That was the only way I could define what happened with Finn. Something that didn't turn out right.

So now I was at a loss. We could communicate with the Ark, but I couldn't bring myself to confide in my mother. I didn't think we had that kind of relationship anymore, and the thought of putting all my thoughts onto a wire where anyone could listen left me cold.

What to do? How to clear my head?

My hand twitched. I wanted to draw. I just wanted to sit down somewhere and sketch whatever came to me. In those moments there was nothing but me and the paper and the pencil. Those were the calmest moments of my existence.

Everybody was taken care of. I could probably find Monty or Jasper again and talk about those medical supplies. Time was critical. Then again, if I burned out and became a basket case, I'd be no help to anybody.

One hour. I could do that. Get something to eat, sit in my tent, and just lose myself.

I went to that temporary place I called home and went in. Most people kept a few extra bits of food in their tents. It was a rough way to live, especially after being on the share system all our lives, but that was reality. I carefully dug out my precious sketchbook salvaged from the art supply store and a few of the pencils Finn gave me. If nothing else, he gave me that much.

Then I went to the other side of the tent, where I slept, and looked under my pillow for the tiny horde of nuts and berries I kept.

Nothing.

There was nothing there.

I pulled up the blankets, the extra jacket I managed to score, the makeshift bedding—nothing.

Stolen.

"Goddammit!" I threw the pillow across the tent in an impotent show of fury. Unbelievable! Just...no, it was totally believable. Someone just came in and stole my food. Bunch of delinquent, lowlife, sonsof-

I sat back on my butt and clapped my hands over my cheeks. Why? It wasn't like that little bit was going to keep anybody fed for long. Couldn't I just have one thing to myself? One thing?

No. Of course not. That would be too nice. I buried my fingers in my hair, fed up. Just fed up. How
was I supposed to—Okay, get a grip, I told myself. I was not going to lose it over a few nuts and berries. There were bigger things. Yes, I was tired and hungry and lonely, but I could not go ballistic over something this small. Death and dismemberment, maybe, but not this. Clarke Griffin was not weak.

I forced myself to breathe in and out, feeling the hot anger recede just a little. It didn't disappear, so I snatched up my tiny sketchbook and pencils with more force than necessary. I propped it on my knee and started to draw Finn's face with the blue he gave me. In minutes he was there, with that long hair I first saw him in. I drew everything—his jaw, his eyes, his neck, his smile.

He looked so happy and carefree.

The jerk.

I stabbed his eye with the pencil, digging it around for good measure. When that didn't seem enough, I did it to the other eye.

And then I proceeded to jab the pencil into his stupid face over and over. I missed once and poked myself in the thigh, but it was worth it. Kind of cathartic.

"Well, if that's not symbolism, I don't know what is."

My head jerked up. Bellamy was sitting outside the tent, holding the flap just out of the way so he could watch me. It gave me the perfect side profile. "How long have you been there?" I snapped, embarrassed to be caught doing something so childish.

And didn't he have anything better to do? a small inner voice added peevishly.

He quirked a brow. "Long enough to know the Spacewalker is not in your good graces."

"Neither are you." My eyes widened. "No, don't come in!"

"Relax, Princess. I come in peace." He was too big for the tent, hunched over to fit in. I don't know where his jacket went. He kept losing it despite the cool weather. How he managed to get it back all the time, I didn't want to know.

He had something in one hand. It looked like... "Is that food?"

"Jasper's first attempt at drying meat out into jerky. It's not half bad." He sat down across from me, taking up more space than just the physical. It was like the whole world shrank down to make him seem larger.

I wondered how he did that. It would be a neat trick to pull off now and again.

He held out a stick. My stomach rumbled in response, and suddenly I didn't want to fight anymore. "Thanks," I said tiredly, reaching out for the stick.

Our fingers brushed.

Why did the smallest touches feel like they meant something monumental? Sometimes I just didn't get human chemistry.

I set the sketchbook aside, next to my thigh.

He half-smiled, bringing out the lines on the side of his mouth and drawing attention to his freckles. Taking his own stick, he nibbled at the meat.
I took a bite. "Oh, man," I nearly moaned. "This is the blandest, best thing I've eaten in a while."

"Funny how our standards have fallen, huh?"

"Food on the Ark was never that good anyway." It was amazing that I could joke like that, considering the mood I was in. The meat changed everything.

We ate in companionable silence. We probably would have enjoyed it more outside with the trees, but then Bellamy would get called away and people would wonder why I wasn't attending to patients. No, I liked it better in here, in a kind of bubble that wouldn't last but still meant a lot.

After a few minutes, Bellamy gave up sitting and lay down on his stomach, sighing like he'd been awake a thousand years. He propped his head on his hand and nodded at my sketchbook. "That's pretty good."

Should I try to hide it? No, no point. He'd already seen everything, and it wasn't something I was ashamed of. "Thanks."

He finished the stick and carefully set it aside. "So what did Spacewalker do to piss you off?"

The casual question was anything but. "Nothing you need to worry about."

I wasn't aware he was moving until he still. "Really." He stared at me intently. "So he did something you think I shouldn't know about."

"Because it's none of your business."

"Or because you're wondering how I'll react. I won't kill him, Princess."

"It's something I have to deal with on my own, without your input."

He shifted. "Did you tell him flat out that it was over?" He cocked his head. "Or does he think there's still a chance? Can't imagine Raven would take that very well."

"There is nothing going on between me and Finn. Not anymore."

"But does he know that?" Bellamy insisted.

"Yes!" I nearly shouted at him. But what it the truth? Why would he leave me a flower if he didn't think I'd be happy?

Ugh. Men.

"Maybe you should make sure to spell it out for him. Some guys can't take a hint."

I glared. "Yeah, I wonder who else could fall into that category?"

Both brows went up. "I can take hints. I can also think critically and take responsibility. I shouldn't have kissed you like that today, for example."

"Was that your half-assed way of apologizing?"

"Just making a point." He turned and stretched out on his back, hands folded behind his head. His shirt rode up to expose a bit of his hip.

I found myself arrested by that patch of skin. When I looked up again, Bellamy's gaze was knowing.
"I said I'd let you choose and you will. All I have to do is wait."

"You said you'd leave me alone."

"I said I wouldn't touch you. I didn't say you couldn't touch me."

I shook my head. "You're so full of it. What makes you think I'd ever do that?"

"There's a lot to be said for the human touch." He extended his arm flat, laying it on the ground palm up. Inviting. "See for yourself."

He was almost touching my knee, so close I could feel his body heat. My fingers twitched. I stared at the limb he was offering me, my whole body focused on it. He wasn't asking for anything in return. That didn't make sense, but that wasn't the primary thought in my head. I just...wanted it. I wanted to hold on to someone, even if it was Bellamy. Just sit there and feel flesh and bone and blood and skin. I wanted it, strangely, as much as I'd wanted Finn that night.

Bellamy said nothing. He didn't move. Just looked at me.

I inhaled, struggling for sense. In the end...I failed. I slowly reached out, knowing this was bad, and I took Bellamy's hand in mine. I lifted it until it was on my knee, his long fingers relaxed and in the air. I closed both of my hands over his one. The rasp of skin against skin and my own breathing was all I could hear.

He was warm. And rough. And real.

Unexpected tears stung my eyes. The world was too much sometimes. I didn't know how much until right then.

I bent my head so he couldn't see.

He curled his fingers until he was clasping mine.

We sat there like that for a year or so. It really did feel that long. Like each heartbeat had a month between them. My life boiled down to this tent and this hand that I held in mine. Human connection.

If he was playing me, he was doing a good job.

But for once, I didn't think he was playing me. Because when I peeked at him through my hair, he was just as arrested at the sight of our handholding as I was. Bellamy Blake needed this as much as I did.

Something softened in my chest.

"You're right about Finn," I said after a while, my voice low and raspy. "I need to spell it out for him."

He swallowed but remained silent.

His skin was so much darker than mine. I spent just as much time outdoors as he did, but all I ever got was pink. I had seen this hand torture, cause pain, and sooth. He'd seen mine take a life and then save one. This hands had seen a lot since we came to Earth. What else were they capable of?

I was almost afraid to find out.

"You'll be fine, Clarke." Bellamy's voice was low and thick. It filled the confines of the tent with no
effort at all. "You always bounce back."

"Not always."

"Then you know where to find me."

I let him go reluctantly, withdrawing one finger at a time. "Thank you." I needed to say that. I glanced at the tent flap, knowing what I had to do. "I have to go."

He sat up slowly, an unreadable expression on his face. "Okay."

The spell was breaking, and part of me didn't want it to. "I'll talk to you later about the packs."

He nodded.

It was my tent, but this time, I was the first to leave, feeling Bellamy's eyes on my back the whole way.
Chapter 5

Disclaimer: I do not own The 100.

I’m taking this slow—but the shit is about to hit the fan.

Finn glanced up in surprise. "Clarke—"

"I'm going to be quick about this," I interrupted. Now that things had been decided, I wanted to get it over with. "Don't do what you did this morning anymore. It's not welcome and it's wrong. If you give anything to anybody, give it to Raven."

His shoulders sagged. "Look, I realize things are complicated, but don't do this."

"They're not complicated, Finn. Everything is as clear as crystal. You and Raven are together. You should treat her right, not go around behind her back giving things to other girls. You and me don't have anything, okay? Just friends, if that. And even that will stop if you don't do what I'm asking," I added softly, letting him know just how serious I was. I couldn't let any of my regret show. This was the right thing to do."

He got to his feet. "What if things aren't working out between us? That we break up? What then?"

I kept my arms and hands strictly at my sides. "Then that's between the two of you and has nothing to do with me. Do you understand, Finn?"

He said nothing, licking his lips and staring at me with big puppy eyes.

"Do you understand?" I asked again, more firmly. "I want to hear you say that you do."

"Come on, Clarke—"

"That's enough." The words cracked between us like a whip. "We're done."

And with that, I turned on my heel and left. I emerged into the sunlight and walked off a bit, heading for the side of the drop ship. When I got there I went a bit out of general sight, leaning my back on the cool metal. I let my head rest against the dented vessel, closing my eyes. I did it. Ripped the bandage off in one fell swoop.

I waited for that sense of happiness or freedom I thought I'd feel. It was there, a little nugget in the left side of my chest, but mostly it was a sense of disconnection. That fear of the inbetween. The 'now what?' stage.

Because I really had no idea what to do from here.

Okay. Moment over.

I opened my eyes and went into the drop ship. I spent the rest of the day sorting supplies and putting together a general list of topics for the classes. I consulted with Octavia on that. We were still stiff and awkward, but as long as we kept it professional the conversation went smoothly.

Then, in her typical Octavia fashion, she jumped right into the most sensitive topic she could. "What's with you and Bellamy?"
I had my cheek in my hand at that point, resting my elbow on the table and considering what we'd accomplished. I tilted my head just so, trying to gauge her mood. She was staring at me with the same mule-headed determination Bellamy sometimes did.

Must be a Blake thing.

Must be nice to have a thing that could be attributed to a family at all. "Would you believe I don't know?"

"Then why is he coming out of your tent, feeding you, and watching you like he does?"

I sat back. "He thinks we'd make good partners."

"Yeah. Partners. Right."

I really didn't want to sit there and defend myself to Bellamy's little sister. "We're not together and we're not having sex. Would you please lay off?"

Octavia frowned. "Wait. You're not?"

"Would it be any of your business if we were?"

Suddenly a bright, bright smile lit up her face. "Oh, this is too good." She darted around to the other side of the table, planted both hands on it and leaning forward. "He *likes* you."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stared at her in stony silence.

That didn't do a thing. "He can be a real smooth operator when he wants."

I scowled.

"Give him hell."


"Please. Bellamy needs to get taken down a peg or two from time to time, or he'll start believing his own hype. Or, you know, forget to just stay grounded." She shrugged a shoulder like she didn't care, but she did.

I eyed her. "What's it like to have a brother?"

"I don't know. What was it like to have two parents?"

That hit me right where it mattered. A hard ball formed in my throat. God, I missed the days when I *had* two parents to lean on. "Good," I managed to say after I licked my lips. "For a while, really good. Like things weren't as bad as they were."

Octavia drummed her fingers on the table. "Yeah." The mood turned somber, both of us lost in our own thoughts. Then, "Let's put it this way. I don't want to find out what it'd be like down here without Bellamy."

I tried to picture that. I really did. At first I couldn't. Then I thought about the Grounders, and the kid with the gash in his leg, and about thirty other things that could go wrong just walking from one side of camp to the other. I thought about the total chaos that reigned the first few days. Bellamy had a lot to do with it, but at the same time, I could now see that he also gave the chaos shape. What would have happened if he hadn't been here at all? Would things have been better, like I thought at first,
or...worse?

My blood ran cold. "I...guess we'll have to make sure he sticks around."

Octavia's mouth twisted, and I could see her weighing me to determine if I could measure up to her standards. We didn't have to say it—we both knew what we were really talking about here. Forget the little sister vetting her brother's "potential girlfriend" scenario. We were talking about a peace agreement to keep her brother alive at all costs. An alliance.

"Yeah," she finally said. "Guess we will."

So that was it. The deal was struck.

A smile flitted across her face. "Should we spit in our hands and shake on it to make it official?"

That startled a laugh out of me. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Too bad. I was kind of hoping to try that on someone."

"I'm sure it's slimier than you want to deal with. The last thing any of us needs is to get dirtier. It's what's causing such a high rate of infection around here."

"We need baths."

"We need a lot of things. Permanent housing and medical supplies. Food." My lips quirked. "A better map."

"What about sending out groups?"

"To take baths?"

"Yeah. Girls only. Guys only. Take turns washing and then getting the hell out of there."

"Grounders would be a problem." Or maybe not for Octavia. I kept that to myself, though.

"Better than us dying of infection. Dunk us all at once and maybe washing clothes in the process. If nothing else, we'd smell better."

And God, some of us really needed to smell better. I weighed the options, gnawing on my bottom lip. It was risky, but a bath would do a lot of us a world of good. On the Ark we had highly regulated shower schedules, but it had been almost two weeks of nothing but the occasional rainfall and quick sponge baths. We were a plague just waiting to happen.

"If we can find someone else who can draw," I mused, "we could try putting together a map. Get a better picture of what's outside. I can bring my sketching supplies."

"Where the hell did you find those?"

"We dug around," I said vaguely. "So which of us is going to tell Bellamy our plan?"

"How about we tell Raven first? The three of us would be able to convince him."

"Maybe convince is the wrong word," I ventured. "Coordinate sounds better. We need to make decisions as a cohesive group. Show a little solidarity." The last thing I wanted was to return to that first day.
"Whatever, Clarke. Let's go. I'm suddenly dying to get some of this stink off of me."

Her and me both. "We've got to keep this quiet. Raven only. We don't want to people to mutiny over a bath."

"Clarke. Move."

A few minutes later, Raven was hearing us out. Her shift was over, and her dark eyes lit up at our proposal. "We'd need rope. None of us know how to swim. If we could string something up to hang onto, maybe block off a shallow area, we'd be safer."

That was a good idea. "Do you know anybody that can draw?"

"Monroe can whip up a pretty funny stick figure."

"We need all the help we can get, but first we let Bellamy in on this."

"Kids that learn engineering have to take drafting classes, don't they?" Octavia interjected, giving Raven the eye.

"Please," she said, hands on hips, "I'm more of a freehander. I barely made it out of that semester."

"We could still use your ability to map out lines and grids," I chimed in. "You'd be really useful."

She rolled her eyes. "Alright. Let's go talk to the king."

I wanted to sigh. Even Raven was calling Bellamy that now. Wouldn't be long before he started demanding a throne and a concubine.

No, that wasn't Bellamy. He was more of the warlord type. With armor, a sword, a horse, and a big, forbidding fortress on the top of a hill. I could see it so clearly in my mind that my hand ached to draw it. It would be moody and dark, full of shadows and that penetrating stare I thought of as pure Bellamy. He'd be seated, leaning forward in a large chair. His sword would be point down on the floor, and he'd be holding the hilt, half in light, half in darkness—

"Clarke."


"Right," Raven drawled, clearly not understanding or caring.

Octavia smirked.

I wanted to find a hole and crawl into it. "Let's find Bellamy."

"Let's find Bellamy for what?" a deep voice asked behind me.

I whipped around, my heart in my throat—and eye to eye with his chin. How did he keep doing that?

He smiled, laughing at me. I looked up into his eyes, remembered the picture, and that stupid blush came back.

He tilted his head in interest. "What are you girls up to?"
I cleared my throat. "We were thinking of getting a group together to go take baths." There. I even managed to sound halfway normal.

"Baths," he repeated with a quirked brow.

"Yes. Girls then guys. Get some of this gunk off of us," Octavia jumped in. She outlined her plan, with Raven chiming in, while I moved out of the way. It was Octavia's moment and I needed to get myself together.

"We can't risk Grounders coming after you," was Bellamy's immediate response.

Hardly surprising. Bellamy was all about pushing the Grounders back, but he was even more concerned about his sister's safety.

"There are just as many good reasons to go as to stay," Raven pointed out. "I don't know about you, but I'd feel a lot happier clean. You might get some extra work out of us yet."

The look he slanted her was less than amused. "Funny, Reyes."

"We'd cut down a little on the risk of infectious diseases," I felt compelled to add.

"We're also going to make a map," Octavia told him excitedly. Never mind that we didn't have a definitive plan for that. It was just a suggestion.

Never mind. I could see the wheels turning in Bellamy's head. We'd all crowded together to keep our voices down, so it was easy to observe him without being obvious about it.

"Come on, Bell. Give us this much. We're dirty and we're sick of it." Octavia was turning on the charm, going in for the kill. "Please?"

"O, it's dangerous. There's no way in hell I'm assigning guards to a group of naked women."

"Who says we need male guards?" she challenged.

Very good question. I wasn't one to play gender politics, but I was suddenly very interested in Bellamy's answer. So was Raven, who crossed her arms and gave him an arched look. And he seemed to realize it. He looked from one girl to the other—me, who had personally removed a knife out of someone's side and gave another a mercy killing, Raven, the girl who electrocuted a prisoner to get answers, and Octavia, who could survive just about anything.

He gritted his teeth. "One hour. Ten girls. Five pairs, little kids with the big ones. Do not dawdle, understand? Or I will personally come and drag every one of your asses back to camp whether you're dressed or not."

Octavia scrunched up her nose. "Ew." She glanced at me and then Raven, and it suddenly occurred to all three of us that we were going to have a bath.

Raven smiled first. Octavia strangled a whoop by throwing herself into Bellamy's arms. Even I couldn't contain my happy grin.

Bellamy chuckled and patted his sister on the back. "Alright, alright." He met my gaze over her shoulder. "Get going. The faster you get out of here the faster you'll get back. I'll pick the other girls and let them know what's happening."

Octavia tore herself away and grabbed me by the elbow. "Let's go! Let's go!"
I followed, trying not to look back at Bellamy. There was no reason to, except— "We need Munroe," I reminded him.

He nodded, a faint smile on his lips.

He really was kind of handsome in a certain light. At a certain angle.

When Raven said rope, she really meant a bunch of fabric that wasn't fit for much else quickly woven together. Ten girls put a few rudimentary braiding skills together and in no time at all, we had a good twenty feet. Half of us armed ourselves. Bellamy was waiting at the gate, looking torn between bemusement and the urge to cancel the whole thing.

It must have been really killing him to let us out of his sight like that. It wasn't the first time I'd seen his protective instinct. He didn't apply it to a lot of people, but he seemed to look after the concept of the collective with favor. Not like a father or anything—that was reserved for Octavia—but as someone who was interested in making life down here work.

He pulled Octavia aside for some last minute instructions. I couldn't hear what they said, but it was a short, heated discussion. It couldn't have been too bad—Octavia gave him another hug and bounced off with her partner.

As I walked by, I met his eyes. There wasn't a special reason why. I was just as worried about Grounders as he was, but I looked forward to getting clean so much that I ached. Still, I knew it was hard for him. I wanted to make him feel a little bit better about it.

He moved like he wanted to take my hand, but stopped himself. "Be careful," he murmured instead.

"We will," I replied quietly, giving him a small smile. "In and out, one hour."

He nodded, but seemed far from reassured.

Time was wasting. I went through the gate and listened as it closed behind me.

Monroe and Raven made up the front of the group. Octavia and I were in the back. We technically had a buddy system. It made more sense to keep the smaller ones in the middle, though. A girl named Jem, who was probably the same age as Octavia, walked with them, a knife gripped tightly in her hand.

We made it to the river. The second we saw it, it was like something snapped inside. We all rushed forward, throwing off clothes. We kept our eyes on the trees as we each took a bit of our rope that we tied to a tree. I was the first to wade in, wearing nothing but my underwear. I didn't have extra clothes to change into, which meant I needed to keep the top layer dry. The bottom layer, though—that was going to get washed thoroughly, come hell or high water.

There was no movement beneath the surface. No disturbances in the treeline. Taking a chance, I ducked my head under. Water closed over my head and suddenly, silence. Blissful silence.

I reemerged with a laugh. "Hurry!" I told the others.

They giggled and almost pushed each other as they splashed in. We were making too much noise, but I didn't have the heart to remind them off it. As long as we were vigilant, we'd get through this.

Raven pulled off her top, revealing pretty tanned skin and long lines. "We have to do this quick," she said, but even she couldn't resist a gasp of pleasure as she hit the cold water.
I took off my underwear and used it to quickly wash the grit from my skin, then found a rock to beat the cloth against. We all ducked our heads a few times, taking turns rubbing our scalps, trying to remember what clean felt like and hold onto the rope at the same time. It was wonderful.

"Are you good?" I asked my partner, a girl of about fourteen with long brown hair and cheeky blue eyes. "I have to get out and do some sketching. Come closer to the shore, okay?"

I knew she wanted to argue, but I hadn't said she had to get out of the water yet, so she didn't say anything. I reluctantly climbed back onto the bank, not even worried about my nakedness. I put my bra and undies on a sunny rock before digging out my drawing supplies. I had to keep an ear open and an eye on my partner, so this was going to be quick and dirty.

We were there maybe twenty minutes. My hair had begun to dry. For the first time in a long while I didn't feel like things were living in the strands. Words didn't exist to describe how amazing it felt to sit there naked, somewhat more relaxed than usual, with real sunlight on my skin. Was this what it was like a hundred, two hundred years ago? It was better feeling than any alcohol could inspire. It felt almost...peaceful, even if I was aware of every minute that passed.

Monroe came up next to me. She was tall and athletically built, kind of like one of those Greek goddesses I remembered reading about.

"Everything okay?"

"Good to be clean. Not sure how I feel about the water part of it."

I looked up.

She stretched her arms overhead and bent to the side. "Gets up my nose and in my eyes. I can't see. I don't like that."

I envied her toned body. She could probably run for miles and not lose her breath. Then again, none of us ever had a chance to run in space, so who knew?

She started to get dressed. "I'll take the left."

"Here." I offered my pad and pencil. "Raven says you can draw a little. Try to remember as much as you can of the walk here and what you saw. Every bit helps."

"Got it." She took everything and walked off.

I stood, looking out over the girls. They looked happy. I hated to do this. "Fifteen minutes," I called out.

A chorus of "what? No!"s echoed. Led by Octavia.

I felt like a mom ruining everybody's good time. "We have to go back soon."

Raven backed me up. "She's right. We're clean. Let's take it for what it is."

I nodded at her, grateful.

She climbed out and stood next to me. "Wish we could stay here all day."

"Me too."

Suddenly she lifted her hand in a staying motion. "Do you hear that?"
Heart freezing, I listened. "Is that...?"

"I didn't pay a lot of attention in Earth Studies, but I swear to God that sounds like a chicken."

Possibilities flashed through my mind. Chickens. Eggs. A domesticated food source. I was so excited I grabbed Raven's hand and stared at her, wide-eyed.

Understanding flashed between us. "Monroe will look after the kids. You go that way, and I'll go this way. We catch it if it kills us."

Well, not if it killed us, but I admired her enthusiasm.

We didn't waste time dressing, just grabbed a knife and a club. Raven had the knife and I had the club. We seperated and circled. I tried to avoid every stick I could, the underbrush pricking the tender soles of my feet. I ignored the scratches of branches on my skin. The chicken, a way to feed people was more important.

Next to a tree I stopped and listened. Dammit. I didn't hear the clucking anymore.

A twig snapped.

I froze. Raven?

"What the hell are you doing here?" an angry voice demanded.

My mouth parted. Bellamy?

A scuffle, then Bellamy barked, "I told you to stay back in camp, Spacewalker."

Oh no.

"Are you kidding me, Blake? That's my girlfriend in there. There's no way I'm letting you or any of your yahoos spy on her."

"And I'm not letting you lay an eye on my sister." A growl. "Or Clarke."

All the blood drained from my face. Oh no. No.

A pause. "What are you talking about?"

Don't. Please don't.

"Maybe it's time someone laid out the facts for you, Finn. Whatever happened, it's over. She's not there for you to take advantage of anymore. Got it?"

"You don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Don't I? All of you, listen up. Clarke's off limits. Anybody that goes near her answers to me."


If I were dressed, I would have punched him. I would have beaten Bellamy Blake over the head with my club. How could he? I was humiliated all the way down to my soul.

A breathe sounded on my right. I looked, and there was Raven. Our gazes met over the distance. I bit my lip, trembling, torn between screaming in anger and burrowing in embarrassment. And Raven? Our dirty laundry was just aired in front of who-knew how many people. Word would
spread like wild fire. Whatever tentative peace Raven and I had between us would be destroyed, just like that.

And for what? So Bellamy could put his foot on the back of my neck and claim territory?

I swiped a shaking hand over my eyes. I think in that moment, I really hated Bellamy.

Raven swallowed, then glared in the direction of the boys. Whatever she was feeling, it wasn't charitable.

A hand reached out and clasped my shoulder. I glanced at her, shocked. What was she doing? Didn't she hate me? Didn't she want to rip my hair out?

It was a weak way to think, but I didn't have enough faith in humanity anymore to think otherwise.

She squeezed. Come on, she mouthed.

I didn't see any hatred there.

That made me want to cry more. I hurt, right in the chest, but I nodded jerkily and crept out after her.

But I didn't see the twig. I didn't know it was there until it snapped under my fist when I put it down to steady myself.

"Over there!"

No no no no—

"Clarke?"

I looked over my shoulder, eyes wide. At Bellamy. At Finn. At at least three other guys.

And they were staring at us, mouths open.

Bellamy's gaze scorched me. They traveled up and down, taking in every bit of exposed skin. Time suspended.

Then he looked at Finn.

And then he punched him.
Chapter 6

Raven didn't hesitate. She leaped out of her crouch and sprang past me, shoving Bellamy to the side. "Hey! Back off!"

I could have helped. Intervened somehow. It was the right thing to do, especially for Raven since she didn't tear my hair out.

I could have. I should have. I didn't. I turned tail and dashed through the underbrush, the sounds of the scuffle continuing over the blood rushing in my ears.

"Clarke!"

No. I was not going to stop. I skittered down the slope, grabbing onto saplings for balance. Every one of them could take care of themselves. Every damn one of them, and if Bellamy Blake thought —

"Clarke, stop, dammit!"

I increased my speed. We hadn't gotten that far. Where was the hell was the shore?

My foot slipped. I nearly fell, but I caught onto a tree in time for balance. My hair caught in the branches, pulling hard. I swiped my hand overhead blindly.

His voice was right behind me. "Clarke, wait."

I felt the heat of his hand, that instinct that lets you know when something's too near, and I dodged it, practically throwing myself behind the tree.

I gripped the trunk as hard as I could, convinced I would wring his neck if I didn't.

He tried to follow.

"Stay away!" I was not going to let him get any more of a look then he already had. Him and a small herd of guys.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, holding the tree too. "I didn't mean to let anyone see that—"

"My choice," I spat at him. "You said it was my choice. Where the hell do you get off telling everyone that I'm off limits?"

"I didn't plan it. That was for Spacewalker's benefit."

"Finn is none of your business. What I do with Finn is none of your business. What I don't do with Finn is none of your business! You aired every piece of dirty laundry I had to people I don't know, just so you could look like the big he-man."

His expression turned thunderous.

"You had no right to say any of that. Raven and I had already talked about it, but what if we hadn't, Bellamy? Do you think those other guys would have kept it a secret?"

"I was trying to protect you!" he growled, darting a step forward. "Do you think he came for Reyes? He came for you. He was stabbed in the fucking side, and he was still trying to get to you."
I retreated, circling. "You were trying to show them that you were king of the damn mountain," I shot back. "And then you pissed all over my supposed choices. Well, guess what, Bellamy? I've made my decision. There's no way in hell-

Like a snake, he struck.

He caught my hand and pulled, causing me to lose my balance. I stumbled flush against the tree, the bark digging into my skin. Bellamy was on the other side, looking every inch that unstoppable warlord I pictured him as.

Our eyes connected for a charged moment of silence.

Without looking away, he bent his dark head and kissed my hand—right in the center of my dirty palm.

I tried hard to get free. "Stop, Bellamy."

His mouth, parted and hot, slid up and closed over my wrist. His tongue swirled over the pulse point.

Sensation raced up my arm to my elbow. My heart hammered like malfunctioning machinery. I twisted, flattening my palm against the tree for leverage, and broke the connection.

His eyes flashed; he pulled my arm up and above his head, forcing me forward while his free hand reached around to spear itself into my hair.

He had me captured.

He came around, covering my body with his everything—his body, his presence, his personality. Everything.

"You think it's that easy to untangle us?" he rasped, his fingers burrowing themselves deeper into my barely dry strands.

I angled my elbow against his chest to keep him away. "All your talk of choice is bullshit."

"I took it too far warning Spacewalker away, but you're deluding yourself if you think this can end any other way, Princess."

My back scraped the bark. "You're the one that's delusional, Bellamy."

He pinned me with his body and his eyes. "You know what I think? I think you don't understand what it means to have someone tell you what you can and can't have. To want something for yourself so bad you can taste it. You want a fight? Fine. Fuck it. Let's fight. I still won't regret telling everybody who I've picked for myself."

Just like he didn't regret taking off the bracelets, or hanging Atom in a tree for being interested in Octavia, or beating the Grounder before turning to outright torture. Those were things he did because, to Bellamy Blake, the consequences were acceptable as long as he got what he wanted.

"You should have picked an easier girl," I gritted. "Someone who would fall for this caveman act."

"Oh, but I've had the easier girls, Princess. I want the bossy bitch that's nice to kids and the doctor who kills out of mercy. That's the one for me."

"How romantic."
"Screw romance. You've had the tower and you've had Prince Charming. This is Earth, and I'm not some friggin' fairy tale hero." His eyes fell to my lips. "Kiss me."

My eyes widened. Was he out of his mind? "No!"

His lashes were long and thick as he continued to stare. "Yeah."

"I'd rather punch you in the gut."

"Coming from you that's like a love letter." He leaned in a fraction more. "Come on, Clarke. Kiss me."

I shook my head.

"Why? Because you're mad?" That dark teasing suddenly cooled. "Or is it because you still want the Spacewalker?" His gaze was intent for a beat. Two. "You do, don't you."

I couldn't answer. Not yes. Not no. "Do you expect me to get over something like that in a matter of days?" I asked tightly, glaring.

Bellamy's expression had turned to stone. He was coiling again. He may not have been a killer, but in that moment I was reminded—yet again—how dangerous he was.

"Why not?" he said. "You barely knew him."

I laughed bitterly, aware that we were almost sharing breath as well as words at this distance. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?" I sobbered, jutting my chin out. "He was my first, Bellamy. I spent a year in prison with four gray walls, and the first person to make me feel good and alive was him. Sorry if I'm having a little trouble adjusting to how quickly it fell apart."

There was rustling in the brush. "Bellamy-"

He slapped a hand on the tree trunk and leaned in, angling his body to block mine immediately. "Turn around, Miller," he ordered quietly. Coldly.

"Whoa. Sorry."

I scrunched myself to make myself smaller, finding my cheek pressed against Bellamy's chest. His body temperature heated my skin. I didn't even know I was chilled until that moment. Suddenly I was too warm. It wasn't just about me being naked; Bellamy's groin was flush against my stomach and pelvis, my leg inserted just a little between his. We were locked together like two puzzle pieces. The whole world was Bellamy—his shirt, his throat, his jacket, his shoulder, his arm, his smell.

It hit me then.

I was using him as a shield.

I trusted him to be that shield.

It was instinct.

"Finn's bleeding. His stitches are torn. Raven's having a freak out."

I raised my head. "He could be bleeding internally. We have to-"

"He shouldn't have left camp. It's his own damn fault. " Bellamy cut me off without taking his eye
off of Miller. "Go back to Finn and help him up. We're going back. Hopefully he doesn't bleed out on the way. I'll get the girls."

Miller nodded. When he disappeared, Bellamy turned his attention to me. "This conversation isn't over, Princess."

He recaptured my hand and turned, pulling me after him.

The girls were huddled on the shore, wide-eyed and dressed. Gasps at the sight of Bellamy rose. "What happened?" Octavia exclaimed, separating herself from the others. "Where's Raven?"

"You took too long." He let me go. "Get your clothes and Raven's. We're leaving."

"Jesus, Bell. Turn around."

"I don't have time for this, O. Move. Finn did something stupid and Clarke's gotta rush in and save the day."

She snapped her mouth shut. So did I. Finn's life was priority now. Arguing with a grim-faced Bellamy was a waste of time. I rushed to get my clothes, not bothering with underwear. I just stuffed them in my jacket pocket. "Let's go."

We all rushed back up the hill with Bellamy leading the way. The others weren't where we left them, but we could see their tracks.

I sped up, practically hauling my partner along by the elbow. I could see movement in the distance, could hear Raven talking.

My partner stumbled over a root, making me misstep.

Schwick. Thunk.

There was an arrow shuddering in the tree just in front of me—where I would have been standing.

My partner screamed.

"Grounders!" Monroe shouted.

"Run!" I pushed the girl next to me hard. "Run! Go!"

All the girls took off, heading full tilt toward camp. More arrows flew, whizzing by in a terrifying hail.

Branches slapped my legs.

One of the girls—Jem—fell, gurgling on the blood welling out of the arrow in her throat.

Oh god.

I ran for her as she disappeared into the underbrush. Out of nowhere Monroe grabbed me by the back of the shirt and propelled me in the other direction. "Leave her!"

"No, I can help-"

"She's dead, Clarke! Go!"
I went.

I ran hard, my heart and lungs and body tight, thumping with every step. Pain sliced my back—an
arrow grazed me. The poison.

No time.

Run.

Live.

Figures were darting around us, jumping from tree to tree and leaping with furious agility through the
obstacle course of the forest. Life had become a series of dark streaks and flashing greens
interspersed with high pitched screams.

Something fell down in front of me; Monroe and I skidded to a halt just in time. The Grounder
slashed at us with a knife where someone's throat would have been. Monroe dodged right. I swung
the club I had clenched in my hand, catching the Grounder in the side.

Monroe stabbed him, sinking her knife into his chest without a second's hesitation. They hit a tree
and stumbled. The Grounder went down and she went with him, still holding onto the knife.

She was trying to yank it back out when another Grounder appeared in the treeline, aiming a bow
right at us.

I threw myself on her, flattening all three of us with an audible ooof.

Monroe swore.

"Come on!" We lurched to our feet. Where were we? Did we get turned around? I couldn't see
anyone. Too many trees. Too many figures.

The Grounder rushed us.

Pure fury and fear fueled my swing; I clocked him in the head. Then I hit him again. And again.
Blood splattered.

He was dead.

A hand wrapped around my upper arm. Bellamy. He practically threw me into a run, following right
behind. He had a girl slung over his shoulder, her arms cascading limply down his back. An arrow
jutted into the air.

We weren't going to make it. I knew it. I knew it with every step, even as I prayed I was wrong.

Bellamy slammed into me with bone jarring force. A hand hit my eye. Sparks exploded. I crashed
into Monroe. We all went down.

A Grounder.

Bellamy mule-kicked, his heavy boot damaging. He rolled, the injured girl boneless on the ground,
and collided with the Grounder with a snarl. I pulled at the girl, trying to get her up, but Monroe had
to take her. She did a fireman's carry, just like Bellamy.

The two men were punching and horrendous sounds of bones crunching and knuckles meeting flesh.
Where was Bellamy's ax?
There, in the dirt. I scrambled for it.

They separated for just a second. The Grounder charged just as Bellamy tripped over a root.

They both went down, down, down the side of the hill, twisting and falling and spinning like two rag dolls. I wanted to scream Bellamy's name, but nothing came out of my mouth.

They hit the bottom.

Neither moved.

"Clarke!"

I looked at Monroe. The decision was instant. "Take her! Run!"

I didn't wait to see if she did. I just threw myself down the rocky slope and slid straight toward Bellamy.

He was face down on the earth, blood all over his skin and neck. He was cut badly. The one on his forehead would need stitches. I glanced at the Grounder. Dead. His eyes were open and staring into nothing. The cut on his temple told that story.

I hurriedly checked Bellamy's pulse. Found one.

Thank god.

The screams were dying down. I didn't know if there were survivors. I didn't know if there were more Grounders. I just knew we couldn't be here.

"Come on." I grabbed both of Bellamy's hands, pulling his arms up. No time for delicacy. I had to drag.

So I did. I don't know where I found the strength. I just left the ax in the dirt and yanked and pulled Bellamy deeper into the ravine, hoping on of the rocks would-

There.

An overhang.

I grabbed handfuls of his jacket, sweat and a few tears running down my face. I couldn't control it. This was the crisis. The moment nothing else in the world mattered but living and making sure Bellamy lived with me. All of this could be futile; I didn't care. I had to try.

I had to.

I got him in there, knowing this overgrown hole could be our grave. I hadn't covered tracks. I didn't have a weapon. I just had a desperate, almost-paralyzing hope in the face of hopelessness.

I crawled in after him. Dust kicked up into my face with every breath, the grit sticking. It itched. I didn't care. I kept one hand tightly clasped in Bellamy's shirt, right over his heart, staring out into the path. Any second now a Grounder would appear. They'd look for their dead friend. They would find us.

We would die.
Chapter 7

Time is a funny thing. On the Ark, there was no night and day. There were numbers on a screen that
told us it was time to wake up, to eat, to shower, to learn, to work, to play, to go to sleep. On Earth,
the sun rose and it set, but the inbetween was endless nothingness filled up with no schedules, no
agenda other than trying to live to see one after the other.

In a hole that was little more than a flat rock on top and hard packed soil below, every single second
became important. I measured it in my breaths. I measured it in Bellamy's heartbeats. I could see each
tick off thanks to Dad's watch on my wrist.

I wondered if there was a Heaven like some people said. I already knew there was a Hell.
If there was a Heaven, I was sure Dad was there. How could he not? He was a good man. A very
good man. I'd done more wrong in the time I'd been on Earth then he'd probably done in his whole
life. Would I go to Heaven? Maybe it depended on what kind of mood whichever god available was
in.

My arm was starting to get tired, raised in the air like it was, my fingers still clenched in Bellamy's
shirt. My shoulder ached and my back burned. I had no idea how deep the wound went or how fast
the poison worked. Could trace amounts kill me? Finn's wound went deep, and it took a few hours
for us to realize how bad things were.

Finn. Raven. Did they get back? Were they dead? What about Monroe and the other girls? Octavia?
If she was dead Bellamy would never-

What was I thinking? The chances of us living through this? I should think about Octavia missing
Bellamy. She would, but she was strong. She'd survive.

At least Bellamy would have someone to miss him.

That wasn't fair. Mom would miss me. Mom would care.

I bit my bottom lip, hating this. Hating where I was, what Mom did, the choices I'd made and the
choices I didn't make. In the last year everything had gone so wrong. I'd gone wrong. I wasn't the
Clarke I used to be, and no matter what, I never would be. The problem was I wasn't sure if I liked
the Clarke I was now.

My gaze was drawn to Bellamy without thinking. He was almost too big for our tiny hiding place,
squeezed up against me bonelessly. He was battered and bloody. It was the worse he'd ever looked.
The first time I'd seen him, he was in a guard's uniform and had slicked back hair. He'd looked like a
perfect product of the system, the soldier who stood tall and strong in a group full of juvenile
delinquents.

He turned out to be the most delinquent of us all. A warrior who didn't give a damn about the
system. He gave a damn about himself and his sister and surviving, and that was it. At least at first. I
never would have thought the Bellamy Blake who gave Murphy a knife to stab Wells would also be
the guy that took care of Charlotte, or slung a wounded girl over his shoulder. The guy who
threatened to off Jasper was not the sort of man I thought I'd see dividing up tasks in camp or
torturing a Grounder to save someone.

He was complicated. Not the fairy tale hero. A real life man who couldn't be pegged in just one
category.
I slowly released his shirt and lay my hand flat on this chest, spreading the fingers wide. I would never have picked Bellamy Blake for myself.

But I was glad that he'd picked me.

Because he was right. Being glad someone existed was better than fleeting happiness. As I scooted myself over, each movement delayed bit by bit to minimize sound, and partially covered Bellamy's body with my own, I realized I was grateful. I would not have wished dying on virtually anyone, but I was glad that his was the chest I was laying my head on, that his was the heartbeat I could faintly hear, and that his smell was the one I smelled now.

I closed my eyes, trying to pretend that we weren't where we were, though that of course was impossible. I thought about my mom and the things I wanted to say to her. If I knew for sure there was a Heaven, all of this wouldn't have been so hard. I could relax, knowing at least there was something to look forward to.

Bellamy shifted beneath me.

My eyes snapped open. I raised my head, looking into his face.

He moaned-

I quickly covered his mouth, darting a furtive glance at the opening of our hideout.

He jerked, grabbing my shoulder. I hissed as pain shot through me.

He came fully awake then, staring at me, his other arm coming up from under me instinctively. His brows furrowed. He tilted his head back and looked around, finally landing on the opening. I watched him take it all in. When his gaze locked with mine, I wondered what to say. What to do. Finally I mustered a wobbly smile.

Bellamy's eyes darkened with understanding.

He closed them for just a second, like he was processing exactly what was happening. His body slowly drained of tension.

Acceptance.

He really did have the longest framed his eyes perfectly. I'd never noticed that before.

Bellamy's hand slid up my side and cupped my hand, still over his mouth. He pressed it down, weaving his fingers through mine, and he pressed a long kiss to my palm. It was very different from the time before. He wasn't proving anything. He was just...savoring.

His eyes opened.

Earth had taught me so many things I didn't know before. I now knew what it felt like to stand in the rain and let it wash over my body. How clean I could feel after, not just in the body but in the soul, just before reality set in again. I understood real hunger. I knew bone deep regret.

I understood what connection really was.

My lips stretched a little bit more into that smile.

I moved our hands so that I could cup his cheek, ignoring the blood and the dirt. His lips...they were full. Why didn't I know that before? I must have looked at them a thousand times. I'd even drawn
them in my head. Their reality just didn't hit me. I guess I thought I'd always have time to sit back and study him.

There wasn't any more time. There was just now.

So I studied them. I stroked the top corner of his mouth with my thumb, liking the way it felt. His freckles were an unexpected touch too. They humanized him the way his rough hands did. If he were some kind of paragon, he'd be designed like a statue. No flaws. No nods toward the quirks of the human body.

I found his imperfections kind of beautiful.

He did, however, have cheekbones that could make a girl green with jealousy. Then again, Octavia had the same. Guess it was another one of those Blake things.

It's strange what I was suddenly noticing. The features that summed him up were, taken one at a time, actually kind of remarkable. Like his ears. And his nose. His throat.

Bellamy shifted, curling an arm around me and settling back, his fingers capturing a strand of hair. He rubbed it, watching the motion, like he was memorizing the texture. I wondered if he could feel my heartbeat with the way our upper bodies were pressed. I could feel the rise and fall of his chest. He felt strong and invincible next to and beneath me, despite the grime and the dried blood crusting his cuts and scrapes.

Maybe, I thought as I watched him study me, what I liked best about Bellamy was that I knew he wasn't. He was strong, but he was also weak. He made mistakes. He was a fighter, but he wasn't invincible. How many other people knew that about him? He definitely realized it about himself.

Bellamy blew out a small breath, his mouth quirking in a rueful tilt. I thought I saw regret too. And why not? He would be leaving Octavia behind. There had to be a half dozen other things he'd hoped to do before he died too. He was only...21? 22? Put in perspective to what he could have had, Bellamy had barely had any life at all.

And me. As ancient as I felt, I was just seventeen. I mulled that over. Seventeen. It sounded old and young at the same time. I wasn't even old enough to vote on the Ark. Not that they wanted a convict's vote, but that wasn't the point. If I'd found someone out of the two thousand plus people I wanted to marry, I would have had to have my parents' permission. In terms of years, I was a kid.

In terms of experience and hardship, though, I felt ancient. Every day here had made me a year older.

How did Bellamy feel?

I turned my head and kissed his finger.

He stilled, a question on his face. I leaned into his warmth. He'd said that Finn was the kind of person that needed to be needed, but maybe Bellamy Blake needed someone to need him too. Why else would he be so adamant we should be together? Why else would he look so vulnerable, like he wasn't sure what I was after?

Death was looming overhead. Was it really all that important that he wasn't some ideal man? He'd been there for me, more than once. He'd come after the girls because he cared. He'd told Finn off because he viewed it as protecting me. He was wrong to announce my secret and publicly claim me, but he knew that.

He wasn't Prince Charming.
He was Bellamy, and when I died—today or sometime in the future—I was going to remember how he was holding me now, not how he never gave me flowers or pretty words. Bellamy Blake was real.

I think I would have come to that conclusion eventually. Circumstances dictated otherwise.

Should have known. Life on Earth had a way of getting screwed up, fast.

The one constant, now that I thought about it, was Bellamy. Bellamy being a jerk, being the leader, being protective, being a smartass, being everything in the spectrum. But he was there.

I scooted up, lifting until my head cleared his shoulder. I used the hand we had intertwined to tilt his head or hold him still—I wasn't sure which.

And then I closed my eyes and kissed him.

It was a chaste kiss. No tongue, no open mouths, but I poured every ounce of my feelings into it. I molded my mouth to his, trying to cover as much space as I could. I told him a lot of things in that kiss. Things I probably would never have been able to articulate with words.

He was still. Very still. Almost frozen.

When I lifted my head, he stared at me. He was holding his breath.

Then he exhaled. It sounded so relieved I almost cried.

I kissed him again, and this time he was ready for it. His parted lips forced me to part mine, and oh, that was a million times better than the first time. Or the second. Who was counting?

Not me. I was feeling.

I was tasting. Another thing I didn't really know until I came to Earth—people taste different.

Bellamy tasted amazing.

His mouth slanted and clung, a sigh gusting across my cheek. I made a sound in the back of my throat. I pulled back for breath and then came right back. This kiss was more passionate, more involved. He nibbled on my bottom lip, let it go, and then licked a wound that didn't exist.

Before I knew it, I was addicted, leaving and returning again and again until my existence boiled down to this unbelievable sensation.

He was cupping the back of my head. I was holding onto his jacket. His arm was around my waist, a big hand flat on my side.

Bellamy Blake was an amazing kisser.

He wiped my mind clean.

Finally we had to separate for more than a single gulp of air. Bellamy was flushed. Seriously, his cheeks and his nose were a little pink. His pupils were dilated and languid.

When did my hand get tangled in his hair? I gave it an experimental scratch, listening to the slight scrape.

He smiled.
He looked happy.

I made him look like that.

Never mind what I could or could not imagine before. My truth was that I wanted Bellamy Blake, and I was glad that he existed.

He lifted his head and kissed me, hugging me close—sliding his hand up my back.

I jerked back, hot pain lancing through me. I barely caught the little scream that tried to burst free. Ugh, that burned!

Bellamy shifted, turning, leveling himself on an elbow so that he could stare over my shoulder. His gaze whipped back to meet mine, silently asking me to tell him that what he saw wasn't what he thought it was.

I gritted my teeth.

That was all he needed to know, and the flush drained from his face. I saw his mind racing, trying to figure out what he could do, and I knew the second he came up empty.

He wrapped both arms around me, above and below the wound, and hugged me close. All I could see in the shadows was a hint of his neck, his cheek pressed to mine. His skin was hot. Or was that mine?

If the fever had already started...

Bellamy turned his head and kissed my jaw. He peppered another kiss on my cheek, my temple, my ear. He smoothed my hair back. I don't know how he managed to do it—it was so tangled by now that there had to be knots everywhere.

It was too warm in here. I was starting to sweat. I still didn't let him go. I grabbed handfuls of his jacket and hung on for dear life.

I felt rather than saw him look at the entrance. I drew back to see that calculating look in his eye. He was weighing the odds.

I shook my head. He couldn't. We hadn't been found yet. We might not. Faced between his running out of here in a desperate attempt to save me and staying in here, alive, I was suddenly grasping for straws. Gone was my earlier certainty that we would die. Bellamy couldn't die. He just couldn't. He had a chance of living if he just waited it out a little longer. The fever wasn't bad. It was more of a temperature. I'd be fine once we got to camp. All we would have to do was apply some of the antidote.

If it was the same poison.

He considered me, thinking I don't know what, but his gaze was hardening. I knew that look.

I shook my head, harder, more insistent. No way in hell.

His lips firmed.

_Dammit, Bellamy. Going ahead nonexistent guns blazing is no way to handle this!_

I don't know how he knew what I was thinking, but he must have seen something. His nostrils flared, and I could practically hear his reply. _Neither is hiding and waiting for them to kill us._
No, I mouthed.

He wasn't listening. I could see it.

Frustrated tears welled up. I wasn't a crier. I didn't just break down. But I was perilously close, at the worst possible time, but goddammit, why wouldn't he listen? Why wouldn't he just realize I couldn't let him take that kind of chance?

His brows shot to his hairline and his eyes widened. His palm immediately cupped my face, his thumb stroking my chin.

I made eye contact, defiant, chin trembling. Stupid.

He read the message as clear as day, and suddenly he softened. He nodded jerkily. He didn't want to agree with me, but he was. Just this once.

Maybe never again.

I sagged against him. Oh, thank god. I was so relieved. So, so relieved.

He gathered me up, and we waited interminable minutes. The sky grew darker. Shadows lengthened. I started to feel warmer, too warm. It was hard to be near him then. It was just...so...warm...

Darkness.
Chapter 8

Fuck this shit.

My head throbbed, I was too scared to feel real fear anymore, and I was not going to let Princess Clarke Griffin die on me. If Grounders were coming, let them. I’d rather die out there fighting for me and my girl then crawled up in a hole like a coward while she drifted into nothingness.

I shouldn't have waited as long as I did. That's what I got for trying to be the nice guy for once. That guy died over a year ago, when my mother was floated and those bastards on the Ark took my sister. The new Bellamy Blake was an asshole. Time to start acting like one.

I gently laid Clarke's head on the ground. It lulled to the side, her hair a mass of dull yellow tangles. So much for her bath. I'd smeared her up pretty good with my blood too.

Except there was no way I'd bled all over the front of her shirt like that.

Not the time to think about it. I smoothed her eyebrow and caught her mouth in a quick kiss. She was a fucking furnace by this point, her lips dry and her cheeks way too flushed. Goddamn Grounders and their poison.

Jaw firming, I looked up at the opening. Time to get this done.

I disengaged from Clarke as easily as I could, forcing myself not to look back as I crawled toward the opening. This little hole was literally a little hole. I don't know how she found it or stuffed me in here with snapping my spine in two. My back scraped the ceiling, if it could be called something that nice, and bits of dirt scattered.

Clarke mumbled.

I could see the tall grass and the exposed roots of a few trees. I listened, straining to hear any sounds of approach—a snapping twig, a muffled boot, anything. Grounders were good at hiding themselves, but they weren't ghosts.

I didn't hear anything but birds. That was a good sign. I would take what I could get at this point.

Octavia's face flashed in my mind's eye.

No. Keep going. She was fine. Octavia was a survivor. She could get through anything.

I had to believe that.

I inched into the changed sunlight enough to see the dead Grounder lying motionless a little bit away. Damn. Drag marks. A Grounder with one eyes would have been able to find us. Clarke was too careful to let that slide normally. She must have been in a hell of a hurry.

No wonder she thought we were going to be found. She was desperate.

I narrowed my eyes, shoving everything systematically into the back of my head that wasn't immediately necessary. All fear, all pain, all the things that would keep me from accomplishing what I needed to do.

I dashed over to the Grounder and quickly picked his dead ass up, slingling him over one shoulder. I dumped him into the brush and snatched a knife and a kit that looked a lot like the first Grounder's. I
opened it; yep, vials of liquid. There would be more antidote in it. I rearranged the tall grass to hide the body and then retrieved my axe from where it lay in the dirt. It felt good back in my hand. I quickly slid it into its holster and kicked at the dirt to hide tracks. Time to go back to the hideout.

I found Clarke with her arm flung out, her hand opening and closing like she was looking for someone. Me or the Spacewalker? Hell with it; she was getting me.

I hooked my hands under her armpits, mindful of her injury. I didn't get a good look at it earlier; who knew how deep it went. "Come on, Princess," I grunted softly. "Let's get you home."

I pulled her out and turned her over to her stomach. The light brought her wound into full technicolor. She had a long gash across her back. An arrow must have caught her passing by. She came that close to dying. She was still teetering.

I gritted my teeth.

It was hard work, but I maneuvered her up onto my back, piggy back style. I hefted her up, draping her arms over my shoulders and leaning forward just slightly so that she wouldn't slide off when I stood up.

Girls were supposed to weigh more than this. Clarke and every damn other person I knew wasn't eating enough.

"Fuck," I cursed under my breath. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." I didn't know what I was cursing—the Ark, Earth, the Grounders, or the fact that I couldn't seem to get shit together. I couldn't magically turn myself into a god with power over food and water. I'd have one of those steaks I'd seen in pictures if that were the case. A big fat one, and I'd eat every bite so slowly I'd get a few gray hairs before I finished.

I went from scared kid to guard to outcast janitor to leader of a hundred punks who didn't know their mouths from their asses half the time. I kept falling from one hellhole to another.

I stood up and shifted Clarke right where I wanted her. I may be in a hellhole, and I wasn't anything like what my mother wanted for me, but Blakes didn't quit. Ever. We fought tooth and nail for everything we had. Food. Status. Life.

And sometimes we fought dirty to get exactly what we wanted.

I took off at a fast walk. I couldn't do better. My face was swelling and I was pretty aware of how long it had been since I had had water. We had to get back to the camp soon, but running would probably kill us both.

I was taking a huge chance.

Fine. Fuck it. Acceptable risk in the face of my choices.

And wasn't the word choice just a big joke? Clarke said I'd been talking bullshit. Maybe I was. Choices on the Ark were illusions. Choices on Earth depended on what was trying to kill us that day. We made decisions, not choices.

Clarke was plastered to my back, her hot cheek on my nape, urging me to get my ass going. "So help me, Princess, if you die, I'm going to be pissed." I used my grip on her thighs to lift her higher.

Part of me wanted to remind her that we needed to finish our conversation, but that wasn't the truth now. Those kisses wiped all that out. Clean slate. I had a taste of that good, golden Princess. I wasn't
giving that up. Prince Charming I wasn't, but this anti-hero was going to sweep in and save the day at least once before everything was said and done.

Clarke may have thought that there was something to that romantic crap, but I didn't grow up reading a lot of fairy tales. I read Octavia books about the jungle. I showed her pictures of panthers. I talked about the lions of the serengetti and the wolves of North America. We spent hours digging up everything we could about all the animal life on Earth from Before. I told her about Roman emperors and Vikings. Those were the stories I believed in, where people took what they wanted and held onto it to the death. Not half-assed plots with some chick waiting to be rescued. I wasn't going to read that bull to my sister.

Even if Clarke Griffin looked like a princess—golden hair and creamy skin, with that haughty chin stuck up in the air—she was the last person on Earth that needed rescuing.

Usually.

Hell. She was entitled once in a while. I wasn't doing that hot today either.

I trudged through the forest with every muscle in my body protesting. I was getting used to that feeling. Since we'd come to Earth, I'd been punched, hit in the head with a log, thrown down a hill, attacked by some kind of giant cat, and shot at. I went to bed every night in pain. Physical...and God help me, mental.

Clarke moaned. Shit. The fever was getting worse. How long was the human body supposed to withstand high temperatures again? I couldn't remember.

My heartbeat had picked up speed and wasn't slowing down any time soon. I never asked for this thing I had with Clarke. Nobody could have convinced me it was even possible two weeks ago. She was a royal pain in the ass, this girl who tried to follow the Ark's rules like they were commandments. She was a nag, an idealist, and a threat. But she was smart too. Tough.

I didn't want to respect her, but that's not something a guy can control. He either does or he doesn't. It snuck up on me. I know exactly when it hit me over the head, too. That crazy herb kid, Monty, wanted to start a garden. And what did I think? Sounds like something the Princess would like.

There is was. The beginning of the end. Startled the hell out of me to realize I was considering her in my decisions. Then I began to notice how much easier it was to talk things out with her. Two heads better than one and all that crap.

Then I realized I was watching her.

And I liked what I saw.

Some animals just know when they've found a good match. Clarke's mine. Pure and simple. And just like the Romans and the Vikings, I wasn't giving that up without one hell of a fight. "And you probably won't like that a bit," I muttered to Clarke, needing to keep her focused on my voice. "So what if Spacewalker was your first? You think anybody's first time is off the charts? Princess, the things I could show you..."

I laughed a little at myself. "I'm too tired to show them to you now and you're in no shape for it, but let's just say stars don't just come out at night."

"You're...such...an ass...Bellamy," she croaked.

Elation bolstered me for a second. "You still with me, Clarke?"
"You keep talking."

"Keep listening. I've got a lot of things to say."

"Like what?"

I ducked under a branch. "Like you're going to get through this. Like I'm going to give you the best med clinic I can. I'll even build you a real house." A small one to start with, because I sure as hell didn't know what I was doing in that department.

"You mean...get the engineers to help."

"Yep."

Her voice dropped to an exhausted whisper that ghosted over my skin. "What do you get?"

I grew a little wary. "What do you mean?"

"From me. What do you get?"

I turned my head and met her bleary, fever hazed green eyes. "I get the girl who gets me, who can deal with my shit and makes me want to believe anybody can be better than they are."

I don't know if she understood what I was telling her; she was flushed, fevered, and there was a good chance she wouldn't remember. But she also seemed surprised. I wasn't the type to bare my soul to just anybody. I didn't spill my guts. Too many people would take advantage of the weakness. Octavia couldn't really understand.

Clarke could.

Her eyes slid closed. She brushed her cheek against my shoulder, back and forth.

I took that as a sign.

A few more feet and there was the wall. It was still pitiful compared to what it needed to be, but right then, it might as well have been made out of fucking gold. A call went up when the patrol spotted us. The gate opened.

"Look, Princess, we're home." I jostled her. No response. "Clarke?"

My blood went cold.

"Clarke!"

Shit! I broke into a run. "Get Jasper," I ordered as I came through the shallow crevice between the gate and the wall. "Get Monty. Get anybody that's helped Clarke fix people."

"Bellamy." Miller came limping up. "We thought we'd lost you, man."

The part of me that wasn't panicking over Clarke was glad to see him too. "My sister?"

"She's fine. A little banged up. Most of the girls made it back. They got lucky."

They did.

I saw Octavia then. She ran up to me in a whirlwind of energy. "Let's get her to the drop ship."
I brushed past her, going on autopilot.

Monty and Jasper met us in the makeshift surgery. I let them take Clarke from my back. They laid her down on the table facedown, her hand dangling in midair limply. I was ready to bark for water but it was already there in a bowl, with Jasper planting the soggy cloth on Clarke's nape. Monty dug through his supplies for the antidote. Octavia was checking out the wound. "We've gotta get the shirt off of her. Help me pull."

"No time." I grabbed both edges of the tear and ripped. The thing came off in shreds, already threadbare. I tore it until it hung from her arms and revealed her bra. I'd take the rest off later.

"She doesn't have another shirt. She'll freeze."

"We'll get her a new one." If I had to fucking sew the thing myself from a parachute.

"Might as well use this, then." Octavia ripped a huge chunk from the thing and dunked it in clean water. She started cleaning the wound briskly. "Ready, Monty?"

"Got it." He opened the vial and poured it over Octavia's cloth. "Not much left."

"I've got more," I told him gruffly, eyes on Clarke.

"Hold her, everybody. This is going to hurt like a bitch."

Jasper had her shoulders, and Monty got her mid-back. I pressed down on her thighs. *Come on, Clarke.*

Octavia took a deep breath to steady herself and wiped.

Clarke jerked and screamed.

"Fuck," I hissed, nearly getting clocked by her back kick. I adjusted my hold. "Again."

Octavia didn't acknowledge me but she didn't hesitate either. She kept cleaning and cleaning, even when Clarke passed out again.

"Did it hurt Finn this much?" Jasper whispered, worried.

"Finn was out like a light," Monty replied. "How should we know?"

"Are you sure it's the antidote?" I demanded.

"Yes, I'm sure," he barked back. "Trust the herb guy, okay? It's not like you spent your life in Agro learning Latin names and nearly bashing your head in with a freakin' plant textbook-"

"Alright," I interjected. "You're the expert. You better hope you are, anyway."

He didn't back down, glaring at me over Octavia's head. "I am."

"We've got to sew this up," my sister announced. "Where's the needle?"

"Here."

"That's it? We've got one needle? Why the fuck didn't anybody tell me?"

Octavia glared. "Do you want to do this now?"
"No. I want the needle." I took it out of Jasper's hand. "What are we using for thread?"

Jasper offered what looked like metal wire.

Great. Just great.

I elbowed between my sister and Jasper. Monty eyed me dubiously as I threaded the needle. "You know what you're doing?"

"You don't question me and I don't question you," I returned. I was already clearing my head, focusing on Clarke's back. She wasn't a person. Not right then. She was a piece of cloth that needed to be mended. I'd done as much sewing on the Ark as Mom or Octavia. I could do this.

And I wasn't about to trust anyone else to put Clarke back together again. "Hold on," I told the others. "If you thought cleaning this hurt..." I left the rest unsaid.

Everybody got ready.

I took a deep breathe. Steady hands. This was going to get done.

"Okay."

And then I got to work.
Stitching up a human being was not high on my list of things to repeat.

Stitching up Clarke? Damned nightmare.

I didn't clean my hands. Didn't think about sterilizing the needle. When I realized that, we didn't have a choice; we had to douse wound in moonshine.

We were lucky she didn't go into shock.

I didn't feel lucky. I felt like a big, beat-up piece of shit that picked on someone who couldn't fight back. The guy that made Clarke Griffin scream in pain.

I lay on a makeshift bed, arm thrown over my face to hide the wetness stinging my eyes. Dammit. It needed to be done. She would have died. Why couldn't I get that through my head and stop friggin' shaking?

"Bellamy."

Octavia.

"I've gotta clean your face and do something about your head."

A corner of my mouth quirked. "Chop it off, you mean?"

"I'll save that for a later day." I heard rustling, maybe the sound of her kneeling. "Come on, Bell. Nobody's here but me."

Okay. Time to get myself together and be big brother. I swallowed the lump in my throat and willed the dampness to dry. I finally pulled my arm away and let it flop to the "bed".

I looked at her.

Being a big brother to Octavia was easy. Being her dad—because let's face it, I was—was hard. Being a dad meant protecting her from the hard shit without sheltering her. It meant hiding when I was afraid so she'd have just a little bit of innocence left. I did a damn good job for 15 years.

Then I failed. I've been failing ever since.

Worst part of it was, she knew it.

She got to cleaning and even stitched my head up like a pro. That hurt. I gritted my teeth and bore it, digging my fingers into the blankets under me.

When she was finished, she sat back. "You've changed."

My head throbbing, I didn't bother biting hers off. "So have you." Truth.

"I stared at death in the face. Gives a girl some perspective." She looked down. "But I've got you, and I don't want to lose you. Not again."

Damn. "Me too, O. Me too."
She bit her lip. "Finn's dead, Bell."

I froze. "What?"

"Miller came in a few minutes ago. He said it was internal bleeding. Finn's dead."

Before I knew it I was looking over at Clarke's sleeping form. "Fuck," I said.

"I thought you should know." She got to her feet like they were made of lead. I sat up too, my vision swimming, but I didn't want to sit over in the corner by myself. I wanted to be somewhere else.

Hell, why not admit it? I wanted to be near Clarke.

Suddenly I was in Octavia's arms, and she was hugging me like her life depended on it. "Love you," she whispered into my shoulder.

I melted a little. I missed this. For an entire year, I missed this. I hugged her back. "I love you too, O."

She left, hiding her sniffle. Leaving me with Clarke.

I got up and hobbled over, feeling stiff. We'd covered her with a fur to keep her warm. I dragged up one of the drop seats and sat down, prepared to wait. Or something.

I don't know. I just sat and stared, half at Clarke, half at nothing. Seemed like hours went by like that, with me turning over the situation in my mind until I was ready to go crazy. I should have gone out and taken control. Who knew what the hell Raven was getting herself into.

Miller would take care of it. For a little while.

"Bellamy?"

I blinked. "Clarke? Hey." I glanced at the parachutes. The light had changed. How long had I been sitting there?

"Where...We're back at the drop ship. How did that happen?" She tilted her head on her cobbled-together pillow. "You've looked better."

I smiled crookedly, smoothing her hair away from her ear. "I said I'd get you through this." My fingers got caught in tangles, so I started to pick them apart. It gave me something to focus on.

"It would be easier to cut it off." She sounded exhausted and in pain, but at least she was making conversation.

I knew this trap. That was the advantage of being the only guy on the Ark with a sister; I learned about women early. I knew better than to argue with a girl about her appearance. Gave me a head start in life. I settled for remarking, "You wouldn't get to do your princess hairdo anymore."

She huffed out a laugh. "That's true. Wouldn't get hooked on branches either though."

I tried to picture her with short hair. Couldn't do it. "Think anybody here knows how to give a decent haircut?"

Her brow furrowed. She looked me up and down. "Is there a reason Octavia has super long hair?"

I pursed my lips, trying not to laugh. "Maybe."
She waited.

I shifted. "Let's just say that bowl cuts are a lot harder than you'd think." Or, in other words, O had a cowlick from hell and one wrong snip earned me six weeks of pouting.

Clarke smiled. She didn't do that enough. None of us did. Sometimes that was easy to forget. Then her mouth would spread and show her teeth, and she'd look so happy that I'd get this warm glob of whatever in the middle of my chest. Clarke was pretty. She had—what were they called? Apple cheeks. They'd glow a little pink when she smiled. I liked it.

I paused in the middle of untangling, just looking at her.

The pink deepened. "What's it like to have a sister?"

"Tough. She takes up a lot of energy."

"You love her."

"Yeah." I put her hair down, satisfied that I'd made at least a little headway. But I didn't want to stop touching her just yet. I let my finger trail over her shoulder, back and forth, liking the way her skin felt.

She shivered.

Hm. "Cold?" I dared her to lie to my face.

Her eyes narrowed. "A little."

Huh. She was getting better at this lying thing. I still didn't believe her, but this time she didn't even hesitate. I pulled up the fur higher, careful of her wound.

"Why is having a sister tough?" Her voice was husky.

"Ever been trapped in a small space with two women on their period, Clarke? When one of them is going through puberty? No where to run."

She was back to smiling, faintly. "Never thought of it like that. You're making me feel sorry for my dad."

Sore topic there, and I wasn't ready to lose this sense of contentment between us. "Compared to that, wild boars don't even make me blink." I shifted to the edge of the seat and rested an elbow on the table. "Don't think they'd appreciate my tea party and hair braiding skills, though."

"That I would like to see."

"Don't think I can do it, Princess?"

"Is there anything you can't do?"

Some of my humor dried up and turned rueful. "Too many things to count."

"I'm laying on a table, sewn back together because of you. I find that hard to believe."

I wet my lips. I didn't want to say it, but she had to know. "There's something I have to tell you, Clarke."
Her smile slowly faded.

"Finn's dead."

The power of words. A few syllables and a person's entire life can change.

She blinked. Her eyes got wet. I watched her accept the truth. Still, she said, "How?"

"Internal bleeding."

Her lashes swept down. A tear, then two, slipped down her cheeks. "Damn him. I told him what would happen if he pushed too far. I told him," she repeated almost soundlessly.

I leaned in. "Clarke." I gathered her hand up in mine, needing to know. "Did I kill him?"

She glanced up, startled.

I sucked in a sharp breath. "I pushed him. Roughed him up when he followed. Punched him for looking at you." Because I was jealous.

Fuck.

"Bellamy. He was moving when he shouldn't have. He could have done it when he was walking after you. It could have happened when he was running from the Grounders." Her fingers flexed in mine. "It could have happened when you punched him and he fell."

My blood ran cold.

"He knew the risks. He took his life into his own hands when he got out of bed when I told him to take it easy." She blinked rapidly. "He didn't think things through."

"I'm sorry." I didn't know for what. The words felt raw in my throat, but they came out anyway.

She nodded. "I don't know if I can...cry here...in front of you." She pulled her hand out of mine and held it in front of her eyes. It was trembling. "So do you think you could-"

"Yes you can," I interrupted. "You can cry in front of me, 'cause I'm not leaving you alone like this."

"No. I don't even have the right to cry. He wasn't anything to me."

Bullshit. Her first, and not the worst human being I'd ever met. I didn't like the guy, but that didn't mean much. I stood up and walked around the table. I hefted myself up onto the surface. There wasn't much room for the both of us, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. "Come 'ere."

She lifted her head, staring at me. I ignored those doe-eyes and slid my arm under her chin, between her face and the pillow. It was almost like we were back in the hidey-hole, squeezed up where two people our size shouldn't be able to fit. "Put your head here, Clarke." I patted my chest.

She looked at it like it was on fire.

"Come on, Princess. You remember how this goes."

She was still staring at my chest, but I could see she was wavering. Her chin was quivering, almost the same way Octavia's did when she was little. Girls aren't pretty criers, in my experience. They get splotchy and red, and their noses run. Which was how I always knew when a girlfriend was trying to manipulate me. Real girls used their whole body to cry.
Clarke had a better reason to cry than a lot of people in camp today.

When she gave in, she practically collapsed against me, grabbing handfuls of my shirt like I was going to run off somewhere if she didn't. I helped her crawl up over me, swinging of her legs over both of mine, her face buried in my chest. She was sobbing, shuddering with every breath. I rubbed her back, my other hand loosely clasped around her head, keeping her warm while she soaked me with tears.

I stared at the ceiling.

I'd never understood that phrase, "hell on Earth".

Now I knew. It was a bunch of kids stuck in the middle of a hostile forest, trying to figure out how to survive. We weren't explorers. Hell, I was the only legal adult around that I knew of. And the Ark shipped a group of teens from space to a land they had only seen in books and videos.

We were used to tight spaces and artificial light. One of the kids had a fucking panic attack when he saw all the land in front of us—*because he'd never seen shit like that before*.

Those were the kind of people the Ark expected to die or make their way a little cushier when they came. They'd get here, look around, and say something pompous, like, "*Good job, kids, the adults will take it from here.*"

I'd bet they'd even say Finn died a hero. So did Roma and Charlotte and Wells. There were always people who could spin someone else's tragedy to suit themselves. Even me.

Sometimes, I thought to myself bitterly, humanity fucking sucked.
Chapter 10

Clarke cried enough for two people, but she didn't cry long. She didn't see the way the parachute fluttered. Jasper poked his head in. Kid took one look at us and seemed to understand; he made himself scarce with a sad look on his face. So he had some sense. Good.

When Clarke finally tired herself into a limp heap, she rubbed her cheek against my chest. "I soaked your shirt."

"Cleanest it's been in a while."

"It kind of smells."

My chuckle turned into a sharp groan. "Ow." I touched my cheek gingerly. Damn, that Grounder packed a punch. I flexed my jaw, testing the swelling. Oh yeah, I was going to look pretty tomorrow. "I'll work on that," I told her.

I dropped my hand back to her skin and returned to tracing invisible patterns. I listened to her heartbeat. She came too close to dying. She wasn't out of the woods yet. That fever was still warming up her skin even as she shivered with reaction. Being with her like this, even as sad and gritty as our lives had become, was good. Felt good. Felt right.

"Be honest, Clarke. Is it my fault?"

She stilled. "Would it matter?"

I tightened my jaw. What the hell kind of question was that? Didn't she know by now? "Yes," I bit out quietly. "Yes it would."

She slowly raised her head to look at me in the eye. "I meant...would it matter what I thought if you still blamed yourself?"

Right in the gut.

My hands flexed. My lungs were starting to fail me, and my heartbeat picked up. If Clarke decided Finn was my fault, if she said it, it was true. It was one thing to tell myself that. It was another to hear it from her. I dragged in breath through my teeth. It was painful. "You have a way of making me believe."

If I sounded a little choked up when I told her that, I didn't give a damn. I could be real with Clarke. She'd seen me at my worst. More than once. If I couldn't talk straight and be as raw as I needed to be with this girl, there was literally no one on Earth that could handle me.

I settled both hands on her hips. "I've got three hundred and twenty four on my head, Clarke. More counting today. I need..." I hesitated. "I need to know exactly how damned I've become."

I couldn't put a right name to her expression. Worried? Concerned? Trying to find the right words to tell me that yes, that made me a mass murderer?

She scooted up until we were face to face, chest to chest. In the back of my mind I recognized how different our bodies were. She was soft where I wasn't, curved where I was just an angle. That didn't even touch the tip of the iceberg with us. We were almost total opposites.
She has pretty eyes. Funny. I knew that already. They were bright and they were serious. I don't what it was about them that held me right then, but they did. I think I could close my eyes and picture them clearly, the way I could picture Earth from the Ark without even trying.

I hated every narrow corner of the Ark. But hell, what a view.

"Bellamy Blake, I told Finn point blank that if he took it too far, he'd die. When he left camp he assumed full responsibility for anything that might have and did happen. It wasn't your fault. It was his."

I searched her face. Her mouth thinned and she stared me down as seriously as she did that first day.

All the tension flowed out of my body in a gusty exhale. "Okay." I nodded. "Okay."

One less death on my soul.

I should have been happy. I was relieved, but even that was tempered by a thickness in the pit of my stomach. One less didn't mean that the others weren't on me. Honestly, I'd forgotten what happy really felt like.

"I killed someone today. Beat his head in." Her shoulders slumped just a little bit. "I guess we're all damned in some way here." She laid her cheek back on my chest. "Do you really think that we'll survive Earth?"

"It's home now," I said as I wrapped my arms around her. "If the Vikings and the Romans could do it, we can."

"Sometimes I wonder how. We don't even know how to survive the winter."

Our breathing had synced. I wondered why bodies did that, why being around one person made them try to work together without the brain noticing it. "We take it by basics. Food. Warmth. Shelter."

"It's too late for Monty's garden, even if we could find enough vegetables with seeds to plant. Raven and I thought we heard a chicken today. That's why we were...where we were."

Naked. I pushed that thought out of my mind, not ready to tackle all of those complications. But hell, I was a man. I was guaranteed to think about it later.

In brilliant technicolor.

"What are you suggesting, Princess? Trying our hand at farming?"

"A sustainable source of food would be nice." And then she shivered.

I rubbed my hand over her flesh. "I think clothes would be our first order of business."

"Real houses would keep us warm."

"We may not have time for that. We have to go basic."

"No problems there," she muttered.

I smiled a little. "Yeah."

I was aware of time moving on, and I knew I couldn't hang out in here much longer. The table was
cold, and Clarke needed to get warm. I had to get outside and deal with things.

Without her.

Well, that just felt fucking unpleasant. "I've gotta go. Stay here. I'm going to have Octavia come sit with you for awhile. Then we're getting you back to your tent. Okay?"

She nodded. "Bellamy..."

"Hmm?"

"If you see Raven...She may need somebody."

"The last person on Earth she'll want to see is me, Princess."

"Send Jasper or Monty. They're good with people."

Better than me, and I was all for that. I carefully shifted out from under her, careful not to jostle anything. And then the worst thing that could happen right then, did.

My jacket got caught on her bra.

Which tore, leaving me frozen with nothing but plump flesh and beaded nipple practically in my palm.

Neither of us moved.

Fuck. What was I supposed to do? "Uhhhh..."

Oh, that was brilliant. Pure genius.

Clarke stared at my arm, then at me, mouth open in a little O of surprise. And then, "You can let go now, Bellamy."

My fingers flexed. "What?" I shook my head. Idiot. "Yeah. Yeah, I knew that." That's when I let her go, not before, and all I could do was stand there like a doofus, not sure what to do with my hand. Wipe it on my leg? Close my fingers over my palm? What?

A reluctant chuckle pierced the silence. Clarke looked up at me, her puffy face alight with amusement and a flush that had nothing to do with crying or the fever I knew she was still going through. "You're replacing that."

What? My hand?

Get your shit together, Blake. The bra. "Don't know how much lingerie I've got laying around camp, Princess, but I'll see what I can do."

"Ask one of your girls."

I quirked a brow and smiled. "Jealous?"

She snuggled deeper into the pillow and sighed, eyes closing. "You'd like that."

Yeah. I would. I planted my hand on the table next to her head and leaned in. "Clarke."

One eye opened again. She was fading and fast.
I smoothed her hair back. "They're not mine and I'm not theirs. It's not how it is." I found myself fondling her earlobe. "You get it, right?"

"Hmm," she murmured. It sounded like an affirmative.

I let myself look at her. She was splotchy, exhausted, dirty and haggard. She looked like hell. That's what a real girl looked like after she got down and dirty and she pulled through even when shit went south.

She was my kind of animal.

On impulse I bent down the rest of the way and kissed her cheek softly. "See you later, Princess."

She didn't answer.

But she did smile. Just a little.

Small things like that made me feel like a damn superman. Like I could do anything and be anybody. Or like I'd done something good and should definitely do it again, just to get that same reaction.

I walked out of the drop ship with a renewed sense of purpose. I knew what role I took on Day 1. Nothing about it was easy, even though in the back of my head I didn't expect it to be so hard. I had this vision in my head that didn't hold up against reality. Now I knew exactly how tough just walking through camp was going to be, but at least I had a little more energy to face it than I did a few minutes ago.

I was almost instantly surrounded by people who wanted to know what happened and what to do. I guess Miller did what he could but they wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth. A lot of them were in a friggin' panic because some dumbass spread the rumor that Clarke was dead.

I listened to the rising hysteria for a full minute before my patience snapped. "Everybody, just calm the hell down!" I finally roared, then winced. Damn, that hurt my face. It fueled my irritation. "Clarke's alive and she'll be fine, so get your heads together. There was an attack, and a girl did die. So did Finn Collins, the best tracker we had."

I looked them all over. "The Grounders are pushing us. They want to cut us off from something even as simple as taking a bath. They're probably hoping if they can't kill us, then disease will."

They were glancing at each other. Some were clearly afraid.

"We need to get serious. Fast. We're making good progress, but it isn't enough. I'm going to reassign a few people. We need a better wall, and some of you are going to get that med bay together. Then we're going to move on to permanent housing, people. Winter's going to be here before we know it. I don't have to tell you what that would mean for us."

I crossed my arms. "This is more than just eking out an existence. This is surviving. This is about showing those bastards we're not going anywhere. We're here, and we're staying." I gave them all a hard look. "Now all of you get back to your jobs. We've got a lot of work to do."

I turned and walked toward Miller. When people began to disperse, I leaned in so no one could hear us. "Thanks for handling things for me for a while."

He nodded, watching the others. "Wasn't easy. Raven's losing her shit and that whipped people into a frenzy."
"Send in Jasper or Monty. Somebody needs to stay with her." Something I wouldn't have thought about if Clarke hadn't pointed it out. "The last thing we need is for our best mechanic to off herself."

He frowned. "You think she'd go that far?"

"Girl threw herself through space for the guy, Miller."

He didn't say anything to that, but I could tell he couldn't fathom that kind of devotion. I could. I spent fifteen years hiding a secret. I put myself on a drop ship that I was 85% sure would blow up on reentry. For Octavia.

For myself.

Because life without her was not an option while I had strength. "Make sure she's with someone," I repeated.

"Alright."

"And get the engineering kids to me. We need to figure out this med center." I spotted Octavia in the crowd. "O!"

She stopped.

I jogged over to her. "I need you to go sit with Clarke, make sure she drinks and her fever doesn't get higher."

"Yeah. I can do that."

I hesitated. "Before you do...see if you can find a shirt for her." I flexed my hand at my side. "And a bra."

Both of her eyebrows slowly climbed to her hairline. "Do I want to know?"

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop the heat sneaking up my neck. "Don't worry about it, okay? Just find it for her. And maybe another blanket too," I added as an after thought. "She's probably cold."

"Oh man. You've got it so bad."

"Shut up, O."

"It's cute."

"Just go. Now."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going."

Not a single soul in this camp knew what it was like to deal with a little sister. None. I was alone in my suffering.

But at least she was talking to me again.

I stood next to the fire, absorbing some of its warmth while I waited for Miller and the others to show up. My gaze fell on the pile of bones sitting next to it, and I was reminded of how long it was since I'd eaten. Some of the them still had meat on it. I scowled. Who the hell wasted that? Did they think we were fucking swimming in edible around here?
There had to be a way of using that. Like...I didn't know, soup or something.


How would we make that?

Soup was hot water with flavor. We weren't supposed to use water for that in space usually, but with an illegal human in our tiny apartment, sometimes we had to stretch rations a little farther in creative ways.

What if we boiled the bones?

Ideas were forming in my head. Vikings and Romans didn't have the technology the Ark did. Neither did we. They had wood and bone. So did we.

I crouched down and picked up a rib with two fingers, looking it over.

"Uh...Bellamy?" a tentative voice piped up behind me. I turned to look at a skinny redhead nervously toeing the ground. She couldn't have been older than fifteen. She was twisting her fingers together. "Miller said you needed to see us?"

I glanced around. "Where are the others?"

"Coming."

I stood up and walked over with the bone. "You design things." I had something on my mind, something I wasn't sure I could keep to myself. It had nothing to do with the med center. Was it important enough to go for?

"You could say that." She twisted her fingers harder. I don't know what a nervous kid like this did to be Confined, honestly, but looks were deceiving, so I kept my face impassive.

"You either do or you don't, kid."

She swallowed. "I do."

I nodded once. Fuck it—I was going to follow through. "Okay." I thrust the rib at her. "Then tell me how to make this into a comb."
Dear Readers: I don't want to spoil you, but I feel obligated to warn that there are triggers ahead. Please keep that in mind before deciding to read further.

"If we take the time to cut boards, we can divide our building resources better. The downside to that being that none of us actually know how to cut a decent board. Or what a decent board might be. Trying to figure it out might a while."

The kid's name was Chris. He was chatty, but he had good ideas. The problem was he wasn't exactly speaking to me. He was talking to his fellow engineers or whatever they were. They nodded their heads and stroked their chins and generally ignored me as they got deeper into their weird engineer bubble of possibilities.

I stood with my arms crossed, watching them go at it.

"We would also need to design and construct tools that would allow us to cut boards of standard width and length so that the process would go smoothly. A saw, a planer to smooth rough edges. Shingles of some kind would be good."

"We could build several houses at the same time," a third kid put in.

"A hundred?" Chris asked skeptically.

I exchanged a sidelong glance with Miller.

A tall kid with darker skin and long brown hair down his back was watching everybody and keeping quiet. Considering he was the only design genius not tossing out ideas, he drew my attention. I could almost see the wheels turning in his head, but he kept it to himself. I'd give him one more minute to throw out something useful. If he didn't, he was going back to working on the wall.

"Two or three is better than none," Chris' opponent—Mike? Jack? Harald?-shot back

"We're talking about hundreds of man hours required to design, set, and test instruments for which we have no resources and no way to get them," some other kid pointed out.

"That's."

"But if you would just-"

"Alright!" I cut in.

Blessed silence.

"You, kid with the long hair. What's your name?"

He tilted his head. "Peter."

"Okay, Peter. Care to share?"

All eyes turned on him. He looked them all over in turn. People on the Ark studying the same thing tend to know each other. Nobody here seemed to realize he existed until I pointed him out.
Interesting.

Peter met my gaze. "Waginogans."

"Gonna have to give me more than a fancy word, Peter."

"It's a type of housing used by the Algonquin tribe in parts of Old Canada. The Iroquois used longhouses. The structures are designed for communal living. They have the same basic frame made out of long sticks or branches lashed together in a dome shape overhead. Cover the frame with sheets of birchbark or weave a lot of other long sticks for the walls and roof. If you want to get really fancy, use brush mats for the roof. Once we get the hang of it, one could be build in two, maybe three days. Waterproof, shelter from snow, minimum cutting, adjustable size."

He said all of that like it was something anybody could have thought of, and at the end of his answer, he stood there and waited for someone to say something.

Nobody did.

I eyed him. Tall, not big but not little. Unassuming. The kind of guy who thought outside the box. And he may have just saved all our asses. "Make it happen, Peter. Listen up, people. You follow him, you listen to him, and you get that wagino—"

I looked at Peter.

"Waginogan."

"Waginogan ready as soon as humanly possible. If anybody else gets a bright idea and wants to talk about it, come talk to me. Got it?"

They nodded.

"And Peter," I added. "That goes double for you."

He didn't say a word.

"Get going."

They went.

Miller turned to me. "Wisdom of the fucking ages, man. We might get through this yet."

"Yeah," I grunted. "And he wouldn't have said a word if I hadn't picked on him." One small decision that could have cost us. "How's the leg?"

He shrugged. "I'll live."

My gaze wandered to the drop ship. "Well, that depends on who looked at it. You eaten?"

He shook his head.

"Go. Take some weight off. If anybody has problems they'll find us." I stopped. "Wait. Did you hear anything that sounded like a chicken while we were out today?"

He frowned. "A chicken?"

"Yeah. A chicken."
"Don't think so."

Sustainable food source. "Tell the hunters to keep a look out. I want those birds alive. We bring them back, construct a pen, and then we have access to eggs."

"That small white thing people used to eat?"

"Yeah."

"Huh. Wonder what they taste like."

"You tell the hunters to find a chicken, and we may get a chance to find out."

"You gonna eat?"

I shook my head. "I've got something to check on."

It had only been a few hours. Probably wasn't something Sam—the girl—had figured out within ten minutes and magically completed in the time since I'd assigned her the task. Still, I grabbed a packet of berries and went to find her. It took awhile. I had a million things to sort out. Delegating only got me so far. For every semi-responsible person I met, there were five or six dickwads that would rather sit on their asses than get something done. The first few days that didn't bother me as long as they were loyal.

That was before the Grounders. Before the nights started to get colder. If I remembered my Earth Skills classes, the leaves would start changing before long. And while I'm sure that was nice to look at, turning colors meant the next step was falling to the ground, and then we were screwed if we didn't get it together.

I told the people working the meat station to start saving bones and boil them for soup. We'd figure out the part about bowls. Some bright genius standing nearby offered to work on that. Apparently kid had a thing for carving that got him Confined on the Ark. People didn't take kindly to metal parts getting mangled. Here, with all the wood, he was in friggin' heaven.

Least somebody was.

I eyed the necklace he'd made—some kind of pendant on a string—and jerked my chin. "Come with me."

We found Sam's tent awhile later. Baxter—poor sap. Who could do that to their kid?-stuck close behind when I opened the flap.

I don't do a lot of goddamn knocking. And when I saw some blond fucker on top of an unconcious Sam, with her pants pulled to her knees and his dick out, I didn't bother to announce myself. I just plowed my fist into his face.

I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him off, tossing him into the dirt and kicking him viciously in the stomach. "Think hitting someone and raping them is a good time?" I asked in a low growl. "Wait 'til you see what I've got up my sleeve."

I kicked him again and again. He wasn't half my size and didn't have half my motherfucking rage to fight back effectively. He grabbed my ankle and tried to get out of there, but I stomped my foot on his hand.

Bones cracked and he screamed.
"Shit, you're killing him!" Baxter yelled.

I almost barked back that the little shit deserved to die. Clarke's face flashed in my mind's eye. I paused mid-kick, breathing hard, and Sam's attacker took his chance. He ran out of the tent—right into the gathered crowd.

I had to play this right. The last mob almost killed the wrong man, and I was a part of that. Then Charlotte died. "Watch her," I barked at Baxter. "Put her clothes back. And so help me, if you even think-"

Baxter recoiled. "Dude. No. Some asshole did that to my mom." And his expression told a very long story about that.

We don't decide who lives and dies here.

I emerged from the tent, making sure the flap was closed so nobody could see Sam on the ground. "This little asshole," I began loud and clear so everybody could hear me, "seems to think that asking permission from someone to have sex is unnecessary." I glared at the crowd, prowling the edge. More than one rapist was here, and I was going to send a message that would be burned into their brains. "He's wrong."

I turned and waved out an arm. "Take a good look at him, people. A very good look."

He stood there like a caged animal, watching the crowd around him surge with barely leashed hostility.

I had to play this right. Nobody else was going to die today, but crimes would not go unpunished. "As of this moment he's banished from our camp. If someone doesn't say yes to sex—I don't give a shit what gender we're talking about—then you leave them alone. Or you'll be like him, out there, with the Grounders who are more than willing to cut us down where we stand. Anybody with a problem with that concept can get the hell out." I glared at each and every one of them. "Got that?"

Reluctant nods. A few kids looked angry, or frustrated, or fuck, I don't know, scared, but they all buckled under my fury.

"You two," I pointed a few burly guys out. "Get him outside the wall. Strip any weapons he's got from him. He can make his own."

They grabbed him by the arms. Before they took him away, I bent low and looked him in the eye, pitching my voice so that only the four of us could hear it. "You come back, and I'll let the girls do what they want to you."

He blanched. His hand was swelling, turning colors.

Good, I thought with savage satisfaction. One thing and one thing only saved his miserable life today, and she was laying on a table in the drop ship.

They dragged him away, kicking. I waited for anybody to join him, but I guess his friends didn't feel like risking my wrath. That was a rat's next of new problems. If anyone decided to take revenge on Sam for their buddy's banishment, there'd be trouble. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, wincing at the contact. I still had a lot of pent up anger to get rid of, and now I had the added problem of figuring out how to protect Sam. Not her fault, but one more complicated issue for me to solve like the diplomat I just wasn't.

I went back into the tent just in time to hear a strangled cry. Sam was backing away from Baxter—
fully clothed—while the guy had his hands up in surrender. "You're okay, you're fine," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. It's fine."

Her terrified gaze shot to me.

Fuck.

I settled into a crouch a few feet away, about the same distance as Baxter. "Hey, kid," I murmured. "You okay?"

"What-"

"He's gone. Banished."


"Ethan's gone?"

I looked at her. "You knew him?"

Great big tears welled up in her eyes, twisting my heart. She held them back by some mystical force I sure as hell wasn't familiar with. "Wasn't the first time," she managed to say.

Shit. "It was the last time," I said, deadly serious.

She looked like she wanted to believe me, but couldn't quite convince herself.

"Listen, Sam, I need you to pack up all your things. We're moving you. Get you a fresh start."

She pushed back her red hair with a scraped hand and laughed a little under her breath. "How? There's nowhere to go."

I recognized that look in her eye too well. I saw it every time I looked in the mirror for the year after Octavia was taken. Trapped by the law. Trapped by the Ark. Trapped by other people's choices. "It's true that we have to stay in the same camp, but that doesn't mean you don't have places to go," I nodded at her head. "Are you dizzy or anything?"

"What?" She reached up like she'd forgotten about it. "Oh. No."

"Then get your stuff. We'll help if you want."

She liked her lips, eyes wide and face pale. "Bellamy...How far did he..."

"He didn't," I said coldly, "and he won't ever again."

Baxter reached for the pile of bones next to him. "I'll get this."

Sam scrambled over. "No, I've got it."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Whatever you say."

We tossed all of her worldly possessions—which didn't amount to much—in a blanket and tied it. I had to hand it to Baxter; he stayed a good distance from her and didn't say anything. She seemed to appreciate that. It wasn't until we left the tent that I realized where I was going. Wasn't until I got in front of the tent, actually, and I was staring Raven in the face.
Her expression hardened. "You."

I lifted my chin. "Me."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't shank you here and now."

"Because I'll put you on your ass if you try."

"The way you did Finn? Right before he bled to death?" Her voice was rising, drawing attention.

I'd had about enough of that today. I got right in her face. "Take a step back, Reyes," I told her in a low, serious voice. "I won't hold back if you come at me. Your boyfriend took his life in his own hands when he left camp. Think about that before you go blaming someone."

She stared at me with red rimmed eyes.

"I don't give two shits what you think about me, but I'm not here for me." I nodded at Sam, who hung back, looking miserable. "I'm here for her."

"So?" she bit out.

"She needs somewhere to stay."

"Get her another tent."

"Not gonna happen. Take a good look at her."

She huffed, but her eyes moved from mine. She looked. She really looked, and a frown started to form between her brows. "What happened to her head?"

"Sometime today you'll hear about a dirty little pissant who got his ass beat for failing to ask permission," I told her quietly.

Understanding dawned. "Why does she need to be here?"

"Because certain people might want to take his fate out on her. Think you can handle that?"

Her face pinched. "I don't want anybody around right now. Just got rid of Jasper."

"Actually," a voice interrupted from behind the tent, "you didn't." He emerged and waved awkwardly. "Hi."

New respect for Goggles. "You up for one more, Jasper? Well," I glanced at Baxter, "two? They've got a project to handle."

"Sure," he said, like he didn't know why I had to ask.

I nodded. "Alright. Raven?"

Sam piped up then. "Look, nobody has to-"

"Yeah," Raven interrupted, hugging herself. "Let's just all get inside, okay? Just don't talk to me."

And she disappeared into the depths.

Well, that was easier than I thought it would be, but the day was early yet. I looked at Baxter and Sam. "I know it's been a bad day," I said, "and take time if you need it. But if you can, finish what I
asked. Let him help you. You can trust Raven and Jasper to watch out for you."

Sam looked at the ground and nodded.

Girls down here were tough. They had to be. But that didn't mean they weren't as breakable as that precious glass I'd find sometimes on the Ark. Satisfied for the moment, I excused myself.

I walked to the drop ship. I went faster with every step, until I was almost jogging. The dull thud of my boots against the Earth was mocking me. Grounders. Finn dying. Shelter being designed. Settling disputes. Raven, Jasper, Sam, that motherfucking little-

I flung the parachute curtains out of the way.

Octavia looked up. "Bell."

I hesitated, gathering my composure. "Think you could give me a minute alone with Clarke? Get me something to eat?"

"Can't get it yourself?" She was trying to tease, but her smile was shaky.

"Too many fans out there," I replied, hands fisted at my sides. I was rigid, breathing a little harder than I should have.

Understanding. "Yeah. Be right back."

I held myself as stiff as a statue until she went by, disappearing. The curtains fluttered in her wake.

I took one step. Two. Then I was by the table, Clarke staring up at me. She was wrapped up in another blanket made of fur and a new shirt. It was blue, I noted absently. Or it used to be. In fact, it looked like a man's shirt. O must have searched far and wide for it.

Her brow puckered. "Something's wrong."

My jaw worked. "We figured out the housing situation. Sort of. It's a work in progress." I forced myself to sit in the vacated chair. It felt like every muscle was frozen. My hands clenched and unclenched on my thighs. "Got a few people working on it. It'll be perfect for us if we can get it to work. Told Miller about the chickens. They're making soup from bones."

"That'll help with stretching food a little further," she said carefully. "You've been busy."

I couldn't look at her. Just her shirt.

"Bellamy."

I didn't want to look.

I did.

Green eyes held mine. "Was it Raven?"

I shook my head. "There was a girl nearly raped today," I reported in a monotone, like I wasn't saying anything significant. It felt significant. It felt monumental. It felt overwhelming. "Apparently she's been raped before."

She paled.
"He's gone. I'll let the girls take care of him if he comes back." The muscles in my arm trembled. "Should have castrated him."

"Maybe."

I blinked in surprise.

"We need all our people, Bellamy. That doesn't mean we turn a blind eye. And the thought of him hurting someone makes me sick."


"You hate people who hurt others for fun," she corrected. There was that goddamn compassion again. "Did you take care of the girl?"

"She's with Raven."

"Come here, Bellamy."

I hesitated, then leaned in. A small hand covered my cheek. "Are you okay?"

Wetness stung my eyes for the second time today. I couldn't stop that. I shook my head. "More than once. Why didn't she tell me?"

"Only she can know that."

"She was afraid I wouldn't help her."

"You helped her."

"But before."

"She didn't know you before." Clarke's voice was hard. No argument. "She knows you now, Bellamy. You did a good thing."

I leaned my forehead on her shoulder and closed my eyes. "When did you become my cheerleader?"

"Since I got shot. Don't get used to it; I'll be up and arguing with you before you know it."

I rubbed my forehead back and forth. Was there a way to suck in strength through osmosis? That'd be a trick. "I miss being a kid. I miss not knowing what people were really like."

"Not everybody. And maybe one day we'll have kids that we can teach to be better than we were."

I stilled. Opened my eyes. Raised my head and met her gaze. "Kids," I said slowly. I thought of Octavia as a baby. She was so small and a little on the chunky side. Her first word was my name. She didn't crawl, not really. She commando-pulled herself across the floor with one arm. Then she was standing and then she was running.

I thought about all that and I looked at Clarke. "Kids," I said again, tasting the word.

Babies. Little humans that scream, cry, laugh, and love their family 1000%.

Her mouth opened and then closed. A blush climbed up her throat. "Not our kids, per se. I meant kids in general. You know, repopulating the Earth. Though the last thing any of us need to be down here is pregnant." Her fingers clenched in her pillow. "I'm not saying anything else," she announced.
haughtily.
Too late.
Way too late.

I kissed her on the mouth. "I want three. Two should be girls. You know what? All girls would be
good too." I knew how to handle girls. I knew how to beat the shit out of boys. It was a good
combination of skills to have, in my opinion.

"Don't tell me that. I don't want to know."

"You've never thought about it?"

"No."

"Princess, you are really not a good liar."

"I'll try to work on that," she sniffed.

She'd never be perfect at it.

Octavia came back then. She looked at me with an arched brow. "You're feeling better."

I lifted a brow. "Did I ever tell you about the time you stuck a button up your nose and couldn't get it
out?"

"Well, that was random." She gave me my food and water, then leaned against Clarke's table. "How
old was I?"

"Two." I looked at the girls, one dark and one fair, and a rare sense of peace settled over me. It
wasn't strong or overwhelming. I was too aware of what lay outside, and all the damn challenges that
could come with navigating our problems. But this was my sister and my girl, two people I'd go to
the grave for. They were settled in to listen to me with open expressions. And it hit me: these two
trust me. They trust me with their lives.

What happened to Sam wasn't a lone incident. Not by a long shot, not in this camp. When I took on
the role of leader, I took on their safety and wellbeing. I didn't realize that at the time. I was just
trying to survive. I knew it now, and while the weight was heavy, it was one I was determined to
carry. Because if I failed to do that, then I was failing these two. Some things I had no choice but to
fail at. Not this.

The side of my mouth lifted.

Yeah. Girls for sure.
Chapter 12

Three days later it was time to move Clarke back to her own tent. No clue who was more relieved, us or her.

The injuries didn't stop because our healer was laid up. They streamed in and Clarke turned into a little doctor dictator, barking out orders to Octavia and Monty while flat on her belly. She didn't know everything, but she knew enough for what we had to deal with. The whole thing would have been funny if it didn't worry me. She got frustrated by her inability to help. I let her get up once on the promise that she didn't make any sudden movements. That lasted literally six minutes. She reached for something while she was talking and almost passed out from the pain in her healing back.

Short of tying her arms to her sides, I couldn't do shit except make her get back to bed.

She was still frustrated, but she managed to keep her tone calm and professional most of the time.

Most of the time.

A kid came in a dislocated shoulder from horsing around on a log and then slipping on the wet bark. I just happened to be there, checking on Clarke, when he came in.

"At least get hurt doing something worthwhile!" she snapped.

All eyes turned to her, surprised. She glared back.

Intervention time. "Easy, Princess. Save that for after we fix him."

Her nostrils flared, but she nodded. "Fine. Monty, grab him by the—"

Too late. I had the kid in my hands and I moved with a sharp jerk. The kid screeched as the shoulder popped back into the socket. "That hurt?" I asked mildly. "Good. Shit happens, but the next time it happens while you're supposed to be helping with the wall..."

I trailed off and left it at that. I wasn't seriously planning on retaliating—at least, not yet—but planting the idea would go a long way.

I stepped back.

"Octavia," I said, my eyes on Bellamy, "wrap his arm tight to his shoulder. He'll be okay in a day or two, but he needs to let the shoulder heal before doing any heavy lifting."

"Guess that means you're on soup duty," he remarked with satisfaction.

Ten or so rough wooden bowls were already in circulation. People had to share at this point, but it was better than nothing. I'd had soup earlier. The bowl actually looked pretty good. Baxter—I'd met him yesterday—had a lot of raw talent. He even added a little spout/lip thing so we didn't have to spoons to drink the broth. By the time everybody had enough bowls, he'd be an expert.

Speaking of experts, I thought as I lowered my eyelashes and smiling to myself, Bellamy was proving himself to be a master of more skills than I'd give him credit for.
Octavia and Monty took the boy away to patch him up in another corner of the drop ship. That left me with Bellamy in relative privacy.

I wasn't allowed to get off of the table, but I was allowed to sit up, so I did, gingerly. I saw his hands twitch. He wanted to help me, badly, yet I appreciated him holding himself back. Bellamy had a habit of trying to be inconspicuous in his hovering...but he hovered. Even when he wasn't in the drop ship, he hovered.

"That was surprising," I said.

He walked over, standing next to me with his thigh touching mine, arms loose at his sides. He'd left off with the jacket again, giving me a good view of his arms. "They do give some medical training to guards, Princess."

"No Octavia this time?" When he'd hugged me, held me close, those arms made me feel like life began and ended there. I'd just watched him use his hands to help somebody, but I also remembered watching helplessly as he pummeled Murphy half to death.

He shook his head. "Though to be honest, I was 98% sure she was the first person I'd have to use it on. We need to get these first aid classes of yours together quick. Other people should be able to handle the small stuff that keeps coming through here."

Small but serious. An infection was all it would take. "How are the waginogans coming?"

Bellamy flickered a knowing gaze at me. He did it every time I said the word he couldn't remember no matter how many times it was repeated. "Good. First one was a disaster, but that's to be expected. Peter knows his stuff. Said he used to build miniature ones out of spare plastic on the Ark."

"Building to scale must be a challenge."

"He'll pull through for us. The second one looked to be in pretty good shape. It fit all six of the building geniuses with room to spare. They slept in it last night to test it out."

I looked at him with interest. "And?"

"And they were still in there when I checked on them this morning," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Piled together in a heap. Didn't bring blankets."

"They slept together without blankets," I repeated. How was that possible? Blankets were so essential.

"One thing I'm learning about these technical types, Princess, is that they don't generally think like we do. Don't ask me to explain it. I don't get it either. I dragged their asses out and they said that they had to work on how tightly woven the sticks had to be."

"Did they shut the door?"

Bellamy gazed at me. "The waginogan doesn't have a door."

"It doesn't, or it's not supposed to?"

His mouth was twitching like crazy. "I guess Peter forgot something. There wasn't even a flap tacked up."

I tried to picture it. Couldn't. But it made me laugh anyway. "Mention that to him. They might find
that it helps."

Bellamy grinned, then hissed, rubbing his multi-color bruised face. "Yeah. He's got a good head on
his shoulders, so I'll go easy on him for forgetting."

I laughed again, and this time it was me hissing in pain. "Ow, ow. I need to lay down," I grumped,
but not too badly. It felt good to laugh.

Getting back on my stomach was a lot easier said than done. I looked down at the table in distaste. I
would have to do some awkward maneuvering, which I did not want to do. Bellamy looked on, an
inscrutable expression on his face.

Things were different between us. Warmer. More intimate. Something inevitably changed in that tiny
hole in the woods, the way things do when put under extreme pressure. I had to trust Bellamy with
my life and he saved it. It created this...bond, something more than the uneasy camaraderie we had to
form after Charlotte and Wells.

He felt it too. I'd learned more about him in three days than I had in weeks. Little things, like how he
looked up proper tea-pouring etiquette so Octavia could have the full tea party experience. I learned
big things, like with what happened to Sam. Bellamy took that personally. Some people would be
able to distance themselves from the nature of the crime to do what they had to do. Not Bellamy. It
ate at him.

And that won him respect.

Baxter was now so firmly in Bellamy's corner I was surprised he didn't start a fanclub. Bellamy had
noticed the change in the boy, but he didn't say anything. As for Sam, I hadn't spoken to her yet, but
I had seen her once. She hung back from the others, except for Baxter. And if she was clinging to
Baxter, one half of the rescue duo, I had a feeling she would go to the ends of Earth for Bellamy.

He was winning people over one step at a time.

Which made me wonder why he needed me.

I knew he had feelings for me. Talking to him for just a little while would prove that. The first
wagoniogan was going to go to the builders—They built it, they get it, Bellamy'd declared—but the
second would be my med center. He was following through.

And the kisses. Those were...indescribably good.

He'd comforted me after Finn. I'd never forget how he let me cry on his chest. He didn't have to do
that.

He was getting more and more familiar with touching me. A brush here. A caress there. All that
attention was making me feel wonderful and afraid. I didn't want to rush into anything. I'd done that
before. It didn't work. I wanted to get to know Bellamy slowly, build up what felt like a blossoming
friendship between us.

The problem was that we didn't have time for that. People died here. Finn had died. Dating, or
whatever someone would call it, was a luxury.

And what about me? What about my feelings? What were they exactly? Were they real? Was this me
trying to attach myself to the alpha male after all? Was this me being grateful to him for saving my
life?
I didn't know any of the answers. That as much as anything made every second I lay on this table, blocked from the normal activity I could gain perspective from, irritating.

I didn't think I'd miss tending to injuries myself, but I did. I hated feeling helpless. "Can we go now?" I asked abruptly. "I want to lie in my own bed."

"Somebody's cranky." But he nodded. "Let's get you out of here, Princess." He reached for me.

I held up a hand. "Wait. I'll do it."

His gaze flicked over me. His lips flattened and his eyes glowed knowingly. "Trying to assert your independence, Clarke?"

He made it sound like a bad thing. Like a cliché that wasn't worth the time it took to point out. "I have to be able to rely on myself," I told him. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"You know what the great thing about having a partner is? You don't have to. At least not 100% of the time."

"I know things between us are changing. I'm not going to fight you on that."

He shrugged. "Wouldn't do you much good."

I shot him a look. "Are you listening, or do I have to punch you?" I almost clapped my hand over my mouth. Punch him? Where did that come from? I'd never said that before in a civil conversation in my life.

He snickered at my dismay. "I'm definitely rubbing off on you."

"I made a bad call before, okay?"

"And now you're scared you're confused or something like that, right?"

I pressed my lips together.

He nodded to himself. "Or...you know exactly how right this is, and the truth of it freaks you out."

I stared up at him. "How do you just say things like that?" I asked at last. "Doesn't it bother you at all?"

"Nope. I know exactly what I want. I know who I want. It's one of the few things I know for sure down here." He gestured at me. "You've got logic on your side. I've got instinct."

I sighed. "Which of us is right?"

"Both of us. Call it a blending of strengths." He pursed his lips. "You don't trust your own judgement, so trust mine. Can you do that?"

Take a chance? A risk?

*You already did.*

I inhaled. "Yes."

The word fell between us. He didn't move, but something changed in him. The atmosphere grew intimate, like he was kissing or hugging me.
And all he had to do was stand there, looking me in the eye. "Good," he said softly.

He was happy.

I liked that. It made me smile.

"Let's get you out of here, Princess," he told me again. This time when he reached for me I let him help me off of the table. I could walk on my own, but he was right beside me the whole way as we walked out of the drop ship and across camp. People moved out of the way and gave us curious glances.

Before long we'd be the center of gossip, if we weren't already. Who knew what Bellamy's little announcement a few days ago to Miller and the others had done?

I wasn't going to worry about it. I could see my tent ahead, and I wanted to run to it. Comfort! Well, more than the drop ship. I was going to have to work on that. I didn't want any other long term patients feel as on edge as I had.

Once the new med center was finished, I silently vowed, I was going to make it something amazing. Or as much as I could with the materials I had at my disposal.

He entered first and held the flap open for me to get through. When I rose, I noticed the bed right away. It was a real one, not my pallet. There was a bright red bundle on it.

I looked at Bellamy. "It's mine. You can't get up and down on the ground without pulling something. But don't get comfortable," he added. "I want that back."

I smiled at his ill-concealed teasing. "And that?" I pointed at the bundle.

Was that my imagination, or did he get a little red? "That?" He cleared his throat, walking past me and picking it up. "That's, uh—Here." He thrust it at me.

What was that all about? I took it.

He wiped his hands on the back of his pants.

Strange.

"Open it," he said.

What did he have to be so nervous about? Frowning, I did what he asked.

And stared.

"Needles," I whispered in awe. I picked one up and looked at it. There was a tiny hole etched into the end. It was such delicate work, and there were a variety of sizes and widths in the pack. "How did you...Did you make this?"

"With these hands?" He flexed them at me. "Not a chance. I was just the idea man." He jerked his chin at the pack. "Like 'em?"

I softened. I couldn't help it—he had suture needles made for me. "Oh, Bellamy. I love them."

He ducked his head and smiled. He bit his lip. "Look again."

"Again?" I dug through and found another object wrapped in a piece of red parachute. I set the pack
down and pulled the smaller thing out. "What's this?" It was bigger than my palm, but smaller than my whole hand. It felt hard, like wood.

I gently untied the knot and pulled the edges away.

A comb.

A wooden, double edged comb.

For me.

I couldn't say a word. I couldn't. There wasn't anything remotely adequate for the swell of feeling in my chest. I traced a finger over the teeth on one side, more widely spaced apart than the other, and commanded myself not to cry. I was not going to get sobby over a comb.

"What do you think?"

What did I think? I thought it was wonderful. I tilted my head up to meet his gaze. To be honest, I thought he was wonderful. That meant something to me.

A long time ago, Finn gave me a colored pencil. Back then I thought that was one of the best gifts anybody had ever given me. It was just like him to give me a gift that could create beauty.

I never thought I'd find suture needles and a comb romantic. I was wrong. It was all about who gave them to me.

A man who was practical to the bone.

A man who, I had to admit now, knew me better than I'd thought.

He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. "I, uh, had Sam make another one for Octavia. So she wouldn't get jealous." He straightened his shoulders, going for the casual look. "So. Think you could use—"

I slipped my arms around his waist and hugged him tight, face pressed to his chest. "Thank you."

He hesitated, then chuckled. "Sure, Princess. Anytime."

His arms came up to draw me closer, but I stepped away, beaming up at him. "I want to use it. Right now."

"Now?" he echoed. "What about my victory hug?"

"First me, then you."

"I'm taking second place to your hair?"

"First my hair, then yours," I corrected, as I carefully leaned over to swing my hair to one side. "Then Monty's, then Jasper's."

"Wait a minute. That puts me in fifth place."

Bellamy was no slouch when it came to arithmetic. I had to be careful about raising my arms, but I caught my swath of hair and pulled it over one shoulder. Using the wider part, I started at the bottom. I moaned at the first stroke, eyes closing in pleasure. "That feels so good."
Bellamy didn't comment.

I tried to raise my arm higher to get more of the tangles out, but the stretching of my stitches made me stop. "Dammit."

"Here. Let me."

Oh, this was so much better. I handed him the tool and let him turn me around. He was tall enough that I didn't have to sit, but that would have just been the most luxurious feeling. "Start at the bottom," I reminded him.

I could practically hear him roll his eyes. "I know what I'm doing, Princess."

His hand gathered up my hair, holding it away from my shoulders. He started combing with brisk, short strokes, moving up and up. He didn't miss a thing. It didn't even hurt. He stopped every so often to get the little whorls of dead hair out of the comb, then he'd start over.

With every slight rasp of wood on hair I felt renewed. I couldn't believe how much of a difference it was making. It was like he was brushing the worst of my problems away. I felt lighter.

I closed my eyes again and let my head fall back. He released my hair as he got to the top. His fingers cupped my crown for balance. He reached forward and ran the comb through the tresses above my ear.

I moaned again in the back of my throat.

He paused. "Do me a favor, Princess. Don't make that noise."

I frowned, still concentrating. "Why?"

He sighed and pulled my hair to the side, stepping up until we were pressed back to front. His arm snuck around my waist.

My eyes popped open, wide and aware.

"That's why," he rumbled, his hard-on firm and nudging me in the lower back with playful insistence.

"Oh." I was mortified by the squeak in my voice. I wasn't a virgin. I wasn't stupid either. Why didn't I make the connection a second earlier? I craned my head back, catching a glimpse of his nose and his mouth and his chin.

He laughed. "Yeah. Oh."

He kissed my exposed, vulnerable neck, right over the pulse. "Do you feel better?"

Heat shot through me from top to bottom, starting at the bit of skin where his mouth tasted me. He moved up, kissing another spot, then another, making a sound in the back of his own throat that vibrated in me.

I caught my breath. This wasn't like any other kiss we'd shared. This wasn't comfort or teasing. Bellamy wanted me.

And I wanted him back, I admitted with a shaky exhale. Wow. How did my reluctant admission of his good looks morph into this? I didn't expect to get dragged under with him so fast. Like my skin was coming alive in away I didn't know it could. I felt every gust of air he breathed.
He peppered slow kiss after slow kiss over my jaw. My ear. Places I didn't know I was sensitive. "Clarke?" he whispered. "Still with me?"

"Huh?"

He chuckled, wrapping both arms around me. "Clarke Griffin, speechless. I'll have to mark it down somewhere."

"Ha ha," I retorted, gathering up some of my composure again. Not much, but enough. "Gonna do me now?"

I almost tore my stitches whipping around to face him. "What?"

He grinned. "My hair, Clarke. What did you think I meant?"

My face flamed. I didn't know a guy could look like he'd won a war over something like that, but that was Bellamy Blake. He went over to the bed and sat down in front of it on the ground, patting the fur behind him with a wicked look. He wasn't smiling anymore, but his eyes were. "Move it, Princess."

If he started whistling, I was going to throw something at him, I swore to myself as I walked over. I had to get behind him and he settled into the cradle of my thighs like he belonged there. He even threw his arms over my legs like I was his throne. "Comfy?" I asked sarcastically.

"Nope." He held up the comb without looking back. "But I'm getting there."

I took the comb, licking my lips, and tried to get it together. I was fine. This was nothing. Just an intimate grooming session.

I hoped I was fooling him better than I was fooling myself, but I had a feeling that wasn't the case. And to tell the truth, I wasn't even that mad. Embarrassed, yes, but not mad. It felt good to be like this, I thought as I went to work on his hair. Whatever this was.

It was something.

It didn't have a name.

I didn't want it to have a name. Not yet.

He had nice hair. Soft. He'd tried to wash it at least once or twice, it seemed, and it gleamed. One thing about not having access to chemical shampoos; we weren't washing away natural oils. None of us could claim frizz anymore, that was for sure.

I got lost in the task literally at hand, and he started to relax. He let his head fall back the way I let mine a few minutes ago, and I drank up his features from this angle. "That does feel good," he admitted.

"Like you're more than half human again?"

He hummed.

Suddenly I understood why my moaning bothered him. That was...sexy.

It didn't take me nearly as long to brush his hair as it had mine. That didn't keep me from continuing
long after all the tangles were done. I let my fingers go through the strands, massaging his scalp and
the back of his neck.

"Oh, damn," he whispered, letting his head fall forward. "Do that again."

I chuckled and set the comb aside, spearing his hair with both hands. Eventually I worked my way
down to his shoulders. I'd never envisioned myself as the type to give a guy massages, but there I
was. It wasn't bad, actually. He felt good, and I was making him feel that. And it gave me a reason to
touch him without thinking about it very hard.

His muscles were tense and I worked them. "Thank you for my comb," I told him quietly.

"You have about an hour to stop thanking me," he murmured back.

"We should have same make more." I switched to the left shoulder. "It could do so much for
morale."

"I'm beginning to see that." He took hold of my wrists and pulled my hands up, resting against me
and wrapping my arms around his neck. His head brushed my belly.

"And I'd really like to stop brushing my teeth with a twig. Toothpicks would be nice."

"Clarke."

"Hmm?"

"Stop talking."

I arched a brow.

"I just want to spend some time with you. Nobody else."

We were surrounded by people. We were surrounded by problems. Still, I nodded my head and on
impulse, kissed his forehead. "Okay."

He smiled, eyes closed.

Bellamy Blake was an ass a lot of the time. He was hard, stern, and unforgiving. But, I admitted as I
brushed his hair back from his face, he was also right. We had something. Something with a lot of
potential.

I wanted that. I wanted this comfort. I wanted his closeness. I wanted to be his partner. I wanted his
kisses.

And maybe, just maybe, I really wanted him for me.

His breathing evened out.

He was asleep.

I smiled.

The future wasn't so dark and bleak after all.
"To be honest I wish I could, but we were up there, Clarke. There was nobody but us."

"Yeah, but we were in space."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm just saying that I don't think space and heaven are the same thing."

"How can they not be? Both are up there. The only thing up there is space and more space."

I shrugged one shoulder with a smile. "I'm not totally convinced."

"That makes no sense. You were there for seventeen years. I was there for more than twenty. I didn't see any giant man out in the stars. In fact, since I was there a lot longer than you I should win this on account of experience."

I laughed at him. "There's no winning or losing this."

He crossed his arms and arched his brows expectantly. "If there isn't, why are we talking about it?"

"Because," I said, watching the comb run through my hair, "I'm curious."

This was my favorite part of the day. Not just getting the chance to comb my hair and revel in how much better it made me feel, but talking to Bellamy. That wasn't to say that we didn't talk from morning to night. That was conferring. That was discussing and sometimes fighting.

Okay, a lot of fighting, but it wasn't the same as before. He was still a passionate jerk who favored the big stick over the friendly handshake. I guess he was just more willing to listen to what I had to say.

As for me, I found myself giving his viewpoints more serious thought.

The kind of talking we did in the last several evenings had more to do with us. What we liked. What we thought. We couldn't completely remove ourselves from the problems that the hundred faced, of course. Still, some of our best ideas had come out of these conversations.

And today I needed it. I really, really did.

I finished combing and held up the tool, pointing to the ground in front of me.
He walked over and sat. "And why are you curious?"

"We could talk about something else, if you want," I said with arched brows, going to work on his hair. This was becoming a thing for us too. A routine that I looked forward to at the end of the day, and moreover, a practice Bellamy seemed to find comfort in.

He still brushed my hair from time to time, but today I couldn't wait for him. I got the strands tangled on another tree again. Then someone broke their leg and I had to set it. I wanted to forget the screams and the blood that was becoming very common in my life.

And then after—no, I was not going to think about it. It had nothing to do with me. My wound was healing. Soon the stitches could be removed. I'd rushed into my tent and took advantage of my renewed mobility to get the tangles—and the problems—out of my hair. I was going to enjoy this time I had with Bellamy, just sitting in my tent and wiping my head clear.

I turned my thoughts to Bellamy, who sat with one of his hands curled over my knee and the other wrapped around my calf. "No, I want to know why you're curious," he said.

"You know why." *Wait.* I sniffed.

"It's always nice to hear how badly you want my brain-"

"Bellamy," I interrupted, "why do you smell like flowers?"

He stilled between my legs, shoulders tensing and then quickly relaxing. "I don't smell like flowers."

I dropped the comb in his lap and buried my hands in his hair before he could react. I poked my nose in the tresses and took a long deep whiff. "*Yes you do.*" Frowning, I tugged his head back so that we were eye to eye. "What's going on?"

He winced. "Monty," he confessed at last, clearly pained. Not by me, I wasn't holding him that tightly. He just didn't want to fess up.

"Monty made you smell like flowers."

He sighed. Deeply. "It's this thing he's working on. He needed a test subject."

I waited.

"He didn't tell me it had flowers in it, okay? He's trying to develop a way of cleaning our hair by boiling plants in water. He was supposed to give me something called mint, but he accidentally gave it to Raven and didn't have the guts to tell me."

A picture was beginning to form in my mind. "So Monty washed your hair for you, and then ran the other way before you could figure it out."

His scowl deepened. "Pretty much." He shot me a dirty look. "Don't laugh."

"I'm laughing at Monty, not you." I took another exaggerated sniff. "I like it. And your hair is shiny." I plucked at the strands. "Does it feel better to you?"

"Yes," he reluctantly admitted.

"How did Raven's look?"

"How am I supposed to know? It's her hair." He paused, considering. "Smelled nice, though."
"I knew he was good for more than moonshine." Before we'd come to Earth, I never would have
known what flowers smelled like. The Ark had agro, but flowers weren't something considered
useful or important. Amazing how a few weeks on Earth had changed us.

I remembered the girl who came into the med center, looking for something to help with her
menstrual cramping.

I ruthlessly shut it down.

Bellamy twined our fingers together. "He said to tell you that mint can be used to relieve certain
kinds of pain, freshen breath, make tea, and I forget what else. Something about chest congestion."

"Tea," I murmured, trying to focus. "That sounds like something I want to try."

"The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that the Ark didn't randomly put people on that
drop ship. We have an agro guy, a chemist, engineers, mechanics, and two or three other kinds I
can't think of right now." He looked to me. "And a healer."

My fleeting sense of contentment vanished. "I think it had less to do with planning than my mother
trying to save me."

"Can you blame her?" It wasn't a rhetorical question.

"Not for that." I untangled our fingers and held out my hand for the comb. He handed back to me
without a word.

I started brushing his hair again. "I know she loves me," I said after a few minutes. "It's just...I was
so sure she loved my dad too." Tears pricked my eyes. "But she turned him in anyway. How can
you do that to someone you love? You don't. You try to save them." I sniffed. "The way you did
with Octavia."

"I don't know, Clarke." He rubbed my calf. "I can't speak for your mom. But she'll come down here
one of these days with Jaha and the rest. You'll have to face her then."

"Do I?" But that brought up something I'd been thinking about more and more. "What are we going
to do about that, Bellamy? You know they're going to try to assimilate us back into the group when
they come."

He twisted around with a frown. "I thought you'd want that."

"I want their technology. I don't want people to die. But I don't know if we belong to the Ark
anymore. We're different. Earth is different. I can't—I don't want to wrap my head around following
their rules again."

Bellamy was staring at me as if he'd never seen me before. "You're serious."

"Yes."

He accepted that silently, his mind whirring behind his eyes. "I did not expect that," he said with an
amazed shake of his head.

Nobody did. Least of all me. But it was on my mind constantly lately, and that nagging sense of
something being wrong was growing harder to escape. "The Ark was created so that we could
survive. It was a tool. Well, we've survived." Sort of. "We need a new society, but we're
outnumbered, outgunned, and they'll probably say we're just a bunch of dumb kids who don't know
any better." I settled back, nostrils flaring in annoyance just thinking about it.

He was watching me carefully. "So you don't want to blend with the Ark again."

"Yes. No." I wet my lips, trying to sort through my feelings. "All I can think about was how easy it was to be floated. How disposable we were to them, and all of our hard work, our...tears, our death, it'll mean nothing when they get here. Like it never happened!"

"Hey." He turned all the way around, reaching up to cup my face. "What's going on with you?"

I gathered my composure with difficulty. "I think tomorrow is my eighteenth birthday," I told him in a clipped voice. "I don't know. I lost count of the days."

His lips parted, but his searching gaze didn't let up. "...that's not it."

Alarm shot through me. "Yes it is. I'm just having a hard time dealing with the idea that if it had been up to them, I wouldn't have lived past tomorrow. Floated. Just like that." I gripped his wrists tight.

"That's not everything," he insisted. "Tell me the truth, Clarke. Why are you rattled up like this?"

"Because we need their technology, Bellamy! When they come, we'll have to deal with them. We need their medical equipment, their medicine, their freakin' contraceptives." I got up and started to pace. "The way people are going at it like—like—rabbits down here, someone's going to end up pregnant. I wouldn't be able to see what's happening. I couldn't find out if something was wrong."

"Clarke."

Something in his voice stopped me in my tracks.

He unfolded from the floor like a panther uncurling from a tree branch. He stood almost too tall for my tent, staring at me with glittering brown eyes. "Tell me what's wrong. Now."

My breath wouldn't come. I was caught. "We've been here for a month." A hard rock formed in my chest. "I haven't had my period. I lifted my gaze to his. "Stress can upset a cycle, but chances are good that I might be pregnant."

He didn't move. Not a muscle. His hands were fists at his sides. "All women on the Ark are fitted with IUDs," he stated calmly. Too calmly.

I nodded. "When we get our first period or when we turn fourteen. I got mine when I was eleven." Facts. Facts were good. I could lose myself in facts, make my voice as dispassionate as possible. "By the time five years were up I was in Confinement, and the Ark doesn't waste resources on the condemned."

And I wasn't thinking beyond the moment with Finn. I almost laughed. How cliché was that? It was every cautionary tale come true, and it was me. Princess Clarke Griffin, Phoenix kid. Wouldn't the hundred just love that? They'd say I deserved it, that I should have realized what would happen. That I should have been more careful.

I put a trembling hand in front of my eyes. Get it together, Clarke. Deep breath.

I dropped the hand. "So," I said, the crack in my armor shored up. "That's that."

Never mind that the father of my possible child was dead. Or that I was on Earth with almost nonexistent medical resources.
Or that Bellamy hadn't said a word in so long it was getting awkward.

I couldn't blame him. I didn't sign up for pregnancy, but he wasn't even there the night of conception. He had no responsibility or obligation to me. Whatever this relationship between us was—friendship, a romance—he didn't need this on his plate.

"I need some air," he said so quietly I almost missed it. He brushed past me, careful not to so much as touch my sleeve, and then he was gone.

I blinked at the remnants of our nightly ritual—the comb, the bed, some food. A person would never guess how much that homey scene meant to me. Or how far from reality it now was.

I sank down on my bed...and I cried.

Goddamn bam motherfucking bam irresponsible bam shiteater!

I rammed my foot one last time into the wall—which held—and backed off, breathing hard.

I knew Spacewalker was reckless. I knew it. And now he was dead, so I couldn't beat the shit out of him for not taking better care of Clarke.

I ran my hand down my face. God, Clarke. The way she was quietly losing her shit back there while trying to pretend that it was all okay? It was not okay. Nothing was okay about this!

Memories of my mom assaulted me. I put my back to the wall and slid down, not caring about the cold. Keeping Octavia a secret meant no check ups, no help except the ebooks we could access and what Mom remembered from the first time around. The labor was horrible. She couldn't even scream. She bit a hole through her lip to keep it in.

I started to shake. We got lucky with Octavia. We got solucky, and that was in the relatively safe confines of the Ark.

We didn't even have toothpaste on Earth.

The horrifying statistics of birth and death in ancient civilizations hammered me. A thousand things could go wrong during pregnancy. Clarke was facing them all. She could die.

The baby could die.

Fuck me, they both could.

And Octavia. Jesus, she'd never had an IUD. What if-

I shook harder, head to toe, pressing the heels of my hands so deep into my eye sockets that it ached. God, what about the girls I'd been with? What if they were like Clarke? I didn't take precautions. I just assumed.

Like Spacewalker assumed.

I was just as much of a piece of shit as Finn.

I surged to my feet, blindly searching in the dark until I came to Monty's tent. I barged right in.

Monty and Jasper looked up just as I seized Monty by the collar. "You repeat this conversation and
they won't be able to find your body," I snarled into his face. "Understand?"

"O-kay," he said, hands up. "What conversation?"

Jasper eased in cautiously. "Bellamy. Look man, you should calm down. Let's talk this out—"

"Shut up." I glared down at Monty. "Is there a plant that can induce abortion?"

"Abortion?" He paled. "You can't be serious."

"Do I fucking look like I'm joking?"

Jasper stared at me. "Octavia?" he asked faintly.

"If I were you, Goggles, I'd keep my mouth shut. I'm going to ask one more time, Monty. Is there a plant a girl could take to end a pregnancy?"

He didn't want to answer me. I could see it in his face. His lips thinned, and finally he said, "Yes."

I almost sagged with relief. "Good." I let him go, nodding. "Good." So there was hope. "Which?"

"I'm not telling you."

I stilled. "Come again?"

"If a girl wants it, she can come to me herself. Beating me up isn't going to change my mind."

"Why the hell would I beat you up?"

He just gave me a look. In his tent. Threatening him. "Fuck," I swore, digging my hands through my hair. "Just...fuck!"

They glanced at each other. "You need a drink," Jasper told me decisively.

_Ain't that the truth._ Part of me wanted to get the hell out of there, but I ended up putting my ass on the ground and gesturing impatiently. "This is going to get ugly," I warned them.

"Uh huh," Monty deadpanned. "Just don't try to kiss or hit me and we'll be fine."

I accepted one of the crude metal cups we'd fashioned from the drop ship and swigged the alcohol. It was—whoa, what the hell was that? I coughed, eyes watering. "New recipe?" I took another drink, not waiting for the answer.

Guy could go blind from that shit. Or get blind drunk.

I was all for the latter. No, wait, no I wasn't. Couldn't risk being seen. Except these two idiots were watching me like I was one of those shadow figure plays I saw once when I was a kid. "What?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just kind of wondering what started all of this," Monty ventured.

Jasper said nothing. Still thinking about Octavia, no doubt.

I looked from one to the other. "Do you know how many women used to die in childbirth? One in eight. That's the conservative number. If you took all the girls in the hundred and did the math..." I swallowed. "Could be caused by anything. Internal damage. Pelvic abscess. Infection." I took another drink. "Know how many kids used to die before they turned two? How many things could
"But..." Jasper looked at me. "The Ark. They have medical supplies, equipment that could help us..."

"When are they going to get here, Jasper? Are we in any kind of goddamn position to sit and twiddle our thumbs waiting? We've got Grounders, radiation fog—half of these jackasses can't be bothered to keep dirt out their cuts!" That didn't have anything to do with it, but I said it anyway. I thrust my empty cup at him. "More."

He filled it.

"We don't even have enough food," I said, drowning in misery. "And you know what I told her? I wanted three. THREE. What the hell was I thinking?" I knocked the second drink back. "Baby girls are cute, and soft, and they like to snuggle. They make funny noises and they think the whole damn world is amazing. They eat everything because they don't know any better. What if they ate the wrong thing? What if they fell and cut themselves? What if she got caught by a Grounder? What if one of those mutant animals decided to slither into camp?"

"He's losing it," Monty whispered to Jasper.

"Of course I'm fucking losing it, dumbass. Do you even hear what I'm saying? Earth is a dangerous place we barely know how to navigate. How are we going to raise kids here?"

"Bellamy, out of an insane sense of curiosity, considering you're in our tent getting drunk and all," Jasper said, "who did you get pregnant?"

"I don't know," I admitted, head down, fingers in my hair.

Monty whistled. "That's a problem."

"I can't watch her die." I didn't mean to say it. "Not because some dick made a mistake and didn't think with anything other than his...dick."

"I'm confused," Goggles stated.

"Join the club," the agro expert returned. "Look, Bellamy, I'm not following you here, but I'll tell you this: abortion is not the answer. We have to prevent pregnancy to begin with."

"And if it's too late? What then, genius?"

"The girls have to choose that for themselves," he said. "I'll tell Clarke that the plant exists. She can tell anybody who's interested."

"She'll die," I repeated.

"Who?" Jasper asked with a frown.

"Clarke."

"Clarke's going to die?" He sat up straight, paling. "From what?"

"The baby." I knew it in my bones.

"You got Clarke-"

"Easy, bro," Monty cut in. "Don't poke the beast." He got up and crouched in front of me. "I'm not
going to make the decision for anybody. That's what the Ark did, and this isn't the Ark. Choices, right?"

I glared, but couldn't argue. Didn't think I could get my thoughts together enough for that.

"We've got some bad things we're up against," Monty continued quietly. "You're right; being pregnant down here is dangerous. For the girls. For the babies. That doesn't mean I'm going to pressure someone into thinking one way or the other. I'll tell Clarke, and Clarke can do what's right for her." He took my cup. "You going to crash here, or are you going back to your own tent?"

"Clarke," I said promptly. "I want to go back to Clarke."

I got up—and didn't even stagger.

They stared up at me with open mouths. "You are officially a god," Jasper stated, clearly impressed.

I snorted derisively. "Please. You two idiots haven't seen shit yet." I pointed. "Remember what I said about repeating this conversation."

I turned on my heel and walked out, straight as an arrow. I headed directly for Clarke's tent without looking right or left, and people were smart enough to stay out of my way.

It came into sight, a beacon. End destination.

I swept the flap open with my arm.

The inside of her tent was dark. There was no more light from the fire outside except for a dim glow, so there was no way to see her face when I entered. I saw her shadow sit up, though, startled.

"Bellamy?" Her voice was tight and watery.

She'd been crying.

"Yeah," I confirmed, not wanting her to think some asshole was trying to crawl in here with her.

"What are you doing here?"

I shrugged off my jacket almost before I made the conscious decision. "I'm staying the night." I tossed the jacket aside and reached for my shirt. It followed the jacket. Next were the boots.

"What?" Her voice rose. "What the hell are you talking about, staying the night?"

"Exactly what that means, Princess. I'm here, and I'm going to sleep in the same bed as you."

"And just what makes you think I want you in this bed?"

"Right now it's less about what you want than what I need." I walked to the bed.

Now she was mad. "Are you serious?" she demanded. "You've said some asshole things to me in the past, Bellamy Blake, but that takes the cake. I tell you I might be pregnant and you think that means-"

"No," I cut her off. "I don't. I'm here because I don't want to be in my tent without you. I'm here because this is my damned bed, and if you're in it I want to be there too. Now move over." I crowded her, and to my total surprise she moved aside, huffing a little as she did so.

I got under the covers, wrapped my arm over her waist, and hauled her gently into me, spooning.
She grunted. "You smell like moonshine and flowers."

I wasn't in the mood for whatever banter she was trying to start. "I'm with you," I said baldly. "I'm fucking terrified, but I'm with you whether you're pregnant or not. But you've gotta know that I might have gotten someone else pregnant because I was too much of a dumbass to think it through. I'm going to take responsibility for that."

I buried my face in her hair, loving the feel of it.

"This isn't your baby," she said, trembling.

"Don't care."

"You don't have to take care of me, Bellamy. It's okay if you don't. You won't be doing anything wrong if you change your mind and walk away now. But it has to be now." She was crying again. "Do you understand what I'm saying? It can't be later, when I've grown attached to you."

"You're already attached to me." She loved me. And I loved her. I told her the truth; I didn't believe love could compare to what we could have, did have. I phrased it like that because there wasn't a better word for this thing. "I'm not going to lie; having this baby is dangerous. It may kill you." I tightened my hold on her. "It might make me a shitty human being to say this, but abortion would be something I would support...if you wanted it." It had nothing to do with the baby. Nothing to do with Spacewalker. It had everything to do with Clarke.

Princess Clarke Griffin.

"But if you don't, then I'm going to do everything I can do to protect you and her when she comes." With my whole soul. No questions asked. "If I've fathered any other kids in camp, I'm going to take care of them too. Can you handle that?"

Part of me squeezed. What if she said no?

"Oh, Bellamy." She was crying in earnest now, her body shaking with it. She turned in my arms and wrapped herself around me, her face buried in my bare chest. "Thank you."


"I'm scared," she admitted. "I'm more scared than I was when we were on that drop ship, hurtling through the atmosphere. Isn't that stupid?"

"No. I think it's pretty natural. We'll be okay, Princess."

"I don't know why you're doing this."

"Yes you do."

She nodded jerkily. "Yes I do. I keep telling myself I don't need you. That I just need myself. I know I'm lying, because you're the person I think of when I feel worried."

"Me too," I confessed.

"All of this is purely hypothetical. It might be just a scare."

"Don't care." I did, but not the way she meant. It didn't affect my ultimate decision.

"You said I can take your shit. That's why you need me."
"Nope. That's why I want you. There's a difference."

"Then why?"

"I'm not going to get all mushy on you, Princess. Just believe it. You're important to me, and not just because you're a healer. Okay?"

She nodded again, slowly. "Okay."

"Now go to sleep. When you wake up you'll be eighteen, and probably up to your elbows in morons getting splinters."

"Just like this?" she asked skeptically, hand drifting from my bare shoulder to the place right over my heart.

"Well, if you really want my body, I'll just have to call it your birthday pres-"

"Good night, Bellamy."

She was laughing. Snotty and congested, but not crying.

Progress. "'Night, Princess."
Dear Readers: Thank you so much to everyone who responded to the story, especially the last chapter. I feel it's fair to tell you something about myself—I don't believe in avoiding certain situations because it might be messy. Life doesn't work like that, nor does the show that we're in love with. Turn back now if that makes you uncomfortable. If it doesn't, go forth and read. Cheers!

Clarke was quiet the next morning. Didn't mention the baby or her birthday. Didn't talk about it the next day either. Or the day after that.

Peter got the waginogans together. In addition to the med center, we had eleven other shelters. More people were being trained in how to make one, so rate of progress was probably going to explode. We weighed them down with rocks so that they wouldn't blow away, though most were pretty sturdy.

Younger kids went into first aid training. They got brand new med packs as a shiny graduation present.

Baxter was churning out the bowls like his pride depended on it. With Sam's help, they were producing some good work. Even a little design here and there, which didn't serve fuck all, but I kept my mouth shut.

The wall was finished with bigger logs, ends buried for stability.

I was getting my heart handed to me left and right.

I didn't think it would be so hard to find my sex partners and ask them if they were still protected. I had a friggin' threesome a couple of times with some of them. I had no problem looking them in the face after that. This wasn't about sex. This was about the rest of our lives and sucking up my own sense of shame every time I had to broach the subject.

Newsflash: there is no delicate way of bringing 'could you be pregnant?' into a conversation. None.

I had to do it four damn times. Three of them thought I was crazy for even asking. The last one was smart enough to wonder why that would come up.

That's how the rumors started. My threatening Monty and Jasper wasn't necessary after all.

She was in her med center, staring into space and biting her lip when I entered. During the day we left the flap open for the most part. We wouldn't be able to do that in the winter, and would have to install a better door then.

There was a lot of room inside, more than I would have thought possible. Peter really surpassed my expectations. There were beds, a few crude night stands for Clarke to set her limited supplies on, and room to maneuver. It was also empty of other people. That rare lull of patients that usually happened around midday when people ate. Funny how nobody screwed shit up when it was mealtime.

Which was why I was there. I brought food. "Come on, Princess. Can't skip lunch."

"Hey," she greeted absently, looking up with a faint smile for me. "Sorry. Drifted off there."
Usually I was the one that avoided topics while Clarke jumped all over them. Talk about your role reversal. For days now I'd been holding back, determined to let her think things through. But when an opportunity to get it out in the open came up, I'd be dumb to let it go. "You're eating for two now. Gotta watch it," I said as I sat down on an empty pallet.

She hesitated, then sat on the other. Octavia took out the stitches just this morning in her back, so she could move around fine. She accepted my offer of berries and nuts (the good kind this time) and slowly started eating. "You make it sound like it's a sure thing."

Trying to sound casual? Wasn't working. I could hear the stress a mile away. "You hopin' for a last minute reprieve, Clarke?"

She kept eating.

I watched her for a minute, then sat forward. "Alright. Get it off your chest."

"This could be a false alarm," she said. "There's no reason to get upset about it just yet."

Was she friggin' kidding me? "You can't just shrug your shoulders and hope for the best. That's not how life works down here." And the fact that Clarke Griffin of all people was shying away from reality was telling. "Me getting lucky with those girls not being pregnant...that's the exception, not the rule. So let's be real about this."

"I am being real about this. It's too early to tell."

"It's not too early to plan," I countered.

She snorted, exasperated. "What is with you? For once I want to be the one that tackles things on a touch and go basis."

"Not with this. Anything but this."

She paused mid-chew, blinking rapidly. Not crying, but wrestling with something internally. She did that sometimes, picking and discarding words in that big brain quicker than I could think. "I'm struggling," she said at last. "None of us are ready for this. You. Me. Raven."

I frowned. "Why Raven?"

"It's Finn's baby, Bellamy. How is she going to feel when she finds out her boyfriend's one night stand ended up pregnant? Especially when he's dead."

Didn't seem to me that it was any of Raven's business. Whatever went wrong in that corner, it was on Spacewalker. Clarke didn't force the guy or even know Raven existed. But telling that to Clarke for the thousandth time was a dumb idea. "The only way she'd know it was Finn's is if you tell her," I said instead, popping a few nuts into my mouth and chewing.

"I can't exactly keep it a secret."

"Why not? As far as anybody in camp knows, she's mine."

"Yours?" she repeated blankly. "Yours?"

"Yeah. Mine." I rolled my eyes as I took one of those nuts she didn't like out of her palm. "What'd you think 'I'm with you' meant?"

Clarke was blinking. Something was not computing. "Bellamy...I know you said you wanted to be
with me and protect us, but..."

I tensed.

"You have to see how massively unfair that is to you. Raising someone else's baby? You didn't even like Finn. He'll be like a ghost. One day you'll look at her and see something of him in her. Won't that bother you?"

My jaw worked. My first instinct was to snap at her, to point out that I'm not that kind of fucking guy and that she ought to know that by now. Instead I sat right there, chewing the hell out of the nuts and berries, keeping my temper under control until I swallowed.

"You have to see why I'm thinking about it. Everybody would tell you to walk away. To not take on someone else's baggage."

It was her face that was doing it to me. It was the most vulnerable I'd ever seen her, and for once I was going to be the steady rock. "I'm going to say this one time, and one time only, Clarke. So listen up. The baby is the baby. You are you. You're my girl. That means this baby is my kid. I don't care where she came from." I stared her down. "Look me in the eye and tell me you understand that."

Her face pinched. Her struggle to believe me was visible, but fear and anxiety was getting the best of her for the first time since I'd seen her after landing.

I put the back of rations aside and rubbed my hands on my thighs. I didn't want to pull out the big guns, but the gigantic fucking bazooka it was gonna be. I exhaled. "Damn you for making me say this out loud, Clarke."

She sat, watching me warily.

"If you die giving birth, who do you think will take care of her?"

She paled. Went white as a sheet, so much so that her green eyes almost glowed.

Well, too damn bad. I hated this as much as she did, but running from the truth didn't make it any less brutal. "You know damn well it'll be me," I told her in a low, raw voice, "so don't ever give me that shit about her not being mine again. We clear?"

I saw a doe freeze up once. All its muscles went rigid with uncertainty. That's exactly what happened to Clarke. I don't think she even breathed.

Then she slowly relaxed. First her legs, then her hands, her shoulders, and finally her face. She almost melted into a puddle on the bed. "Yes," she said softly. "We're clear."

I narrowed my eyes. It couldn't be that easy. "You sure?"

"You're right. If I die, I know you'll be the only one I can trust her with. The only one I'd want her with."

I'd won, but that didn't matter. I was pissed. Really pissed. She'd made me say something that I didn't want to even consider in front of her. I resented it. Now she'd get obsessed with the idea and make all kinds of last minute arrangements for the baby's care. Morbid crap like that. "You are not allowed to die."

Humor warmed her gaze. "You know as well as I do that's not up to us."
"It hinges on you going through the with pregnancy to begin with. You have to really want this kid, Clarke. You have to be willing to do everything being pregnant and a mother down here will take. Otherwise...it's got to be ended."

"I know that. Right now I can't think as clearly as I need to. If this were someone else, I know exactly what I would say. It's dangerous. We don't have enough food. We don't have any of the normal things people take for granted. The camp just isn't ready for this. The problem is that it's easy to say, but that's not what I'm thinking about. Every minute of the day I wonder if she has a chance. If she did, if I knew that deep in my heart..."

She waved a hand like she was telling me some other person's story. "Then I think about what might happen later. Say we both survived the birth. We wouldn't be out of the woods. We'd be right in the middle of them. What if I lost her, Bellamy? What if after everything, she caught a cold or ate something wrong and she died?" Her gaze turned inward, agonized. "I'd be broken into so many small pieces I'd never come back together again."

I ached inside.

"I..." Clarke took a deep breath. "I want her. But I couldn't handle..."

"I know, Princess. I understand." I thought of the last year, where every day meant one closer to Octavia getting floated.

She focused on me. "You do, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"It's your body, Clarke. It has to be your decision."

She smiled sadly. "Then why are we talking about it like she's already here? That it's a girl, and that she's ours?" She reached out and took my hand in both of hers, stroking my knuckles with her thumb. "I think we both know we don't want to end this. Not you. And not me."

That was it, then. Our answer. We were going to be parents.

Green eyes met mine across the narrow space. "Are you really terrified?"

I released a shaky breath. "Yeah."

"Me too." Suddenly she lifted my hand and kissed the back of it softly.

"What was that for?"

"For being exactly what I need. First the comb, the needles, and now this. I'm glad we're not keeping score, because I'd be seriously behind."

I smiled at her teasing. "Who says we're not keeping score?"

Her brows arched. "Oh, we are? I see. Well, I did save your life. That has to count for something."

"I sewed you up after that."

"That's...true. Hmm." She thought about it. "It might be time for me to step it up."

She stood up and came to me—not to the bed, to me. She stepped into the v of my legs and cupped my face. Her hands were freakin' tiny compared to mine. She made me feel like a giant, even though I was pretty average for a guy. The second her palms slid across my skin, most of my remaining tension drained away. I didn't know how she had the power to do that to me, but I sank into it.
She smiled down at me, thumbs brushing my cheekbones. "I can't believe how many freckles you have. Octavia doesn't."

"She's the lucky one in the gene pool, I guess."

"I like them." She hesitated, like she couldn't decide if this was okay, but then she bent down and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. "I like your hair."

"Yeah?"

"Mhmm." She kissed my temple. "I like your voice."

"It's a pretty nice voice." I didn't even have to make it raspy. I could smell her. It was Monty's flower water. 

She kissed my cheek, my nose, and my other cheek. "I like how decisive you are, even when you're being bullheaded. I can count on you to keep your head in a crisis."

"Are you appreciating me as a person or as a leader?"

"Can't it be both?" She kissed my chin. "You once told me you weren't a fairy tale hero. You're right, you know. You're better. A fairy tale prince sticks around when things are going his way. You stick around no matter what." She pulled back just a bit. "Sure you don't want to change your mind? I'll give you one last chance."

I slid my hands up her thighs and grasped her hips. "Kiss me, Clarke."

"Okay," she whispered just before settling her pretty mouth on mine.

I like it when she agrees with me.

She kissed me like she had a world full of time. Sounds poetic, but it wasn't. It was...consuming. Clarke kissed me as though we weren't sneaking in a little alone time, or sitting in her med bay, or were smack dab in the middle of a freakin' forest. She kissed me like this was our house after a long day at work, right before we ate dinner and talked about our day. Long kisses. Exploring kisses. Kisses that broke just a little before she came back, changing the angle. Eyes closed, enveloping kisses. It was all Clarke. The only thing I had to do was hold on and enjoy.

Well hot damn. I definitely can go for more of this.

Which, of course, was the exactly moment she pulled back.

"Come back here," I said. I pulled her into my lap and wrapped my arms around her, chuckling at her snort. Some of her hair got stuck on my mouth, and I made a face as I tried to get the strands off.

Little fingers plucked the hair away, then lingered, tracing the curve of my bottom lip. She looked happy. Well, not happy happy. But content. Better than before.

How come after all this time watching her, there was still something new about her face? Didn't it ever get old? "So," I said, brushing our mouths together. I loved her smell. "Looks like we're going to be parents, Princess."

She breathed in, then slowly breathed out, nodding. "Looks like." She aimed one of those knowing smiles at me. "If I'm pregnant."

"Uh huh." I wiped off a smudge of blood from under her jaw. Her hair got in the way again. "I can't
take this anymore. Sit on the ground. I'm taming this mane."

"Oh? How?"

"Don't give me attitude, Princess. Just sit and enjoy my braiding skills."

She obeyed. Hell, that was what, twice in one day? I needed to start keeping a journal so I could remember this stuff.

I started picking up bits of hair and getting to work.

"You really don't think Raven should know."

"Nope." There was such a thing as oversharing. "She'd just be hurt and it wouldn't solve anything." That sounded like a girly enough answer.

"I guess."

"She's ours, Clarke. Spacewalker was just there for conception. The rest is all us."

"You're right." She gusted out a sigh. "She's ours."

"Exactly."

"You know, if it weren't for all the problems we're going to come up against, I'd almost say you were excited, Bellamy."

"Excited?" Nah, that wasn't the right word. "I'm...worried. About you. About her. Wondering if I can keep you as safe as you need to be."

"But?"

"Kids are sponges. They soak up information as fast as you can give it to them. Ever seen an idea click in a kid's head, Clarke? It's pretty amazing. And they have personalities when they're real little. You know how they're going to be as adults by the time they're two, essentially. O always wanted to explore the jungle. Learn about the mountains. She got into everything because she was too curious for her own good."

"You must have been good with her."

"I was." I finished the tail, using the little string she had in her hand to tie it off.

"You still are. She's just...a teenager. Same as the rest of us."

"Don't remind me."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You know people only say that when they think I'm not going to like the question."

She sat up, then knelt between my legs. This...was not comfortable. Not comfortable at all.

"Does it bother you that we haven't had sex?"

Well, shit. "This is really not the time to talk about it, Clarke."

"It's the perfect time. Here you are, ready and willing to be someone's father, and we haven't even
done anything except kiss."

I had two options—show her just what was on my mind or pray to a god I didn't believe in for some
divine intervention.

"Hey Bellamy—Whoa!"

*Or, I thought as I turned to glare at Jasper, who stood with his mouth open and his hand over his
eyes, I can kill a skinny kid that looks like a zipper with goggles.*
"Get out," Bellamy growled deep in the back of his throat, the promise of violence thick in the air.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you say," Jasper returned, using his let's just be calm about this voice. He kept his hand firmly clapped over his eyes, slowly backing away.

He could not have picked a worse time to show up. I wanted Bellamy all to myself. I wanted my answer. This man had just stepped up in the most telling way possible. I was still reeling from it. Couldn't we have one more minute together, without being reminded of how many more problems we were going to have to deal with today?

I stifled my uncharacteristic annoyance. This was a stolen moment. As monumental and overwhelming and life changing as the possibility of being pregnant was, I couldn't allow it to take over my head. Being leaders meant dealing with the hundred's problems. Either that or stepping down and letting someone else assume the title.

I eased back on my legs, away from Bellamy and our compromising position. I ignored the dark look he sent me as I addressed Jasper. "Was there something you needed?"

He paused in his retreat for just a second. "Oh, you know, the usual. Miller bumped his head but said he's fine, Octavia's driving Monty crazy and he can't get rid of her, Baxter's on strike, and I'm bored now that the wall's done and there are only so many nuts I can crack before I crack-"

"Five minutes," Bellamy interjected, clearly disgusted. "I was gone five minutes."

More like half an hour, but I could see how that seemed fleeting to him. It wasn't nearly enough for me either. "We'll be out soon, Jasper. Thanks."

"No problem." He turned and scampered, obviously trying to outrun Bellamy's increasingly thunderous expression.

He looked like a god sitting there with his legs parted, his big combat boots pointed out, and his shirt stretching across his chest because he was leaning back on his hands. A displeased god, judging by his clenched jaw.

This was the man who considered it his divine right to be my child's father.

My heart clenched in my chest.

I was becoming a fool. I knew that. I didn't trust him at the start. I didn't even trust him as recently as that night he first told me he had time and facts on his side. Since then he'd been chipping away at my heart piece by piece, putting his name on the bits that he managed to get from me.

The first time he told me to hold his hand.

Pissing me off so badly when he warned Finn away, then protecting me from prying eyes. When we were hiding, I knew I wanted him. I knew I was glad he was there with me. Even though I had to trust him with my life, though, I held back. I latched onto him because it was the last thing I'd do in the world, and I wanted to memorize everything beautiful and ugly about him.

Then he saved me. He let me cry. He didn't let me retreat. He kept tipping me over. He made me not just want him, but want him. For me. He made Clarke Griffin want Bellamy Blake all to herself.
The comb. The needles. The bed. The way he saved Sam and gave Baxter a purpose. Monty's flower water. Wanting kids. The way he told stories about Octavia. The sense of humor that peeked out from time to time. Our evenings.

The list got longer and longer every day. The baby? I was more than willing to be on my own, to take care of my body and accept the consequences of my decisions. He didn't have to be here.

I couldn't even call what he was doing choosing to stay.

He was emphatically rejecting the option of walking away.

I lowered my lashes to hide my thoughts from him. "I'll go see if Miller's really okay," I said, already starting to stand. "Then I'll talk to Baxter. There's got to be a reason for the strike."

"Not so fast, Princess." He didn't move so much as an inch; the power of his personality alone was enough to bring me up short.

He looked up at me like he could see right into my soul. That darkness that always clung to him was back in full force, reminding me of all the times I mentally compared him to animals. Not one speck of playfulness remained. It was like it never existed.

"We were having a conversation," he reminded me lazily.

I sighed. "And you said now wasn't the time to talk about it. It's true; we have to deal with other things."

He still didn't move.

I reached out and brushed a wild black lock from his temple. "Thanks for braiding my hair. You were right; I am impressed."

A big square hand captured mine before I could blink.

Dark, dark lashes framed piercing eyes. "One of these days," he rumbled, "you're gonna learn to get out of your head."

Before I could ask him what that meant, he pushed himself up to tower over me. I stumbled back to accommodate for the suddenness; he followed and followed until I was backed into the sturdy side of the waginogan.

I couldn't read his mood and that set me on edge. "Bellamy, what—"

He backed up just a little. I thought that was the end of it, but then his other hand came up and his fingers took hold of the hem of my new shirt—oh my god, why the hell was he lifting that—

His head bent and his mouth latched onto my chest. Right there, on the swell, where my left breast met new-to-me brastrap. I gasped and arched in utter shock. He snaked an arm around my waist and yanked me up into him, lifting me high from the ground while he sucked as hard as he could on my skin. I through my head back, staring at the ceiling for a wide eyed second, trying to assimilate just what in the name of—and then my brain short circuited and all I could feel was his tongue swirling right before he broke suction.

My entire body was malfunctioning. I had grabbed onto his shoulders instinctively for balance, and I stared at the scar on his forehead from the Grounder attack. "Bellamy!" I couldn't even make my voice go higher than a whisper.
He made a sound like a grunt or a groan and then he dipped his head again, running his tongue in a hot, wet, consuming circle on my tender skin.

Then he latched on again, pulling and making the most amazing noises in the back of his throat, like he was devouring me.

I didn't know what to think. I only knew how to feel.

When he pulled away again with a slight pop, his cheeks were flushed and my body was zinging in so many places I didn't know where to begin. He was panting. I wasn't even breathing, my mouth parted in pure astonishment.

His eyes grew hooded. "That's mine," he rasped. He palmed the breast possessively, running his thumb over my nipple. He tilted us and dragged his tongue along the underside of my jaw.

God.

Then he let me slide along his body to the ground, his semihard arousal out and proud against all the right places. My heart thundered against his chest, my shirt crawling up the further down I went.

His hand slid with me, covering my bare stomach with a hot palm. "So's this," he breathed into my ear.

This stark intimacy had me arrested. All the hair on the back of my neck stood up in response. Every nerve in me was alive.

"It's coming. It's happening. There's no stopping it. And when it does, we're going to use each other up so good." He circled his hips, making sure I felt all of him. "I won't let a goddamn thing get in our way—not Grounders, not the hundred, and no chances of tearing open your wound." He leaned in, his face over mine. For a second I noticed my pale hand next to his darker skin, and then I was caught in his gaze. "Better be prepared for that, Clarke."

He kissed me, short and hard, burning me deep.

When he drew back he looked like he could tear the whole world down. "Now you can go see if Miller's alright," he told me, stepping out of my arms. My fingers dragged against the fabric of his jacket unconsciously.

He pulled my shirt down, smoothing it over my belly. "Remember to put on your coat, Princess. You need to stay warm."

"Uh huh," I replied dumbly.

The corner of his mouth quirked. His eyes smiled at me.

I watched him leave, my brain total mush. All I could do was stand there, finally able to breathe, the spot he'd marked on my chest throbbing pleasantly.

Right over my heart.

My arms lowered, my hands going to my stomach without thought. I laughed a little at how dazed I was, shocked at how quickly Bellamy Blake could make me forget where I was.

So it was official, wasn't it? There wasn't one bit left of my heart that belonged to me anymore. It was all Bellamy's. I thought of Finn, and how I felt with him, and the pang in my chest was more of
a stab of regret. I didn't want Finn to die. I'd always mourn that, but what I felt with him was barely a flicker compared to the way Bellamy filled me up. He made me vulnerable in a way that I couldn't recover from.

*I love him*, I admitted to myself at last. My lips twisted. I was in love with Bellamy Blake, and he was right; the word just didn't cover reality. We had more.

I didn't doubt that Bellamy was right for me. Not anymore.

I just hoped that I was right for *him*.

It had nothing to do with the baby. It had nothing to do with our positions as leaders for what remained of the hundred. Everyone was counting on us to make the right decisions, to help others survive. People here needed me because I was a healer. I was smart. I had certain knowledge. I knew that I could fill the role they required. I tried every day to make sure I didn't let them down.

But Bellamy? I knew he wanted someone to listen to him, to let him unwind in a way he couldn't let himself do in front of Octavia. He said it himself; he wanted me because I could handle his shit, but there was a big difference between want and need.

I wanted to step up. I wanted to be to him what he was to me. The rock. The counterbalance. The voice of reason when things didn't look quiet so clear anymore. I wanted to take care of him the way I felt taken care of.

But how? What could I do that had no ties at all to being his co-leader? That was just for him?

I realized that my fingers had gotten tangled in my shirt, and I smoothed it back down again. Pregnant or not, Bellamy and I were now a family. That was the way it was going to be. And later, when it wasn't time to be leader, when I could sit down and think like a real human being, I was going to figure out how to show him I was all for that plan.

Taking a steadying breath, I cleared my head. I methodically put on my jacket in hand and placed the zipper in its place, then pulled the tab up. By the time it reached my throat I was ready.

Time to go save the world one teenager at a time.

I left the med center with some basic supplies, planning to see a few patients in addition to Miller. He turned out to be fine, but I noticed Monroe standing off to the side, trying to pretend she wasn't watching us. At first I thought it was because Bellamy asked her to watch me. Her gaze, however, didn't dart to me. It kept sneaking to Miller.

Understanding dawned. She made eye contact with me, realizing I'd connected the dots. She looked embarrassed. I gave her a minute shake of my head, then got back to work. Her secret was safe with me.

An imp snuck up on me at the last minute, however. When I pronounced Miller fit to walk around, I added, "But just to be sure, someone should check on you a few times tonight. Anybody we know that could—oh, Monroe, come here."

Frowning, she ambled over.

"Can you make sure to drop by Miller's tent tonight and look him over? Nothing big, just making sure his eyes are fine. That kind of thing."

Miller grunted. "I'm not going to die in my sleep, Doc."
"If there's one thing I take as seriously as a knife in the ribs, Miller, it's head injuries. Monroe is going
to check on you. End of discussion." I quickly walked away, flicking a look at Monroe as I did.

She looked happy, but was doing a good job of squashing it.

I tried to hide my smile, schooling my expression. Next stop, Baxter.

Which meant coming face to face with Raven for the first time in...a while. Since...

I slowed in front of her tent, just out of sight, and stared at it, chewing my lip. I had to get this done. I
knew that. But it would be hard. I didn't know how Raven would react to me. I didn't know what to
say. If she even wanted me to say something.

Well, I wasn't going to get anything done out here. I needed to go in.

"Anybody home?" I called out as I got closer. I bent down and peered in. There was Baxter and
Sam...and Raven.

She was scribbling away at something. She paused at the sound of my voice. When she looked at
me, I stifled a gasp. Her face was hollow and the dark circles under her eyes just made the bloodshot
parts more obvious. We got lost in a moment, just looking at each other, when she broke eye contact
and started writing again.

Baxter was sitting, or rather reclining, in a corner. He looked at me with none of the warmth I'd come
to expect from him. Sam was rigid several feet away, fiddling with what looked like another comb.

"Hi." I came into the tent and sat down. "Something you want to talk about?" I asked without
preamble.

"Why am I making all of these bowls?" he asked.

A frown creased my brow. "Because we need them."

"What do I need?"

"A break, I'm guessing."

His shoulders sagged. "You have no idea. Do you know how many of those stupid things I've
made? Twenty. Do you know how many more I don't want to make? All of them. Because it's all
me. See this?" He held up his hands. Blisters riddled them.

I swore inwardly. I got out my pack and got the necessary things ready. "Why didn't you tell
Bellamy?"

"Have you ever tried to tell that guy anything?"

"Yes," I retorted, "and he listened because it made sense."

He sagged a little under my confidence, then rallied. "So, fine, he'll give us a break. But all these
people are getting bowls. Tell me what we're getting in return?"

"You get the same food as everybody else." I tended his wounds. "Without having to go out and kill
it."

"But I'm also doing highly specialized work that people cannot seem to understand takes time to
complete. Every day somebody comes by and complains. Where are the bowls, where are the
"bowls? And you know what, they also broke three of the ones I'd already finished!" He waved a hand dramatically. "Tell me how that's fair!"

"So what do you want me to do about it?" I asked. "Reasonable requests, Baxter. And I'm not making promises. I just want to know what it is that would make you feel like things are fair."

"More people to help Sam and me."

I disinfected his palms. "I'm listening."

"Something to compensate us for our time."

"We can't institute a monetary system, Baxter. We have barter."

"Exactly, except I'm doing the work and the group is benefitting without exchanging something for it. I could have been on the wall, gotten the same amount of food, and I would have had a lot less to do."

He had a point. He was making an extra, concerted effort, and probably would continue to do so in the future. The fact remained, however, that we couldn't do any sort of credit system. It would introduce imbalance to a society that was barely able to call itself that. We'd just gotten rid of classicism. We didn't need it back again. "If we barter something to you, you'll agree to continue?"

"If there are extra people to help. And it can't be a one time thing. You've got to think about it—bowls are something that usually last for more than one use. Don't get me started on the topic of spoons."

I chuckled. "Okay. We'll see what we can do. For now I want the two of you to take a break. Rest. Eat. Doctor's orders." I looked at Sam. "That means you too."

"I like the work," she told me quietly.

"I like you well rested and able to continue doing what you like," I returned in the same reasonable tone I'd heard my mother use a thousand times. "Or make something for yourself, if you like. It can be pretty cathartic. Just don't go overboard, or I'll come back and give you both hell."

I gathered up my supplies after tying off a couple of light bandages on Baxter's palms. "You can trust Bellamy," I said to them. "He won't bite your head off for no reason."

Raven stopped scribbling. She was just staring at the paper. It looked like a grid. Like the map we wanted to put together that day we took a bath.

I steadied myself. "See you later, Raven."

I took a chance. I knew it was a risk when I did it, but I did it anyway. I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

She didn't respond.

I left the tent and was ready to go about my rounds, when I heard her call out my name. She came out of the tent in a rush, looking kind of wild. She took me by the arm and dragged me behind her, up the hill, past the med center, and behind the drop ship where there was no one around.

She let my arm go and started to pace. I caught a hint of that mint Monty had introduced to us. Her hair looked nice, but the rest of her...She clearly wasn't eating the way she should. She was gaunt,
pale under her natural olive complexion.

She stopped, turning to me. "How are you?"

My brows raised. I wasn't expecting that. "Fine," I replied automatically. It was programmed, something I said without thinking. The standard response that meant nothing.

Her eyes welled. "I'm not. I'm not fine at all, Clarke. I'm really... really not fine." Her shoulders started to shake. "I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't seem to feel anything but this-" She held a fist in front of her chest. "I don't know what to say. What to do. I don't ever remember being without him."

I watched her, stunned by how quickly stoic Raven seemed to be crumbling.


I knew people were watching her. I knew they were making sure she didn't hurt herself. Suddenly I was realizing that no one had ever gotten around to showing Raven that she could go somewhere to grieve.

To keep all of that bottled up inside... I thought of Bellamy, and when I cried. Had anyone given Raven that chance?

Maybe she wouldn't want it from me. Or maybe she did. Why else would we be here?

"You're the only one out of everybody who comes close to understanding," Raven whispered in the end. She wasn't crying. She was breaking.

So I grabbed her to me, not caring if she hugged me back. It was so easy to forget that other people needed Bellamy and I to be more than leaders sometimes.

She stood stiff in my arms for what seemed like eternity. Then her hands grabbed hold of my jacket and she hunched, down, down, until her forehead rested on my shoulder.

And then she cried.
I was worried.

It wasn't a new sensation for me. Earth didn't magically solve my problems. It just gave me a set of new ones. I dealt with fuckery every day here. You couldn't put a hundred teenagers in the middle of nowhere and not expect some.

I eyed O and Monty as they argued over whatever. Jasper stood off to the side, watching the whole thing go down like one of those tennis matches I saw on a vid once. Something to do with the types of flowers in the flower water. "I need the two of you to shut up for a minute," I growled.

Silence. Thank god.

My sister needed a job. Something more than just the odds and ends of coordinating classes and teaching medical techniques.

She was bored. I needed something that would keep her focused.

Lucky for me, I just had a huge, convoluted issue to throw at her. "Clarke's pregnant," I announced to the three of them.

Jasper, Octavia, and Monty froze. Guess the Wonder Twins didn't expect me to just say it like that.

O's eyes went large and round. "Are you shitting me? What they're saying is true?"

I arched a brow. The rumors were making some serious rounds. "Would I joke about something like that?"

"That's—I just—I gotta sit down for a second." She tried to sink into a repurposed chair, but that lasted about two seconds before she jumped up again. "How in the hell?"

"The normal way, O." Totally true. "Her IUD ran out." Also true. "Which means we need to get prepared, fast. Starting with birth control methods. I want texts, plants, viable options, contingencies, back ups of back ups, and I want you," I said pointedly, "to stop messing around until you're protected."

She ignored that. "We just got here, Bellamy. How could she possibly be pregnant that fast?"

Count on my sister to focus on details I'd prefer to smooth over. "We don't know for sure yet. I'm betting on yes."

"Damn," she whistled. "Damn. You're going to be a dad, Bell." She stood straighter. "I'm going to be an aunt!" She slapped her hands on her chest like someone literally belted her with the realization.

My lips twitched. "Yep."

"Holy shit. I'm going to be an aunt." She looked at me, her big eyes starting to sparkle with excitement. You'd think I'd given her five Christmas' worth of presents all at once. "How do you feel? How does Clarke feel? Jesus, is she scared? I'll bet she's-"

"O." I grasped her shoulders. "Calm down. We're both fine. We're...well, it's big, but that's why we're going to tackle this like a team. You, me, Clarke, and these two."
"Yeah, you. This isn't just a baby. It's the biggest challenge that's faced us yet." I dropped my hands to my sides. "Repopulating the earth is part of our job description. If we can't successfully bring kids into the world, then we might as well let the Grounders off us. So far we've been doing a decent job of surviving. Now I want us to focus on thriving."

They glanced at each other, then Jasper squinted at me. "Do you practice these speeches before you give them, or does it just come naturally?"

"Feeling inspired? Good. We need a working list of suggestions. Viable sources of food, a concentrated look at medical needs, and a long term plan that will keep us from turning into another Roanoke."

"Roa-who?" Monty asked.

Octavia gaped. "You've never heard of Roanoke Island?" She shook her head. "What floor did you grow up under?"

I slung my arm around her shoulders. "Easy, O. Not everybody likes the classics." So what if I sounded smug? Here was living proof of my parenting skills. Scared as fuck and nervous I may be, but I'd already done this once. I could do it again. "Roanoke Island was an English colony in old America. The founder left for a few months for supplies. When he sailed back, every single person in his community was missing. No bodies. No explanation."


"A baby council," Monty mused. "Alright. I've got one of those charcoal pieces and paper that Clarke gave me. Hang on."

"Basics and then subcategories," Octavia said. "It'll organize things better."

See? Smart.

"We should bring Miller into this," she went on. "And Clarke."

"Clarke's doing damage control with Baxter and then rounds. We'll include Miller later when we have something to include him in on." We all crowded around the table when Monty came back. I looked at our measly supplies of writing supplies and tried to remember how the Romans used to do it. "Wax."

"What?"

I shook my head. "Never mind." I'd have to tuck that idea back for later. We had other important things to worry about.

Monty wrote: Food. Shelter. Clothes. Then he drew column headings.

"Peter's getting the waginogans together. Everybody should have a place to sleep within the next day or two," I said, slipping my arm from Octavia's shoulders and rubbing my hand over my jaw in thought.

"That leaves us with parachutes and other tent materials work with."

"Shouldn't we cover the waginogans with them?" Jasper wondered. "Seems like it would help fight
against the cold. Not that I know how cold snow gets. Or if we'll have snow."

Monty already had a charcoal mark on his neck. "Not clothes?"

"Shoes," Octavia suddenly said. We all looked at her. "We should cover the waginogans, but we should also hold back a bit. If we sew it just the right way, we can either cover our shoes in the winter to make them waterproof, or as socks or something. Our clothes aren't going to last forever."

On the Ark material was constantly repurposed, passed on, and patched. We had a few engineers that produced new synthetic material, but it was pricey and usually reserved for anything but clothes.

"Look, I'm concerned with the food situation," Monty remarked. "We need to do some serious gathering, and when that's done, we have to find a way to store it so that it lasts through the winter."

"We could try dehydration," Jasper said immediately. "Moisture would reanimate taste. All we'd have to do is boil or steam whatever it was. We've got the jerky thing down. If a couple dozen boars, deer, squirrels, and any other critter decide to run their way through camp, we'll be sitting pretty."

"If we had all those animals, we'd have pelts. If we had pelts, we could make those into clothes. A way to keep warm," Octavia pointed out.

"And food," Monty put in again. "Don't forget that."

"Humans used to use sinew for thread, remember, Bellamy?"

"Where are we going to get the animals?" Jasper wondered. "Where are we going to keep everything?"

"This is where ebooks come in handy. One of us needs to get on the horn with the Ark and try to get patched into their digital library. The more references we have the better," I said, hands on hips.

"Why don't you do it?"

Yeah right. Me talk to the Ark? Never again in my lifetime.

Octavia must have seen the resistance on my face, because her eyes narrowed. "You're the one that spent all that time downloading books on pads. Why should we go looking for someone else to do it when you know the archives like the back of your hand?"

"It's not like we have pads to haul around anymore, O. We rely on that one stationery computer. Whoever would do the research has to sit right there. I've got to be out and about, not in front of a monitor." I shook my head. "It's gotta be someone else."

"Or we could just ask Peter."

All eyes turned to Jasper.

His brows almost disappeared into the goggles on the top of his head. "What? He told us about the waginogans, right? Based on his tribal history? Well, they lived without modern technology too. How did they do it? Waginogans can't be the only thing Peter learned on the Arc."

Respect for the zipper. "That's good thinking, Goggles. Go get him." I turned my head just in time to catch the proud grin Octavia was beaming at him. It shriveled when she realized I was looking.

What the hell was that about?
I shook my head and rubbed my temple. Whatever. I didn't want to know. Not right now.

Jasper scampered out of the drop ship. If he was right and Peter had some idea of what to do, then Peter will have saved our asses twice.

I knew it was a long shot. The chances of a teenager remembering that much about ethnic traditions while trapped on a metal container in space...slim to none.

But he knew about the waginogans. He even practiced. What else did he know?

Well, whatever information he had buried in that head of his, I was going to dig it out. Even the smallest nugget could mean a significant difference in our quality of life.

For us. For the baby.

The baby. Pelts could keep her warm. She'd be born in the late spring or something like that. I didn't remember much from most of my Earth Skills classes, but I did remember my history. Napoleon was defeated by the Russian winter. The Vikings were blocked in by ice. Exposure, dysentery, and inadequate supplies killed more soldiers than swords, knives, or bullets during war. Keeping her warm and keeping her fed would be half the battle.

"Fish."

I jolted from my reverie. "What?"

"Fish," Monty repeated slowly. "They're a source of protein and omega three. We'd get vitamin D too. It doesn't necessarily have to be deer or boar that sustains us. The lucky thing is fishing can be done in winter. We could dry, boil, or bake whatever we wanted."

I had a regular Think Tank on my hands here. "Good. Any idea how to fish?"

He flashed a rueful grin. "No. But if we can figure out how to make a net, we could fake it enough that we won't starve."

"What about that giant thing in the lake?" Octavia cut in, intrigue coloring her voice.

Good point. "We'll stick to the river."

She scowled. "Or we could make some spears and go for it."

"They're a source of protein and omega three. We'd get vitamin D too. It doesn't necessarily have to be deer or boar that sustains us. The lucky thing is fishing can be done in winter. We could dry, boil, or bake whatever we wanted."

I held up a finger. "No.

Jasper yelled up through the hatch. "Back!" The first thing I saw was goggles, then a head of dark hair. He hauled himself out of the way and waited for Peter, who followed close behind. He didn't look nearly as excited as Jasper.

"Peter," I greeted.

He stood up straight, expression guarded. "Bellamy."
"Jasper tell you what we needed?"

He nodded.

I spread my legs. "Can you help us?"

"Animal drive."

I waited a beat. "From now on, Peter, I want you to pretend that I don't know what you mean unless you give me context." It was the waginogan thing all over again.

"Every so often all the hunters of a tribe would organize an event where they were drive a herd of deer or boar into an enclosed area, like a crevice or cave. This meant tribes could gather a greater amount of meat in a shorter period of time, making it possible to survive the winter. They stored the meat underground in storage bunkers designed to keep everything at a regulated temperature."

He kept his hands at his sides like he was being interrogated. Even though his face was impassive, every once in a while his eyes would dart to someone. Kid did the same thing with the other group. Guess he wasn't good with being put on the spot, but to give him credit, he didn't falter once in his explanation.

When he was finished, there was silence. He had that effect on people.

I angled my head at Monty, who was staring at Peter with his mouth slightly open. Didn't blame him. That matter-of-fact tone took some getting used to. "Did you get all that?"


"Feeling better about the food situation?"

"Better's relative around here," he said, "but it's a start. Better yet, it's doable." He turned back to Peter. "Any chance you know how to fish?"

Peter frowned. "Don't you?"

I pulled on my earlobe. "Listen," I said as I came closer, "maybe it's not been made clear to you, but we're in a hell of a situation here. That head, I pointed, "has got ideas that we need. Anything—and I mean anything—can mean the difference between life and death to someone."

Genuine confusion marred his brow. "You seriously don't know?"

Well, I guess I knew what 'flabbergasted' looked like now. "Nope. It's up to you to teach us. No hanging back. No assuming. If you know something, you say it. I don't want to have to keep guessing with you." I looked him in the eye, man to man. "Alright?"

He thought it over, his hands flexing a little. Then he nodded. "Alright."

"I want you to keep talking. Monty's going to write down what you have to say. Bounce ideas off of these three. I'm going to go check on some things. When I come back, we'll talk about it more."

It was a start. A very, very good start, and when I stepped back and nodded goodbye to Octavia, I felt hopeful for the first time in a while.

I climbed down the ladder and went in search of Clarke. I wanted to see how things went with Baxter and Miller. More than that, she needed to be there when the Think Tank presented its ideas.
Even more than that, I just wanted to see her.

It didn't bother me that we now had a version of the Arc's council. I wasn't Jaha, and nobody was more privileged. They didn't make the decisions. In the end all they were doing was dreaming up ways we could make it through the winter. It was life and death, but not the way the council I'd known and resented all my life had operated. Like Clarke said, every life down here mattered. I was going to do my damnedest to make sure as many of us got through this as possible.

No culling. No illegal second children. No living in a small box and dreaming of a big life. Here we had a future. It was uncertain, but it was real. We just had to figure out how to grab hold of it.

I only made it a few feet out of the drop ship when I heard Clarke's voice. It was low and urgent, and it sounded like—fuck, was she crying?

I spun on my heel, ready to make some dirtbag pay as I stomped around the perimeter of the drop ship, but what I saw was not what I was expecting.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Shit. Raven was the one crying. Clarke's eyes met mine over her shoulder. "We're going to do this," she was saying. "You're not alone."

Double shit.

What was I supposed to do? It was like walking in on somebody else having sex. Hell, I'd probably handle that better. I thought about turning and running off. How to do it without making any more noise?

Clarke's pale hand rubbed up and down Raven's back. Something about the gesture stayed me when I would have turned. I watched it drift up and down the material. It was such a motherly thing. I used to do that with Octavia when she had a bad dream.

I met Clarke's eyes again.

"You can always come to me," she told Raven, her voice dark and fierce. "It's sad, and it hurts, and he was too young. You don't have to know what to say or what to do. There's no right way to handle this. But I'm here." She squeezed her arms tight, like she was trying to piece Raven back together or something. "Okay? I'm here."

I'm here.

It was meant for Raven, but that was meant for me too. I could see it in her face, in the way she refused to break eye contact even when I should have been making tracks. She held Raven so tight I was surprised she could still breathe, but Reyes was so busy crying she didn't seem to notice. I zeroed in on the sound despite myself.

I knew that grief. I felt it the day O was taken and Mom was floated. Suddenly I was back in that tiny hole of a bunker I'd been demoted to. I couldn't even fit my legs in there. It was so small my feet hung off the end. I stared up at the ceiling, too numb to feel at first.

Then I heard the silence. I spent fifteen years cooped up in a cabin never meant to hold three people, with a couple of women that made more noise than I'd realized. Fifteen years of listening to two other people breathe, or turning over, or sighing, or shifting in their sleep.

Suddenly all I could hear was the hum of machinery, something I hadn't noticed in so long it scared
I didn't have many friends because I had Octavia and Mom, but it was okay. I did have them. I could rely on them. They could rely on me. We were like anchors.

Not anymore.

That's when I felt it—being alone. Totally, utterly alone, and not knowing how to live like that.

_I'm here._

She would be, I realized. I'd known it somewhere deep down in me, away from real conscious thought, but suddenly it was right in front of me. Clarke was the kind of girl that wouldn't let anyone be alone when it mattered. But me, personally? She'd march into hell and drag me out by the hair if she had to. She already had, in a way, smuggling me into a tiny hole in the ground when I was unconscious.

Her lips pursed, just the smallest bit.

I felt that familiar warmth spread through my guts, filling me with a kind of peace and promise I hadn't realized I was missing. It happened whenever I went near her.

Yeah, Clarke Griffin loved me. She loved me the way I loved her, like two animals that could be good alone but unstoppable together. I had no idea how much of that she realized, but it was there, right in her eyes.

I took a step back, treading carefully. I didn't want to intrude, but I didn't want to walk away from Clarke just yet either. I lingered on her face, the only one that made me happy just by looking at it.

Raven was in the middle of a raw, open moment that I needed to respect, so I silently nodded at Clarke.

My girl. My future, if I thought about it.

She didn't nod or smile back.

She didn't have to.

I turned on my heel and left quietly.
I'd never thought of myself as someone that could comfort people...or at least be the one people turned to for comfort. Doctors who couldn't take themselves out of the emotional side of a situation lost their focus. They couldn't do their job, and they couldn't help the people that trusted them with their lives.

When people got used to seeing you shut your emotions down, they started assuming you didn't have any at all.

I watched Bellamy turn around and walk away, a weird kind of fear squeezing my heart. I'd started leaning on him more and more to see the real me. If something happened to him, I'd be lost. Functional but without an anchor.

Realizing that made my heart break just a little bit more for Raven.

I waited until her sobs died down to labored breathing, patting her back with one hand and keeping her close with the other. "We're going to make it," I told her. "I don't know how, but we're going to. We're in it together, okay?"

She sniffled, her hands holding onto my jacket like it was the only thing keeping her standing. I'd always thought Raven was the strongest of us all. I still thought that. But she'd had the floor cut out from under her. She needed time.

I wished I could give it to her. The problem was we just didn't have it. There was so much at stake here. We had to keep pushing forward no matter what.

I smoothed her hair back, blinking back the wetness in my own eyes. She had it up in her normal ponytail, but it was haphazard and I didn't think she'd washed it in awhile. Everything about her radiated neglect—both from herself and from others.

I was just as guilty as anybody else in that regard. I just wasn't thinking about much beyond myself. It was time to start doing something about that.

I drew back and looked her in the eye. "We need to get you hydrated. While we're at it, we're going to get washed and get some food in you."

She sniffled, staring back wordlessly.

I squeezed her shoulder.

She blinked rapidly, then nodded, swallowing and gathering her composure. "Okay."

I smiled a little. "Okay."

We turned and started to walk back to the heart of camp, Raven rubbing at her cheeks to get rid of the tear stains. She lifted her head, and it was almost looking at the old Raven again.

I knew it was probably desperation that sent Raven to me. She was right; I was the only one that could come close to understanding how she felt without Finn. The thing was...she'd held her hand out to me more than once when she didn't have to. She could have tried to tear my hair out when she found out about me and Finn. She could have been a justified bitch when we were at the river. She wasn't. I didn't know how much that meant to me before.
I couldn't give her time, but I could give her friendship. Maybe that wasn't much. I had to at least try.

We sat down with the others and Raven finally ate something with substance out of one of the bowls Baxter made. I listened around, looking for potential helpers. I got a rudimentary mental list together of about four people, but I knew next to nothing about carving, so the final decision would be up to Baxter.

Our next stop was to Monty's. He wasn't in, but his supplies were. The both of us made use of that flower water I'd heard so much about. I even finally got to experience what mint smelled like. Clean and...fresh. Kind of like a cold morning.

We stripped down to our underwear to keep our shirts clean and took turns scrubbing each other's heads over the bowls. When it was my turn, I found myself with my head bent, staring at my belly.

It looked the same. No discernible changes. No way to tell yet if anything was different with me. Standing there, gripping the edges of the crude table, all I had was time to think.

Bellamy was right—I had to stop pretending that things would magically fix themselves with this pregnancy thing. I had to face it.

I was probably pregnant by a dead one night stand who cheated on his girlfriend.

It was a less than ideal situation. It sounded awful in my head. Definitely not fairy tale material. If this was one of those soap opera recordings I secretly watched on the Ark, I'd wince at the hackneyed plot twist. But...life wasn't pretty. It wasn't convenient. I had baggage. Bellamy was willing to help me carry it, but I needed to do most of the heavy lifting. For me. For my baby. Even if I wasn't pregnant now, I might be some day in the future. Then or now, things would not be easy.

Thanks to my talk with Bellamy today, I felt more optimistic about it, but Raven was the one that really hammered a point home. We were all down here. Some of us were good people, some of us were bad people, and some of us were somewhere in between. In the end, though, we had to do the best we could because there was no returning to space.

This was home now. I had to make to make it the best place I could for my baby.

My baby. She'd never know what it was like to be anywhere else but on Earth.

By coming to me Raven reaffirmed my conviction to do better. It was easy to get tired down here. It was easy to forget that other people had problems and were suffering too. I could lean on Bellamy and take comfort in him, but I also had to be the person other people could look to and take comfort in too. It was more than just being a stand-in doctor or a leader. It was about being a part of a group that needed to get through this. Otherwise what was the point?

I needed a community for my child.

So how was I going to start?

We were standing around, rubbing some rough fabric over our hair, when Raven finally said something, "You ever wonder what's out there?"

I glanced at her.

"Besides the Grounders and Mt. Weather, I mean."

"Like buildings and towns? Sometimes. Why?"
"I just wonder what we're missing by staying in here."

"Raven...I know you feel trapped."

"It's not just that. We know better than anybody how big Earth is. We spent our whole lives staring at it." She squeezed her hair a little harder. "When we were kids Finn and I would sometimes sit at one of the viewports and talk about what was down here. He was really good at telling stories. He had this book from his granddad called *Western Civilization: Volume One*. A textbook or something, with real pages. I'm not much for reading, but we must have gone through that thing four times front to back."

I stayed quiet. This was Raven's way of dealing with loss. I knew that, but it was strange to hear something so personal about Finn. Maybe it was my talk with Bellamy this morning. I was coming to terms with the idea that I was going to have a baby. Part of me wanted to know more about the person who fathered her, even if I kept that information to myself for the rest of my life.

If Raven thought it was weird she was telling this to her boyfriend's one night stand, she didn't let on.

"He wanted to see a lot of things. The pyramids. Statues. Cities. He always wanted to be a cowboy. I told him there was probably nothing left down here but he wouldn't listen. Said something must have survived." She looked at me. "What if he was right? The Grounders made it. Maybe a building or something is still standing. Stuff we could use."

"We might have to go through a lot of territory to get to it," I said carefully. I didn't know where she was exactly she was going with this, but I had an idea.

And I wasn't sure if I could encourage it just yet.

"Or it might be over the next ridge," she countered. "We don't know because we haven't tried. What if there's a huge supply depot somewhere? With...I don't know...flashlights, medical supplies. Clothes for winter."

I heard what she was saying, but how much of it was her talking and how much of it was her grief? "I can't argue that whatever we would find would be helpful. We need anything we can get. But is it worth sending some of the few people we have left on a hunch?"

For a second Raven didn't reply. Then suddenly she smiled like she was laughing at something on the inside, even while her eyes got wet. "*When something seems difficult, dare to do it anyway,*" she said. "Finn's favorite quote."

It sounded like Finn.

It resonated with me—the hundred were defying expectations every single day, and Raven wasn't wrong. "It's something that's worth thinking about."

"Come on, Clarke. You and I both know if people want to leave the camp, you can't stop them."

"No," I allowed, "but I do know that the smaller the group, the easier it would be for the Grounders to pick us off. Strength comes from numbers. We don't know what the Grounders want or how to talk to them. That's not even counting radiation fog or all the wild animals you could come across. I'm not saying that we shouldn't," I added when she would have spoken. "I'm just saying we have to be careful. If nothing else, I've learned that down here."

"Personally, I don't think being careful has gotten anybody anywhere down here."
Said the girl who put herself in a junk ship to get to Earth. "Just promise me you won't go off on your own?"

"Why? There's nobody to care anymore."

I stopped what I was doing. "I care."

She wouldn't look at me. "Why?"

"Does there have to be a why? I care. If you disappear, I'll worry. It's just that simple." I put the towel up to dry and put my shirt back on. "Want to come with me on my rounds today?"

She hesitated. All of a sudden it was starting to get awkward between us. Why? Was she embarrassed? I waited, not wanting to push her.

Then she shrugged. "Alright."

Why did I feel guilty all of a sudden? "Let's see what the hundred's gotten itself into today."

"A group of self-policing teenaged delinquents? What could have gone wrong?" was her wry reply.

The answer to that: a broken finger, a smashed foot, a bump on the head, two idiots who decided fighting over the same girl was a great idea, and a twisted wrist. Having Raven along turned out to be a big help; she helped set the finger and clean the cuts and wounds that we came across. I got through my rounds in half the time.

We didn't talk much. It was easier to get lost in the barely controlled chaos. I caught sight of Munroe at one point. She was following Miller around close, sneaking looks at him when he had his back turned.

"Hmm," Raven said suddenly. "I didn't see that coming."

I looked from them to her, wondering what she was thinking. "You hang out with her a lot?"

"Some. Munroe's okay. A little dry, but you can count on her for a dirty joke every once in a while."

I tried to picture that and failed miserably. "What kind of dirty joke?"

She just raised her eyebrows.

"I've had fun before," I insisted.

Her look didn't change.

"I am very fun."

She held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay. Whatever you say."

This was peer pressure, pure and simple. "Is that how it is?"

"That's how it is."

"Alright, I'll prove it—" Something caught my attention.

"I'm waiting," she prompted.

But I was busy looking at the kid that just walked by. A kid I'd treated a week ago for a cut on his
hand, who was now keeping it wrapped up in a filthy rag, tinges of green peeping out from under the bandage.

I didn't bother to explain; I just left Raven right where she stood and marched over to grab him by the shoulder. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded, grabbing his wrist.

He ripped it out of my hand. "Jeez, ease up Clarke."

"I told you to keep this clean! That means washing your bandage and putting some of those plants I gave you on it. Did you do any of that?"

"It's just a little cut," he said.

"A little cut that is now infected." I pointed at his hand, ignoring the people who were staring at us. They needed to hear what I had to say. "Do you see those green and blue lines? That's your body trying and failing to fight foreign bodies in your bloodstream. If you don't help it along, it loses the fight and your blood essentially becomes poisoned, because we never developed the natural barriers needed to survive down here. What started out as a little cut will kill you."

The more I talked, the more furious I became. How could someone be so stupid? I was very clear from the beginning that he had to take care of the wound. I had no idea I'd have to hammer the idea that we were in a life-threatening situation home. Call it youthful neglect or just plain stupidity, but he was fundamentally signing his own death warrant by just leaving things to chance.

He was getting it now, though, if his expression was anything to go by. He tried to hide his worry behind a lazy shrug. "You'll fix it."

If anything, that made me madder. "Do you know how I'll fix it? By cutting off your hand. If you don't come with me, right now, and let me do what I can to undo the damage you've done, then amputation is the only chance I have of saving your life." I glared. "Let's go."

He hesitated, pale, looking at his friend like he would be able to help. His friend stared back, wordless, his lips almost white.

I felt Raven step closer to my back. I hoped to God she wouldn't say anything. I was furious, but I was also hyper aware of the onlookers. I didn't start the confrontation for the alpha points. That didn't mean I didn't know what would happen if he shrugged me off again. I still had a long way to go in proving to them that I was an essential part of the camp, not someone that could be taken for granted or stepped on. If she tried to help me, they might take that as me needing someone rather than being able to handle things on my own.

The tense moment stretched out.

If he didn't take me seriously, he would die. They'd know I was right, but sacrificing a life just for people to get that wasn't worth it.

He swallowed. "Okay."

He turned and started marching.

I didn't know how tight I'd been holding myself until just then. I couldn't relax—there was too much to do, and it was not going to be pretty—but I was glad at least to have the chance to save him. I was going to fight this out to the bitter end.

I steadied myself internally and followed. Raven caught up to me, sliding a look my way. I met and
held it. "This might get messy," I told her solemnly.

"Is that something you can do?" she asked me in a very low, earnest voice, making a slight motion over her wrist. Her skin was a little pale.

I nodded, trying to keep the conversation to a minimum and one eye on my patient's back. "May not have a choice. I'll need help." I hated to ask. She'd been there during Finn's surgery, but this was different. This was cutting off a human body part—probably the most gruesome thing imaginable right now.

"You really know how to throw a party, Clarke."

The weak joke made me smile. "I'm a barrel of laughs."

"I'll giggle after," she said. I could see how much the decision cost her, but she didn't flinch under my scrutiny or back down.

I was more grateful than she could imagine.

xxxxx

I read through the list slow and steady. Didn't want to miss a detail. When I got to the end, I lowered it and looked at the ragtag group I'd assembled. "This is good. Real good." So good I almost felt confident.

"I thought you were bringing back Clarke?" Octavia said from where she sat across the room. She had that smug look on her face. She knew they'd come up with something workable.

"Busy." Better to leave it at that. I didn't know what Reyes' deal was, but it didn't take a genius to figure out it had something to do with Finn. Jasper and a few others had been good about watching her, but hell, some things a person had to get off his or her chest.

"This guy's a walking book." She nudged Peter in the thigh with her boot.

Jasper clocked the movement, frowning when she beamed a smile up at the silent member of that triangle.

It took everything I had in me not to roll my eyes. Great.

The sigh Agro-Wonder smothered beside me echoed the sentiment.

Peter just looked extremely uncomfortable with all the attention, looking up at the wall next to him like it had the ability to save him. Poor guy. I'd try to help, but Goggles needed to get his own hands dirty for once.

Not that I was crazy about the idea of him and Octavia. Or anybody and Octavia. Truth was, though, Jasper had nobody to blame but himself for his own misery. Step up or step aside. "Alright. Teams. Any suggestions?"

We bounced names around, but it wasn't as long a list as I would have liked. The problem was that we had a hell of a lot of people we didn't know much about. That had to change. "First thing we're going to do is figure out who is in this camp and what they can do. O?"

"You got it, big bro. Want to come with me?" she asked Peter.

You know, if she hadn't spent her entire life locked up in one room or another, I probably would
have killed someone on the Ark a long time ago. Or maybe she would have gotten all of this out of her system sooner? I crossed my arms and just waited for Peter to collapse under pressure.

He looked at O like she'd asked him to eat one of those bugs that flew into your face at night. I had a feeling he would have legitimately run the other way if someone hadn't been blocking the path to the hatch.

"I'm going with you," Monty suddenly announced.

I raised my brow.

"I'm sick of being the guy stuck inside. I want to have a chance to meet people when they aren't drunk on my moonshine or throwing up. Maybe I'll do better with them when they're sober."

Goggles looked like he had his doubts, but respect for not saying whatever he was thinking out loud. Monty didn't strike me as much of a mover or a shaker either. He was just one of those people you had to go to, not the other way around.

He was already gathering up his writing supplies—exactly where did he get those, again?-and acting like it was a done deal, so I shrugged and nodded at Octavia. She took the hint and got up without another word.

For once.

Peter waited until they left, very interested in that wall again, before he looked me in the eye for the first time. "Wouldn't it be easier to ask the Ark for a comprehensive list of data? You'd have number, age, and career path."

"Yep. But I have a feeling people here have skills the Ark doesn't know anything about." I inclined my head toward the table. "Mind if I ask why you know all this? Not much of it was found in Earth Sciences."

A shadow crossed his face. "Some cultures were already on the verge of dying out when everything happened. Whoever's left has to carry the stories inside."

I stared at him. "You're the last?"

He nodded. "After me, there's nothing left."

Jesus. Just...Jesus.

"Maybe not," Jasper said from behind. "The Grounders survived. Nobody thought that was possible."

Peter looked at him, and Jasper bit his lip. "I mean...you know..." He kind of flailed at that point.

"Maybe not," Peter repeated solemnly. Then he cracked the first smile I'd ever seen from him. If you could call it that. I don't think his lips actually moved much.

Jasper, on the other hand, grinned. Probably relieved he didn't put his foot in his mouth again. "So, what stories are we talking about here?"

"Not now, Goggles," I interrupted. "Save it for the fire. I want the two of you to check on the waginogans. Once those are done, we're getting work on nets and spears. Confer with Octavia and Monty to see who might help you with that."
"Oh. Okay. Come on, Peter."

They went to the hatch and climbed down. I guess Jasper thought they were out of earshot, because I heard him say to Peter, "But seriously though: what stories?"

I sighed and sank my head into my hand, but couldn't help laughing a little.

It was never really quiet in camp. The din just deadened a bit at night before the forest took over. Different kind of sound from the mechanical white noise I'd grown up in.

With everybody gone, the sound from outside was blocked out enough that I actually felt alone for once. The good kind of alone. I enjoyed it for all of two seconds, looking at the table and remembering everything the Think Tank had gotten accomplished. It was all theory at this point, but we had nothing but opportunity down on the big old world for practical application.

I thought about Clarke. Was Raven done crying yet? Everybody dealt with grief a little differently. Hard to say what a person would do while they were mourning somebody. Should I go check?

Eh. Better to let Clarke handle it. Health was her domain. Guess that could extend to emotion as well as the body. I just had to make sure nobody got themselves killed, everybody stayed safe, and stupidity didn't run rampant.

Had to wonder which of us had the harder job.

Suddenly the faint echo of a scream ripped through the quiet.

Shit.

I rushed for the hatch.

All I had to do was follow people's line of sight and I ended up at Clarke's med center. "What happened?" I demanded.

Another scream.

I pushed my way in, practically shoving people out of the way.

"Would you shut up?" Raven was yelling into some guy's ear. She had him in a headlock and was holding his arm on the table by the wrist. Clarke was helping, keeping pressure with one hand while she held a smoking knife in the other.

The smell of burning flesh was sickening.

Suddenly the guy slumped forward, out cold.

"Finally," Reyes grunted as she untangled herself. "He should have known better."

Clarke noticed me then. "Hold his arm down, please. He's not going to be out for long. I have finish closing the wound."

I saw the cut. "What the hell?"

"We've cleaned out the cut and drained it. Now we have to seal it. If it stays exposed to air, he might lose the hand." She was all business, but I saw the glisten of sweat on her temple. This was not easy for her.
So I just nodded and took up Raven's position, locking my arms around the guy's body and holding him steady while she put all her weight on his arm.

"Ready?"

We both nodded.

She went to work.

I was probably going to puke later, but in that second I had a wriggling, panicked idiot to handle.

Clarke was finished almost before he got the scream out, dousing the knife in a bowl of water. She examined her work and nodded. "That's all we can do for now."

"You bitch!" he shouted furiously.

I almost clocked him, but Clarke just met his gaze calmly. "Imagine how much it will hurt if you don't do what I say next time. Cutting off your hand without anesthetic. Picture it for a second."

I thought he would pass out again, so I flicked him in the cheek. "Hey. Pay attention."

"If amputation means saving your life, I will do it," she said. "So do yourself a favor. Listen to me."

I slowly let the guy go. If he tried anything, he was going down. But he didn't. He listened to Clarke with a white face, and when she was done, he limped out of the med center into the crowd that had gathered around.

I watched him go with a tic in my cheek, then turned to the girls. "Everything alright here?"

They glanced at each other. "Bellamy, I was the one with the red-hot knife," Clarke pointed out.

"That didn't answer my question."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but then a little smile appeared at the corner of her pretty mouth. "We're fine."

I had a feeling she was talking about more than her and Raven. I nodded. "Good." I stayed for a second longer—I didn't want to keep walking away from this girl—but there was a camp to run and a lot of people to see to. "See you later?"

She nodded.

Yeah. We'd see each other later.

I left.

Hours—and I do mean hours—later I found her in the tent we'd set the computer up in. Raven was nowhere to be found and Clarke didn't seem to be communicating with anyone in particular, so I let myself in. She had the one chair/stool thing, so I settled for collapsing on the ground at her feet. Or her side, whatever you wanted to call it.

I leaned my head on the makeshift desk. "Damn."

"That bad?" One of her hands drifted down. Fingers threaded through my hair.

She was petting me like a...I don't know, dog or something. The worst part was that I didn't mind.
"Yeah. How about you?"

"Well, nobody's dead and there aren't any extra parts lying around camp. I'd call that a success."

"What did Baxter want?"

She gave my hair a final tug and went back to typing. "Extra help. He had a good point; he and Sam are working really hard. They can't keep up the same pace. He also made a case for extra compensation."

"What?"

"Well, they're providing a specialized service to the camp but for exactly the same amount of food as someone who spends their night guarding the wall."

"We can't do money."


"So what are we thinking?"

"I don't know. I've been trying to look up bartering systems, but I'm not having much luck. We have group share. We have a rationing system. Giving more food or something special seems like it would set us up for a problem."

"Everybody needs to contribute," I thought out loud.

"We can't let Baxter and Sam be taken for granted."

"We need those bowls."

She stopped typing. "What about buy one, get one free?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Whenever I would see an Old America show, they had something called advertising. Basically if a person bought something, they'd get another thing of equal or lesser value for free."

"No money, Clarke."

"I'm not talking about money." She looked at me from the desk. "I mean giving Baxter and Sam help and something special they want. They give everyone exactly one bowl for free. After that, if someone wants another or breaks theirs, they have to trade with him for it. It'll be up to the individual."

I didn't see how that fit in with what she'd originally said, but... "That's not a bad idea. It's still barter, and people still get something they need."

"Or Baxter and Sam can teach other people how to make what they need."

"Also a good idea. Could do both." My brain was too tired to make a decision about it now, so I just sat there and listened to her type for a while. "Still researching?"

"Sort of. I'm looking something up Raven said today."
I lifted my head. "Things good with her?"

"Good enough," was her vague answer. "As good as we can expect. She mentioned sending out parties to see what's out there."

Dammit. "I was afraid of that."

"I asked her to wait."

I had a feeling that would only work for so long.

"Found it," she said suddenly. "*When something seems difficult, dare to do it anyway.*"

I perked up to listen.

"*When life seems to beat you down, dare to fight back. When there seems to be no hope, dare to find some,*" I finished.

"Dare to fight back," Bellamy repeated slowly. "I like that. Who said it?"

I looked at the credit line. "Steve Maraboli."

"I'm gonna use it."

I smiled at the keyboard as I typed. "So Jasper's right? You do preplan your speeches?"

"Ha ha, Princess. I just like quotes."

"History, quotes, Romans, Vikings, and the jungle. You are a surprisingly learned man, Mr. Blake."

"I'm a regular wealth of knowledge." He sighed. "Just hope some of that's useful down here."

I paused in the middle of a sentence, turning to look at him. "It is, Bellamy. What you don't know, we'll find out. Isn't that the point of your Think Tank? Put our heads together?" I'd heard a little about it, but didn't know many of the details.

"I'd feel better about it if we were talking to experts."

Where was this sudden bout of uncertainty coming from? *Or,* I wondered as I considered him, *has it always been there?* "Hey." I turned on the stool and put my hand on his cheek. "If weren't for Peter, we wouldn't know about waginogans or animal drives. Experts are those people on the Ark who have never stepped foot on Earth. Most of it's just book knowledge. You've got people with practical experience now." I grasped his chin and gently shook his head. "You know that, or you wouldn't have gotten them together."

His skin looked sallow thanks to the shine of the computer. How had he looked on the Ark? All that beautiful tone must have been washed out. *What a waste.* Bellamy needed to be under the umbrella of natural sunlight. He belonged under it.

His big fingers came up and curled over mine. "It's easy when it's just about the hundred," he confessed softly, "but now we have someone relying on us that's totally helpless. When Octavia was born, we had a place to keep her in and food to feed her with. Not much, but it was there. When I think about how much work we still have to do, and the fact that it's a bunch of teenagers that has to make it happen..."
He looked at my palm, then kissed it.

"If we want a society, we have to start acting like it. We may be teenagers, Bellamy, but we're not kids anymore. It'll be okay."

He blew out a deep sigh.

"You're just worried." I leaned in to brush a thumb over the shadows under his eye. "And tired. Come on; let's go home. We need to relax."

His eyebrows climbed to his hairline. "You're telling me to relax, Princess? I think you've got our roles reversed."

"I've been hanging out with this really bad influence lately." I took a firmer hold of his hand and helped get him to his feet.

He loomed over me like a big, comforting shadow. "How bad?"


"Horrendous?"

"Abominable."

"Gotta meet this guy," he said, wrapping his arms loosely around my waist.

"I'd think you'd like him."

"Okay," Octavia's voice interrupted from outside the tent flap. "I can't take it anymore. Get a tent, you two. I'm getting the heebie jeebies."

Bellamy turned to say something, but I stopped him with a hand on his chest. "We are in a tent," I called back.

"Jesus," she muttered under her breath. "Look, I'm just here to tell you that we've got fifty names and everything else under the sun on the list. Peter's at the fire and he's telling some kind of story. Jasper says it's awesome. Come if you want."

xxxx

We heard her leave.

Clarke frowned up at me. "List?"

I sighed. Another moment gone. "I'll tell you on the way to the tent. We're getting a waginogan tomorrow, by the way."

She started to shut down the computer. "Are we?"

I heard her emphasis on the word we. "Yep. No getting out of this now, Princess. We'll be together in the eyes of the law and man."

"Man referring to the hundred, and law referring to the fact that we have none?"

"Gotta make an honest woman out of you."
"What if I like being infamous?" Her voice grew husky. She straightened, and gave me this look. "I think we left off somewhere today," she said, biting her lower lip.

Holy shit. "Clarke..."

What the fuck was I going to say? I have no idea. Between me opening my mouth and the first syllable climbing out of my throat, Clarke had stepped into my space and wrapped her hands in my shirt. She lifted herself up on her tip toes and pressed her lips to my throat.

Lightning struck my brain and it went dead. It was all sensation at that point. My arms came around her out of their own instinct, clutching her to me. Her breath warmed up my skin as she mouthed the column of my neck, sucking and licking a spot just to the right.

I bent my head, breathing in her scent. Couldn't find enough air to groan.

She scraped her teeth over my flesh.

"Clarke," I gasped, eyes closed, turned on in zero-point-three seconds.

Suddenly she drew back. Cold rushed over the wet spot her mouth had left behind. "Now you're marked too,"she said.

I blinked, trying to figure out what just happened.

She kissed me. Just cupped her hand around the back of my head and kissed me.

I kissed her like my life depended on it. That was the dumbest turn of phrase I'd ever heard, but in that moment totally true. My world contracted to this girl and us and how we felt together. All our differences and our sameness. When I came up for air I kept our foreheads pressed. Didn't want to give up the contact. "Is this going where I think it is?"

"I want it to," she confessed.

Thank fuck. I put my hand on her back to pull her into me—and she winced.

Shit. Her stitches were out, but the wound was still there. "Or maybe not," I said.

Disappointment rushed through me.

"We can," she insisted, curling her hands tighter.

I had to laugh. "No, we can't, Clarke. What I've got in mind does not leave room for careful handling."

She was not happy with that conclusion. "I'm the doctor."

"Don't care, Princess."

"You're being stubborn."

"I'll make the wait worth your while," I promised, letting her see all my dirty thoughts. And there were many.

She narrowed her eyes, clearly interested despite herself. "Alright," she said after a minute, "but I will be expecting great things, Mr. Blake."
I grinned. "I will deliver, Ms. Griffin." I kissed her again, long and deep, then drew back and started walking with my arm around her waist. "So this list..."

To be continued.
Chapter 18

Bellamy always came to bed exhausted, but in his sleep he was too restless to stay in one place. I had also learned he put out an insane amount of body heat. It was like sleeping next to a furnace and it hadn't gotten cold enough for me to tolerate that yet. He didn't want to give up contact altogether, so he compromised by keeping at least part of us together. Some mornings I woke up with his butt to me, his leg between mine. Sometimes it was us holding hands and facing each other. One day I woke up with him flat on his stomach and me draped across his back.

I smothered a smile. That one was definitely my fault.

Between bad morning breath and getting washed up, we managed to develop a nice, homey routine. It felt almost normal. Our nights stayed pretty much the same as before.

I was going to have to do something about that soon.

Today it was his leg thrown over me. I turned over to face him, admiring the line of his profile. I used to think he was good looking, but me not liking him clouded my perception. Now...I couldn't help but be fascinated by the individual parts that composed Bellamy Blake. The freckles. His nose. His hair. The slope of his eyebrows. The crease on his cheek when he smiled.

The camp hadn't stirred awake just yet. It might as well have just been him and me in the world.

I nibbled my lip, staring at the bare angle of his bicep. Nothing was stopping me but me.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his skin. Warm.

He sighed.

So far so good. I moved a little to the left, kissed that space there, then to the right, kissing the space there too.

His head rolled toward me. "Hey," he said sleepily, eyes not quite open.

"Morning," I whispered, careful not to breathe on him.

His lashes lifted. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you wake up." I started to follow the line of his collarbone.

"Keep that up and I'll be more awake than you can handle." His hand curled up and tangled in my hair, playing with the strands. He was more asleep than anything, and I thought that peaceful, foggy look was unbelievably cute.

I leaned over him, spreading kisses over his chest. "I don't know about that."

"We've got to be careful, Princess."

I slid my bare knee up over his pants. He was already interested. "My back's fine, Bellamy."

He caught my knee but didn't move it. "Yeah, but that's not the only thing we have to consider."

I paused, confused. "What else could there possibly be?"
He didn't answer at first, just brushed my hair out of my face and cupped my head. "We don't know if you're pregnant yet."

I frowned. "I don't get it." I drew back a little. "You said-

"And that still stands," he interjected quickly. "If you are, you are. But if you aren't? I don't want to put you at risk. We have to get you protected."

I absorbed that. "Why does it feel like you're trying to find excuses?"

He closed his eyes. "Don't be like that, Clarke. It's obvious that's not the case." He pressed my thigh against his hard-on for emphasis. "But I'm not putting you in danger just so we can relieve some of the sexual tension."

I tried to be reasonable and see the logic in what he was saying, but mostly I felt rejected. It was silly and it wasn't something I was proud of, but I couldn't help the nugget of hurt that was starting to blossom in my chest. "There are ways," I offered half-heartedly. "We don't have to do everything."

His brows climbed to his hairline. "Do you seriously think we're going to be able to start something and then stop it?"

I sat up all the way. "We could if we wanted."

He sat up too, now looking tired in a different way. I shouldn't have started this argument, but dammit, I just...well, I didn't know how to put it into words. We were together but not together. Sex didn't make a relationship work. We'd proven that. Logically it didn't mean much of anything in the grand scheme of things.

But...I loved him. It took me a while to realize that's how I felt, and now I wanted to do more than just say it. I wanted to show him. Not just comb his hair and make him feel better when he had a bad day. I wanted to express it in a way that had been around since humanity started.

He wasn't letting me.

"Clarke."

I didn't look at him, concentrating on the blanket in my lap. I picked at the pills.

His hand came up and cupped the cheek farthest from him, turning my head so that my ear was right next to his mouth. "I think," he said softly, "that you are greatly underestimating your appeal to me."

He kissed my cheek.

Okay. So that went a long way in making me feel better, but that didn't mean I didn't see his game. "I won't be swayed by your excellent diversion tactics," I said, trying to smother my smile.

"I've got skills you've never imagined," he tossed back. Then he grew more serious. "You said it would be just a few weeks, right? We can wait that long."

I sighed. "I don't want to." I didn't care if I sounded like a petulant child. In a way that's exactly how I felt.

"I like how bad you want my body, Princess, but the gate's locked on this one."

I cast him the side eye. "Are you saying that you're a prince in the tower?"
He grinned. "Wanna slay my dragon?"

"Get out." I shoved his legs off of the bed. "Go. People need you."

He leaned on me heavily. "Is that a no?"

I put my hand on his face and pushed, laughing. "Fearless leaders need to lead."

"I'm going. I'm going," he groused. Then he stood up and one of my favorite parts of the day started —watching him stretch.

The muscles in the human body were amazing. Watching Bellamy go through the motions of loosening them up? It was the closest to poetry I'd find down here.

I nibbled on the tip of my finger.

He started to wash up. That was my signal to get going too. I made a show out of taking my shirt off and reaching for my bra, keeping myself in plain sight.

I heard him muffle a groan.

Good.

I put the bra on, then winced. Dammit. Was there something stuck in the lining? I adjusted. In the middle of shifting things around, a thought occurred to me.

Tender breasts.

Mood swings.

It was too early for that, wasn't it? I tried to do the math.

"You okay?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Just thinking about something."

He frowned. "Okay."

Should I tell him? These were also signs of a period. It could go either way at this point. "Any idea what's happening with the nets?"

"Experiments one and two were utter friggin' failures," he muttered, throwing his makeshift towel back in its place before shrugging on his shirt. "Experiment three is supposed to start today."

Peter had turned out to be a lifesaver. He was quiet, maybe quieter than even Sam, which was probably why the two of them got along so well. She was always parked right beside Jasper at night, listening raptly to one of Peter's stories. It was becoming a regular communal thing. Dozens of people would gather around and listen to creation tales and fantastic happenings none of us had ever heard of before.

One night I'd commented on how strange it was to Bellamy. Peter was so comfortable in the background that you'd almost forget he was there. I never would have thought he'd light up the way he did when it was time to tell a story. He was so good at it. He had a way of making someone feel awed and inspired, and maybe a little bit smaller in the grand scheme of things. When he talked, I wanted to draw.
"I think he's been waiting for this day all his life," Bellamy'd said.

I didn't know what he meant by that exactly, but I didn't doubt it. Some people were just born for it.

I shivered. As warm as the days still were, nights were getting undeniably chillier. Not cold, but that was just around the corner. I could see why Bellamy was started to feel frustrated about the nets. We needed the food, and soon.

I wanted at least a few more minutes of quiet time with Bellamy, but it wasn't to be. We walked into the morning light together. The camp was waking up, and people were already headed for the ration station, yawning and stretching.

The landscape of the camp was changing.

No more tents. Every one of the hundred had a waginogan. They had to be shared for the moment, but the novelty of having a real roof overhead was enough to keep the complaints down. Crude bed frames were being constructed so that everyone could have a sleeping space to call their own. I could feel the change in the camp. People were...well, I'm not sure happy was the word, but they were content, more cheerful. We had fewer fights and—miraculously—fewer injuries. Morale was up, as Bellamy would say.

It wasn't until the mood lifted that I realized how dark and serious the air around camp had become.

There was nothing to laugh at down here, really. The uncertainty of survival was serious business. More than that, I think people had just become used to being grim.

Providing shelter—real shelter, in the true definition of the word—and equipping them with the necessary skills to create it, gave the hundred hope. It was small compared to the radiation fog, or the thunderstorms, or any of the other natural events Earth throw our way, but they had it. We had it. We were slowly but surely taking something back for ourselves. We had real, tangible power.

You could feel the difference just by walking through the camp.

Suddenly it wasn't let's just hope we get through this. It was maybe we can do this after all. Once that had been sent into motion, it became "What else can we accomplish?"

Octavia plopped herself down on the log next to Bellamy. "I've been thinking."

He said nothing. Didn't even grunt. This was Blake for I'm listening.

"Remember the Viking common halls?"

He perked up.

In her excitement she turned to swing a leg over and face him fully, eyes alight. "Peter told me last night that his people had the same thing, and that's where they would gather in winter to tell stories and eat. We'd have to move the wall back, but I think we have to to do that anyway if we're going to build more waginogans. That would mean clearing out a few trees, which would give us the space and materials we need to build a common hall. More people would have to go on patrol, but some of these kids don't have anything to do right now anyway. We could start out with basic chairs and tables," she said, ticking off a finger at a time, "a fire pit, a kind of stage for when someone needs to make an announcement, and it would be a focal point to run to if we need it."

She paused, smiling at the both of us. "What do you think?"
I thought it sounded like she'd had it all figured out.

Bellamy and I looked at each other. "It's ambitious," I said.

"Wood burns easier than metal."

"But we can have it designed to be easier to defend."

"We'd have to start with a giant waginogan."

"I think it's a good idea," I told him.

He turned to his sister. "Peter has a lot to handle with the nets. You would have to take control of the main part of the project."

"Leave it to me," she said with total confidence.

I liked her enthusiasm. Octavia had been working really hard lately, showing that she had a knack for organizing things. A project like this was exactly what she needed to challenge her. "It would be a good idea to bring Miller in so he can keep an eye out."

Octavia waited a beat. "On what?"

"The more wall you take down, the more exposed you'll be. It wouldn't hurt to have him around."

"Oh." She looked relieved. "Yeah. Of course."

She was so thrilled by the possibilities that she just skipped off then and there, to find Miller or someone else, I wasn't sure. I waited until she was out of sight. "You're handling this well."

"She's gotta grow up sometime."

"Try saying that again like you aren't choking on a bag of nails."

"Today this is as good as it gets."

"It's good to know, though," I said after a companionable silence. "Not even two months ago we were all fighting each other for supremacy. Now we've got homes, a plan for the future, a kind of cohesion..."

"Let's just hope that it's not like Icarus flying too close to the sun."

There was a danger that we were doing too much too fast; actually, it was more like a matter of hubris. Isn't that what ended up destroying the world in the first place? "I've never thought history repeated itself."

"Well, there are about a million examples that prove you wrong, Princess."

"No. It's not history that repeats. It's people. The way they think. They keep falling into the same traps because they're afraid to do something revolutionary. I don't want that to happen to us."

He didn't say anything to that. He just finished eating his meal.

Raven helped me in the med center when she wasn't tinkering with salvaged machinery. Octavia was busy with her plans. Monty was collecting samples of the local fauna and experimenting with uses. Jasper split his time between Peter and Monty. He had the language skills to make Peter's wishes
known and the brains to help Monty work through his problems.

Bellamy went wherever he was needed.

Baxter and Sam had set up a virtual factory for crafted goods. They had help and they were making our lives more civilized. The rest of the hundred were becoming builders, hunters, guards, whatever any of us needed to get this place really going.

Once the ball of progress started, there was no stopping it. That day the first successful net was created. After that it was onto the next.

I kept track of my symptoms. I added dizziness to the list.

On the third day, Peter, Jasper, Baxter, Monroe, and Bellamy went fishing for the first time. I had a feeling someone was going to get hurt, so I had them take their first aid kits.

It was near sunset when they came back. The gate opened and they strolled in like kings, grinning and eager to show off. We were all thrilled. Food! Wonderful food. And there was plenty of it! What would fish taste like? How did we eat it?

Jasper saw me and thrust something towards me. "How about that, Clarke?"

On his knife was a long string of fish held by the gills.

The scent assaulted me.

I couldn't stop it; I turned around and threw up right then and there at the base of a tree. It was awful, and it just kept happening.

"Shit! Are you okay? Clarke, are you okay?" He was holding onto my arm.

I patted him without looking up. "I'm fine," I croaked. "It just...happens."

"Ha-" Comprehension dawned. "Ooooh."

I wiped my mouth and finally raised my head.

Bellamy met my gaze from across the crowd. He knew. I watched it settle over his shoulders like a physical weight. He stood taller, straighter, and for a second my heart squeezed to look at him. I'd told him that none of us were kids anymore. Here was physical representation of that truth. Bellamy, ready to butt heads with the future.

And he was mine.

I was his.

Knowing that gave me the strength to smile slightly at him, even though my stomach was still roiling and nausea was crawling up my throat again. "I'm going to go wash my mouth out," I said to no one in particular.

The whispers had already been there. Now it was a murmur. I felt the looks pinned right on my spine.

Instead of going to the med center I headed for Monty's, hoping that mint water was good for more than hair.
Monty looked up when I came in. He gave me a silent once over, and in that understated way of his, nodded to himself. "Rough day?"

"As life changing revelations go, not that bad. Wasn't something I didn't already know." Or at least suspect. "I need something to clean my mouth out with."

"Yeah," he said, getting up and getting what I needed. When he handed the bowl over, he stood back and watched me. "Want to talk about it?"

I rinsed and spat into the waste water receptacle. "Give me a minute." I took another mouthful, swished, and spat. "That feels so much better. My first time around fish and I throw up."

"Guess they caught some after all. I was beginning to think they'd fallen into the river." He settled back down on his makeshift cot. "How are you feeling? Not, you know, physically feeling. I meant mentally and emotionally."

I wasn't shocked by his lack of surprise. The rumors had been circulating for awhile, and Bellamy had flat out announced it to his Think Tank. "Scared. Worried. Relieved to know one way or the other." I toyed with the cup. How to put this into words? "And...a little excited." I darted a glance at him. "Is that weird?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that's the usual response."

"This aren't the usual circumstances."

"No. That's why I'm going to say something that's probably going to put a damper on the moment." Monty locked his hands around one knee and looked me straight in the eye. "Some people are justifiably scared at the thought of having a kid down here."

"...I know." I was one of them. Acknowledging that didn't matter to the little nugget of happiness that had started to glow in my chest. There were so many things against us, but knowing that she was real...that made a difference.

"I've been looking into alternative means of contraception. I've also come across certain combinations of plants that will end a pregnancy." He just left that out there, not bothering to explain what I already knew he was offering.

Bellamy and I had talked. We had decided to be parents. For a second, though, I thought about the choice Monty was putting in front of me. It was the final test of my commitment, and from this moment I had to be totally sure. No turning back.

I sighed shakily, knowing what I was getting into.

I raised my chin. "I'm going to have the baby."

We stared at each other for what felt like a long time. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but it wasn't like Monty to make judgments. That was the beauty of him. He just let you be as you were.

Suddenly he sighed. "How are we going to get protein into you if you throw up when you see fish?"

A laugh bubbled up.

It's exactly what I needed.
It was dark when I left Monty's, even darker when I got to our place.

Bellamy was waiting for me inside. He stood when I came in, and for a moment neither of us said anything.

Was it awkward? Maybe. We were facing down a life changing event. Most people would be scared.

The thing was, most people weren't Bellamy Blake. He was scared, sure, but he also had the heart of a lion. He would stare down anything if that's what it took to get what he wanted.

"So," I said after a minute. "I'm pregnant." I tried for cheerful but it came out nervous.

We had prepared ourselves for this moment. It shouldn't have felt so...profound.

A little smile quirked his lips and he nodded. "Yeah, Princess. You're pregnant."

I didn't know what to do with my hands. "No going back now. I already told Monty I don't want to abort."

"You keep talking like I don't know all of this already."

"Sometimes I find comfort in repetition. Keeps me sane." Was that weird? It was probably weird.

"I love you."

What? I looked up at him. "What?" I said again, only this time out loud.

"Are you surprised?"

"You said love was just a nice word."

He shrugged. "When they come up with something better, I'll start using that instead." Gaze warm, he looked me over. "Come here."

I didn't know I was waiting for him to call me over until he did, and then suddenly I was in his arms and there was nowhere else I wanted to be. "This is crazy," I sighed.

"Our whole lives are crazy, Clarke," he said against my hair where his chin rested. "What's one more thing?"

I once told him that strong girls only needed themselves. I still believed that. Still, there was no denying that having him with me to share all of this made me feel so much better.

I wanted to show him that, so I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him. Then again. And again.

Then I really kissed him, the way I'd wanted to do for ages.

All of his excuses were gone now.

He pulled away from me. "Are you sure?" His heavy breathing rushed over my cheeks. He cupped my ear.
"I'm not going to let you say no this time."

This was it—the course we'd set. I was going to see it through.

Because I loved him. Because he loved me. Because this was Earth and it wasn't safe. We didn't
know things like where or when or how, but we knew each other and how short life could be here.
Nobody was going to stop me for reaching out for the person I wanted. Not even Bellamy.

I reached up and pulled him back in for another kiss.

The way our mouths melded was something I could never stop being surprised at. It was like coming
home to a place you didn't know you lived.

My hands got tangled up in his wild hair—have to do something about that soon—and held on tight.
It was me that was in control, not Bellamy, and I took that for all it was worth. I was vaguely aware
that he was holding onto me back, but I didn't know where or how.

I sank into feeling, but it was just the beginning. This was all the anticipation of our time together,
love, relief, and a deep seated need that had nothing to do with circumstances and everything to do
with Bellamy Blake.

I dragged his jacket off of his shoulders and yanked it down to his elbows, then pushed him back
until his calves hit the bed. He kind of fell back with a grunt and a crack that almost broke the frame.
"Easy there, Princess."

"No." I threw off my own jacket without looking where it landed, then threw myself at him a second
time. He caught me by the hips as I kissed him again, bearing us both back until he was flat, arms
trapped by the elbows.

I straddled him and rained kisses over his throat, then retraced the path with my tongue.

"Fuck," he hissed. Big hands held my hips in place, trying to get us closer through layers of fabric.
He kissed my temple and my forehead. "Let me up, Clarke."

I ignored him and pulled the collar of his shirt down, sucking on the skin I found there.

My hair was everywhere, so I absently pulled the mass over one shoulder while I left little marks in
my wake. Here, there, anywhere I could reach, and all the while Bellamy was moving under me like
he was in torture. The temperature of our wagingan had shot up about ten degrees. I loved the
sound of his breathing and the way he held me so tight, like he wanted to take over but needed me
close.

Good. That was just the way I felt about him.

I went back to his wonderful mouth. While he was distracted I slid down to straddle only a thigh. He
followed me a bit, unwilling to stop kissing me, so it wasn't until it was too late that he realized what
I intended. "What the hell..." he murmured, dazed.

I pulled his shirt up and mouthed his stomach.

He hissed. He started to pull his arms out of his jacket sleeves, but I grabbed onto them and laced our
fingers together. This was my territory. I was going to explore it.

"Dammit, Princess," he gritted through his teeth when I swirled my tongue around his belly button.
"I said I would make it worth your while."
"You made me wait too long." I sucked on the bit of hip peeking out from his pants. Hard.

He bucked. "Okay. That's it." He yanked his hands away and threw off the sleeves. "We're doing this-

Thinking fast, I pulled his pants open and mouthed his cock.

He stopped right there and then and shuddered, his face a configuration of shadows and heat.

There was nothing but a flimsy pair of underwear between him and me, and an incredible surge of power made me feel almost light headed.

This was my man. Handsome, intense, loyal, incredible Bellamy Blake.

Time to lay claim.

I barreled ahead, grabbing the edge of the underwear and pulling it down. My first sight of him in all his glory was amazing and strange. I still wasn't used to the sight of a man fully aroused, and it was doubly fascinating for me because of who I was with. This was all for me. The shaft, the length, the width, every bit of it. I marveled at him.

I wasn't exactly experienced, but I wanted it, and so I didn't think much about technique when I took hold of Bellamy's cock and licked the tip. Curiosity prompted me to do it again, and again, and I wondered what it would be like if I took more of it into my mouth, going down slowly.

Bellamy had frozen, his breathe shuddering out of him.

I think he was afraid to move.

When I read my tiny, secret stash of romances on the Ark, I never realized going down on someone could be erotic—the tension between the two of us was so wound up it was almost painful.


I watched him with every bob of my head.

He stared right back, his mouth parted, little gasps coming out.

His shoulders shuddered.

He smelled so good. Tasted good.

A hand came up and buried itself in my hair. "Clarke."

I came up for air—this was harder than I thought, trying to remember to breathe through my nose while my heart pounded against my rib cage and just in general not being overwhelmed—and ran my tongue his cock from root to tip.

"Fuck." He sat up and then he was kissing me hungrily, holding my face like he never wanted to let it go.

My brain short circuited. Wow.

Oh right, I still had him in my hand.

I ran my palm up and down.
He groaned and raised his hips, going from my mouth to my jaw and then down my neck. Instinct made me pull back but he followed—oh, did he follow—wrapping his arms around my back and holding me still while he sucked on my collarbone. I couldn't stop the breathy moan that tore out of me, my head tipping back.

Wow, I thought again.

His hand hooked under my thigh and pulled me in close. It was so awkward and so good at the same time and our clothes were still on. Why the hell were they still in the way?

Bellamy suddenly cupped my nape and made me look at him. "You and me," he panted, staring hard into my eyes. It sounded like a vow.

I nodded and wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him hard. "You and me always," I promised against his mouth.

He'd fought for me and I'd fight for him, no questions asked.

Saying it out loud kicked something in Bellamy into high gear. He flipped us over until I was on my back, kneeling and pulling his shirt over his head.

I'd never forget that sight for the rest of my life—Bellamy Blake's beautiful chest and torso, pants undone, his cock hard for me.

Then he was throwing that t-shirt away like he couldn't stand it a second longer and he was back, yanking my pants and panties down my legs and straight up in the air. They went sailing after the t-shirt.

His mouth was all over my belly in the next second. All I could do was bury my hands in his hair while he licked his way up to my chest. My skin felt more alive than it ever had before, all the nerve endings twitching under his tongue.

He reached my bra and pulled me up to get it and my shirt out of the way. Did I say I was in charge? I was wrong. He definitely was, and I had no urge whatsoever to change that.

He took over the way he always did—totally and completely. He pushed me back on the bed and suddenly got out of it, pulling his pants off the rest of the way.

I thought he'd get back in bed. I wanted him back in bed.

He didn't move, standing stock still, looking down at me.

Thick lashes framed hot, intense eyes. They started at my hair, which must have been a mess, then drifted down my face to my kiss-swollen lips. He drifted down my neck to my chest, already peppered with his marks, down my ribs to the hair between my legs. He lingered there, licking and biting his lip like it was the best thing he'd seen in his whole life and he couldn't wait to explore it.

My hands clenched in the covers. How was I supposed to breathe, again?

Then he moved on, down my legs and to my feet. I didn't think there was much interesting down there, but he wasn't in any hurry when he retraced his path, back up my legs, to my thighs, my hips, my stomach, my breasts and my lips.

Bellamy had the lean, easy grace of someone who had to carve his life out of wilderness. His narrow hips, wide shoulders, and easy stance. His darker skin, his cute freckles, that wild mop of hair. Every
single part of him was sexy.

He looked into my eyes, a smile lighting up his face. He looked happy.

I had never been so turned on or content in my life.

Words utterly failed me, so I help up my arms.

He came into them as easy as breathing because he belonged there, on top of, mouth on my nipples and sucking as hard as he could over my heart. I rained kisses on his temple and arched my hips into his, rubbing against his cock until he was slick from me.

He rock with me, hand under my thigh, the other palming my breast so that he could lave it all he wanted.

He wouldn't let me touch him, not really, driving me crazy with how few places I could reach this way. I wanted my hands on every single part of him, but all I could do was grab his hair and dig my fingers into his shoulder blades.

He breathed out a chuckle.

Thought that was funny, did he? I rolled my hips extra hard that time.

He stopped laughing in a kind of adorable hitch.

Next thing I knew his fingers were around my clit and he was kissing my neck. "Tell me exactly where you want me to touch," he commanded me softly.

Was he serious?

"Now, Clarke. And don't be nice about it."

It was his voice that ripped up my resistance. He didn't think I'd do it? I'd show him.

And I did, describing in explicit detail where and when and what pressure to put while he followed my orders. If I didn't like what he was doing I told him, and he seemed to find that so sexy he couldn't stop humping me.

Fine, I was humping him back, riding his fingers when I told him to shove them into me and how, feeling that pressure build up. It was his panting on my neck, the damp on my skin where he'd kissed me with an open mouth, his fingers, his smell, just everything Bellamy that sent me over the edge.

I clenched up with a groan, overcome by the orgasm, holding onto him for dear life.

"Come," he was chanting in my ear. "Just like that, Princess. Keep coming."

Oh god, I needed to stop. I needed to catch my breath.

No chance. No sooner had I sagged in relief than he was there, grabbing me by the thigh and opening me wide so he could position his cock. First it was just the tip, then the rush of pressure, and he was there, all the way in.

He stopped.

He looked at me.

I was arrested.

It was all there—lust, love, possession, adoration.

He flexed his hips, pulling out and pushing in.

I bit my lip to keep the moan back.

He did it again, and again, and again, hard and steady, sometimes fast and slow, watching me the entire time. I fought the urge to close my eyes. Some things were just too intimate. He was staring into my soul. He could see all my secrets.

I could see his too, so I kept them open.

I angled so that I could meet him better, slipping a hand over his nape and holding him to me, kissing him with an open mouth I could barely suck air into.

He shifted until he'd propped himself on his forearms, hands in my hair, framing my head.

He was so big.

So beautiful.

All mine.

His expression was tightening. His thrusts were going faster. He was getting close.

"I want you to come in me," I told him. "Really deep. Don't hold back."

"Shit," he muttered, sinking into me, the bed was creaking. He was biting his lip so hard I thought he would hurt himself.

I had no mercy. "Come in me, Bellamy. Come on, I want to see it. I want to watch your expression."

"Oh fuck-"

I burrowed my fingers deeper in his hair. It was going to happen. It was going to happen- "Right now, Bellamy. Come!"

"Oh sh-" he took my mouth like he needed it to live, but I tore away and watched him shudder, mouth open, bliss and pain on his face.

It was gorgeous.

"Holy shitballs, Clarke," he gasped in utter amazement.

I laughed. "Exactly."

"You wrecked me." He still sounded stunned.

Wait. "Why are you surprised? You told me it would be like this."

"Not like that. Like...wow." He eased down next to me, hand in my hair. "I've spent a lot of time fantasizing about us, Princess, but nothing came close to what just happened."
"Is that a compliment?" I teased.

"That's a benediction."

For a guy who claimed he wasn't very good with words, he had a way of saying things that poked me right in the heart.

Our bodies were cooling and our breathing evening out, but I didn't want to move. I wasn't sure I could. Bellamy wasn't in any hurry either, stroking the side of my face while I hung onto his wrist. Outside the camp had settled down, letting in the natural sounds of the woods.

It made me think of the Ark. How much I didn't miss it.

"I should have made you come twice," Bellamy said suddenly, looking annoyed with himself.

I burst out laughing.

He raised up a little. "What?"

"Only you."

"Hardly, but thanks for the compliment, Princess." He studied me. "What were you thinking about?"

"Statistics."

He blinked. "I definitely should have made you come twice. My girl should not be thinking about math after sex."

I turned more on my side. "Up on the Ark we probably ran across each other at least once or twice. Maybe more. We were trapped in too small a space to rule it out."

He hummed, not adding anything.

"What we did up there... it was living but it wasn't thriving. I would have been dead if they'd never put me on that ship. Our lives were so radically changed by coming here that I can't ever imagine going back. I wouldn't, not even for a second." I ran my finger down his chest. "It's brutal but at least it's real."

He caught my hand and brought it up to his mouth, pressing his mouth lazily to the skin. "I'm going to build you a house, Clarke. I'm gonna make us a life."

My heart squeezed. "It's not just you. I'll be right there with you, making it happen. Don't forget that."

"How could I?" He kissed me.

There was a lot he wasn't saying. There was a lot he didn't have to say. I understood. Not a single day was guaranteed. There was a lot of hard, dangerous work ahead. There would be losses and heartbreaks.

I still wanted to try. With Bellamy.

Part of me wondered is something between us would change once we'd had sex.

It did.
Some unsettled part of my heart had found what I could only call peace. It was a weird word to use down here on Earth, but it was true. I had a fixed point. His name was Bellamy.

Octavia's project was done within a week. It wasn't the same thing as building the pyramids, but it might as well have been. The first night we were in there, every single person that remained in the hundred was high on accomplishment. Octavia's Great Hall was the pinnacle of our achievements so far. It was more than just surviving. It symbolized what we were capable of.

Bellamy gave a speech, but Octavia was the girl of the hour. She was being recognized for planning and executing a project none of us thought was possible a month ago. Alcohol flowed and the patting of the back never stopped.

I honestly did not know who was prouder: Octavia or Bellamy.

The second highlight of the night was Peter. We'd gotten used to his stories around the camp fire, but nothing could have prepared us for the tale he'd apparently been holding back.

He climbed up on the raised platform, brushing his long black hair behind his hair nervously. We all sat on rough benches that would be replaced soon, drinks I wasn't allowed to touch resting on even rougher tables. None of us cared.

"Shh!" Jasper hissed at a couple of people who didn't realize it was starting.

Peter's hands flexed at his sides. Then he squared his shoulders. "This is the tale of Nanabozhoh, son of the West Wind, grandson of Nokomis, teacher of humanity. The man who brought fire to his people, whose brother became chief of the dead, whose virtue cannot be surpassed."

A hush fell over the crowd. The sound of the snapping bonfire was the only noise.

"After a long, wearisome journey that took Nanabozhoh across many miles and through many tribulations, he came upon a pleasant, lush valley filled with life. Here he heard the sound of a drum, and the voices of people singing. It was after dusk, and though tired, Nanabozhoh came closer. He saw people dancing in a lively fashion, their head feathers bouncing in every direction. He recognized no one. He received no friendly greeting, no invitation to dance with them."

Bellamy sat forward next to me, propping his elbow on the table and rested his cheek in his hand as he listened.

Whatever else Peter could be like during the day, in moments like these? He was king.

I could picture it so clearly. I could almost hear the beat of the drum as I stroked my hand up and down Bellamy's broad back.

"Nanabozhoh was a good dancer, and he longed to join in the fun. He asked and he asked, but no one invited him. Finally Nanabozhoh decided to dance by himself, his feet finding the familiar patterns. He danced and he danced, enjoying himself despite the cold welcome, when suddenly the bright moon burned away the night and Nanabozhoh saw that he had been deceived."

Peter paused.

"Nanabozhoh, son of the West Wind, grandson of Nokomis, brother to the chief of the dead, teacher of humanity, had mistaken the wispy heads of reeds for the feathers of eagles, and the singing of his people for the whistling of the wind."

Bellamy chuckled and I laughed.
Peter smiled. "Even the teacher of humanity can sometimes make mistakes. Nanabozhoh put down his blanket and his knife, and lay himself down for a good, long rest."

We clapped. It was a good story. "Do you think he was talking to us?" I asked.

He looked at me warmly. "Maybe. There's always a moral somewhere."

"Make your own party when nobody else will invite you?"

"That, or don't expect to be perfect."

Drinks clunked down on the table in front of us. "Alright, you two, enough of that," Octavia said. "Bell, I need you to explain to these doofuses who Sir Walter Raleigh was."

He groaned. "Why can't you ever argue about something like the Holy Roman Empire?"

She snorted. "Like that's ever going to come up in conversation." Her hand pounded the table. "Come on!"

He glanced at me. I shrugged. He was on his own.

No sooner had he vacated his seat then Raven slid into it, angling her body my way and nodding at my drink. "Gonna take that?"

"Little bit out of my diet right now." I pushed it her way.

"I heard." She took a deep drink. "Repopulating the Earth and all that. You okay with it?"

Not too long ago I wouldn't have known how to answer that. Now it was easy. "Yeah," I said softly. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Hmm." She drank again, only this time she stared into the bottom of her cup when she put it back down.

The back of my neck prickled.

It came out on the backend of an exhale. "Is there something you have to tell me, Clarke?"

I stilled.

Nobody had ever said Raven was stupid.

She swallowed and looked at me. "I mean...you know."

There were a lot of ways I could respond to this. Tell the truth. Let that drop on her. Suddenly I was back at the beginning, struggling whether to admit what had happened between me and Finn. I thought she had the right to know.

This time? What would the truth help?

Nothing.

It had already been decided.

I reached over and took her hand. "It's Bellamy's, Raven. He's the father."

She didn't quite believe me. Or maybe she didn't want to. "Oh." Her shoulders sagged. "Oh." This
time it was a little softer, full of resignation.

She didn't let go of my hand.

"Were you hoping otherwise?"

"That would be weird, wouldn't it?" She ducked her head. "You're sure?"

"Yes. No doubt in my mind." I wanted to take away the fresh wave of pain I knew she had to be going through. Some things, though, just didn't have a cure.

Raven's eyes slid closed. She inhaled. Exhaled. Swallowed.

When she opened her eyes again, they were wet but calm. "Congratulations."

A spark of happiness caught in my chest. "Thanks."

"Bellamy excited?" I shot her a look, brows raised, prompting a laugh. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Does your mom know?"

All my mirth dried up. Mom. I'd have to tell her eventually, if for no other reason than to get her medical opinion. There was so much to do. So much to learn. We had to prepare ourselves for the best and the worst.

Mom wasn't the only doctor on the Ark, but even if I asked someone else, word would travel.

She'd have to hear it from me. Even with everything that had happened between us, some part of me felt I owed the woman that had raised me that much.

"Hey."

I looked up.

"You'll be okay, Clarke. We'll figure something out."

We. Now there was a word that had come to mean a lot to me lately. There was power in the collective. There was relief knowing there was a support system behind me, even if none of us actually knew what the hell we were doing.

Bellamy's mop of hair made him easy to spot in the crowd. He turned his head and his eyes caught mine. He didn't smile, but he might as well have.

We could do this. We could definitely do this.
It took Clarke two friggin’ weeks to tell her mother about the baby. In the end she did it because I threatened to do it myself. Her body was going through changes. Forewarned was forearmed. Clarke knew that, but she still put it off as long as possible. I meant to push her sooner, but I got distracted by the fuckery happening right under my nose.

A couple of dickwads had decided that they didn't have to pull as much weight as other people did. Didn't mean they changed their mind about how much food they deserved, though. Funny how that worked.

In the first few days beating the shit out of them would have solved the problem. Things were changing, which meant I had to get smarter.

A few minutes after dark, a couple of words of warning, Miller and Monroe in the background for ambiance—boom, problem solved.

For the moment.

The better our foothold on Earth, the more restless the camp seemed to get. We were getting too big for the original wall. O's project extended our territory for the moment, but soon enough the hundred wasn't going to be satisfied with staying in the same tight confines. We'd had enough of that on the Ark.

If this went on much longer, the group was going to split. With winter coming on, we couldn't afford to lose anybody.

More than that, I could feel the hungry looks on the back of my neck. Bunch of wolves looking to take down the alpha for a taste of power. I couldn't beat them all. I had to give them something else to chew on.

The animal drive.

Clarke ended up telling her mom without me. I didn't know until she came out of the computer waginogan pale and quiet.

Which left the next part up to me.

I sat down on the stool and rubbed my hands on my thighs. Last time I was here, Clarke convinced Jaha to pardon me. That felt like a thousand years ago. I swore I'd never get in contact with the Ark again, but sometimes a guy had to set aside his own grievances to do the right thing.

I put on the headset and steadied myself before making the call. "Dr. Abby Griffin, please."

"One moment while I patch you through."

The screen did that wavy thing it did when the signal was sent from one screen to another. I waited, heart in my throat, trying to settle my nerves for what seemed like an eternity.

The waves settled, and suddenly I was looking at Clarke's mom.
They looked alike. I never thought about that. Octavia looked like Mom. I shouldn't have been so surprised. Clarke and her mom shared the same serious, steady gaze that seemed to take in more than I was willing to share. By the time she opened her mouth, I had the feeling she had my number.
"Yes?"

Hell. What did I say? "Dr. Griffin, my name is Bellamy Blake."

"I know. I looked you up in the system."

"You did?" Of course she did. Get your shit together, Blake. "I...just wanted to introduce myself."

"Considering you got my eighteen year old daughter pregnant, Mr. Blake, I think that was the polite thing to do."

She wasn't going to give me an inch. Okay, then. "I was dealing with things in camp when Clarke decided to tell you about it, otherwise I would have been here. I didn't want you to think that I'm not 100% in this with her."

She didn't look impressed. "That's very noble of you."

"Noble has nothing to do with it. I love Clarke. I love this kid. I'm going to do everything it takes to make sure the three of us make it down here."

"Mr. Blake, do you know the consequences of a pregnancy? Especially in the situation that you're in?"

"Believe it or not, yes. Intimately." And I wasn't going to pretend otherwise.

"Then you might appreciate how difficult it is for me to sit here and listen to my daughter tell me that she is risking her life for something that was completely preventable." Her composure cracking, Abby Griffin ran a shaking hand over her mouth, looking less like a doctor and more like a mother than I would have expected.

What the hell was I thinking? Of course she was upset. Clarke was her kid too. "Look, Dr. Griffin, we've been risking our lives since Landing Day. We should have blown up on entry. We didn't. We should have died a least a thousand times since then. Some of us did, but Clarke didn't. I told her she had all the cards with this pregnancy. She's choosing to keep it. My job is now to make sure that she and the baby make it through this."

She looked away from me, clearly fighting tears.

Shit. "I need your help. We both do. Hell, all three of us. Clarke's pretty much running the flag ship for how we do things in the future. We've gotta be on the same page here, because when the Ark lands we're going to be family."

That was really all I wanted to say. She could do with that what she wanted.

Wasn't much to do but wait and see how she responded.

She didn't at first. Guess it was harder for her to put her emotions aside than usual, considering who we were talking about. "Did you have much to do with your sister's raising?"

"Hands on," I said.

"Good. You already understand what it's like to worry about your child."
"I'm having nightmares already." No use hiding the fact.

She cracked a smile. "I'm sure you are. That's normal."

Panthers attacking a wall and a baby crawling into a snake infested lake? I doubted that. "Are we good, Dr. Griffin?"

She nodded slowly. "For now. There's a lot to plan for."

"Yeah. But not today. I'm going to wait a day or two for her to get her feet back under her. Then we'll plan."

"Fair enough. Take care of my daughter, Mr. Blake, or I'll come find you when the Ark lands."

Now I knew exactly where Princess got her attitude from. "Understood."

I clicked on the button and ended the call. Then I sat there and absorbed the fact that Clarke's mom was a little scary.

Not as scary as Clarke was probably going to be, I thought suddenly with a chuckle. The first time someone messed with our kid, I probably wouldn't have time to react before Clarke whipped out the knife and started slicing body parts off.

My Princess was a badass.

I took off the headset and tossed it on the table.

"Bell?" Octavia poked her head through the door. "Are you coming? We're ready."

"Coming."

Her gaze darted between me and the computer. "Everything okay?"

Let's hope. "I just talked to Clarke's mom."

"Oh shit. Is she a total battle ax? Did she yell at you? Threaten to cut off your-"

"Consequences were implied," I interjected. "You don't have to enjoy that so much."

She flashed a cheeky grin. "You're my big brother. This is what I do. Seriously though, are you okay?"

"I think we're on the same page. For now. Don't know how much more I can hope for."

O nodded, her humor dimming for just a second. "You think Mom would have been happy?"

"What?" Where the hell did that come from?

"You know, with being a grandma and all."

I studied her quietly. "Honestly? Mom never thought that far ahead, O."

It was a hard truth.

I loved my mother. I love Octavia. When you're a kid you don't question your parent's choices. Then you grow up and realize a few things.
Mom lived in the moment. She didn't think her decisions through; if she had, she would have asked herself if it was fair to make Octavia live under the floorboards indefinitely, to make us literally the only people she'd ever talk to. Not one single part of our lives stayed the same after Octavia came. I didn't have real friends because it risked our secret. Mom had to resort to sleeping with men she couldn't stand just to keep ahead of the game.

If I hadn't made that stupid mistake of taking O to the party—one lousy party—how long would she have stayed hidden? Until she was old? Never seeing other people, never making friends. Always with us. Always isolated.

How was that fair to a kid?

I shifted and put my hand on her shoulder. "No use in what-ifs. Let's just try to get through the day without someone falling down and busting their head open."

Her lips twisted. "I didn't know you were an optimist."

"Get out there, smartass."

Everyone was set up in different groups, each with their own jobs: the drivers would scare the animals in the right direction, funnelers would keep them on the right path, and the spear carriers would do the slaughtering. Hunting parties had already scouted out deer herds and boars. We were going to do this quick and all at once.

Clarke's blonde head was easy to pick out of the crowd. She was standing next to Monroe and Raven, her bag of supplies crossed over her shoulder.

I wasn't happy about her going, but the truth was that being pregnant didn't make a difference in how much we needed her. Someone was going to get hurt. She had to be there to get them through it.

Our eyes met as I climbed up on one of the fallen logs. "Listen up. You all know what you've been assigned. I want you exactly where you are supposed to be at all times. Do not wander off. Do not lose focus. This drive means the difference between eating and starving this winter. It also means jackets, new clothes, and something warm to sleep on. You think it's cold now? Wait another month. Bring your med packs and stick together. Let's do this."

We weren't leaving the camp unprotected, but it felt that way as we were filing out of the gate. I cut through the crowd to get to Clarke, catching her arm. "Be careful out there."

"I will."

Damn, she had pretty eyes.

"Get a room," some asshole cut in, pushing through roughly.

What the hell?

Rogers. The kid who was causing trouble. Guess I didn't scare enough shit out of him last time.

Clarke's mouth pinched when she watched him go. "You be careful too. See you later."

I nodded. Not much else to say.

She'd be walking the line all day, never out of sight of anyone, checking the groups to make sure things were okay. We'd worked out a system of guards to keep watch for Grounders. If anyone
showed up uninvited, we'd know in under a minute.

The last thing I wanted to do was watch Clarke walk away from me, but we both had jobs to do.

I turned on my heel and headed out. Let's get this over with.

It was hard as shit. We were dealing with animals that were at least twice our size and weight, and we were operating without any form of communication between teams. I think more deer got past us then we wanted, but we worked at it.

Nobody got gored or trampled. That was something.

Hours went by. We walked the woods, looking for stray animals. We broke off into twos and threes. The last thing I needed was that little pissant Rogers tagging along with me, but we had no choice. Being alone wasn't an option.

Problem was that I knew within minutes that something was off. He kept watching me. "What?" I demanded.

He ran his tongue along his cheek and smirked. "Nothin'."

"Then get your head in the game and pay attention."

"It's just that I was wonderin'," he said, tramping after me, "how the hell you got to be the way you are."

Unease prickled on the back of my neck.

"I mean, did we have an election I didn't know about? I might have wanted to vote for the other guy."

I stopped walking. "You got something to say to me, Rogers? Say it."

He tilted his head. "I'm saying that maybe I'm sick of taking orders from you, Blake."

"Is that right? Think you could do a better job?"

He took another step closer. "You know, you give great speeches. The one I liked most was when you told us we could do whatever the hell we want." He held out his hands. "Look at us now."

"Yeah, all those roofs over our heads and walls protecting us must really be damaging your self esteem."


Son of a bitch. "You're done talking. You don't like the way I do things, you get out. Join your buddy and enjoy nature all you want."

"I'm so scared," he giggled. "Look, I'm shaking. You aren't one of us. You're just some dick that got himself on a shuttle and then hooked up with prime pussy."

My fist slammed into his face. "You're right, Rogers. I'm not like you. I'm actually human."

He spat out blood and swung, knife out.
I dodged and kicked him in the knee. He stumbled and lost the blade.

Fuck! Wet leaves made me slip, and that one mistake was all Rogers needed.

He charged and got me right in the waist hard enough to knock the breathe out of me.

I tripped over a root and we fell.

He got the upper hand and punched me. My head snapped to the side. Blood filled my mouth.

Thick fingers wrapped around my throat. Rage made him strong and he had the fucking leverage, but I wasn't out of this yet.

I grabbed his wrists and dug my thumbnails into the flesh. The hell if I was going to die today!

"No!" A hand appeared out of nowhere and yanked Rogers back by the hair.

Suddenly he was gone.

"Argh!"

No, no, no. Goddammit, Clarke was already dragging him back and off of me.

He lashed out. I didn't see what he hit. She fell.

A sound ripped out of me. Red poured into my vision. I scrambled to my feet to fucking kill the piece of shit that dared attack my girl, but I was too late—Clarke got to him first, stabbing him right in the thigh with his own knife seconds before I grabbed him by the jacket and flung him into the tree.

He hit hard, blood pouring out of his leg.

"You're going to die for that, asshole," I spat, already advancing.

Clarke's voice sliced through the fugue. "Bellamy."

I'd have turned but then I heard what she heard: rustling and an ominous squeal.

Boar.

It burst out of the trees a second later, the two faces staring at us with nostrils flaring and deadly tusks stained with blood. There was a spear sticking out of its side.

How the hell did it get out of the animal drive?

No time. I spun on my heel and grabbed Clarke. "Run!"

She was already in motion, half running with a limp as fast as she could. I heard Rogers scream behind me. There was more squealing and yelling, and what sounded like something ripping. Blood thundering, I threw my arm under Clarke's legs and picked her up, rushing for safety in the trees.

Rogers was still screaming.

I stopped in front of the first tree that had branches low enough to climb. In a split second decision, I put Clarke down and ordered her to use my leg as leverage. She didn't think twice about it. I practically shoved her onto the lowest branch and then climbed up after her. "Keep going!"
Up, up, up, far enough that nothing that wasn't on two legs or a cat could climb.

Not away from the screams though.

They suddenly gurgled then cut off. I pressed Clarke against the trunk and listened, trying to hear over the sound of my own pounding heart.

Nothing. Just some snorting.

The pig stumbled out of the brush, covered in blood and weaving. It was well on its way to being dead.

Panting, I looked at Clarke. "Are you alright? Did he hurt you?" I ran my hands over the parts of her I could reach, desperate to find whatever was wrong.

If there was a cut, a break—what about the baby?

Small hands cupped my face. "I'm okay. He punched me in the leg, that's all. I saw you on the ground. What happened?"

She was okay. "The baby?"

"We're fine, Bellamy."

Fine. They were fine. I pressed my forehead to hers. If I were a religious guy, I'd be thanking someone higher up.

Blue eyes were shining with tears. "Tell me what happened."

"He challenged me. Said that he was sick of being given orders." And I was glad he was dead. If the boar hadn't done it, I would have. Losing was not an option, not when Clarke and the baby were depending on me.

She tore away from me and punched me right in the arm.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Don't you ever let anybody get you on the ground again!" She hit me again. Oh shit, was she crying? "You could have died! I could have-"

She was going to fall over if she didn't watch it. "Take it easy, Clarke!"

Suddenly she was sobbing. We were straddling a thick branch in a tree while a killer pig was drunkenly circling the forest floor underneath us, and Clarke was crying.

What the...

"Hey." I pulled her hands away from her face. "Hey, Princess, I'm okay. We're all fine, remember?"

"I know," she sniffed, trying to get herself under control. "I know that. This has to be baby hormones. I was nervous all day that something would happen to you, and I was thinking about it too much, and then I saw him trying to choke you...!" She scrubbed at her face furiously. "I'm glad he's dead."

I smiled reluctantly. "Brave princess. You scared the piss out of me too." My hand covered her knee. "Don't ever rush in like that again. I'm serious."
She snorted. "I wasn't just going to let him kill you."

"If it comes down between me and you, pick yourself. Got it? You and the baby come first."

Clarke shook her head, the blonde end of her braid brushing against her jacket.

I stopped the motion. "I am not going to fucking lose you. Never. You survive no matter what."

"Not at the cost of you."

"Do you not understand what I'm telling you? Goddammit, Clarke, I love you!"

"Well I love you too!" she yelled up in my face. "If you think I'm just going to stand back and watch someone take you away from me, you don't know me at all!"

"You have to make the hard choices! If something happens, if I can't win a fight, you have to be the one that takes over." That was a future I didn't want to imagine, but we didn't have the luxury of pretending it wasn't a possibility. We came too close today.

"Only if you swear to me that you'll do the same."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You said that if I die, you'll take care of the baby. I trust you with that. But if something happens to me and you have to choose between us-"

I didn't want to hear this. I didn't want to even consider it.

"-then you pick her. Even if it means killing me in the process."

That pissed me off. More than Rogers. More than Murphy. It just pissed me the hell off.

But I nodded. What else was I supposed to do?

Clarke's brow furrowed in concern and resignation. "Okay." She looked down, nervous and maybe raw. "I think it's almost dead."

"If it isn't, I'm going to kill it myself," I muttered, swinging my leg over the branch. I was in the mood for it.

The boar was leaning against the tree. I don't know how those stupid little legs could hold up a massive body like that. Nature at its finest.

Not counting the two faces.

I slipped to the branch below ours. "Stay there."

"Be careful."

I went down farther, making sure my boots had a sure footing before easing forward and laying flat on my stomach. The boar was just below me, making weird noises, the spear sticking out of its side rising and falling with every breath.

I hooked an arm around the branch, reaching out with the other...slowly...slowly...

There!
I yanked it out.

The animal yelled but didn't have the strength to go anywhere. I dropped to the ground and rammed the spear into its neck to finish it off.

It collapsed. Dead.

I waited for a second, not willing to chance it. You never knew what a wounded animal was capable of.

It didn't move, so I called up to Clarke that it was safe.

She climbed down to the last branch until she was sitting and about to jump off. "What are you, crazy?" I asked gruffly. "I'll catch you."

I held my arms open.

She arched a brow. "I'm not helpless, Bellamy."

Yeah. Didn't care.

Her lips twitched. Next thing I knew she was thumping against me, arms around my neck.

We didn't talk. We could do that later. First order of business to get back to the others and see how the rest of the animal drive went. Hopefully Rogers was the only casualty. We'd have to come back for the boar later, if at all.

We trudged through the woods, me ahead of Clarke, listening for signs of any more animals. Or worse, Grounders.

Clarke's leg gave her trouble from where Rogers had punched her, but there was nothing either of us could do about it. Soon the wall came in sight, though, and we were in the camp without anything else going wrong.

According to Miller, not one person died. There were a hell of a lot of injuries incurred from sheer stupidity, but Clarke's med boxes and training had come in handy. It probably saved more than one life that day.

It was a friggin' miracle.

I updated Miller on Rogers. Official story was that he got gored while Clarke and I were treed. No use giving any more details than that. Who knew how many buddies Rogers had in camp? Didn't want to give them ideas.

We'd have to watch our backs better from now on, though.

Camp was busting with energy. Everybody was thrilled by our first animal drive. We had meat. We had bones. We had hides. We'd given the middle finger to Mother Nature for once.

I found Peter in the center of the hype, directing like a general. Jasper and Octavia were his seconds. I didn't bother interfering; this was Peter's show. He was the brains of the operation. I just lent my back with pushing carcasses onto stretchers we'd lashed together and hauling them to the meat station. Once they were up to their ears in blood and guts and meat, we redirected to the storage locker.

Goggles called it the Deep Freeze.
He wasn't far off.

It was long, bone breaking work. Didn't hear anybody complain, though. We'd be eating good tonight.

Once the animals were stripped of everything edible, their bones were washed off and then boiled for soup. After that the bones would be used for carving whatever we needed. Maybe even a few things we didn't. Baxter was getting around with those little pendants of his. Sam made some kind of stick thing she used to twist up her hair. That was probably going to be the next thing to flood the ranks.

Hours later, I was so tired I could barely drag myself back to the waginogan. Clarke was inside washing up. She looked back at me, silent and watchful.

Our conversation from earlier came rushing back to me. All of it.

She ducked her head and went back to washing.

I eased up behind her, putting my hands on her naked shoulders. Just to feel her softness. The contrast of her skin and mine made me pause. My hands looked like paws, dirt caked under the fingernails and covered in scraps.

To think, I used to consider being a janitor a dirty job.

Clarke's shoulders slowly relaxed.

"So," I murmured. "You told me you love me today."

She swiped at her forehead in annoyance. "I didn't mean to yell it at you like that. I was supposed to say it nice."

It was easy to step closer, pressing my front to her back and wrapping my arms around her bare torso so I could put my hands flat on her belly. "Had it all planned out, did you?" I could just see it.

She leaned her head back on my shoulder and looked up at me, wincing a little. "Maybe."

Cute.

I leaned my chin on her shoulder and breathed her in deep.

"I got you something."

"Mmm?"

She tried to get out of my arms, but fat chance of that. She had to maneuver around the two of us, picking up a familiar piece of red parachute. "For you."

I cocked a brow. "Did you get me a comb, Princess?"

"Maybe. Open it."

Letting her go in these quiet moments was not my favorite thing to do, but I drew away reluctantly and accepted the thing. It was tiny. Definitely smaller than a comb. I tugged on the string.

The edges fell open.

A tag?
I pinched it between my fingers and brought it up to the light. Bone, rectangular and flat, it reminded me of the things people used to id their stuff with. Holes had been punched into each end and a cord strung through.

There was something etched into it. I looked closer. "A sword?"

"I had this image once—you know what? That's not important. It just seemed to suit you." She licked her lips. "It's a bracelet. It seemed dangerous to have something around your neck, so..."

Was she nervous?

She was definitely nervous.

"Baxter?"

"I sketched and he made. Do you like it?"

I looked at the tag. Tried to think of the last time someone gave me something. Anything.

Octavia.

A guard's uniform.

Notice that my mother was floated before I could get to the hatch.

A demotion.

A gun.

Orders to kill Jaha and a way onto a shuttle bound to explode.

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. "Yeah. It's good."

Clarke narrowed her eyes, looking for the lie. She wouldn't find one.

I held it out. "Wanna put it on me, Princess?"

She slowly smiled. "Okay."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hello! It took me awhile to update; I wasn't sure where I wanted to go with the story and I lost steam because of it. Well, miracle of miracles, I was struck with inspiration and ended up writing the last three chapters, which means this story is up and rolling again!

Thank you for stopping by. Please remember that reviews are how fanfiction writers get paid!
Chapter 21

The first time I felt the butterflies, I thought it was indigestion.

The second time, I thought I was nervous.

The third time? I started to get worried. I mentioned it to Mom during one of our regular, semi professional meetings, where both of us understood that there were things we weren't saying.

Her eyes welled up with tears. "It's the baby kicking, Clarke."

Kicking?

Of course, I thought a second later. Why didn't that occur to me before?

I teared up. Mom cried.

The fourth time it happened, I ran to find Bellamy as quickly as I could and shoved his hand up my shirt right there in front of everybody.

I'd be very embarrassed about that later.

The look on Bellamy's face made it all worth it. "Is that...?"

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. It felt like I was bursting.

His grin lit up the world. "Wow."

"Clarke. Wake up."

"Bellamy? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Come outside. You've got to see this."

The first thing I noticed was how cold it was. Sometimes I thought winter on Earth was even colder than billions of miles in space, but today it felt different. I stumbled to my feet, keeping the furs around me. Bellamy had his pants and pants on. I was too tired to do more than distantly appreciate that. Pregnancy wore me out more quickly than I thought it would.

All the cobwebs in my head disappeared the second Bellamy pushed open the door of our waginogan.

White. Everywhere.

"Oh my god," I breathed. "Snow."

Bellamy grinned. "Welcome to your first snowfall, Princess."

His first snowfall too. Our first snowfall!

People were already running around like idiots, sticking out their tongues to catch the flakes. Science said that each one was unique. But knowing that and seeing it were two different things.

Excitement welled up inside of me so fast I couldn't contain it. I rushed back to the bed and threw the
furs down, scrambling for my clothes.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Bellamy said, catching me around the waist. "Easy there, Clarke. I don't want you to fall."

Only three months into my pregnancy and he was already this protective. Even with my boobs hurting, the fact that none of my old clothes were fitting anymore, my occasional moodiness, and an appreciation for certain types of meats that I'd never experienced before, of the two of us Bellamy was definitely having a harder time.

"Then come out," I said, kissing him, "and make sure we stay safe."

He chuckled against my mouth. "Oh, I plan on it. You'll never shake me off now."

I just smiled.

Seven people died that winter. It was a hunting party that got lost during a storm and never made it back. We wouldn't come across their frozen bodies until much later in the spring.

In the meantime, a shaky truce with the Grounders ensued. Bellamy was the least surprised of all of us. "It's tradition," he told me gruffly one night. "Goes all the way to the Etruscans. Fight in good weather, then go home to tend to crops. Survive winter, get ready in spring-"

"Then try to wipe everybody out in the summer," Jasper finished with a kind of horrified respect. "Dude."

Monty clapped him on the shoulder. "Here, bro, it'll take your mind off of things." He handed him a drink.

Was it my imagination, or was Sam watching Monty from under her lashes?

Baxter darted a look between the two. Sad acceptance flashed across his expression.

No. It wasn't my imagination at all.

When I was five months pregnant and having serious issues with mobility, Bellamy started planning our house in earnest. He thought about it day and night. If he wasn't seeing to camp business, he was obsessing over the plans.

It represented something more than a house to him. It was security. It was safety.

I knew neither of those things were real. It was just a thing, a building of wood that could burn as much as the next thing. I wanted it for the baby, but Bellamy? He needed it.

The day it became warm enough to think about laying foundations was like all the good parts of Unity Day to the power of three for him.

"I'm getting a bassinet for you," he told the baby one night. Well, my belly, which was as big as Mt. Weather at that point. "We're thinking up a harness too."

I stroked his hair. "Are you talking to me or her now?"

"Both of you. We'll need a way to carry her around with us."
The thought of hauling around a child while I set broken legs was both horrifying and a little funny. "What are we doing?" I muttered out loud. "This is crazy."

He raised his head and arched a thick black brow.

I smoothed it. "I'm trying to picture you giving one of your speeches with a baby strapped to your chest."

He played with my finger while he pictured it. His lips twitched.

God, I loved this man. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Those first few days on Earth seemed like a thousand years ago, back when we were young and scared. Now we were older, still scared, but how I felt now and how I felt then were two different animals.

"How did we get like this, Bellamy?"

"Well, Princess, when two people love each other very much, they give each other a special-"

I slapped his shoulder. Idiot.

Sometimes I think Bellamy genuinely forgot he wasn't there for the baby's conception, but then again, there were moments I did too.

Finn. My chest squeezed with a touch of regret. I would always have complicated feelings about him: anger, pity, a tragic sense of loss for someone who died too young. In the end, however, I had to concentrate on the living. On Bellamy. On the baby. On our lives together.

So I smiled at Bellamy and asked, "Is that how you're going to explain sex to her? I think you need work."

"Good thing I have forty years to practice, huh?"

My brows shot to my hairline. "Forty years? Is that how it's going to be?"

"Princess, have I ever given you the impression that I'll be a laid back father?"

Not for a single second. "You are in for such a hard time."

When I was six months pregnant, malnutrition became a real issue in camp. We had to organize another animal drive.

Another death.

Bellamy threw himself into the building of the cabin, which was halfway done by the time the snows finally melted completely.

Spring was beautiful, but with it came the discovery of the hunting party we lost. That was a solemn day.

Bellamy didn't come home that night.

The next morning he showed up with the bassinet, which was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I cried.
When I was seven months pregnant, Bellamy finished the house. It was a one room cabin with a real roof and a floor and a door we could lock. There were windows that closed via shutter. There was a rough chimney for a fire and a bed.

I looked around, marveling at the tangible evidence of Bellamy's love. Featured prominently was the bassinet, already covered with furs and gifts Raven and the others kept leaving.

This wasn't the only cabin, but it was the first to be completed.

I was speechless.

"What do you think, Princess?"

I knew Bellamy like the back of my hand. He was nervous, waiting for my approval, watching me with steady dark eyes.

Did he really think I wouldn't like it?

Coming to a sudden decision, I walked to the door and threw the latch.

"Clarke?"

I walked up to him and just kept pushing back until his knees connected with the bed. He sat with a thump, confused until I used his shoulders to help myself kneel between his spread legs.

Comprehension flashed when I reached for his pants and dragged them down with one pull.

"I take this to mean you—Ahh," he sighed, his head falling back.

I smiled. "Shut up, Bellamy."

---

When I was eight months pregnant, all the snow was gone and the weather had warmed up.

And I was going crazy.

Absolutely, completely crazy.

"We won't be out of sight of the wall," I said calmly.

"No." Bellamy paced the floor of our house back and forth, restless energy coupling with worry so tangible it radiated from him.

I wasn't asking permission, but that was the last thing I was going to say when he was in a state like this. "We need the herbs, Bellamy," I opted for instead.

"Then let Monty go out there by himself."

"It's right outside. The whole thing will take fifteen, twenty minutes at most."

"No, Clarke. Not this late."

He was going to drive himself—and me—insane before the baby came. Every day he sensed a new danger. Every night he had a nightmare. Me too, if I was being honest, but at least mine were a symptom of pregnancy. Bellamy's worry was of an entirely different breed. "Bellamy, I need to walk."
He stopped and looked at me, a wild black curl almost covering one eye.

"I have been trapped in this camp for a very, very long time. I'm going a little out of my mind, to be perfectly honest. I want to remember what it looks like on the other side of that wall." I stood and walked over to him. Actually, the proper word was waddled. Having a big belly threw my center of gravity for a loop, and the result was this ungainly sway in my stride that I was half afraid would never go away, even after the baby was born.

I cupped his face, stroking a freckled cheekbone. "Hey," I murmured.

The hard lines of his face softened. "Hey." His hands rose to settle on my hips.

"What if we took a guard? Someone armed to the teeth?" That seemed more than reasonable, especially considering how far we weren't going to go.

He shook his head slowly. At least he had the decency to look conflicted. "I can't spare Monroe or Miller."

"Then we'll take someone else."

"I don't trust anybody else. Not with you." His hand slid to my belly. "Not with her."

I sighed in frustration. "Please, Bellamy." I didn't know why this was so important to me. It just was. I was sick and tired of the camp and everybody in it. It was barely outside the gate. I hadn't seen anything beyond that wall in months. I felt like we were back on the Ark, cooped up in a tiny room with the same four corners.

I just wanted to move.

Outside was green and beautiful and just within reach. We hadn't had anyone act up in camp for a while. Maybe that was a good sign?

I wanted to believe that. I had to make myself believe that, especially after what happened with that one kid—Rogers, back on the first animal drive.

The last few months were a blur of getting ready for the baby and battling fears and trying to pretend that everything was okay when sometimes it just wasn't it. I wanted a tiny slice of one morning thinking about something else. Was that really so wrong?

I posed the question to Bellamy and he didn't have an answer. He knew as well as I did that we were both suffocating from what-ifs. "Twenty minutes," I repeated softly. "You can time me."

He was soft and warm, his big hand settling on my cheek to stroke the curve. "Turning your puppy eyes on me isn't going to work, Princess."

"Is that so?" I pouted.

"It isn't safe."

"It's never going to be safe, but that's not going to stop me from living."

He wavered. He wanted to say no, but he knew I had a point. "Alright," he sighed reluctantly. "Twenty minutes. That's it. But it can't become a habit, got it? At least not until the baby gets here."

Which was starting to feel like never, to be honest. I was sick of being pregnant but scared of what came next. Not a fun situation to find ourselves in.
I kept that to myself and brought his face down to kiss.

When I told Monty what we were up to, he looked relieved. "I need to get out of here."

"I know what you mean," I sighed, patting my distended belly.

"Hey," a new voice interjected. We turned to see a tall, slender guy with dirty blond hair. "Bellamy said you needed a guard."

He looked familiar, but it took a second for me to place him. Benny. I couldn't remember what his crime on the Ark was. Usually that didn't matter much to me. This time, though, something about this guy brought Confinement back to mind, bold and clear.

Pregnancy paranoia? I'd reserve judgment for the moment. I shoved aside the feeling and looked him over. "Are you ready?"

He grunted and shrugged. "Let's get going."

Well, he was in a hurry. I glanced at Monty and he shared the same feelings, apparently. We all lined up and waited for the gate to rise. Bellamy was, for once, nowhere in sight.

Pretty rare thing these days, I thought with a smile to myself.

It really was a short walk to our destination, straight past the graves of the kids that would never see another year. And here I was, pregnant at eighteen. That still amazed me from time to time. When we came back, I was going to stop at Wells' grave and tell him about it. I hadn't a chance to do that in months.

My baby wouldn't have a friend like I had in him—at least not for a while—but it was something I wanted to share. Bellamy didn't think there was a place after death. I was a little more open to the subject, and if I was right, I wanted to tell Wells' how it felt to be this close to a new life. I was on the edge of something I never thought I would have.

It was hard. It was weird. It was terrifying.

I stepped over a few tree roots, the forest floor crunching under my feet, thinking of the first time we walked through here. We were just kids then. Babies ourselves, compared to now.

Now I was almost a mother, and my child was going to grow up navigating a world I barely understood.

That was probably the worst part of all of this, I thought as I bent down and got to work with Monty. All the things I didn't know. Did every new parent worry about that or was it just me.

I ignored Benny, who was still giving me a creepy vibe. He kept looking around, which was technically what he was supposed to do, but something about it just wasn't hitting the right note.

So much so, that after five minutes, I was looking for a way to whisper to Monty that we should leave. This wasn't just pregnancy paranoia. This was a real feeling and I needed to talk to Bellamy about it.

"Monty-"

He looked up just then, eyes snapped wide. "Clarke, look out-"

I tried to whirl. My center of gravity made me skid and I threw out my hands, desperate for balance.
Monty grabbed me.

Was it Grounders? Radiation fog?

It was Benny. I looked at his knife and then at him, dread dropping my heart to my feet. "What are you doing?"

He smirked. "Just a little payback."

Monty was suddenly in front of me, arm around my belly. "What the hell, dude?"

Heart pounding, I glanced back at the wall. Just far enough away to be out of line of sight. Too far to run.

The line of graves looked start against the weathered wood.

"Let's just stay calm," I said, clutching at Monty's sleeve. "We can talk about this."

A shadow separated itself from the trees. Not a Grounder; he was a kid I didn't recognize, but he had to be one of the hundred. Or he was. Right now he looked half insane, his hair long and uncut, with a scar across his face. He looked like a starving ghost, gaunt and ready to drop, but the hate in his gaze was overpowering.

"You're that guy Bellamy threw out," Monty growled. "The one that was hurting Sam."

The rapist.

Oh god.

He smiled, an ugly twisting of his lips, eyes gleaming with triumph. "Give the Agro a gold star," he sneered.

We were still easing back, edging toward the safety of the wall. Monty's arm was warm but we needed more than that. We needed help. Guns. Something. Anything.

Nausea was threatening me, and for once it had nothing to do with the baby. It was cold, stark fear.

This was someone who hurt people for pleasure. He hurt Sam, the sweetest person I knew, who wouldn't say boo to a fly. He was a predator, and when he looked at me, raking his disgusting gaze down my body, it was like he was looking at prey.

My hand settled on my stomach. How dare he? What kind of lowlife scum went after someone weaker than himself? What kind of twisted soul raped?

Anger made me brave. "What do you want?" I bit out.

"Didn't you hear Benny? It's called payback, bitch. Fuck Bellamy. Whatever the hell we want? What a crock." He pulled out a long piece of sharpened bone strapped to a handle, pointing it at me. "Move another step, and we won't even get to the fun part of today."

Benny laughed. "I'm looking forward to that."

The leer on his face left little doubt what they had planned.

My stomach roiled. Had they been planning this? How? When?
"I've been waiting a long, long time." The kid's voice pitched higher.

Insanity.

"Run, Clarke," Monty whispered seconds before he launched himself at Benny.

No time to think. No time to decide. I just turned and ran.

"Help!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, dodging tree roots I couldn't see, heart pounding. "Somebody help!"

*Have to go have to go have to survive have to live-

A hand buried itself in my hair and yanked. I couldn't keep my balance and crashed to the ground, twisting at the last minute to protect my stomach.

Pain burst in my chin when I cracked it on a root. My vision dimmed.

The hand was back in my hair, pulling me up on my knees roughly. "Please," I said through tears I couldn't stop. "Please don't hurt me."

I didn't care if I was begging. The baby. The baby had to live.

"Please-"

"Shut up!" he hissed, the bone knife flashing when he held it to my throat.

There was someone shouting on the wall.

He pulled me up. It hurt so much I didn't even make a sound.

Monty was on the ground, holding his head. Benny was next to him, writhing, his knife in his side.


He didn't wait for me to follow. He just pulled and I went, clutching his wrist. He pulled and he pulled until we were past Monty and deeper in the woods.

*Fight back,* instinct urged.

No. If I did that and missed or made a misstep or moved just a fraction too late, he'd turn that knife on us. I couldn't risk that. He wanted to hurt Bellamy. He wouldn't hesitate killing me and the baby if he thought that was the way to do it. That was probably his plan now.

Bellamy. I had to stay alive long enough for him to find us. He'd come. Nothing short of an act of God would be able to keep him away. Just a few minutes, I thought wildly as we went who knew where, that was all I needed. Then Bellamy would come and this would all be over.

We weren't that far from the camp. Surely by now everyone would be rushing out and see Monty and Benny.

Just a few minutes-

The trees abruptly fell away, revealing a creek. There was a little boat on it.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in my throat. Was this real? A source of water this close to camp, and
we'd had no idea it was here.

How had we survived this long?

He pushed me down the slope. I barely caught myself from falling, my side aching and my teeth clenched together. "Get in or die."

I couldn't even see my toes. He wanted me to get in a boat?

His head snapped back to me. The blade stabbed in my direction. "Get in!"

That was the insanity of someone who knew he was being hunted.

I grabbed the lip of the wood and practically fell in. The boat bobbed dangerously from side to side. I had no time to recover before he pushed us off and threw himself in after me.

The current was fast. Faster than I would have credited, taking us away from the shore by the time I struggled to a sitting position.

There was foliage—thick ferns and dead tree branches lining the way. It was so dense that anything I thought looked familiar quickly vanished.

Bellamy would track us, but he wouldn't be able to see where the creek went right away. No wonder we didn't know it was there.

My heart lurched.

He'd find us. I was sure of it. But would he do it in time?

Thunder rolled overhead.

The guy—whoever he was—took out a long pole and dug it into the water and the bed below. We went faster. Suddenly the creek widened and I realized something else.

This wasn't a creek.

It was a tributary, filtering us right into the river.

His back was to me. The knife was back in his belt. He had a pole and he was armed, but if we got any further out the water would sweep us away and the chance of Bellamy finding us would dwindle.

One chance, I realized suddenly. My one and only chance.

I pulled myself up to my knees. The water was already too wide. I'd never reach the shore on my own if the boat overturned. We'd sink like rocks and drown.

The thought made me freeze.

Just then a blur appeared out of the trees and launched itself at the boat. Monty landed with a thump and a curse.

We tipped dangerously. I clutched the edges and tried to keep from crying out.

The guy whirled and Monty punched him right in the neck, just the way Miller taught him.
The pole went sailing into the water when the boy clutched his throat. I dove for it, pawing at the water, but it was gone.

We had no way to steer.

Monty hit him again, and again. They grappled and I hung on, too frightened to pray. The baby. The baby.

They went overboard.

"Monty!"

To Be Continued...

If you enjoyed this, please leave a review! The end is near...
"Monty!" I screamed again, frantically searching the water.

*Please don’t drown. Please don’t drown!*

His head popped up a second later, mouth open in a gasp.

I didn’t think twice—I grabbed him by the hair and pulled, dragging him toward the boat. He latched onto the side.

Counterweight. We needed counterweight. "I'm going to lean back," I told him desperately, thunder drowning out my words. "I'm going to lean back and pull! Climb in!"

We strained as hard as we could.

When he fell into the boat with a wet splash, I had never been so happy in my life. "Are you okay?" I ran my hands over every part of him I could reach, checking for breaks and cuts almost without thinking. "Tell if any of this hurts."

Monty coughed up a mouthful of water. "C-Clarke. I'm good. I'm okay. Are you alright?" He sat up, worried. "Did he hurt you?"

The enormity of what just happened hit me. "I thought you were dead." I threw my arms around him. "You're okay."

He squeezed me back. "Yeah. Yeah." I felt him nodding against my neck. "I guess all that training actually worked out."

That hysterical laugh from earlier escaped in a loud bark. I was just so damn relieved. "You were great," I said as I pulled back. "My hero."

He laughed too.

Just like that, my chin trembled. "I was scared," I heard myself admitting. I didn't mean to say it.

He took my hand and nodded. "Are you really okay?" he asked, searching my face.

"I think I will be." Thank God.

"Clarke!"

My heart leaped.

"Clarke!"

I twisted, scanning the shoreline. When did we get to the river? When did we get this far out?

Bellamy tore out of the trees, his pale face clear even at this distance, shouting my name.

Happiness ripped through me. "Bellamy!" I yelled back.

"Clarke!" He started running along the river's edge as more and more figures popped out of the woods.
There was no way he could reach us. We were already in the danger zone, exposed to Grounders. We had no way to steer and the way was too rocky for him to keep following, the edge steeper and steeper until it was nothing but a sheer stone wall, the side of a mountain that had crumbled a long time ago. I saw Miller following close behind, saying something to Bellamy I couldn't understand.

A second later Bellamy tried diving into the water. Idiot! He couldn't swim!

Miller grabbed him at the last second, dragging him back.

Bellamy was yelling and swinging.

"Jesus," I heard Monty whisper.

I looked. The river was bending. We only had a minute before we disappeared from view. "Try to steer with your arms!"

The water was bitterly cold when I shoved my arms into the depths, the current so strong it almost pulled me out before I could correct.

Monty was right there with me, paddling.

I thought it was a splash at first, but then it happened again and again, big fat droplets landing on the back of my neck and my cheek. The skies had opened up and rain coming down.

My last sight of Bellamy, right before the mountain blocked my view and the rain came down too hard to see, was a second after Miller punched him hard enough to make him crumple to the ground.

Bellamy.

No, no time. Had to focus. "Keep paddling, Monty! We've almost got it."

That wasn't true. It took a lot longer than that to get to the other side of the river. By then we were soaked, cold from the rain and the water, and my teeth were chattering. The pain in my side was turning into a spasm. From the cold? I struggled to get my thoughts together, watching Monty snag what branches he could to pull us in. The boat bumped the ground a second later. On the wrong side, but it was better than drifting. He held onto the branch and put a foot on solid ground, balancing between it and the boat.

He stuck out his hand and I grabbed it. "Put your foot out, Clarke. When I pull, I want you to throw your arms around me, okay? I'll do all the work."

I didn't argue. I didn't even point out the possibility of falling back into the water if we didn't time this just right. Monty had a firm grasp of how dire our situation was. I could trust him. That had been true almost from day one.

He looked me in the eye. "Ready?"

I nodded. "One, two..."

"Three!"

We pulled it off without a hitch, but at the last second we spun and fell—onto the ground, splattering into the mud.

More pain in my stomach. A quick jolt and it was gone.
Monty scrambled to his knees. "Clarke, God, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I panted. "We're fine. We have to find shelter." There was no way we could navigate this insane rain, which was so hard and violent it pounded onto my skin like little pebbles. "Help me up!"

We were in bad shape. We stumbled alone, trying to see more than a foot in front of us. I spared a thought for Bellamy, but the trouble was so immediately present that I couldn't dwell on the worry for long. Priority was shelter. Then rechecking for wounds we might have missed. We'd rest a minute or two and wait for the storm to let up, and then we'd go back up the river until we came to a part that was narrow or shallow enough to cross.

All of that while being incredibly pregnant and avoiding Grounders.

*Easy peasey,* some strange and perverse part of my brain quipped. It was something Dad used to say.

*Yeah,* I thought with my teeth chattering, *totally easy.*

By the time we found the cave, I knew it wasn't just the fall that had hurt me.

It was labor.

I was labor.

I tried to hide the fact from Monty—which was a rash decision utterly influenced by the day's events. It was worry and fear all mixed together. The last thing I wanted was for him to go into a panic too. We weren't that far from camp, at least theoretically. The process of giving birth took hours. It wasn't beyond the realm of expectation that the rain would let up, allowing us to reach camp before I needed real assistance.

So I kept mum.

The rain did not let up. More than an hour passed. I clutched Dad's watch to my chest and focused on my breathing now and then, trying to clear my mind of worry and stress to concentrate on staying calm.

The moment I realized that the situation was not going to turn to my favor was a difficult one. It meant accepting that all my careful plans had been systematically destroyed. There was going to be no birthing hut. No Raven to assist. No Bellamy for moral support. The pains were coming harder, longer, and the only two people I could rely on was myself and Monty Green.

When I told him what was happening, he went quiet, as though waiting for me to tell him it was a joke.

Another hour later, and I really, really wished I could oblige him.

Oh God. Oh God. I'd never felt anything like this. I didn't know—I knew but I didn't know—what the pain of giving birth would feel like. A human being was trying to make her way into the world via my body, and it was trying its hardest to make sure she got there.

It was agony.

I fell back, panting, dazed, sweat on my forehead and under my arms. Fear raced through me. This was just the beginning. How was I going to keep the screams in when things got bad? I wanted to cry at the thought of things getting worse, but I kept it back. I couldn't fall to pieces. The baby was
what mattered. Making sure she lived was what mattered. I had to get through this. I had to keep my screams in. There was no choice.

Monty was pale and drawn under his beautiful complexion. His eyes were wide, and I think he was almost as scared as I was. But he saw me looking at him and he reached out to hold my hand. "You're going to be okay, Clarke. We're all going to get through this."

I blinked back the wetness, feeling raw and vulnerable. "I'm n-not so s-sure." Another contraction welled up. I gasped and clenched my teeth so hard I thought they'd crack. I breathed through them, desperate to keep all the sounds in. When it receded, I wanted to go limp and slip into unconsciousness. "I've got to get up," I told him. "I've got to walk."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

I nodded, crawling up. He helped me stand. "Gotta let...gravity...do its work." I stood on shaky legs and clutched at his arm before I transferred my hold to the wall. I looked at him, this poor kid who liked to be in the background, stuck with me during one of the most awful moments of both our lives. "I'm sorry, Monty. I really am, but I need you. I don't know if I can do this without someone."

Bellamy, my poor heart cried. I needed Bellamy.

Bellamy wasn't here. Monty was.

He looked terrified, but he gulped that down and managed a smile. "Don't worry. It'll be a piece of cake." He even managed to sound like he believed it. Monty would do what needed to be done. He was quiet, but he was strong. He could handle this.

"I've never eaten cake," I told him, trying to inject some humor. "Have you?"

"No. Give me a growing season or two. By the time this baby is two, I'll have all the ingredients to make her the first cake any of us have seen."

I smiled. There were so many things we could do, so many possibilities to explore. "I'd like that for her, you know? And if anybody could do it, it's you." I wiped at my sweat. I was shaking with fear and pain, but dammit, I was hot and cold. "Monty."

He crowded closer. "What's the matter? Need me to hold your hand again?"

Yes, but not for the reason he thought. I seized his hand in both of mine. "If something happens to me—anything—I need you to take the baby to Bellamy. Don't bother to do anything for me. No burials. Don't even pause. Just take her and run."

This was the most important thing I would ever do in my life. This was my child. My baby. If she had a chance, then by all that anybody had ever held holy, I'd die giving it to her.

Monty was staring at me, but he said nothing. He didn't try to argue with me. He didn't try to tell me that I'd live and all this was for nothing. We both knew that this might be one of the last things I ever did. If I survived, then we'd keep this conversation to ourselves. I wasn't going to risk leaving anything unsaid on that slim possibility.

"If Bellamy is dead or hurt, someone has to take care of her. Raven, or you, or Jasper, Octavia, or Miller—I trust you. Please make sure she's loved and warm and safe. Just give her this," I hastily pulled off Dad's watch and gave it to him. My words were spilling over each other in my hurry to get them out before the next contraction. "It was my father's and I want her to have it. Tell her something nice about me but let her know I wasn't perfect either. Or him—it could be a him, too, right? I don't know why I didn't think about that. Tell him or her I love them very much, and tell Bellamy--" All the
tears I'd been fighting were sliding down my cheeks. "Tell him I love him too."

I swiped at my face. Now was not the time. I had to make sure this went as flawlessly as possible. I sucked in a deep breath and looked at Monty. "Okay? Can you do that for me?"

"Clarke." He put his hands on my upper arms. "I'll do it. I promise." His voice was calm and soothing. I think he realized I was close to breaking from the worry, and he stepped up and became the rock I needed in lieu of Bellamy.


Another contraction was building, building, and I turned to hold onto the rocky wall of the cave, not even bothering to pray. It would keep going and I was helpless to do more than ride out the storm. When it finally faded, I walked. I walked back and forth so many times I'm sure Monty got dizzy from it.

Contraction after contraction came. It was becoming harder to keep in the screams. In the end I picked up a piece of thick wood laying around the cave and stuck it in my mouth. It was crude and dirty, but it gave me something to concentrate on biting.

My hair clung to my forehead and neck in thick ropes. I was filthy and in so much pain. It was awful. I was so tired but there was no reprieve. Monty started to talk about whatever came into his mind. Jasper. Octavia. His own take on the situation. "He'd be better with Raven," he said once. "He makes her laugh."

"He makes Octavia laugh," I pointed out between contractions.

"Raven needs it. Octavia needs..." He shrugged. "I don't know, actually."

"What about you? What do you need?"

"Me?" He blinked.

I looked at him. Monty was quiet. He was the calm in the storm, but he had a quirky sense of humor too. He didn't pressure people into being more than they were. I'd seen him working with Octavia more than once. Nobody would ever say he was the alpha male, but not everybody needed that in their lives. He was the kind of guy that would be in the background, the tether, and the way station a girl could depend on all her life. The port where all the weary could rest.

I wanted that for him. I wanted a lot of things for all of us, but if there was anybody up there that would listen to just one more wish, I hoped they'd give Monty exactly what he deserved.

The rain had let up and finally stopped, with a little sunshine peeking out, but it was far too late to do anything about it.

Contraction were like being struck by lightning over and over again. It sapped my strength, and eventually I got to the point where even crying out took too much energy. I couldn't walk anymore, and so I crouched on the floor with my back braced against the stone. My stomach was out so far I couldn't see my knees or between my legs. I tried not to think of my fears, but it was almost impossible. So I had to talk. "Bellamy and I have been wondering what she'll be like."

"I hope she takes after you," Monty said, settled next to me. "No offense, but I don't know if I could handle another Bellamy or Octavia. They'd all kill each other."
I laughed. "I have a feeling she'll be trouble one way or the other." The contractions were coming faster now. We'd been at this for hours. I just wanted it to be-

I paused. "Monty," I whispered, striving for calm. "I have to take my pants off. I have to take them off now."

"Like, off?" Monty blanched. "Alright. Want help?"

"Yeah. And my underwear too. Quick, okay? We have to be quick."

"Got it."

Other than his initial hesitation, Monty went through the necessary motions like a professional. We didn't have time to be embarrassed. He saw what he saw. It was going to get worse and we both knew it.

I got back into my crouch and hurriedly put the bit in my mouth. Deep breath, deep breath, pant-
Pain.

Push.

Had to push. PUSH. PUSH!

"Again, Clarke!" Monty said through the haze. "I can see her head! Come on, you can do this. One more time. Good strong push."

This was for her. My baby. I bit into the wood so hard it cracked, bearing down with all my strength and fear and hope and determination-

Oh GOD the pain got worse and then-

Monty reached in between my legs, his face a mask of concentration. "One more time," he ordered. "Her shoulders are out."

I pushed again. I trembled and cried and pushed.

And then-

"She's here, Clarke!" Monty crowed excitedly. He pulled back and there she was, a mass of limbs and blood and other fluids, still attached to me through her umbilical cord.

My child.

I slumped back against the wall, so weak and wet and tired I didn't know if I could ever move again.

"Check her mouth," I told him urgently. "Make sure nothing is blocking her airway. Hurry."

He did exactly what I'd asked, using his finger to make sure everything was okay. He used his sleeve to wipe her nose. He did it quickly, like he'd done it a million times before.

The baby jerked, the little face scrunching. A little cry rose up.

My child.

Monty grinned, amazement lighting up his face. "Hi there," he cooed. "It's okay, little girl. I've gotcha." He looked at me. His eyes were a little wet. "Wow. Look what you did."
I smiled through my tears.

"Here, take her."

I held out my arms, and there she was. My little girl. I'd never seen anything so breathtaking. "Hello," I said, a feeling of elation so pure in my chest I could barely keep it in. I smiled, wide and bright, so ecstatic to finally hold her, see her. "Hi," I said again.

"We have to cut the cord," Monty reminded me, reaching for his knife.

I nodded, not looking away. "Do what you can to clean the blade. We've got to sterilize it as much as possible."

Which was to say that we had nothing. No fire. No water. Nothing to clean it with. He tied off the cord with one of my shoestrings and then looked up at the ceiling before he made the cut.

It wasn't over then. I still had to expel the placenta. Birth was messy. Neither one of us cared. I counted all of her fingers and her toes. I checked her out in every possible way to make sure she was fine.

She only had four fingers on her left hand. I stared at it, my throat tightening. Radiation? Genetics? Who knew? And in the end, who cared? She was here. So I smiled down at her and kissed the palm. "You'll be fine, sweetie. I promise."

"What's her name?"

"Nova." Bellamy and I didn't discuss it too much. She was the first baby to be born on our new home and represented our new lives together. Naming her after that made sense. The placenta came, and I got rid of it while Monty wrapped Nova in my jacket to keep her warm. It was way too cold for her, even in what seemed like the steamy heat of the cave. I was too tired to put on my underwear and my pants again, but I did it anyway. I took her back and held her, absorbing every bit of that moment I could. Monty sat next to me, looking at Nova with wonder. I don't know if he'd ever seen a baby before, really. I didn't see all too many either, and I practically grew up in the med ward.

I picked up his hand and kissed it. "Thank you," I told him again. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"Hey," he protested, flushing. "You're the one that did all the hard work."

And it was leeching my strength from me even then. I knew what I had to do, but I hung on as much as I could, kissing Nova's little face. "She has to eat every two hours," I said wearily. "You can't let her get cold. Wrap her up in a fur if you can. She needs a hat. She'll lose too much heat otherwise."

"Clarke?"

"You've got to take her, Monty. If she's hungry, I'll try to feed her now, but then you have to take her without me."

He shook his head. "I can't. You're fine, right? Right?"

"I'm too weak to go with you. If you stay out here much longer darkness will fall and we can't stay away from camp that long. No, don't argue with me, Monty. You have to get Nova back. Come back for me when you can."
He let his head fall back on the stone, staring at the ceiling again, clearly hating his choices. "You can't die," he said without looking at me. It wasn't like when Bellamy said it. He always ordered me to stay alive. Monty pleaded.

"I'll hang on as long as I can. Don't worry about me. You keep her safe. Get her to Bellamy if you can. That's your only job now."

He looked at me, choking up. "Today is May 19th. Just so you know."


I tried to feed her, but she was too tired. I kissed her over and over, wishing everything good I could for her, and then I gave her over to Monty. "Be careful."

"You too." He gave me one last look at the entrance of the cave, and then he shook his head. "God," he uttered with feeling.

He left, taking Nova with him.

I once read that a child was a woman's heart outside of her body. I now knew that it was true. I lay down on the ground, numb and tired. My baby. I held her. I told her I loved her. I sent her away for safety.

I ached inside, but I knew I had done the right thing.

As my eyes slid closed, I only hoped that Bellamy would be waiting for her.

To Be Continued...

If you enjoyed this installment, tell me what you think!

Only a few more chapters left...
Chapter 23

To everyone who hung in there with this story, thanks. The final chapters will be up within a few hours.


I woke up with the headache of the century. Goddamn Miller. He had fists the size of boulders and he hit like an avalanche.

I sprang to my feet—or tried.

I was tied to the bed. "MILLER!"

Octavia was the one that came in through the open door. "Wait, Bell! Wait!" Her face was white. "The storm's over. I'll get a knife and cut you free. No! Dammit! Stop struggling, you'll cut your wrists."

"Get me out of this," I thundered frantically. "I have to get to Clarke." If one fucking thing happened to her or the baby, there wasn't a soul on Earth who wouldn't feel my goddamn rage.

She sawed at the makeshift ropes. "We've organized a search party. They're already out looking for them."

"Why am I tied down?" I should be the one out there. That was my girl. My kid. "Why didn't anyone wake me?"

"Cool your jets," Raven snapped from the doorway. "We just sent them out twenty minutes ago, as soon as it got light."

She looked like a wreck. You'd think it was Finn all over again.

I didn't give a damn. "Don't bark at me, Reyes. What do you mean, light? How long was I out?"

"Losing your shit isn't going to help anyone. Listen. We've sent them out in parties of three, Miller and Monroe are leading the first two. They'll check back in, and then you can go out with them."

Screw that. I was going out now.

Raven and Octavia blocked my path. "Move," I growled. I was this close to tossing the mechanic out of the way. I'd be only slightly more gentle on Octavia.

My girl. My kid. They were out there. I had to find them. I was shaking with the need to go.

"You have to think!" Raven insisted. "Calm down. You're no good to either of them if you just run off into the woods."

"You have no fucking idea-"
"Yes I do!" she yelled back. "I know exactly what you're feeling. I was there. I'm there now. So listen!"

I quieted, turning on my heel so that I wouldn't do what I wanted and bowl her right over.

A hand grasped my arm. Octavia. "They'll be fine, Bell. Clarke is smart. So's Monty. They're going to come back before you know it."

I shook my head. She couldn't know that. Nobody could know that.

Small arms slipped around my waist and hugged me close. She hadn't done that in a long, long time. My heart ached, but I slung an arm over her shoulders and hugged her back.

I swallowed and turned back to Raven, more composed. "Alright," I said. "Tell me where they are on the map."

Which wouldn't do a shitload of good. How the hell did we not know that creek was there?

Thirty minutes later I was a friggin' basketcase, pacing the gate until I wore a path in ground. Almost everybody stayed the hell away from me, knowing they were just one comment away from getting the shit beat outta them.

The only exceptions to that rule were Octavia and Sam. The girl came up to me and silently handed me a bowl filled with soup. She didn't say anything, so I nodded my thanks and pretended not to see the sympathy in her face. She walked away without a word at all.

I traced my finger over the lip of the bowl, remembering the comb I'd given Clarke. Dammit, was it that long ago?

My heart thumped dully. What if she was dead?

I had no fucking clue how I'd get through that. How I could keep going one day after another and not talk to her. It was different from the despair I felt on the Ark. Octavia, my sister, was precious to me. Clarke...dammit, I didn't know how to say it, but she was Clarke and I had to have her with me to breathe right. To do more than go through the motions of living.

The sun was coming up. Night was burning away.

Where was she?

I paced even more, hanging onto the bowl like a talisman. There was a path forming in the dirt.

There weren't any memories, none of that montage shit they played in the movies I sometimes got to watch. I couldn't think of all the times Clarke smiled or yelled at me because I was too busy wondering if she was dead and hoping that she wasn't.

A harsh laugh escaped. Hope? What the hell was hope down here? Nothing.

"Bellamy!" someone yelled down from the watchtower. "I see movement!"

"Is it Clarke?" I barked back.

"It's Monty!"

I dropped the bowl and ran. "Open the gate!" I shouted. "Now!"
They pulled it open and I rushed through.

I came to a screeching halt when I saw Monty.

It was Monty. Just him.

And he was carrying something small in his arms.

No.

I couldn't move until he came right up to me. He was breathing hard. "Bellamy," he panted. "Thank god."

"Where's Clarke?" I demanded through cold lips. My eyes fell to the bundle in his arms. Clarke's jacket. Clarke's watch strapped to his wrist.

The jacket moved.

My heart thudded once.

"Here," he said, offering the bundle. "Meet Nova."

I tried to compute, but my brain wasn't working right. "Nova," I whispered. My arms came up of their own accord, and suddenly she was in them.

My daughter.

She was tiny. Light. She weighed next to nothing. My skin looked so dark compared to hers, my hands massive.

I stood there, staring down at her, not sure what to feel. What to do. She was here. Finally. But where was her mother? Where was Clarke?

Mind reeling, I lifted her to look in her face. She looked like a scrunched up little doll, a bit wrinkly and annoyed by life in general. She shifted and made a snuffling noise.

If Clarke wasn't here but Nova was...

I felt my knees go a little weak. Clarke.

"I left her down the hill. I couldn't drag her anymore."

My gaze snapped to Monty. "Clarke's alive?"

"Yeah, but she's in a lot of pain." He held up his hands. They were torn to shreds. "I made a travois. Peter showed me."

A travois. A kind of sled made out of tree branches lashed together.

Shock and relief held me immobile. I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Clarke was alive.

Nova stirred, making a noise.

It took everything I had—every single fucking scrap of self discipline I owned—not to squeeze her to me.

The sound of running feet. "Bellamy?" Raven appeared at my elbow, looking from me to Monty.
"Where's Clarke?"

I looked at her without anything really registering.

She saw Nova and she froze, paling. "Oh god."

Nova was moving around a lot more now, building up noise, hands opening and closing in the air. Hungry. That realization crystallized in my mind in the middle of all the madness. Baby is hungry.

I snapped into action, spinning, cradling Nova to my chest, and shoved past the two of them without stopping to see if they were following.

When I strode through the gate, Octavia was standing on the other side, her mouth hanging open. Hell, we were gathering a fucking crowd.

"Is that..."

"Nova," I said."Your niece." The first. "Clarke's at the bottom of the hill. I have to go get her. Hold out your arms. Crook it. Good, support her head. Ready?" I carefully handed my daughter to my sister.

She couldn't seem to stop staring at the kid. "Wow." She looked up at me. "I won't let anything bad happen to her. I promise," she told me solemnly, voice hardening with determination.

"Keep her warm. Keep her as close to your skin as possible." I smoothed the edges of the coat back and looked at Nova. My daughter. I would never get enough of saying that. I bent and hastily kissed her little head, one hand on Octavia's shoulder. "Daddy's going to be right back, Nova. Gotta get your mother." I traced my finger over her baby cheek. "I love you."

Raven was right behind me when I turned and loped down the hill. I was in such a hurry that I didn't even grab a weapon.

My nerves were fried by the time we got to the bottom of the hill. I caught sight of blond hair in the early morning mist, standing out among the muted green.

I barreled down the last few feet, feeling desperate, my heart lurching into my throat when the rest of Clarke came into view. She looked like one of those Greek figures I saw in an ebook once. Still. Too still.

I knelt by her. Please be alive. "Clarke."

Her eyes cracked open. "Bellamy?"

I smiled, not caring about the damn tears blurring my vision. "Hey, Princess." I needed—God-I kissed her forehead over and over, smoothing her hair back. "Let's get you home."

"I love you." She closed her eyes.

"I love you too, okay? Just hang in there. You'll be nice and comfortable soon."

She didn't respond. Fuck. Almost a year ago I carried her on my back. Not this time. She'd just given birth, and I was going to have to trust everyone watching us from the camp to keep us safe.

Raven was already assessing the situation. "We both pull?"
"We both pull," I confirmed grimly, wiping my tears away. Who cared if she saw them?

"It'll be the smoothest ride ever." Raven had a way of sounding confident even when she was as white as a ghost. "She'll be okay."

"You're damn right she will." I couldn't tell you where that came from. I knew as well as anybody else that shit went down here faster than anyone could blink, but I now had Clarke in my sights. If anybody wanted to take her—death or the Grounders—they'd have to get through me first. "Let's go. I don't want to be out here longer than necessary."

I wanted us back in camp, in our house, with our daughter. No where else.

It was slow going. Clarke made these noises, terrible little whimpers that she cut off when she could. Raven blanched every time we got to a rough patch. No wonder Monty couldn't come any further. He'd hit the toughest part of the trail, full of rocks and roots.

When we finally, finally got back, Miller and Monroe, Sam and Baxter, and Octavia were waiting on us. Everyone looked worried. This wasn't like last time. This wasn't something we could fight. If anything went wrong with Clarke, we were helpless.

I hurried to our house. Octavia opened the door and then rushed to sweep off the top covers of the bed. In a few steps we were there and I was laying Clarke down gently on the furs. "We have to clean her up," I said. "Where's Nova?"

"There." Octavia pointed at the bassinet. My baby girl had been bathed and was wrapped up in one of the long shirts I sewed for her, Octavia's makeshift socks laying beside her. She was shifting restlessly, her mouth opening in a little yawn. Her feet kicked and her hands moved.

My eyes lit to her right hand. Four fingers.

My heart softened. "Come here, Nova." I picked her up, holding her to me and nuzzling her hand. She scrunched up her tiny nose. "It's okay. Daddy's got ya. We need to get this hands covered. Don't want you to scratch your face by accident." I kissed all her fingers. "Let's go see Mama while Aunt O gets some water."

Octavia didn't move. "You're really good at this," she whispered.

"Practice. Go. We need that water. Call up Dr. Griffin. She'll know what to do."

She blinked and turned to go. "Bell?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." She disappeared out the door.

I watched her leave with an odd feeling in my chest, but there wasn't time to dwell on it.

Clarke lay on the covers like a limp doll. God, I was glad she was back. I didn't care about anything else as long as she, Octavia, and now Nova were safe. I knelt next to the bed and leaned on it, keeping Nova secure. "Clarke," I called gently. I blew a stray lock out of my eye and waited a second before trying again. "Come on, Princess. Wake up."

She did, slowly. Painfully. She had shadows under her eyes and she looked a lot like death.

But alive.
Thank fuck.

"Monty," she croaked. "He didn't leave."

"He brought you to us."

"Last night. I tried to get him to go. To bring Nova to you." She swallowed. "I thought..."

"Don't say it."

"He was brave."

And I'd owe him for the rest of our lives, but right now, I wanted to get her better. "Tell me you're okay, Clarke, because I can't take this kind of shit again. I'm not strong enough for another day like today."

"I'm exhausted and I'm filthy, but I think I'm okay." She reached up a dirty hand and brushed the side of my face. "You were worried."

"I was out of my fucking head," I told her baldly. I turned my head into her palm and kissed it. "I could live without you," I confessed, "if living meant breathing and not choking on air. But I'd be broken. So don't go anywhere without me, Princess."

She sighed. "Why do you always tell me the craziest things when I'm flat on my back?"

I smiled, that tender glob in my chest warming. "Probably because that's the only time you don't give me attitude about it."

Nova squawked.

"Hey," I said, easing back. "What's the matter, baby girl? Are you hungry?" I nuzzled her head. She was so soft and new. My heart swelled. I'd go to the grave for this tiny creature. She had no idea what I'd do for her, and that was fine by me. "We're going to get Mama cleaned up, and then we'll see about this food thing."

"What do you think of her?" She tangled her finger in Nova's tiny hand.

"You know I'm not that guy, Princess. I don't have the words for it."

For some reason she found that funny.
Octavia came, but she left the bowl and cloth and took Nova from me. They went to hang out outside while I took Clarke's clothes off and tossed them to the side. I took care with sponging her, refusing to let her do it. "Dammit, Clarke," I groused without heat. "I didn't get to be there for the birth. At least give me this."

That made her stop. I was learning how to get my way...even if I did feel a little cheated to miss out on Nova's first appearance. I didn't even want to say there'd be a next time. Looking at Clarke, how tired she was, how scared we'd both been, I didn't know if I could go through this again.

I washed her everywhere. Her breasts, her legs, and between them. Her underwear probably wasn't going to make it, but the damn things were way past their prime anyway. I tossed them and the dirty cloth in the bowl when I was done, then pulled the covers almost up to her chin. I kissed her. "I'm going to get Nova. She's probably hungry."

While I was at it, I was going to check the status of that call to Clarke's mom. She was the only one I trusted to figure out what was happening here now.

"I want to hold her."

"I know, Princess. Be right back."

I went outside. Octavia wasn't where I thought. She was off in the distance, surrounded by...well, hell, how the fuck many people was that?

I strode through the crowd. For once they didn't pay a damn bit of attention to me. They were busy staring at my daughter and my sister, who was proudly showing Nova off. "Look at my niece, bitches. Just check out how perfect she is."

Girls cooed. Dudes grunted, probably feeling their manhoods shrivel up.

_Fuckwads_, I thought with a shake of my head.

"What's wrong with her hand?" someone asked.

My head whipped around.

But I didn't have to step in. The least likely person in the world did.

"Nothing," Sam declared loud and clear. Her chin was up. Her hair was tied back, and she looked liked she was ready to take the guy on all by her lonesome.

"Jeez, man," Baxter added from the background. "What's wrong with her hand? What's wrong with your head?"

Others gave the guy a hard time, so that was taken care of relatively quickly.

"Keep going, Monty," Monroe cut in. "Was it really bad?"

"How bad could it have been?" Miller asked dryly.
"Bro," Monty said in a tone that left no argument, "you don't even know..."

"That's enough, kiddies," I interjected in a loud voice. Everybody turned like they’d had no idea I was there.

I pushed through them and took her from Octavia, who almost didn't give her up.

I nearly left it at that. What the hell else was I going to say? Nova was here and she was mine.

But I found myself pausing, giving them all a speculative glance. "Clarke's had a big day," I said. "If you need anything medical, go to Octavia or Monty. They'll help out where they can. Big emergencies, you come and get me. So try to stay out of trouble." I hesitated. "Nova's the first step. In a couple of months it'll be one year since Landing Day. We're making progress, people. Be proud of that."

She was starting to fuss in earnest now, making weak noises in her blanket. I rocked her a little.
"Miller, you're in charge. You know where to find me."

He nodded, and I left. Clarke was already anxious when I came back inside, sitting up on the bed.
"What took so long?"

"Octavia wanted to show Nova off." I didn't tell her the rest. I simply handed her our daughter and watched as she was held up to Clarke's breast.

I scooted in next to them and wrapped my arm around Clarke, letting her lean into my chest. Nova latched on and the only sounds that filled the air was her feeding.

I couldn't believe how tiny she was. Octavia was small, but that was seventeen years ago. All of my memories were softened by time and that warm glob that stuck around in my chest.

Damn, I loved these women. Clarke. Octavia. Nova. What I felt for each of them was radically different, but what I'd do for them? Exactly the same. "I think she's going to be dark-haired," I remarked after a while.

Clarke hummed, fascinated by the little girl she was holding.

I looked at her golden hair, which was in bad need of a brush, and I couldn't hold it in anymore.
"You gave your watch to Monty because you thought you were going to die, didn't you."

She stilled.

I trained my eyes on her. "Don't ever do that again."

"Bellamy..."

I traced her jaw. "No. We're getting that watch back tomorrow. Understand me, Princess? It's nowhere near time for you to give it away."

But she didn't take the hint. "I really thought that might be it for me," she confessed, swallowing, "and it hurt me to know that I'd never see you again."

"We're here. We're together." She couldn't forget that. Couldn't think that there was nothing worth fighting for. "So stick around, alright?"

She smiled. It was a beautiful thing.
Hours later, after a lot of running from the call waginogan to our house and back again, and Dr. Griffin had given us strict instructions, and had seen her granddaughter, and fucking cried (which made Clarke cry, and frankly, my heart just could not take that shit) things had settled down.

Clarke was asleep.

I couldn't sleep.

It felt like if I took my eyes off of either one of them for one single second, they'd disappear again. The nightmare would start over.

I watched Nova nurse. She’d latched alright, but Clarke was too exhausted to actually hold her. It was a kind of turn and passive feed situation. I monitored the situation like a hawk. When she was done, I carefully detached her and shifted the baby against my shoulder to burp. I’d taken my shirt off and made sure to drape a clothe for the inevitable spit up.

Amazing what you remembered. It had been over a decade since I'd done this, but that warm feeling of a small child under my hands came rushing back, causing a weird sense of deja vu.

She was warm, and safe, dressed, in my arms. I knew in the deepest part of me that I was gonna lose a lot of sleep over this kid, and it had nothing to do with the night schedule that was sure to come. "You had a different daddy at the start," I told her.

It felt important to say, even though she was less than a day old. We had to get this off on the right foot.

Almost a year had given me perspective. In the end, Finn was just a kid who died young. I didn't like him, but I didn't hate him. And in a way he'd given me something I'd never let myself hope for. "He can't be here for you, but you don't have to worry. I will never, ever let you down."

"Part of me wishes...that Finn could have seen her," Clarke said quietly from the bed.

I turned. "You're awake?"

"Is that bad of me to admit?"

"Clarke. I'm her father. She's mine. That doesn't mean Finn never existed. We're all just making it up as we go. Nothing's going to change the way I feel about you or about Nova."

"I love you," she said suddenly. "It's not just love. It's adoration, and respect, and commitment. We're connected, and I just wish there was a better way of telling you exactly how I feel."

A year ago, I couldn't see this for myself. Fuck, I couldn't see past the day. There wasn't a point. I was trapped on the Ark, a hard, unforgiving place of harsh light and artificial air. Then I got myself onto a drop shuttle that should have blown up on reentry, but didn't.

If I thought about it, that was when most of us came alive. The real air, the trees, the sun. We fucking exploded all over this planet, and we were making it. We had a home that we carved out day by day. We had problems. We didn't have it easy.

It was all worth it. Every scrap. My sister was alive. My girl was here. We had a daughter. I was a brother, a husband, and a father. Fucking weird how much a year could change a guy who had no options and even fewer hopes.

I reached out and smoothed her hair back. "Go back to sleep. I'll watch over you."
Her eyes were already closing. A second later, she was off in dreamland.

After I finished burping her, I gently laid Nova down on the bed, got undressed, and slipped in beside them. I studied the tiny human being I had accepted and assumed responsibility for, marveling at every detail. Her impossibly small toes. Her mouth. Her ears. Her chin. So little.

I leaned on one arm. "One of these days," I murmured to her, "I'll tell you all about the jungles and the Serengeti, and I'll teach you about lions and wolves. Your mother will show you how to draw and help people, and when she's done I'll teach you how to beat the shit out of anybody who messes with you."

She sighed in a baby sort of snuffle.

I smiled. "But not tonight."

And that was just fine by me.

*****

Epilogue

The block went flying through the air and conked Monty right in the damn noggin. "OW!" he howled, slapping a hand over his wound.

Nova grinned and laughed.

"Nova," I said sternly, exasperated. I put a finger under her chin and gently tilted it up so our eyes met. "Not okay, baby."

Her smile faded. Most of the time she was a great kid—hell, she was only two and a half—and it was all about impulses at this point. I was glad all I had to do was use a serious tone. Wait a few years and we'd probably be having screaming matches.

I walked over with her perched on my hip. "Sorry, man," I said by way of apology. "She launched it before I realized what was happening."

He was still rubbing his forehead. "No problem." He handed over the block. "You gotta admit she's got an arm."

I knew. She'd started throwing her food before she'd even turned one.

Life with a little one was not easy. We had to change the way we did things to make camp safer for her and the three other kids that popped up over the last two years. Accidents happened—Nova had no idea what the hell the word slow meant—but for the most part we were lucky.

Still, this kid was going to worry me into an early grave.

I handed her the block. "Tell Uncle Monty thank you."

"Sank you," she said dutifully.

"Good girl," I praised. It was good to let her know when I was serious, but I didn't have to rub it in.
She was a toddler, for crissake.

And just like that, she was happy again.

She had her mother's smile and big brown eyes and a mass of brown hair. She liked it when I braided it. It was our thing.

"How's the garden coming?" I asked Monty.

"Getting the cabbages was a bi—problem, but I think we're going to make it." He stood at the fence, proud.

We'd come a long way in two and a half years. We'd lost a few. One of them to childbirth. That scared the fucking shit out of me all over again. I wasn't ready to consider another kid with Clarke just yet, but she was hinting. I'd asked her to give me three or four more months to get my balls girded, then we'd go for it.

The Ark had landed, so things would be easier. At least we had that. The Ark was doing its own thing. We were doing ours. It worked, though our side-by-side status gave Clarke and me even more responsibility.

Still, we had houses. We had chickens. We had sustainable food sources. We'd figured out how to make clothes from animal hides a long time ago. We were making it. Things with the Grounders weren't peachy, but we were learning to live with each other.

Clarke had made up with her mom, if you could call it that. They'd bonded over Nova, at least. Clarke was grateful for advice.

Raven was spending almost as much time with Nova as Clarke was. She'd even met someone.

Octavia was...Octavia. Still giving me gray hair. I wish I was kidding about that. I was only twenty six, dammit. I had Clarke pull the three or four hairs she'd found, but that shit had to stop.

We were all older. I could see it in our faces, in the way we held ourselves. Life was hard on all of us, but I think we all looked around with pride at what we'd accomplished. The drop ship had become this symbol of before and after for us. We barely used it, but we kept it clean. One of these days we'd have to decide what we'd do with it, but for now we were content to let it be.

Nova started talking to me. She talked about literally everything. Most of it was one word and small sentences, but she was smart. She knew her numbers, she could recognize letters, and she could remember the most random animal names.

The Latin names.

Yeah, my baby girl was a genius.

Having four fingers on one hand instead of five meant we had to adjust a few things, but other than that, she was totally normal. A regular little hellraiser.

I swung her around so that I held her against my chest, facing out, and swayed back and forth while I listened to Monty's report. "Good. Talk to Jasper. Coordinate. You know the drill."

"Aye aye," he tossed out.

Great. "Let's go, baby. It's time to eat."

"Time to eat!"

Then a nap. And if I was really lucky, alone time with Clarke.

We went to the new and improved med center just in time to see Miller marching out, his kid tucked under his arm. He looked annoyed.

I arched a brow.

"Button up the nose," he said by way of explanation. "I'm going to kill the dic—idiot that thought it was a good idea to have those around. If Monroe doesn't kill me first."

Bullshit. Monroe was the laid-back parent.

Hal's face was red and puffy from crying, but other than that, he looked perfectly comfortable hanging there in a good imitation of a sack of wet clothes. Weird kid. Totally reaffirmed my hope that our second would be a girl too.

"See ya."

"Yeah." We ducked into the med center.

Clarke turned, saw us and smiled. Her hair was longer, the braid falling down to her waist. I loved it. "Hey," she said.

"Mama! Aye aye, Mama!"

I rolled my eyes. "Monty."

"Ah." She took Nova. "It's time to eat, huh?"

Nova was busy playing with her block, tracing the design and not paying attention to us boring old parents.

I looked at my daughter and my girl. "Anything big happen?"

"Surprisingly, no. Hal stuck something up his nose again. He's becoming a professional patient."

"Weird kid," I said for the thousandth time.

She smiled at me knowingly. "You can't pick which gender the next will be, Bellamy."

"I can hope, Princess."

She hummed, her head tilting back.

I crowded closer. "Kiss me, Clarke," I murmured to her.

Her smile spread. "Okay."

…..my kind of animal...

**The End**
Chapter End Notes

A thousand thanks for going on this journey with me.

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